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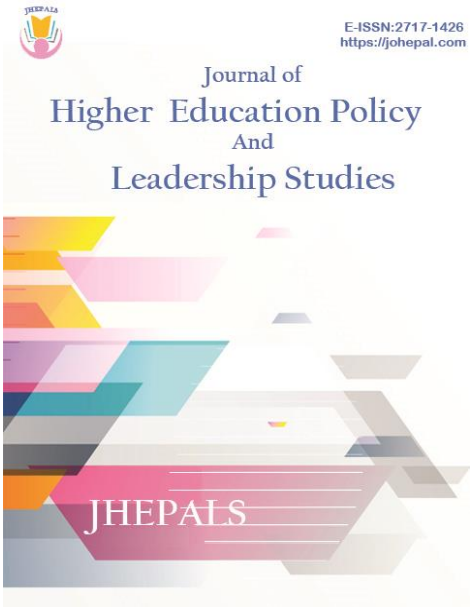
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Experience and Authenticity: Shaping the Future of Minority Serving Institution Presidents



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Experience and Authenticity: Shaping the Future of Minority Serving Institution Presidents

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Abstract

In this study, we explored the role of mentoring in preparing aspiring leaders of color for the presidency of Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). We drew from semi-structured interviews with aspiring leaders to examine how relationships with current or recently retired MSI presidents shaped their leadership development. We used a servant leadership framework and found that mentees gained access to candid insights, professional networks, and an inside view of presidential responsibilities. Mentors' transparency, authenticity, and availability fostered trust and confidence, while race and gender continuity provided affirmation and a sense of belonging. Participants highlighted the value of strategic advice, encouragement, and genuine care. However, some relationships were hindered by limited accessibility and unclear expectations. Overall, this research contributes to ongoing conversations about diversifying higher education pipelines and ensuring that colleges and universities that serve large numbers of students of color are guided by leaders who are well prepared, supported, and equipped to steward their missions.

Keywords: Minority Serving Institutions; College Presidency; Higher Education Leadership; Mentoring; Servant Leadership; Leadership Development; Presidential Pipeline

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Introduction

Mentoring is vital to professional development in various fields, including higher education (Balinda, 2023; Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Aspiring leaders who wish to join the presidency can benefit greatly from mentoring relationships (Briscoe & Freeman Jr., 2019). Mentoring contributes to the personal and professional growth of aspiring leaders (Gasman et al., 2023) as well as the motivations of these leaders (Gasman et al., 2021; Gasman et al., 2024; Gasman et al., 2025). Although there is research related to individuals currently serving as college presidents at MSIs (Briscoe & Freeman Jr., 2019; Freeman Jr. & Gasman, 2014; Palmer et al., 2017; Hill & Wheat, 2017; Muñoz, 2009), there is relatively little research on the experiences of those who are being mentored specifically to become college presidents by current or former college presidents, and within MSI environments.

With this article, we add to the research on mentoring and the college presidency by exploring the experiences of individuals currently participating in a mentoring program designed to prepare them for a college or university presidency. In addition, the individuals in this study are leaders of color who are interested in pursuing presidencies at MSIs, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Asian American and Native American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), among others. We seek to understand the challenges and opportunities that arise with their mentors and how mentees navigate their relationships with mentors. This paper answers the following research question: What did MSI aspiring leaders gain from a two-year mentoring relationship with a current or recently retired MSI president?

In answering this question, we also consider the challenges and opportunities of leading an MSI. For example, some issues germane to leading an MSI (depending upon the institutional context) include: 1) limited access to essential resources and funding (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008; Gasman & Esters, 2024); 2) working with a student body that is diverse in multiple ways (race, class, gender, religion, first-generation, nontraditionally aged, etc.) (Conrad & Gasman, 2015); 3) the scope and depth of institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, especially at MSIs that began as PWIs (Garcia, 2019; Garcia, 2023); 4) high levels of burnout and turnover based on lack of support staff and the politicization of anything relating to racial equity (Garces & Cogburn, 2015; Gasman & Esters, 2024; Gasman et al., 2021; Gasman et al., 2024); 5) limited opportunities to network with other MSI leaders (Gasman et al., 2021; Gasman et al., 2024; Gasman et al., 2025); 6) public misconceptions about the sustainability and relevance of MSIs, including changes in local, state and federal leadership (Gasman & Esters, 2024; Conrad & Gasman, 2015); 7) a commitment to community engagement and empowering the surrounding community (Gasman, Spencer, & Orphan, 2015; Gasman & Esters, 2024); 8) being student-centered institutions (often self-identified as "teaching institutions") that are committed to broad-based student success (Conrad & Gasman, 2015); 9) possibly being a two-year MSI and thus needing to have pathways and partnerships in place for students to continue their education (Conrad & Gasman, 2015); and 10) having a commitment to preserving cultural histories, languages, values, and practices. This is especially applicable to TCUs (Conrad & Gasman, 2015).

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By shedding light on the experiences of those mentored to become college presidents at MSIs, our research can inform the development and implementation of effective mentoring programs that can help prepare the next generation of higher education leaders who will serve large numbers of students of color. Our findings may be of interest to both current and aspiring college and university presidents, as well as those involved in the recruitment and selection of top-level higher education administrators of MSIs. With this research, we aim to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the future of higher education leadership – most specifically at MSIs -- and the role that mentoring can play in shaping that future.

The zeitgeist of political vitriol and increased scrutiny of college and university presidents has created a fraught landscape for individuals aspiring to lead institutions. Amongst this cadre of individuals, those who aspire to lead MSIs are poised to steward a critical sector of postsecondary education. Ample scholarship has shown that MSIs are the crucibles for educational access for most students of color in the nation (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Garcia, 2019; Garcia, 2023; Gasman & Conrad, 2013). Most MSIs are public institutions, community colleges, and comprehensive regional institutions, so they are the engines of educational preparation for most college-seeking students. Indeed, deepening our knowledge base on aspiring MSI leaders' experiences is especially timely. While past scholarship has considered leaders' important histories and futures at specific types of MSIs (HBCUs and HSIs, most notably), exploring the future of leadership for MSIs as an aggregate unit of analysis is especially important.

Literature Review

We have organized our literature review into several categories: 1.) general literature on the college presidency with a sub-section on women in the presidency; 2.) literature on the role of mentoring in the presidency; 3.) literature on mentoring and presidents of color; 4.) literature on the HBCU presidency and mentoring; 5.) literature on the HSI presidency and mentoring; 6) literature on the TCU presidency and mentoring; and 7) literature on the community college presidency and mentoring (given that 50% of MSIs are community colleges).*

General Literature on the College Presidency

Although the literature on the college presidency has been growing over the past three decades, it is disparate and uneven in quality and scope. Most of the research is focused on characteristics and preparation of leaders, with a small mention of mentoring and the pathways they take to leadership. In their work, Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) created a typology of career paths for college presidents, labeling them scholar, steward, spanner, and stranger. They also drew from the American Council on Education's (ACE) American College President Study. They argued that when colleges widen their recruiting net for presidents – drawing from nontraditional sources – they can increase the gender, race, and ethnicity of

* Of note, we were not able to locate any literature on the mentoring of future or current presidents of Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions, Predominantly Black Institutions Native American Non-Tribal Serving Institutions or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Serving Institutions. There are a few thought pieces but no empirical research.

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presidential candidates. However, they noted that those presidents who arrive at the presidency through academia are more likely to be mentored. Likewise, Hartley & Godin (2009) focused on first-time presidents' career patterns and characteristics. They also drew upon data from the American College President Study, examining 20 years and looking for trends. They conducted their research to improve policy and practice within the Council of Independent Colleges, including future recruitment and future mentoring of presidents. The authors found that the presidency was greying and search firms had added difficulty attracting highly qualified leaders to the college presidency.

Golden (2014) focused on diversifying the pipeline to the presidency, highlighting succession planning as a strategy. He suggested that colleges and universities emulate the strategies of corporations, focusing on succession planning, including extensive mentoring, to solidify leadership and continuity. One of the more recent studies by Romano (2020) focused on the next generation of public college and university presidents. Concerned about persistent turnover and shorter tenures as presidents, this research sought to understand the type of preparation needed, including mentoring, to be a first-time president. The findings were limited as the author focused more on developing a framework for the pathway to the presidency than on mentoring.

