

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY INTO HOW STUDENTS EXPERIENCE  
AND UNDERSTAND THE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENCY

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Little is known about how college students experience and understand the university presidency. Students are important consumers of the academic experience and by affiliation are constituents of organizational leadership. The social distance between students and university presidents continues to narrow. To address the void in scholarly literature, my study explored how students experience and understand the university presidency.

My investigation utilized phenomenological methodology to form descriptive themes. I interviewed 10 college students who self-identified as being involved with extracurricular activities and having, at minimum, occasional interaction with their president. Participants were selected from two small, public, Midwestern universities where their president had served for five or more consecutive years. The in-depth face-to-face interviews with students provided rich data.

My findings revealed three themes relating to how students experience and understand the university presidency: *(a) value experiencing informal presidential encounters; (b) understanding leadership through compassion and vision; and (c) meaningful impact from presidential interactions*. Students experiencing interaction

acquire an enduring image of presidential leadership. Students understand the presidency as a balance between compassion and vision. Students form impactful memories when their president recognizes their effort and accomplishments. Encouraging interactivity between students and presidents benefits students by further motivating their campus involvement, enhancing their connection to the university, and inspiring their student leadership aspirations.

Recommendations for further research include: (a) investigating interactivity between students and presidents through social media; (b) expanding the target population to include a more diverse student demographic and differing types of organizations; (c) studying how involved students influence the general student population and serve as a key communication conduit for presidents to reach a larger population; and (d) exploring how university presidents experience and understand their students.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Universities are made up of people with a purpose. Some are engaged in learning, some in teaching and research, and yet others in support or leadership. This study focuses in on how the learners experience and understand the leaders. Regardless of their objectives, all groups in a university environment are unified through the educational experience. Information, knowledge, and resources are shared through interactions among these groups. While researchers have investigated each of the university stakeholders independently, the relationship between certain groups is yet to be explored. Specifically, previous research does not describe how students experience and understand the university presidency. My study begins to discover the connection between students and university presidents by demonstrating perspective through the lived experiences of college students. The student voices are shared in later Chapters of this dissertation as a way to highlight the evolving phenomenon.

Research has focused on learners with studies involving students (Astin, 1984; Gellin, 2003), student trends (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lamp, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lamp, 2011; Kenny, 1990), student expectations (Kuh, Gonyea, & Williams, 2005; Rothgeb & Burger, 2009), and student development (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kohlberg, 1976; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perry, 1970; Piaget, 1965). Research has also studied the university presidency by investigating the responsibilities of the position (Ehrenberg, 2004; Fisher & Koch, 1996; Gilley, Fulmer, & Reithlingshoefer, 1986; Ingram, 1993; Kerr, 1984), presidential perspectives on achievement (Chace, 2006; Flawn, 1990; Kauffman, 1980; Trachtenberg & Blumer,

2008), and leadership theory (Bogue, 1994; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Burns, 1978; Bush, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Zigarmi, Fowler, & Lyles, 2007). While university presidents and the students they serve share an important bond through important interactions and experiences (Brodie & Banner, 1996; Downey, 1977; Fisher & Koch, 1996; Flawn, 1990), scholarly literature is unidirectional and void of studies regarding the student perspective. This study seeks to explore how students experience and understand the university presidency at two small, public, Midwestern universities.

### **Study Background**

Higher education continues to evolve. Previously, one could argue society valued universities expecting “direct satisfactions and enjoyments received by the population from living in a world of advancing knowledge, technology, ideas, and arts” (Bowen, 1977, p. 58). Today many view higher education as “vital to maintaining our competitive position in an increasingly knowledge-dependent world economy” (Bowen, 2010, p. 144), while also adequately preparing individuals for social mobility. For those who agree with this evolving sentiment, universities are important. To help establish the boundaries of this study, I start first with a broad perspective portraying higher education as a pillar to providing information and service to humanity and then narrow the focus in on two important stakeholders that coexist within this environment: students and university presidents. Therefore, broadly speaking, our world spins in a state of constant change that begs for innovative thinking and problem solving. The global community inherits shared predicaments including warring conflicts, human rights violations, poverty, environmental degradation, overpopulation, implications with public health, and economic instability. Society is at the mercy of its own intellectual potential (Brodie &

Banner, 1996). Some would suggest that education holds a key to unlock undiscovered answers plaguing our world. Universities aspire to play a primary role in molding humanity through cultivating knowledge and preparing individuals for this citizenship (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). Students are the direct consumers of this educational effort and university presidents are charged with leading the success. The manner in which students experience and understand the presidency is yet to be researched and yearns for discovery.

University presidents serve at the helm of these complex organizations where scholarship is assumed to elevate cultural, political, and economic development. As chief executive of these institutions, presidents are often charged with transforming universities through leadership strategies. An important component to the success of a transformational effort is the ability of followers to understand the needs and objectives of their leaders (Burns, 1978). Students are constituents of presidential leadership and are at the core of a university's mission (Flawn, 1990). Discovering how students experience and come to understand the university presidency helps further develop our knowledge of this evolving interactivity and provide valuable insight for those who participate in, encourage, and evaluate transformational success in higher education.

The social distance between students and university presidents continues to narrow. Recent trends in marketing strategies that target student audiences highlight the celebrity status of the presidential position (Henderson, 2009). Research linked to leadership theory suggests benefits associated with leaders connecting with their constituencies (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Burns, 1978; Bush, 2003; Jablin & Putnam, 2001). The advent of online social networking, among other interactions, has created an

environment where some presidents choose to engage with students in an informal and unprecedented manner (Joly, 2007). Despite the evolving relationship, literature is void of studies investigating how students perceive presidential leadership. To address this gap in the literature, my study explores how students experience and understand the university presidency. Investigating the interactivity between the two groups is of professional interest to me and contributes to empirical research by attempting to bridge the crevasse in the literature. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, my research sought to investigate common themes through the lived experiences of the student respondents. In person interviews with involved students provided a data rich perspective relating to how they understand the university presidency.

Little is known about how college students experience and understand the university presidency. My study weaves together existing research involving students and university presidents. The lived experiences of students who interact with the presidency is the platform from which my study's data emerged. The phenomenological approach is founded on the premise that meaning is developed and survives within the individuals being researched (Schwandt, 2000) and enabled me to discover how students experience and understand this pivotal leadership position. Analyzing data through a lens involving student development theory and leadership theory helped decipher developing themes through a negotiation of patterns as they related to how students stitch together experiences and make meaning surrounding the university presidency. These students are consumers of the educational experience and arrive at university campuses throughout the world with needs, values, opinions, and desires (Flawn, 1990). Research involving college student development suggests numerous factors that influence the manner in

which a student matures intellectually and socially (Astin, 1984; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Perry, 1970; Tinto, 1993) but does not offer a phenomenological insight into how students understand and experience the university presidency. Patterns in the data collected during interviews and viewed through a lens of existing theory generated a basis for both describing and comprehending how students make meaning regarding the position of university president.

Presidents facilitate organizational decisions and are, by position of authority, held ultimately accountable for their ability to manage relationships with their constituent groups (Fisher & Koch, 1996). While students are arguably one of the most important constituents in higher education, the literature does not connect them with university leadership and as a result presidents and students may be viewed as structurally distant from each other. Discussion surrounding successful leadership often involves a direct linkage between leader and organization or boss and employee (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; McGregor, 1960), similarly this study reached beyond to connect how students experience and understand the university presidency. While some considered association between these two groups as distant due to their differing roles in an organization, I viewed the relationship as mutually important and saw benefit in further developing our knowledge of the students' perspective regarding the presidency. An organization is enhanced when a leader engages with all members to cultivate an environment based on collaboration (Fullan, 2005). Students are key constituents and current trends find university presidents more actively associating with them through formal and informal



interactions (Joly, 2007). Discovering the underpinnings of how students experience and understand the presidency will further inform the literature and provide valuable insight.

### **Statement of the Problem**

How do students experience and understand the university presidency? How does interaction with a president shape student meaning of the college experience? To validate what I perceived as an uncharted investigation regarding these questions, I began exploring this topic through discussions with multiple student affairs experts and higher education researchers. The feedback I received was encouraging with indication my topic of interest was indeed an unexplored phenomenon. An extensive literature review also indicated a deficit in empirical data for understanding how students experience and understand the university presidency. While scholars have investigated what college students think about their professors and their schools, research relating specifically to how they make meaning of the university presidency does not exist.

Several books written by retired university presidents assert importance associated with higher education leaders connecting with their students (Chace, 2006; Flawn, 1990; Kauffman, 1980; Pierce, 2012; Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008). Suggestions, however, are experience based evolving directly from the presidents and not steeped in research. While an assumption exists that students must have some perspective regarding university leadership, research has not traversed the issue which creates a researchable abyss that begs for discovery.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Discovering the underpinnings of how college students experience and understand the university presidency reveals much regarding the interaction between two important

stakeholders in the academic experience. The relationship between students and presidents continues to evolve (Fisher & Koch, 1996) and yet remains undefined by the literature. This void creates a dynamic platform for investigating and describing how students perceive their interactivity with presidents. A qualitative study seeks to “explore, explain, or describe a phenomenon” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 33). Investigating how students perceive the presidency is the foundation of my dissertation. The purpose of my qualitative research is to explore how students involved with extracurricular activities at two small, public, Midwestern universities experience and understand the university presidency. Procedures aligned with qualitative research guided this phenomenological approach as it provides insight into the student perspective. Bassey (2002) suggests “the purpose of research is trying to make a claim to knowledge, or wisdom, on the basis of systematic, creative and critical enquiry” (p. 115). Specific patterns emerged representing the lived experiences of the students investigated. The phenomenological themes offer insight into how students experience and understand the university presidency and what, if any, influence the experience has on them.

### **Research Questions**

University presidents are responsible for administering institutions that promote collaboration and organizational achievement (Fisher & Koch, 1996; Fullan, 2005). Organizational success is driven by factors including enrollment, academic performance, and student perception. A tenet to university leadership is a president’s recognition “that the students are the university’s core business” (Flawn, 1990, p. 105). Of specific interest to this research is how students experience and understand the university presidency. Marshall and Rossman (2006) contend that “qualitative approaches to inquiry are

uniquely suited to uncovering the unexpected and exploring new avenues” (p. 38).

Following suit with Creswell’s (2003) recommendation, central study questions are presented within the parameter of a chosen research tradition followed by a minimal number of subsequent queries designed to further align the focus of the study.

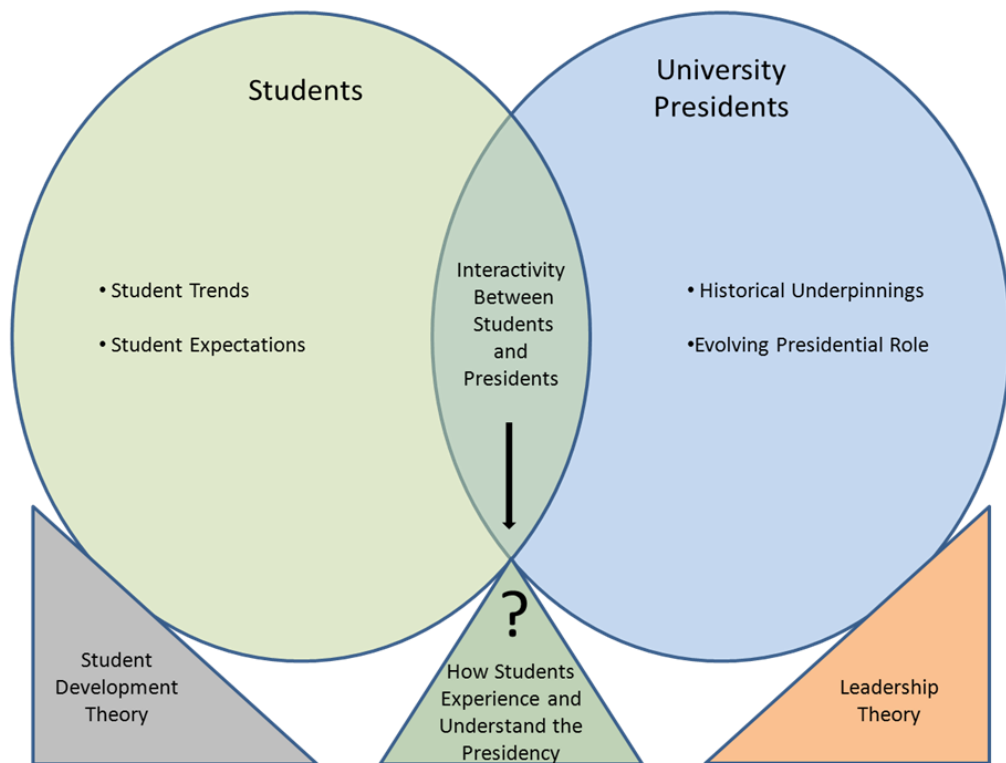
Additionally, the phrasing of questions is purposefully open-ended utilizing exploratory verbs and beginning with words such as “what” or “how”. The terminology used for the questions reflects the research intent and creates a map for data collection (Creswell, 2007). For the purpose of this study the following questions help establish the research agenda and further drive the investigation:

1. How do students experience and understand the university presidency?
2. How does this experience and understanding of the university presidency inform or shape the college experience for students?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study establishes a research focus on the interactivity between two important groups within higher education: students and university presidents. Phenomenological research seeks to discover how individuals construct meaning of the human experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004) and has served as a guiding influence in the development of this dissertation. Tenets of phenomenology are woven throughout my research design to ensure appropriate representation of the lived experiences of those being investigated. Demonstrating the essence of the respondents’ perspective improves accuracy in representing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I am compelled as a qualitative investigator to develop a broad foundation of relative knowledge in order to adequately vet developing themes through inductive discovery (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

My literature review is designed to help define the project parameters and assist in navigating patterns and themes that emerge through analysis of the data. Focusing first on what is known independently about students and university presidents, the investigatory effort then attempts to further define the student perspective regarding interactivity with their president. Insight into the way students experience and understand the university presidency surfaces throughout the emergent process. The following diagram in *Figure 1* conceptualizes the journey.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual Framework

To understand the student population I strove to discover the essence of their experience as defined by the key components in the literature. This section highlights scholarly studies involving student trends such as the social networking (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer,

Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008) and continued parental involvement throughout the college years (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Kenny, 1990; Levin Coburn, 2006; Shellenbarger, 2005; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Student expectations are represented through a descriptive report of research relating to both academic and personal needs (Bok, 2006; Clark, 2005; Kuh, Gonyea, & Williams, 2005; Light, 2001) in addition to studies linking student evaluation of their faculty (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Hobson & Talbot, 2001; Rothgeb & Burger, 2009; Wittrock, 1986). In support of this direction “the need to discover the student’s beliefs and expectations should be first and foremost in our minds as we design the educational environment and activities that will engage the student and produce the outcomes that are important to us, as well as our students” (Howard, 2005, pp. 31-32). Focusing on this literature helps to qualify how interaction with a university president can shape student meaning of the university experience.

The literature states “the university is one of the more enduring and complex enterprises in the long history of human organizations; it thus provides a useful vehicle through which to study the phenomenon of leadership in all of its human expressions” (Padilla, 2005, p. 247). The framework I use to describe what is known regarding “University Presidents” includes insight into the evolving role of a president through a historical lens of higher education leadership and studies involving pathways to the presidency (Barwick, 2002; Cuban, 1988; Rhodes, 2001). Literature relating marketing and communication trends augments the discussion of a changing presidential role (Fullan, 1993; Smith, 2004). Assertions made through published books and articles by

current and former university presidents (Chace, 2006; Flawn, 1990; Kauffman, 1980; Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008) provides insight into presidential views regarding successful leadership linked to purposeful engagement with their student constituents.

While functioning in very different roles, both students and university presidents coexist within an institutional environment. Support indicating the existence of a relationship is found in a recent study of university leaders suggesting presidents rank students as their most rewarding constituency (American Council on Education, 2007). At the crossroads of both groups, students and university presidents interact in a variety of formal and informal ways. It is in this realm I wish to discover the essence of how students experience and understand the presidency. I explored the types of interactions and highlighted available information regarding dialogue between both entities (Chace, 2006; Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008; Pierce, 2012). An analysis of articles relating to issues arising at specific universities where students have voiced concern or praise regarding the performance of a university president (CNN.com, 2006; New York Times, 2012; University News, 2012;) helps to further frame what students may describe as meaning surrounding their understanding of the university presidency.

Relative research aligned with students and presidents serves as a foundation for comprehending a phenomenon involving the interactivity between students and university presidents. I utilize two theoretical pillars to frame the research: student development theory and leadership theory. Student development theory is explored through both a psychosocial (Astin, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and cognitive lens (Kohlberg, 1976; Perry, 1970; Piaget, 1965). Leadership theory is expressed through personality perspective (Bass, 1996; Bennis & Thomas, 2002;

Fisher & Koch, 1996; Kambil, 2010) and organizational leadership frames (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Bush, 2003). From this foundation, findings and patterns are compared and contrasted to existing literature to further qualify how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Rationale and Significance**

I am interested in exploring how students perceive interactivity with their university president. This investigation has implications relative to researchers, academic executives, student services professionals, public relations staff, and students. Research has not yet traversed the interactivity between university presidents and their student constituents. Filtering the phenomenological findings through student development theory helps to frame the results for implicating future research. Findings may further inform university presidents and assist them as they reflect on their own leadership. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggest administrators should “shape the educational and interpersonal experiences and settings of their campuses in ways that will promote learning and achievement of the institution’s educational goals and to induce students to become involved in those activities, to exploit those settings and opportunities to their fullest” (p. 648). Discovering how students experience and understand the university presidency may provide further perspective of interest to presidents. Learning about how students make meaning of their shared encounters with university leadership could be of importance. Presidents interested in further developing relationships with their student constituencies may benefit from acclimating to the rich descriptive account of how students describe their lived experiences and understanding associated with the presidency.

Investigating how students experience and understand the university presidency may aid members of governing boards in better deciphering key issues between presidents and students. University trustees, charged with presidential oversight, can glean awareness from information relating to themes associated with how students experience the presidency. To this end “there will be more successful presidents when we are able to think more seriously about what we need from them, and about the conditions that enable their success” (Hahn, 1996, p. 72). Presidential search materials often suggest universities are seeking a student centered leader. Relative knowledge of how students experience and understand the presidency may additionally assist trustee boards with their executive hiring and oversight responsibilities.

Discovering how students perceive interactivity with their president can also benefit student services staff by providing perspective that may inform their role when tasked with navigating issues that involve both students and the president. An example includes fostering interaction between the two groups. Likins (1993) suggests “the combination of the specialized expertise of student affairs staff leaders with the president’s personal talents and professional power can result in an outcome that serves students better than either could individually” (p. 84). Learning how students experience and understand the university presidency may aid staff in better developing these interactions and further support recommendations regarding the amount and nature of the shared engagements with the president.

Students, as an important constituency in the educational process, may benefit from reviewing the findings associated with this research. Exposure to the themes that emerge from the lived experience of peers may help to unify and further motivate a



collective student voice in the organizational process. Student voice is important to higher education. Research indicates students, as individuals, shoulder the greatest responsibility when determining the impact people, programs, services, and activities have on their university experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Through my research I hope to begin to bridge the empirical gap between students and university presidents. This study may pave the way for future discovery by qualitatively acknowledging student stories relating to the interactivity between educational leaders and their student constituents. Presidential leadership has previously been investigated more through an organizational lens assessing a president's role, responsibilities and compensations (Montell, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Rhodes, 2001; Williams, 2007). The student experience, conversely, has been examined more through the educational context relating, among other areas, their association to faculty (Centra, 2003; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; McKeachie, 1997; Ory, 2000; Rothgeb & Burger, 2009; Wittrock, 1986). Some presidents do interact with their students both formally and informally (Brodie & Banner, 1996; Flawn, 1990; Pierce, 2012). Based on this interactivity, I was interested in investigating how students experience and understand the university presidency. This perspective may contribute broadly to higher education by further broadcasting an important view emanating directly from the student voice. This phenomenon encouraged my further investigation.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

This study is founded on a qualitative approach to discovery that appropriately frames the effort within an interpretivist philosophical position focused primarily on the experience and understandings within a student's world. According to Creswell (1998)

qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 99). The emphasis is on how individuals construct meaning and knowledge through interactions within the social context which appropriately aligns with this project’s interest in researching how students experience and understand the university presidency.

Phenomenological inquiry is utilized to further develop the qualitative frame. This methodology assists discovery and understanding within the data rich environment evolving from the lived experiences of the student participants. Whereas some methodologies strive to determine opinions and a generalization through hypotheses, a phenomenology seeks to explore contextual meaning through the situational knowledge of those being researched (Creswell, 2009). My study initiates investigatory interest in an area previously unexplored. I methodologically look to students to describe how they experience and understand the university presidency. With a lack of existing research illustrating the interactivity between these two groups, my study seeks to develop understanding through the lived experiences of the participants and opens the door to continued discovery. A phenomenological approach can contribute to the literature and provide meaning where a void exists due to a lack of available research (Creswell, 2009).

Further focus occurs by setting aside common assumptions. This sets the stage for a less impeded search of intuitive meaning which helps guide the research beyond current thinking and into a deeper level of understanding (Merleau-Ponty, 1956). Scholarly perspective is derived from emerging themes reduced through a process of prior

reflection, continued reflection, and clarifying reduction (Husserl, 1931). While my study involves research relating to students, university presidents, and the interactivity between both groups, my primary focus centers on the manner in which students experience and understand the university presidency.

My dissertation follows the guidelines of a traditional phenomenology as described in Moustakas (1994) where my role as the researcher is to generate a written description of an individual's external observations and internal process of cognition. Phenomenological reduction prescribes a series of steps and considerations that are included as chronological actions throughout this dissertation. Creswell (1998) recommends first describing the lived experience of interest, working then to dissolve preconceived judgments, acknowledging the realities of this consciousness, and lastly refusing subject-object dichotomy and accepting reality through an individual's experience. While I further define this process in Chapter Three by integrating additional information, the following overviews the process.

As suggested in Moustakas (1994), bracketing or focusing the researchable interest, ensured my study design remained methodically connected to the empirical questions while I compiled the stories associated with the lived personal experience of the participants. The next step of horizontalization directed me to assign equal value to each developing segment of meaning. These ideas defined the essence of the phenomenon by leading me to focus on my participant's described experiences through the consciousness rooted in their self-awareness. Continued analysis of the data rich material occurred through coding where issue related cluster developments transformed into experiential themes (Moustakas, 1994). This effort compelled me to seek sufficient

research saturation regarding how students experience and understand the university presidency.

