

BUILDING THE SENIOR TEAM AFTER A PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SENIOR LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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College of Education, Health, and Human Services
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by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. My husband, children, parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews. I love you all and you all have a special place in my heart. Papa, Nana, Papa, Grandmother, Laurie, and Aunt Vikki, I love you and I miss you. I hope that you are proud.

**BUILDING THE SENIOR TEAM AFTER A PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION: A
QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SENIOR LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION (114 pp.)**

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Higher education is facing a wave of presidential transitions. While the transition of a president can be a monumental and celebrated occasion for a college or university, it is often accompanied by work disruptions, job uncertainty, and turnover of senior administrators. University presidents can face numerous challenges as they try to adapt to a new culture, team, and work processes; at no time during their career are leaders more susceptible to failure than when they are in transition. Therefore, the development of the senior leadership team comes at a time critical for the new president's success. It is vital for mid-level administrators who have ambitions to serve on the senior leadership team to understand the leadership transition and how university presidents develop their teams. This understanding is equally important for senior leadership team members who are a part of the inherited leadership team and will likely face a presidential transition.

This narrative study examined how university presidents and senior team members understand their experiences and decision-making processes while building a senior leadership team after the presidential transition. Five university presidents and six senior leadership team members were interviewed for this study. The senior leaders interviewed were vice presidents and individuals who reported directly to the university president. When making decisions about the makeup of their team, significant influences on the presidents included institutional practices, governing bodies, diversity, equity, and inclusion. In addition, effective communication, collaboration, expertise, and trustworthiness were vital attributes that influenced the new

university presidents' decision-making. Findings show how the senior leaders interviewed understood their path to a senior leadership team and experienced the presidential transition. Finally, the findings suggest that senior leadership team members have had an overall positive experience as a member of the senior leadership team during the presidential transition and that they were able to navigate challenges with the support and resources provided to them by their university presidents.

Keywords: presidential transition, senior team building, narrative research, succession planning, senior leaders, mid-level administrators

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FOREWORD

My journey in higher education began in 2009 when I accepted an administrative support position at Kent State University with the goal and hope of a college degree. As a Black Woman, I recognized early in my career in higher education the value and power of a college degree. According to Gasman, Abiola, and Travers (2015), earning an advanced degree is critical for people of color to qualify for faculty and senior-level administrative positions. With each degree pursued (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral), I have grown academically and professionally. My children and loved ones have also been positively impacted and influenced by my work and growth in higher education. This educational journey has been transformative, increasing the trajectory of my career and influencing the educational journey of my sons and family.

I currently serve as associate chief of staff within the president's office. My position is a mid-level administrator role at a public institution of higher education. Jo (2008) describes a mid-level administrator as support personnel (academic or nonacademic) who reports to a top-level officer, senior administrator, or dean. In this role, I oversee a team of administrative professionals and work closely with the other president's team members to organize university events and special projects for the president. Additionally, I lead numerous cross-divisional teams for large university initiatives. At this stage in my career, I am beginning to prepare to develop myself professionally for continued advancement in leadership within higher education. Research suggests that a typical career pathway to a senior-level or executive-level position begins with aspiring leaders in the middle (Ebberts, Conover & Samuels, 2010; Golden, 2014).

I have been fortunate to work for leaders who have challenged me to grow professionally and encouraged me to see myself as a leader. These individuals respected my leadership and could see me going further than I could see on my own. For example, I vividly remember a

conversation on my career path with my supervisor. She asked me what I wanted to be a vice president of—implying that she thought I could become a vice president and that I had options. I was taken aback and remembered thinking, "she thinks I can be a vice president." This example is just one of the countless moments of encouragement and affirmation I received from my many mentors, which have brought me to where I am professionally and on this doctoral journey.

I want to continue my path within the Office of the President and as a senior leadership team member one day. What is most professionally appealing to me long term is the role of the vice president and university secretary. I feel a connection to the collaborative and participatory nature of the role. This position is a dual role of the board professional and chief of staff to the university president. In addition, this position serves as a member of the president's senior leadership team. Reed (2017, p. 2) describes the role as follows:

- *The glue that connects the board with the president, institution, and key stakeholders;*
- *A trusted counselor and confidant;*
- *A prognosticator who is capable of "seeing around corners," anticipating needs before they are felt and issues before they arise; and*
- *Ideally, a strategic partner and advisor to leadership who assists in furthering the institutional agenda and ensuring good governance.*

Similarly, Jacobs (2020) describes the Chief of Staff (COS) role as having similar traits. Jacobs (2020) describes the COS as a critical position to help with time management by allocating high-level tasks and projects, enabling the chief executive to free their time for other activities. Jacobs (2020) states that COS responsibilities range from policy and government relations, compliance oversight, crisis management, COVID response leadership, budgetary management, and a ubiquitous category of "management of special projects." In addition, the

COS adds the value of having someone other than an executive assistant to help the senior leader make the most strategic use of limited time for decision-making and implementing policies (Jacobs, 2020; Ciampa, 2020). Lastly, the COS's understanding of the necessity of, and correlation between, building internal and external relationships is not only a critical corporate (or institutional) function to attain consensus but a public relations imperative (Cardwell, Williams, & Pyle, 2017).

When I began my doctoral studies, I strongly desired to learn more about senior team development with a focus on racial diversity at the senior level. As I explored the research literature, I began to reflect on the research findings and the current state of leadership at my institution. Since our current president's transition, there have been numerous appointments of individuals to the senior team who are Black.

Additionally, there have been internal promotions to the senior team and replacements for the senior team. These hires, terminations, and promotions further sparked my interest in senior leadership team development in higher education. In this dissertation in practice, I explored how university presidents make decisions about skills, qualities, diversity, equity, and inclusion when they appoint to their senior leadership team and how senior leadership team members experience the presidential transition as senior leadership team members.

As I aspire to advance, I am eager to learn about the perceived attributes, unique qualities, or skills that distinguish those selected to be on a senior leadership team. I approached my dissertation in practice to learn about contextual factors when developing a leadership team, including what professional experiences and circumstances prepared mid-level administrators to leap to the senior team. The knowledge acquired from hearing these stories was beneficial to me professionally and has further sparked my interest in senior leadership team building.

Presidential transitions are unavoidable. The findings from this study offer valuable perspectives from individuals currently in the role of the university president or on a senior leadership team. This insight benefits both sitting and aspiring presidents, senior leadership team members, and mid-level administrators who aspire to serve on the senior leadership.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In this narrative study, I explored the process of building senior leadership teams from the perspective of university presidents and the senior leaders selected to serve on a senior team after a presidential transition (sitting president to a new president). I also examined how university presidents and senior team members make meaning of their experiences, decision-making processes, and decisions during the formation of a senior leadership team after the presidential transition. This study provides an in-depth examination of the experiences of individuals who were once mid-level administrators and now serve as members of a senior leadership team at public institutions of higher education. It provides insights that will be helpful to presidents and aspiring presidents, mid-level administrators at higher education institutions who aspire to serve on a senior leadership team, and current senior team members who will inevitably face a leadership change.

Literature on senior team building after a presidential transition and succession planning in higher education is significantly limited (Cavanaugh, 2017; Jackson & Allen, 2022; Kezar, Dizon & Scott, 2020; Klein & Salk, 2013). A paucity of research discusses the decision-making process in building the leadership team from the perspective of university presidents after a transition. There is also a gap in the research on the views of direct reports to university presidents after a presidential transition (Alvarado, 2021; Gaval, 2009). This narrative study contributes to the academic literature addressing these gaps.

Five university presidents and six senior leadership team members were interviewed for this study. The senior leaders interviewed were vice presidents and individuals who reported

directly to the university president. The participants shared their experiences throughout the presidential transition. Influences on the presidents when making decisions about the makeup of their team, including the board of trustees, the needs of the institution, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. The findings from this study suggest that university presidents are mindful of the institution's needs when selecting individuals to serve on the senior team. In addition, the findings identified the following attributes as necessary for members of these university presidents' senior teams: experts in their fields and trustworthy collaborators with highly effective communication skills. Findings also highlight how the senior leaders interviewed understood their path to a senior leadership team and experienced the presidential transition. Finally, the findings suggest that senior leadership team members have had an overall positive experience as a member of the senior leadership team during the presidential transition and that they were able to navigate challenges with the support and resources provided to them by their university presidents.

Statement of the Problem

As predicted, a wave of retirements is taking place from the baby-boomer presidents (Harris & Ellis, 2017; Skinner, 2010), resulting in an increase in presidential departures in higher education (Alvarado, 2021; American Council on Education, 2017; Gaval, 2009; Selingo, Chheng & Clark, 2017). This increase in retirements may be exacerbated because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a growing number of college presidents are leaving their jobs after two grueling years trying to navigate their schools through the pandemic (Zackal, 2022; Doherty, 2022). An increase in presidential departures equates to an increase in presidential transitions. The transition of a president can be a monumental and celebrated occasion for a college or university. This time of transition can be simultaneously exciting and uncertain for university community

members, particularly members of a senior leadership team, as the presidential transition will likely include work disruptions, job uncertainty, and turnover of senior administrators on the inherited senior leadership team (Alvarado, 2021; Freeman & Kochan, 2013; Overend, 2011; Reed, 2017; Smerek, 2013).

Martin and Samels (2004) assert that leadership transitions reveal a good deal about how colleges and universities are structured and how they organize their leadership. On day one, university presidents acquire the weight of the responsibility as the administrative head of campus. They are responsible for leading a team of professionals in the fundraising, budget management, and strategic planning efforts for the institution while also working to establish good relationships with the local community, state, and governing boards (Eckel & Kezar, 2016; Freeman & Kochan, 2013; Gednalske, 2022; Harris & Ellis, 2017). According to Gednalske (2022), a university president must be a strong and capable leader to meet the expectations of demanding constituents, reach aggressive enrollment goals, achieve financial challenges, satisfy accreditors, and exceed fundraising expectations. As a spokesperson for the university (Fleming, 2010; Freeman & Kochan, 2013; Havice & Williams, 2005), a university president is to be accountable to various stakeholders, including the board of trustees, students, faculty, and administrative staff (Edwards & Omilion-Hodges, 2022; Trent & Pollard, 2019). Additional accountability points include community members, political leaders, donors, and parents (Seling, Chheng & Clark, 2017). Cultivating stakeholder relationships is integral to the president's success (Quinn, 2007).

University presidents can face numerous challenges as they try to adapt to a new culture, team, and work processes; at no time during their career are leaders more susceptible to failure than when they are in transition (Mandershied & Harrower, 2016). Therefore, the creation of a

senior leadership team comes at a time critical for the new president's success. There is a gap in the literature regarding senior team building after the presidential transition. Research regarding senior team building after a leadership transition is vital for mid-level administrators who have ambitions to serve on a senior leadership team to understand how university presidents build their teams. Understanding the perspectives of university presidents is equally important for senior leadership team members who are a part of the inherited leadership team as they will inevitably experience future presidential transitions. Finally, it is also critical that aspiring and new university presidents understand the considerations and influences they may face when establishing their new senior leadership team.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative narrative research study was to examine how university presidents and senior team members understood their experiences and decision-making processes when the senior leadership team was formed after the presidential transition. This study explored the decision-making process and factors that are perceived to influence university presidents in determining how they select individuals to serve on their leadership team, including whether to promote from within, hire externally, or retain or terminate a member of their inherited leadership team. The study also examined what, if any, methods were implemented to establish a diverse senior leadership team. Lastly, building the senior team was explored from the perspective of the individuals selected as senior leadership team members.

The following research questions guided the study:

- How do university presidents in higher education form their leadership teams?
- How do diversity, equity, and inclusion influence presidents' decisions when appointing members to a senior team?

- How do direct reports to university presidents make meaning of their experiences as the senior team is established after a presidential transition?
- What factors are perceived by the university president and senior team members to contribute to the promotion or retention of leaders during a leadership transition?

Conceptual Framework

The following section details the guiding framework for this qualitative research study.

Succession Planning

The study was informed by Rothwell's (2005) succession planning framework. Existing research highlights the foundation of succession planning and makes recommendations for implementing and managing succession planning. Among the first studies to emerge on succession planning were those conducted in 1916 by Henri Fayol (Collins & Collins, 2007). Fayol believed that succession planning could help to avoid organizational missteps because succession planning ensures putting the right people in the right positions at the right time (Ahmad et al., 2020). According to Fayol, if an organization continues to react rather than proactively plan, leadership continuity and vacant senior posts will be filled by unqualified successors (Chevalier, 2008; Siambi, 2022).

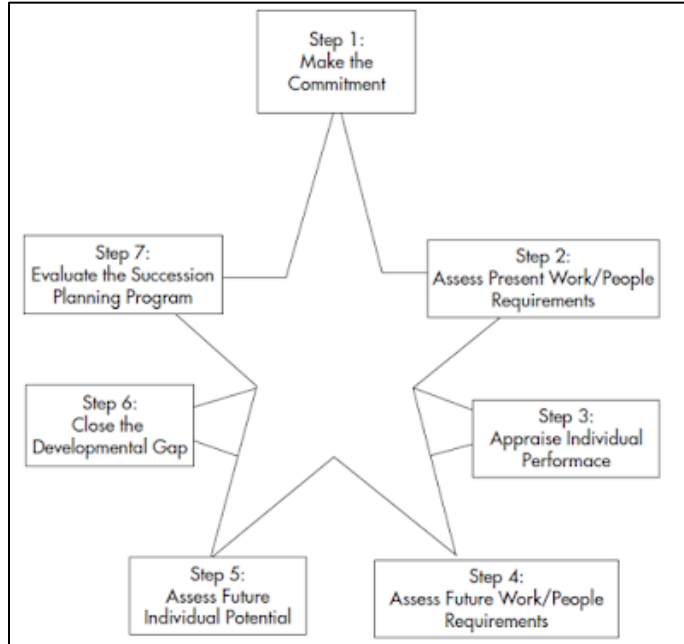
While many other succession planning theories have emerged over the years, many scholars commended Fayol's attempts to create a comprehensive framework for improving organizational performance (Chevalier, 2008; Siambi, 2022). Like many others who have developed succession planning frameworks, Rothwell's (2005) framework is grounded in Fayol's guide to succession planning. Therefore, Rothwell's framework was used as a lens when analyzing the data generated through the study. Estedadi and Hamidi (2015) state Rothwell's four fundamental reasons for succession planning:

1. Succession planning is the method an organization must employ to ensure the right people are in the right places at the correct times.
2. Succession planning lessens the effect of downsizing.
3. Succession planning advances diversity and multiculturalism.
4. Succession planning provides a framework for establishing career paths, training, developmental plans, and individual career moves.