Using a phenomenological approach, Al-Asfour et al. (2021) investigated the skills needed for hiring presidential candidates before age 40. They interviewed these individuals and found that most participants had little to no mentoring, learned through real-time experiences, had the "right" education and credentials, and were in the "right place at the right time." Participants also had highly developed interpersonal skills.

The general literature on the college presidency recognizes informal and formal mentoring as a critical factor for career advancement, particularly as one moves forward in their career. Scholars see mentoring as having even more significance in the careers of women and people of color due to the inequities across their career paths.

Women in the Presidency

Within the larger literature on the college presidency, most of the research is focused on women. Hytrek (2000) examined how women lead with authenticity despite having few other women to look to as role models and limited access to women mentors. Likewise, Madsen (2008) conducted extensive interviews with women presidents, highlighting their inspirations, experiences, and challenges.

Ghouralal (2019) examined the under-representation of women in the presidency. Drawing upon the American College Presidents Survey, as previous researchers have, the findings suggested that the percentage of women in the presidency has not increased rapidly and is connected to women having greater difficulty securing mentors, especially mentors with significant social capital.

Several studies explore identity and the 'calling' that women presidents have to do the job (BlackChen, 2015; Oikelome, 2017; Tran, 2014; Tunheim et al., 2015; Tunheim & Goldschmidt, 2013). These authors explore issues of race, gender, class, and how these identities impact how one pursues the presidency and is called to the role.

Overall, the research demonstrates that women are underrepresented in the presidencies of colleges and universities. It also clarifies that women experience more difficulty securing mentors, especially same gender mentors.

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Role of Mentoring in the College Presidency

The research in this area collectively explores the role of mentoring in leadership more specifically and directly. Several articles focus on how mentoring contributes to the career development of individuals aspiring to college and university presidencies (Merriam & Thomas, 1986; Merriam et al., 1987). These authors highlight the significance of mentoring in facilitating the ascension of professionals from diverse functional areas, such as student affairs, to senior leadership positions. Mentoring is depicted as a critical factor in preparing individuals for the multifaceted responsibilities of presidents, regardless of their initial career trajectories.

Most of the research related to the role of mentoring pertains to the challenges and experiences of women college presidents. Several studies (Reis & Grady, 2020; Grotrian-Ryan, 2015; Neumann, 1990), using in-depth qualitative approaches and/or surveys, emphasize the critical role of mentoring in the development and advancement of women presidents. Mentoring provides guidance, support, and opportunities for leadership growth, contributing to women's professional success in higher education leadership roles. Interestingly, many women were more likely to receive mentoring from men, as men are more prominent in the roles that women aspire to be in. In addition, the mentoring was informal, developed through relationships rather than formal programs (Searby et al., 2015). Moreover, women presidents were likely to mentor other women on their path to the presidency. These researchers suggest that formal mentoring be enacted to bring more equity and consistency to the mentoring experiences of women.

One of the most prominent studies in this area was conducted by Hill and Wheat (2017) and focused on exploring how presidents understood the role of mentoring in their lives and along their career paths. Using a postmodern feminist theoretical framework, the authors aimed to give voice to the unique and individualized ways aspiring women leaders and women presidents engaged with and made meaning with mentors and role models in their lives. Using semi-structured interviews with 16 women in higher education leadership positions, they found that there were minimal mentors and role models; that there were significant gender dynamics in mentoring relationships; and that the women felt they benefited greatly despite the complexities of the relationships.

Although most studies found mentoring to be a positive force in the lives of women presidents, Tolar (2012) found that high-achieving women in her qualitative study described the presence of mentors as “both a help and a hindrance” and the “absence of mentors as both a benefit and a deficit” (p. 1). The women she talked with wanted flexibility in how mentoring works. Some women felt that formal mentoring programs were advantageous, while others found them limiting and not as genuine as a more organic mentoring relationship.

The literature on the role of mentoring emphasizes how mentoring contributes to career development, how mentoring can prepare individuals for the complex responsibilities of the presidency, how mentoring can counter high levels of turnover, and how most women are mentored by men informally and would benefit from more formal mentoring from women.

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Literature on Mentoring of Presidents of Color

Some literature on mentoring and the presidency focuses on presidents of color. Most of this literature pertains to African Americans and women in particular. Some researchers in this area explore the presidency overall (Chang et al., 2014) but pay special attention to the role of mentoring. These studies tend to be small in terms of participants and provide an in-depth exploration of the experiences of African American college presidents, examining race and gender issues (Holmes, 2004; Martin, 2020; Martin, 2021; Pichon & Mutakabbir, 2021). The studies are practical and aim to help others through the advice of the interviewed presidents.

As noted, the greatest concentration of articles related to the mentoring of presidents of color focuses on Black women. These scholars identify common obstacles and strategies that work to navigate these obstacles (Ramey, 1995). Moreover, the authors explore the career paths of the individuals they interview, ascertaining the paths to success that they have followed on the advice of their mentors and how others can learn from them to crack or eliminate the glass ceiling (Smith-Adams, 2022). Other research studies on Black women offer recommendations for mentoring these leaders, explaining the roles mentors can play and how mentees can take full advantage of their mentoring relationships (Smith & Crawford, 2007; Penny & Gaillard, 2006).

Briscoe and Freeman Jr. (2019) offer one of the only studies related to mentoring African American men who serve in the presidency. They employed a phenomenological research approach. Through this approach, they conducted an in-depth exploration of how mentoring shapes the preparation and success of leaders, including how mentees move through phases in their mentoring experience. Their findings suggest the need for formal mentoring programs focusing on executive leadership and managing executives' various roles.

Literature on the HBCU Presidency and Mentoring

Literature about the HBCU presidency – much like the general literature on presidents of colleges and universities – is focused on characteristics, aspirations, challenges, and mentoring before and during the position. Much of the literature is pursued by a small group of individuals who tend to write with each other, including additional scholars from time to time. Most of these scholars are African American and/or attended HBCUs for at least one of their degrees. The research is qualitative, using one-on-one interviews with either aspiring presidents or current presidents of HBCUs. A subsection of the literature focuses on Black women leaders of HBCUs.

Much of the research began in 2014 with work by Freeman and Gasman (2014). In this qualitative study, the authors explore the characteristics of HBCU presidents and how they mentor the next generation of leadership at HBCUs. The impetus for this work was the high turnover in the HBCU presidency for the past few decades. The authors and those interviewed expressed concern over the "recycling" of presidents who failed in their positions. Wright (2015) conducted a similar study, focusing on how to produce and select competent leaders of HBCUs – again with concern over the high turnover experiences at HBCUs in the years prior.

Commodore et al. (2016) explored the role of mentoring in preparing the next generation of HBCU presidents, also expressing concern over the high turnover in HBCU

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leadership across the country. Findings revealed that being open to mentoring and willing to shadow a highly successful HBCU leader helped prepare individuals for leadership. Findings also pointed to a need for humility and self-awareness to succeed within the presidential role. Mentors can foster these skills. Likewise, Freeman et al. (2016) interviewed presidents, board of trustee members, and presidential search firm staff to understand better the skills and characteristics needed for the HBCU presidency (See Esters et al., 2016 for a similar study). Like Commodore et al. (2016), they found that truly wanting to do important, change-focused work in the position rather than the mere prominence of the presidential position was an essential characteristic of future presidents and could lead to a reduction in turnover.

Also interested in presidential turnover and fit, Lockett (2019) conducted a portraiture study with four HBCU presidents who resigned or were fired. Her extensive narratives aimed to understand institutional fit and how a lack of fit can make for difficult relationships between presidents and boards.

Concern about preparation, turnover, and mentoring of HBCU presidents continued among researchers in the next decade as HBCUs were again experiencing short-term presidencies. In one example, Palmer and Freeman Jr. (2020) examined the practices used by unsuccessful HBCU presidents. The authors point out that they conducted the qualitative research in an effort to identify practices that must change in order to engender more successful presidents at HBCUs. Along a similar vein and as a result of some very prominent and public firings, Commodore et al., (2020) studied the experiences of Black women HBCU presidents, exploring the way these women are controlled and discussed by the larger public. Although mentoring was not a focus of their research, the dire, misogynist, and racist experiences that they endure require ample mentoring and confidants.