The total sample for this study was designed to involve up to 16 university students participants chosen from two comparably small sized, public, four year, and primarily undergraduate teaching universities in the Midwest. The presidents at both of these institutions served their university in that position for five or more years. Further justification for the intentionality of these sample decisions is provided in the methodological section of Chapter Three. A purposeful sampling strategy was first utilized to select involved student respondents with the likelihood they had shaped some meaning around the university presidency. Next, criterion sampling, as suggested by Creswell (2007), further focused the subject population by incorporating only participants who had completed four or more consecutive semesters at the university they were currently enrolled and were actively involved in student organizations, intramural sports, campus governance, residence life activities, or other university functions. Respondents were chosen who expressed some previous level of interaction with the university president. Data collection for my study occurred through in-depth face to face interviews designed to explore how students experience and understand the university presidency.

The process I used to organize my research thoughts was derived from both commonly held practices in phenomenology and Hycner's (1999) five step approach. While this strategy is further defined in my Chapter Three, an overview lays the groundwork for acclimating to the process I chose for my investigation. Data was gathered through the interviews. My effort with field notes and memoing assisted with organization and helped navigate developing themes. Bracketing and phenomenological

reduction ensured my preconceived judgments were suspended to focus in on the experiences of the student respondents. Two separate phases of coding helped me negotiate data analysis. Delineating the units of meaning first enabled me to begin to condense verbal and nonverbal communications as I strove to discover the essence of meaning in the data. Clustering then helped me to search for data groupings that congregated to form ideas related to the research questions. I then began to extract general and unique ideas from the interviews which were later condensed into themes. Themes were composed into a composite summary of the findings and relate directly to how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **The Researcher**

A study is influenced by the unique worldview of the investigator and therefore sets course according to the researcher's own thoughts, experiences, and objectivity (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008). Advocating on behalf of others while encouraging a collective voice has always been my passion. Interest in both student input and presidential leadership finds residency in my past, present, and future professional endeavors. Reflecting back as a student leader, I recall rallying for student ideas to be heard. I remember thinking institutional decisions were too often made without student input. Later, as an administrator, I endeavored to programmatically create standing positions for student representatives on important university committees. Now, as an assistant to the president, I work to bring credibility to student issues and create opportunities for students to meaningfully interact with university leadership.

My concerted effort to reflect on personal experience and worldview has helped me to better qualify my role as an instrument in this qualitative discovery (Creswell,

2007). As a phenomenological researcher, I am dedicated to authentically representing the lived experiences of students in relationship to how they experience and understand the university presidency. To best embrace the informative voice emanating from students, I am tasked with disclosing my own subjectivity. This effort helped challenge and expand my views to allow for greater comprehension of the developing themes within the data. Lutrell (2010) suggests six categorical considerations as the qualitative researcher organizes for self-disclosure: research relationships, research questions, knowledge frameworks, inquiry frameworks and methods, validity, and goals. This reflexive model helped me to form a scaffold for revealing my disposition as it relates to a research foundation involving university students and presidential leadership.

My dedication to constructing an investigatory framework with methods that encourage validity is described both here and in my Chapter Three section on credibility. Prior to discussing my own disposition relating to the research, I offer an overview of my commitment to accurately demonstrating the voice of the participants. Authenticity is developed through the precise conveyance of participant perspective (Lutrell, 2010). An ongoing discussion with my chair, committee members, current and past colleagues, students, other phenomenological researchers, and seasoned student service professionals helped me align a framework that encouraged a platform for legitimacy. Member checking of interview transcripts provided student participants with the opportunity to correct inaccuracies and further elaborate on the research questions. Journaling, as suggested by Moustakas (1994), occurred throughout the discovery and ensured a documented account of my association to the process. Primary and secondary coding strategies for dissecting the data were selected to align with approaches common to

phenomenological research and are outlined for possible future analysis. A rich description of the student participants' lived experiences advocates for transferability of the findings as their expressive stories shed light on the research interest.

To strive toward critical thinking and manage the influence of bias, I embraced regular dialogue with my dissertation chair, my direct supervisor (a university president), and three former colleagues in student services leadership positions representing a diverse cross-section of institutions. My experience working in student services has emboldened a pragmatic philosophy in regards to resolving issues in a practical way. Seeing the world as a complex arrangement of changing realities and advocating for students to weigh options by forecasting potential consequences speaks to this leaning. A philosophical interest in student development combined with my awareness and observation of changing student trends has helped me to unite theory with practice. My experience working as an assistant to the president and professional quest to later serve as a university president compels my interest in leadership and the relative phenomenon involving student understanding of the position.

My goal is to provide a rich description of how students experience and understand the university presidency. This research effort is strategically designed to contribute both to my personal curiosity and to the greater good of others (Lutrell, 2010). Findings serve as directed undertones in my professional journey as a university leader and may produce practical knowledge that can benefit the field of higher education. Specifically, my dissertation is designed to open the door to discovering the way students perceive the interactivity with their university president. While research must be strategically designed to investigate meaning, context, and process (Lutrell, 2010), a

phenomenological approach enabled me to discover how students understand the university presidency through their own lived experiences. My role as the researcher influenced every aspect of this design. Acknowledging that research neutrality is impacted by the subjectivity of the investigator, further describing my affiliation to the research topic helps to signify my disposition to the discovery (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Although a student's pathway to becoming involved with extracurricular activities is unique to their own life experiences, I am able to view the affiliation through a lens of similar interest and understanding. I was an active student leader throughout junior high and high school serving as president of my class. Through these early developmental experiences, I learned the joy derived from advocating on behalf of others. It was in this setting I first acclimated to diplomacy and began to develop a civic interest in rallying a collective student voice. Reflecting back on those initial occurrences enables me to appreciate the impact educators and administrators can have on students by encouraging their development through involvement opportunities.

My civic participation continued to develop in college. I sought out Lake Superior State University for my undergraduate degree due in part to its size and personal approach to education. Other factors included its location in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and my love of the outdoors. This small, public university was the ideal size for a student to become involved. Although the early nineteen nineties preceded an era when student inclusion in university governance was commonplace, times were changing in higher education. I relished in opportunities to rally behind student issues and gravitated again towards student leadership positions. I served as president of the Student Body and later as chief justice of the All Campus Judiciary where I authored a new student constitution



that formalized the rights and responsibilities of students and student organizations. Through interactions with administrators, I discovered that students and staff working collaboratively on organizational issues was a recipe for success.

As an involved student, I observed the authority inherent in the university presidency. To me, this person seemed to be at the center of all important things. I recall thinking they were an expert in everything university related. I felt honored to experience occasional interaction with the president and began to develop great respect for their role and responsibility within the organization. I was witness to key decisions being made that would directly impact the institution. My perception was the more informed the president was on an issue, the more fitting the resolution. The more appropriate the resolve, the greater the compliance and support from those impacted by the decision. Something would start as an idea and then through effort, research, and discussion become an implemented action. Enthused people served as collaborators while the president facilitated the process and ultimately decided the direction. I viewed the president as an influential motivator in navigating organizational achievement. This was a life lesson in leadership that forever inspired my future career path.

Interest in discovering how students experience and understand the university presidency has developed through my personal and professional acclimation to leadership and specific interest in pursuing a career as a university president. I am passionate about leadership and service. Although striving to facilitate group success has always been a thread in the fabric of my life, it was 1996 when I cognitively began a career path directed toward becoming a university president. An altruistic interest in public service and a deep seeded admiration for the life enhancing impact of education helped narrow

my interest in leading in the university setting. My professional journey continues to speak to my interest in leadership and further demonstrates my disposition relating to this research.

With more than 10 years of success driven management in student affairs, I was fortunate to obtain a diverse spectrum of knowledge that motivates my specific interest in both students and university presidents. My career path gained momentum from increased responsibility. I was fortunate to lead a student services department at a state university. Through managing offices including Housing, Residential Life, and Student Life, I supervised a large staff of professionals, planned and facilitated conferences, authored grants, enterprised with other departments, managed budgets, analyzed statistical data, developed and implemented marketing plans, celebrated collaborative effort, lead staff through change, and directed the improvement of services. Programs and services that today are organizational staples were nonexistent at the time. While change was in the air and seemingly motivated by society's developing expectation of higher education, the pages were blank and yearning for words. I was fortunate to be part of a paradigm shift that compelled university administrators to further explore the programs and services they provided their students.

We are products of what life presents us and my research interest is impacted both from the fortune of achievement and the lessons derived from hardship. After seven incredible years of administrative experience at Lake Superior State University, I was interested in diversifying my exposure to academic learning institutions prior to pursuing a doctorate degree. Longing for adventure, I accepted a chief student services position within the University of Alaska statewide system. In summation, I quickly found myself

amidst a dysfunctional work environment. One fraught with abusive presidential authority, nepotism, organizational chaos, and fiscal malfeasance which for years had forced staff to either leave or join and enable what others described as the “reign of terror”.

Despite a direct effort to be a positive catalyst for ethical improvement, administrative improprieties continued. As a last resort, I chose to stand on principle and worked closely with statewide university authorities to wage what felt like an epic battle to disclose and substantiate leadership wrong doings which ultimately lead to a presidential resignation. Although integrity seemed to prevail over abusive authority, there were irreversible casualties. With my administrative spirit tarnished and the recognition that continued dysfunction at that institution seemed emanate, I elected to resign my position prior to beginning classes for my doctorate degree. During this time I volunteered within the local community while also serving as an evaluator for the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. Collectively, the previous hardship provided valuable life lessons and further motivated my interest in educational leadership and advocating on behalf of organizational success through shared governance and collaboration.

Throughout my career I have worked closely with seven very different university presidents. Each has taken great pride in proclaiming they are a “student centered” leader. Three have demonstrated a genuine compassion for their student constituencies. Conversely, two were publically reprimanded by trustee boards for, among other concerns, their poor reputation with the student body. The other presidents, by my

account, have made a mediocre attempt to connect with their students as an expected behavioral role inherent to their position of authority.

While I am fortunate to have learned valuable leadership lessons from each of the presidents I engaged with, I am beyond privileged that one president significantly served as a mentor. Working closely with him on projects facing our university enabled me the opportunity to acclimate to the role of president. The work day would start early with a discussion involving the tasks at hand highlighting any and all valuable information that might assist with achieving the goals. Evenings would end late with an open reflection on the challenges faced throughout the day and any resulting learning experiences. He not only encouraged my continued development as a leader but instilled in me a regimented approach to managing a large organization. While our leadership approaches differed slightly, I was able to compare and contrast methods. When I reflect on my own passion to serve as a leader in higher education, I recognize a heartfelt aspiration to follow in his footsteps. His guidance, perspective, and wit continue to resonate in my memory. I am blessed to have had the opportunity to directly experience his legacy which now heavily influences my own journey.

While leading is very much a cooperative endeavor that integrates effort and productivity, I believe the art of leadership is a personal exploration into the inner realities of one's own abilities and beliefs. I am a proponent of value based leadership. My practice has been influenced by authors and theorists including O'Toole, Bennis, Bouge, Bolman and Deal, Heifetz, Kouzes and Posner, Badaracco, and Ellsworth. My approach to management is founded on integrity, unified vision, persistent work ethic, critical thinking, listening and communication skills, individual encouragement,

cooperative problem solving, self-reflection, a personable demeanor, and knowledge of the ever-changing realm of higher education. These assertions emanate in the daily interactions I have with the president, staff, students, and the community.

My courses in higher education leadership taught me to best prepare for the dissertation effort by establishing personal research foundations, exploring differing research approaches, and introspectively reflecting on epistemological, ontological, and methodological perspectives. Revisiting these philosophical tenets helps me to further inform the reader of my research disposition. As a self-identified student of leadership and passionate about facilitating collaborative achievement, my personal and professional history walks a path that parallels progressive engagement with student services and university management. As a former student leader turned university administrator, values, beliefs, experiences and judgments resonate throughout the design and implementation of this study. Believing knowledge is socially constructed has long been a tenet of my professional effort.

With my pedagogical roots firmly planted in the constructivist tradition, my life experiences have been viewed more through a subjective rather than objective lens. A qualitative researcher with these epistemological underpinnings strives for transparency in regards to subjective answers and interpretations (Charmaz, 2000). My investigation adopts the following assertions by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as important proficiencies to assist an investigator in obtaining research sensitivity:

1. The ability to step back and critically analyze situations
2. The ability to recognize the tendency toward bias
3. The ability to think abstractly

4. The ability to be flexible and open to helpful criticism
5. Sensitivity to the words and action of respondents
6. A sense of absorption and devotion to the work process. (p. 7)

I am an enthusiast for life-long learning and a cheerleader for formal education. I believe an institution succeeds when all constituencies embrace an active role and together celebrate forward momentum. A vision for achievement sparks an internal flame that kindles my motivation to generate discussion with colleagues regarding our personal role in reshaping higher education. Recognizing the responsibility associated with some day serving a university as their president, I want to thoroughly invest in experiences that adequately prepare me for this challenge. I believe leadership is an adventure into the uncharted realm of success. While the past provides a rich historical perspective and the present is awash with ideas and assertions, the future of leadership is in the hearts and minds of those who daily interact with the practice. This serves as a foundation for my research.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The credibility of process is paramount to qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). While this form of inquiry provides for rich description, the methodological limitations include the complexity of design which requires extended time and effort (Creswell, 2003). Additional considerations need to be made when using a qualitative approach due to the active role of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). To address this limitation, I developed a semi-structured approach with pre-determined preliminary questions to ensure each of the participants experienced a consistent interview design (Patton, 1990). As previously suggested, students participating in my

research were provided with an opportunity to check documented transcripts for accuracy which assisted with validity and reliability (Creswell, 2003). While my study design creates an opportunity for investigating the way students experience and understand the presidency, the phenomenological design designates a small study size. Qualitative research focuses in on the experience of a few individuals in an effort to infer aspects of a phenomenon involving many (Creswell, 2003). It is my contention that while broad generalization is not applicable, the reality of interest resides within the student participants (Schwandt, 2000). I attempt to tell their story through their voice, their perspective, their lived experiences and their understanding.

This research effort recognizes student perception is in a constant state of flux and while it can have immediate implication on student decision making and actions, conceptualization is filtered through both biological and cultural experiences that motivate meaning (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000). To best qualify learner observation one must acknowledge perception is generated from unique underpinnings representing individual beliefs and signifying relevance only in the present moment (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). I also recognized a cautionary need for rigorous vetting when implicating leadership assertions relating to university presidents. Each president leads their organization in a unique way. Even popularized theories regarding leadership traits can, upon further investigation, diminish in proposed applicability (Harms & Crede, 2010). An effort to steep emerging data in empirical literature helped to build credibility in the findings.

While I am a vocal advocate for motivating and recruiting greater diversity in our university leadership, the unfortunate fact remains that the majority of university

presidents are White men (American Council on Education, 2007). Despite an effort to locate a criterion-similar institution administered by a leader representing greater diversity, both of the sample locations have White males serving as president. Although I acknowledge this as a possible limitation in my study, it is also to this group that I relate through my own race and gender.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This research effort is organized in a five chapter design. Chapter One has developed a foundation for discovery and overviewed key methods and considerations. The second Chapter explores existing literature and establishes a framework from which the dissertation builds upon. Chapter Three describes the methodological tools utilized to navigate the investigation. The fourth Chapter presents thematic data emerging from the proposed research questions. The final Chapter provides analysis of the findings and discusses theoretical conclusions regarding student experiences and understanding of the university presidency.

Phenomenological research is an emergent design and serves as an organizational map while also influencing all aspects of my dissertation planning. My commitment to the methodological underpinnings guided the fluid process of data collection and analysis. Although the qualitative approach provided a semi-scripted plan, findings evolved through patterns of discovery where I strove to understand meaning as it was represented through the voice and experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). While Chapter Two presents the building blocks from which the phenomenon evolves regarding the interactivity between students and presidents, data collection and analysis is emergent in nature and I, as the researcher, represent a dynamic role throughout the



discovery. The methodological process guides analysis and connects sampling to the discovery and demonstration of a phenomenon through data delineation and meaning extraction.

## **Summary**

In Chapter One I introduced the structural framework for my dissertation. I provided an overview of the key concepts surrounding the coexistence of students and university presidents within the educational environment. A deficit in scholarly literature connecting these two groups has been outlined as a researchable problem begging for discovery. The research questions were presented as a core component of the project and provide for a dual layer of inquiry first exploring how students experience and understand the presidency and then further probing how this perspective might then shape their university experience. The potential benefits associated with investigating this evolving phenomenon were described as possible interest to trustees, presidents, student affairs staff, and students. My choice in a phenomenological method steeped in qualitative discovery was overviewed for later discussion in Chapter Three. I provided the reader with a thorough description of my association to the topic as to appropriately disclose any bias and demonstrate my openness to the formation of new understanding. I discussed the challenges and any subsequent effort associated with my study's limitations and delimitations. Chapter One then concludes with a logistical description of how the remainder of this five chapter dissertation is organized. This chapter has provided the foundation from which future Chapters will further frame how students experience and understand the university presidency.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of a literature review is to sufficiently position the study within the realm of existing publication as it relates specifically to the topic while also foreshadowing the determined research approach (Creswell, 2007). The qualitative researcher must first locate and summarize relative studies or conceptual commentaries and then represent them in an inductive design (Creswell, 2003). As suggested by McNabb (2002), this study conveys several aspects of previous research to vet new ideas and both frame and cross-check data obtained through my interviews. Empirical studies relating to students and leadership guide the literary journey and develop a platform from which to further explore how students experience and understand the university. I purposefully weave my research questions into the fabric of the literature review. This developed a balance between existing knowledge and relative inquiry and helped to set the stage for my qualitative data collection and subsequent analysis.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest a good review assists with making dimensional comparisons of data while enhancing sensitivity and formulating further process to include validation through topic saturation. My Chapter Two illuminates the researchable landscape by highlighting literature relative to college students and university presidents. Review of recent student trends and student expectations frames the first part of the review while a historical perspective on university leadership and available presidential assertions supports the later. Of particular interest are research based findings that help to define the parameters of this study. This literature is later used to help develop meaning around the themes that emerged in the data. Theory relative to college students and

university presidents served as partial foundation for qualifying how students experience and understand the presidency. The two theoretical pillars used to frame the research include student development theory and leadership theory. From this foundation, findings and ideas were compared and vetted in an effort to further define the emerging themes.

## **Students**

Students are currently, have been, and will always be at the core of the higher education enterprise. They are the main consumers of the scholastic experience and sport an ever changing array of expectations. Universities continue to navigate an evolving environment compelled by technology, social trends, and institutional competition. The currently enrolled population of traditional aged students in higher education is referred to as the millennial generation and was born between 1982 and 2002. Recent literature is beginning to define the later grouping of these students as Generation Z suggesting they are maturing in a time of “greater public urgency and emergency, both at home and around the world” (Irvine, 2010, p.2). Themes common to this socially-oriented group include: (a) value in achievement and financial gain; (b) interest in supporting positive social change; (c) and elevated anxiety linked to expectations (Atkinson, 2004). Many of these millennial students choose to enhance their college education by participating in extracurricular activities and organizations. An upsurge in student participation with clubs and organizations may be the result of millennial students being more motivated, more focused, and more participatory than prior generations (Strauss, 2005).

The perspective of an involved student is of particular interest to my research effort as their involvement improves their likelihood of exposure to university life. Greater organizational exposure may increase an involved student’s interaction with their

university president. Increased interaction may then enhance the probability of those students shaping some understanding of the presidency. Students of interest for my study demonstrated involvement with activities such as student government, student activities, clubs and organizations, residential life, intramurals, and others. Knowledge regarding the involved student population assisted in each stage of this investigation. I intend to accurately demonstrate their voice through their lived experiences relating to how they experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Involved Students**

Universities dedicate both staffing and resources to services and programs designed to encourage student involvement. A university curriculum is enhanced when student development opportunities such as clubs and organizations are made readily available to students (Chickering, 2006). Developing purposeful opportunities for students to engage in activities out of the classroom and encouraging participation is an important consideration for university leaders as they continue to develop organizational offerings (Kuh, 1995). While the capacity of an institution's learning environment is enhanced through opportunities for students to engage in extracurricular activities (Tinto, 2006), students are attracted to involvement with campus clubs and organizations as they seek to add meaning to their own lives (Strauss, 2005).

The university experience can be intimidating for some students as it is an amalgamation of freedom, responsibility, and opportunity. A student's ability to develop a sense of belonging helps them to avoid difficulties associated with isolation and in turn has a positive influence on their academic achievement (Tinto, 1993). Benefits to students who chose to be involved include leadership development, time management

skills, goal setting experience, and opportunities to interact and collaborate with others (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004). Amplified interaction and collaboration with others in the university may improve the likelihood of an involved student acquiring perspective regarding the presidency. Do involved students who interact with the president have thoughts on the leadership position? I was interested in discovering if exposure to the president impacts a student's understanding of the organization and in any way shaped their university experience.

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement serves as ideological tenet for some university administrators who dedicate to providing students with a holistic educational experience. His research paved the way for understanding how meaningful participation in activities outside of the college classroom setting affects a student's overall learning and personal development. He suggested the academic support structure based on a regimented approach needed to change. Astin's work directed awareness to a more nurturing recognition that each and every student brings a unique set of expectations, needs, and experiences to the educational environment. Student clubs, organizations, and activities serve as a conduit for students to engage in purposeful effort that further cultivates their personal development while supporting and augmenting their academic journey.

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement was based on data collected over several years involving more than 200,000 students which indicated distinct patterns of positive factors relating to educational outcomes that increased with student involvement, whereas negative outcome factors were present with non-student involvement. The

longitudinal data indicates students who were involved with extracurricular experiences were more likely to graduate and furthermore develop a multitude of talents and life skills (Astin, 1984). Although the study spotlighted the connection between students and faculty members, I was interested in exploring if a notable level of interactivity occurs between involved students and presidents. My investigation sought to explore the experience of involved students as they were deemed more likely to have developed some understanding of the university presidency. Astin (1985) suggests:

A highly involved student devotes considerable energy to studying, spends a lot of time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Consequently, an uninvolved student may neglect studies, spend little time on campus, abstain from extracurricular activities, and have little contact with faculty members or other students. (p. 134).

Research additionally indicates the intellectual development of a student is positively influenced by both their academic and social involvement (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). Similar empirical support for the benefits associated with involved students comes from Gellin (2003) who conducted a meta-analysis of the research associated with student involvement between 1991 and 2000. The investigator found direct links between student involvement in extracurricular campus organizations and gains in critical thinking relative to one's own motivation to participate, interaction with others, commitment, and exposure to various other views and experiences. Gains in critical thinking equate to academic success. A student's participation in a club and

organization has shown to also improve their academic persistence through a greater likelihood for retention and degree attainment (Derby, 2006).