Rothwell (2005, p. 79) suggests that systemic succession planning and management can be attained by following his seven-pointed star model (see Figure 1), which consists of the following steps:

1. Making a commitment toward succession planning and management
2. Assessing present work and people requirements
3. Appraising individual performance
4. Assessing future work and people requirements
5. Assessing future individual potential
6. Closing the development gap, and
7. Evaluating the subsequent succession development program

While the nature of the analysis in this study was inductive, the data were also analyzed using Rothwell's framework. Rothwell Seven-Pointed Star Model see Figure 1.

Figure 1*Rothwell's Seven-Pointed Star Model*

Note. From Vijay Bankar, by Succession planning for leadership development, 2015.

Definition of Terms**Diversity**

Diversity includes all the ways in which people differ, and it encompasses all the different characteristics that make one individual or group different from another. It is all-inclusive and recognizes everyone and every group as part of the diversity that should be valued. A broad definition includes not only race, ethnicity, and gender — the groups that most often come to mind when the term "diversity" is used — but also age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, and physical appearance. It also involves different ideas, perspectives, and values (Racial Equity Tools, 2020; Equity Fluent Leader, 2023).

Equity

Equity is to treat everyone fairly. An equity emphasis seeks to render justice by deeply considering structural factors that benefit some social groups/communities and harm other social groups/communities (Racial Equity Tools, 2020).

Inclusion

Inclusion is authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities, and decision/policymaking in a way that shares power (Racial Equity Tools 2020; Open Source Leadership Strategies, 2023).

Leader Development

According to Day (2000), leader development expands an individual's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes.

Mid-level Administrator

A mid-level administrator is an academic or nonacademic support personnel who reports to a top-level officer, senior administrator, or dean (Jo, 2008); Mid-level administrators contribute significantly to the educational organization by serving and supporting the primary functions of teaching, research, and service (Rosser, 2004).

Predominately White Institution (PWI)

Predominately White Institution (PWI) is a term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Jackson. 2018; Lomotey, 2010).

Presidential Transition

A presidential transition is the transition of the sitting university president to a new university president. Reasons for leadership transitions may vary, such as death, retirement, scandal, and illness (Gednalske, 2022).

Succession Planning

Succession planning is an intentional process aimed at identifying and cultivating employees within an organization (Weisblat, 2018) that prepares for senior executive leadership changes in an organization and develops the pipeline of potential internal successors (Golden, 2014; Jackson, 2017).

Succession Planning and Management

Succession planning and management is a strategic technique for ensuring company stability by building a pipeline for leadership continuity at all levels of the organization (Siambi, 2022).

Senior Leadership Team Member/Senior Leaders

For this study, senior leadership team members and senior leaders refer to executives, vice presidents, chiefs of staff, and board professionals who report directly to a university president. Senior leadership teams are the critical decision-makers invested in authority who work collectively to achieve organizational goals (Kezar, Dizon & Scott, 2020).

Organization of the Dissertation

This section discusses the organization of the remainder of the dissertation. The literature review is presented in Chapter 2 and is followed by the design and methods of the qualitative study in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 includes the thematic analysis of the data collected and a response to the research questions. Lastly, Chapter 5 concludes the study with a discussion, implications, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents my review of the literature on senior team building and succession planning in higher education. This literature review includes a summary of scholarly research focusing on presidential transitions, senior leadership team selection, and succession planning in higher education.

Except for information acquired from a few books, most of the material for this literature review was obtained through electronic databases from the University Library at Kent State University and a literature search through Google Scholar. In addition, the following keywords were used to obtain information on senior team building: leadership transition, presidential transitions, diversity, higher education, succession planning, succession planning in higher education, and senior team selection.

Upon the review of the research literature, the following topics emerged as significant:

- Presidential transitions
- Turnover
- Internal versus external hires
- Leader development
- Succession planning
- The benefits and recommendations for succession planning in higher education
- Diversity in higher education
- Diversity pipeline

Presidential Transitions

The transition of the sitting university president to a new university president, be it external or internal, can be an uncertain time for the university. Reasons for leadership transitions may vary, such as death, retirement, scandal, and illness (Gednaslke, 2022). Voluntary retirement makes up most separations, though increased age, ill health, and death are also contributing factors (Overend, 2011). As a university manages the uncertainties of its leadership transition more effectively, it becomes an institution more intentional in its systems, administration, and mission (Martin & Samels, 2004). Cavanaugh (2017) asserts that leadership transitions are inevitable and disruptive, stating that when leaders change, there is a disturbance in the force that, at worst, terms of chaos. According to Martin and Samels (2004), institutions spend considerable time orienting new students to our institutions; little thought is devoted to designing an orientation or entry process for our senior leadership.

Building a senior leadership team is an integral part of the transition and is challenging, studies have primarily focused on the president rather than the leadership team (Alvarado, 2021; Jackson, 2017.) The senior administrators who work directly with the president are the least written about and often most misunderstood (Alvarado, 2021; Overend, 2011).

Turnover

Higher education faces uncertainty and unpredictability in today's rapidly changing environment; organizations must rely on their people's most critical assets (Mehrabani & Mohamad, 2011). A significant demographic nearing age-eligible retirement predominantly holds executive positions in public, private, and nonprofit sectors (Ritchie, 2020; Stewart, 2016). In addition, labor forecasts predict a continued increase in job turnover at the management level (Ritchie, 2020; Stewart, 2016). A study by Gaval (2009) indicated that senior team members'

turnover during the first two years of the new presidency was 50% at the vice president level. A new president's arrival almost guarantees the departure of members of the inherited leadership team, be it retirement, job changes, or removal from the position. In addition, the often-high turnover during a transition of administration can lead to a sweeping overhaul of top managers and strategic reorientations (Padilla, 2004), generally resulting in the replacement of many or all members of the executive team (Gonzalez, 2010). These departures and other factors of a presidential transition can leave the president in a difficult situation with developing their team and all the other priorities they need to manage.

Turnover can cost the institution resulting in the loss of valuable institutional memory (Rosser, 2004). In a study seeking to understand voluntary turnover for women administrators, researchers found that frequent turnover in upper management had strongly influenced over half of the respondents, having several different supervisors during their tenure at the institution due to frequent turnover among senior administrators (Jo, 2008). Although researchers Mishra and Upadhyay (2022) assert that several factors account for turnover, their research indicated that one of the most prominent reasons for most employees is the lack of identification and belongingness with their institutions. Given the significant turnover during a presidential leadership transition, succession planning within the institution could benefit the university and the new president, who must build their leadership team.

Internal versus External Candidates

Institutions of higher education in the United States tend to search and hire more externally than internally for senior and executive leaders, as there is an extreme bias in favor of outside hires (Cavanaugh, 2017; Paul, 2017). Gonzalez (2010) suggests that external candidates can

bring prestige to an institution, increasing its status by hiring administrators from universities that are perceived to be more prestigious.

In the corporate sector, evidence indicates that inside preference results in better organizational performance over time and talent are best developed from within, starting with the selection of the best individuals and continuing through a career-long process of mentoring, coaching, internships, externships, and other professional development opportunities (Cavanaugh, 2017). Researchers Long et al. (2013) state that executive search firms have shown a distinct advantage to an internal versus an external candidate.

Several barriers can prevent succession planning. One of which is the traditional national search (Klein & Salk, 2013; Witt & Kiefer, 2008). The national search can create space and opportunity for university leaders to consider external candidates over internal candidates. Additionally, shared governance has been a barrier to internal succession planning. Because of shared governance, faculty members can veto candidates for all intents and purposes, and internal candidates always have some baggage (Gonzalez, 2010).

The failure rate of presidencies can be traced at least partly to the consequences of new leaders coming from outside and needing to understand the institutional culture (Cavanaugh, 2017; Paul, 2017). External candidates, however, are seen as having new energy and charisma, while internal candidates' weaknesses are already known; they have baggage, and because of this, the bar is often set higher for them (Klein & Salk, 2013).

Leader Development

With increasing attention on the need for current and future leaders, colleges and universities must reexamine recruitment, professional development, and succession plans currently in place to attract candidates seeking new careers or transitioning into higher education

as well as to develop leaders internally (Betts, Urias & Betts, 2009). Universities are equipped with individuals in the middle who are ready to lead. According to McDaniel (2002), the best leadership development, according to the literature, offers a mix of learning experiences, including lectures, case studies, experiential exercises, simulations, and other practices.

According to Day (2000), leader development expands an individual's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes. With the proper development and guidance, these individuals can be ready when needed if the university actively and intentionally puts in the work to develop leaders in the middle. Even if the appointment is for an interim period, institutions must take the necessary steps to prepare who is next.

Additionally, the intentional preparation of future leaders for higher education remains a critical need today in institutions across the globe (Madsen et al., 2012). Ethics, empowerment, collaboration, globalization, entrepreneurialism, and accountability shape how leaders must lead (Eddy & Rao, 2009). Effective leadership is critical for an organization's success (Braun et al., 2009). To respond effectively to the complex educational, social, political, and economic concerns of society, higher education must develop leaders who can engage the institution and its faculty/staff by creating institutional leadership development opportunities in which faculty/staff can develop multi-dimensional perspectives, competence to meet the challenges of a constantly changing environment, and the ability to think strategically and act collaboratively (Wisniewski, 2004).

Succession Planning

Succession planning is an intentional process aimed at identifying and cultivating employees within an organization who have the potential to lead the company and sustain its success in the long run (Weisblat, 2018). Succession planning is a strategic technique for

ensuring company stability by building a pipeline for leadership continuity at all levels of the organization (Siambi, 2022). It is a deliberate and proactive process that forecasts organizational needs and addresses staffing problems before they cause a leadership crisis (Collins & Collins, 2007; Atwood, 2007; Rothwell, et al., 2015; Weisblat, 2018). According to Dai et al. (2011), companies with effective succession management plans will get their best people the right developmental experiences to help them transition from one position level to another and rigorously evaluate them in their jobs.

According to Fayol, for an organization to thrive and remain competitive, leaders must develop the leadership characteristics and skills essential for long-term success (Siambi, 2022). This description of succession planning suggests that institutions offer professional leadership development for their employees to develop leaders from within to create a pipeline of leadership continuity. In higher education, leadership development may happen throughout the organization with various opportunities for professional development, be it committee work, training, or mentorship opportunities, to name a few. Sometimes, the intent for a pipeline of leadership continuity at the institution is missing. As Cavanaugh (2017) and Paul (2017) suggest, other institutions often reap significant benefits from the investments made by an institution in professional development.

Despite experience with the inevitability and disruption of leadership transitions, higher education institutions have primarily resisted proven success practices such as succession planning that could help ease these events (Cavanaugh, 2017; Richards, 2016). Odwusi (2018) argues that identifying and developing potential successors for critical positions in an organization through a systematic evaluation process and training competent employees for transition processes is fundamental for the success of every organization. However, succession

planning is a complicated concept in academia due to dramatic cultural differences between the boardroom and the campus (Clunies, 2004).

While corporate America has embraced the model of succession management, the concept, although emphasized in the classroom in higher education, has largely been avoided by the administrations of universities and colleges (Long et al., 2013). Grossman (2014, p. 156) asserts that the lack of succession planning results from philosophies of searching externally for the best-fit belief that informal succession planning strategies are inadequate.

Benefits and Recommendations for Succession Planning

Highly successful organizations have a critical mass of passionate advocates who understand that succession planning is the key to sustainability (Gonzalez, 2010). Succession planning is both a strategic planning tool to address the issues created by individuals' departure and to bridge the knowledge gap created by a departure (Klein & Salk, 2013). It provides an organization with a surplus of talent by helping members realize their potential, which should not be confused with performance (Gonzalez, 2010). Finally, it provides opportunities while recognizing that only some participants in succession planning activities will move into leadership roles (Golden, 2014).

Succession planning can effectively preserve institutional memory and improve institutional knowledge (Estedadi & Hamidi, 2015); therefore, the shortage of succession planning in higher education may weaken institutional effectiveness because of changing leadership and the loss of institutional knowledge (Grossman, 2014). However, by keeping the values, mission, and strategic plan at the center of the organization's succession management process, the organization, whether it is a corporation or an institution of higher learning, can compete in a rapidly evolving environment (Long et al., 2013).

For universities to seize this opportunity, they must begin to invest and prepare for future leadership through succession planning. Succession planning prepares for a successor and develops successors from within (Golden, 2014). Trustees and top administrators must provide visible support and convey that succession planning is essential (Clunies, 2004). Deans and other executive administrators must identify and develop talent and staff to provide operational support. Succession planning should be a flexible and evolving process intricately linked to the department and institution's mission and respond to changing organizational demands (Clunies, 2004).

Diversity in Higher Education

As institutions embedded within a broader society, colleges, and universities are neither immune to the persistent challenges nor the rewards of promoting social diversity, equity, and inclusion (Adserias, Charleston, & Jackson, 2016; Taylor, 2020). Institutional and structural diversity have numerous benefits for students, staff, administrators, and the overall institution (Jackson, 2017, p. 2; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000). Diverse and inclusive learning environments expand students' personal, social, and moral growth capacity and enable universities to achieve their mission (Oguntbei et al., 2012). Moreover, a diverse and inclusive learning environment prepares college students for the realities of a pluralistic and global society (Friedman, 2005; Oguntbei et al., 2012).

Diversity in higher education is a social force that promotes the importance of understanding differences in building a cohesive social fabric in society (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Taylor, 2020). Inclusion creates a welcoming campus environment for students, faculty, and staff from different backgrounds (LePeau, Hurtado & Williams, 2019). Diversity in higher

education can transform the institutional culture and pedagogical practices in higher education (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Taylor, 2020).

No doubt tackling structural change must be collaborative; senior leaders are responsible for practicing what their mission and vision statements preach (Taylor, 2020). Implementing diversity goals into the institution's organizational culture targets the values and beliefs in the institutional environment for change (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Taylor, 2020). Gasman, Abiola, and Travers (2015) state that institutions must consider diversifying their campuses at all levels. According to Aserieas et al. (2017), no leadership style is best suited to implement the diversity agenda in colleges and universities. Instead, it is not the leadership style that matters as much as the collective efforts needed to enact issues of transformative change (LePeau, Hurtado & Williams, 2019; Taylor, 2020).

