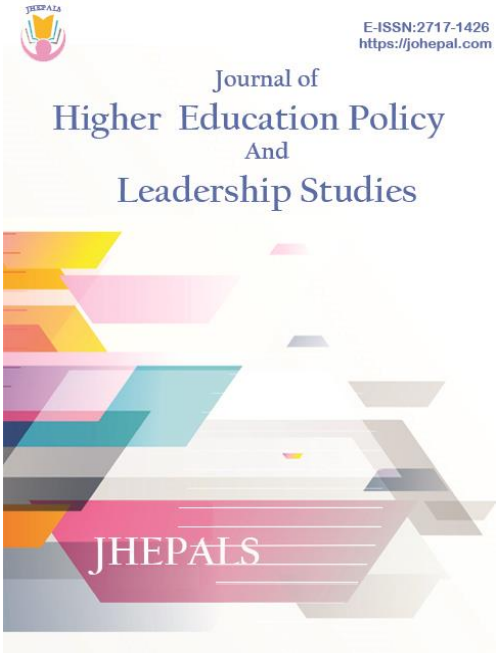
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Understanding the Motivations of Future Minority Serving Institution Presidents



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Abstract

Given the critical role that Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) play in U.S. higher education, it is vital that they have motivated and effective leadership. Ensuring that MSIs have strong leadership is essential to accomplish their goals of serving low-income, first-generation, and students of color, providing a 21st century curricula, and preparing students for the workforce and beyond. The purpose of this study is to explore why leaders pursue the presidency at MSIs. How, specifically, have they developed an interest in and passion for leading MSIs? What draws them to lead this type of institution? We use Greenleaf's (1977/2002) Servant Leadership model as a framework for this study and our analysis. Our findings indicate that aspiring presidents are focused on the unique purpose of MSIs, a desire to "give back" or "pay it forward" in terms of their experience, a passion for helping underserved students, a commitment to ensuring people of color are in leadership positions, and an interest in solidifying the future of MSIs.

Keywords: Servant Leadership; Motivation; Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs); University Presidents

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Introduction

> I think MSIs play a niche here…. the fact that they are one of the biggest providers of higher education for a lot of our Black and Brown students I think is crucial…. I think there's just something about starting at the table and not having to defend why issues of race are important….It's like, hey, at least we're all on the same page here. We don't have to start with that conversation. Let's move on to other topics. [MSI Aspiring Leader]

Accounting for only 7% of U.S. colleges and universities yet enrolling nearly 28% of all students in the nation, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) are a unique subset of federally designated postsecondary institutions (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Garcia, 2019; Garcia, 2020; Gasman & Conrad, 2013; Gasman, Baez & Turner, 2008; Núñez, Hurtado, & Galdeano, 2015). The majority of students at MSIs are low-income, first-generation, and/or students of color (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). By and large, MSIs are dedicated to serving the needs of these students, with many having an express mission to serve the particular racial and ethnic groups aligned with their missions. For example, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Tribal Colleges & Universities (TCUs) were established specifically to educate African Americans and Native Americans, respectively. Even Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), which are based on demographic percentages, have moved closer to serving the needs of Latinx students due to pressure from advocacy groups and scholars (Garcia, 2019).

As the opening quote suggests, MSIs not only serve a high percentage of students of color, they are unique spaces where issues of race and racism are often addressed directly, where the ideologies of equity and meritocracy in higher education are critically questioned, and which seek to dismantle barriers to higher education for underserved students while simultaneously recognizing and supporting the assets and cultural capital students bring with them. While the word "minority" is part of the vernacular of MSIs, ironically, MSIs are institutions where students of color are neither stigmatized nor marginalized; MSIs are institutions where students of color are empowered to achieve their full, holistic potential. As one aspiring MSI leader reflected "I think that we need to come to the table and we need to be very conscious about what is the potential of 'minority' students. In my mind, we are no longer a minority. In my mind, we are who we are and that's it."

That said, MSIs continue to be challenged by limited resources and financial assets, invisibility and lack of recognition for their success, and resistance from politicians and educators who no longer see the need for their existence in a supposedly "colorblind" society. MSIs are thus caught in a double bind where they must at once defend their purpose while continuing to evolve and meet the needs of an ever-increasing diversity of students. As one aspiring leader noted "I think showing students that they are not just a bottom dollar, but that they are our future and we genuinely need them, and also making sure that the people who we lead understand that." Another noted similarly that "We don't have the luxury to build ivory towers and to stay the same for a 100 years."

Given the critical role that MSIs play in U.S. higher education, they must serve students well and continue to be a positive return on investment. Ensuring that MSIs place effective leaders at the helm is an essential step in accomplishing these goals. However, effective

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leaders do not just happen; they need to have opportunities to grow their skills along the path to the presidency. The purpose of this study is to explore why leaders pursue the presidency of Minority Serving Institutions. How, specifically, have they developed an interest in and passion for leading MSIs? What draws them to lead this type of institution?

While the participants in the program came from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, as well as diverse educational and professional backgrounds, we found many commonalities regarding their motivation to one day lead an MSI, including a desire to "give back" or "pay it forward" in terms of their experience, a passion for helping underserved/minority students, a commitment to ensuring people of color are in leadership positions, and an interest in solidifying the future of MSIs. Each of these themes will be discussed independently throughout this paper, although they are often overlapping.