Student involvement provides a conduit increasing the opportunity for exposure to the university and, as previously suggested, the university president. This in turn elevates the likelihood an involved student has formulated some thoughts surrounding the university presidency and shaped some meaning around any associated influence. Much can be discovered from the perceptions involved students form. University presidents often connect with their student constituencies by focusing specifically on interaction with involved students (Fisher & Koch, 1996). Despite documented examples of presidents making practice of connecting with their student constituencies to monitor shifting needs (Chace, 2006; Flawn, 1990; Kauffman, 1980; Pierce, 2012; Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008), student perception regarding the university presidency has yet to be explored in a research venue. This void in available literature yearns for more investigation. The following overview of student trends helps further guide this research effort.

### **Student Trends**

As society continues to evolve, universities often serve as a pliable medium to contemporary trends. New social constructs sculpt reality by molding paradigms. Each new generation of students brings an exciting set of experiences and expectations developed through their interaction with an ever evolving world. Student trends continue to serve as an area of focus for research and subsequently provide insight into the student population by defining some of the key influences in their lives. The current student population totes uniquely expressive characteristics which differentiates the group from

past and possibly future generations. Among these central themes flows an adversity to web based relationships and zealous parental involvement. According to Grail Research Group (2010), students currently entering college can be described as:

well networked, more virtually present, and more tolerant of diversity, comfortable with and even dependent on technology, materially satisfied, yet financially conservative, well-educated, informed and environmentally conscious, and more connected to their parents than prior generations (p. 2).

Conceptualizing these trends helps to construct a framework from which to build understanding as this investigation delves into exploring how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### ***Social Networking***

Students of today are socially networked. Web-based friendships include peers, family, coworkers, educators, popular social icons, businesses, brands, and even some university presidents. Face to face communication has been significantly augmented with virtual connectivity. Internet sites designed to promote social interaction have rapidly increased in popularity from the late 1990's (Ezzy, 2006). Virtual communication over the internet is revered as both convenient and casual (Read, 2004). The influence of social networking sites has infiltrated numerous aspects of daily life (Donath & Boyd, 2004). Research has compared this developing trend to tribal behavior. Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009) suggest the social networking culture of college aged students offers a phenomenological view of developing norms similar to those of indigenous tribes.



Recent research also offers a snap shot of the influential role the internet plays in today's society. A study tracking online patterns found 93% of the traditionally aged college students spanning 18 to 29 years of age regularly use the internet (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Much of this usage involves social networking sites such as Facebook. These sites create fertile opportunities for developing relationships (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006) and, moreover, for maintaining preexisting friendships (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Facebook was first started in 2004 and aspires to "give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook.com, 2011). The site caters to the growing interest in social networks and was recently ranked the most visited website in the world (Bosker, 2010).

University students are a socially networked group (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). A social network can be described as a conglomerate of people connected by a shared set of social expectations often representing inclusion through regular interaction, shared support, and personal disclosure (Garton, Haythorathwaite, & Wellman, 1997). Lenhart et al. (2010) suggests US adults 18 to 24 years old with on-line profiles went from 8% to 35% from 2005 to 2009 with 75% of those in the traditionally aged university student range sporting a personal profile. Research indicates this developing trend fosters psychological benefits to college students by promoting a sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) conducted a regression analyses on survey results stemming from a sample involving 286 undergraduate students and suggest the beneficial resources gained from interactive social networking is advantageous by helping students get the most out of their university experience. Research conducted by

Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) found college students turn to social networking sites for friendship, seeking connection with others, finding things to do and sharing information about social events. In one study regarding social networking, a college student responded that interacting on Facebook decreased their overall size perception of their university (Read, 2004). How does virtual networking or face to face interaction between a student and university president influence how a student perceives their college environment?

Additional research suggests college students utilize social networking as a conduit for seeking support and gaining increased knowledge regarding each other. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011) surveyed a sample of 450 college students investigating Facebook usage, psychological well-being, connection strategies, and actual versus virtual friendships through social networking. Data was organized through mean and standard deviation and then analyzed through regression models. Findings “point to an evolved approach to describing interaction patterns which moves beyond dichotomous ‘online’ and offline’ social worlds and instead acknowledges these channels as deeply integrated communicative spheres” (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011, pp. 886-887). The research also suggests Facebook creates a venue where students often advance socialization in otherwise inactive relationships. Although existing studies focus primarily on connections between students, social networking association between students and university presidents may have similar implication. Might this form of connectivity between the two groups influence student understanding of the presidency?

Student services professionals and university executives are challenged with how best to acclimate and even cultivate this evolving form of social alliance. Does social

networking tarnish the stoically academic façade that often defines the structured image of a university president or can communicating with students on a virtual turf assist in developing beneficial interaction? Practitioners are faced with a fashionable angst. Watch from afar with bewildering amazement or trendily develop an online profile and join the masses as they seemingly live and all but breathe in a virtual reality? Support for encouraging involvement with this evolving pattern is founded in human development theory which originated long before the advent of web based communication and champions justification for elevating value associated with promoting a sense of student belonging (Erikson, 1968). Numerous examples exist of university presidents sporting profiles on Facebook where differing levels of interaction with and disclosure to students can be observed. Of interest to this study is how interaction between students and presidents may shape student meaning of the university experience and what, if any, significance students place on the interface.

Beyond acknowledging that social networking helps foster connectedness among college students (Boogart, 2006), research also indicates students form impressions from their observation of information available through the profiles of others in their network (Walther et al., 2008). Some studies have focused on networking between teachers and students which may also have implication for university administrators. A connection that might otherwise be less likely or awkward is made easy as a student "...can intangibly surround themselves with the online representations of friends and acquaintances- allowing them to instantaneously feel close to any or all of them" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007, p.3). This assertion holds true in studies investigating how students view effort by their teachers to participate in online social networking (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds,

2007). Their findings suggest students view appropriate teacher profile disclosure as genuine and honest if information represents the teacher's dedication to their capacity as an educator. This result may have implication as it relates to the manner in which students view and understand a university president to whom they are acquainted through social networking or face to face interaction.

### ***Parental Involvement***

In addition to being socially networked, college students of today are prodigies of unabridged parental involvement which often surfaces in higher education. Parents can be observed choosing classes, determining living arrangements, and problem solving logistical challenges for their young adult college students. Phone interactions between parents and university staff at times include interactions where guardians adamantly demonstrate their generational prowess. Termed "helicopter parenting" this hovering advocacy delivers a unique set of complicating implications for practitioners. The resulting banter between parent and university staff often excludes a student's own representation of their needs and expectations.

To address challenges associated with this overbearing parental phenomenon, universities have strategized in creative ways. One technique is to segregate parents from academic registration during orientation and encourage students to interact with advisors independent of parental negotiation (Shellenbarger, 2005). A secondary method embraces the involvement and engages the collaboration through specially designed programs and services often facilitated through an Office of Parent and Family Relations (Wartman & Savage, 2008). The divergence between both techniques signifies the challenging nature of this trend which finds university leaders wrangling with what structurally is the most

appropriate response. If students' lives are heavily influenced by their parents, might this affiliation to a deferred authority in some way inform their experience and understanding of the university presidency?

Strong student advocacy continuing into college years is a product of Baby Boomer parents with an elevated tendency for sheltering and safety which cultivates a prolonged sense of attachment (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Levin Coburn, 2006). This trend finds parental involvement spanning the college experience with seven out of ten students reporting "very often" communication with a parent occurring throughout the academic year (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). Universities are navigating this phenomenon by fine-tuning their message to parents. As previously suggested, numerous examples exist where organizations have developed parental advisory groups in an effort to harness some benefit from the movement (Wartman & Savage, 2008). While research seems void of demonstrating interactions shared between university presidents and parents, presidents are often key speakers at pivotal events both recruiting and welcoming the student/ parent conglomerate to their university. This exposure suggests parents may develop a correlation between the universities and their presidents. Does this connection, through parental influence, further inform student understanding of the leadership position? Of interest to this study is the influence parental involvement plays in how students experience and understand the university presidency and if any linkage connects the parent paradigm to the evolving phenomenon between students and presidents.

Administrators are challenged with balancing student privacy, which is inherent to independence, with reassuring parents that their prized offspring are receiving a quality education with sufficient services to help them succeed academically (DeBard, 2004).

The apparent structural response and allocation of resources by academic executives seems to acknowledge the development of a new academic constituency; namely students' parents. While parental prowess can prove challenging for universities, research indicates some direct benefit to the students. Kenny (1990) conducted a quantitative study involving a random sample of 159 seniors at a large selective university. The study found students highly desired an ongoing relationship with their parents. Parents were predominantly viewed as a positive influence in their student's educational endeavors. Additionally, those students who reported close relationships with their parents also indicated a more extensive effort in career planning. University presidents will continue to navigate challenging organizational decisions with both welcomed and unsolicited feedback from eagerly and adamantly involved parents. Does this proverbial umbilical attachment between students and parents influence the way students shape meaning of their university experience? This literary journey continues with investigating what research indicates students expect regarding their academic experience along with potential application derived from how students evaluate their faculty educators.

### **Student Expectations**

Students are consumers of the educational experience. Universities are complex knowledge generating institutions purposefully balanced between academically focused human capital and administrative custodianship. Ultimate responsibility for both student living and learning falls squarely on the shoulders of the top executive. The president responds, either directly or through proxy, to high profile occurrences. A president's ability to stay abreast of changing student expectations is directly impacted by the form and amount of interaction between leader and constituency. Tough decisions directly

impacting the lives of those who embody the campus community are informed and influenced by the information available to those leaders who wrangle with a sustainable momentum for their university.

According to Merleau-Ponty (2004), humans react to people, places, and things in a non-neutral manner and assign either a positive or negative connotation which evolves into defined schema and in turn impacts perception through a previously defined frame of reference. Awareness of what students perceive while attending a university and the manner in which they evaluate engagement helped to further shape themes as they emerged throughout this research effort. While existing literature does not currently demonstrate student expression regarding the university presidency, certain findings do emerge through student perception of other organizational entities that may have application to this investigation. Of specific interest is empirical research that helps construct a foundation for demonstrating how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### *Academic Perceptions*

College is a new and exciting environment for many students. Although academic life can be laden with challenges and occasional pitfalls, data suggests approximately 80 percent of undergraduates report a positive experience (Bok, 2006). Kuh, Gonyea, and Williams (2005) studied how students develop their academic expectations by analyzing data from 43 institutions of higher learning involving 38,000 student records and found:

As expected, students entering the more selective, private institutions have slightly higher expectations, as do students entering doctoral-extensive, doctoral-intensive, and baccalaureate liberal arts colleges. At the student level, gender

seems to make the largest single contribution, meaning that women expect to more frequently participate in a range of educationally purposeful activities. Race also makes a small contribution, indicating that students of color expect to take part more frequently in a wider range of activities than white students. (p. 50)

My study focused on a population comprised of involved students who indicated somewhat regular interaction with their university president. Effort was made to select a sample that represented a diverse make up of differing sex and gender/ethnicity representation with interest in demonstrating the perceptions expressed by the respondents.

Students are faced with both positive and negative influences while attending college and can learn to strategize as they navigate these difficulties. Clark (2005) offered four categories that identify student effort to persevere through challenges: “overcoming an obstacle, seizing an opportunity, adapting to change, or pursuing a goal” (p. 302). While some students excel at planning and modifying their behavior and actions to negotiate positive outcomes, some students hold beliefs that shift blame to other entities. Clark (2005) further explains that university programs such as freshman seminar are designed specifically to promote student rights and responsibilities while also encouraging students to seek assistance and share opinions regarding their university experiences. This same sentiment is often also expressed by university presidents during student orientations and academic convocations. How do these presidential messages impact students and do they in any way shape student meaning of the university experience?



Learning outcomes and teaching methodology have evolved as areas of interest for previous research. A study involving 1600 college students found respondents preferred a structured approach to teaching yet believed much of their learning occurred outside of the classroom setting (Light, 2001). This suggests interaction and experience with others augments student knowledge obtained in class. Some educators have developed opportunities for students to closely collaborate within the classroom environment. Research regarding learning communities found students report greater levels of motivation and higher mastery when they feel connected (Summers & Svinicki, 2007). Of specific interest to my study is how student interaction with university presidents influences a student's connectivity to the college experience.

Benefits seem to also abound when students report feeling connected to their university. Strauss and Volkwein (2004) found that organizational efforts to improve advising interactions, increase faculty availability, encourage active engagement in classrooms, and foster student connectedness through campus activities noticeably increased persistence and graduation rates. Can application of these findings span the administrative divide? How does purposeful interaction or a sense of student connectedness with a university president influence a student's engagement with the campus community? What, if any, connection do students make between their perception of the presidency and their own academic expectations?

### ***Student Assessment of Faculty***

Although research is void of information relating to student assessment of the university presidency, investigations regarding themes arising through student evaluation of faculty served as a potential foundation for inference. The manner in which students

perceive a faculty member directly impacts their motivation to engage in learning and their capacity to understand presented information (Wittrock, 1986). How do students perceive the university presidency and does interaction between a student and president influence a student's thoughts or actions? As with any form of assessment, defining the criterion used for evaluation is important. Broadly qualifying student perception as it relates to teaching is particularly challenging due to the varying goals of specific educators. As a result, effort to define teaching effectiveness is often demonstrated through ties to student learning with both summative implication for promotion and formative application with helping faculty improve their effort (Hobson & Talbot, 2001). Overseeing student learning has become an important process for universities and includes monitoring the manner in which students evaluate their experience with faculty.

An extensive quantitative study conducted by Rothgeb and Burger (2009) found significant support for student evaluations among political science department chairs. Among those surveyed: 84% at bachelorette, 94% at masters, and 92% at doctoral granting institutions utilized student evaluations as a significant indicator for determining teaching effectiveness. This similarly begs the question, if student opinion was formally represented in evaluating presidential performance might it change how some presidents choose to engage with the constituency? Student evaluation of faculty has a considerable impact on educational design. University educators continue to transition away from a regimented lecture based methodology of teaching where raw information is simply dictated to the students. A pedagogical shift influenced by student evaluation has encouraged educators to focus more on the learners through methodologies that embrace constructivist learning which builds on the preexisting knowledge of the students

(McKeachie, 1997). According to Centra (2003), “students who learn more in a course expect to get higher grades and also believe instruction has been more effective” (p.515).

Can connections be made between the manner in which students perceive educators and how students experience and understand the university presidency? Albeit very different, both educators and administrators provide services and information to students that define their college experience. Student evaluation of teacher effectiveness further defines the parameters for educator accountability in the classroom (Ory, 2000). According to Chickering and Gamson (1987), analysis spanning 50 years of research based on learning defines effective teaching as developing interaction between educator and student, promoting mutual student exchange and collaboration, utilizing active learning methodologies, providing timely feedback, motivating a task oriented focus, and encouraging high expectations. Many of the empirically based assertions parallel actions that can also be modeled by university leaders.

Why are constituencies, including students, not asked to assess presidential leadership? In an age where increased responsibility demands elevated accountability, one could argue students should have a voice in evaluating leader performance. For this sentiment to develop we must first understand the phenomenological change occurring between the two groups. My study begins to explore this connection. Prior to investigating the manner in which students might evaluate university presidents, understanding the foundation from which the social constructs are derived must be considered. This phenomenological effort focused data through a lens involving: (a) student disposition to social networking; (b) parental involvement; (c) an understanding of student academic perceptions; (d) and knowledge regarding student assessment of

faculty. Emerging themes were also vetted with knowledge of the theoretical foundation surrounding student development.

### **Student Development Theory**

Scholars have aspired to explain human social development for centuries. Effort over the past seventy years has refined and directed this theoretical journey. Research and supposition presents a growing body of knowledge that helps to identify influences relative to student development. Theoretical affiliation is an important pillar in any research effort and further serves as a contextual foundation for framing my phenomenological approach. Discovery into how students experience and understand the university presidency will be substantively enhanced by qualifying findings through a student development lens. Studies involving students' mental, emotional, and social growth are often categorized into camps with two popular affiliations being psychosocial theory and cognitive theory. Psychosocial theory refers to the chronological life stages where unique sets of developmental challenges occur. Cognitive theory implicates the manner in which students perceive, filter, organize, and make meaning of their experiences. These theories served as a lens from which I viewed my study's findings and negotiated meaning as themes evolved in the data demonstrating how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### ***Psychosocial Theory of Student Development***

Higher education continues to evolve with respect to seeking meaningful learning experiences for students. Research supports engagement between learners and faculty with findings suggesting that shared interaction is one of the most influential forces in a student's development (Astin, 1999). Many institutions have created residential learning

communities where a student's academic journey is strategically integrated with their social life. This setting provides students regular interaction with faculty and staff both in and out of the classroom. Empirical support from a meta-analysis for these types of collaborations indicates promising results with increased psychosocial development, academic success, elevated involvement, and improved student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although research based literature does not address interactivity between students and university presidents, a similar connection might be made in exploring potential developmental benefits students might experience through interactions with the presidency.

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) psychosocial model is a common lens for theoretically understanding student development. The model asserts college experiences provide a platform for the establishment of personal identity. Seven vectors are suggested as a psychosocial growth trajectory for traditionally aged students: developing confidence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Variables affecting a student's back and forth progression through the vectors include individual maturity, the amount of support received, and the differing degrees of difficulty. How do students identify with a university president and does this influence their own development?

Bronfenbrenner's ecology theory (1995) qualifies the dynamic process between individuals and others in their environment by asserting purposefully consistent interaction is required between an individual and their environment for measurable growth to occur. Similarly, Astin's involvement theory (1984) offers insight into how

growth occurs in students through the interplay between an individual's exertion of physical and psychological energy. Within my study the raw data received from respondents has been filtered through these theoretical models to assist with making sense of the themes relating to how students develop an understanding of the presidency and the resulting impact. How does student interaction with a university president shape their perception of the college experience?

### *Cognitive Theory of Student Development*

College students are presented with an ever evolving amalgamation of experience and information. Conceptualizing how students form meaning helps to build a foundation for analyzing my data and formulating relative theory. Piaget's research spanning the 1930's through the 1960's describes moral development in children. Piaget (1965) suggests action encourages concurrent development, and as a result, children develop morally through interacting with their environment. As a child grows they move from a heteronomous stage to an autonomous disposition. Young children are egocentric and view rules and authority in a uni-directional manner concerned more with outcome than purpose. Ethical maturity promotes both moral reasoning and critical selectivity which encourage cooperation and respect. How do university presidents perpetuate opportunities for students to engage in personal discovery? Are there any examples of shared discussion between students and presidents surrounding rules leading to outcomes within the organizational environment?

Perry, influenced by Piaget, suggested the cognitive theory of student development in 1970. Perry (1970) purports a theoretical emphasis based on a college student's intellectual journey with truth, meaning, value, and responsibility as they relate

to growth from cognitive conflict. Individuals progress through three levels of development: dualism, relativism, and commitment. Each level contains three stages moving from a structural orientation to affective action. Considering this developmental assertion, interactions between students and presidents could nurture student growth through encouraging a comprehensive mindset as natural complexities advance through a developmental continuum of maturity. How do university leaders challenge students to link relative experience with learning and cognition?

Kohlberg's (1976) theory of moral development further describes the cognitive process individuals encounter when faced with new circumstances and purports moral judgment motivates decisions and behavior. Three stages are offered as sequential progression for individual development. The pre-conventional stage designates a state of being where the student is unaware of societal rules and subsequently does not demonstrate any concern. Awareness and respect for social expectations begin to develop in the conventional stage. The post-conventional stage encompasses a student's moral maturation to a level where their value system exceeds the rules of society. My study acknowledges the theoretical depth involved with the development of student perception. This theoretical lens helped to focus analysis as themes evolved through the repetitive rigor of collecting and comparing data relative to how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **University Presidents**

A university president is charged with the assiduous assignment of facilitating an academic organization. They are evaluated on their ability to sustain an institutional commitment to functional prosperity and scholastic prominence. Literature echoing the

voice of reflective university presidents indicates the job is beyond daunting but carries great opportunity for positive influence (Chace, 2006; Flawn, 1990; Kauffman, 1980; Pierce, 2012; Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008). The promise of a chaotic lifestyle in addition to an elevated professional challenge appeals to a unique character.

Understanding how the position has historically developed, reviewing the career trajectory, and learning how modern challenges continue to redefine the role served as a platform for then integrating leadership theory and helped to position my research interest into how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Historical Underpinnings of the Position**

To understand the complexities associated with the university presidency, it helps to first acclimate to the historical circumstances surrounding the creation of the position. Prior to the emergence of presidents at universities, our country's patriotic ideologies echoed throughout the land and Americans greatly feared the concept of singular authority with any type of leadership. Whether it be church, state, or a factional group, the strong sentiment remained that public life should be governed by broad public interest. To redirect authority away from the religious hierarchy, governments began to appoint lay individuals to oversee academic policy (Zwingle, 1980). The role of education was evolving fast. If our nation was to continue development based on freedom, democracy, and entrepreneurship, education beyond rudimentary skills would be essential. A more detailed system of educational oversight and governance was needed to orchestrate the developing interest in learning organizations.

Building on the knowledge that university authority would require a differing structure than our European counterparts at Oxford and Cambridge, the concept of



nonacademic governing boards first became practice in the development of Harvard University. Whereas in Europe, academic oversight was influenced predominately by faculty control, America did not have an available pool of professional scholars to draw from. According to Trow (1970), topics were taught by a group of young men who served more as tutors. Harvard chiseled out an existence founded by a lay board that relied on the good intentions of those involved with the process. It was decades before the role of faculty began to acquire the professional respect afforded to it today. The concept of faculty domination and self-interest directly conflicted with society's strong desire for public style governance. Governing boards, in the early 1900's, responded to the evolving administrative needs by appointing presidents to carry out oversight of the day to day operations (Cuban, 1988).

The role and responsibility of the university president continues to evolve today. As previously discussed, presidents are tasked with navigating challenging decisions while accounting for the ever changing educational landscape. The developing phenomenon between university presidents and students is at the core of my research interest. Understanding the leadership trajectory of a president helps connect the presidential role with an overview of leadership theory by describing where the executive motivation is professionally cultivated. This then set the stage for a phenomenological investigation into how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Pathway to the Presidency**

In current times, presidents emerge from differing professional backgrounds and several different academic areas, none of which seem to disproportionately perpetuate leadership achievement (Fincher, 2003). The author suggests much of what differentiates

academic chief executives from other educators is their willingness to accept responsibility for impacting direction and making decisions. The number of university executives emerging from a student affairs background is on the rise due in part to their practical experience advocating for recruitment and retention (Diamond, 2002). Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) offer four categorizations for presidential trajectory. The first two are considered traditional pathways: a Scholar ascends in the typical fashion through faculty ranks and into administration; a Steward follows a higher education management path without ever serving as a full-time educator. The remaining two defined pathways are less customary: a Spanner represents those who have external working experience with politics or business and also excel as faculty members; lastly, a Stranger does not have any university employment experience either as an educator or administrator.

