

Leadership in Action: Implementation of AACC Leadership Competencies (Data Collection)

Sabbatical Written Report

By

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## **Introduction**

As outlined in my sabbatical application, the original purpose and goals of this sabbatical were as follows:

Purpose of proposed sabbatical:

- Collect data as part of conducting academic research for doctoral program
- Gain greater insight and practice with the process of conducting academic research

Goals of proposed sabbatical:

- Complete preparations for conducting research related to dissertation
- Conduct interviews to collect qualitative data
- Transcribe qualitative data to prepare it for analysis

Changes had to be made to this initial plan however, due to my dissertation proposal not being ready for final approval of the committee. The purpose of the sabbatical was still to gain insight into conducting academic research but the goals shifted to completing a dissertation proposal and the preparations for conducting my research at a later date.

## **Methods and/or Processes**

The dissertation journey is one that does not always follow a well-articulated path. During the beginning of my sabbatical, I had received final approval from my major professor to send my proposal to my secondary professor for consideration. It was intended that the secondary professor have two weeks to review the proposal and respond with feedback for consideration. In reality, it took the secondary professor three weeks to return the proposal with feedback. During this wait, I spent time drafting the institutional review board (IRB) protocol for my research. This involved researching and compiling information around recruitment methods,

confidentiality methods, consent processes and potential risks and benefits of my study.

Although this protocol draft will continue to change until the study is approved by IRB, it is helpful to have a working draft to build from.

I also spent time compiling a list of all community college presidents within the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCU), given that this is the region where my study participants will come from. Additionally, I spent time to identify how long each president had been serving in such capacity at his or her institution, as well as contact information. This information will assist in the recruitment process at a later date.

Once I received the feedback from my secondary professor, I began to read and understand the suggestions she was making on my proposal. Although this research is my own, I am acting under the guidance and support from my committee and ultimately have to receive their approval for the study. Most of the remainder of my sabbatical was spent addressing the changes that were identified by my secondary professor and continuing the proposal writing process. In several places, I needed to provide more specific information to explain concepts/topics to a reader outside of the community college setting. This process also required me to seek out clarification from my major professor around the suggestions to my proposal.

One other occurrence, which impacted the process of my dissertation proposal, was that the faculty member who stepped up to fill in my position while I was gone, encountered multiple family emergencies which required her absence from the Math Resource Center (MRC). Given that my position as director involves supervision of the daily operations of the MRC, I opted to step back into the MRC during her absence in order to maintain stability and consistency in the center. The duties within the MRC are specialized and it would have been too difficult to train another faculty to fill in during this time.

## **Results and/or Outcomes**

Although the results of my sabbatical were not aligned with my original intentions, I did make significant progress on my dissertation proposal and feel confident that I will move forward with my research during the upcoming academic year. The flexibility I had to demonstrate during this time helped me to remember that much of what we are required to do in academia and especially research does not always lend itself to a well-articulated, pre-planned structure. Instead, we are presented with situations where we must seek out additional information, increase our clarity and make decisions around how to move forward in a way that respects the insight of others and maintains the integrity of the initial intentions.

I am including my dissertation proposal at the end of this report, in case anyone wishes to view it in its most updated draft form.

## **Final Reflection**

My dissertation topic is about leadership within community colleges. Even though it specifically focuses on community college presidents, I believe the skills and competencies required for leadership are prevalent throughout all leadership positions. I have learned a lot already around leadership theory, but I look forward to learning more about leadership in action. In my role as MRC director and as an instructor, I have gained insight and continued to develop my skills in communication and collaboration, both with my staff and the students I worked with. Even though I have a great deal of experience related to this position, I know that my learning and development in leadership will continue to grow. Also, I recently accepted the position of interim dean of the mathematics division and I believe this is yet another opportunity for me to learn, develop and institute my skills in leadership. Outside of my division, I have had many opportunities to contribute my leadership to the college, including being a faculty

representative and chair of Student Affairs Council and Phi Theta Kappa advisor. Although my new role will have me shift to different responsibilities outside of my division, I look forward to opportunities where I can contribute to our college in a meaningful way.

Overall, I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to take a sabbatical, even though it played out differently than I had originally anticipated. I feel that my knowledge and understanding of the research process, as well as the insights I have gained in leadership, will help me support and encourage other faculty around sabbatical opportunities in the future.