Literature Review

According to the most recent data, 58% of the sitting university presidents in the United States are over the age of 60 (ACE, 2017). These presidents are moving closer to concluding their academic careers. This fact has led many higher education researchers to debate from where the next cohort of presidents might emerge (Brantley, 2019; Farrington, 2008; Freeman & Kochan, 2012; Lum, 2008). Some researchers suggest that there will be many openings for university presidencies across the country. In the past 15 years, a number of institutions turned to sitting university presidents to replace the outgoing presidents in their institutions. Colleges and universities that want to employ a seasoned president to serve their school may have problems in the future as the Baby Boomer presidents begin to retire (Farrington, 2008). The next most common pool from which to draw presidential talent is that of senior cabinet level officers within higher education. Unfortunately, this pool of individuals is homogenous and doesn't offer the diversity that is needed across the nation and especially at the nation's MSIs (Brantley, 2019).

Brantley (2019) stated that it is important for universities to implement succession planning for presidents. Likewise, presidents, according to Herring (2010), need to be able to deal with issues, including attracting and retaining students, managing their time, maintaining campus morale, leading change, and balancing institutional finances. Historically, many university boards assumed their potential president would need to be an external candidate. With succession planning, he said, "presidents and institutions can reach out to those with potential for senior positions and groom them to take over later" (30). Issues related to increasing diversity and accessing the pipeline to the presidency include, but are not limited to, various academic backgrounds, experiences, and consideration. In many ways, potential candidates of color are often not considered because they have not been given the opportunities to gain the experience to pursue a university presidency.

College and university presidents typically hail from the faculty, with the vast majority of them beginning their careers as faculty and moving to a department chair role, then a dean, then a provost, and subsequently becoming president (ACE, 2017). However, in recent years, there have been changes, with more presidents coming out of student affairs (4%), institutional advancement (4%), and from outside the academy (15%)—including politics and the corporate world (ACE, 2017). Of note, among presidents of color, 9% hail from

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student affairs. Pathways to the presidency, which used to be fairly predictable, are now weaving in and out of the academy and coming from many directions within the academy.

College and University Presidency

The literature on the college presidency overall is sparse and dated. In addition, it tends to focus on White men. Most of this research pertains to either successful or failed presidents (Neumann & Bensimon, 1990; Rhodes, 1998; Thacker & Freeman, 2019), strategies for effective leadership (Birnbaum, 1992; Friedman & Kass-Shraibman, 2017; Fisher, Tack & Wheeler, 1988; Fisher & Tack, 1990), ambiguity and leadership (Cohen & March, 1974; Vaughan, 1989), the pathways to leadership (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; McLaughlin & Riesman, 1990), and various functions of the presidency (Anderson & Davies, 2000; Cook, 1997; DiCroce, 1995). Moreover, the research often includes pontifications and reflections from senior leaders rather than actual research studies (Eells & Hollis, 1961; Trow, 1984). Although these reflective contributions are essential, they do not replace the need for qualitative and quantitative research studies. More recently, there has been some exploration of women and women of color holding the role of president (Brown, 2005; Turner, 2007). Overall, these research studies and reflections fail to look at motivations for pursuing the presidency across various individuals and institutional types.

MSI Leadership

In more recent years, researchers have paid attention to the presidency at Minority Serving Institutions. When looking at the sector of institutions as a whole, the American Council on Education explored the topic in an infographic. They found that 35.5 percent of MSI presidents are people of color. They also found that MSI presidents were more likely to have served as a president previously, more likely to have been hired from within higher education, and more likely to have spent their entire career within higher education than presidents of majority institutions. Of note, the authors found that presidents of MSIs considered the following actions to be a high priority in their presidency: making clear in public statements the status of racial minorities and women on campus, ensuring periodic review of institutional policies and procedures to eliminate racial and gender bias, and encouraging searches to yield a high percentage of minority and women candidates (Fujimoto, 1996; Imlay & Schaap, 2019)

Palmer et al. (2017), in their book *Effective Leadership at Minority Serving Institutions*, call for strong, inventive and visionary leadership based on practical solutions, policies, and projects. They also suggest that presidents have evidence to demonstrate their effectiveness in delivering good leadership outcomes throughout the varied terrain of MSIs.

Uniquely, Washington-Lockett and colleagues (2018) issued a report on women presidents of MSIs, which discussed the many issues and challenges that women leaders at MSIs face, including institutional culture, difficult board relationships, challenges to personal values, salary gaps, finding a mentor and serving as one, and imposter syndrome (Washington-Lockett et al, 2018). Although informative, the report did not include empirical research, and instead offered practical recommendations to move the field forward for women leaders.

The majority of research related to the presidents of MSIs is focused on HBCUs. In 2014, Freeman and Gasman wrote a foundational article aimed at capturing the background

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characteristics of HBCU leaders. They were also interested in how current HBCU presidents groom aspiring presidents for leadership. They found that HBCU presidents tend to be recycled – meaning they move from one institution to the next, and that fairly few new leaders secure presidencies. Moreover, they found that although grooming of future presidents takes place, it is not systematic in nature (Freeman and Gasman, 2016).

Freeman et al. (2016) interviewed HBCU presidents, asking them what they thought the essential skills needed to become a president were. The seven skills mentioned the most by study participants included: vision, communication, fundraising, a disposition toward entrepreneurship, the ability to understand and negotiate with faculty, board management, and the ability to collaborate.