It is common on university websites to find diversity, equity, and inclusion messaging that describes the importance of acceptance, respect, and tolerance (Taylor, 2020). LePeau, Hurtado, and Williams (2019) suggest that colleges and universities almost ubiquitously espouse the values of diversity, inclusion, and social justice values in their mission statements, strategic plans, and websites. According to LePeau, Hurtado, and Williams (2019), it is critical to take a multi-dimensional approach to implement efforts to enact equitable campus environments in the work of everyone (i.e., faculty, staff, and students). Wilson (2015) suggests that for true diversity reform to take shape, there must be an effort to address diversity across the institution (Wilson, 2015). Adserieas et al. (2017) call attention to the role of other institutional leaders within the organization, suggesting they are also essential players in advancing the diversity agenda and driving the transformation of the organization's culture.

Lack of Underrepresented Leaders at the Senior Level

Institutions of higher learning sometimes maintain an implied social contract to keep a gendered and racial social order in the hiring and promotion of white individuals (Mullings, Gooden, & Spencer, 2020). While students and faculty of color are increasing in US higher education, minorities are still significantly underrepresented in senior-level leadership (Chang et al., 2014). Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) assert that African Americans remain underrepresented at the administrator level. White males are highly represented in upper-level administrative positions, and people of color are represented in lower-level administrative positions (Jackson, 2000; Jackson, 2003). According to a survey by the American Council on Education (2017), only seventeen percent of college presidents are racial minorities, and only five percent are women of color. While national demographic data on faculty, governing boards, and presidents are readily available, there are limited common data sets delineating a demographic breakdown for entry-, mid-, and senior-level positions (Betts et al., 2009).

Expanding the Diversity Pipeline

Historical legacies, prejudice, and racism persist across predominantly White institutions as there are limited numbers of people of color at senior level positions (Gasman, Abiola & Travers, 2015; Taylor, 2020). Strategically aligning and incorporating diversity efforts into succession planning and management practices could enhance diversity and prepare the next generation of leaders through the development and inclusion of minority professionals (Jackson, 2017, p. 2). Cultivating a pathway to senior leadership positions for individuals of color begins with pipeline development (Taylor, 2020) and mentoring. According to Reed (2017), more intentional efforts are needed to build career pipelines for diverse individuals. In essence,

leadership succession planning is not mere vacancy planning but a proactive approach to the systemic development of leadership capabilities with a long-term perspective (Siambi, 2022).

Mentoring is an integral component of success for faculty and administrators (Alger, 2000; Taylor, 2020); therefore, mentors can have a critical effect on the career paths of individuals who aspire to advance in higher education administration (Brown, 2005; Taylor, 2020). Gonzalez (2010) argues that successful organizations should engage in a considerable amount of teaching, mentoring, and coaching to identify, develop and utilize existing talent, including the talent of women and minorities. Such approaches, when embedded at every level in the institution (Cavanaugh, 2017; Dennis, 2016; Richards, 2016; Wilson, 2016), are beneficial for increasing the participation of women and minorities in academic leadership (Cavanaugh, 2017; Washington, 2016).

Reed (2017) suggests that to increase the diversity pipeline; institutions should educate about the leadership role, encourage leadership development that allows individuals to grow and cross boundaries, and encourage their selection for institution-wide committees or other opportunities for professional growth, to name a few. According to Long et al. (2013), proactive measures like these ensure that the leadership is committed to the organization's values, mission, and strategic plan by intentionally developing employees within the organization for advancement.

Conclusion

The literature review findings illustrate the challenges and opportunities university presidents face when building a senior team after a presidential leadership transition. Findings from the literature review served as a guide to establishing the framework for this study,

Likewise, the literature review influenced the research methodology for this study and was a reference when analyzing the data.

There is limited literature on presidential transitions and succession planning in higher education. Additionally, there are gaps in the literature on the team-building experiences of university presidents and senior team members. This research study adds to the literature on senior team building after a presidential transition.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This narrative research study examined the stories of five university presidents and six senior leadership team members to understand their experiences and decision-making processes while the senior leadership team was formed after the presidential transition. Chapter three is divided into three sections, research design, data collection, and data analysis.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do university presidents in higher education form their leadership teams?
2. How do diversity, equity, and inclusion influence presidents' decisions when appointing members to a senior team?
3. What are university leaders' pathways to presidential leadership teams?
 - a. How do direct reports to university presidents make meaning of their experiences as the senior team is established after a presidential transition?
4. What factors are perceived by the university president and senior team members to contribute to the promotion or retention of leaders during a leadership transition?

Research Design

In this research study, I used a qualitative narrative research design to explore senior team building after the transition of a university president. Stake (2010) suggests that qualitative research focuses primarily on human perception and understanding. This approach was appealing to me because it seeks the understanding of individuals in a personal way. Qualitative research considers the perception of the participants and how their experiences shape and affect their lives.

The methodology employed in this study is narrative inquiry using interviews. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), narrative inquiry studies the ways humans experience the world. This type of qualitative research approach is a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of the participants through their stories (Creswell, 2003; Overend, 2011). Narrative research involves a relatively small number of participants, typically from two to fifteen (Alvarado, 2021; Riesmman & Quinney, 2005; Squire, 2013).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants for this study. Etikan (2016) states that the purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate selection of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants (Taylor, 2021; Tongo, 2007). The participants targeted for this study were sitting university presidents and senior leaders at public higher education institutions that went through a presidential transition within the last six years. For this study, senior leadership team members refer to vice presidents and executives who report directly to a university president (titles include executive vice president, vice president, senior vice president, provost, chief of staff, executive board secretary, and university secretary). An additional criterion for senior leaders was that they served at the institution in some capacity upon the arrival of the new president. (These leaders were inherited senior team members or promoted to the senior team.)

Electronic invitations were sent to university presidents and senior leadership team members at public institutions of higher education who have been in their roles for two to five years. In addition to the electronic invitations, my colleagues also shared information about this study with senior leaders within their networks.

Eleven participants were selected for the study and interviewed: five university presidents, two chiefs of staff/board professionals, and four vice presidents. This was a diverse group of individuals, including persons of color, women, and men (see tables one and two). The senior leadership team members who participated in this study came from multiple higher education institutions within the United States. The institutions that these individuals work at are Predominately White Institutions. Predominately White Institution (PWI) is a term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Jackson. 2018; Lomotey, 2010).

The participants' roles varied at each institution, with many experiencing numerous presidential transitions. Some of the participants initially served in interim capacities. They were later promoted to permanent roles on the senior team, while others were a part of the inherited team and were promoted or remained in their current positions. Of the university presidents interviewed, only one of the five was an internal candidate.

Figure 2

Demographics of University Presidents

Pseudonym	Title	Details of Hire	Sex	Self-Identified Racial Identity
Dante	President	Internal Hire	Male	White
Jerome	President	External Hire	Male	White
Tyrone	President	External hire	Male	White
Donna	President	External hire	Female	White
Sheila	Chancellor (President)	External hire	Female	White

Profiles – University Presidents

Donna serves as chancellor (president) at a public university on the east coast of the United States. She has been in this role for roughly three years. She was an external candidate, and this is her second presidency. She reports to the university system office and the Board of Trustees.

Shelia is a university president at a public university on the east coast of the United States. She has been in this role for roughly five years. She was an external candidate, and this is her second presidency. She reports to the Board of Trustees.

Tyrone serves as president of a university system in the Midwest. He has been president for a little over three years. He was an external candidate with prior university presidential experience. He reports to the Board of Trustees.

Dante serves as president at a public institution in the Midwest. He has been president for a little over three years. He was an internal candidate. He reports to the Board of Trustees.

Jerome serves as president at a public institution in the Midwest. He has been president for six years. He was an external candidate. This is his second presidency.

Figure 3

Demographics of Senior Leaders

Pseudonym	Title	Details of Hire	Sex	Self-Identified Racial Identity
Harriet	Chief of Staff and Board Secretary	Inherited	Female	White
Jaron	Vice President	Inherited	Male	White
Marcus	Senior Vice President	Interim, two promotions followed	Male	Black

Monique	Senior Vice President	Inherited, promotion followed	Female	Black
Paige	Executive Secretary to the Board (Chief of Staff)	Inherited, promotion followed	Female	White
Vanessa	Vice President	Interim, promotion followed	Female	White

Profiles – Senior Leadership Team

Harriet currently serves as chief of staff and board secretary at a public institution on the east coast of the United States. She was promoted to this title under her previous president. She was an inherited senior leadership team member for her current president. She reports to the president and to the board of trustees.

Jaron currently serves as vice president at a public institution in the Midwest. He was already on the senior leadership team at the time of his new president's transition. There have been no changes to his role. He reports to the president.

Marcus currently serves as senior vice president at a public institution in the Midwest. He was an internal candidate who served as interim vice president prior to being promoted permanently to vice president. He was later promoted to senior vice president. He reports to the president.

Monique currently serves as senior vice president at a public institution in the Midwest. She was a member of the new president's inherited leadership team. She was promoted to senior vice president shortly after her new president transitioned. She reports to the president.

Paige currently serves as executive secretary to the board (chief of staff) at a university system in the Midwest. She was recently promoted to this role. She reports to the president and the board of trustees.

Vanessa currently serves as vice president at a public institution in the Midwest. She was an internal candidate who served as interim vice president prior to being promoted permanently to vice president. She reports to the president and the foundation board.

Situating the Global Landscape

The participants in this narrative study serve as the senior leaders of higher education institutions who were part of a presidential transition during the COVID-19 Global Pandemic. Without much warning, personnel in higher education institutions abandoned face-to-face instruction in the mid-spring semester of 2020 and shifted rapidly to online learning (Anand & Hsu, 2020; Kruse et al., 2020; Smalley, 2020). According to many researchers, institutions of higher education should not underestimate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; the long-term impact of COVID-19 is not yet fully understood, and such results may transform education and how a university president leads in the foreseeable future (Gednalske, 2022; Kelderman, 2020; Kruse et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2020).

Also worth noting, while educational leaders were trying to navigate a shift in leadership priorities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, they also had to grapple with how racism impacts their personal and professional lives (Grace et al., 2022). The killing of George Floyd and other unarmed Black Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic caused social unrest nationally and abroad (Anand & Hsu, 2020). These murders happened when many were home during quarantine and the business of day-to-day living was disrupted. Moreover, this new reckoning with racial injustice prompted new insights and dialog about systemic racism, power, privilege, bias, and inequity at higher education institutions and beyond (Grace et al., 2022; Simien & Wallace, 2022). These extenuating factors may have influenced how presidents decided to select their teams, particularly related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Data Collection

The following section includes the data collection methods for this qualitative study.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate the data for this study. Mathers, Fox, and Hunn (1998) state that semi-structured interviews involve open-ended questions based on the topic areas the researcher wants to cover. The interviews were in-depth and approximately 45-60 minutes long. The interview questions were developed to create a space for the participants to share their experiences. In preparation for the interviews, I held a mock interview with a critical friend to develop comfort with the interview questions and approach. Rehearsing the interview helped me become more comfortable with asking questions. This assisted me in making necessary improvements to the interview questions (see Appendix C/D). This rehearsal also helped with anticipating any challenges and developing strategies to expand each question depending on the participant's responses (Grossman, 2014). After the mock interview, I was prepared to facilitate the interviews.

To prepare the participants for the interviews, I shared details regarding what to expect during the interview. I provided the options for the interview format (phone call, Microsoft Teams or Zoom). This allowed the participants to select which interview format was most comfortable for them. All individuals chose the virtual Microsoft Teams option except for one who opted for Zoom. Lastly, all participants received the informed consent to participate protocol in advance of the interview (see Appendix B).

The set of questions differed between university presidents and senior administrators. The interview questions included topics regarding their professional background, leadership

philosophy, professional development, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and more. Below are a few of the interview questions asked in each of the groups:

University President Interview Questions:

1. Describe your leadership philosophy:
2. What insights were given to you about the inherited leadership from internal and external stakeholders during your transition?
3. What attributes, skills or qualities were considered when retaining, promoting, or selecting someone to serve on the senior team?
4. How did diversity, equity, and inclusion guide your decision-making process?

Senior Administrator Interview Questions:

1. Describe your leadership philosophy:
2. Describe your role and responsibilities at the time of the presidential transition:
3. What if any changes to your role or division occurred during the transition?
4. Describe any professional development, mentoring, or other leadership development opportunities that you participated in before your role:

In most cases, the participants did not have difficulty responding to the questions in depth. However, there were times when I had to reiterate or rephrase the questions. Stake (2010) asserts that researchers can sometimes push respondents to sharper concentration by asking them to examine and respond to a specific statement, story, artifact, or quotation. The open-ended nature of the interview questions provides opportunities for the participants to share in more detail; if the interviewee has difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer can use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further (Mathers, Fox & Hunn, 1998). Many of the conversations from the interviews extended

beyond the question sets. In addition to responding to the interview questions, the participants were interested in hearing about my professional plans and offered advice and resources. I believe this was due to how I conducted the interview.

Transcription

A transcript is a verbatim documentation of a recorded interview, a tool that helps qualitative researchers make sense of and understand interviewees' experiences and perceptions (McLellan, MacQueen & Neidig, 2003). In constructing a transcript, researchers are constructing the narratives for analysis (Alvarado, 2021, p. 19). In my study, the interview audio was transcribed verbatim via transcription software (Microsoft Teams and Zoom).

The initial transcripts captured the conversation verbatim; as such, there were duplications and numerous grammatical errors. Thorne (2020) states that verbal material often has stops and starts, grammatical errors, partial words, and repetitions as a person gathers their thoughts and tries to find the best way of communicating them to an interviewer. As such, the transcripts were edited to reduce grammatical errors, partial words, and repetitions. I made corrections to word duplications and words that were not captured correctly by the transcription. To ensure the quality of the transcript, I compared the recordings to the corrected transcripts to confirm that all recorded statements were captured and accurate. This process was completed twice to ensure accuracy. A copy of the transcript was shared with each of the participants.

Data Analysis

This section includes the procedures implemented to conduct the data analysis, including the development of case narratives and coding and thematic analysis. As I reviewed the recordings and compared them to the transcripts, I began to pick up on themes throughout the interviews. I then studied the interviews and transcripts multiple times. I picked up something I

hadn't noticed before with each read. As I continued to immerse myself in the data, underlying themes materialized. The time spent with the transcripts and the interviews assisted with developing the case narratives.