The most recent article, conducted by many of the same researchers (Gasman et al., 2023), focused on why aspiring presidents choose to lead HBCUs. The qualitative research project draws from interviews and found that these individuals have a commitment to giving back, want to serve people who look like them, and want to lead in Black communities.

Hispanic Serving Institution (HSIs) Presidents and Mentoring

Although there is research related to the presidency of HSIs, most of it does not mention mentoring. In one of the earlier studies, Montas-Hunter (2012) focuses specifically on Latina leaders, examining the "impact of identity, self-efficacy, and cultural interface with the attainment of leadership roles for Latinas in higher education" (p. 316). She finds that the Latinas in her research "emerged as confident individuals who had a clear sense of who they were as leaders and were confident about their capability to lead" (p. 317). However, she also highlights challenges such as the extensive media attention they receive and the expectation to fulfill woman-coded gender roles by being warm and selfless, while also being assertive and competent. Participants in Montas-Hunter's study cited the support of role models, and family members as crucial in overcoming these challenges. Her study concludes that "the journey toward leadership requires a shared responsibility by Latinas in the path to leadership, the community that supports them and the gatekeepers to the executive suites of academia" (p. 333).

In one of the most comprehensive studies on aspiring HSI leaders, Ortega et al. (2023) highlighted a critical issue. They noted: "Troublingly, even racialized minoritized workplaces,

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like the HSIs we explored, are not immune to whiteness' grip. Indeed, many HSIs prescribe to whiteness and invalidate or undervalue the knowledge and assets of PoC [people of color] …" (n.p.). This situation arises partly because HSIs remain influenced by the decision-making of white stakeholders. The authors also suggested that although it is encouraging that HSIs may "hire Latinx leaders," some study participants questioned "their institution's true hiring intentions," suspecting it to be more about fulfilling a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) agenda rather than genuine change. They found that many Latinx individuals were "expected to be an image for the institution at cultural events, not leaders." Furthermore, Ortega et al. (2024, p. 310) stressed that "diversification is critical at HSIs, considering preliminary research findings exhibit how HSIs, including their leaders, often uphold white normative standards" (n.p.; see also Gasman et al., 2024).

According to Ortega et al. (2023), Latinx aspiring and current leaders at HSIs face challenges due to three primary reasons: 1) white-coded practices and politics; 2) racial bias in hiring; and 3) intragroup animosity. For instance, when referring to white-coded practices and politics, the authors note that study participants felt pressured to conform to "norms, rules, and expectations rooted in white and Eurocentric values and traditions," and many felt the need to "code switch" even within an HSI context. Leaders at HSIs were keenly aware of "hidden politics" and the reality that "some people are waiting for you to fail, some people are setting you up to fail, and some people are actively sabotaging everything you're doing" (n.p.). In discussing racial bias in hiring, Ortega et al. also point out that racial and gender stereotypes continue to permeate the workplace, effectively hindering people of color, including Latinxs, from securing and succeeding in positions of power (n.p.). Lastly, the authors address intragroup animosity, sharing that "Latinx leaders at HSIs tend not to advocate for other Latinxs," largely due to the competitive environment fostered by rules established by white males (n.p.). Although comprehensive in nature, mentoring is not the focus of this important research (Gasman et al., 2024).

The most recent study related to HSIs, and the presidency focuses on aspiring presidents' intention to serve and give back to their communities (Gasman et al., 2024). The authors do not focus specifically on mentoring, but they do discuss, based on qualitative interviews with a cohort of aspiring HSI presidents, the need for aspiring leaders to have access to the experiences and mentorship of previous leaders in order to prepare for the role of the presidency.

Rather than focusing directly on mentoring, the research related to HSIs and the presidency, tends to touch upon the pathways to the presidency, with mentoring being a factor along the way. Most scholars writing in this area are, like the other areas in this literature review, focused on women. Leaders of HSIs are faced with the complexities of leading racialized institutions that often have never had Latinx leadership. Delgado-Romero et al. (2016) found that for Latinx individuals, reaching the highest executive role such as the presidency is not common for this demographic. Thus, the need for mentorship for these aspiring leaders is critical in the succession of leaders of color.

Literature on Tribal College Presidents

While there is a scarcity of literature and research on TCU presidents, two studies provided significant qualitative insight into the experiences and perspectives of these leaders. The first study, "Leadership Styles of Successful Tribal College Presidents" (Campbell, 2003),

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included interviews with tribal college presidents in three states, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. These presidents were at institutions such as Sinte Gleska University, Salish Kootenai College, Turtle Mountain Community College, and Oglala Lakota College, among others. While the study did not focus specifically on mentoring, it did provide insight into the unique context of leading a tribal college, and the skillsets that were most needed.

Among the primary questions posed to presidents in this study were: 1. What leadership characteristics or qualities do successful tribal college presidents possess? and 2. What is the tribal college president's perception of his influence on institutional culture? Presidents were also asked to reflect on a number of sub-questions, such as: Describe your leadership style; Describe what you do to instill loyalty to the institutional mission; Explain how the institutional culture reflects your leadership style; and Describe how you are responsible for traditions that are currently practiced within the institution (Campbell, 2003, p. 74).

The author found that "Although Tribal Colleges are subject to many of the same leadership issues that mainstream institutions find perplexing, there are some rather distinct differences." More specifically,

> First, it is necessary to understand that these institutions are inextricably bound to the Tribes and Tribal governments that charter them and provide their basis for legitimacy. Then there is the expectation that these institutions will act as gatekeepers for Tribal languages, history, and societal mores. They must also provide the Tribal community with those resources and opportunities that exhibit the institution's commitment to educational and experiential learning opportunities, while providing a culturally relevant interface. (Campbell, p. 36)

In their interviews, TCU presidents emphasized certain key qualities that they aspired to, including the importance a collective sense of vision and purpose among staff, faculty, administration, presidents, and board members. As one president reflected: "My leadership style is to work with others, to try and understand their needs, their interests, and to keep focused on our mission statement and let that guide my decisions" (p. 108). Another president noted similarly:

> It is like being on a journey with others within the institution, and if you have a road map, and you know where you are going, you can turn that vehicle over to any of them and they will get you to that destination—that is why everyone needs to know and live by the vision (p. 110).

Given the history of colonization, TCU presidents also stressed that they wanted to "provide a place of hope" (Campbell, 2003, p. 112) and that preserving tribal cultures, languages and traditions was a critical part of their role as leaders. The president of Sinte Gleska University, for example, shared that: "You cannot separate Lakota culture from spirituality, they go hand in hand; they are one" (p. 176), and further noted that:

> As the leader it is important that I knew previous generations, those who were able to teach me about the bigger picture, and where I fit in, and most importantly, how to bring people into that and do what has to be achieved. (p. 176).

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A more recent study, "Leading tribal colleges and universities: Perspectives on the skills and experiences need to lead indigenous high education" (Al-Asfour et al., 2024), emphasized many of the same leadership qualities, underscoring the importance of moving outside the lens of a Western model of leadership when studying TCUs presidents (p. 2). The authors noted that: "Current knowledge about the uniqueness of Tribal college leadership is necessary to counteract potential misunderstandings and illuminate key differences between Native American and the European approaches to higher education leadership" (p. 3). Moving away from definitions of effective leadership that focus on "authority," and "chain of command," the authors instead considered ways that presidents of TCUs value "collectivist decision-making and servant leadership" (p. 3). Building upon prior research by Crazy Bull (2017), Al-Asfour et al. (2024) emphasize how TCU presidents "need to comprehend complex situations and facilitate social discourse among different parties. This aspect holds particular importance for TCUs, as they must navigate interactions with Tribal stakeholders and non-Tribal agencies" (p. 5).