Commodore et al. (2016) explored the important mentoring practices and subsequent professional advice that should be employed by HBCU presidents in order to sustain leadership at HBCUs. Their findings suggest that those interested in becoming presidents of HBCUs should focus on the essential aspects of the presidential role, shadow successful HBCU leaders, gain experience serving across a variety of administrative capacities, participate in professional development activities, display humility, learn how to navigate academic politics, and learn now to present oneself as an executive. Briscoe and Freeman (2019) also explored pathways to the HBCU presidency, exploring the role the mentorship plays for future leaders, including one-on-one mentoring and mentoring through professional development programs.

Esters et al. (2016) produced a report titled *Effective Leadership: A Toolkit for the 21st Century Historically Black College and University President*. The report focuses on providing current and future presidents with the tools and expertise that they need in order to be successful. The authors recommend state and federal policy-making expertise, the ability to form collaborative partnerships, socio-emotional intelligence, fundraising prowess, ability to engage a wide-range of university stakeholders, and the willingness to serve as the living logo of the university.

Freeman and Palmer (2020) examined unsuccessful leadership practices of HBCU presidents. Although this research is not focused on aspiring HBCU presidents, it does provide a good understanding of the practices to avoid as a successful president, and takes an asset-based approach to understanding the mistakes presidents make. In a related article, Freeman and Palmer (2020) also explored the effective practices of HBCU leaders, concluding that experiences and professional knowledge are the sources of success in the HBCU presidency. Likewise, Esters and Strayhorn (2013) examined the practices and contributions of HBCU presidents, focusing on those presidents at public, land-grant HBCUs. They found that these presidents were dedicated to educating underserved students and promoting racial uplift and empowerment.

Overall, with regard to the MSI presidency, we know the most about what is needed in order to be a president – most often from the perspective of current presidents – and the least about why aspiring leaders want to be presidents. Our research complements the work that goes before ours and also adds to it by engaging aspiring leaders in conversations about their motives for pursuing presidential leadership positions.

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Theoretical Framework

We approached this research using the framework of servant leadership to understand the leaders featured in this study for two reasons: 1. The MSI Aspiring Leaders Program, which brought these leaders together, is built on the concept of servant leadership and entry into the program is decided upon, in part, using a servant leadership inventory. 2. The previous literature related to MSI presidents demonstrates that they have a desire to serve others, especially MSIs and the types of students who attend them. According to Greenleaf (1977/2002):

> The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons: do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (p. 27)

Greenleaf (1977/2002) states that servant leaders prioritize the needs, ambitions, and interests of others before their own. According to van Dierendonk (2011), servant leadership differs from other forms of leadership because it focuses on the needs of followers rather than the requirements of the organization, and it stresses the ideal of service in the connection between leader and follower. Leaders' knowledge of communication and decision making is essential. Although these are crucial qualities for the servant leader, their willingness to listen closely to others must be strengthened. The servant leader tries to learn and understand others because people need to be welcomed and respected. Servant leadership is, at its heart, a long-term, transformative approach to life and work, in essence, a way of being, with the capacity to affect good change in our society. Servant leaders give genuine hope and direction for human growth, as well as the construction of better, more compassionate organizations.

Spears and Lawrence (2002) identified ten characteristics of an effective servant leader based on Greenleaf's servant leadership model. These include: listening, empathy, healing, self-awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. As we analyzed the data related to the aspiring leaders in this study, we looked to these characteristics.

Research Methodology

The Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) Aspiring Leaders program, which has been in operation for four years, offers a valuable research opportunity to better understand the pathways to leadership within MSIs. As such, we used the program as a research site.

Participants

Our research team interviewed 45 aspiring leaders participating in the program. These individuals hailed from a broad cross-section of MSI types as well as Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). They were all aspiring to be presidents of MSIs and are 5-8 years away from a presidency. We asked questions related to their motives and aspirations as they

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pertain to the presidency. We aim to inform the growing literature on college presidents as well as the literature on equity in higher education.

These individuals applied to be a part of the program through a national process that was advertised widely across higher education outlets and social media. The program application included submission of their CV and a three-minute video during which they discussed their knowledge of challenges and opportunities for MSIs, why they want to lead an MSI, how their past experiences will inform their leadership, and how participating in the program will benefit their development.

Data Collection

Our research team conducted 45 semi-structured interviews lasting 30-60 minutes. We conducted the interviews via telephone. Interview protocols included questions, informed by our literature review and theoretical framework, and were focused on the aspirations and motivations of the aspiring leaders. To maintain credibility, the protocol questions were asked consistently across participants. All interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder. We uploaded the data to a secure cloud storage file; access was given to a third party for transcription. We solicited consent from each participant before each interview through an IRB approved consent form. We informed participants of their anonymity in any published work by using pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

We re-listened to the interviews and re-read the transcriptions, taking notes and sharing our thoughts and general interpretations as a research team. We then imported the transcriptions into NVivo qualitative software to code the data in an efficient manner. We used an In Vivo coding strategy, as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes" (p. 74). This method honors the participants' voices. Use of In Vivo codes also enabled us to highlight participants'' interpretation of educational opportunity and process codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to identify activities that they recognized as empowering students to persist and learn. After an initial wave of coding, we engaged in axial coding, which helped us refine and combine codes that are similar to each other (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2015). Multiple codes were identified, compared and refined through two additional rounds of review and deliberation. Redundant codes were collapsed to generate larger categories that spoke to the study's research question, which led to the development of four major themes.