Case Narratives

This research study was developed with the intent of learning from the participants' experiences. Therefore, I felt it critical to include their stories within this dissertation in practice. Storytelling about an experience allows the narrator to appeal directly to the reader (Reismann & Quinney, 2005). After the transcripts were reviewed, I developed a case narrative for each participant. Case narratives are condensed stories that preserve the participant's experiences (Alvarado, 2021).

From the transcripts, I reorganized the question responses in a logical order that created somewhat of a timeline of the participants' background to the current experiences as a university president or a senior leadership team member. I organized the case narratives for university presidents as follows: professional background, leadership philosophy, diversity, equity, and inclusion influences on leadership, challenges, team building, skills and attributes of team members, and hindsight reflections. A slightly different order was followed for senior leaders as their interview questions were different. I organized the senior leaders' case narratives in this way: Professional background, leadership philosophy, diversity, equity, and inclusion influence leadership, professional development and mentoring, role at the institution, influences and challenges, experience with the new president, and hindsight reflections.

From there, I was able to reduce the text to a condensed narrative of the participants' experiences. I gave a significant amount of time to organizing and condensing each case into a

narrative that fully captured the details of each participant's story. Developing the case narratives was invaluable for the data analysis.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

After developing the case narratives, I began coding the narratives. According to Gibbs (2007), coding is a way of indexing or categorizing the text to establish a framework of thematic ideas about the data. Saldana (2015) described coding as arranging things data systematically or categorizing them. I used DEDOOSE software to organize the coding of the case narratives. I reviewed the case narratives numerous times and completed coding across each case narrative three times. Each time there was an adjustment to the code categorization. Coding helped me identify and generate themes. Within each round of coding, I identified themes that appeared across each of the university presidents and senior leaders. The coding process was essential as I sought to make meaning of the data.

Once I completed the coding, I engaged in a thematic analysis using the coding to highlight similarities and differences in patterns across all the participants' case narratives. The thematic analysis identifies patterns or themes within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Upon completing the thematic analysis, I examined how themes from the data responded to the research questions. Figure four illustrates the theme development from the coding.

Figure 4*Coding to Theme Development*

Theme	The decision-making of the new presidents on hiring after the presidential transition was influenced by diversity, equity, and inclusion.
Sub-themes	<p>University presidents and senior leaders found it essential to develop intentional strategies around diversity, equity, and inclusion (and belonging) at their respective institutions.</p> <p>All university presidents agreed that having a senior team should reflect the university and community population.</p>
Codes	<p>Chief DEI Officer Inclusion/Belonging Multiple Voices/Differing Opinions Reflect our Population Too White</p>
Theme	There were similarities to the pathway of senior leaders to the senior leadership team.
Sub-themes	All the senior leaders indicated they had participated in some leadership development through engagement within various professional associations and organizations.
Codes	<p>Journey Mentors Professional Associations Preparation/Experience</p>
Theme	The senior leaders found their new university president supportive.
Sub-themes	<p>The senior leaders often referred to their presidents as supportive, willing to provide financial resources, and give advice when needed.</p> <p>The senior leaders experienced various challenges navigating the COVID-19 as members of the senior leadership team.</p>
Codes	<p>Advice COVID-19 Supportive Resources Compassion Understanding Listen</p>
Theme	Institutional practices and governing bodies influenced university presidents' decision-making when building their senior team after the presidential transition.
Sub-themes	The university presidents prioritized the institution's needs and historical hiring processes as key priorities when building their senior leadership teams.

	The board of trustees was an indirect influence that appeared across the president's discussions on establishing their teams.
Codes	Board of Trustees Institutional Hiring Practices Needs of the Institution Internal/External National Search Turnover Promotion Inherited Team
Theme	Effective communication, collaboration, expertise, and trustworthiness were key attributes that influenced the new university presidents' decision-making.
Sub-themes	<p>A recurring theme in the interviews with university presidents and senior leaders was how effective communication is critical.</p> <p>When discussing their leadership philosophies, university presidents and senior leaders overwhelmingly responded that they do not micromanage (only Sheila indicated that she takes on a more hands-on approach); as such, they all expressed the need to have experts on their teams.</p> <p>The presidents and senior leaders talked about the importance of working with others.</p> <p>Trust and honesty are qualities mentioned by many of the university presidents, as necessary.</p>
Codes	Experts No micromanagement Communication Honesty Trustworthiness Measure Evaluate Team Players Collaboration Accountability

Positionality and Reflexivity

I am a Black Woman. I am a wife and mother of three sons. I am a daughter, a sister, an auntie, and a big cousin. I am a first-generation college graduate. I work in higher education at the mid-level administrator level. I was recently promoted to associate chief of staff in the President's Office during the data collection phase of this research study. I have experienced more than one presidential transition in higher education. As such, I have heard stories regarding presidential team building from senior leaders and understand some of the challenges based on my professional experiences. Hamilton (p. 12, 2020) states that a researcher's chosen methodology (and the theoretical framework from which it is developed) influences how research projects are devised, who the target population will be, the choice of method, the kind of questions asked during data collection, and the process of interpreting that data. This research study came to fruition due in part to my own research interests and in part because my institution was going through senior team building after a presidential transition.

I live and research as a Black Woman. My study is reflexive in nature because I evaluate and analyze my actions in relation to the research (process and practice) and the research participants. Reflexivity refers to how researchers to take inventory of position and power when undertaking a research study. My background and experiences in higher education have no doubt influenced this study. However, a reflexive approach challenges me to understand my own subjectivity to best represent the participants. Hamilton (2020) suggests that researchers have the responsibility and power to represent participants' lived experiences, and that is a result of engaging in a project of reflexivity.

Additionally, Crowe et al. (2011) suggest that theoretical lenses should not constitute a straitjacket, and cases should not be "forced to fit" the theoretical framework employed. The

framework for this study was considered throughout the data collection and analysis. There were many times when the experiences described in the interviews did not line up with what the framework suggested. I reviewed the data with a reflexive approach to gain an understanding and not simply reaffirm personal assumptions or force the data and findings to fit the framework. As I discuss below, one tool I used to promote my reflexivity was my researcher journal.

Watt (2007) suggests that journaling is an introspective record of a researcher's work that helps them take stock of biases, feelings, and thoughts, so they can understand how these may influence the research. Journaling allowed me to track personal reflections after hearing from each of the participants. It was interesting to me to hear from the participants and consider if their responses were in line with the limited research or how their answers related to the framework that guided the study. I made sure to notate items that were in support or opposition to the framework. For the most part, the framework was not lining up to what was been shared from the participants. The journal helped me check my assumptions.

In the journal, I also captured reflections on the interview and noteworthy moments that benefited me as a professional, such as cautionary advice about how I should prepare for a presidential transition. I also noted statements and nonverbal responses that stood out during the interviews. For example, during one of the interviews, one of the participants cried while sharing a story. Bacon (2014) states that journaling informs the mapping of self and research through an intuitive, albeit reflexive, experience.

The journal was vital as I analyzed the data. I was able to reference the journal for pertinent notes about similarities and underlying themes that materialized as I interviewed each participant. I also took additional notes as I began to identify themes during the coding process. I

revisited the journal to cross-reference earlier notes and notes taken during the data analysis process to ensure that I hadn't missed anything.

Critical Friends

I shared the codes, themes, and thematic analysis with critical friends and a validation group as reviewers of the data analysis. McNiff and Whitehead (2011) suggest that practitioner researchers should aim to submit the data and findings to rigorous critique at all stages, including asking critical friends to provide feedback on the data, emerging analyses, and ideas. Critical friends can be other colleagues, clients, students, or anyone who will give a sympathetic but critical hearing (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Samaras (2011) defined critical friends as trusted colleagues with whom researchers can seek support and validation of their research to gain new perspectives in understanding and reframing their interpretations.

The dissertation chair provided additional validation for this research study. McNiff and Whitehead (2011) describe validation groups as scrutinizing evidence and listening to knowledge claims. The chair and critical friends reviewed many aspects of the research process for this study, from the research study proposal through the dissertation. Engaging with the chair and critical friends was essential for accountability and determining whether claims and evidence were plausible.

Ethics

Many of the participants expressed their concerns about confidentiality and protecting their identity. Their personal and identifying data were redacted from the transcripts, and a pseudonym was assigned to each participant. When reflecting on their leadership transition, many of the participants shared stories that included national events that took place on their campus or in the city where their campus resides that would identify them as participants. As

such, the descriptions of universities, locations, and specific circumstances that would become identifiers of the institutions were also redacted.

Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 73) state to help you recognize distortions, fabrications, and omissions, you build redundancy into the design by asking the same question in different ways to check the results. The interview questions were created with some redundancy to allow participants multiple opportunities to opine on the subject. Questions regarding external influences on team building were reiterated with an opportunity to discuss any additional influences. Finally, the last interview question allowed the participants to offer hindsight reflections. In most cases, the participants often reflected on the same stories. The interview questions allowed participants to discuss their teams and share their experiences with the presidential transition and senior team building. In some cases, the stories that were shared were public and verifiable.

This study followed protocol to obtain Institutional Review Board approval Kent State Institutional Review Board. Additionally, the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative was completed. This training is designed to assist universities and other institutions with necessary training regarding ethical research practices, including an overview of the National Commission Belmont Report of 1979. Respect of Persons from the National Commission Belmont Report (1979) incorporates at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection. All participants were respected throughout the research process.

Limitations

I recognize that due to the positionality of the individuals interviewed, they may not have fully disclosed the entirety of their experiences after the presidential transition. These individuals

serve in the most senior positions at an institution and are responsible for making decisions that impact thousands of people. Moreover, this is their livelihood, and they may not want to jeopardize their employment. Additionally, I did not interview individuals who were removed from the team, so the voices and experiences of those who were terminated or who voluntarily resigned are missing from this study. Lastly, I interviewed a small sample of individuals who serve as presidents and senior leaders in higher education. While their experiences on team building and serving on the senior leadership team shed light on senior team building after a presidential transition, they cannot be broadly generalized.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

I completed this study to learn from the experiences and reflections of individuals who serve as senior team members during a leadership transition and learn from university presidents who have developed their senior teams during their leadership transition. The following research questions guided the study:

- How do university presidents in higher education form their leadership teams?
- How do diversity, equity, and inclusion influence presidents' decisions when appointing members to a senior team?
- What are university leaders' pathways to presidential leadership teams?
 - How do direct reports to university presidents make meaning of their experiences as the senior team is established after a presidential transition?
- What factors are perceived by the university president and senior team members to contribute to the promotion or retention of leaders during a leadership transition?

Through the data analysis processes, I identified several themes and subthemes. A central theme was the significant influence of diversity, equity, and inclusion on the presidential transition relative to decision-making, elevating voices, developing strategies, and team building. Another theme identified was the pathway to the senior leadership team for senior leaders, including their professional experiences, mentoring, and professional development. An additional theme captured how the senior leaders experienced support in their role as senior leadership team members from their new president while navigating the global COVID-19 pandemic. Another theme that affected the new university presidents' decision-making was the

senior leaders' key attributes, including effective communication, collaboration, expertise, and trustworthiness. Lastly, institutional practices and governing bodies influenced university presidents' decision-making when building their senior teams after the presidential transition.

The following section presents the findings of the thematic analysis of the 11 case narratives. While some themes were unique to university presidents and senior leadership team members, I found that several themes were shared between university presidents and senior leaders.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Influences on the Presidential Transition

The decision-making of the new presidents on hiring after the presidential transition was influenced by diversity, equity, and inclusion. There was much discussion in interviews about how diversity, equity, and inclusion influenced the presidential transition for all the presidents, including its role in creating positions, elevating voices, and strategic planning. This included a desire for university presidents to have a diverse leadership team that reflected the campus population, which would also add differing perspectives and opinions to their leadership team. The influence of diversity, equity, and inclusion also included decision-making on establishing strategic plans with a diversity, equity and inclusion lens and adding a chief diversity officer to the senior leadership team to lead university efforts on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Four of the five university presidents created a senior-level chief diversity officer position shortly after their arrival. This position already existed on one of the president's leadership teams.

Donna felt that diversity, equity, and inclusion work is "critically important." Therefore, one of her first hires was the university's associate vice chancellor and chief diversity officer. She wanted to appoint a new Vice-Chancellor, but because she is part of a university system, she

did not have the autonomy to make that decision independently. Instead, she had to ask permission from the system office.

I was told I could not have that (vice-chancellor), but I could have an associate vice-chancellor (AVC). I created a new position, which was an AVC for DEI, which reports directly to me, which is unusual for an AVC to report to a chancellor, but I did it anyway because I told the campus that I believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion is important and that I was going to have somebody sit on the cabinet who reported to me in this position and we've done that.

Even though the position was not at the level that Donna wanted, she proceeded with the hire because it was critically important for her to have a member on her team dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

Elevating Diverse Voices

Two of the university presidents and many of the senior leaders discussed having a diverse senior leadership team adds differing, critical voices and opinions to the leadership table and within the university community. Tyrone said, "You make better decisions when you have diverse voices at the table." Vanessa shared similar thoughts. She said,

I've always strived for voices and representation from different kinds of people ... who wants to be surrounded by the same kind of people? ... I find it a chance for me to grow as well as a chance for the entire team to grow.

Jerome thought it was essential to have diversity among guest speakers and to host programs to highlight different viewpoints and build community. He said,

We demonstrate the value of diversity in the various speakers and programs we host throughout the year ... We are the most diverse institution in our state, so to be on this

team, you must understand and embrace diversity ... Some incidents bring heated responses, and we must have a team at the cabinet level that understands that.

The thought of differing voices was shared by some of university presidents and senior leaders to improve decision-making and opportunities for growth for the senior leadership team and the broader university community.

Developing Intentional Strategies

University presidents and senior leaders found it essential to develop intentional strategies around diversity, equity, and inclusion (and belonging) at their respective institutions. Donna shared that they completed a strategic plan during her first year and that “it (diversity, equity, and inclusion) is infused within our strategic plan.” Monique and her leadership team implemented a campus-wide climate survey to identify where there was work to do and used that study to inform decisions. She stated,

I would probably say that I’m more around inclusion ... I think when you have diversity ... but if people don’t feel included or a part of it, diversity is for not ... I wanted to understand how our staff was feeling ... what are the pain points ... what are the things that we know we need to be including and addressing to create an environment that staff wants to continue to both work and play in. We use that data from the climate survey to help inform everything that we do as an executive leadership team.