*Doctoral Dissertation Proposal*

**Leadership in Action: Navigating the Issues of Today's Community Colleges**

submitted by

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to

Dissertation Committee

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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from the

College of Education and Graduate School

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Month, Date, Year

## Abstract

Community colleges are changing to meet the needs and demands of the 21st century and these changes are also a driving force behind the shifts that are happening to the essential functions of the presidents who lead the community colleges. In order to navigate the complex systems and lead colleges to successful outcomes, it will be important to understand the issues being faced by community colleges presidents and develop upcoming leaders who possess the leadership skills and strategies necessary to address them. The purpose of this study is to examine the issues that current community college presidents are facing and understand the leadership skills and strategies they employ in addressing those issues. Through a qualitative research design, narrative inquiry will be used to collect data from 10 currently practicing community college presidents in a semi-structured interview format. These data will be analyzed using narrative analysis and a qualitative coding process to discover themes that occur.

*Keywords: community college president, leadership competencies, leadership skills, leadership strategies, adaptive leadership*

# Leadership in Action: Navigating the Issues of Today's Community Colleges

## Section I, Focus and Significance

### **Introduction**

Nearly half of the population of undergraduate students attend community colleges, and these institutions have served as “the gateway to postsecondary education for many minority, low income, and first-generation postsecondary education students” (American Association of Community Colleges [AACCC], 2015, para. 1). Despite the service community colleges have traditionally provided, these institutions are increasingly finding themselves in positions of impending transformation. AACCC (2012) noted in *A Report From the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges*, “If community colleges are to contribute powerfully to meeting the needs of 21st-century students and the 21st-century economy, education leaders must reimagine what these institutions are—and are capable of becoming” (p. vii).

Among the changes that community colleges are being compelled to make, addressing the achievement gaps that exist in higher education for individuals in historically underrepresented and underserved groups is a significant one (Bensimon & Kezar, 2005). Although these colleges were founded on the premise of providing higher education with an open-access mission, community colleges today must make commitments to ensure that student success and completion rates increase. Additionally, community colleges must continue striving towards ensuring equity in educational outcomes across racial, ethnic, and income groups, while continuing to preserve opportunities for any individual who wishes to enter (McClenney, 2013).

As community colleges evolve, the role of the community college president (or chief executive officer, CEO) has also changed. Presidents of the past were seen as traditional leaders operating within a hierarchical structure (Sullivan, 2001). They started new community colleges



and grew existing community colleges that “started on a shoestring and were creative, daring, and unrestricted grew into large bureaucracies with enviable physical plants, vast resources, and considerable community support” (Sullivan, 2011, p. 561). Hockaday & Puyear (2015) note that community colleges are now grounded within the higher education structure, but face multiple new challenges. Those who will lead community colleges into the future will have to confront issues that are more dynamic and complex than the issues experienced by previous presidents.

### **Research Problem**

Today’s community college president has a whole new set of challenges that she or he faces while leading their institution. These challenges include limited financial resources, significant changes in student and staff demographics, a shift to student learning outcomes assessments, technology developments that change the way that instruction is being offered, increased regulations from external sources, and demands for shared governance from internal sources (AACC, 2012). Navigating this system and enacting changes are complex responsibilities that require extraordinary leadership (McClenney, 2013).

Finding individuals who can lead community colleges in ways that meet the challenges associated with increased expectations of student access and success will be crucial. In order to ascend into a presidential position, these individuals will need to be successful administrators and have an aptitude towards fundraising (The Aspen Institute, 2014). In addition to being effective at communication and driven to produce results, it is important that these individuals have the ability to create and cultivate dynamic leadership teams. They need to find ways to establish the motivation across the college that is directed toward improvement at an accelerated pace and to lead strategic planning processes that result in plans for that improvement. Also, these future presidents need to have strong financial and operational skills, as well as the ability

to raise resources from many different sources. These skills and abilities are often a result of having an understanding beyond the college to see how external partnerships can contribute to the college's goal of increasing student success (The Aspen Institute, 2014).

The job of being a community college president can be daunting. The position involves tremendous stress and is often very challenging emotionally (Bowles, 2013). Additionally, presidents are increasingly finding themselves under shorter, rolling contracts, often three years or less (Weisman & Vaughan, 2007). These stressors have led to greater mobility and transitions amongst community college presidents, with more presidents having two or more presidencies throughout their career in community college education (Weisman & Vaughan, 2007).