Throughout the data collection and during our analysis, we used a constant comparison approach in which we compare our notes and codes to emerging themes in the overall study (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). In using both inductive and deductive analysis procedures, we considered multiple stories within the data in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the data. Throughout the coding process, we also used analytic memos in order to keep track of all theoretical notions that arise from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

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Reliability and Trustworthiness

Throughout the study, we took several measures to ensure the validity of the findings. First, the principal investigators engaged in frequent conversation in the field during and after the interviews to sense and tease out potential and personal biases (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 1993). Memos developed in the field became part of our database. Second, members of the team spent a substantial amount of time reviewing and evaluating the data to determine coding categories and themes, thereby ensuring inter-rater reliability (Yin, 2012). Third, as we analyzed transcripts, we held weekly meetings to share and deliberate on codes we had developed individually. In these meetings, we tested one another's codes and emerging themes against transcripts and one another's interpretations. Finally, we collected documents the MSI Aspiring Leaders interview process (cover letters, CVs, application materials, videos) and used these to triangulate data collected through our interviews.

Positionality

No study is disconnected from the experiences, dispositions and positions of its researchers; the current study is no different. In designing this study on the aspirations and motivations of aspiring leaders in their pursuit of an MSI presidency, we were continuously mindful of our position as researchers (four women, one man and three people of color). We approached this study with the belief, based on the literature, that MSIs benefit from passionate leaders who understand their unique context (Yosso, 2005). This approach is reflected in the ways we shaped the collection, analysis and discussion of the data.

Findings and Discussion

After a thorough analysis of our data, we found five major themes related to the motivations of aspiring leaders and their desires to lead Minority Serving Institutions. The major themes resulting from our research point to a) aspiring presidents being focused on the unique purpose of MSIs, b) a desire to "give back" or "pay it forward" in terms of their experience, c) a passion for helping underserved students, d) a commitment to ensuring people of color are in leadership positions, and e) an interest in solidifying the future of MSIs.

MSIs Serve a Unique Purpose

> "I went to an HBCU because I had always been one of the few Black faces in the classroom. And I said, well that's enough of that….And then I went to get my doctorate and that was at an HBCU…. which was completely different than what I'd ever experienced in grade school, middle school and high school. As a matter of fact in high school, though I was in a private high school, the guidance counselor told me there was no way in the world I'd get to the college that I wanted to go to. Just wasn't going to happen. Even though they were being paid to educate me, they were still finding a way to dampen the spirit and aspirations."

Many graduates of MSIs in general, and HBCUs in particular, share the experience of having gone to secondary schools where instead of being "educated" they were discouraged and had their spirits and aspirations "dampened" by teachers and staff who did not believe in their potential.

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MSIs play a unique role in American higher education, educating 40 percent of students of color in the nation (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). This unique purpose is a draw for many aspiring leaders. They recognize the special features of MSIs, including a nurturing environment, culturally-relevant programs for students, a highly diverse environment, a curriculum focused on making positive change locally and across the nation, and an environment that fosters an interest in graduate school and ensures preparation for its rigor (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). In the words of one aspiring leader:

> "Our Minority Serving Institutions are national treasures that haven't been fully recognized by the majority of populations as such. They recognize them as institutions that serve students of color, but the extent to which these graduates are making viable and incredible contributions to the viability of this nation isn't fully recognized. Look at the success rate of students graduating from historically Black institutions, going onto the majority institutions for the[ir] masters and doctoral degrees. That population of students tends to do better at the majority institutions than their counterparts of color that have matriculated from majority institutions."

Another aspiring leader mentioned the unique ways that MSIs create inclusive communities: "I'm very interested in student success. How do we build inclusive spaces and equitable spaces? For me, that's why it appeals to working at a Minority Serving Institution, particularly at an Hispanic Serving institution." The uniqueness of the MSI environment and the express purpose of serving specific populations has meaning to the aspiring leaders. In the words of one of the leaders, "I've spent most of my professional career in Minority Serving Institutions as a faculty member and administrator. So, I feel like this is a home for me and this is a place where I am serving large numbers of students that represent the community that I want to serve and that I've served in the past. And so, for me it's kind of a perfect fit to serve in an MSI because that's kind of been my trajectory and those are the communities that I'm passionate about serving." In the spirit of servant leadership, this aspiring leader is focused on making positive and long-lasting change in society, and is committed to the growth of people (Greanleaf, 1977; Greanleaf, 2002; Spears, 2005).

Aspiring leaders understand that the rich diversity of MSIs – in terms of faculty and students – makes a difference to the learning environment. This unique feature draws them to want to lead MSIs. According to an aspiring leader:

> "I think when I started my career I didn't quite know [what MSIs were]. I mean I knew what they were, but I didn't know what all that meant. So then I think just being at an institution and falling in love with the students and the type of students and the backgrounds that they come from, I think that's where my passion for Minority Serving Institutions comes from. I mean I really love our diverse campus. I love the different ideas that can come from that, the different conversations and all of those things. So instead of being at a place [where] everybody looks the same I really enjoy this type of environment."