Monique and her team used the climate survey to inform their decision making during their reorganization. This approach assisted her with creating an environment that her team wanted to be in. Marcus shared a comparable attitude, recognizing that the university should live its values, seek out inequity and use what is learned to inform and strategies to act within the practice. He said,

Living diversity, equity, and inclusivity, and practice, and not just saying that we value that or writing that's who we are, but actually living that in practice ... looking at places where inequities are rearing their head to try to be solution-oriented about remedying those inequities are great passion points of mine ... how do we use what we've learned in those spaces to inform our practice?

Like Monique, it was critical for Marcus to take what has been learned to inform his practice, to live diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The Senior Team should Reflect the Population

All university presidents agreed that having a senior team should reflect the university and community population. Dante asserted,

As a public university, we ought to reflect the population of the public at a minimum. So, when I became Provost, I really committed to the admission of students ... to do all we could to have a diversity that's more reflective of our state's diversity. We've largely reached that with our student body, but we have not with our professors, and we have not with our leaders. So that's that was important to me, not just because I was president, and it was the cabinet because I think public universities should be reflective of the population of the state.

Tyrone suggested that close attention must be given to the candidate pool when executing a search noting,

You get the pool of candidates that you get, and from there, you must hire the best candidate and sometimes, that can be challenging. So, I'm a big believer that the most important step really is building the pool of candidates.

Tyrone and Dante described hiring a diverse cabinet member as a “win” and a “slam dunk” for the institution when the candidate pool provided a diverse candidate whose experience aligned with the institution's needs.

Shelia adds that having a diverse team holds the institution accountable, stating,

It (DEI) has continually informed it not only because we're a public institution with a commitment to inclusive excellence but because of the visuals, the optics of the senior team, or for that matter, the board of trustees, or anything else you know you got going on. Not only for the perspectives but for the community to know that we're not just saying one thing and doing another thing like it was really important to build that team that way.

Shelia emphasized the importance of having a team that matched the university's commitment to diversity. Sheila inherited a diverse senior leadership team comprised of men and women, three of whom were black males. She said,

When making future hires, I will be sensitive to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It doesn't mean replacements will be the same; it just means that I want to be sensitive to the overall profile of who the cabinet is. Turnover isn't all the time, so you have to really be sensitive to that because people stay in the role for a while, otherwise, you could be locked in for a long time to a certain profile that maybe doesn't reflect your commitments to diversity. I'm pleased to say I, I don't know, got to be a national story, but it was certainly a regional story here. We now currently have seven schools, academic schools. ... all seven are run by women, and I'm pleased about that.

Jerome discussed how too few persons of color are in senior leadership positions. Noting that specifically, he had a diverse team, but in his opinion, it was still “not diverse enough.” Tyrone said that the institution was “very big” on trying to increase diversity,

I will say it was interesting when I went to this institution, you know, it was very big on trying to increase diversity, which we had never had any African American vice presidents. There are no African American Deans. And the first three vice presidents searches I did were all white males. And I was like, oh, you got to be kidding me because, like, they're trying to increase diversity. But at the end of the day, they were far and away the best choices.

Jaron and Vanessa recognized progress with hiring more diverse individuals but acknowledged that there is still work to be done. Jaron stated, “I think we’ll continue to learn ... continue to do better ... it’s my hope.” Vanessa noted how her president was instrumental in funding support to further diversity in her team. She said,

My president has supported with funding and support as well as the support from human resources, student affairs, and working together with our vice president of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We’ve really reached out much farther than we ever have before in our recruiting ... I’m really proud of our record in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and I think we can only get better.

University presidents and senior leaders shared an overwhelming response to the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion when building a team. While none of the leaders stated they hired a person of color because of race alone, they all indicated the need for the senior leadership team to reflect the university community. Because some individuals remain in their leadership roles

for long periods of time, the university presidents stressed the importance of a diverse candidate pool.

The Pathway to the Senior Leadership Team

Senior leaders did not initially begin their careers with intentions set on serving on the senior leadership team. This section highlights the professional journey of the senior team members. The pathway for each senior leader was filled with academic pursuits, professional experiences, professional development opportunities, and other senior leaders who recognized their contributions and accomplishment. The senior leaders climbed the ranks through administrative roles, with many years of experience within their professional fields. Mentors proved invaluable for some leaders, as did engagement through professional organizations.

Engagement with Professional Organizations and Mentorship

All the senior leaders indicated they had participated in some leadership development through engagement within various professional associations and organizations over the years, resulting in mentorships and professional growth for many of the senior leaders. In addition, they described organizations as ways to learn about their profession and connect with individuals in similar roles or positions across different institutions.

Attending professional conferences was critical to learning the basics of Harriet's role early in her career but more important to her were the relationships she has built over the years, so much so that she remains actively engaged today. Harriet stated,

But the fact of the matter is, being involved in both of those organizations gave me access to wonderful people who do the same kinds of work that I do, and there's not very many of us on a campus that does it, so it can get a little lonely. Knowing that there are people out there who kind of understand the challenges that you face, it's really helpful.

When Monique reflected on her experience with a professional organization, she recalled the relationships she established over the years; she referred to them as "kitchen cabinet members" members," she said,

I had a lot of really amazing mentors who saw a lot more in me than I planned for myself ... who were great sponsors and supporters of me through ... organization as a very young professional early in my career.

These individuals helped Monique when she started her career and have continued to support her over the years. She is still very involved in the organizations, even though she is no longer in the area.

Paige didn't have much engagement with professional organizations over the years. Now that she is in this new role, she is hopeful to participate more actively in two professional organizations later this year, she stated,

Now that I am in the new role with ... I'm planning on probably attending that conference as well just to network and learn from others who are in similar roles on how you can grow and change to serve your board and president better.

Marcus is active and engaged in a variety of professional organizations. He reflected fondly on his mentor, to whom he attributed much of his success, including his current role. He and his mentor are now colleagues as they currently serve in the same role at different institutions. He described her as family,

She's more like a member of my family than she is like the maybe typical mentor. She has been invaluable to my trajectory professionally she has certainly served as a mentor and in some ways, she's been a sponsor. She has definitely put me on to different professional opportunities, both employment as well as leadership and professional

development, and continues to do that today. She is herself a sitting vice-chancellor. So, we occupy the same role now, which is wild even to think about. We've walked our career paths together and she has been such a value added to my own professional and personal trajectory, and to be quite honest with you, I don't believe that I would be sitting in the seat that I am had it not been for her mentoring. So yes, the leadership development workshops have been great. Yes, those fellowships have been awesome. The number one driver, I think of my professional trajectory, though, has been the mentoring that I've received.

For Marcus, the relationship went beyond the typical professional mentorship and developed into a valuable relationship that he treasures.

Jaron and Vanessa had differing involvement with leadership development and mentoring, but the effect of their experiences is still making an impact on them as senior leaders today. Jaron opined on a leadership training that he participated in,

[My president] invested in me to go to a leadership seminar which was a week-long ... that actually taught me what I wish I had learned earlier ... to truly value difference in diversity and to understand what it meant to have diversity within a team.

Vanessa shared that she learned to be a good leader from one of her mentors. She stated, "He taught me a lot about being a leader and appreciating people on your team ... that has led me all my life." Vanessa valued the lessons learned from this mentor. The lessons guide her leadership and how she puts great emphasis on caring for her team.

Harriet has actively been engaged in two professional organizations over her career. She said that the conferences put on by the organizations provided "logistical skill-based kinds of

sessions that people need, particularly those early in their career.” What she found most helpful were the opportunities to network with others like her. She said,

But the fact of the matter is, is that though being involved in both of those organizations gave me access to wonderful people who do the same kinds of work that I do, and there's not very many of us (chiefs of staff) on a campus right that do it so it can get a little lonely. And knowing that there are people out there who kind of understand the challenges that you face, it's really helpful.

Harriet believed she had a moral obligation to give back to other new professionals in the organization,

I feel strongly in giving back, and so I think if you build a skill base and have the experience like I've had the great fortune to build over the years, it's selfish to not share that. And so, I take opportunities all the time to mentor newer professionals and do presentations at national conferences because I feel passionate about that.

As an active member of two associations, Heather continues to give back to new professionals serving as chief of staff. The connections she made within the organizations were integral to her development and she hopes to continue to do the same for new professionals.

The senior leaders did not begin their careers with the goal of serving on the senior leadership team. This path was charted from them as they continued to advance professionally in various administrative roles. The engagement with professional associations and the mentorships acquired through the professional organizations were regarded as some of the most impactful to the senior leaders on their professional journey and integral to their success. So much so that many are still engaged and active even though they are in senior roles.

Senior Team Members found University Presidents Supportive

Most of the senior leaders referred to their presidents as supportive as they transitioned into their roles on the senior leadership team while also navigating the COVID-19 global pandemic. Many opined on the evaluation and goal-setting process with the new president, with the majority stating that there is a collaborative approach to goal setting connected to the president's overarching goals and the institution's strategic priorities. They all appeared to be especially proud to say their president is not a micromanager and trusts them to do the work they were hired to do.

Throughout the interviews with the senior leadership teams, they often recalled experiences with the new president relative to their own leadership and decision-making. Vanessa said the following about her university president, “A couple of things I appreciate about my president. He is not a micromanager, he trusts what the team does, and he’s there if I need him ... I can count on him.” Marcus shared that his president was supportive and cared for others throughout the organization and supported opportunities for growth, he said, “What I can appreciate about my president ... He helps us as leaders be equipped to be successful ... He does that through providing financial resources to participate in professional development and leadership development.”

Marcus found his university president supportive with advice and funding support when needed. He has participated in several leadership trainings and is actively engaged in a variety of professional organizations, all of which are supported by his university president.

Senior Team Members Faced Challenges Navigating COVID-19

Senior leadership team members shared various challenges, including the pressures of decision-making that would impact the university community, building a team in a virtual

environment, communication barriers, division reorganizations, and layoffs. Marcus referred to leading in the pandemic as a lesson in leading; he said, “It was a great lesson in learning to lead in turbulent times.” I could hear a change in their tone as they discussed various challenges in reorganizing their teams. Monique, Vanessa, and Marcus experienced divisional reorganizations in their roles' early stages related to the pandemic, including a realignment to support students better, layoffs due to a decrease in revenue due to the pandemic, and the acquisition of units from another division. Monique said that while she and the president “had a short experience together ... we were also able to realign the division, even in the midst of going through the pandemic so that we could better support students.” Marcus also took on a division reorganization that included the acquisition of several units he stated,

You're making a decision that impacts the lives of thousands and thousands of people with little to no information, with an ever-changing pandemic that is unknown and really have to be able to be graceful in that leadership during that time of great uncertainty.

He felt the pressures of the impact of the remote environment because of COVID-19. When he reflected to the transition to his new role with the president, he said, “We were working remotely ... How do you engage with staff and the work while they are dealing ... personally and professionally.” The weight of his new role and the responsibility of decisions that impacted thousands was a heavy burden to carry. But he was not alone in carrying the weight and overstated that he could “count on my president.”

While Marcus took on more team members, Vanessa was charged with a reorganization that charged her with cutting her team by 35 people. She said,

“That was the hardest thing I had to do.”

Of all the challenges described Vanessa's charge of laying off 35 employees stood out the most. She cried when discussing, and for a moment, I could visually see the profound impact that decision had on her personally and professionally.

While all the senior leaders interviewed shared a positive professional relationship with their university president, some of their relationships were awkward when they started working together, partly due to the nature of the role. The chief of staff/board professionals had the most challenging time due to the nature of their role and the COVID-19 pandemic. A chief of staff's primary role is to support the president at the highest level. For this professional relationship to work properly, a level of trust must be established while also learning about the new president's leadership and working style.

Both Harriet and Paige spoke of the initial awkwardness due to the remote environment of the pandemic and the time it takes to establish a good working relationship. Harriet shared that her current president had been a president at another institution. There she did not have a chief of staff, so the role was different for the new president. She said, "And so when she came into the role, I don't know that I've ever said this to her, but I don't think she knew what to do with me." Not having the daily face-to-face interaction was challenging. Harriet said, "When covid came to town the whole dynamic changed." The changes due to covid coupled with adjusting to a new leader was at times challenging. Things that Harriet would normally have done for the president, like speech writing and other support functions this new president would do for herself. Harriet would have to adjust with her new presidents' approach to the role, and she did. She said, "my role in terms of helping to facilitate and manage the cabinet is greater now than it was [under the previous president]. Harriet was successful in building a relationship with her new president and she managed to build trust, which expanded her responsibilities.

The getting to know the president stage was different than what Paige was used to due to the remote environment of the pandemic, still she and her president found a way to develop a functional working relationship. Paige said,

I wish we didn't have covid in the beginning. I would come in two to three days a week in the mornings or, you know, and even hour meetings. We kept our space because COVID was new enough, and we would have our masks on and trying to respect each other's privacy. But you know, really, he didn't know me. I didn't know him. I'm trying to learn his leadership style. But you're not working with someone you know 8-10 hours a day like you ordinarily would. So, it was a different, definite, a unique transition, I will say. But ironically enough, it allowed us to get to know each other in a different capacity. Paige and her new president were able to find a way to get to know one another, even with the distance due to the pandemic.

Jaron was reflected on his president's leadership during the pandemic. Jaron described his university president as someone with principles he said, "My president had principles and values that guide him in his approaches ... that was helpful for all us ... helpful for me for sure." Jaron found his university president's leadership during the transition and the global pandemic helpful—for us all, implied the entire university community.

Overall, the experiences with the senior leaders and their new presidents were described as positive because of the support they received from their university presidents. There, however, were some occurrences during the transition that were challenging to them as senior team members, including the reorganization of divisions, large group layoffs, and leading in a new role during a global pandemic. These challenges did not overshadow the positive experiences that each of these senior team members has developed with their university presidents.

Necessary Key Attributes of Senior Leaders

All university presidents described the key attributes necessary to serve on the senior leadership team. Expertise, effective communication, collaboration, and trustworthiness were described as essential.

Expertise

When discussing their leadership philosophies, university presidents and senior leaders overwhelmingly responded that they do not micromanage (only Sheila indicated that she takes on a more hands-on approach); as such, they all expressed the need to have experts on their teams. Many said they offer guidance and support when needed, but the preference is for these leaders to lead as the experts. Dante stated,

I really do think you just hire good people, and you give them the responsibilities to do the work. I don't want them to be afraid of making mistakes. I just don't want them to make the same mistakes more than once. My philosophy is to let them do their jobs and give them advice when they ask for it and help them stay out of trouble. I just don't try to make daily decisions that they ought to be making.