After interviewing 11 TCU presidents, the authors concluded that using consensus and the "skill of listening to the Tribal community" were paramount for TCU leaders. As one president reflected: "A top-down model does not work in Tribal communities" (Al-Asfour et al., 2024, p. 8). Tribal presidents often spoke about the importance of having knowledge about "sovereignty issues" and the vision of Tribal elders (p. 9). Collectively, they felt strongly that TCU leaders need to have both Tribal and non-Tribal political experience," and to be able to communicate effectively "within the institution, within the reservation and to non-natives" (p. 9)

When it came to the issue of mentoring, the TCU presidents in this study stressed the importance of being able to reach out to other TCU presidents "without making me feel like a burden to them" and to be able to learn from "past mistakes" (Al-Asfour et al., 2024, p. 12). Interestingly, while some male TCU presidents were uncomfortable with the term "mentoring" as it suggested a hierarchy rather than mutually beneficial relationship, the same did not hold true in their interviews with women presidents (See also Manuelito-Kerkvliet, 2004). The authors found that: "women college presidents viewed mentoring as critical for TCU leadership while men presidents avoided using the term 'mentoring' and instead emphasized supporting and helping one another" (Al-Asfour et al., 2024, p. 14). This led the authors to call for "additional research examining Native women's experiences" in the presidency (p. 15).

The research on the TCU presidency highlights the unique leadership challenges faced by presidents, emphasizing the importance of culturally relevant leadership and community engagement. TCU presidents navigate complex relationships with Tribal and non-Tribal entities while preserving Tribal cultures and traditions.

Literature on Community College Presidency and Mentoring

As over half of MSIs are community colleges, we felt that it was important to explore the literature pertaining to community college presidents. Prior to the late 1980s, there was very little research related to presidents of community colleges, and community colleges overall. These institutions were undervalued and stigmatized as not being prestigious or important in U.S. higher education, and as such, were rarely included in scholarly work pertaining to higher education or leadership in higher education (Gasman, 2013; Thelin,

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2011). The early research focused on the development of community college leaders (Roe & Baker, 1989) and examined a major report by the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. The authors noted that leaders of community colleges have one of the most substantial roles in higher education given the diversity and needs of students. Some scholars explored the experiences of African American community college presidents, as community colleges were places that were more open to Black leadership. And, given the diversity of community college students, the authors determined that African American presidents could serve as role models for students, which was empowering (Phelps et al., 1997). Adding to the research, McFarlin, Crittenden, & Ebbers (1999), explored the background factors of community college presidents with the intention of strengthening these institutions.

The early 2000s ushered in more diversity among students at community colleges, as well as scholars concerned about the lack of Latinx leadership at these institutions (Gutierrez et al., 2002). Authors wondered where Latinx presidents would be trained and how to create pathways for them within higher education institutions. Related to this concern, but spanning across race and ethnicity, VanDerLinden (2004) examined the differences in mentoring that men and women received prior to becoming leaders at community colleges, finding disparities for women (See Campbell, Mueller, & Souza, 2010 for a similar study.) Blackwood and Brown-Welty (2011) and Tran (2014) also explored women of color and their mentoring experiences on the way to community college leadership. Using a survey as well as qualitative interviews, the authors examined the effect of mentoring on these women's careers, the challenges of finding a network, and how mentors were essential to success (See also Hull & Kelm, 2007; Wallin & Johnson, 2007). Muñoz (2009) rounded out the decade with a mixed-methods study of Latina community college presidents. Her findings suggested that Latina presidents face considerable bias along the path to the presidency of the community college.

Eddy's (2005) work – both on her own and with other scholars has contributed greatly to the literature over several decades by providing a foundation for those interested in the presidency of community colleges. Through qualitative interviews with nine presidents, she explored how community college presidents think about their leadership and construct their approach to leadership (2005). She argued that although people are predisposed to approaching leadership with their own schema, they are open to learning as the job calls for intense learning. Eddy (2008), much like VanDerLinden (2004) mentioned earlier, expressed concern about the lack of women leading community colleges, especially given that nearly 60% of the students at community colleges in the early 2000s were women. She found that networking, self-determination, and perseverance were key to women leading community colleges. More recently Eddy et al. (2019) examined the differences between rural and urban leaders in terms of career paths and professional development, with some attention to mentoring. They found that rural leaders are often pressured to support local economies and to solve larger college going issues in the local community, making it necessary for these leaders to have ample preparation in these specific areas.

Hague and Okpala (2017) looked at the factors that shape career advancement for African American women leaders at community colleges. Interviewing twelve women, they found that the women believed that their race and gender, leadership preparation, networking, and relationships were essential to their ability to move into leadership

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positions. Delgado and Ozuna Allen (2019) conducted a multi-site case study focused on women of color in Texas community colleges, exploring how these women navigated the pathway to leadership and the impact of their mentoring experiences. They found that women of color who had "cultural translators, cultural mediators, and role models" were more likely to reach the presidency at a community college. Similarly, Barrett (2020) examined the role of mentoring networks in the careers of women leaders of community colleges using a quantitative approach and developmental network typology. Findings indicated that leaders have informal networks and that most of these networks were made up of peers rather than mentors.

Artis and Bartel (2021), using qualitative analysis explored how leadership development practices can help fill the pipeline of presidents to community colleges. Their findings determined that both mentoring, and continually progressive leadership responsibilities, were essential to the success of these presidents (See earlier studies by Reille & Kezar, 2010; Strom et al., 2011). Likewise, Martin III (2021) examined the role of community college presidential preparation programs, finding a lack of access for more leaders due to the limited availability of these programs.

Overall, the research in this area focuses on the importance of community college leadership that understands the unique needs of the diverse student bodies at these institutions. Much like the research across the sections of this literature review, women and people of color have less access to leadership at community college, despite it being the area (aside from HBCUs) with the most presidents of color.

Summary of Literature Review

The literature on the college presidency and mentoring reveals several important points of agreement among researchers. There is consensus on the critical role of mentoring in the career development and success of college presidents. Researchers recognized that mentoring provides essential guidance, support, and networking opportunities, which are crucial for leadership roles. Additionally, researchers believe that women and presidents of color face additional challenges. They also call for more targeted mentoring and support to address these challenges. Furthermore, scholars agree on the importance of mentoring in diversifying the leadership pipeline, emphasizing the need to encourage mentoring relationships that increase the representation of women and people of color in these leadership roles. Additionally, mentorship for women and people of color creates avenues for institutional change.

Despite this agreement, there are notable disagreements in the literature as well. Researchers have divergent views on the effectiveness of formal versus informal mentoring programs. While some studies suggest that formal programs bring consistency, others find them limiting compared to the more organic nature of informal mentoring relationships. In addition, scholars have mixed findings on the perceived impact of mentoring on professional success. Some studies highlight significant benefits, whereas others note complexities and potential drawbacks. Lastly, there are differing perspectives on the extent to which institutional practices and racial biases have an impact on the success of leaders of color. Some research emphasizes systemic barriers as significant obstacles, while others focus more on individual strategies and mentoring relationships as a means to navigate these challenges.

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Theoretical Framework

As we explored the mentoring experiences of prospective leaders, we used the servant leadership framework as our conceptual foundation. The framework guided the development of our interview protocol and analysis (Greenleaf, 1971). According to Greenleaf's perspective (1971), the essence of a servant-leader lies in prioritizing service. The drive to serve is innate, and a conscious choice propels one towards leadership. Servant leaders set themselves apart by placing the needs, ambitions, and interests of others above their own, which contrasts with traditional leadership models (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). This approach highlights the importance of addressing followers' needs rather than focusing solely on organizational goals (Gasman et al., 2024).