Another aspiring leader described being fully committed to the mission of MSIs and their commitment to first generation, low-income and students of color:

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Minority Serving Institution Presidents

> "What I will tell you is that since participating in this [program], I was approached to join a search for a presidency….I thanked them for the opportunity, but I'm not interested in that search….I am committed to the populations that Minority Serving Institutions serve. When I mentioned [my commitment] to the recruiter, they said [the institution doing the search] has a population [that is] about 70% first-generation, low-income. That is all well and good, but I want to be with people of color….I want to take the connections that I've made because my commitment to MSIs stems out of my own background, as a person who's a first-generation college student, college graduate. One of [MSIs'] commitments is to make sure that students, regardless of their background, regardless of their educational history, regardless of their income, come and graduate. I am committed to that [mission]…. I want to be in a place that is committed to making sure that every student that comes in can come through and graduate. So, there is clearly something going on at [Minority Serving Institutions], and I want to be part of that."

Servant leadership requires the type of commitment to the growth of people that this aspiring leader exemplifies (Spears, 2005). The uniqueness of MSIs also plays out in terms of community engagement and this type of engagement is important to those aspiring to lead MSIs. From the perspective of an aspiring leaders who has been active in the HSIs sector:

> "I've been at different types of institutions, elite, Research One Intensive, a Texas, HSI, and [a] Cal State. And one of the things that I really like about MSIs, [and HSIs, in particular], is the focus on community engaged work, working collaboratively with stakeholders.. I think it fits naturally with my approach to academic leadership…which is community engagement and community wellness….the special mission and vision and access that Minority Serving Institutions provide to communities. California State University is the largest university in the world, maybe the universe depending on if there's life out there. Right? So, it provides access to communities of color. And Latino communities, African American communities, Asian American communities, and Pacific Islanders, and Native American communities. And so, you have a special mission. I think that the mission and the goals and the students that are served at MSIs are really engaged in communities of color - [more so than at PWIs]."

Building community is an essential aspect of servant leadership and is expressed by this aspiring leader as she wants to ensure that the communities that she cares about are engaged and healthy (de los Santos Jr. & Vega, 2008).

Servant leadership emphasizes empathy, healing and stewardship (Spears, 2005). According to an aspiring leader who wants to pursue the presidency of a tribal college, "I do work at a tribal college….Really just serving, particularly tribal people. I also attended a tribal college for my undergraduate degree so that was something. I think I learned the value for us, for Native Americans, the value of honoring the sacrifices of our ancestors." Overall, the aspiring leaders felt drawn to serve at MSIs as most servant leaders do – they experience a calling to the leadership role.

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A Desire to "give back" or "pay it forward"

Many of the aspiring leaders either attended an MSI or one of their family members did and as a result, they feel committed to give back or "pay it forward" to the next generation of students or to MSIs themselves. In the words of one aspiring leader: "My wanting to be president of an MSI is connected to my attending an MSI as an undergraduate, and always knowing that at some point in my career I wanted to go back and be of service to an MSI, to give back all that was given to me." Another aspiring leader mentioned family members attending HBCUs and the importance of this legacy:

> "My parents and my siblings, we all were products of HBCUs, and…we watched these phenomenal scholars, we watched them as they taught us, as they did what they did, to ensure that we had what we needed to make it in society. So I've always felt a call and an urge to want to go back and be a part of that legacy. That's one of the reasons I feel I can be good at what I do. I understand our culture. I understand the need. I understand the unique needs, let me just say, the unique needs of the MSI institution."

Attending an HBCU has had a profound impact on the aspiring leaders with whom we talked. Their experiences and memories are central to their commitment to leading these institutions into the future. An enthusiastic aspiring leader stated:

> "I am a product of an HBCU. And my children are products, my parents are products of an HBCU. My experience was really phenomenal because I believe that when you have the experience of an HBCU… you have faculty there who understand the trials or the blocks that you may encounter and they are there to cultivate your strengths….So that love for teaching and I'm a believer in lifelong learning in that we never stop. It's ongoing and we never stop teaching if that's the gift that's been given."

While the literature on presidents overall, and HBCU presidents discusses many traits and skills that are needed to be successful as a president, it does not delve into the desire to give back or "pay it forward."

Other aspiring leaders can see the direct impact that HBCUs had on their leadership skills and want to bring those skills back to HBCUs. A Grambling State University alumnus shared: "As an [HBCU] alum, I have a direct understanding of the benefit of an MSI. It's one that afforded me the opportunity to hone my leadership skills as an undergraduate through service as student body president and understanding at that time the lens of what a senior administrator's role was in higher education. So, that is my foundational pre-set that still carries me to this day as an aspiring leader in this program and working as a senior administrator at an MSI." In many ways this aspiring leader was informally groomed for a presidency through the many experiences that he had during his time at an HBCU (Freeman & Gasman, 2014). Unfortunately, research shows that his experience is not the norm and that formal preparation programs and mentoring is needed in order to spur interest and provide support to aspiring leaders.