Dante did not want to be in the day-to-day operations of his senior leaders and expected them to take responsibility for their work, even if they made mistakes. Similarly, Tyrone said,

I surround myself with smart people and free them up and support them to do the good work that they do. When that happens, we tend to be really successful, and I found that in every role that I've had, you know, the better the people around me were, the better, more successful we were ... I would say with the people I hire, you know, they usually have more expertise in their area than I do, so 95% of the time I'm going along with what they

want or what they think is the best idea. and if I'm not, then I probably didn't hire the right person.

Tyrone believed that if he wasn't comfortable with the recommendations from his senior leadership team members 95% of the time, he probably did not make the right choice in hiring that leader.

Vanessa said, "You hire people that are experts in their field ... my job is to knock down walls and build bridges across the university ... to make their jobs easier." Vanessa felt that her role as a senior leader was to partner across the university to make the work of her team easier, not to micromanage her team. She said she tells her leadership team, "My role is not to mind your business." Like the others, Donna preferred a collaborative approach to leadership,

The leadership team here was used to my predecessor making all of the decisions, so it was an adjustment for the team. I expect the senior leaders to offer their suggestions and recommendations because if I have to make all the decisions, why do I have a senior leadership team? I'm not an expert in everything, I get information and I make decisions, but I rely heavily on the experts, and I want input. Over time they learned now stylistically, I expect them to have researched the topic, have an opinion, and be able to share it.

Except for one university president, most university presidents and senior leaders approached their work in collaboration with their senior leadership team members. Their preference for hiring the experts freed them up to work on things they felt they were supposed to do rather than get in the weeds of the teams of their leaders.

Effective Communication

A recurring theme in the interviews with university presidents and senior leaders was how effective communication is critical. Senior leaders and university presidents reflected on communication after the presidential transition. Sheila said,

I'm a hands-on leader who believes a lot in a lot of communication ... I do have a cabinet and a team that we do a lot of thinking together. But at the end of the day, I'm willing to say I'm going to make the call on that.

She put great emphasis on communication, which helps her when making decisions. Likewise, effective communication was critical to Dante. He stated,

One skill that's really important to me is to be able to clearly explain in a non-specialist language what you're doing, why you're doing it, and why it's needed to be done. So, if you're a vice president and you use a lot of lingo, that's from your disciplinary field or you're just not very clear at communicating, that's really difficult for me. So, one non-negotiable skill set for me is the ability to communicate what you're doing, why you're doing it, how you're doing it, and use a language that's accessible to people that aren't in administration or in your academic field. That's really important.

Jaron reflected on his most recent and previous transitions with a new president, and in hindsight, he wished he had done a better job communicating in lay terms the contributions of his team. He said, "Have a clearer message of who we are as an organization or a contributing factor of the organization that was more succinct with greater evidence."

Most of the participants indicated that there were challenges with communication during the presidential transition due to the remote nature of communication because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Some challenges turned to frustration. Donna expressed this frustration; she said,

Well, so I came in COVID, which meant for the first, I'm going to say nine months a lot of my team I didn't even meet in person. I met them during the interview process, but I didn't sit in a room with them, and we were doing everything virtually right. So, some of them were really great about texting. I give everybody my cell number. They text, they communicate, and then it was interesting how some had a hard time with communications, right. So, you start thinking about the dynamics with all of that and how that worked. I mean, there were people who I hadn't actually been in a car driving to a meeting with or I hadn't been in my office, but I knew them because they were pretty regulars and saying, hey, we have an issue. Let's work through this. And then there were some people who just thought it was business as usual. I'm going to just do my own thing, and I don't really care if you're asking questions. I had a hard time with that. Lack of communication from some of her team was especially challenging for Donna, she ultimately removed the team member who had trouble with communicating.

Effective communication was considered a top priority for the university presidents. While they all recognized that the pandemic influenced the ways in which communication happened, it did not negate the desire to have it.

Collaboration

Many of the presidents and senior leaders talked about the importance of working with the other senior leadership team members to achieve strategic goals. Some university presidents found it essential not to work in silos and advantageous to work collectively across the institution. Jerome states, “You must be a team player ... one of the key things we talked about with the athletic director ... can we find someone that has some collaboration with academic affairs?” Tyrone shared a comparable thought, “We can be very siloed in institutions, and people

like to build their little fiefdoms. I don't think that works particularly well, so I'm looking for those who collaborate really well.” Jerome and Tyrone stressed the necessity of collective leadership and working beyond silos.

Collective leadership and collaboration were also key for Donna. She said,
 My leadership philosophy is to empower my people to the best of their abilities, hold them accountable, but be encouraging and nurturing, and continue to push so that we're all better and that collectively we communicate well and we're supporting each other and that we're continuously elevating.

She indicated that in her current presidency, the members of her inherited team were not used to a leader who sought to make collaborative decisions so there was an adjustment for her team members. She said “I'm not an expert in this thing, I get information, and I make decisions ... is an actual expert in this topic, so I want input. There was an expectation from Donna to have leaders who were willing to make collaborative decisions. Even though the final decision was in her hands, she would not make the decisions without the collective input from her team.

Trustworthiness

Trust and honesty are qualities that were mentioned by four of the five university presidents as necessary. One of the presidents indicated that those who were terminated from their inherited team were due in part because they couldn't trust what they were telling them about the work in their divisions within the organization. When Dante spoke of two individuals that he ultimately ended up replacing, he said the following,

So, I don't need to agree with you. Getting back to micromanagement, we don't have to agree. You can tell me, look, I'd really rather do it this way. But what you can't do is tell

me one thing and do another ... I just felt like overtime working with these individuals that I couldn't trust them.

Trust in the senior leaders' capabilities and performance was also a consideration. On Donna's team, lack of trust was described as a combination of not knowing what her team member was working on or what they were communicating. She explained, "So I kept trying to find out, like, what's going on? What's the real story?" Sheila referred to her trust as a way to describe the competence of some of her team members. She said, "I totally trust them. I don't look over their shoulder. They get the job done and they do it well." Sheila also described having trouble at times with evaluations and communicating with team members whom she did not trust; she said, "How do you tell a professional ... I'm not feeling compatibility with you or I'm not sure I trust you to get this done." Lastly, Tyrone indicated that he had to fire an individual who was engaged in unethical practices. Tyrone said,

There was one person (who wasn't a direct report) that I did fire ... we had one person in an area doing unethical things, misbehaving, just insubordinate, and it was at a point where it was, I knew it was not going to get better.

For Tyrone, the lack of trustworthiness for this individual was described as engaging in unethical behavior and being insubordinate.

While there were differences in how the university presidents described the importance of trustworthiness, it was evident that it was a priority to each of them. As for some, the lack of trust of some team members resulted in termination.

University presidents sought experts in their respective fields, effective communicators, a collaborative approach to the work, and trustworthiness. Likewise, it was critical for each president to have team members who communicated effectively and whom they could trust. The

university presidents wanted to be informed and trust what they were being told about the work and what was going on in senior leadership team members' respective areas.

Influences on Team Building for the New President

Each university president described important considerations that influenced them when building their senior teams. All university presidents inherited a senior leadership team (cabinet) when they became president. They knew early on that they would need to fill vacancies and, in some cases, replace members of their teams. Influences, including the board of trustees and the institution's needs, emerged as the university presidents described how they put their senior leadership team together.

Board of Trustees

The board of trustees was an indirect influence that appeared across the president's discussions on establishing their teams. The board's presence was felt as pressure during the team-building phase of the transition by university presidents and senior leaders. Concerns for ensuring that the board was in a good place were expressed throughout the various interviews. Sheila felt it was important to note that the board takes an interest in the senior leadership team stating that the board chair often asks her, "Do you have the right team?" She said, "I do report to the board, and the board's opinion is not determinative about who the team will be because they trust me, but it does matter to them." At Sheila's institution, members of the board serve on senior team search committees.

Tyrone shared similar experiences with board involvement, stating, "The board decided they needed to be more involved in the search process for vice presidents and for Deans and got involved in ways that were not productive or helpful." Tyrone shared how the board of trustees offered their perspective on his inherited team with his current and previous presidency. He

indicated that his previous board told him “That everyone on the inherited team except for one was incompetent and that I should replace everyone.” His current board offered a more balanced perspective on who was “good” and who was “problematic.” Even though his current board offered a balanced perspective, the board’s presence regarding his senior leadership team makeup was felt.

Dante expressed the importance of managing turnover to avoid concerns from the board of trustees. Turnover for the senior leadership team can come in different ways, including retirement, resignation, and termination. Dante, an internal candidate, had already worked alongside his inherited team for nearly ten years. He knew right away that he would need to make some changes.

When you think you need to make personnel changes, you should make them, but know that you may have other people come up to you and say we're leaving that you hadn't planned on. What does that look like to your trustees, for example? So, you're confident in your ability to explain to the trustees why you're removing these two people, but what if two becomes four? Now I must, you know, explain to them. No, no, no, the world isn't on fire.

Even though Dante didn’t indicate that the board offered any commentary on his team, nor did they sit on searches, he still acknowledged the importance of ensuring that the board understood what was going on as he established his team.

Likewise, many of the vice presidents also felt the pull and influence of the board of trustees, noting that when the relationship with the board of trustees is turbulent, there is a direct impact on the senior leadership team. As Paige stated, “All it takes is one bad relationship ...” Paige and Harriet work directly with the board of trustees as they have joint reporting to the

board of trustees and the university president. Similarly, Vanessa has joint reporting to the university president and the foundation board of directors for the university. All of them, in one way or another, described the need for harmony with members of the board and the university president. At some point on their journey, Paige and Harriet were told that they would report directly to the board between presidential transitions. However, after hiring the university president and developing a healthy board and president relationship, their positions remained, with each being promoted to higher-level positions.

Vanessa felt that she and the division's success required a healthy relationship with the board. She noted that while she currently had a good working relationship with her president and the board, that wasn't always the case. Vanessa shared that there was tension between the university and the foundation board when she began. She recalled,

It got off to a rocky start at first with the foundation board and the university president, but he (the president) worked really, really hard to mend that, and he's done it. And there is mutual respect, and they now meet quarterly and they're working together and that's a true testament to both of them and a big help to me because it helps me bring those two groups together and lets me serve both.

Donna shared how critical it was to be cautious regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to avoid drawing negative attention from the governing board. She said,

I have a general philosophy that we have to do the right thing for all of our people, and diversity, equity, and inclusion are critically important, but I have to watch the way I say it and the way I do it so that I don't draw unusual attention that comes and gets us into some trouble with governing bodies or with the legislature.

Given the current political landscape in the United States, where there is much discussion on higher education in politics, Donna would instead focus on the work and avoid attention from the governing board that would prevent the work. She said, “You spend more time-fighting battles than doing the good work that you need to do, so that's sort of my theory is let's do the good work and make sure we're moving forward.”

The importance of a functional and positive working relationship with the board of trustees became evident in the interviews. Whether direct or indirect, university presidents and senior leaders noted that having the board's support was critical and how it could become a burden when that relationship is not managed well.

The Institution

Many university presidents mentioned the hiring practices of the institution and strategic priorities being a top consideration when building their senior leadership teams. The institution's needs were a key component of Tyrone’s approach to leadership. He said, “It's not about you. It's always about the institution, the organization trying to make the organization better.” Tyrone prioritized making the institutions he served better a top priority.

Considering the institution's needs helped them determine if there was an internal candidate equipped with what was needed for the role or if they should look externally. Shelia stated, “I do try to think carefully about what institutionally is important for us right now.”

Tyrone said,

Sometimes the internal is so dysfunctional that you can't imagine anybody from the internal actually being able to do it ... there are other times where it is actually really functional and somebody internal, maybe kind of is the perfect fit.

Donna shared a similar view stating,

I've done some external hires, and then I've promoted some people internally ... With the external hires, I did the assessment as to whether we had the talent and the skills internally and whether that was the right match, we didn't ... I realized that going externally was the best route.

Dante knew early on that he would need to make some replacements to his team. He said,

I knew that a couple of vice presidents weren't doing their jobs all that well, and in both cases, I thought there would be other people that we could do better in a national search, and I knew their second in charge would be better even if we didn't do a national search.

Each of these university presidents considered what was best for the university and in doing so made considerations for internal candidates.

While none of the presidents noted that it was an influence, the national search was a standard hiring practice due to the institution's culture. Each university president referenced the national search in some manner. Jerome indicated that it is uncommon to do a closed search at his institution and that all hires are typically done with a "national search." Tyrone also stated, "Generally, we do national searches."

Dante and Tyrone both thought there would be challenges with executing national searches. Dante said, "I wasn't at all convinced we could run a vice presidential search as well fully remotely ... and yet we did." Tyrone shared similar concerns stating, "when I got here, I said, you know, I'll never hire anybody if I don't meet him face to face ... and three of the four people I've hired I've never met face to face before we hired them."

University presidents have significant considerations and influences when building a team. While the presidents ultimately had the autonomy to select whom they wanted to hire, promote, or remain on their team, these institutional priorities, hiring practices and governing

bodies directly impacted their team development. Each university president retained members of their inherited team after the transition and promoted an internal candidate to the senior team. For example, Marcus and Monique were promoted to senior vice president less than a year into their role.

For the most part, the university presidents took their time making decisions regarding members of their inherited team, not removing anyone from the team within the first six months except for Dante, who was an internal candidate. He already knew who was performing well on the cabinet, so he moved more quickly than other university presidents when removing a team member. In addition, the university presidents indicated that when deciding to let go of a team member, it was for a good reason.

The presidents explained they had various ways of evaluating the members of their inherited team, including one-on-one meetings, feedback from individuals in the university community, a deterioration of trust, unsuccessful performance improvement plans, or failure to complete projects numerous times. A hindsight reflection of three of the five presidents is that they didn't move quickly enough when terminating a team member that wasn't working out; they each said they wished they would have moved a little sooner.

While the influence of institutional hiring practices and governing bodies directly or indirectly affected how university presidents went about hiring senior team members, none of the presidents had a strong preference for internal or external candidates. They were more focused on the needs of the institution. If an internal candidate were prepared for the role, they would have an opportunity to be considered; if there was not, the president leaned toward an external candidate.