Although categorically women and minority presidents continue to be underrepresented throughout higher education, research indicates a slow increase in diversified executive service (Ross, Green, and, Henderson, 1993). Research conducted by the American Council on Education in 2006 regarding presidential demographics found 86% White and 77% male (American Council on Education, 2007). This unfortunate portrayal can be observed through my own effort to develop the sample population for this study. I was unsuccessful at locating even one female or minority president at a small (under 10,000 students), public, Midwestern, four year teaching university who had been seated for five or more years as determined necessary through my sample site criteria. While I am a vocal advocate for motivating and recruiting greater diversity in our university leadership, we are faced with the discouraging reality that most

university presidents are aging White men (American Council on Education, 2012). Does the gender, ethnicity, demeanor, leadership style, or other consideration help to create a linkage between some students and the president? How do students identify with the presidency?

### **Evolving Role of the University President**

Acclaim through scholarship and research were once considered sufficient credentialing for a university presidency. The search criteria has shifted extensively and now includes: seasoned management; administrative success; leadership experience; aptitude with media, community, and legislative relations; and skill in navigating an athletic program. Rhodes (2001) described the presidential position as:

...in spite of financial pressures and political concerns, in spite of public disenchantment and campus discontent, the academic presidency is one of the most influential, most important, and most powerful of all positions, and there is now both a critical need and an unusual opportunity for effective leadership. The college presidency is one of the most influential of all positions because the future leaders of the world sit in our classrooms. The academic presidency also is one of the most important of all positions because it is chiefly on campus that knowledge—the foundation of the future—is created. Furthermore, it is most powerful of all positions because of its persuasive influence and long-term and wide-ranging leverage. (p.223)

Findings additionally indicate many presidents bring prior presidential experience to their post. Research on university leaders suggests one out of five presidents had previously served in the top position at another institution prior to acquiring their current

presidency (Williams, 2007). So with the presidential position compelling such deep potential influence and requiring elevated career acumen why has previous research never sought to connect student perception to this leadership post? Of particular interest to my study is how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Marketing and Communication Trends**

University presidents are increasingly found at the center of marketing campaigns with their portraits prominently displayed on billboards and organizational websites. Progressively, presidential commentary is broadcast through radio and television sound bites and in informational mailings. Educational executives are dedicating increased time to communicating with constituencies. Presidential decisions are often justified in correspondence delivered electronically to all impacted campus areas. University communities have learned to look to the president for answers and understanding. Of interest to my research is how does the promotion of presidential leadership through marketing and media influence how students experience and understand the presidency.

Leaders conduct higher education business in a public venue where decisions are regularly challenged. University presidents must learn to adequately balance opposing responsibilities: they are at the center of discovering and resolving organizational deficits while also championing optimism and good will. Presidents are required to oversee campuses that increasingly are turning into battlegrounds for crisis and tragedy where public scrutiny points to leadership for immediate answers (Nelson, 2008). Navigating media intricacies that revel in negativity is a real skill. The important need for public transparency in organizational leadership finds university presidents often serving as a respondent or spokesperson for issues facing students, faculty, staff, and campus

community. How is student understanding of presidential leadership shaped through things they hear and see in the media and through dialogue with others?

### **Presidential Achievement**

While education is yearning for change, “presidential leadership is the main imperative for the revitalization of higher education” (Fisher & Koch, 1996, p. 273). Empirical research pertaining to presidential interviews indicates those serving in the positions believe success comes from the following several considerations: (a) total commitment; (b) courteous treatment of others; (c) self and group confidence; (d) interest in action; (e) a resolute and unrelenting demeanor; (f) actively participating in governance; (g) an unyielding work ethic; (h) portraying a sense of humor; (i) friendly and approachable behavior; (j) maintaining a consistent disposition; (k) conveying authority with ease; (l) and although in the spot light, they believe effective presidents generously share recognition (Fisher, Tack, & Wheeler, 1988). While these findings emerged from questioning current university presidents, students have not been asked how they experience and understand the presidency. As a result, the student voice is unrepresented in the literature regarding presidential leadership. What might students suggest a successful university presidency involves?

### **Leadership Theory**

Researchers have long investigated what makes a leader tick. Numerous theories abound on the periphery making inference to key leadership tenets. Studies exploring corporate populations have implications useful for business and industry. These findings can also be applied to understanding the fundamental underpinnings of executive leadership within higher education. Awareness of the theoretical suppositions linked to

leadership further informed this investigation into how students experience and understand the university presidency and helped qualify patterns in the themes that emerged from analysis of the student perspective.

Five categories are first offered to help define the development of leadership theory followed by a discussion of organizational leadership frames which encompass a theory based scaffolding to further define leadership behaviors within a university's organizational structure. While my review is not comprehensive and does not delve into the validity of each of the theories, the summary does overview the prominent themes that serve as a pillar to this research effort. These theories are then woven into the fabric of description as the qualitative themes emerged demonstrating how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### ***Great Man Theory***

Leadership theory has developed extensively from earlier work focused on analysis of a distinguished leader's accomplishments and surmised implication of their innate character traits. To understand the evolutionary progression of leadership theory a brief review of earlier assertions helps to map the historical underpinnings of the current philosophical suggestions. The Great Man Theory contends certain individuals are born with a natural disposition that compels their achievement as a leader. Discussion surrounding this theoretical explanation of leadership gained popularity in the nineteenth century through the writings of Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish historian and satirist, as he attempted to define the success of male dominated military and political leadership throughout history. Carlyle contends "the people will be saved by the great men; that is if people will listen to the hero, obey him, and believe in him, all will be well" (Carlyle,

1966, p. vii). The author further suggests leaders must embody some manifestation of each of the following five characteristics: divinity, prophecy, poetic performance, priestly mannerism, scholarly communication, and a kingly demeanor (Carlyle, 1966). Void of any of these natural birth traits would limit the individual's ability to perform as a leader. This conjecture has been criticized in application for not addressing the diversity of situational effectiveness while also not equating the role or influence that stems from directing a group of diverse followers (Clark & Clark, 1990). The Great Man Theory marks a starting point from which to further develop the theoretical perspectives that helped me as I searched for clarity in the phenomenological themes that emerged through my data analysis.

### ***Trait Theory and Personality Perspective***

While evolving beyond inherent birth traits, momentum for personality perspective as a viable link to leader behavior continues to develop through scientific efforts. Gordon Allport, an American psychologist, is known as the father of trait/personality theory. He purported through research conducted during the 1940's that individuals are motivated through both biological needs and experiential development including awareness of one's own body, identity, esteem, extension, image, and ability to cope rationally (Boeree, 2006). Trait theory and personality perspective have resonated with some leadership theorists who use psychometric or psychological testing to compare and contrast certain characteristics that lead to leadership achievement. Bass (1996) suggests certain personality attributes can compel leadership success and improve organizational function by motivating employee contribution and increasing worker satisfaction.

Researchers have explored personality perspective from numerous angles deriving assertions regarding which specific character ingredients combine to compel leadership achievement. Bennis and Thomas (2002) contend a leader's learned ability to adapt to adversity through sustaining forward mobility through difficult times is imperative to their success. Kambil (2010) conducted a leadership study and discovered five fundamental traits common to each of the executive respondents: curiosity, courage, perseverance, personal ethics, and confidence. The elevated role curiosity played in the professional lives of those interviewed was considered to be a significant finding for the project. A leader's inquisitive disposition was repeatedly suggested by the respondents as a driving force in their own self-directed professional development and as a means to better acclimate to the social dynamic of the organizational structure (Kambil, 2010).

What characteristics will students describe as important to the success of a university president? Fisher and Koch (1996), through their empirical study of educational executives, define characteristics common to successful college presidents. While a changing social and economic landscape may beg for differing results, earlier findings suggest effective presidents are:

less collegial and more distant; more inclined to rely upon respect than affiliation; more inclined to take risks; more committed to an ideal or a vision than an institution; more inclined to support merit pay; more thoughtful, shrewd and calculating than spontaneous; more likely to work long hours; more supportive of organizational flexibility; more experienced; and more frequently published. (p 57)



Of specific interest to my research project is how students experience and understand the presidency. What characteristics do students see as important to presidential success? What student perception patterns will emerge through phenomenological data analysis and how do they compare to the empirical research linked to university presidents?

### ***Behavioral Theory***

Leadership theory seems to undergo a developing continuum. Evolving beyond the Great Man assertion that leaders are born with a unique success-driven disposition, trait theory then suggested leadership potential can be measured and analyzed. Subsequently, theoretical assertions regarding leadership then began to focus more on some of the core beliefs rooted in behaviorism. The idea that a leaders' behavior can serve as a primary predictor in determining their influence further expands the notion that individuals can learn and develop appropriate attitudes and actions that can compel their ability to function as a leader. Stogdill (1974) suggested predominant leadership behaviors can be categorized into specific orientations including task achievement, relationship fostering, change facilitation, and passive or absent leadership behavior. The Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire was developed for a study conducted at Ohio State University over a ten year span beginning in 1946. The survey entailed 150 questions designed to describe an individual's behavior within a group setting. Researchers used factor analysis to define nine dimensions of common behaviors amongst leaders. According to Saal and Knight (1988), findings supported the notion that leadership was not based on inborn traits. Instead analysis of the data directly indicated methods and strategies could be taught to improve leadership success. I was interested in

understanding how students defined leadership success as it related to the university presidency. How do students perceive the behaviors of university presidents?

### *Situational and Contingency Theories*

Industrial psychology gained momentum in the 1970's with leadership theory focusing in on both internal and external situational factors within an organization (Bass, 1990). Fiedler's (1967) contingency theory asserts group performance is linked to a leader's style and situational favorableness. He suggested situational favor involves the amount a group accepts their leader, the manner in which tasks are managed, and a leader's exertion of power and authority. Hersey and Blanchard developed the Situational Leadership Theory in 1977 which furthered Fiedler's work by suggesting effective leadership is contingent on a leader's ability to navigate a situational matrix. Four categories were offered for analyzing leadership style within the matrix: directing clear instruction; coaching with communication and motivation; supporting through shared decision making; and delegating responsibility (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). What stories will students share regarding observations they have made of the presidency in differing situations?

While there are several examples of differing contingency theories, another I find connected to my research interest is the Path-Goal Contingency Theory, as defined by House and Mitchell (1974). This theory focuses in on the follower and further views leadership through the interaction between those leading and those being led. Responsibility is placed on the leader to assist followers in developing behaviors that best align with predetermined goals. Leadership success is therefore obtained when leaders address obstacles affecting productivity and motivate others into believing they are

capable of excelling at their tasks (House & Mitchell, 1974). Of particular interest to my study is discovering how students describe interactions with their president? How do these encounters shape their university experience?

### ***Transactional and Transformational Theories***

Through reinforcing the concept of shared value and collaboration Burns (1978) constructs a premise for explaining fundamental differences between transactional and transformational approaches to leading. Diverging even more from the effort of previous researchers to describe management attributes of great leaders, the author ventured more into the dynamic relationship between leaders and followers. Burns describes the act of leadership as “the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers” (Burns, 1978, p. 425).

Burns suggests transactional leadership is “exchanging gratifications in a political marketplace” (Burns, 1978, p. 258). This give-take relationship relies on a manipulated outcome based on self-interest: in the most simplistic form, a transaction between leader and follower. A leader subscribing to this method mobilizes support through an interactive means of rewarding the follower’s effort. Incentive for compliance with a leader’s request is motivated by a follower’s interest in receiving the reward. Value for both parties is placed on the desired exchange. Burns’ assertion of a transactional approach provides defining linkage to previous leadership theory which encourages leaders to cultivate fairness and loyalty within the organizational framework. Emphasis is placed on achievement of the directive. While leaders who can consistently “get the job

done” are considered successful, followers are the doers and play a minimal role in the design process. With transactional interactions defined, I was interested in exploring how students understand exchanges with their president.

Burns (1978) describes the transformational approach as an experience that collaboratively engages both leaders and followers, which can also result in an elevated level of participatory consciousness for all involved. Transformative leaders embrace change and are perpetually negotiating their role with authority. Value is placed more on process than outcome. Burns suggests these leaders are also learners. He contends, “*Real* leaders – leaders who teach and are taught by their followers – acquire many of their skills in everyday experience, in on-the-job training, in dealing with other leaders and their followers” (Burns, 1978, p. 169). At the core, transformational leadership moves all participants away from self-motivated interests and immerses them in morality and purpose. Leaders and followers work collaboratively to transform their purpose and goals to best represent the group’s collective needs. How do students experience collaborative engagements with the presidency?

Burns (1978) advocates the true scholarly application of both leadership techniques lies in the heart of their differences. Transactional leadership is the more traditional style embossed with maintaining organizational equilibrium through respect for linear authority. According to the author, results are often short term, situational, and surface. Followers are only partially engaged with the process. More depth enters the leadership equation with a transformational method. Additionally, outcomes tend to endure time as the relationship between leader and follower is more substantive. By transforming the way a group functions, reward is shared and can lead to a contagious

motivation for continued participation. Burns (1978) argues transformational leadership is more complex and he significantly justifies the achievement oriented benefits associated with leadership that promotes a collaborative transformation. Awareness of these two realms of leadership helped me vet ideas and themes evolving from the data relative to how students experience and understand the university presidency. Next my literature review explores a leader's awareness and actions within defined organizational frameworks.

### ***Organizational Leadership Frames***

Theoretical frames relative to educational leadership include Structural/Formal, Human Resource/Collegial, Political, and Cultural/Symbolic (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Practitioners skilled in accurately interpreting organizational patterns can utilize these designations as a starting point for further analysis. The frames serve as “maps that aid navigation, and tools for solving problems and getting things done” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 18). Acknowledging the existence of differing perspectives engages my research with fundamental underpinnings. Of particular interest is how students perceive their university president. Knowledge of the frames enabled me to qualify some of my findings by filtering the developing themes through a lens that further focused the student observations.

The structural frame takes root in the early twentieth century work of industrialist Frederick Taylor and German sociologist Max Weber which emphasized the benefits associated with patriarchal systems based on a fixed division of labor and strategic delegation of responsibility (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Often organizational rules, policy, and expectations are formally represented in the system architecture through guiding

documents (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Leadership is mostly unquestioned due to an image of administrative authority (Bush, 2003). A structural approach often unrealistically assumes employees accept the direction established by those in positions of authority (Bolman & Deal, 2003) and “focus on the organization as an entity and ignore or underestimate the contribution of individuals” (Bush, 2003, p. 57). Hammond (2004) further suggests structural approaches common to higher education can limit communication with constituents resulting in organizational decisions that lack appropriate discourse.

The human resources frame is based on a systematic approach to investing in employees by distributing authority throughout the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2003). This collegial perspective promotes decision making through a democratic process that seeks consensus in an effort to avoid disparaging group conflict and upholds common beliefs and goals in relationship to the purpose, vision, and function of the organization (Bush, 2003). The frame observes regular investment in the continued development of others, empowering their achievement, and promoting their diversity (Bolman & Deal, 2003). As a down side, this frame tends to be time consuming, overly normative, and can sometimes inappropriately assume a group consensus must be reached (Bush, 2003).

The political frame embraces a concept that coalitions of people and groups compete for reduced resources in a manner that culminates in an expected level of healthy conflict. Power is an essential component in the political frame and emerges through position, expertise, control of reward and resource, and coercion (Bush, 2003). Specific organizational goals are determined through a process that promotes negotiation and bargaining within the realm of a political arena (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Limitations

of the political model include a propensity for becoming submersed in conflict and negating the importance of adhering to a more defined approach to decision making (Bush, 2003). Political environments must be also closely monitored and can shift from dignified to destructive (Bolman & Deal, 2003) with organizational goals often being ambiguous, unstable, and under resourced (Bush, 2003).

Cultural and symbolic models “focus on values, beliefs and norms of individuals in the organization and how these individual perceptions coalesce into shared organizational meaning” (Bush, 2003, p. 156). Stories of heroic individuals, myths, vision, and values are ritualized both in celebration and ceremony (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The frame often manifests as an artistic expression best representing a changing culture by symbolizing expected norms (Bush, 2003). The cultural frame is susceptible to overly emphasizing rituals while neglecting other organizational considerations and also risks ethical dilemma by imposing values on others (Bush, 2003). Do students look to their university president for vision or value? Applying the organizational leadership frames with other leadership theory has helped to set the stage for supporting emerging themes with applicable literature as it relates to how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Interactivity Between Students and University Presidents**

Empirical research is void of studies investigating the interactions between students and university presidents. As a result of this deficit, I offer a snapshot constructed from my professional observations to help enlighten the presidential parameters of my research analysis. This review involving the types of interactions between students and presidents leads into my discussion of current and former university

presidents espousing the importance of student connections. How do students describe this interactivity? Are there presidential expectations that emerge from the student voice? There will be more successful presidents when we are able to think more seriously about what we need from them, and about the conditions that enable their success” (Hahn, 1996, p. 72). My research intent was to explore the evolving phenomenon between students and university presidents through the lived experiences of the student respondents.

### **Types of Interactions**

Students and university presidents coexist in organizational environments and yet often seem worlds apart. The social distance continues to narrow with academic executives dedicating increased effort to engage with students. Often presidents sanctify early interface with parents and students by providing remarks at regional recruitment events. The president regularly kicks off new student orientation with motivating commentary and then follows up with a scholastic charge at the academic convocation. Formal interactions continue with speeches at recognition ceremonies, ground breakings, fundraisers, pep rallies for sporting events, and other official celebrations. Students often receive emails or letters bearing the president’s signature justifying an organizational decision or requesting their compliance with an issue. From beginning to end, interaction between students and presidents mark progression in the educational experience. A welcome address to students and parents as they first arrive to the campus and a handshake or hug on the graduation platform signifies the full progression of the academic endeavor. How do these experiences inform or shape the college experience for students?



Informal interactions occur when a university president hosts a student forum or entertains a group of student leaders. A presidential stroll across campus may evoke several brief encounters with students. The social networking paradigm continues to encourage administrative participation and finds some presidents informally communicating with their constituencies through online friend requests. Some students serve on committees with the president, while others seek audience to convey difficulty or seek assistance. Students can benefit from interaction with university administrators. Astin's student involvement theory contends that students who are actively engaged in their environment will increase their development (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Will findings from this phenomenological inquiry into how students experience the university presidency suggest any support for interactivity? Does the connection between students and presidents influence students with their educational journey?

### **Presidential Assertions**

According to McLaughlin (1996) presidents often find themselves amidst a fast paced, highly demanding rigor that presents unforeseen challenges to their physical, emotional, and intellectual capacities. Although the demand is relentless, the author asserts many chief executives view the opportunity as the culmination of their professional career. Of those who still find time and energy to compose retirement memoirs, asserting engagement with students is a reoccurring theme (Brodie & Banner, 1996; Chace, 2006; Flawn, 1990; Kauffman, 1980; Pierce, 2012; Smith, 2009; Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008). Investigating how students understand and experience the university presidency helped develop support for these assertions. While the

presidential commentary is not empirically based, it does demonstrate the need for further research.

Joseph F. Kauffman served as president of Rhode Island College from 1968-1973. His writing encourages other presidents to invest time and effort into acclimating with their students and cultivating their trust in leadership. He suggests:

Political skill will be desirable, but the indispensable ingredient of leadership will be a sense of trust that the leader will do the right thing with what limited discretion remains.

To instill that trust means leaders will have to show they understand and are committed to the values that people with the best motives can follow. (Kauffman, 1980, p.115)

Several presidential commentaries provide further direction on how presidents can accomplish this by better understanding their students. Keith H. Brodie who served as chancellor at Duke University from 1982 to 1985 and then as president of Duke University from 1985 to 1993 recalls “I got to know them –and their concerns–through a number of avenues, both formal and informal” (Brodie & Banner, 1996, p. 81). Brodie who describes the importance associated with presidents interacting with their students suggests “as president, I am happy to say, I learned a lot about our students, and one of the things I learned most about was their fervent commitment to voluntarism and their determination to act according to the dictates of conscience” (Brodie & Banner, 1996, p. 82).

One of the roles associated with any form of leadership is decision making. Some presidents look to their students as a source for information. Peter T. Flawn served as

president of the University of Texas at San Antonio from 1973 to 1977 and the University of Texas at Austin from 1979 to from to 1985 and again there as interim president from 1997 to 1998. He advocates that presidents need to reach out to both involved and non-involved students suggesting “you will be very pleased at how much you can learn through frank and open conversation with this mixed group of students. You may not like everything you learn, but this kind of exchange will give you information you cannot get in any other way” (Flawn, 1990, p.104). William M. Chance who served as president at Wesleyan University from 1988 to 1994 and Emory University from 1994 to 2003 furthers this concept by suggesting students play a pivotal role in shared governance. He contends “students have real political power on campus, particularly over what they are to be taught... I learned that not only are students ‘customers’ or ‘clients’; they can also become key participants in negotiations about the curriculum” (Chance, 2006, pp. 163-164).

A common theme in the presidential reflections suggests importance associated with presidents acclimating to their students. Stephen J. Trachtenberg who served as president of George Washington University from 1988 to 2007 shares: “I would encourage my successor to have regular office hours for students and to attend their performances, discussions, athletic events, and informal gatherings whenever possible” (Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008, p. 15). Upon more reflection he concludes: “talking to and observing students became one of the most important and enjoyable things I did as president” (Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008, p. 15). Further advocating for presidents to connect with their students, Janet F. Smith who has served as president at Columbia State Community College since 2008 suggests “the connection between the president and

students and the type of relationship formed is influenced by the leadership, responsibilities, temperament, and strengths of the president” (Smith, 2009, p.15). In her advice to presidents she goes on to recommend “as you stride through each day, walk a hall, engage a student if no more than to say, ‘good morning. How are you today?’ It makes a difference for the student, and it makes a difference for you” (Smith, 2009, p.28).

Susan R. Pierce further discusses interactivity between presidents and students. She served as president at the University of Puget Sound from 1992 to 2003 and recommends “one of the great joys of being on a college campus is the opportunity to be with and get to know students” (Pierce, 2012, p. 73). She also asserts that presidents should reach out to all students with her statement: “when setting up meetings, presidents should always ask, and insist that others ask, what voices other than the usual ones need to be heard- that is, who else should be at the table?” (Pierce, 2012, p. 59). She further claims through her own experience that presidents:

should sit in the student section at athletic events and eat meals at the student center... I will be candid. I always viewed these occasions as one of the prerequisites of my job. If a president sees them as a burden instead, perhaps she or he has chosen the wrong career. (Pierce, 2012, p. 60).

These assertions from reflective former presidents emerge from their frontline experience. While my study explores the phenomenon relating to how students experience and understand the university presidency, these declarations affirm that some presidents go beyond valuing interactivity with their students. Examples in these memoirs advocate that current and future leaders should consider developing connectivity with

students as part of their own presidential effort. As the interactivity between students and university presidents has not been researched from either angle, this investigation focuses in on the essence of the students' lived experiences.