It is no longer suffice to allow students to simply attend community college - there is pressure make changes which provide some assurances around what students actually achieve while attending. With this shift in focus toward greater accountability in improving student success and completion rates, today's community college presidents need to understand ways to implement change (AACC, 2015). Leadership that can envision, strategically plan for, and implement such changes takes time. "Trustees cannot recycle leaders every 2 years and expect to move the institutional needle on student success and completion in any significant manner" (AACC, 2013, p. 4). The pool of potential leaders is shrinking, especially those with the ability to successfully lead right from the start (AACC, 2013).

In a 2001 report for AACC, Shults explained that the impending retirements of community college presidents would result in a leadership crisis. Shults' research indicated that the current landscape of presidents was flooded with baby boomers and 79% of sitting presidents were expected retire within 10 years. Additionally, he also indicated that fewer advanced degrees in community college administration were being awarded, leaving the "leadership pipeline" less

than adequately stocked (p. 2). According to an AACC survey conducted in 2012 (Tekle, 2012), the median age of community college CEOs was 60 years. At that time, about 75% of CEOs were planning on retiring within the next 10 years, and an additional 15% were planning to retire within 11 to 15 years.

There is looming unease that there will be a shortage of community college presidents in the future. Currently there are a significant number of baby-boomers who are leading organizations, including community colleges. Before long, these leaders will seek out retirement or other transition options and this leaves concern for and question about who will be taking their places. “We had been expecting and anticipating a fair number of retirements but it has become almost a tsunami with the way people are transitioning now; almost one a day for the past year” (W. Bumphus, personal communication, February 3, 2017). It is believed that there are not enough up and coming leaders to take over these positions, potentially resulting in a leadership void (Wiessner & Sullivan, 2007).

Some community college presidents manage to utilize their leadership to navigate the current dynamics facing their institution and endure at their institution long enough to enact change that has meaningful results for student success. In order to build the capacity of upcoming leaders and strengthen the leadership pipeline, it will be important to understand the work that is being done.

### **Justification of Importance**

The 21st Century Commission put forth a call for redesign/reinvention of community colleges. The process of rethinking what to do and how to do it is going to take a leader that is committed to the challenge of leading institutional change and successfully navigating the issues that arise along the way. Institutional change does not happen overnight - change takes time. It

will be important for an institution to have a president who can lead the change process to fruition (AACC, 2012).

The Aspen Institute partnered with Achieving the Dream, Inc. (ATD) to conduct research around the qualities of community college presidents that lead to student success. Community colleges that perform at high levels have presidents that possess exceptional leadership qualities and skills. These presidents have the knowledge and drive to lead their institutions to greater levels of student success (The Aspen Institute, 2013). Through interviews with presidents from these high-performing community colleges, as well as experts in student success reform, ATD and the Aspen Institute were able to determine the actions and attributes deemed necessary when leading such change. In their report, *Crisis and Opportunity: Aligning the Community College Presidency with Student Success*, these two advocacy organizations detailed the qualities that they found common to the most effective community college presidents. These qualities are:

- *Deep commitment to student access and success:* While those who devote their careers to community colleges often care deeply for the populations and missions these unique institutions serve, it is clear that some leaders, more than others, demonstrate a persistent, almost zealous drive to ensure student success, while at the same time maintaining access for the broad range of students community colleges have traditionally served. This commitment drives them to become community college presidents and informs the great majority of their actions (The Aspen Institute, 2013, p. 6).
- *Willingness to take significant risks to advance student success:* Exceptional presidents demonstrate that skillfully taking risks is a vital step toward improvement. For example, they publicly admit and take ownership of low success rates as a tactic to build urgency

around an improvement agenda, and they make bold decisions to reallocate resources when needed to advance student outcomes (The Aspen Institute, 2013, p. 6).

- *The ability to create lasting change within the college:* Community college presidents that have brought about substantial improvement in student success spend substantial time and effort working to create that change internally. These presidents generally lead change through four critical steps, 1) building urgency, 2) creating strong plans, 3) collaborating with and listening to faculty and support staff, and 4) implementing and evaluating change strategies (The Aspen Institute, 2013, p. 7).
- *Having a strong, broad strategic vision for the college and its students, reflected in external partnerships:* Highly effective presidents work to serve students not just while on campus, but also in ways other college leaders might deem beyond their control or responsibility. In particular, they focus on who in their community gets access to a college education, whether students are positioned to succeed when they arrive, what non-educational services they receive on campus, and whether they succeed after they graduate. These leaders build strong relationships with other organizations—including K-12 school districts, universities, employers, community-based non-profit organizations, and policymakers—that are tailored to deliver what students need most to succeed (The Aspen Institute, 2013, p. 7).
- *Raise and allocate resources in ways aligned to student success:* Exceptional community college presidents craft and expertly implement strategies for raising revenue – and deploying resources – that support and align with their goals for improving student success. They are unusually entrepreneurial in raising revenue and consistently strategic when allocating resources (The Aspen Institute, 2013, p. 7).