Servant leadership acts as a consistent framework for aspiring leaders of MSIs as it highlights leaders' abilities to move past a self-centered approach in leadership to one that focuses on the empowering of the university and the constituents they serve (Gasman et al., 2024). As servant leaders seek to achieve the overall vision for the university, they do so by equipping those who they serve with the necessary resources and support to allow for a full contribution from every community member to the university's success. The concept of servant leadership is particularly useful as a guiding framework for this study, because of our focus on people aspiring to be presidents at MSIs. MSIs are known as institutions that do more than educate students, they seek to serve and empower communities, preserve cultural values and languages, and promote educational equity for historically underserved groups (Gasman et al., 2024). This was something that participants who applied to the mentoring program and participated in the program that we studied, were aware of from the start. For example, the selection process for both presidential mentors and aspiring leaders involved the use of a servant leadership inventory, adapted for self-assessment, as part of the criteria (Clark, 2019). Participants rated themselves on a seven-point scale (from strong agreement to strong disagreement) on a thirty-item inventory reflecting van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) dimensions of servant leadership: empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship (Gasman et al., 2024). The selection committee reviewed these inventories and considered the responses as one factor among others, such as career trajectory, letters of recommendation, a statement of purpose, and a higher education finance-focused presentation. Matches between presidential mentors and aspiring leaders were made based on their inventory responses. Given that the program was advertised and conducted as "rooted in servant leadership," both the aspiring leaders and their mentors approached this commitment earnestly.

Servant leadership emphasizes the importance of service in the leader-follower relationship, requiring open communication and sound decision-making. Key to the role of servant leaders is a commitment to active listening and fostering open dialogue. These leaders enhance their ability to understand others' perspectives, recognizing the basic human need for respect, comfort, and a sense of belonging in their roles.

Embracing servant leadership can become a transformative force, affecting personal behavior and decision-making. This approach influences all areas of life, offering the potential for significant and lasting societal changes. By engendering hope and fostering growth, servant leaders help create compassionate organizations that prioritize their

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members' well-being (Gasman et al., 2024). In our analysis, we will apply the servant leadership framework, noting when presidential mentors adhered to its principles in their interactions with their mentees.

Methodology

The guiding research question for this study was: What benefits do MSI aspiring leaders derive from a two-year mentoring relationship with a current or recently retired president? Below, we outline our participant selection and data collection, data analysis procedures, discuss trustworthiness and reliability, address positionality, and note the limitations for the study.

Participant Selection and Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews with a cohort of 43 aspiring leaders, all identifying as people of color, at the midpoint of a presidential preparation program (detailed below). These participants either aspired to apply for or had already applied for one or more presidencies. Of the participants, 60% were women and 40% were men. Each participant held a role in higher education as faculty leaders or central administrators, typically at the dean, associate provost, or provost level. Aspiring leaders came from throughout the United States. While they aspired to be leaders of MSIs, it is important to emphasize that there are multiple MSI designations, and within these designations, significant diversity in institutional history and culture. So, while participants wanted to become an MSI president, their specific goals and motivations varied as to whether they sought to lead an HSI, HBCU, AANAPIS, PBI, TCU, or other type of MSI. The program was designed to be intentional and transparent about these differences, while also acknowledging that the overall focus on MSIs made this program stand out from other college presidency mentoring initiatives.

All participants held terminal degrees and volunteered for the interview process, which lasted 45-60 minutes via telephone or Zoom. The interview questions, informed by our literature review and our servant leadership-based theoretical framework, focused on the mentoring relationships among MSI leaders. We used an open-ended protocol for all interviews, allowing flexibility for probing questions as needed. In our instrument, our guiding questions invited participants to reflect on how they navigated and benefited from their program-assigned mentoring relationships. We also inquired as to the challenges in the relationships. We conducted the interviews between 2019 and 2022. Recordings were securely stored in a password-protected cloud file, and participants provided consent through an IRB-approved form, ensuring their anonymity.

Data Analysis

We thoroughly reviewed interviews, transcriptions, and notes, importing transcripts into NVivo for efficient coding. We also coded the data by hand to gain more familiarity with it and to ensure that NVivo did not miss important themes. Following the strategy outlined by Miles et al. (2014), we coded data using participants' language to respect their perspectives. Our initial coding used the major tenets of servant leadership (a priori codes) as described in the framework section (Gasman et al., 2024). We employed axial coding to refine and merge similar codes, using iterative reviews and discussions to identify, compare, and refine

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multiple codes (Miles et al., 2014; Gasman et al., 2024). Redundant codes were collapsed into larger categories, forming the basis for our dominant themes. Constant comparison allowed us to align notes and codes with emerging themes (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Gasman et al., 2024). Through memos, we captured theoretical insights throughout the coding process, with quotes illustrating larger themes rather than serving as standalone representations of participants.

Trustworthiness and Reliability

Ensuring trustworthiness and reliability was crucial in this study. We validated our findings through multiple strategies. First, we engaged in field conversations to deepen our understanding of the context and participants' perspectives. We conducted post-interview evaluations to identify and mitigate any potential biases that may have influenced data collection (Gasman et al., 2024). We used inter-rater reliability checks during team meetings to enhance the consistency and accuracy of data interpretation. Additionally, we collected and analyzed supplementary documents, such as participant applications, to triangulate findings and strengthen the credibility and dependability of our findings.

Positionality

Our research team consists of four individuals with diverse backgrounds in terms of race, gender, age, region of the country, country of origin, sexuality, religion, language, and current or past affiliation with various types of colleges or universities (PWI, HBCU, HSI, and ANAPISI). Aware of possible biases, we engaged in continual self-reflection and challenged each other, believing that our diverse perspectives both guided and enhanced our research approach. Aligned with Boveda and Annamma's (2023, p. 306) invitation to think of positionally statements beyond static descriptors without attending to the "power dynamics that accompany embodied privileges," we also considered how the principles of servant leadership in the study's design, data collection, analysis, and recommendations resonated with our personal views on leadership. The guiding impetus for this work is driven by our collective interest in transforming leadership opportunities at MSIs; yet our divergent perspectives provided a chance to listen to participants' insights through our respective standpoints to enrich how we categorized the findings across participants' insights.

Limitations

Recognizing the inherent limitations, our study could benefit from a larger sample size or additional interviews to enrich the data. Although we achieved data saturation with 43 participants, a larger sample or multiple interviews per participant could further enhance the study's depth. We align with qualitative paradigms that value exploring social phenomena beyond the constraints of generalizability (Gasman et al., 2024). As Ravitch & Carl (2019) note, "generalizability is not a recognized goal of qualitative research" (p. 193). Given the single data collection design of this study, we acknowledge that a longitudinal approach can more deeply speak to the deviations of aspiring MSI leaders' career trajectories and their mentoring relationships. Further, additional triangulation with participants' mentors could expand upon how we conceptualize MSI aspiring leaders' accounts of their own mentoring relationships. These limitations, however, do not undermine our participants' capacity to answer our guiding question given its focus on

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deepening our understanding of aspiring leaders' retrospective accounts on their mentoring relationships.

Findings

In this section, we explore the benefits aspiring leaders derive from a two-year mentoring relationship with a current or recently retired president. The findings reveal several key advantages for mentees. First, mentors provided invaluable access and an inside view of leadership, offering practical insights into the responsibilities and challenges of the role. They assisted mentees in navigating crucial questions related to career advancement and personal development. Additionally, mentors consistently demonstrated candor, transparency, and authenticity, fostering a relationship built on trust. The mentoring relationships often featured strong institutional and personal connections, with race and gender continuity enhancing the mentee's sense of belonging and support. However, we also noted that some mentor-mentee relationships could have benefited from further strengthening to maximize their potential. In these cases, the issues that came up most frequently were related to mentor availability and communication, often reflecting the individual personalities and responsibilities of those involved rather than an inherent problem in the structure of the program. Overall, these findings underscore the multifaceted support mentors provide, ultimately aiding aspiring leaders in their professional journey. Of note, there is some overlap across the findings.

"Peaking Behind the Curtain": The Role of Availability, Access and an "Inside View"

Aspiring MSI leaders were appreciative of mentors who were regularly available and accessible as it indicated a high level of commitment and support. For example, one mentee stated, "You can call him any time of the day or night and he'll give you feedback." Another agreed, noting:

> Being able to interact with her and know that at the drop of a dime, I can at the very least call her or reach out to her, knowing that she will respond to me. So, that's a huge advantage to have that access, if you will, because a lot of people don't have that access.