### **Summary**

In Chapter Two I reviewed relevant literature spanning students, student trends, student expectations, student development theory, university presidents, the historical underpinnings of the position, pathways to the position, the evolving role, leadership theory, and presidential assertions. The literature review sets the stage for later analysis as the themes that emerged through the lived experiences of the participants are vetted through this literary lens. While the research presented in this Chapter creates a peripheral foundation of knowledge surrounding the phenomenon it also demonstrates the existing void in prior empirical investigation relating to the interactivity of students and presidents. The literature reviewed in this chapter supports the need for exploring how students experience and understand the university presidency. These were the research areas and empirical findings at the onset of planning my investigation that I believed were important to set my study in the context of existing literature. Later in Chapter Four, I build upon and further define these connections to help focus the themes that emerge within the data.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Design**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how students experience and understand the university presidency. Current literature is void of describing the interactivity between these two important entities within the educational environment. The involved student voice was at the core of this investigation as their lived experiences shed light on this phenomenon. A qualitative strategy was chosen to help navigate my investigatory effort. A declaration regarding how an investigator views knowledge strategically motivates the research and guides every aspect of the study from question to conclusion (Broido & Manning, 2002; Charmaz, 2006; Crotty, 1998; Vogt, 2007). This section outlines my study's ontological, epistemological, and philosophical tenets.

#### **Ontology**

As the researcher, my own knowledge development paradigm leads the exploratory effort and provides further rationale for strategic decisions regarding selection of methodology, data collection, subject sampling, and data analysis. According to Creswell (2003), ontology is the claim researchers make regarding knowledge; epistemology is how individuals have arrived at that knowledge; and methodology is the process of studying it. To this end, my research scaffolding is designed with an ontological view that assumes the phenomenon being studied is complex where contingencies are inevitable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I agree with Crotty's (1998) assertion "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon

human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). I believe the manner in which humans respond to the social environment is based on their own perceptions and significantly affects future actions and interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These ontological assumptions helped to emphasize the lived experiences and worldview of the student respondents and further aligned my epistemological leanings with this study.

### **Epistemology**

A fundamental belief motivating this project evolved from my own affiliation with a constructivist disposition. Whereas an objectivist view espouses knowledge exists in objects independent from consciousness and experience, my constructivist epistemology asserts knowledge is a product of the social context where meaning evolves from interactions with others (Crotty, 1998). Further support for constructivism is evident in the aim of this project to explore the way in which student participants create and understand meaning through their own social constructions (Charmaz, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989) a study steeped in constructivism asserts:

- the researcher-respondent relationship is subjective, interactive, and interdependent
- reality is multiple, complex, and not easily quantifiable
- the values of the researcher, respondents, research site, and underlying theory undergird all aspects of the research
- the research product is context specific (p.83)

A constructivist approach aspires to both discover and describe the unique nature of those being investigated (Briodo & Manninig, 2002). This epistemological leaning was fitting for my study and structurally placed the student voice at the center of the discovery. The rich description of the participant responses guided my analysis of the data. To prepare for my constructivist disposition as the investigator, I reflected on how I personally make meaning (Crotty, 1998) and acknowledged that the student participants would likely convey multiple meanings surrounding the same issue (Creswell, 2009). The intentionality of design helped guide this interactive experience with an emphasis placed on the evolving story told by the participants. I strove to accurately shed light on how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Philosophical Tenets**

The constructivist epistemology enabled me to navigate this research project with an open-minded approach to discovery. Broido and Manning (2002) suggest the interactive relationship between constructivist researcher and respondent is subjective and guiding where multiple realities may emerge creating complexity not easily measured. Even further, the context specific interpretation is influenced by the values of all involved. To best explore these interpretive worldviews I needed to actively engage respondents in the constructivist foundations of shared history, language, and actions (Locke, 2001). My research sought to explore the phenomenon surrounding how students experience and understand the university presidency.

As previously suggested, my research related philosophical persuasions and helped me construct the framework in which the study is designed (Broido & Manning, 2002; Charmaz, 2006; Crotty, 1998). This investigation is founded on pragmatic



undertones with belief that meaning is created through action and interaction. As one who aligns with pragmatism, I assumed social knowledge is an accumulation of experiences that combine to form a foundation for the continued evolution of thought and societal trajectory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I believe truth is what individuals recognize as a current worldview and new knowledge becomes useful in changing and further developing what was previously recognized as reality. My goal was to get to the essence of how students experience and understand the university presidency. The voice of the student respondents helped to navigate this truth.

### **Qualitative Discovery**

With a determined constructivist epistemology, the next step to developing my research framework was subscribing to a qualitative approach. This directed my research to focus in on the emotional responses and perceptions of the participants rather than more quantifiable variables. Whereas quantitative research evolved from earlier postpositive thinking and seeks to define knowledge through cause and effect perspectives, qualitative research has emerged more recently with links to a constructivist view (Creswell, 2003). This assertion claims meaning is developed both socially and historically with individual experience holding a capacity for multiple subjective interpretations. Although research involving college students and the university environment has often focused a quantitative lens on generalization and statistical predictability (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), the inductive approach of this study sought to explain the complexity of a social phenomenon through defining patterns in the emergence of findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Through in-depth conversation

between the researcher and the participants the students were afforded an opportunity to revisit their experiences and construct meaning through dialogue.

Unlike a more objectivist view where quantitative meaning is independent from consciousness and experience (Crotty, 1998), my interpretive data emerged and was collected through open ended inquiry and then analyzed in an evolving manner that required me, as the researcher, to actively participate in the explanation of social meaning (Creswell, 2007). This investigative process of discovery was designed to develop a richly detailed analysis that embodied student understanding of the university presidency. While quantitative methodologies seek precise measurement to support the broad generalization of results and study replication (Glass & Hopkins, 1996), my qualitative research more applicably explored the depth of the phenomena to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the idiosyncrasies involved with this phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The flexibility associated with this effort enabled me, as the primary data collection instrument, to probe for deeper meaning through continued dialogue with the student respondents (Creswell, 2003).

### **Phenomenology**

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define methodology as “a way of thinking about and studying social reality” (p. 3) while method is “a set of procedures and techniques for gathering and analyzing data” (p. 3). I was deliberate in choosing a research methodology that best aligned with my research interest. A phenomenological inquiry “is an attempt to deal with inner experiences unprobed in everyday life” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). I chose this method to help identify meaning behind the human experience as it related to a

phenomenon or notable collective occurrence (Creswell, 2009). The phenomenon of interest was how students experience and understand the university presidency.

The modern phenomenological method is credited to German philosopher and mathematician, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) whose work evolved during the ideological turmoil following World War I. Husserl advocated through his research that objects exist independently and that observations and experiences involving these objects are reliable suggesting an individual's perceptions are accurate representations of their consciousness (Fouche, 1993). The phenomenological foundation of this study "aims at attaining a profound understanding of the nature or meaning of our daily experiences (Crotty, 1998, p. 25). Other researchers dedicated to furthering this method who appear in the literature include Martin Heidegger, Alfred Schultz, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Husserl's work titled *Logical Investigations* was republished in 1970 and is considered the primary doctrine for the movement (Crotty, 1998). Vandenberg (1997) suggests the effort of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty significantly popularized Husserl's earlier influence.

Phenomenology is used extensively in research emanating from sociology, psychology, health sciences, and education (Creswell, 1998). Through this method I was "interested in showing how complex meanings are built out of simple units of direct experience" (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). I chose phenomenology to help lead a comprehensive account of lived experiences from which "general or universal meanings are derived" (Creswell, 1998, p. 53). After I determined a phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study, the following suggestions as outlined by Creswell (2007) and derived from Moustakas (1994) were included in the design and served as a procedural

map for my project which explored how students experience and understand the university presidency:

- a phenomenon of interest to study is identified
- the researcher recognizes and specifies the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology
- data are collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon
- the participants are asked two broad, general questions (Moustakas , 1994):  
what have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? what context or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?
- data analysis occurs through organized “clusters of meaning” and from these clusters evolves both textural and structural descriptions of the experience which leads to a composite description that presents the “essence” of the phenomenon (Creswell 2007, pp. 60-62)

### **Sampling, Subjects, Access, and Setting**

I purposefully chose the criterion for selecting research sites as a result of my future interest in serving as a president at a university with matching demographics. I gravitated towards the unique educational offering inherent to a small public university and believed the personal propensity of the institution’s size enabled presidential leadership to play an integral part in organizational mission and achievement. Additional consideration was used for determining this type of site based on my experience working at a small public university where interaction between president and students was somewhat common. Criterion used for selecting research sites included choosing

universities where the president has served in that capacity for at least five consecutive years. These variables each promoted increased consistency regarding student and president interaction and ultimately led to the selection of two small sized, public, four year, and primarily undergraduate teaching universities in the Midwest for research sites to explore how students experience and understand the university presidency.

I investigated the phenomenon through exploring the lived experiences of the student respondents as they related to my research questions. I purposefully created a sample size based on specific criterion, project do-ability, and to thoroughly seek saturation of developing ideas. Progressively moving through a sample can help with conceptual clarity until no additional concepts surface (Locke, 2001). Appropriate saturation occurs when “no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category, the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions, and the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 212). The total sample for this study could have involved up to 16 university student participants chosen from two comparably small sized, public, four year, and primarily undergraduate teaching universities in the Midwest. Appropriate approval was obtained from the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board and at both institutions used as data collection locations (Appendix A). Both sites had a designated Institutional Review process for approving research conducted at their university. As a professional courtesy, I notified the President’s office (Appendix B) and Student Affairs department (Appendix C) at each of the selected locations. If a response was not received within seven days, a follow up phone call occurred utilizing the key points from the previous email as a script for the request.

Researchers in a qualitative design seek interpretive information from a participant sample as small as one individual and up to everyone within the organization (McNabb, 2002). Boyd (2001) suggests research saturation can typically be attained with two to 10 participants. Creswell (1998) recommends a phenomenological study involve “long interviews with up to 10 people” (p. 65). Based on my study’s single occurrence face to face interview design, I planned to start with an approximate sample of 10 participants. Once the initial sample was determined, I was prepared to broaden the sample up to 16 students if necessary to further clarify emerging data until informational saturation had occurred (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The welfare of study participants guided all stages of this project. Participants received and acknowledged by signature a document which explained both the scope of the project and outlined avenues available to them should they ever feel harmed by the process. The document indicated a participant’s ability to cease involvement without any recourse. As the researcher, I abided by a strict code of confidentiality and maintained data in a lock protected environment. Participant information was coded with a participant chosen pseudonym from the onset of the project and did not represent any other identifiers from that point on. Ethical principles linked to scholarly discovery through autonomy, beneficence, and justice helped promote trustworthiness of process and guide my subjective efforts throughout every aspect of the study.

Again, the total sample for my phenomenological study was comprised of up to 16 students from two research locations. The addition of criterion sampling, as suggested by Creswell (2007), helped further focus my subject population and further promote the probability of student and president interactivity. Three criterion were utilized to

determine if students qualified to be selected as respondents for the research. I included only participants who: (a) had completed four or more consecutive semesters at the university they were currently enrolled; (b) were involved in student organizations, intramural sports, campus governance, residence life activities, or other university functions; and (c) indicated on the demographic questionnaire they had experienced, at minimum, occasional interactions with their university president. Subscribing to Astin's (1984) assertion that involved students tend to express a greater connection to the institution, the first two criterion enhanced the probability that student respondents had some exposure to the university presidency and subsequently developed some understanding of the position. Five additional considerations were utilized to express a balanced blend of both student demographics and experience as the sample group was chosen. These included academic major, sex, age, citizenship, and racial/ethnic identification.

I first utilized a purposeful sampling strategy to select organizationally involved student respondents. This strategy attempted to best develop a sample where multiple perspectives would offer both depth and diversity (Creswell, 2007) and where selected respondents were likely to provide information relative to the phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2005). It had been my professional experience that involved students at a small university had a greater likelihood of interaction with organizational governance and perhaps had increased exposure to experiencing the presidency. The students of interest were involved with activities such as student government, student activities, clubs and organizations, residential life, intramurals, and other extracurricular activities. My hope was to discover students who could speak to their understanding of the university

presidency. As previously suggested, involved third year and beyond students were deemed to be more likely to have formulated some meaning surrounding the leadership position from their college experience.

I next chose a modified snowball sampling effort to further connect with potential participants. A selected student affairs administrator at each research location was asked to forward a promotional email (Appendix D) to potential student participants. This was directed to students whom they observed as actively involved with university sponsored extracurricular activities. Students receiving the email were asked within the text to forward the information on to other potential students who met the criterion.

Additionally, I asked that a flyer (Appendix E) be posted around campus encouraging interested students to participate. My email message and flyer outlined the scope and purpose of the investigation and directed students to a brief online demographic questionnaire (Appendix F) through the software questionnaire tool Secure Survey. The online survey was managed through the Western Michigan University Information Technology Department. Data was housed securely on the university server and was then deleted at my request following recovery of the information. This preliminary questionnaire was used as a screening device to determine participation. The online questionnaire included a statement informing respondents of their assent to participate. I responded through email to those who completed the survey. For those who did not meet the criteria I thanked them for their time and informed them the study was bound by a narrow design and they did not match the demographic I was seeking (Appendix G). Those meeting the inclusionary criteria were emailed to arrange a convenient time for an interview (Appendix H). Participants received two reminders (four days prior and the day



before) of the interview arrangements (Appendix I). I scheduled interviews over a two day visitation to each of the research locations. Participants were provided with the informed consent (Appendix J) as a preliminary step to the interview which outlined the purpose, eligibility, involved commitment, discussion of risk and benefit, and associated confidentiality of the experience. The document was read over to assist with understanding and any questions were answered regarding the process. A signed authorization indicated acknowledgment of the conditions of participation. Prompt response to any subsequent participant inquiries was prioritized to ensure their engaged connectivity to the research process.

This study presented only minimal risk to those who partook because data was collected and communicated through the anonymity of a pseudonym. Selected participants invested time engaging in interviews and reviewing the subsequent transcripts which is also referred to as member checking. Respondents did not receive any form of payment or service as compensation for their involvement with the research. Participants may have benefited knowing they were contributing to a body of knowledge that further informed concepts linked to the university student experience and presidential leadership. All participant identifiers and responses were protected with the strictest level of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were immediately applied at the time of consent to replace personal identifiers and respondents were required to submit subsequent information under the chosen cryptogram. All data was stored for at least three years in a locked environment in the principal investigator's office. Documents linking specific participant information to chosen pseudonyms was securely stored in a separate file and only reviewed by the designated investigators. Data collected from individual

respondents was reported in either summary format or their fictitious name if applied as a direct quote.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data collection for this project occurred through interviews designed to explore the lived experiences of students who had interacted with a university president. Participants were asked to attend an interview scheduled for approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviewing is a particularly effective technique for collecting data about the lived experience of participants (Van den Berg, 2005). Interviews were conducted with a semi-structured approach reflecting on the framework presented in the literature. Although I had prepared open-ended interview questions with prompts to guide the experience (Appendix K), exact wording and order remained flexible to best navigate the interactive experience with each respondent (Merriam, 1998). I field tested the survey protocol with five Western Michigan University students to ensure clarity with my selected questions. If necessary, I was prepared to return to HSIRB with any significant changes to the inquiry.

Interview times and dates were determined through the online scheduling tool Doodle.com to best establish student availability and convenience. The setting for interviews was a confidential environment where students felt safe sharing without distraction. Interviews were audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. To ensure accuracy, participants were provided with an electronic copy of their transcribed interview and asked to verify correctness, clarify any discrepancies, and further remark on the inquiry.

## **Data Analysis Process and Procedures**

Colazzi's (1978) phenomenology data analysis model highlights conceptual patterns and describes the process I chose as I prepared for my investigation. The following steps guided my plan for data analysis:

1. The researcher thoroughly reads and rereads the transcribed interviews to identify with the data and to acquire a sense of each individual and his or her background and experiences.
2. From the transcripts the researcher identifies significant statements which pertain directly to the proposed phenomenon.
3. The researcher develops interpretive meanings of each of the significant statements. The researcher rereads the research protocols to ensure the original description is evident in the interpretive meanings.
4. The interpretive meanings are arranged into clusters, which allow themes to emerge. The researcher seeks validation, avoids repetitive themes, and notes any discrepancies during this process.
5. The themes are then integrated into an exhaustive description. The researcher also refers the theme clusters back to the protocols to substantiate them.
6. The researcher produces a concise statement of the exhaustive description and provides a fundamental statement of identification also referred to as the overall essence of the experience.
7. The reduced statement of the exhaustive description is presented to the study's participants in order to verify the conclusions and the development

of the essence statement. If discrepancies are noted, the researcher should go back through the significant statements, interpretive meanings, and themes in order to address the stated concerns. (pp.48-71)

It was imperative that as the researcher I immersed myself in the data by repetitiously reading over the material as I prepared for analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). My data collection, note-taking, coding and memoing transpired simultaneously from the onset of the research and a sorting process facilitated project organization to achieve categorical saturation (Locke, 2001). McNabb (2002) suggests developing a map for facilitating qualitative analysis which influenced my early thinking about data collection through the phenomenological approach. Subscribing to this method, the following phases guided my early data examination for this study prior to moving into two phases of clustering and coding. First, I reflected on the data by stepping back to ponder the big picture as I reviewed the dialogue and then moved fully into reading all material from start to finish. The next step of questioning required me to begin making notes of interest as I reread the material in order to begin the development of a structured interaction with the data. As previously mentioned, my study was guided by a phenomenological framework. Firmly based in qualitative research, phenomenology provided me an avenue for discovering the lived experiences of the student respondents. From these stories, I searched for comparisons in how the participants experienced the phenomenon; as meaning ultimately evolved from relationships in the data (Colaizzi, 1978).

Data collected through the interview protocol provided a rich depiction of how students understand the university presidency. Hycner's (1999) data analysis process

recommended I first chronologically bracket the commentary and begin phenomenological reduction. The data reduction process began with open coding and interpretive memoing where I suggested identifying words that best represented emerging topics that might serve to form categories of meaning. This helped me determine direction for further analysis. Next, I identified the salient points that developed within the data to further shape the evolution of core topics. The following phase again required coding and memoing but was more focused as I justified my evolving analysis through connecting directly to the data for the purpose of confirming and revising emerging topics and redirecting those ideas to meaning units. The final stage required me to think deeply about the evolving categories and search for alternative understanding prior to converting the emergent categories into thematic units and using the themes to compose my descriptive report. Creswell (2007) suggested researchers search for patterns by “pulling the data apart and putting them back together in more meaningful ways” (p. 163). Through this strategic puzzling, I hoped to discover how students experience and understand the university presidency. Reaching the final stage of confirmed themes involved summarizing, validating, if necessary, modifying ideas prior to settling on the general and unique themes to make the composite summary.

### **Credibility and Reliability**

Credibility is imperative to qualitative research ensuring participant representation is accurately identified and depicted (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Creswell (2007) suggests numerous paths can lead to effective validation for researchers who seek parallel approaches. My study embodied four strategies designed to promote credibility and enable future verification. Peer review of the methods and analysis occurred

simultaneously throughout the research process and provided me with balanced considerations as I strove for accurate interpretation of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Discussions and resulting commentary from my advisor, dissertation committee members, fellow PhD. students, and colleagues in higher education were noted and compiled for further reflection. Member checking occurred to allow participants to check transcripts for inconsistencies and to serve as a platform for further clarification. This process helps investigators “check their own subjectivity and ensure the trustworthiness of their findings” (Jones, 2002, p. 469). Lastly, findings were communicated through thick-rich descriptions. The unique voice of the student participants was at the core of my research process and allows future researchers to determine applicable transferability of findings to other settings (Creswell, 1998). My hope was to provide an accurate portrayal of how students experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Summary**

In Chapter Three I described my intentionality in determining every aspect of the research design. My ontological, epistemological and philosophical beliefs were described to reveal my prevailing association to suggest meaning is developed through social contexts and truth is experienced through a current worldview. I align with constructivist and pragmatic leanings. I justified my decision to embrace a qualitative discovery navigated by a phenomenological method which provides for research focused on the lived experiences of the student participants. My choice in conducting interviews was discussed as an appropriate course for collecting data with several important considerations outlined as steps to ensure accuracy and validity. A spreadsheet assisted me in tracking information relating to research participation (Appendix O).

Again, at the approval stage of my project, a total of up to 16 involved students with more than four consecutive semesters at their current university could be selected to take part in the research. Students were chosen from two small public universities in the Midwest where the president had served in their current position for five years or more. The purposeful decisions surrounding the selected sample, subjects, access, and setting were outlined to demonstrate a focus for the project which aligned with my professional interests and also aspires to contribute to the empirical knowledge base. The wellbeing of the participants and integrity of process guided this dissertation effort. The process and procedures utilized to analyze the data were presented in detail for later review and possible research duplication. Lastly, in Chapter Three I discussed the strategies I used to promote both credibility and reliability as I explored how students experience and understand the university presidency.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This study explored how students understand and experience the president in a university setting. A void in previous research and literature explaining this phenomenon compelled my interest in investigating the student perspective regarding the interactivity between these two groups. Studying the underpinnings of how college students experience and understand the university presidency revealed the importance students placed on interactions with their president. A qualitative framework was used to design my study. Methods common to phenomenological research guided data collection and analysis. The results are a culmination of the students' voices and share a deep perspective into their lived experiences. To study how students experience and understand the university presidency, I established my research framework based on two primary questions:

1. How do students experience and understand the university presidency?
2. How does this experience and understanding of the university presidency inform or shape the college experience for students?

Chapter Four presents findings that evolved from data collected through interviewing a total sample of 10 involved students selected from two small public universities in the Midwest. The interview protocol provided a venue for rich depiction of how students experience and understand the university presidency. Careful analysis of the interview transcriptions allowed me to identify word and thought patterns which set the stage for later theme emersion (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). After reading each transcription multiple times, I entered into phenomenological reduction by delineating



units of meaning. This was accomplished by noting patterns in the way student participants described experiencing and understanding their university president. I then clustered the meanings to support the formation of themes. Ultimately, 12 clustered meanings which I termed “data buckets” developed from this effort and later led to the emergence of three themes.

### **Summary of Participants**

The results for my phenomenological study developed through data collected from 10 face-to-face interviews with involved students attending two small public Midwestern universities. Criterion sampling helped focus the population for my study and further promoted the probability of reaching students who had interaction with their president. Strategically, I only included participants who: (a) had completed four or more consecutive semesters at the university where they were currently enrolled; (b) were involved in student organizations, intramural sports, campus governance, residence life activities, or other university functions; and (c) indicated on the demographic questionnaire they had experienced, at minimum, occasional interactions with the university president.