Although the positions varied across the participants, there were overlapping themes throughout each detailed account. The goal of the thematic analysis was to identify themes and patterns that are important or interesting and use these themes to address the research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). As a result of the analysis, several themes and sub-themes emerged, including those related to their professional journey (senior leaders), how they describe their experience with their university president (senior leaders), how they describe building their teams (university presidents), the influences of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during a presidential transition. This thematic analysis of the participant's experiences and reflections provides insight for new university presidents, mid-level administrators, and sitting vice presidents. Furthermore, the thematic analysis was integral to understanding the data.

Synthesizing the Findings

This section includes a synthesis of findings to the research questions that guided this study. The thematic analysis helped me to identify five core themes and subsequent subthemes:

1. The decision-making of the new presidents on hiring after the presidential transition was influenced by diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. Institutional practices and governing bodies influenced university presidents' decision-making when building their senior team after the presidential transition.
3. Effective communication, collaboration, expertise, and trustworthiness were key attributes that influenced the new university presidents' decision-making.
4. There were similarities to the pathway of senior leaders to the senior leadership team.

- a. All the senior leaders indicated they had participated in some leadership development through engagement within various professional associations and organizations.
5. The senior leaders found their new university president supportive.

Figure five illustrates the research questions and the corresponding themes.

Figure 5

Research Questions and Corresponding Themes

Research Question	Corresponding Theme(s)
1. How do university presidents in higher education form their leadership teams?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The decision-making of the new presidents on hiring after the presidential transition was influenced by diversity, equity, and inclusion. • Institutional practices and governing bodies influenced university presidents' decision-making when building their senior team after the presidential transition. • Effective communication, collaboration, expertise, and trustworthiness were key attributes that influenced the new university presidents' decision-making.
2. How do diversity, equity, and inclusion influence presidents' decisions when appointing members to a senior team?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The decision-making of the new presidents on hiring after the presidential transition was influenced by diversity, equity, and inclusion.
3. What are university leaders' pathways to presidential leadership teams? a. How do direct reports to university presidents make	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were similarities to the pathway of senior leaders to the senior leadership team. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ All the senior leaders indicated they had participated in some leadership development through engagement within various professional associations and organizations. • The senior leaders found their new university president supportive.

meaning of their experiences as the senior team is established after a presidential transition?	
4. What factors are perceived by the university president and senior team members to contribute to the promotion or retention of leaders during a leadership transition?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective communication, collaboration, expertise, and trustworthiness were key attributes that influenced the new university presidents' decision-making. • Institutional practices and governing bodies influenced university presidents' decision-making when building their senior team after the presidential transition.

How do University Presidents in Higher Education Form their Leadership Teams?

At the start of their presidency, all the university presidents had a senior leadership team that they inherited. There were some retirements announced early on when they became president for many so they knew right away that some positions would need to be filled. Considerations for the needs of the institution were a top priority for the university presidents as they established their senior leadership teams. The board of trustees was also a key consideration as university presidents navigated team building during their transition.

The university presidents had multiple considerations for what was needed for the institution and their teams, which caused them to decide if an internal or external candidate was most appropriate for the needs of the institution. This signaled that there was no preference for

internal or external, rather the priorities of the institution. All the presidents expressed an openness to considering internal candidates, however institutional culture at most of the institutions required the presidents to complete a national search. Even with the national search, some internal candidates were selected to serve on the senior leadership team.

The university presidents were slow to make initial changes to their inherited senior team except for one university president who was internal and already had concerns about a couple members of the team. The presidents reflected on how they measured and evaluated their inherited team. They spent time with their senior team in one on meetings and collectively with the senior team. For most, the time spent with their team was in a virtual environment because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This was a challenge for some university presidents and their teams. The senior team members who were retained were said to have completed projects and exercises as requested and kept open and honest communication with the university presidents. Those who were removed from the team were removed due to performance, poor communication, or lack of trust.

University presidents are responsible for overseeing the entire university, which is often comprised of many divisions and units. It is integral for the university president's success and the success of the institution to have a highly functional senior team. Therefore, university presidents found it extremely necessary to establish teams that prioritized the needs most important to the institution.

How do Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Influence Presidents' Decisions when Appointing Members to a Senior Team?

University presidents shared an immense commitment to have a diverse senior leadership team. This was made evident with the creation of a chief diversity officer at four of five of the

institutions. Five of the six university presidents established a senior-level chief diversity officer position shortly after their arrival because their institution didn't have that role. The remaining president already had this position on their team. The presidents all concurred that having a diverse senior leadership was critical for leading a complex institution such as a university and that the diversity at the senior level would improve decision-making for the entire organization.

Some of the university presidents expressed some frustration with the makeup of their inherited team, with two of the presidents saying specifically that there were "too many white males." All university presidents acknowledged the importance of having senior leadership that mirrors the university community. Diverse representation at the senior level is beneficial for the community to understand that the university is committed to its mission of inclusion and excellence.

The university presidents understood that to have diverse representation at the senior level, intentional hiring strategies would need to occur. Specifically, ensuring a diverse candidate pool meant communicating with search committees and search firms. None of the university presidents appointed individuals solely because of their race. The university presidents stressed that senior leaders who are successful in these roles are likely to remain for a substantial period of time. Therefore, intentional hiring strategies such as a diverse candidate pool were critical.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion significantly influenced university presidents as they established their teams. In addition, four of the university presidents, a diverse team was a top priority for the students and the communities their university serves. All the university presidents demonstrated these influences in the hiring and decision-making processes during their presidential transition. The presidents all seemed to be proud of their efforts to establish a diverse

team while also being keenly aware of the need to continue to work towards more diversity university wide.

What are University Leaders' Pathways to Presidential Leadership Teams?

The senior leaders did not initially begin their careers with plans to serve on the senior leadership team. Their awareness of a desire to serve at the senior level came after many years of working in their fields. Each of the senior leaders interviewed had well over 15 years of experience within their areas of expertise.

Each senior leader's pathway comprised professional experiences, professional development opportunities, and mentoring. The senior leaders advanced in various administrative roles throughout their careers and many of them attributed their success to mentorships established early in their careers. Mentoring relationships were established for some with engagement in professional organizations and associations. Experience, coupled with professional development and mentoring, established the pathway for these leaders to the senior leadership team.

How do Direct Reports to University Presidents Make Meaning of their Experiences as the Senior Team is Established after a Presidential Transition?

The senior leaders who were interviewed all began their new roles during the global COVID-19 pandemic. So not only were they navigating the transition with a new president, but also many were also starting in a new role as a senior leader while also managing a division during the pandemic. There were times throughout the transition that were tumultuous, as much of their time with their teams was spent in a remote environment. The senior leaders had to establish their relationships with their team members via virtual platforms like Zoom and Teams. As a result, many did not see their employees in person for nine months. Additionally, many

senior leaders were tasked with reorganizing their units, with one having to lay off over 30 people shortly after taking on the role.

The senior leaders all shared that they had what they thought to be a positive working relationship with their university president. While they all expressed that their university presidents were not micromanagers, they felt that support was often offered, and they had comfort with their president that they could go to them for advice when needed. In addition, they all appeared to be pleased not to have the additional pressure of micromanagement while charting their paths of leadership within their respective divisions. This support was critical when undertaking necessary staffing cuts and making decisions that impacted the university community as it pertained to the pandemic.

All the senior leaders expressed that they work with their university presidents to establish their goals with their divisions and that those goals are shared with the overall goals of the president and the university. They shared appreciation for the open feedback that they received from their university presidents throughout the year. Additionally, none of the senior leaders expressed any concerns or lack of trust in their presidents. On the contrary, they felt that there was a genuine desire for them to do well from their university presidents.

When asked about hindsight reflections, many senior leaders reflected on the early stages of their transition. While none of them shared any regrets, some reflected on the need to take a pause when making changes that impacted the lives of others; some offered care and concern for the well-being of their teams and how they learned to lead with grace while enduring the pandemic. Many wished they had more in-person time with their teams to be able to get to know them on a more personal level. They felt the virtual environment took that away.

What Factors are Perceived by the University President and Senior Team Members to Contribute to the Promotion or Retention of Leaders During a Leadership Transition?

Most of the university presidents mentioned a prioritization of the needs of the institution when establishing their senior leadership teams. Other key considerations were the senior leader's ability to communicate effectively, collaborate with other senior team members and divisions within the university, and lead without micromanagement from the university president. Lastly, trustworthiness was of utmost importance for the university presidents.

All the senior team members interviewed for this study were internal candidates who were appointed to the senior leadership or inherited senior leadership team members. Two of the senior leaders interviewed (Marcus and Monique) have been promoted since joining the senior leadership team. When the senior leaders described their working relationships with the university presidents, they all expressed the importance of open and honest communication. Similarly, this was a key consideration for university presidents when identifying what was necessary for their senior leadership team members. The university presidents all discussed a need to believe what the senior leaders told them about their divisions. They would prefer honest feedback and thoughtful recommendations.

The senior leaders opined on developing shared goals with their university presidents, with many expressing their university presidents' support in wanting them to succeed as leaders. The collaborative leadership approach was helpful during the turbulent time of navigating a global pandemic. Marcus and Monique attributed their success and promotion to their leadership in partnership with the president during the pandemic. Collaboration was another critical skill that the university presidents deemed significant.

While, ultimately, the university presidents are the most senior administrators with the most significant responsibilities, it was critical to them to have senior leaders capable of leading. They all wanted to have experts on their senior team. This sentiment was shared among senior leaders, who also strived to have experts on their teams to trust with various responsibilities within their division.

All the university presidents shared that they gave each leader on the inherited team an opportunity to remain on the team. The university presidents indicated that those who did not stay on the team were removed because of their inability to communicate, lack of trust, or incompetence. The university presidents described the senior leaders promoted internally to the senior leadership as capable leaders who demonstrated what the university needed at the time. The promoted senior leaders believed that their university presidents communicated clear shared goals throughout the year, rather than just at review time. They felt that the university presidents wanted them to succeed and provide them with the needed support.

Summary

In this study, I aimed to learn from the university presidents' and senior leaders' experiences with senior team building after a presidential transition. I learned that university presidents strongly consider the institution's needs and diversity, equity, and inclusion when building their senior leadership teams; there is no preference for internal or external candidates, and that succession planning is not common practice. University presidents in this study did hire internally, promote, and retain members of their senior leadership team. They attributed key characteristics needed by the senior leaders they hired to be experts in their fields, effective communicators, collaborators, and trustworthy.

The senior team members shared their experiences navigating a new president and leading a division while navigating a global pandemic. They shared challenges with reorganizations and employment cuts but primarily focused on the positive relationships developed with their university president. The senior leaders found their presidents supportive and available with advice and resources if needed. In addition, many senior leaders attributed their positive relationship to clear, open communication and collaborative goal setting.

Lessons learned from the experiences of the 11 participants of this study are beneficial for new and aspiring university presidents and sitting and aspiring senior leaders, as presidential transitions always occur. These lessons help us understand the nuances of building a senior team, with the considerations for the institution and influences of governing boards. It brings awareness to essential attributes that university presidents seek out and highlights some of the challenges new senior leaders face in their new roles. These experiences share the considerations that university presidents must take when building a senior leadership team and some of the complexities that senior leaders face once they are selected to join the team.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through conducting this study, I learned of the many challenges university presidents and senior team members face creating the senior team after a presidential transition. From navigating a global pandemic to challenges with governing boards, these unique experiences from the perspective of university presidents and senior leaders shed light on senior leadership team building in higher education. The findings of this study helped me to conclude that these university presidents were intentional about the university's needs and priorities when building their senior team, that diversity, equity, and inclusion were considerations for team building and, at times, influenced decision-making to appoint members to the senior team; that senior leaders found their new presidents supportive, even during times of difficulty; that these university presidents hired, retained and promoted experts who were effective communicators and were trustworthy; and lastly, that succession planning was not a common practice.

Discussion

The findings from this study add to the limited literature on presidential transitions in higher education and address some gaps in the research. For example, there is limited literature on senior team building from the perspective of senior team members and university presidents (Gaval, 2009; Alvarado, 2021). Likewise, there is limited literature on succession planning in higher education (Cavanaugh, 2017). Regarding diversity at the senior level, existing literature discusses the lack of underrepresentation at the senior level in higher education (Wolf and Dilworth, 2017) and the turnover of senior administrators after a presidential transition (Overend, 2011; Smerek, 2013; Reed, 2017; Alvarado, 2021).

Perspectives of Senior Leadership Team Members

There is a gap in the existing literature of the perspectives of senior team members after a presidential transition (Alvarado, 2021; Gaval, 2009). The senior leadership team members shared various experiences with working with their new president. Many of them were onboarded during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Navigating their new role with a new president during a time of uncertainty was challenging, yet they all shared high respect for their university president's leadership. Each senior team member shared reflections on the unique transition as they built a relationship with their new president through virtual meetings and phone calls while also establishing relationships to lead and motivate their teams in the same virtual environment.

A common thread among the senior leaders was that they worked closely with their university president to develop shared goals and received advice and support from their leader when needed. Support from the university presidents was described in various ways, including advice when needed, providing financial support, and mending key relationships that were integral to the senior leadership team members' success. Lastly, many of the senior leaders had divisional restructuring at the time of their transition into their roles, so their support from their president was crucial. These findings address some of the gaps in the research pertaining to the senior leadership team member experiences during a presidential transition.

Perspectives of University Presidents

The university presidents interviewed expressed a desire to establish a senior leadership team of experts who were effective communicators, had a collaborative approach to work, and were trustworthy. The institution's needs were a top priority when selecting an individual for the team. Another critical consideration was diversity, equity, and inclusion. The university presidents shared a similar belief that the senior team's makeup should reflect the campus and

surrounding community population. While the presidents noted that they never hired specifically because of race or diversity, it was at the forefront of their minds and was a priority for each of them.

Existing literature suggests that there is a lack of racially diverse individuals in leadership roles (Chang et al., 2014; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015) as the percentage of racially diverse individuals at the presidential level is only seventeen percent (American Council on Education, 2017) and no real tracking exists for senior leader (Betts et al., 2009). However, many of the university presidents for this study were hired at the time of the Black Lives Matter movement due to the murder of George Floyd. While none of the university presidents noted a connection between their choices for hiring racially diverse candidates, there was certainly a desire from each to have a diverse leadership team, which is inconsistent to the existing literature. Since 2020, many persons of color have been hired for senior leadership roles in higher education. According to a recent article in Forbes (Nietzel, 2023), the nation's top private institutions are being led by a woman or a person of color. These hires may show an increase in racially diverse leadership in coming studies.