Aspiring leaders have profound memories of their experiences at HBCUs and want students in college today to have those same experiences. They have a genuine sense of hope for the direction and growth of the next generation (Greanleaf, 1977; Greanleaf,

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2002). Many of the aspiring leaders see their leadership as key to these kinds of growth-oriented experiences happening at HBCUs and MSIs overall. In the words of a two-time HBCU graduate:

> "I'm a two-time graduate of HBCUs. I went to Florida A&M University, and I went to North Carolina A&T, and so a lot of who I am as a person was cultivated at FAMU, and for that I will add, and so I learned a lot about myself, I learned a lot about just being a black person.... I think for me it was just this notion of knowing what attending an HBCU did for me, and how it helped me to grow as a person, as an adult, and the lessons I learned and to know that if I could be a part of movement at an institution where I could help students experience what I experienced, such that they will grow and learn and develop and become thriving members of society and become leaders, I think that is a challenge and that is an opportunity which I would love to pursue, which is one of the reasons I threw my name in the hat, if you will, for the MSI Aspiring Leaders program."

Although HSIs have a different history than HBCUs – one that results from the changing demographics of the nation rather than being established with a specific mission (Garcia, 2019), aspiring leaders affiliated with HSIs also feel a strong commitment. One aspiring leaders shared:

> "As a person of color, as a Chicano, as someone who attended an MSI as an undergraduate, just my own scholarship and my work over the last 15 years in higher [education] has convinced me just so much more that this is where I need to be to, to be serving and leading within an institution that serves a significant number of students of color and historically marginalized students. I feel like this is my calling in a way, in so many words."

As Greenleaf (1977/2002) shares, servant leaders have a natural feeling that they want to serve – they feel called to lead. Another aspiring leader interested in leadership at HSIs, pointed to the University of California (UC) system (which has several HSIs in it) and its importance in her life and that of so many Latinos ``I wanted to come back to California and contribute back to the UC system, which has given me so much. As it turns out, again based on the California population, the majority is Hispanic. So UC-[XX], [like other HSIs] is working to be a school that a lot of first generation [students] are attending." This aspiring leader is also motivated by watching HSI students - like her - "view college as an opportunity to not only transform their lives but that of their family. Hearing about how important that is and knowing that we help to make that difference [matters.]" In the vein of servant leadership, this aspiring leader is interested in the capacity for change in society, genuine human growth, and the betterment of communities (Vargas, 2011).

Overall, aspiring leaders who attended an MSI (or had family members attend an MSI) felt an obligation to give back. A statement by one aspiring leader exemplifies this notion: "[It is] important for those who are there at their schools to know that we can go off and come back home and because we have learned some new things, we have a responsibility to share that."

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Passion for Helping Underserved Students

The unique mission of MSIs as well as their graduates' commitments to them are essential to their sustainability. The aspiring leaders with whom we talked emphasized mission and their individual commitment on many occasions. They also mentioned their passion for helping students from backgrounds like them and whose experiences were similar (Imlay & Schaap, 2019). One aspiring leader described her passion as: "I've always been one that has been committed to helping students of color, or minority students. I represent minority students, so that has been a passion of mine ever since I can remember."

Even when the aspiring leaders didn't attend an MSI, they still described a passion for helping students of color. Although she didn't have the opportunity to attend an HBCU, one aspiring leader noted: "I've always had a passion for working with the population of students that many MSIs serve, and being that I [am] one. Now working at an HBCU, I'm able to see the contrast in staff and how [they] work with the students, and the support is very different than what I experienced [at a Predominantly White Institution]. The aspiring leaders want to meet students where they are and take them to new levels; they envision a role for themselves in this kind of work and feel passionately about such a role (Imlay & Schaap, 2019; Greanleaf, 1977; Greanleaf, 2002; Spears, 2005). According to one aspiring leader: "I have an interest in leadership in institutions that move the organization forward to really meet students where they are. I think that a lot of folks say that but don't actually realize what it might take in order to do that in the context of helping [students] particularly in the MSI culture." This aspiring leader exemplifies the tenets of servant leadership in her interest in constructing a better and more compassionate organization.

The aspiring leaders with whom we talked have a desire to make a difference with low-income and students of color, and, as mentioned, they often feel called to the work (Greanleaf, 1977; Greanleaf, 2002; Spears, 2005). An aspiring leader told us:

> "I [have] had the bug since 1994 of wanting to be a college president -- to leave my footprint and my ideology of wanting to create a campus community where we not only grew our student leaders but also grew that community that we serve. We're in a time where we need to make sure that we provide an environment for people of color to be able to thrive and excel and see the quality of education, but also be able to do it in a path where it's the least resistant."

Aspiring leaders use words like "love" when talking about what draws them to leadership at an MSIs:

> "I think my love of students has drawn me there. It was not something that I sought out. I was asked to become a department head unexpectedly. And I took the position and it took me a couple of weeks until I realized why they chose me…. I have a real passion for the business of education that I wasn't expecting to find. It's not just about making money. But the benefit that you give to students and to families who depend on that, that to me is a good reason to go home tired."

Overall, the aspiring leaders offer a sense of compassion, warmth and interest in serving others when discussing their desire to lead MSIs (Greanleaf, 1977; Greanleaf, 2002; Spears, 2005). They are aware that they have a leadership skill set but believe that their underlying compassion for students rises above these skills in terms of ensuring that they

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are ready to lead an MSI. An aspiring leader put it this way: "I think that skill set combined with my passion for students and in providing access and equity for those students and helping them, all students, reach their full potential is something that has for me kind of fueled my passion or my drive to want to be engaged and pursue a presidential leadership position."