The sample of five males and five females ranging in age from 19 to 22 proved to be a blend of both demographics and student experience. Two of the participants identified with being Black and eight identified with being White. None of the participants shared the same academic major which provided for diverse perspectives. Six of the participants meeting the study criteria were seniors and four were juniors. As previously suggested, involved students express a greater connection to the institution (Astin, 1984). The sample was well represented by involved students with a diverse range

of extracurricular participation including representation of Greek life, student government, academic affiliated organizations, and student activities. A total of 43 different student organizations were noted as participants detailed their involvement. The selected frequency data and participant demographics are depicted in *Figure 2*.

Variable		n
Age		
	19	1
	20	2
	21	5
	22	2
Sex		
	Female	5
	Male	5
Racial/Ethnic Category		
	White/Caucasian	8
	Black or African American	2
Academic Class Status		
	Junior	4
	Senior	6
Campus Activity/Organization Combined Involvement		
	Academic Organizations	18
	University Governance Organizations	11
	Honorary Organizations	8
	Student Activity Organizations	9
	Student Government Organizations	5
	Greek Organizations	3

*Figure 2.* Participant Data Frequency

### **Participant Narratives**

Qualitative inquiry allowed me the opportunity to engage with these involved students as I investigated the phenomenon surrounding how they experience and understand their university president. I discovered students who could speak to their lived experiences with the presidency. The following descriptions are designed to help the

reader feel the essence of their stories. One of the secondary interview questions I asked the students was what advice they would provide university presidents if given the opportunity. Their responses end each participant description and are offered as a representation of their voice.

Benjamin Terrell is a 22 year old Black male majoring in Public Relations. He is in his senior year and his involvement includes both student government and academic organizations. He self-identifies as a (7) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. He has aspirations of success and looks at his involvement as a student leader as the conduit for his future professional interests. He claims his president knows his name from being involved on campus. He sees the president frequently around campus and asserts it is easy to get in contact with him if necessary. He feels interactions with his president are meaningful and beneficial and suggests being part of the process is awesome for a student. He believes his president relies on involved students to accomplish things and then only steps in if necessary. He values the feeling of trust his president has in the involved students. He asserts it is important for students to have a relationship with their university leader and thinks presidents should demonstrate a fun demeanor. He believes the president is the chief representative of his university and has the important role of designating action. He values the advice his president provided him regarding the importance of delegating responsibilities to others while also offering continued opportunity for future consultation. He suggests maintaining a good rapport with students and focusing on visibility are the two most important considerations for presidents. Much of Benjamin

Terrell's commentary advocates from the premise that student leaders are an important resource for presidents. He asserts:

With student leadership a lot of growth happens. I would say that student leaders work very hard. We always have something to say and we always have input. When you're planning things we are a great source of information. Student leaders know your target population and what they want.

Calvin Hobbes is a 21 year old White male majoring in Sociology. He is in his senior year and his involvement includes student government, academic organizations, and social justice affiliations. He self-identifies as having a moderate level of interaction (5) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. He is an involved student who describes feeling purpose in advocating on behalf of others. This passion often finds him interacting with his president. He describes his president as a down to earth, caring individual and values presidential open forums as a venue for ideas to be heard. He suggests his president has impacted him in a positive way and he appreciates the information exchange he experiences relating to the direction of his university. He regularly observes his president making an effort to connect with people and highlights his leader's effort to listen and acclimate to the views and concerns of students and staff. The characteristics he most values in a president include a thick skin, desire to compromise, and the ability to understand an opposing view. He suggests that having his opinions heard by his president has helped him to grow as a student leader. The advocacy for providing opportunity for student input was a reoccurring theme in his commentary. Calvin Hobbes offers advice to presidents:

Stay connected with the individual faculty and students. Try and keep a view on the big picture of what's happening but also on the small details. A lot of the responsibilities of the president gives you the ability to effect students at large but there's a lot of needs that smaller student groups have that can be met. Some general advice is to keep an open door policy, to make sure that you're available to hear feedback from different people because feedback should be able to go to the top at some level.

Charlotte Erickson is 20 year old White female majoring in Political Science. She is in her junior year and her involvement includes academic organizations, honor societies, and student life activities. She self-identifies as a (5) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. She attributes her personal development to campus involvement which also serves as a source of excitement in her life. She is passionate about her school and believes her president's caring and approachable nature makes the campus experience easier for students. She looks at her president as a role model and contends he inspires her leadership. She describes feeling important when her president talks to her. She is impressed with her president's intelligence and values seeing him regularly around campus, noting that time together in an informal setting is great for students. She most connects with the president's approachability and dependable nature suggesting he does what he promises. She believes presidents should be good listeners and successful at resolving problems, furthering that students like to voice their concerns and have the issues addressed directly. She believes her president represents the students and their interests as important decisions are being made. She suggests her president has made her

feel important by talking to her and showing he cares. Charlotte Erickson suggests presidents should look to students for clues to sustaining organizational achievement. She advocates:

I think the most important thing is to look to the student side. I'd tell them that one of their responsibilities is to listen to the students and figure out the problems they are having or even the good things they think because then you can repeat those events or those policies.

Graham Dempsey is a 21 year old White male majoring in Exercise Science. He is in his senior year and involved with residence life, academic organizations, and honor societies. He self-identifies as a (9) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. He is an involved student who loves his university and greatly values informal interactions with his president. He differentiates between a perceived boring formal "suit" type perception that other leaders have and his president's effort to be involved with everything. Observing his president say hi to students in the halls impresses him and he believes it creates a personable culture for his university. He describes the campus community as lucky to benefit from his president's leadership style. He values his president providing him with feedback and suggests these shared interactions help him to feel safe and comfortable and further promote campus feeling like home. He expects his president to make good decisions and keep the university moving forward. The meaningful interactions he has with his president are described as most important and he suggests they can make a real difference in a student's college experience. Graham Dempsey further encourages presidents to focus on the less involved crowd. He advises:

The kids that don't get out or aren't involved, have just as much to offer – they just might not be as outgoing. So maybe more of the focus on the kids who aren't involved needs to happen from the president's office. If there is a connection from the top level to the bottom level, retention rates might improve. I think that you will find uninvolved students in different places. As far as sporting events and different events, just being able to make connections outside of formal events.

Justin Time is a 19 year old White male majoring in Biochemistry. He is in his junior year and his involvement includes student government, residence life, and school spirit activities. He self-identifies as a (9) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. He glows enthusiasm when speaking of his involvement as a student leader at the university he believes to be the best. He sought out leadership opportunities in college to further develop his skills and interests. He describes his president as outgoing and easy to talk to and suggests he embodies the spirit of his university. He expects his president to be personable, informative, and be able to communicate on numerous levels. He believes the president's high level of involvement with students leads others to readily recognize him at events and around campus. He suggests it is very easy to get in and talk to his president. He values the collaborative relationship his president has with student organizations. His personal relationship with his president makes him feel important, and the president on several occasions has provided him information and advice. He feels that if students are involved and have a personal relationship with their president that they are more likely to stay enrolled. He believes his president supports school spirit by being visible around campus and by demonstrating a willingness to participate in different events. Justin Time

speaks to the value associated with presidents connecting with their students in a meaningful way. He advocates:

I want them to know that students, especially students in leadership positions, really do appreciate when you give them the time of day to talk about anything. I think that when you are reaching out to students, it shouldn't only be about accomplishing things; it should also be about getting to know them. That helps build those relationships. Try and know as many students' names as possible.

Katie is a 21 year old White female majoring in Accountancy. She is a junior and her involvement includes Greek Life, academic organizations, and student life activities. She self-identifies as a (5) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. She is an involved student who enjoys coordinating student activities. Her enthusiasm shines as she describes her experiences planning events and seeing fellow students enjoy and benefit from her effort. She depicts her president as a fun, likeable, easy-going person who has passion for her school and encourages students to love their university. She values that her president demonstrates signs of recognizing her in passing. While she is unsure of the president's responsibilities, she expects him to be confident in his decisions, inclusive, and recognizable. The president's goals and vision are important to her personally and she believes he facilitates these both for the students and for the university. Katie values knowing that she shares a similar passion for her school and suggests to presidents:

I think that anyone is involved because they like it and they are happy doing it. I don't think anyone that is involved is in it for themselves. True leaders love it. Know that we are passionate about the school, just like you are. I think to be a



university president you have to enjoy the school you are working at and share that same passion with a student leader.

Lola Peppers is a 21 year old White female majoring in Respiratory Care. She is a senior and her involvement includes student government and academic organizations. She self-identifies as a (5) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. She is an involved student that responds to experience in direct manner. Her early involvement with extracurricular activities compelled her to contribute to her university through student leadership. She contends although her interaction with her president is somewhat minimal, it is most likely more than most students. She describes her president as friendly but seemingly a little distracted. She conveys disappointment when she suggests the president has never remembered her name and recalls being embarrassed when she held an event in her president's honor and he didn't recognize her. It is most important to her that students feel like they are heard by their president. She believes the ability to say the president has reached out to you in some way is important to most students. She contends presidential interaction has the potential to make students feel good and encourage them to get involved. Lola Pepper's advice to presidents offers qualifying sentiment to the importance associated with leaders knowing their constituency. She suggests:

I would want presidents to remember that they wouldn't be there without the students and their job should be mostly about making sure you know who they are, especially the leaders on campus because it is very important that you acknowledge their work and understand where they're coming from no matter what organization it is or if it is different viewpoint from yours. Without them

they wouldn't have a job in the first place and that is something I firmly believe in.

Pink Disney is a 20 year old Black female majoring in Psychology. She is in her junior year and her involvement includes athletics, residence life, school spirit activities, and academic organizations. She self-identifies as a (7) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. She is very involved on campus and suggests involvement is the fuel that keeps her going. She seems charged with passion and confidence when she describes the love she has for her university. She loves sports and is a motivated athlete seeking additional balance through being involved with other activities. Self reportedly, she enjoys being “in the know” and offers that being involved motivates her and gives her purpose. She describes her president as laid back, non-opinionated, and very approachable. She values that he knows most of the student leaders on a first name basis and often sees him around campus giving high fives and hugs. She contends the personal face to face interaction between her president and fellow students means the most and suggests her president is approachable and genuinely cares. She once asked the president to attend a function and he, to her surprise and honor, offered his phone for her to check the date and input the event on his calendar. She appreciates how her president makes important decisions while listening to and seek opinions from others. The interaction with her president makes college feel like home, provides her with a feeling of importance, and helps her to feel connected. Pink Disney appreciates the connection she experiences with her president and advocates:

Interactions are important. Go to a sporting event and sit in the student section. When he comes to football games, he hangs out there. It's noticeable and makes you comfortable. Students feel like they made the right choice to come here because they know the person leading them.

Skip Valley is a 22 year old White male majoring in Theatre. He is in his senior year and his involvement includes school spirit activities, academic organizations, and honor societies. He self-identifies as having almost regular interaction (9) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale. Skip Valley is an outgoing advocate for his university with diversified participation as an involved student. He jovially describes his president as the coolest guy. He is continually impressed when his president walks by, greets him with hello, and remembers his name. The fact that his president remembers him is enduring and continues to come up in his commentary. Interaction with his president has made him proud to be a student at his university and he contends this has led to his increased involvement with campus. He believes the president sets a good example for other members of the university community by being a good listener and good care giver. He feels a president should be visible, kind, and understanding. He values his president's open office concept which puts the leadership front and center and not hidden away. It is the informal interactions between presidents and students that he advocates are most important. His comments often center on elevated support for the casual encounters with his president. He suggests:

Although I think from a student perspective formal is important because he gives his speeches every semester, I think to all students informal ones are like a 10. It is a big thing for us to know he walks the same halls.

Tracy is a 21 year old White female majoring in Physical Education. She is in her junior year and her involvement includes residence life, school spirit activities, academic organizations, and honor societies. She self-identifies as a (9) on the Presidential Interaction Likert Scale that ranged from (1) *no interaction* to (10) *regular interaction*. Her involvement distinguishes her as a student leader. The deep pride she has in her university is conveyed through her heartfelt remarks. She views her president as a role model describing him as a big kid. She believes her president cares about students and is viewed by many as a friend and mentor who fits in well. She suggests that when a president shares their goals that it helps students align and develop their own goals. Tracy values her president's approachability, kindness, dedication, genuine interest, and understanding. Her observation of his compassion is a reoccurring theme in her commentary. The interactions she has with her president mean a great deal to her and she finds it inspiring that a person with such an important role can interact on such a relatable level. She shares stories of her president randomly offering students congratulations for their accomplishments and she believes this leaves a lasting impression. Her president has influenced her view on leadership and she aspires to someday be a university president. Tracy suggests students do have interest in university function and encourages presidents to acclimate to student thinking. She supports her assertion by encouraging the development and dissemination of simplified organizational business updates. She advocates that presidents:

Need to know the mindset of the students. I don't know if there is an easy way to do that but I know that it is the most important part because it is about the students. We're the ones paying and we're the ones keeping the university going.

I wish there was a simple way to make all the professional jumble into a more understandable read. I think making the business aspect of the presidency understandable. The short and sweet version of the complicated strategic plan. And if it is presented in a way that is simple I think that students would respond better and be involved. I think that there is a lot that students don't know about in the business side and it would be cool for them to see. I think if a lot more was presented to students as goals it will give the students more connection because they will feel more included in the decision making process.

### **Emerging Themes**

Engaging with the data in a meaningful way was a calculated effort. As suggested by Richards (2009) striving for quality in data records occurred simultaneously throughout the collection and analysis focusing in on accuracy, application of context, depth of description, usefulness, and a reflexive connection to the data. Saldana (2013) presents an in-depth description of coding processes utilized in qualitative research. This manual served as a planning tool as I mapped out my plan for analysis. With my inquiry based on an ontological foundation with interest in the lived experiences of the participants, I involved four methods for my initial coding cycle: attribute coding, emotion coding, value coding, and narrative coding (Saldana, 2013). Each coding method resulted in a different look at the data. Attribute coding organized data through the separate research sites and the manner in which the participants responded to the initial Presidential Interaction Likert Scale found on the demographic questionnaire. Emotion coding linked me back to my field notes where I reviewed and linked observed sentiments and reactions noted during the interviews. Value coding combined similarities

in belief statements and helped me to think about and formulate the verbiage used for clustering the data. The final first cycle effort was narrative coding which enabled me to step back and review the entirety involving each participant's story in order to fully capture the essence of the data.

Acclimating to the non-linear nature of this qualitative research occurred through an ongoing process of negotiating feedback loops (Richards, 2009). This process found me immersed in the data, learning and then clustering concepts, seeking feedback from others, revisiting the data, revising the clustering, and then repeating the process often several times over. Memoing helped me make sense of the input I was getting and directed my focus with the coding process. I utilized two second cycle coding methods outlined in Saldana (2013): pattern coding and focused coding. Pattern coding encouraged me to reexamine the initial codes to identify patterns and relationships which then led to assigning category clusters or data bucket labels. I then vetted the developing data composition through focused coding and identified both significance and frequency of the codes renegotiating the clusters into a more succinct representation of the data that captured the integrity of the students' experience and understanding of the university presidency.

### **Data Coding**

Through the process of analysis, I identified 291 statements as significant to the study. I repeatedly reviewed the initial groupings of meaning through the context of the participant's complete response to my research questions. This helped me cross reference overall meaning with the developing clusters. These groupings were originally organized into 12 coded clusters: Approachability, Leadership, Visibility, Empowerment, Pride,

Informed, Recognition, Involved, Interaction, Care, Home, and Other. The clustered response frequency from the original coded clusters is presented in *Figure 3*. Response frequency charts were updated with each new cycle of coding and cross referenced as the ideas and later themes emerged.

		<i>Participant</i>										
		<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	
												<i>totals</i>
<i>Coded Cluster</i>	Interaction	6	10	7	8	12	6	7	12	10	5	83
	Leadership	7	6	5	4	6	7	2	7	7	10	61
	Involved	5	5	4	3	4	2	2	3	2	1	31
	Visibility	5	2	3	5	3	2	5	1	0	3	29
	Empowerment	7	3	2	0	6	3	1	3	1	1	27
	Approachability	2	5	1	1	4	1	1	0	0	0	15
	Pride	2	4	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	12
	Informed	1	0	3	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	9
	Care	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	3	8
	Home	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	1	6
	Other	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	6
	Recognition	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	4

Participant Pseudonym Coding for Table 2  
 1-Benjamin Terrell 2-Charlotte Erickson 3-Graham Dempsey 4-Katie 5-Justin Time  
 6-Lola Peppers 7-Pink Disney 8-Tracy 9-Calvin Hobbes 10-Skip Valley

*Figure 3*. Clustered Response Frequency

As suggested previously, the data was further refined through numerous first and second cycle coding efforts. The developing code clusters continued to change as data was refined through a differing strategic lens. The primary 12 coded clusters were further negotiated into 7 data clusters each representing an evolving conglomerate of meaning. These included: Approachability, Leadership Compassion, Value in Visibility, Personal Empowerment, Pride for School, Informed, and Recognition. Ultimately, analysis led to

the emergence of three core themes describing the phenomenon of interest. The three themes that evolved through the data relating to how students experience and understand the university presidency were *value experiencing informal presidential encounters, understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision, and meaningful impact from presidential interaction.*

The first theme *value experiencing informal presidential encounters* encompasses the significance students place on informally interacting with their president. The essence of this theme relates to how students experience the university presidency. Value is placed on observing the president in informal settings throughout campus. Visibly seeing their president interact regularly with others provides students with an enduring image of leadership presence. Participants express appreciation for having a sense of knowing who their president is. Students suggest the shared informal interaction with their president leads to increased organizational knowledge and for some the basis of a cherished relationship.

The second theme *understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision* demonstrates what students believe to be important personal characteristics of their president and their perception of key presidential leadership responsibilities. The essence of this theme describes how students understand the university presidency. Participants comprehend their presidents as good listeners and diplomats. Students appreciate having access to their president and find comfort and confidence in reflecting on this availability. Participants suggest presidential leadership is best developed from compassion and vision. This is further defined by the students as their president's genuine concern for all and his propensity for motivating organizational achievement.



The third theme *meaningful impact from presidential interaction* describes the student impact experienced through the interactions with their university president. Participants value their president knowing them by name and describe interactions leave them feeling important. The essence of this theme is developed in the influence students experience from the phenomenon. Lasting memories are formed by the participants when their president recognizes their effort and accomplishments. Students are inspired to become more involved and describe feeling an enhanced connection to their university. Interaction between student and president can be impactful to a student's leadership aspirations. The following discussion is designed to clarify and support the findings of this study. Direct quotes from interview transcriptions are offered to best represent the lived experience of the participants and highlight, through their own voice, how they experience and understand the phenomenon.

### **Theme One: Value Experiencing Informal Presidential Encounters**

All participants described value associated with presidential interaction. Commentary and shared experiences regarding the formal and informal interactions the students had and observed others having with their president gave light to emerging categories for defining the themes. Respondents shared observations of their president around campus, in common areas, and at functions while also commenting on the meaning formed from this visibility. Lola Peppers added value to this theme by suggesting:

In addition to everything else that you are supposed to do as a president like go to meetings and travel, make sure you take time to be seen around campus and not

just in your office up in a corner somewhere. Make sure you're out on campus waving to students and remembering a few students' faces.

The involved students interviewed defined their observations of presidential interactions through offering personal examples of informal interactions, formal interactions, and recollections of their president connecting with other students. They described deep appreciation for presidential visibility. Numerous participant examples highlighted awareness of their president's presence around campus in an informal setting.

Charlotte Erickson offered:

I see him out and about on campus, which is another thing I like about him. Especially in the fall when it is nice outside and a lot of people are outside, I always see him out and about every week. He walks through the courtyard and says hi to people.

Participants also offered experiences relating to more formal interactions with their university president. Pink Disney offered additional commentary comparing formal to informal experiences by suggesting:

I think the informal interactions are more important. At formal events he has to interact and answer questions but informally just walking around or riding his bike around campus he doesn't have to talk to us but he does because he cares.

The involved students provided value statements relating to observations of their president connecting with other students. Tracy suggested:

He will joke around with the students like he is their best friend but then in other situations he will guide you through it like he's your mentor. He's very relatable and works to fit in on a college campus. My grandpa was joking around with me

and asked if I knew the president and I told him that everyone knows him and he kind of looked at me funny like not everyone knows their president. It was just the fact that he has a mindset of “I’m here for them” - real compassion.

Similar to other participants, Benjamin Terrell found presidential interaction important and contended:

That should be one of the primary things they set out to do. You wouldn’t believe how happy it makes people feel to say they interacted with the president. It’s very important to students to have the relationship with the leader of their school.

Student commentary described significant importance associated with presidential interaction. This is accounted for through participant stories relating to their appreciation for presidential visibility, value through access to the president, and promotion of pride leading to a home-like atmosphere. Additional support evolved through the students advocating an importance in knowing who their president is, interaction increasing knowledge, and some describing the president as a mentor or friend. Participants further defined interactions with their president through sharing a sense of importance associated with presidential visibility. Katie simply suggested “I appreciate seeing a president around and recognizing whom our president is.”

Many of the involved students interviewed suggested experiencing increased pride in their university leading to the campus feeling more like home. Tracy recollected:

His mindset of the culture of (University) of keeping it home and making it a home, not your home away from home but your actual home. I’ve gotten to the point where I visit my parents and then I come back home. The mindset he has of wanting students to feel connected and making sure that students that are

connected feel as connected as possible definitely has made it home for me and made it very hard for me to leave.

Pink Disney asserted presidents:

Should be seen. It is easier for him because we are such a small university but it would also be easy for him to just sit in his office and then go home. He doesn't have to hang around campus past 4:30 but he's there. He's approachable and he genuinely cares about the students and what is going on around campus. It makes it home.

The majority of the respondents discussed how interaction with the president increased their knowledge of both the university direction and organizational goals.

Calvin Hobbes pointed to the foundation of this sentiment when he stated "I expect them to lead the university and to give us a sense of vision and to guide us into future years."

Tracy further supported this sentiment when commenting on her president's top priorities: "Making the students aware of what the university's goals are because then it helps them aim their goals."

By placing value on closeness and connectivity, four of the involved students described their president as a friend and or mentor. Justin Time spoke to the benefit he got from having regular meetings with the president and offered:

He always has a lot of good advice for me. One of the things that was stressed in the meeting I just had with him was keeping him updated on what needed to be done to help the students. I really appreciate that.

The first theme *value experiencing informal presidential encounters* described how students experience the university presidency. It established that students appreciate

informally interacting with their president. Students also value knowing their president and observing him in informal settings throughout campus. Students describe feeling a sense of increased organizational knowledge resulting from informal interactions with their president. The second theme *understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision* will now demonstrate what students believe are important presidential characteristics and key leadership responsibilities. The theme captures how students understand the university presidency.