Some aspiring leaders were surprised by the amount of access they had to their mentor but very grateful for the experience. One mentee stated,

> I would say I have more access than expected. I didn't think I would have this kind of access. She's kind of opened doors, whether it's text messages or cell phone number, direct line, that sort of thing, so way more than I expected. I thought it was going to be more so 'here's my assistant, if you need to reach me, schedule a meeting four weeks out,' that sort of thing, but no, she's been, if I text her and say hey, quick question, can we chat or something like that, she's been open to do that, so she has exceeded my expectations.

Aspiring leaders were also grateful for the inside view that they received from mentors, sharing, "The value of having a good mentor, someone who has been in the role and can give you an inside view is important." Another aspiring leader told us,

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> I've actually visited his school, he took me on a tour. I met his staff before he retired, and it was really, really valuable to see those things and to be in those places, and that just sort of took the level up even more being an observer and allowed to ask questions and see how things are run from the president's view.

Likewise, an aspiring leader noted,

> I was invited to his campus, made a couple of visits there. I was invited to his commencement as a VIP. He had good insight, and he knew his students, and that's the good thing. He knew what they needed, he had a good relationship with the board, and that's some of the things I learned from him.

"My Mentor has My Back": The Role of Trust and Genuine Care

The supportive nature of mentorship and the deep and evolving mentor-mentee relationships, which led to professional and personal benefits were evident in our conversations with the aspiring leaders. Mentees felt a sense of support and trust. One aspiring leader shared, I'm going out to see her so we can talk shop and bounce ideas off of her. So, the fact that I can still reach out to her, and she's well connected, and so she knows this landscape, and I trust her. So, I know that when it comes down to it, she has my back in this space.

Likewise, another mentee shared,

> Just talking with my mentor and him saying, 'You are really going to be good, one day.' That's hopeful because when I think of myself, I am so incredibly excited about this opportunity, but I am the first to say I am also incredibly scared of this opportunity. So, having somebody say, 'you know what; you are ready to begin this process, and when you finish, you're going to be able to do this.' That's the kind of a confidence boost that you need to really say, maybe I can do this.

Aspiring leaders were affirmed by the level of genuine care offered by their mentors. As one mentee said,

> I would say that one of the things that's different than my other mentoring experiences, that may be a little bit more than I expected, is the level of care. I see a genuine level of care that my mentor has for me, and it's not like oh, I'm too busy. It's literally like hey, I want to see you be a president.

She added,

> Typically, you get a mentor, and it's kind of very business and structured-like, where this experience appears to have been more like there's an evolving relationship and there is a level of care and a level of support and a level of truly nurturing, and I want to try and develop you, so it has been really great. It has totally exceeded my expectations in that aspect of just really this individual being caring and thoughtful and wanting to see me reach my goal.

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Aspiring leaders felt they could ask for feedback on everyday issues and difficult issues, and their mentors would have their back. One mentee shared,

> My mentor has been highly effective. I think the point where you can have this level of mutual respect, accountability, and reciprocity in the relationship. There's certainly been a lot of times where I've been able to send a text message to my mentor and say this is the moment of the day and this is how I'm feeling in a very authentic way. What is your feedback? And sometimes it's a very constructive route of, 'I would look at it like this,' and other times it's something as simple as, 'You're prepared for this. I know you can do it.' I've been to her campus twice and had the opportunity to meet with both her and her senior leadership team, connecting at various conferences. I've been able to say I now have both a mentor, a coach, and a friend for life.

One aspiring leader describes her mentor as "a member of my village" who is consistently there for her. She conveyed,

> We have a great foundation that will sustain our relationship going forward outside of the structure of the program, so I definitely feel as though I've not only gained a mentor, but a member of my village, if you will, for life…. When you think about navigating something like a presidency, you want to have the right people on your board of directors, or village, whatever analogy works the best, but that requires honesty. It requires commitment, and it requires a level of reciprocity. When I speak with my mentor, it is one of those core moments of safe space, and/or appreciation and there is a level of respect that you cannot, you cannot replace, and for that I'm certainly grateful to the program for bringing us together and how we continue to be a part of each other's lives going forward, I think the best is really yet to come on that front.

Many of the aspiring leaders felt that they had secured a friend or that friendship would be the foundation of the relationship as it moved forward. One mentee stated,

> I think that literally as we continue to build our relationship, professional and personal, that I would like to cultivate her as a friend and someone that can vouch for me, and submit letters of support for me, if I pursue a senior leadership position.

Some of the aspiring leaders felt that their mentoring relationship offered both an institutional and a person connection. One mentee told us,

> I think a lot of it is personality. I think an effective mentor has to have some sort of connection with you on some level or another. In my mentor's case we connected because we're both first generation. We also both really believe in the mission of Minority Serving Institutions. We both view California quite well because we have been here for quite some time. We are interested in exactly the same type of students…. So, I think knowledge and background, institutional background is key.

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Another aspiring leader has a deep personal connection based on her and her mentor's interest in HBCUs, but that personal connection has gone much further. As she shared,

> She gave me her personal number; you call me anytime…. When my mom died, she said I'm here to just listen. If you want me to just hold the phone, I'll just hold it, and I appreciate that so much with her.

"What You See is What You Get": The Role of Candor, Transparency and Authenticity

Given their past experiences interacting with presidents of colleges, or well-known leaders, the aspiring leaders welcomed the candor, transparency, and authenticity of their mentors. They wanted this type of relationship as it is hard to get questions answered and difficult to ask for advice when there is not openness. One aspiring leader described it this way:

> When there is candor, where I can get complete and transparent honesty….my default assumption is that they are sincerely invested in my development, and so they are telling me what they are telling me or sharing their feedback because they want me to do well, so candor is one characteristic in a mentor that is vital.

Aspiring leaders appreciated authenticity and vulnerability in their mentor as well. One leader shared,

> The things that came across with the presidential mentors was the idea of transparency and being authentic, your authentic self, which is very important to me, because that's one of my staples. Anytime I'm interviewing or I'm going to a setting, I lead with that and pretty much say what you see is what you get. I am who I am, regardless of how many degrees I have or the title that I may carry, I try to be my most authentic self, and I see that the authenticity also ties back to ethics and integrity, which are also key in these roles.

One of the mentees described his mentor as "forthright and transparent." She stated:

> What I appreciate about him is that he's very forthright and transparent, and he tells it like it is. I always appreciate him sharing incidents about his time as president, because again, being from the state, I'm very familiar with the HBCU, and some of the challenges that he faced. I've faced them here at my own HBCU, even though I'm not a college president, some of the foolishness, that's what I always call it, that he talks about, I somewhat live it every day, so it's good to hear that one, I'm not crazy, and two, that somebody else dealt with it, overcame it and was successful.

She added,

> He also talked about, again, the things that he was able to accomplish and the things that he regrets that he wasn't able to do, but again, what I appreciate about him is that he says this is who I am. Here is my character. Here is my level of integrity, and here are the things I'm not going to put up with, and he'll say in all of my work, when I felt like those things were being compromised, I had to walk away and it's okay to do that, and so to me, that is reassuring and

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> reinforcing that when you come to that place of uh-uh, this isn't who I am, it's okay to walk away.

Another mentee also appreciated the "matter of fact" nature of her mentor. He shared,

> Every conversation we have had has been purposeful. We've had an agenda where we've had what we're going to talk about. We talk about that, and we keep it moving and what I like about him is that he doesn't mince words. He is very matter of fact. He tells you straight and that is that. I remember I had been approached about a potential opportunity and I vetted it through him, and he gave me some answers about it. And I have appreciated his perspective because he's retired. He's been in this game, oh my gosh, for so long and so his expertise has just been great and I know that I can always call on him.

"A Story to Tell": The Role of Race and Gender Continuity

The literature is clear that it is difficult for leaders of color to find mentors who offer race and/or gender continuity. Aspiring leaders want to be mentored – at least in part – by someone who has had similar racial and gender experiences. Aspiring leaders shared with us,

> The mentoring piece is key for me. Before this experience, I had not had an opportunity to be mentored by an African American man. I appreciate the way that my mentor has not given up on HBCUs and how he continues to really write and voice his opinions. What that tells me is he wasn't too scared by his experiences and that there's life on the other side, too. And even after all of this, whether or not I ascend to the presidency, I have a story to tell, and it may help somebody else. So, I'm very appreciative of that.