The university presidents interviewed had no preference for internal or external candidates. This contradicts the research literature that suggests universities prefer an external candidate (Cavanaugh, 2017; Paul, 2017). While the university's culture may have called for an external search (Klein & Salk, 2013; Witt & Kiefer, 2008), the university presidents in this study said they often look inward to see what the institution needs among current employees. All the university presidents who participated in this study hired and promoted senior leadership team members from within. While leading in a global pandemic in a completely remote environment for the beginning of their presidencies, some university presidents found the stability offered by

inherited team members and internal candidates beneficial. In some cases, an external candidate was the needed choice.

The university presidents considered the board of trustees when hiring at some point. Unfavorable relationships with the board created difficulties for some of the university presidents and some of the senior leaders, with board members wanting to have a more active role in hiring decisions. Clearly, a good relationship with the board was essential for the success of the university president. That sentiment was shared among the university presidents and senior leadership team members interviewed.

Since the university president is the most senior leader of the institution, overseeing various divisions and departments, it was critical that they build their team with individuals who can assist them with achieving their and the institution's goals. Most of the university presidents had a collaborative approach to leadership, so they relied heavily on the expertise of their leaders when making decisions regarding the university. The experiences of the university presidents interviewed give necessary perspective for aspiring presidents and senior leaders and current sitting senior leadership team members. Additionally, this adds to the limited literature on team building after presidential transitions in higher education.

Turnover

Each of the university presidents interviewed acquired an inherited leadership team. In most cases, there was some turnover on each of the presidents' senior teams. As the research suggests, turnover was inevitable (Overend, 2011; Smerek, 2013; Reed, 2017; Alvarado, 2021). Turnover occurred due to retirement and termination on each senior team for university presidents interviewed. The number of individuals who resigned or were fired from each team

represented no more than a third of the respective teams. The turnover in the cases of these university presidents differed from the 50% turnover that Gaval (2009) described as guaranteed.

When reflecting on hindsight changes, the university presidents said they were slow to terminate individuals and, in retrospect, wished they would have moved sooner for the overall good of the team and the institution. Taking their time allowed the university presidents to evaluate the individuals on their team and determine what was best for the institution, which was a top priority for all the presidents interviewed.

In some ways, the turnover gave the presidents a say in who would join their leadership. The timing of retirements was sometimes a challenge for some university presidents, as they were making plans to replace individuals who were not working out; they weren't necessarily prepared to replace those retiring. In other cases, the retirements were welcomed due to performance issues and freed up a position for the new president to select members of their choice for the team.

Succession Planning

Rothwell's (2005) succession planning framework was used as a reference for this narrative study. Rothwell (2005) suggests four fundamental reasons for succession planning:

1. Succession planning is the method an organization must employ to ensure the right people are in the right places at the correct times.
2. Succession planning lessens the effect of downsizing.
3. Succession planning advances diversity and multiculturalism.
4. Succession planning provides a framework for establishing career paths, training, developmental plans, and individual career moves.

In line with the research (Chevalier, 2008; Cavanaugh, 2017; Siambi, 2022), these presidents were not aware of any intentional succession planning. There was, however, mention of funding support for professional development. In addition, many senior leaders made professional development accessible to their team members through professional development opportunities within the institution and external endeavors with professional organizations and associations. Many of the university presidents and the senior leaders indicated they were directly responsible for supporting and encouraging their direct reports and assisting them on their career journeys. They also felt an obligation to support their team member's professional development and advance them on their professional journeys, with the notion that if they move on from the university, so be it. They have done their part in assisting. This commitment to professional development was expressed throughout the various interviews and is in line with Wisniewski (2004) assertion that higher education must create leadership development opportunities for faculty and staff for the organizations to thrive.

While much of this work is in line with Rothwell's (2005) framework, the missing ingredient is the intent toward developing employees for the organizations and individual's success. Learning the university president's processes and reasoning for selecting members of the senior team and their support of professional development (even if that meant growth elsewhere) addresses a key gap as to why succession planning is not common practice in higher education. It is critical for universities to have opportunities for professional growth and development at all levels and for all employees, with attention given to those who would not usually be chosen for such opportunities.

Leader Development and Mentorship

Senior leaders all opined about professional organizations and associations and the opportunities these organizations created for professional development. Many of the senior leaders described their experiences with these organizations as giving them the opportunity to learn and grow as new professionals as such many are still active in these organizations and now serve as mentors to other young professionals. Senior leaders also reflected on the networking opportunities these professional organizations provided, which turned into mentorship relationships for some. The senior leaders reflected on mentors who became vital to their professional success. This is in line with the research suggesting that mentors influence higher education advancement (Brown, 2005). Many senior leaders attributed their success to their mentors and are still in contact with them to this day.

Diverse Pipeline

As Reed (2017) suggests, more intentional efforts are needed to build career pipelines for diverse individuals. In some ways, succession planning can assist with establishing a diversity pipeline by creating opportunities for individuals who wouldn't typically be considered for such opportunities. However, succession planning that names a successor or successors could position the university toward a nondiverse leadership team if the individuals responsible for the selection do not prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion. This may be why many senior leadership teams in higher education are not diverse now. As Gasman, Abiola, and Travers (2015) declare that historical legacies, prejudice, and racism persist across predominantly White institutions.

Implications

The implications of this study offer the perspectives of sitting university presidents and senior leadership team members on the team building experience after a presidential transition. The university presidents shared the skills and qualities necessary to be considered for the senior

team and remain on the senior team. Senior leaders shared experiences that put them on the pathway to senior leadership, including professional development and mentoring. University presidents shared the institutional practices and relationships with governing boards that influenced their decisions regarding hiring. Other major influences on the university presidents hiring decisions were diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The findings suggest that to become a senior leadership team member for these presidents, the individual needed to be an expert in their field. Each of the senior leaders interviewed had education coupled with numerous years of experience in their areas of expertise. Additionally, the senior leaders were active in professional organizations and associations during their careers, to which they attribute some of their professional success. A good mentor was key for a few of the senior leaders, with some saying that their mentor was, in part, a significant factor in their career trajectory.

The pathway to the senior team for each of the individuals interviewed was by way of demonstrated success throughout their career journey, with almost all noting that the road to leadership was not an intentional plan but rather good work that was recognized along the way coupled with mentorship. It wasn't until they were well into their careers that they knew they could lead at the senior level. This suggests that a combination of experience, mentorship, and professional development opportunities positioned them for this role.

The university presidents were thoughtful of the needs and priorities of the institution when building their teams. If the institution's practice for hiring called for a national search, the university presidents followed that institutional practice. University presidents were mindful to keep their board informed and engaged to prevent unwanted interference and to keep a positive relationship.

The findings provide insights for new presidents building their teams and new senior team members navigating a presidential transition. In addition, the results of this study help mid-level administrators and sitting university team members understand the team-building process from the perspective of university presidents.

Implications for my Practice

The findings of this study were invaluable to me as a mid-level administrator within the office of the president at a public institution of higher education. I was able to take away something for my own professional benefit from all the participants as I aspire to serve as chief of staff one day. Some of the leadership approaches of the presidents and senior leaders reaffirmed my own leadership style. I, too, trust the experts (and hold them accountable). I enjoy a collaborative approach to work and appreciate clear communication. I support professional growth and development for my team (and advocate for myself).

A key takeaway from this study for me was the value of honesty and effective communication. The individuals who were removed from the senior team after the presidential transition were described as poor communicators whom the presidents couldn't figure out nor trust what they were saying. While I know honesty is needed, I hadn't considered it in a way to measure a team member the way the university presidents did. Surely, honesty is critical in all levels, but even more so at the senior level. That is a takeaway that will guide me in the future.

The commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion from each of the presidents and senior team members was inspiring and gave me hope that there are leaders who recognize the importance of diverse representation at the senior level. This representation can signal to students, faculty, and staff that the president and the senior team are committed to the university's values. The emphasis on developing a strong and diverse candidate pool is

something that will continue to guide me in my own practice and when I serve on committees for other areas.

The university presidents and the two chiefs of staff interviewed offered me some advice that will be key in my own practice. Two presidents shared similar advice to at the time of a new presidential transition. They suggested that I allow the new president space to find their own way. To offer support that will assist them in finding their way around the university that still shows respect for their place as the president.

Both participants in the chief of staff role provided me with an honest observation of some of the frustrations they experienced during the presidential transition. The hindsight reflections shared by Harriet and Paige were great advice for the future when I navigate a presidential transition. I learned that it is critical to assist the president with maintaining a positive relationship with the board. While there are limitations to what can be controlled as chief of staff, any efforts towards a good working relationship between the board and the president are invaluable. I was also encouraged to remember at the time of my current president's transition, to acknowledge our relationship and grieve the loss to prepare for the transition of the new president.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on how senior leaders navigate presidential transitions would add to the ongoing literature on presidential transitions. More in-depth exploration of their experiences could provide insight for mid-level administrators and sitting senior leaders. Learning from leaders who were terminated by a new president would also be helpful, as it would add a missing voice from this study. The findings from this study suggest senior team leaders and university presidents have positive working relationships. The perspective of those who have not

experienced a smooth transition could add value for leaders who aspire to work at the senior level and for those who are currently serving on senior leadership teams.

The findings from this study highlight some of the challenges of new senior leaders after the presidential transition. Each senior leader that was responsible for leading a division within the organization went through some reorganization or restructuring of their own units. Insights from that experience would be helpful for new senior leaders. Another recommendation is for researchers to interview more university presidents to gain additional insights about decision-making while building the senior team. There were only five university presidents interviewed for this study, thus adding additional voices may expand the viewpoint on what is necessary to serve at the senior level. A final recommendation for future research is for researchers to take a deeper dive into why universities do not engage in succession planning.

Conclusion

By hearing from these university presidents, I have learned that there are so many complexities regarding team building at the senior level, and that is just one area of focus for a new president. This serves as a reminder as to why team member selection is so critical. The experiences shared by the senior leaders have offered an in-depth look at the journey to the senior team and the challenges an individual faces when they arrive at the senior team. Their transitions could be described as turbulent, with division restructuring, a global pandemic, and laying off team members. Yet, they also shared pride for their teams and their relationships with university presidents. The lessons learned from this study have better prepared me when the time comes to deal with the transition of my own president.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

APPENDIX A
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear (Name):

My name is Lashonda Taylor. I am the assistant vice president for university events and special projects within the Office of the President at Kent State University. I have been at Kent State for over 14 years. In my current role, I oversee university events and special projects for the Office of the President.

In addition to my role as assistant vice president, I am a doctoral candidate for the Doctor of Education in Interprofessional Studies at Kent State. As an emerging leader in higher education, I am interested in learning about the experiences of senior-level executives during a presidential transition. I am focusing my dissertation on how university presidents build their senior teams and how senior leaders make meaning of their experiences during the creation of the senior team.

I am writing to inquire if you would be willing to share your experiences with me for my dissertation. Your participation would include a Microsoft Teams video interview or a telephone call (based on your preference) to share your experience during the presidential transition. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be followed up with a 30-minute video or phone interview.

All interviews are confidential, and interview questions will relate to your experiences during the transition. Your real name will not identify you during the interviews. Lastly, the name of your institution will not be identified during the interviews or in the study.

Thank you in advance for considering this invitation. If you have questions about the study, don't hesitate to contact me at ltaylo33@kent.edu or 330-283-3605.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lashonda Taylor

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Building the Senior Team after a Presidential Transition: A Qualitative Study of Senior Leaders in Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Dr. Tricia Niesz - tniesz@kent.edu

Co-Investigator: Lashonda Taylor - Ltaylo33@kent.edu

You are invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. A signed consent form does not guarantee participation in the study.

Purpose: This qualitative study aims to explore the creation of senior leadership teams from the perspective of university presidents and the senior leaders selected to serve on a senior team after a presidential transition.

Procedures

Participation will include a Microsoft Teams video interview or a telephone call (based on your preference) to share your experience during the presidential transition. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be followed up with a 30-minute video or phone interview. All interviews will be confidential, and interview questions will relate to participant experiences during the transition. Participants will not be identified by name during the interviews or the study. The names of institutions will not be identified during the interviews or in the study.

Audio and Video Recording and Photography

The interview will be (audio/video) recorded and transcribed via transcription software to ensure all statements are captured and accurate. Recordings will be destroyed upon the conclusion of the research study. You have the right to refuse to be recorded.

I agree to be (audio/video) recorded: YES____ NO ____

I would like to review the (recordings/transcripts) prior to their use: YES____ NO ____

Benefits

This research may not benefit you directly. However, participating in this study will help us better understand presidential leadership transitions and leadership team building. The findings developed from this research study will add to the literature on presidential transitions. The results will give higher educational professionals an opportunity to explore this process through the stories of the individuals who have experienced it.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life.

Privacy and Confidentiality

No identifying information will be collected. Your signed consent form will be kept separate from your study data, and responses will not be linked to you.

Your study related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the researchers will have access to the data. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate, or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Lashonda Taylor at Ltaylo33@kent.edu or Dr. Tricia Niesz (Lashonda Taylor's Advisor) at tniesz@kent.edu. This project will be reviewed and approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330-672-2704.

Consent Statement and Signature

I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

Participant Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS

1. Describe your professional background and how you came to be in this current role.
2. Describe your leadership philosophy:
3. What insights were given to you about the inherited leadership from internal and external stakeholders during your transition?
4. What plans, if any, did you have for appointing members to your senior leadership team?
5. How did you determine the strengths and opportunities for development or change for leaders on your inherited team?
6. How did this process inform your decision-making to retain or replace leadership team members?
7. What attributes, skills or qualities were considered when retaining, promoting, or selecting someone to serve on the senior team?
8. How did diversity, equity, and inclusion guide your decision-making process?
9. Were any additional influences or challenges at the institution or beyond during your transition that may have influenced the selection of your senior team members?
10. In hindsight, is there anything you would do differently to build your senior leadership team?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS

1. Describe your professional background and how you came to be in this current role:
2. Describe your leadership philosophy:
3. Describe your role and responsibilities at the time of the presidential transition:
4. What if any changes to your role or division occurred during the transition?
5. Describe any professional development, mentoring, or other leadership development opportunities that you participated in before your role:
6. What if any influences or challenges occurred during the transition period that may have influenced or impacted your role?
7. How would you describe the incoming president's process to evaluate the effectiveness of your leadership and contributions?
8. How do diversity, equity, and inclusion guide your leadership?
9. In hindsight, is there anything you would do differently during the transition?

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