Desire to See People of Color in Leadership Positions

Across the group of aspiring leaders that we interviewed, we found a desire to see more people of color in leadership positions, which is consistent with the findings of both Imlay and Schaap (2019) and Freeman and Gasman (2014). And, in particular, the aspiring leaders noticed the dearth of women of color in higher education more generally, but at MSIs as well (Washington et al, 2018). Given the special focus of MSIs on students of color, they were committed to diversifying the higher level administrative positions, including the presidency (Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Imlay & Schaap, 2019). From the perspective of one aspiring leader:

> "I remember being a student at my college in California and seeing one particular vice president of color, Latino, and he was very visible at the university. I didn't really know him too well at the time but I was always curious…and he ended up being the vice president of student affairs at that particular institution. I ended up connecting to him years later and he kind of became a mentor until he retired. And I think for me seeing people in those rolls meant a lot and I also saw that they were very far and few between. I think that was one kind of key formative experience and then in graduate school just not seeing a lot of representation from people of color in those chairs, or dean, or vice president or vice chancellor or even chancellor, the president positions. And I think in many ways, representation matters, life experience matters, and I know a lot of people bring those life experiences to [leadership] positions."

Another aspiring leader added, "I think for me as a woman of color in higher ed that was a big draw for me. I was really seeking that opportunity to do both professional development, leadership development but also in the context of being with people, people of color who are kind of in similar situations [and] who have an equity lens at the forefront of what we do and so I was excited to get that opportunity." Women in colleges and universities are underrepresented (Imlay & Schaap, 2019), but women of color are nearly missing (Washington et al, 2018).

Some of the aspiring leaders at Hispanic Serving Institutions are concerned that the leadership of their institutions isn't diverse enough given that sometimes the HSI designation is relatively new and the leadership is still majority White and men (Garcia, 2019; Imlay & Schaap, 2019). An aspiring leader shared,

> "I feel that more folks of color, we have to step up and serve in these positions because I'm seeing how my faculty are treated. We are at an HSI, and we don't have the luxury that HBCUs have where from the ground up this is our mission. HSI happens to an institution. So, there are a lot of folks here who are angry about it, just to see how they're treated and the environment is not right. We

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> have to [lead]. I kind of feel I have to. There's so few of us even in these positions, so how do you even build a pipeline when there's nobody there."

The aspiring leaders see the need for more people of color in leadership positions in higher education as part of an overall national push for more people of color in leadership roles (Imlay & Schaap, 2019). Many of them were inspired by the 2016 presidential election results, when Donald J. Trump was elected. They saw women of color, in particular, coming together to make change in an effort to influence the 2020 election and defeat Trump. They felt empowered to do the same within the higher education context – to come together and make positive change. A woman aspiring leader shared: "The 2016 presidential election really was an impetus for me [to see out leadership roles]. I think the election really highlighted the need for more women and women of color in key leadership positions. So, although that was mainly in politics, I think it sort of hit me then across the board."

Ensure the Future of MSIs

> I do have an obligation to ensure that this school and perhaps some others still exist well into the future.

Looking into the future of higher education, it is not a given that MSIs will continue to exist and to receive specialized classification and funding. As noted in the beginning of this paper, the myth that we are now both a "color-blind" and "meritocratic" society, challenges many funders and educational policymakers to continue to define (and defend) the unique role that MSIs play in educating students of color. Even students who are able to get into highly-touted and fiercely competitive universities often choose to attend MSIs because they have a special culture of making students feel like "family," nurturing collaboration in place of strict competition, using culturally relevant pedagogy, and prioritizing student engaged teaching and learning over top-down research and standardized testing.

The aspiring leaders who we interviewed were committed to the future of MSIs and were very clear about this commitment and their role in the sustainability of MSIs (Esters et al., 2016). From the perspective of one aspiring leader who is committed to supporting HBCUs:

> "I think there are many brothers and sisters of all hues waiting in the wings at Predominantly White Institutions who want to come back to Minority Serving Institutions and I tell my colleagues all the time across the nation that there is a place for you here, that these institutions are deserving of leadership and the commitment to ensuring that these institutions are still here….I do have an obligation to ensure that this school and perhaps some others still exist well into the future."

Another aspiring leader concurred, adding "What do we do about the 100 or so HBCUs that still exist today? How do we provide a sustainable path for them to continue to exist and then thrive?".

Some aspiring leaders have witnessed a revolving door of presidents and see the damage it does to their campuses (Esters et al., 2016; Freeman & Gasman, 2014). They want to provide consistent leadership for MSIs as they see it as the key to the sustainability of these institutions (Freeman et al., 2016). An aspiring leader lamented:

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Minority Serving Institution Presidents

> "I started watching our administration, and I watched a president pretty much get drummed out, and watched another president come in, and it is one of those moments when you say to yourself, I could do better than this, and you know, I did say to myself, are there certain things that they know that I don't know? I'm going to have to start learning those things, so I've been paying attention. I've been watching. I've been asking a lot of questions. I've strategically asked to be on certain committees, on purpose, so that I could learn more to strengthen MSIs."

Other aspiring leaders noted that they needed to be proactive as current leaders of a particular age will soon retire, and it is critical that they are prepared to continue their legacy. Additionally, aspiring leaders were concerned that if they were not fully prepared, the legacy of MSIs would be co-opted: "We were the originators of this and we need to stop letting folks co-op our work and recommit to our mission, vision and values and empower our current students to do and live again the mission, vision and values of our institution." Another HBCU aspiring leader similarly noted their concern that important policies that support HBCUs may not be renewed with intentional preparation and strategic planning: "I believe in HBCUs and in the political climate, to be honest, ten years, policies have been adopted, policies have not been renewed, as a result it makes it, the landscape for HBCUs is much more difficult, and having leaders that are prepared, responsive, innovative and committed will help ensure the success of HBCUs, moving into the future."