Another aspiring leader was grateful to be mentored by a woman. She stated,

> I think that her wisdom is quite helpful because she has that perspective, and I appreciate the fact that she's a woman leader who has gone through all the various challenges that she faced in order to reach her level of success. So, I really appreciate her perspective for that reason.

At the same time, participants appreciated learning from role models who had different life experiences and perspectives.

"Skillsets I Want to Develop": The Role of Strategic Advice and Help

Mentors helped their mentees in myriad ways from pushing them hard to network to talking about skills they were missing to encouraging self-reflection. As one aspiring leader conveyed,

> She said you need to be presenting and mixing and mingling with folks. So, she sent me this link one day; I just looked it up. You've probably heard about the Association of American Colleges and Universities. So, they had this big event, big conference in Chicago. She said, 'You need to submit an abstract, present,' and I submitted and got accepted. So, I'm going to be out there mixing and

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> mingling with all of these folks within AACU. She does stuff like that. She's like, 'You need to be there and do it.'

Another aspiring leader discussed the need to acquire expertise and skill sets in areas she was unfamiliar with. Accordingly, her mentor encouraged her to acquire these skills in order to secure a presidency. She told us,

> We talked about advancement, which was a skillset I wanted to develop, so we talked specifically about strategies on how to develop that, especially what role the president plays in advancement. And then we ended with talking about the search process and she did a life skills assessment and talked about where there were some potential gaps in some places, I'd like to get experience before seeking [a presidency].

Mentors also helped aspiring leaders to reflect on where they are in life and where a presidency fits into their life. One aspiring leader shared,

> I think my relationship with my mentor has allowed me to really be attuned to the nuances of the job and has allowed me to self-reflect on where I am in my life. Do I really want to put up with it? Do I want to have to deal with this? That then has also informed the type of institution I would like to serve at? Just processing the priorities and traits that I know I possess, and here's the priorities and the traits that I refuse to sacrifice, and so if I find an institution that they don't fit or they're not appreciated, then I have to be okay with saying then this isn't the place for me. I don't know that there are too many MSIs, in particular HBCUs, where my characteristics and traits would be a good fit, and I think I have to be okay with accepting that. Then figuring out if it is not a college, is there a policy space, is there a state system or school system where those qualities and traits would be appreciated?

Room for Improvement in the Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The relationships between the aspiring leaders and mentors were not without a need for improvement. In general, this fell into three categories: lack of accessibility, poor communication, and missing a personal connection. Some of the mentors were too busy, not accessible, and did not provide clear expectations to their mentees about the relationship. As one aspiring leader described it:

> My mentor while fantastic and extremely accomplished and very gracious in our conversation, is not accessible to me. He's extremely busy. When I asked about us meeting on a regular basis, he basically said that would just not be possible. He suggested I text him whenever I have a question.

Another aspiring leader shared a similar situation,

> So, in addition to already having the sense that my mentor is not available, he's very, very busy and his inability to commit to a consistent meeting schedule like once a month. He really felt he could not commit to any type of structure and his feedback was just text me whenever you'd like to get together. I've done that and it hasn't worked yet so I've spoken with him once.

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Some aspiring leaders realized that they did not step up and take full advantage of the mentoring relationship. One individual noted,

> I don't think that the communication was as often as it probably could have been. I think, once again, the challenge was determining ways I needed to reach out to him and utilizing those relationships to be beneficial for me.

Another aspiring leader shared,

> I wasn't sure how much I could use my mentor without feeling like I was overburdening my mentor. So, I was cautious about not wanting to speak with my mentor about things that maybe were petty things that I could maybe figure out on my own or through the other professional channels that I had…. I think another challenge was just being able to determine how to best use my mentor.

For some aspiring leaders, the personal connection was missing. According to one individual,

> I think with my mentor I've developed an incredible professional connection. The personal connection, I think that wasn't there, and I attribute that mainly to, at least for me, the academic background that I come from. I think an important piece of that, as I am on the other end of this, is developing a personal connection with your mentor as well as a professional mentoring connection, and I think that was, for me, the piece that was missing.

Summary of Key Findings

Our findings highlight the significant benefits that aspiring leaders gained from a two-year mentoring relationship with current or recently retired presidents. Mentees appreciated mentors who were available and accessible, providing practical insights into leadership responsibilities and challenges. This type of accessibility exceeded many mentees' expectations, allowing for more direct and frequent communication. Mentees valued the opportunity to gain an inside view of leadership, which included participating in campus tours, attending leadership team meetings, and observing presidents as they conducted their duties.

The personal support and encouragement from mentors, including their candor, transparency, and authenticity, were crucial for the mentee's confidence and professional growth. Many mentees felt a deep sense of trust and care from their mentors, describing the relationship as more personal and nurturing than anticipated. Mentors also provided invaluable advice and feedback on everyday issues and significant career decisions, often fostering a lasting friendship. However, some mentor-mentee relationships required improvement, particularly in terms of accessibility to their mentors and establishing clear expectations around the relationship. Also, some mentees felt they could have capitalized on their mentoring relationships more effectively. Overall, our findings underscore the multifaced support mentors provide, which significantly buttresses aspiring leaders in their professional journeys.

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Discussion

Application of Theory

The connection to the servant leadership framework as outlined by Greenleaf (1971) and further expanded by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), is evident throughout our findings. The framework, which emphasizes prioritizing the needs of others, open communication, active listening, and fostering personal and professional growth, aligns closely with the experiences and perceptions shared by the mentees in our study.

Regarding the theme of "Availability, Access, and an Inside View," our findings demonstrate that mentors who embodied the principles of servant leadership were highly appreciated for their availability and accessibility. The ability to reach out to mentors at any time and receive prompt feedback is a testament to the servant leaders' commitment to placing the needs of their mentees first. This approach aligns with Greenleaf's (1971) assertion that servant leaders prioritize the ambitions and interests of others. The mentors' willingness to provide an inside view of leadership roles further exemplifies their dedication to empowering and educating future leaders, reflecting the servant leadership dimensions of empowerment and stewardship.

When reviewing the theme of "My Mentor Has My Back," the supportive nature of mentoring relationships, characterized by trust and a deep sense of care, mirrors the servant leadership principles of humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance. Mentees felt a genuine level of care and support from their mentors, who were invested in their personal and professional development. This idea aligns with the servant leadership emphasis on fostering a sense of belonging and respect and creating a safe space for growth and self-reflection. The mentors' encouragement and validation provided mentees with the confidence to pursue their career goals, demonstrating the servant leadership qualities of empowerment and courage.

With regard to the "Candor, Transparency, and Authenticity" theme, our findings highlight the importance of these tenets in mentoring relationships, which are also core tenets of servant leadership. Mentors who were forthright and honest in their feedback helped mentees navigate the challenges of leadership roles with greater clarity and confidence. Open communication and transparency are essential for building trust and ensuring that mentees feel respected and understood, which are key aspects of the servant leadership approach.

When considering the "Race and Gender Continuity" theme, the significance of race and gender in mentoring relationships aligns with the servant leadership principle of interpersonal acceptance and respect for diverse experiences. Mentors who shared similar racial and gender backgrounds with their mentees provided valuable perspectives and support, helping mentees navigate the unique challenges they faced. This continuity enhances the mentees' sense of belonging and affirms their identities, which is crucial for their personal and professional development.

The theme of "Help Provided to Mentees" demonstrated the various ways in which mentors help their mentees, from pushing them to network to encouraging self-reflection, and demonstrated the servant leadership qualities of stewardship and empowerment. By guiding mentees through practical steps and encouraging them to develop new skills, mentors acted as stewards of their mentees' growth and success. This proactive support

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and guidance reflect the servant leader's role in fostering the development and well-being of their mentees.

Lastly, in terms of the theme of "Room for Improvement in the Mentor-Mentee Relationship," the identification of areas for improvement highlights the need for a continued commitment to the principles of servant leadership. Ensuring that mentors are accessible, providing clear expectations, and fostering both professional and personal connections are essential for maximizing the potential of these relationships. Addressing these areas will enhance the effectiveness of mentoring programs and ensure that they fully align with the servant leadership framework.