### **Theme Two: Understanding Presidential Leadership Through Compassion and Vision**

Descriptive themes emerged as participants discussed their lived experiences with how they perceived the leadership of their university president. The voice of the involved student gave life to and defined this theme. Ideas emerging through analysis included participant commentary regarding the personal characteristics of their president and their perception of key presidential leadership responsibilities. A consistent thread in most of the participant transcriptions focused in on presidential compassion. Examples were shared in stories and participants also expressed this as an important characteristic relating to successful presidential leadership. Katie captured this theme when she suggested:

If he is happy to work here and be here then why wouldn't the students be? I know he almost took a job somewhere else but he stayed because he loves it so why wouldn't the students love it? He's passionate about it and I think that has influenced me because I'm passionate about my school too.

Similarities were observed as the members described presidential characteristics they believed were most important. Students found it significant that their president

model likeable characteristics and be available. The manner in which participants described traits centered on presidents serving as a role model, being good listeners, offering diplomacy, being approachable and kind. A reoccurring statement suggested the involved students believed a university president should serve as a role model and share passion for their university. Charlotte Erickson directed this idea with her statement “I look at him as kind of a role model.”

Another characteristic participants described as important for university presidents was a genuine interest in listening to the needs of their students. Skip Valley offered “A president should be a really good listener and a really good care giver.” Charlotte Erickson added through example “He didn’t make me too nervous because I felt like he was actually listening. Then when he asked me questions he kind of smiled with it so I remember thinking he was a good guy.”

The majority of the participants also advocated that diplomacy, compromise, and follow through with student needs and suggestions were vital characteristics for presidential leadership. Calvin Hobbes suggested:

He cares about the university and the constituents. I think he is a very good president; he makes an effort to understand the faculty and student viewpoints. He has to be able to compromise and to see where different sides are coming from, even if they disagree. I think that’s definitely one of the more important factors, being able to understand at least where other sides are coming from and giving them professional treatment.

Participant commentary often centered on interest in their president being approachable, relatable, fun, and genuine. Students expressed pride in knowing they

could easily interact with their president. Benjamin Terrell asserted, “I want to be able to just go up to the office and say hi. I don’t want to deal like you have bodyguards around.” Pink Disney offered, “President (Name) is very laid back. He’s not opinionated at all and very approachable. You can always see him in the hallway and he talks to you or gives you a high-five or a hug.”

Comments pertaining to availability often were followed by more reflective participant feedback suggesting value was placed on presidential displays of caring, kindness, and compassion. Calvin Hobbes offered:

Just the sense that the administration does actually care about the campus community that we’re not just numbers on a spreadsheet. I know from experience with my colleagues at other universities that their administrators simply are not available to students. The things that he’s doing here really show what he is about.

Skip Valley ventured into a statement comparing his president to others:

He supports everybody on everything. I don’t know that much about him like what religion he is or anything but I know with his title and position he shows how much he cares about everyone. Not him but others might think they are stuck up because of their position but he always is very kind and very understanding. I imagine other university presidents, the more prestigious they are, the less personal they are.

Three ideas emerged as participants described their perception of key presidential leadership responsibilities: managing multiple roles, championing goals, and leading vision. Students perceived their president as a manager and visionary. Numerous participants described a view of their president managing dual roles and navigating

between university business and attention to the students. Lola Peppers conferred with her statement:

I understand that there is a lot more that goes on behind the scenes than what people know and that he, in addition to, running the university and making decisions for students, he also travels to political engagements and tries to fight for lower tuition rates and tries to get us financial help throughout the year.

Participant response echoed expectations relating to the need for their president to champion goals for their university. Katie furthered this idea by suggesting:

As a President, even as a small organization President, you have to have goals for the organization. The President is an overseer but they have to direct people and motivate the people below them to take the organization in a new direction. You need to have goals and something to strive for.

The majority of the involved students interviewed spoke to their president's demonstration of leadership through observations of delegation and motivating vision. Participants described recognizing that the president was responsible for organizational staff and resources. Some of the student stories involved observations of their president conveying vision through empowering other administrators or faculty. Calvin Hobbes furthered the idea with his assertion:

They have a responsibility not just to the board that oversees them but also to the community around it and the different constituencies within the university. They have a responsibility to really shape the vision of the university and to try to bring others into that and really improve the university in any way they can. One of the overriding goals should be to leave the university in a better place than where they



came into it, at the end of the day that should be something that's important to them and that should be how they measure the standard of their work.

Whereas the first theme *value experiencing informal presidential encounters* explained how students experience their presidents, the second theme *understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision* described how students understand the university presidency. Important characteristics included good listening, diplomacy, compassion, and vision. The students advocate that having easy access to the president is important. The third theme *meaningful impact from presidential interaction* describes the influence on students resulting from how they experience and understand the university presidency.

### **Theme Three: Meaningful Impact From Presidential Interaction**

All participants described some level of impact experienced through the interactions with their university president. Examples involving the impact of lasting impression are signified through members indicating value in the president knowing them, memories of the president congratulating them, shared interactions leaving students feeling important, and witnessing their president encouraging student involvement. Most student leaders expressed an enduring value in their president recognizing and remembering them with an emphasis on the president knowing their name. Justin Time reflected on the meaning behind the relationship and offered:

It makes me feel important as a student. But not only that, it makes me want to have other people get to know him. If you know somebody great, you don't want to be selfish and not let other people get to know them. Other people get to know how great of a president he is because he is so willing to have students get to

know him. Obviously all students have different opinions on things and different wants/needs and views on what can be done differently. If we expand that relationship to many different students, he is going to get a lot more input and that input can make a difference.

Tracy also provided a reflection that highlighted an experience where she perceived herself as the benefactor of her president's compassion. She understood the presidency as having potential for meaningful impact and recalled:

When I got the Student of the Year, he was the first email I got and it was at 1am on a Sunday. Tears. I was just totally shocked. It took me two days to respond to him because I couldn't put into words what to say or how to respond to him. Just amazed that he could take that time to put his thoughts together and that he stayed up until 1am just to tell me that he knew and congratulate me. That definitely had a big impact.

Justin Time experienced his president in a manner that enabled him to feel important. The happening also helped him come to the recognition that his president is dedicated to connecting with students. He offered:

Attending his white elephant gift exchange at his house. Not a lot of people can say they have been to the president's house. So I thought that was pretty cool. It made me feel important as a student and that my opinions are actually valued. We were there and he actually spilled some red pop on his white carpet and about five minutes after we got that all cleaned up, his wife spilled something. It was funny because it was obviously a really nice house and all us students were worried about breaking things or touching things and then they are the ones that make a

mess. To be invited to something like that really makes me feel like he wants these connections with students.

Lola Pepper described experiencing a shifting reality from feeling important to disappointed. She understood the capacity of the presidency to either inspire or discourage students. While she valued presidential interaction, she was disenchanted to recognize her president seemed disingenuous. She shared:

My strongest memory would be the first time I met him which was at a recruitment event. He shook my hand and asked me where I was from even though I was working it. He took an interest in me as a person and gave me a pat on the back for doing a good job and it really seemed like he appreciated we all were there. At first it was a really big impact because it made me feel important but then I saw him and again and he didn't remember me and then again he still didn't remember me and just walked by me and didn't recognize me at all. If you ask someone their name once or even twice, after that maybe even if you recognize their face, just acknowledge them and not ask their name again because it makes you look very intimidating and unapproachable.

Many participants described having an impactful memory that stemmed from their president offering recognition and congratulations. Tracy recalled "Everybody else just said thanks but he wrote a genuine thank you and was excited to tell me he was proud." Students shared other lasting impressions evolving from interaction with their president. Skip Valley reflected back on an impactful memory and offered:

He came to see it and he actually stayed for my presentation that was really cool he came back the next day when I went to semifinals. He actually wrote in a

Presidential letter that mentioned all three of us actually won first place in all the categories – so that he came to support me means a lot.

All the student leaders interviewed suggested that the relationship they had with their president left them feeling important. Adding additional support to the lasting impression university presidents can have on students, one of the participants asserted that experience interacting with a president can impact less involved students by encouraging them to get more involved. Lola Peppers suggested “I think that any engagement with the president and acknowledgement of how they work could get an uninvolved student involved. Even just talking to them and offering advice could motivate.”

Most of the involved students also described a personal influence evolving from presidential interaction. Members provided support for this impact through examples of their president personally inspiring their involvement, student leadership growth through having their opinions recognized, an enhanced connection to the university, and the relationship with the president impacting the student’s leadership aspirations. Charlotte Erickson described the inspiration that evolved from her relationship with her president:

It’s not like I’m star struck but (President) is really important and it is cool to tell people that I know him. It is a nice feeling and that way and I think it is important because I am really passionate about my school and when you can see the administrators and faculty that are also passionate about it and they’re out in the community and not just up in their office doing their own work, they actually care about the students and they’re around and approachable and it makes it so much nicer to be here.

Skip Valley made meaning of the experience he had interacting with his president and asserted:

It has made me more proud to be a student at (University) just seeing him and working with him through the stuff I have gotten more involved with admissions and I give tours and I tell the students what I think and that I have had all this interaction with the president.

Some of the participants suggested that connecting with the president and having their own opinions recognized or validated provided opportunity for involvement and growth as a student leader. Calvin Hobbes described this sentiment:

Me personally, it helps put me at ease because I know at the end of the day, regardless of what happens, that the student voice was heard. Kind of also in a professional way, it helps me grow as a leader by being able to talk with them and negotiate different things.

Lola Peppers reflected on connectivity between students and president and offered:

Being able to say you go to a university where you can say that the president has reached out to you in some way is very important to a lot of students. It makes them feel like students aren't just there to go to school, it makes them feel like they are encouraged to be involved and they're encouraged to get to know people higher up in the university.

Many of the involved students described an impactful difference in the college experience through interactions with their president suggesting the interactivity created

an enhanced connection to their organization. Justin Time talked to the sense of belonging and suggested:

In this position as a peer adviser, to get students to come back to make students feel like they belong and are safe, I feel like it is important for them to build connections with people that they feel are important. Obviously the president of the university is way up there. If students are able to build connections with these administrators it makes them feel like this is where they belong.

Charlotte Erickson furthered this sentiment and offered the following consideration:

Having close relationships with students is a good thing. It makes the students feel more passionate and more happy to be at the school. Anytime anyone asks me about (University) I tell them to come here because it is the best school ever. The closer I am with everyone on campus, including the president, that's just one more thing I could talk about.

Some of the participants suggested their relationship with the president influenced their leadership aspirations and practice. Charlotte Erickson reflected on her president's popularity and asserted "If they know him, they love him. If they don't know him, they've heard good things about him so I think he is a good role model and somewhat inspiring for my leadership." Benjamin Terrell defined his appreciation through discussing the impact of his relationship with the president:

When we sat down for my meeting last semester, it was my first meeting for my term. He gave me such great advice and he told me that he understood I like to do everything and be a part of everything but I had to learn how to designate. Looking back, that's where that came from. He helped me understand that I

couldn't do it all and I would have to designate and if things do get too rough he assured me I could always come to him.

The first two themes *value experiencing informal presidential encounters* and *understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision* described how students experience and understand their presidents. The third theme that emerged from the data *meaningful impact from presidential interaction* depicted influence the students experience from the phenomenon. Participants indicated value in their president knowing them by name. Students expressed a feeling of importance when they reflected on their interactions with their president. Stories of impactful memories were shared by participants who received recognition from their president. Students were inspired to become more involved and became more connected to their university. Interaction with the president served as a leadership aspiration for some of the students.

### **Connection to the Research Questions**

Whereas students are the central beneficiaries of higher education, university presidents are charged with leading these complex learning organizations. Student and presidents are therefore key groups within the educational environment. Investigating the phenomenon that exists relating to how students experience and understand the university presidency is at the core of this research project. I set out to make meaning of this unexplored void in the scholarly literature. To accomplish this task I posed two main questions designed to not only serve as a procedural map for the investigation, but moreover to structurally search for meaning through the lived experiences of the students. The following relates my findings to the research questions in an effort to describe the essence of the phenomenology by weaving in the emergent themes from my study.

## **How Do Students Experience and Understand the University Presidency?**

My first research question cut to the core of interactivity between students and presidents. When first discussing a design for my research endeavor, several higher education practitioners suggested students would likely have limited input to represent what was suggested as possible disinterest in aspects relating to organizational leadership. I managed for this possibility and identified a sample of involved students who could assuredly demonstrate some connectivity to the presidency. I also bracketed out my preconceived perceptions to promote accuracy in the emerging representation of the phenomenon. This process helped me obtain, analyze, and describe data to accurately represent the first-person students' point of view (Husserl, 1931). To this end, the student voice in the following excerpts represents how students experience and understand the university presidency and the resulting impact.

Students demonstrate *value experiencing informal presidential encounters*. It is through these interactions they most enjoy experiencing their president. They observe him walking around the university engaging with others. They see him sharing time, space, and spirit at sporting events. He is observed riding his bike through campus. The participants feel the leadership presence of their president. The informal interaction they experience with their president enables them to feel like they know him more as a person than as a figure head. This humanizing perspective is important to the students and provides them with perspective relating to the person behind the position. Students describe informally experiencing the president as a conduit for learning more about their university. Calvin Hobbes experienced his president's likeable characteristics and valued his availability. He understood the presidency to have responsibility as both manager and



visionary and appreciated organized opportunities for interactivity between students and president. He offered:

I guess my strongest memories of him are at the open forums. I think that is where we really see him as a person and not just someone from the third floor administrative office. He's joked with students and he's really shown that he cares about those things. In terms of me, my interactions with him at the open forums have been significant and I really value them.

The students describe *understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision*. They understand their president through observations of his demeanor and decisions. These experiences provide students with perspective on what they believe to be important personal characteristics of their president and their key presidential leadership responsibilities. Students understand their presidents to be compassionate and function from a foundation of genuine care and kindness. Students also describe presidents as visionary and responsible for motivating organizational achievement. Students understand their presidents to be good listeners and diplomatic in their ability to engage others in shared governance. Students value access to their president and find comfort and confidence in reflecting on this availability.

### **How Does This Inform Or Shape the College Experience for Students?**

My second research question delved into the meaning and impact associated with how students perceive and experience the presidency. As previously represented, several of the participants described encounters with their president as impactful. Students reflected on influential memories with their president indicating the interactions leave them feeling important and make a difference in their college experience. Students

describe being motivated by their president to become more involved with their university. Students view presidential leadership as inspirational with influence on their own disposition as a student leader.

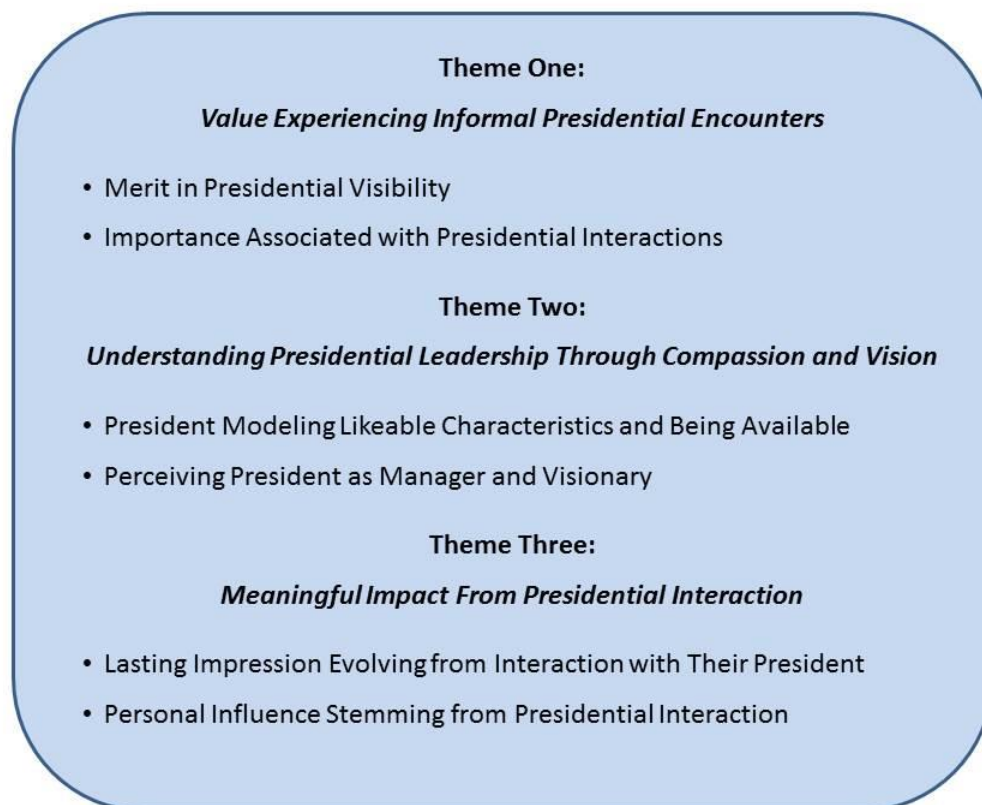
Charlotte Erickson reflected back on an encounter she had with her president at a weekend academic related competition. Her description conveyed her thought progression as she ultimately arrived at the impactful assertion that the experience motivated her leadership aspirations. She shared:

I was excited because the president was spending his Saturday with us and he was helping us, putting his time into the program, and it seemed like he was enjoying himself. He also asked us personal questions after so it wasn't just business. It made me feel important and that he cared and it made me feel good about the university as a whole because it seemed like the president cared and it made it seem like a great place. I think it had a positive impact on me. I think it inspired me to want to be in more leadership roles.

The students describe *meaningful impact from presidential interaction* and place value on their president knowing them by name. Lasting memories are formed by students who receive presidential recognition for their effort and accomplishments. Students indicate that stories involving cherished presidential interactions are shared with other individuals and celebrated as uniquely important occurrences. The experience and understanding students have relating to the presidency enhances their connection to the university.

## Summary

In Chapter Four I present findings that describe how students experience and understand the university presidency. I reiterated my strategic determinations in both design and analysis. My research decisions purposefully aligned with strategies designed to investigate the lived experiences of the students I interviewed. I provided a narrative of the participants and also demonstrated frequencies in their demographics and inclusionary representations. I discussed the data coding cycles and feedback loops which directed my effort to navigate the process. I outlined the emergent process utilized for advancing idea clusters into developing themes. The evolving themes and their supporting foundations are displayed in *Figure 4*.



*Figure 4.* Demonstration of Themes

The lived experience of the student participants led the narrative for supporting the formation of three themes. The three themes that evolved through the data relating to how students experience and understand the university presidency are *value experiencing informal presidential encounters, understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision, and meaningful impact from presidential interaction*. I conclude Chapter Four by merging my study results with my research questions to focus findings and provide explanation as to how students experience and understand the university presidency and how that understanding impacts their college experience.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

This phenomenological study explored how students experience and understand the university presidency. I was interested in discovering how students describe their interactivity with their president. This offers relative insight for researchers, academic executives, student services professionals, public relations staff, and students. My research intent was for study findings to augment the body of knowledge surrounding college students and university presidents. The lived experiences of 10 involved student participants from two, small, public, Midwestern universities were captured through face to face interviews, categorized into 12 original cluster groupings, and then further distilled into three emergent themes. This Chapter weaves together the literature and findings, discusses practitioner based implications, and makes a case for future research.

#### **Connection to the Literature**

Previously, in Chapter Two I presented a foundation of literature for positioning the study within a framework of existing publications involving both students and university presidents. Empirical studies spanning student trends, student expectations, student development theory, the historical underpinnings of the presidency, the evolving presidential role, and leadership theory now serve as the collective lens for vetting my findings. Relative literature is utilized to help develop meaning around the themes that emerged in this study. While previous research has not directly explored how students experience and understand university presidents, highlighting parallels in the findings and bridging the differences in samples and settings is necessary to suggest relative implications.

My first theme represented in the study *value experiencing informal presidential encounters* speaks to the way students experience the university presidency. Findings parallel the research based assertion that influential student development evolves from shared interactions as described in Astin's (1984, 1999) Student Development Theory. Astin (1984) purports:

Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. Such involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel.” (p 528)

As suggested, student involvement and demonstrated interaction with their president was at the core of my research project. Many participants in my study attributed some of their student involvement to inspiration evolving from interactions with their president. Pink Disney was vocal in expressing this sentiment. Astin's (1984) theory also suggests the more a student becomes involved, the more exponentially they connect to the organization and gain from the experience. Similarly, respondents in my study who purported extensive encounters with their president also described much connectivity to their university.

Kenny (1990) describes the benefit college students experience from increased parental attachment and stable family ties. Student participants in my study similarly shared stories describing close affiliation to the university and feelings of stability stemming from their attachment to and encounters with their president. Similar to the indices used for Kenny's (1990) research, many of the participants I interviewed

demonstrated confidence through assertiveness and also shared well defined career aspirations. Some even described a feeling of family attachment to their university. This evidence suggests corresponding similarities to the research regarding family connection and the attachment benefit associated with study findings linking the value my student participants placed on interactivity with their president.

As suggested by Strauss and Volkwein (2004) persistence and graduation rates are increased through student connectedness to the university. Several participants in my study attributed a greater sense of connectivity through knowing and interacting with their president. Many shared stories that highlighted appreciation of their president's effort to be visible to fellow students. As university administrators work to improve the student experiences on their campus, considerations should include opportunities to further align student commitment through improved staff availability, encouraging student involvement, and compelling growth (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). Presidents can lead the charge for greater student connectedness and set an important example by being visible and interacting with their students.

A university student's ability to form a sense of belonging is an important factor that impacts their involvement and retention (Astin, 1999). My study indicates presidential interaction is important to students and their shared experiences provided evidence that student development is positively impacted. Participant commentary showed elevated value in the informal interactions with their president. Several students expressed appreciation in observing genuine and honest connectivity that was compelled by personal acts of compassion, self-disclosure, and meaningful advice. Similarly, although referencing social networking, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) found that

teachers who personalize their online image through the use of humor, stories, enthusiasm, and appropriate self-disclosure are perceived by their students to be more effective. These parallels in the findings suggest that presidents can utilize encounters with their students to develop positive impressions and encourage a strengthened sense of belonging.

The second theme evolving from my study's data, *understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision*, centered on how students understand the presidency. My findings compared to some of the effective teaching and mutual exchange principles outlined by Chickering and Gamson (1987). Evidence of a president's frequent contact, encouraged cooperation, and high expectations were noted throughout my data analysis. Chickering and Gamson (1987) suggest that frequent contact with students is the most important consideration compelling student motivation and involvement. Evidence was present in my study confirming that some of the students believed interactivity with their president helped them reflect on their own values and leadership effort. Benjamin Terrell described this sentiment several times relating his own leadership achievement back to the advice he received through interactions with his president.