Ensure the Future of MSIs

The themes above were the most common among the aspiring leaders and represent the breadth of aspirations and motivations among the aspiring leaders' cohort. However, there were a few other themes that stood out and that we think are important to share. First, many of the aspiring leaders who attended HBCUs discussed the desire to "reclaim the legacy of HBCUs" as part of the reason why they want to lead an HBCU. One aspiring leader described her desire like this.: " I understand the importance of HBCUs… I mean in terms of the degree to which HBCUs continue to disproportionately place people of color, primarily African-Americans in graduate and professional schools, despite their comparatively small size….I believe in HBCUs."

Second, some aspiring leaders are motivated to lead at an MSI by their past experiences at an MSI. They saw others lead or they led and truly enjoyed it (Commodore et al., 2016; Freeman & Gasman, 2014). An aspiring leader described his experience as: "having the opportunity to directly impact student experience, speaking on behalf of the students, being a partner with the administration and ultimately championing change for an institution that leadership experiences is always and forever will be a cornerstone to my experience as an administrator." Other aspiring leaders served in presidential cabinets or worked on high-level programs to advance women; these experiences served as the impetus for their desire to serve as a president (Commodore et al., 2016).

Third, some aspiring leaders want to lead an MSI in order to support the positive experiences of faculty of color. And forth, aspiring leaders are interested in seeing more people of color in leadership positions. According to one aspiring leader: "My focus to be an effective leader in this institution is that the need for leadership is paramount. The need for

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leaders who are committed to the ideal of the organization but also leaders who understand the trajectory of where the organization needs to go for their sustainability and ultimately their growth. So knowing what the need is I think for me throughout my career I've always followed the path of where do I have the opportunity to make an impact. So understanding there's a great need, there's a skillset that I possess and an experience that I bring to the conversation that really bodes well for me professionally as well as for the success of the organization."

Recommendations

While there will always be individuals ready to take the mantle of MSIs leadership, it is important to note that this is difficult to achieve without the proper mentors, support systems, and networks. Understanding the aspirations and motivations behind leaders' desire to pursue leadership positions is important to both our understanding of leadership more generally and to programs and efforts to foster leadership opportunities among aspiring leaders. Based on our interviews with 45 aspiring leaders, we offer the following recommendations for those who want to lead Minority Serving Institutions in the future, those who are mentoring aspiring leaders, and those conducting research in this area.

Recommendations for Aspiring Presidents

Those aspiring to the MSI presidency will benefit from creating and sustaining networks. These networks provide ongoing support systems, allow for collaboration on innovative ideas, and provide a platform with which to influence policy and practice. Aspiring leaders can also emphasize with and fully support the needs of those students they will one day serve by drawing on their own positive experiences at MSIs.

Aspiring leaders, as well as researchers, must recognize that while MSIs are a governmental classification, each type of MSI has a unique history and mission, and further, each individual school needs responsive leadership. While there are best practices, no MSI is the same and becoming an effective leader is not something that can be reduced to a "to-do" list.

Aspiring leaders should not shy away from discussions of race and racism, which are central to the lives and experiences of faculty, staff and students at MSIs. However, they should avoid reducing the role of MSI leadership to fighting racism. MSIs are special institutions because of the way they value students, meet students where they are, provide students with critical resources, and create opportunities for students to reach their full potential academically, professionally and socially.

Recommendations for Mentors of Aspiring Presidents

Mentors must recognize that aspiring leaders come from diverse racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and many want to lead a particular type of MSIs. Leading a Tribal College, for example, is not the same as leading an HBCU. Aspiring leaders need particular types of mentors with specific expertise.

Mentors can do a better job for their mentees when they recognize that even within the same classification not all MSIs are the same and being a leader requires a deep understanding of the specific context of individual institutions. There is no "one way" to prepare people for leadership.

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At the same time, mentors should pay attention to commonalities among the reasons that aspiring leaders want to lead an MSIs (to give back, to ensure the future of MSIs, to see people of color in leadership positions) and provide mentoring that is holistic across these different motivations. Lastly, mentors should prepare aspiring leaders for the potential controversies that might engulf MSIs, especially in the current political environment. It is important that future leaders are prepared to address these issues and have practice advocating for MSIs.

Recommendations for Research Related to Aspiring Presidents

There is very little research related to aspiring presidential leaders. The literature would benefit from the collection of further quantitative and qualitative data from more aspiring leader as well as relatively new MSI Leaders to explore their preparation, needs, and challenges. The overall literature on aspiring presidents would also benefit from more in-depth research that delves into the various MSI types, looking at their commonalities and differences in terms of leadership needs.

Conclusion

Overall, there is little research pertaining to the aspiring leaders or current leaders of MSIs. Given the important contributions that these institutions make, and that their students make, to society, it is essential that we learn more about their motivations, needs, and challenges. And, although this new knowledge is important for research, it is even more important for the future of MSIs, which need strong and effective leaders who have a passion of leading MSIs. MSIs crave and need leadership from individuals who value the history, mission, legacy, and student body of MSIs.

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