Our application of the servant leadership framework to the mentoring experiences of aspiring college presidents provides a rich understanding of the benefits and challenges of these relationships. By prioritizing the needs, ambitions, and well-being of their mentees, servant leaders create supportive and empowering environments that foster personal and professional growth. Our findings also underscore the importance of servant leadership in mentoring programs and highlight the potential for these relationships to transform not only the careers of aspiring leaders but also the institutions they will eventually lead. Through a continued commitment to the principles of servant leadership, mentoring programs can cultivate a diverse and capable leadership pipeline equipped to navigate the complexities of higher education with integrity empathy and inclusivity.

Alignment with Literature

Our findings reveal several key points that align with and expand upon the research that we analyzed in our literature review. Both our findings and the literature emphasize the critical role of mentor accessibility (Doman, 2016; Ghouralal, 2019; Merriam & Thomas, 1986; Merriam et al., 1987; Searby et al., 2015). Aspiring leaders appreciated the high level of availability and accessibility of their mentors, which often exceeded their expectations (Tolar, 2012). The mentors discussed in our study were open to direct communication through texts, phone calls, and personal visits, allowing mentees to gain an inside view of leadership by participating in campus visits and attending meetings (Commodore et al., 2016; Hill & Wheat, 2017). This approach reinforces the literature's emphasis on mentors providing guidance, support, and career navigation through regular communication and accessibility (Holmes, 2004; Martin, 2020; Pichon & Mutakabbir, 2021).

Personal support and encouragement from mentors were highlighted as crucial in our findings. Mentees felt a strong sense of trust and care from their mentors valuing their candor, transparency, and authenticity. Aspiring leaders described their mentoring relationships as more personal and nurturing than anticipated, leading to significant professional and personal benefits. This finding aligns with the literature, which states that effective mentoring relationships are built on trust, honesty, and personal investment from mentors (Briscoe & Freeman Jr., 2019; Hill & Wheat, 2017; Montas-Hunter, 2012). Our findings also provide rich descriptions of how personal support and encouragement manifest in practice, illustrating the depth of these mentor-mentee relationships.

Both our findings and the literature emphasize the importance of institutional and personal connections in mentoring relationships. Mentees reported that shared backgrounds and values, such as being first generation college students or having a commitment to MSIs, strengthened the connection with their mentors (Campbell, 2003).

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The literature similarly notes that effective mentoring often involves a strong institutional fit and personal connection, with shared experiences and common goals enhancing the relationship (Blackwood & Brown-Welty, 2011; Montas-Hunter, 2012; Tran, 2014).

Within our findings, race and gender continuity emerged as particularly beneficial, with mentees appreciating mentors who could relate to their racial and gender backgrounds. This finding is reflected in the literature we examined. More specifically, our finding confirms the difficulty for leaders of color, and women of color in particular, to secure mentors with similar experiences. (Commodore et al., 2016; Esters et al., 2016; Freeman et al., 2016; Gutiérrez et al., 2002; Montas-Hunter, 2012). We found, much like the literature we reviewed, that same race and/or same gender mentors served as "cultural translators, cultural mediators, and role models" (Campbell, 2003; Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019, p. 32).

However, our findings also noted areas for improvement in some mentoring relationships. Some mentees felt their mentors were too busy or inaccessible, and there were instances where clear expectations and consistent meeting schedules were lacking. Additionally, some mentees felt they did not take full advantage of the mentoring relationship. These challenges are acknowledged in the literature we examined, which recognizes that not all mentoring relationships are equally effective and that issues such as mentor availability and clear communication of expectations can have an impact on effectiveness (Penny & Gaillard, 2006; Ramey, 1995; Smith-Adams, 2022; Smith & Crawford, 2007). Our findings provided specific insights into how these challenges can manifest and impact aspiring leaders' mentoring experiences and future professional experiences.

Recommendations

Regarding advancing the leadership potential of aspiring leaders at MSIs, both the literature and our findings suggest that mentoring is important. Below, we offer recommendations for future research and practical implementation of mentoring programs tailored to MSI presidents' unique needs. With these recommendations, we seek to more deeply understand what makes aspiring presidential mentoring effective within MSI contexts. With our recommendations, we aim to bolster the leadership development pipeline at MSIs, ensuring that aspiring leaders are supported in meaningful and culturally relevant ways.

Recommendations for Research

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the sustained impact of mentoring relationships on the career trajectories and success of MSI aspiring leaders. There are many presidential preparation programs across the country, but this is the only program that specifically looks at higher education leadership and mentoring through the lens of MSIs overall, which, while diverse, also share certain core values and institutional identities. Also, very few aspiring leaders programs – whether focused on MSI leadership or higher education leadership in general- evaluate their effectiveness or follow participants' careers.
2. Explore how same-race, same-gender, cross-race, cross-gender pairing impacts mentoring relationships, including the benefits and challenges. This is particularly critical for MSI mentorship programs, as many MSI aspiring leaders come from PWIs

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and have not had much opportunity to be mentored by people with similar racial and cultural backgrounds.

3. Explore the various mentoring program structures to understand which formats are most effective for supporting aspiring leaders (e.g., one-on-one mentoring, group mentoring, formal/structured vs. informal mentoring). In the case of TCUs, for example, the literature suggests that the term "mentoring" is a Western concept.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Develop structured mentoring programs with defined goals, expectations, and timelines to maximize the benefits for mentees. These structures can go a long way in encouraging mentors to establish clear and consistent communication channels with mentees, ensuring regular availability and accessibility.
2. Implement comprehensive training programs for mentors to equip them with the skills needed to provide effective and supportive guidance to mentees. It is not enough to assume that all leaders are experienced mentors.
3. Encourage mentors and mentees to develop personal and professional connections, fostering a more profound sense of trust and support. It is also important for mentors and mentees to appreciate different experiences and viewpoints, recognizing that each brings something unique to the table.
4. Create feedback channels for mentees to express their needs and concerns, allowing for continuous development and improvement of the mentoring relationship.

Conclusion

Our study shed light on the meaningful impact that mentorship can have on aspiring leaders, particularly those who want to serve as the president of an MSI. We found that the most meaningful mentoring relationships are marked by accessibility, personal connection, and authenticity, which, incidentally and according to research, are shared values within most MSI contexts (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). While literature provides a foundation for understanding these dynamics, the concrete examples in our study offer a vivid portrayal of how these elements come to life within the MSI context. The stories of mentees gaining significant access to their mentors, forming deep personal bonds, and receiving candid advice underscore the transformative potential of effective mentoring.

However, the nuances revealed in our study prompt a deeper exploration of what it truly means to foster successful mentoring relationships for aspiring leaders of MSIs. The challenges faced – whether related to mentor availability, clarity of expectations, or the mentees' engagement – highlight that mentorship is not a universal solution. It requires a careful balance of commitment, communication, and mutual respect. The disparities in the effectiveness of different mentoring relationships suggest that MSIs and programs preparing aspiring MSI leaders must be more deliberate in structuring and supporting these collaborations.

Moreover, the emphasis on race and gender continuity raises critical questions about the inclusivity of leadership development programs. Suppose leaders of color and women benefit significantly from mentors with similar backgrounds. What steps are being taken to ensure such opportunities are available, especially for those leaders aspiring to lead MSIs?

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This consideration is not merely about representation but creating spaces where diverse experiences and perspectives are valued and nurtured.

Reflecting on the multifaceted support mentors provide, it is essential to think beyond the immediate benefits to the long-term implications for leadership within educational institutions, specifically MSIs. How can these insights inform the development of more robust, inclusive, and supportive mentoring programs? What measures can be implemented to address the gaps and challenges identified? By answering these questions, we can envision a future where mentoring is not just an added benefit but a foundational element of leadership development, fostering a new generation of MSI leaders who are well-equipped, confident, and genuinely supported in their professional journeys.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest to be cited here.

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Human Participants

Participants signed informed consent forms, and our research conformed to the Institutional Review Board guidelines at Rutgers University.

Originality Note

The paper is the authors' original work, and proper citations are used if others' works are included.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

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