Participants in my study also shared stories suggesting their president encouraged cooperative problem solving at student forums. This structured opportunity to openly discuss and debate ideas was viewed by the students as an effort to promote collaboration and a deeper understanding of issues. Chickering and Gamson (1987) described the organizational benefit associated with staff holding high expectancy of themselves and extending that same expectation to students. My study found evidence that participants



felt compelled to excel in order to align with what they perceived as their president's expectations.

My study indicated that students valued their president modeling likeable characteristics and being available. All the students I interviewed suggested their president was successful in his position. This finding aligns with literature relating to trait and personality research. The manner in which my participants described traits focused on presidents serving as a role model, being good listeners, offering diplomacy, and being both approachable and kind. This aligns with Bass' (1996) suggestion that certain personality attributes can compel leadership success and improve organizational function by motivating contribution and increasing satisfaction. Whereas earlier personality research of educational executives by Fisher and Koch (1996) suggested effective presidents are "less collegial and more distant; more inclined to rely upon respect than affiliation" (p. 57), my findings indicated students value connection, compassion, vision, and availability.

The stories told by my participants indicated that they understood their presidents to be making an effort to interact and learn more about student views. Kambil (2010) contends a leader's inquisitive disposition can help them to better acclimate to the social dynamic of the organizational structure. Whether the president's effort stemmed from curiosity or inclusionary practice, the students I interviewed valued the shared interactions and availability they shared with their president.

Three ideas emerged as my participants described their perception of key presidential leadership responsibilities: managing multiple roles, championing goals, and leading vision. Numerous participants described a view of their president managing dual

roles and navigating between university business and attention to the students. Participant response echoed expectations relating to the need for their president to champion goals for their university. The majority of the involved students I interviewed spoke to their president's demonstration of leadership through observations of them delegating to others and motivating a collaborative vision.

Findings from my study pointed to students perceiving their president as both a manager and as a visionary. This supports Fincher's (2003) suggestion that presidents are instrumental in promoting organizational characteristics and building networks and collaborations within the institution. Several participants I interviewed discussed their expectations relating to their president advocating goals for their university. House and Mitchell (1974) describe the manner in which goals are achieved through the encouragement and support of leadership. The Path-Goal Theory of Leadership they discussed clarifies the path for followers, removes any roadblocks or obstructions to achievement, and increases the reward as the effort progresses. Four types of leadership were outlined in House and Mitchell's (1974) research that parallel stories of how students experience and understand the university presidency. Supportive leadership aligns with students perceiving their president as compassionate, friendly, and fun. Directive leadership is noted when students describe their president providing guidance and giving direction. Participative leadership is linked to students appreciating opportunities to provide their president with input and share in organizational governance. Achievement-oriented leadership was observed in my participants' stories suggesting their president challenged their best effort and believed in their ability to succeed.

Ties to two leadership frames seemed to persist in the lived experiences of the students I interviewed. Bolman and Deal (2003) define the political frame as strategically structured. Looking at my study's findings through this lens connects similarly with student stories where the focus is on involved students vying for resources, building coalitions, and managing conflict. Some of the students I interviewed shared their understanding of the president's authority and discussed their appreciation for having an opportunity to compete in the organizational process. Calvin Hobbes in particular vocalized his interest in utilizing presidential interaction to advocate on behalf of his fellow students and to help direct support of student issues for aligning resources accordingly. The symbolic frame represents an organizational culture where the focus is more on the institution's spirit, soul, and meaning and less on rules or authority (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Many examples were present in my data connecting to this frame and demonstrating how presidential interaction enthused school pride and encouraged greater involvement. Tracy was most vocal about her understanding of the president's role in advocating a culture that embraced organizational spirit.

My third theme emanating from the data, *meaningful impact from presidential interaction* captured the essence behind how experiencing the university presidency informed or shaped the college experience for the students. Perry (1970) asserted that college students transition through nine positions which are grouped into four categories which represent a student's cognitive development and attitude towards knowledge. Many of the participants in my study described a coming of age relating to their own pathway to student involvement. Stories commonly demonstrated progressive involvement as their academic endeavor advanced. More involvement in most cases was believed to lead to more interaction with their president. Charlotte Erickson was shaped by a deep admiration for her president

and she qualified the resulting impact as both role modeling and inspirational. Perry's (1970) cognitive theory of student development progresses from dualism to subjective knowledge into procedural knowledge and then onto constructed knowledge. Each level represents a progressive association to reasoning. Many of the students I interviewed demonstrated cognitive processing that connects with the cognitive knowledge level where knowledge is formed through integrating concepts with personal experiences resulting in reflection on meaning. Students in this phase gravitate toward commitments, explore issues relating to responsibility, and recognize accountability as an evolving process (Perry, 1970).

Many of the participants in my study spoke to a culture of university connectedness that they believed originated from or at least was championed by their president. Stories persisted describing a community of involved students who embraced and celebrated an elevated level of motivation through their connection to each other and to their president. Justin Time was most vocal in his discussion surrounding a sense of community. This corresponds with Summers and Sviniki's (2007) findings linking higher student motivation to fostering a sense of connection and cooperation to community within the classroom.

Many of my participants described developing a lasting impression from interacting with their president. Participant stories often included impactful examples where their president offered them congratulatory praise. Some of the students explained presidential interaction as transformational and provided instances where the interactivity left them feeling important. Although Lola Peppers' expectation to experience a deeper connection with her president was not met, she still advocated on behalf of the transforming influence of the presidency and a president's ability to inspire students.

Similarly, Burns (1978) describes the inspiring benefit associated with transformational leadership. My data correspondingly suggested the students understood their presidents to be encouraging, compassionate, visionary, and dedicated to involving others in the organizational process. Bass (1990) asserts that through vision and demeanor leaders can transform organizational cultures and motivate common goals. My study's findings paralleled his assertions and provided impression based examples of students experiencing intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence through interactivity with their president (Bass, 1990). Likewise, the students I interviewed shared statements demonstrating the trust, respect, and admiration they had for their president and their university.

Many of the involved students in my study also described an impactful personal influence stemming from interaction with their president. This aligns with Kuh's (1995) study that explored the influence of extra-curricular experiences and found that student leadership, peer interaction, and staff contact contribute to valued college outcomes including interpersonal competence, practical competence, cognitive complexity, knowledge and academic skills, and humanitarianism. Several of the students in my study provided support for this influence through examples of their president personally inspiring their involvement. Many of the involved students described an impactful difference in the college experience through interactions with their president creating an enhanced connection to their organization.

Several of the participants I interviewed suggested their relationship with the president influenced their leadership aspirations and practice. Tracy and Benjamin Terrell both entertained professional yearnings to become university presidents and attributed that

interest to the experience and understanding they gleaned from interactions with their president. Erickson (1968) asserts in the sixth stage of his identity development theory, intimacy versus isolation, that it is critical for young adults to develop close relationships with other people in order to understand and replicate a process involving commitment. Tinto (1993) further develops this concept by identifying areas of student non-commitment leading to institutional departure. One of the three areas suggested as important to student persistence is a student's integration into an academic and social system while attending college. His research also supports the lasting impression and impact that evolves from interactions with faculty and staff (Tinto, 1993). Justin Time reinforced this assertion when he shared his belief that being involved and experiencing presidential interaction helped to keep students enrolled. The participants I interviewed all demonstrated strong connectivity to their university and their stories aligned with evidence indicating integration in both academic and social systems benefited their academic persistence.

The meaningful impact and personal influence students in my study described experiencing from presidential interaction can be further viewed through the student development lens. In addition to Astin's (1984) assertion that positive educational outcomes come through significant connections, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) discuss college impact models that incorporate variables found to impact behavior and encourage development. A theme in these models represents institutional traits and campus ethos which are directly linked to the way students experience and understand their organization. Participants in my study provided stories connecting interactions with their president to impactful sentiment regarding the benefits associated with shared presidential experiences.

Charlotte Erickson offered how her president served as a role model and inspired her own thinking.

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) research involving student development and personal identity outlines seven vectors that share links with the participant commentary collected in my study. The following connects the lived experiences of the students I interviewed with characteristics from each vector. Some of the participants in my study discussed developing intellectual and interpersonal competencies through their student involvement in college. This led to what they described as bigger picture thinking and increased interaction with others. Skip Valley suggested he had never been involved with extracurricular activities prior to college but his participation grew exponentially and was encouraged by his president.

Several of the students I interviewed spoke of an effort to manage or negotiate their own emotions and reactions to changing campus environments. Calvin Hobbes was a vocal supporter of open forums where concerned students could engage the president in meaningful conversation regarding issues important to students. Many participants discussed valuing interdependence as a building block to their success. Katie shared how the reciprocal interaction she experienced with her president and other involved students helped her determine her career aspirations. Several students expressed appreciating the interpersonal relationships they had with others throughout the university noting a culture that embraced diversity. Graham Dempsey described feeling fortunate that his university could benefit from his president's willingness to connect with all students regardless of who they were, where they were from, or what they believed.

Many of those in my study conveyed an established identity as an involved student. Benjamin Terrell partially attributed his leadership identity to the advice he received through interactions with the president. Student involvement served as a platform for many of those interviewed to develop purpose socially and professionally. Justin Time expressed a motivated outlook on his professional life linked to the encouragement he received from his president. Personal integrity was mentioned by Charlotte Erickson and Tracy who also both expected and valued the same characteristic in their president. Chickering and Reisser (1993) conclude that an individual's vectors are impacted by the university through institutional objectives, the size of the organization, and the student-faculty relationship. The findings from my study suggest the impact extends beyond student-faculty relationships to also include student-president interactions.

### **Implications of the Findings for Practice**

My study presented a portrait of extracurricular involved students at two small, public, Midwestern universities. Their stories developed a foundation of knowledge surrounding how students experience and understand the university presidency. It is from the rich descriptions evolving from the student stories that I base my recommendations for practice. Connecting back to the early mapping stage of my project, I proposed this study would have relative implication for researchers, presidents, trustees, student services professionals, public relations and presidential staff, and students. The students' voice expressed through their lived experiences was always present as I explored and defined the phenomenon. This essence now serves as the basis for my recommendations.



This study has initiated a research dialog regarding students and presidents. While I explored how students experience and understand the presidency, my study's findings compel further investigation into the relationship and connectivity between these two groups. Additional focus, differing methodologies, and expanded samples are considerations for researchers as they continue investigating students and presidents and work to further seek understanding and define gaps in scholarly literature. My research offers a starting point that now encourages further exploration.

Presidents are charged with leading learning organizations. Students are constituents of presidential leadership, and according to my study's findings, they experience the *meaningful impact from presidential interaction*. Presidents can benefit from knowing their effort to interact with students is qualified by the discoveries in this research. Recognition that students *value experiencing informal presidential encounters* encourages presidents to reflect on the level of engagement they offer their student constituents. Presidents should build time and strategy into their schedules to encourage informal interactions. This interactivity best occurs at different times and in different settings throughout campus. Shifting travel routes, walking through different buildings, gaining an awareness of and visiting popular social and study locations are basic considerations that can engage students. The intentionality of these encounters needs to be built into the presidential routine. This effort would provide for informal presidential interaction that was deeply valued by the students in my study. Location and discussion topic seem less important and overshadowed by the excitement the students expressed in their stories recalling casual interactions with their president.

Trustees are responsible for organizational oversight which finds them engaging in the recruitment, hiring, direction, and evaluation of university presidents. Shared governance structures common to higher education finds organizations looking to their president for a balance between managing the day to day operations and championing the mission and vision of the university. The students in my study had much to say regarding important characteristics representative to presidential achievement. Trustees need to employ great leaders and maintain high expectation. Presidents who recognize their students are prone to *understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision* are likely to recognize their student population as key players in the collaborative process of sustaining organizational achievement. Therefore, trustees can benefit from seeking presidential candidates that comprehend the influential nature of their position and aspire to engage with their students in meaningful ways.

Student services professionals are on the frontline assisting students in their educational journey. Great effort and extensive resources go into developing programs and services that encourage student involvement and connectivity with their university. Recognizing that students experience *meaningful impact from presidential interaction* enables student services professionals to strategically develop and foster interaction between students and presidents. Student services leaders can help engage presidents in recognizing the importance associated with developing bonds with their student constituency. The participants I interviewed expressed appreciation for having a sense of knowing who their president was. Student Services can help bridge the gap through programming designed to encourage casual exchanges between students and the president.

University public relations staff is charged with promoting the organization and often serves as a conduit for the president to convey important messages. The students in my study expressed *understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision*. Marketing strategies and news releases can be developed to promote this sentiment. A photograph displayed through print or virtual venue of students informally interacting with their president could resonate with past, present, and future students. Additionally, the president's staff often assists with speech writing and constituent work on behalf of the president. My findings indicate that letters and emails from the president commending accomplishments were cherished as significant occurrences by the students. Acknowledging the *meaningful impact from presidential interaction* enables the staff to represent the president in a manner that demonstrates the benefits of influential recognition.

Students are at the center of the higher education equation. As direct beneficiaries of the organizational offering, they can find purpose through engaging with the president on important issues. While not all presidents demonstrate capacity or interest in interacting, students should expect to have a voice in shared governance. Students can advocate individually and collectively that they *value experiencing informal presidential encounters*. In settings where a president is not perceived to offer opportunities for interaction, student advocates should encourage engagement. Assistance and ideas for coordinating shared experiences between students and the president may be available through Student Services. The participants in my study expressed that interacting with their president led to personal inspiration and increased university connectivity. At

locations where a president does express interest, students should take full advantage of the opportunity to experience the *meaningful impact from presidential interaction*.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This phenomenological study offered a preliminary view surrounding the essence of how students experience and understand the university presidency. Previous research had not explored the interactivity between students and presidents. Limitations involved with my study include limiting factors specific to phenomenological investigations.

While this form of discovery focuses in on the essence of the lived experience of a specific population, other aspects of the interactivity are not explored. As the interactivity between students and presidents impacts the ever evolving relationship, not having the presidents' perspective is a limitation. Participants in my study were involved students with, at minimum, occasional interaction with their university president. This limits how well the findings apply to the general student population. The lack of represented diversity in both setting and sample are limiting factors. My study contributes to learning how students experience and understand the presidency. The findings are best understood through the context of the ten students I interviewed for my investigation. Transferability can be determined through considering the detailed descriptions specific to the students' settings and situations.

My study's findings offer a foundation from which to build on as future investigations continue to explore the evolving dynamic. The four areas I suggest for further research consideration are: (a) the interactivity between students and presidents through social media; (b) expanding the target population to include a more diverse student demographic and differing types of organizations; (c) studying how involved

students influence the general student population and serve as a key communication conduit for presidents to reach a larger population; and (d) conversely, investigating how university presidents experience and understand their students.

I recommend future studies explore the interactivity between students and presidents through social media. While a web search indicates numerous university presidents are currently engaged with their students through social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, neither president at the schools in my study's sample interacted with their students through virtual networking. In fact, student respondents from both universities cited organizational policies banning faculty and staff from connecting with students in this manner. Future studies should further explore this aspect of the phenomenon. My interviews indicated some student interest to support this recommendation. When Benjamin Terrell was asked to reflect on what other students might expect from a university president he suggested: "I think their expectations would be someone who is fun, someone who has a twitter account and is very personable."

This study spanned student perception regarding the formal and informal interactivity they experienced with their university president. As presidents continue to affiliate with their constituencies in new ways it will be important for them to align with the changing communication modalities that are most common to their students. The presidency by nature and vested authority compels leaders to think, act, connect, and respond in a very public manner. Discovering how presidential interaction through social media is experienced and understood by students would help further compel this investigation.

I recommend further research expand the target population to include the non-involved student perspective, more diverse student demographics, and differing types of universities. The involved student population was intentionally targeted in this study due to the increased likelihood that they had experienced their university president. While my research findings support both value in and positive impact associated with interaction between students and presidents, the uninvolved student voice is missing from the equation. Several of the participants spoke directly to their perception that presidents motivate student involvement and serve as a positive influence. Many of those interviewed in this study described feelings of importance after experiencing an interaction with their president.

Calvin Hobbes advocated on behalf of the potential benefit associated with presidents further engaging with non-involved students. He suggests:

I think a lot of uninvolved students experience a lot of the ramifications of the decisions that the president is making but they don't have any actual interaction with the president. I think, honestly, the average uninvolved student wouldn't be able to give examples of what the university president does on a day to day basis. Try to engage the students because even the uninvolved or uninterested students, if they hear of an opportunity to give feedback on something they care about, they will... I think if a president makes the effort to reach out to students that it will be returned.

Future research should further explore the manner in which involved students influence the general student population and serve as a key communication conduit for presidents to reach a larger population. While further investigation may demonstrate a

greater propensity for uninvolved students not knowing or caring about university leadership, the impact of stories and information expressed by involved students to other stakeholders would further define and qualify this line of discovery. Expanding the target population to include more diverse student demographics and differing types of universities will also help to further describe the phenomenon and offer deeper insight into how students experience and understand the university presidency.

I also recommend future research explore, conversely, how university presidents experience and understand their students. My research focused on the student voice as it investigated the lived experiences of the student participants. This is one half of the phenomenological equation. Presidential intent is also at the core of this interactivity and compels the other half of the evolving relationship. Inverse to my research, empirical studies have not yet investigated how presidents experience and understand their students. Future research should explore presidential perspective as it relates to their effort to connect with their student constituency. Themes evolving in data from studying presidents could be compared and contrasted to my study's findings to further develop a framework for comprehending and describing this ever changing phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

Previous studies had not investigated any connection between students and university presidents. As a researcher and higher education practitioner engaged in sustaining organizational achievement and having presidential career aspirations, this defined absence of analysis compelled my interest. To address the void in scholarly literature, my study explored how students experience and understand the university presidency. My investigation utilized phenomenological methodology to form descriptive

themes. I interviewed 10 college students who self-identified as being involved with extracurricular activities and having, at minimum, occasional interaction with their president. Participants were selected from two small, public, Midwestern universities where their president had served for five or more consecutive years. The in-depth face-to-face interviews with students provided rich data.

My findings revealed three themes relating to how students experience and understand the university presidency: *value experiencing informal presidential encounters, understanding presidential leadership through compassion and vision*, and the *meaningful impact from presidential interaction*. Students experiencing interaction acquired an enduring image of presidential leadership. Students understood the presidency as a balance between compassion and vision. Students formed impactful memories when their president recognized their effort and accomplishments. Encouraging interactivity between students and presidents benefited students by further motivating their campus involvement, enhancing their connection to the university, and inspiring their student leadership aspirations. The evolution of my conceptual framework is displayed in *Figure 5*. The emergent themes have been added to exhibit the foundation of discovery that establishes how students experience and understand the university presidency.



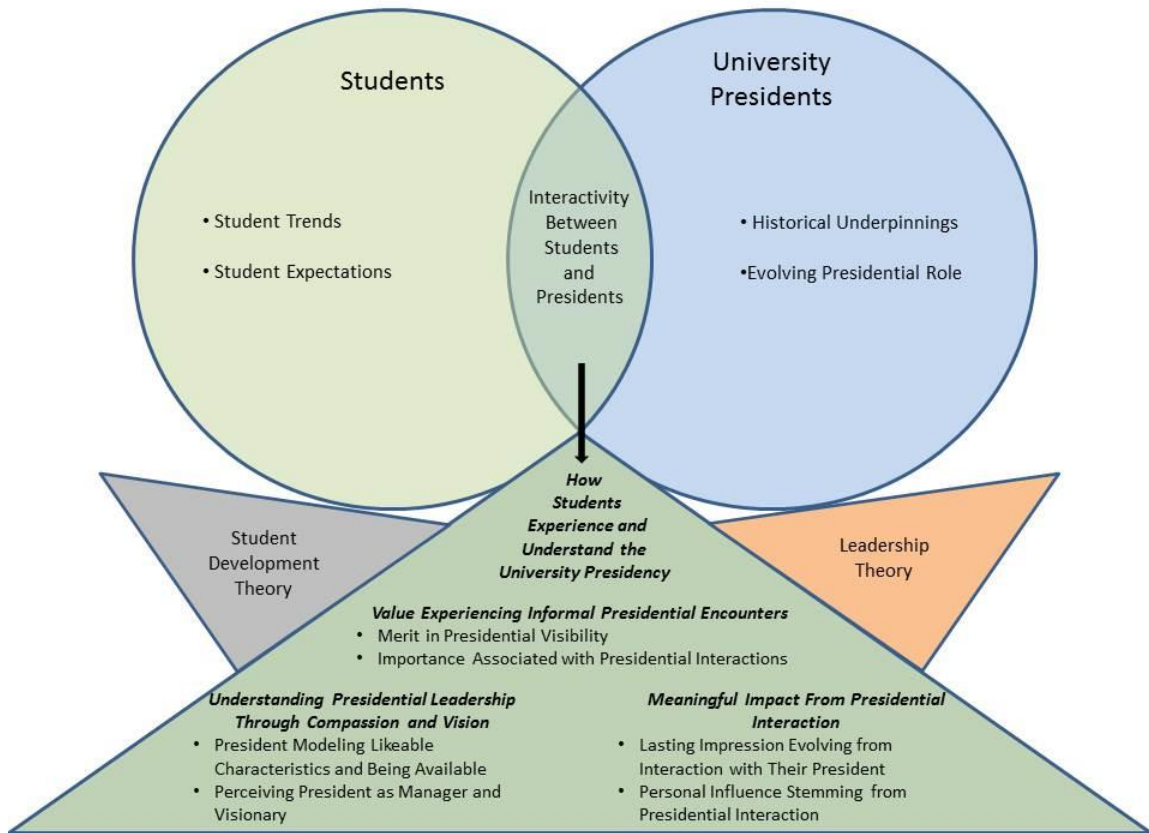


Figure 5. Comprehensive Conceptual Framework

This research project has provided me with deep insight into how students experience and understand the university presidency. The purposeful design focused in on the voice of the participants. The involved students I interviewed each shared valuable perspective into the phenomenon. Their stories demonstrate that meaningful interaction occurs between students and their president. Evidence indicates this interactivity is valued by the students and influences the way they perceive their college experience. My study is a first step to better understanding the connectivity between these two important groups of stakeholders in the higher education system.

Implications for practice evolving from my study extend to researchers, presidents, trustees, student services professionals, public relations and presidential staffs,

and students. Recommendations for further research include: (a) investigating interactivity between students and presidents through social media; (b) expanding the target population to include a more diverse student demographic and differing types of organizations; (c) studying how involved students influence the general student population and serve as a key communication conduit for presidents to reach a larger population; and (d) exploring how university presidents experience and understand their students.

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