In 2003, AACC received a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The purpose of the grant, called Leading Forward, was to address the national need for community college leaders. From November 2003 through March 2004, AACC held several summits, working with key constituents to determine the essential knowledge, values, and skills that community college leaders needed (AACC, 2005). The qualitative data from these summits were compiled by the American College Testing (ACT) organization, resulting in a competency framework for leadership. From this framework, AACC designed and electronically distributed a survey to the participants of the leadership summits as well as the Leading Forward National Advisory Panel, to ensure that all of the leadership competencies of community college professionals had been addressed. They received 95 of the 125 surveys back, and all six competencies were looked upon with great support, which helped to ensure the validity of the leadership competencies (AACC, 2005). The result was adopted by the Board of Directors of AACC in 2005 and published as *Competencies for Community College Leaders* (AACC, 2005). The six competencies included organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, community college advocacy, and professionalism.

Recognizing that the community college environment continues to change, AACC (2013) realized that the leadership competencies should also be reconsidered for further improvements and development (AACC, 2013). As such, they consulted with the AACC Executive Committee of the Board of Directors, AACC Presidents Academy Executive Committee, Association of Community College Trustees, National Council of Instructional Administrators, National Council for Student Development, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Commission Implementation Team 9, as well as several focus groups with new and established community college CEOs to review and revise the

competencies. The results were published as *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders: second edition* in 2013. These competencies are:

- *Organizational Strategy*: An effective community college leader promotes the success of all students, strategically improves the quality of the institution, and sustains the community college mission based on knowledge of the organization, its environment, and future trends (AACC, 2013, p. 6).
- *Institutional Finance, Research, Fundraising, and Resource Management*: An effective community college leader equitably and ethically sustains people, processes, and information as well as physical and financial assets to fulfill the mission, vision, and goals of the community college (AACC, 2013, p. 8).
- *Communication*: An effective community college leader uses clear listening, speaking, and writing skills to engage in honest, open dialogue at all levels of the college and its surrounding community; promotes the success of all students; ensures the safety and security of students and the surrounding college community; and sustains the community college mission (AACC, 2013, p. 9).
- *Collaboration*: An effective community college leader develops and maintains responsive, cooperative, mutually beneficial, and ethical internal and external relationships that nurture diversity, promotes the success of all students, and sustains the community college mission (AACC, 2013, p. 10).
- *Community College Advocacy*: An effective community college leader understands, commits to, and advocates for the mission, vision, and goals of the community college on the local, state, and national level (AACC, 2013, p. 11).

With the new edition, AACC delineated the competencies across the spectrum of emerging leaders, to new CEOs (within the first three years on the job) and established CEOs (three or more years on the job). Although this study will focus on established community college presidents, it might provide a structure for similar studies focusing on emerging and newly employed leaders.

There is overlap between the leadership competencies put forth by AACC (2013) and the leadership qualities deemed essential by the Aspen Institute (2013), so for the purposes of this study, the researcher is going to combine the following competencies and qualities:

- Deep commitment to student access and success / Community College Advocacy: by advocating for the mission, vision and goals of the community college, the president is demonstrating deep commitment to student access and success. For this study, these will be combined into the title *Community College Commitment and Advocacy*.
- Having a strong, broad strategic vision for the college and its students reflected in external partnerships / Collaboration: by focusing on supporting the needs of all students who attend community college, prior to starting at the college, while they are at the college and once they move beyond the college, the president will be fostering strong internal and external partnerships through collaboration. For this study, these will be combined into the title *Partnerships and Collaboration*.
- Raise and allocate resources in ways aligned to student success / Institutional Finance, Research, Fundraising and Resource Management: by focusing on ways to raise and allocate resources, as well as seek out pertinent information, the president will be demonstrating strong skills related to finance, research, fundraising and resource



management. For this study, these will be combined into the title *Resource and Information Management*.

By definition, a competency is “an ability or skill” (Competency, n.d.) and a quality is “a characteristic or feature that someone or something has” (Quality, n.d.). Thus, through the actions of community college presidents, their leadership abilities/skills and their leadership characteristics/features could be demonstrated and recognized. For the purposes of this study, the researcher will refer to the combined set of AACC (2013) leadership competencies and the Aspen Institute (2013) leadership essential leadership qualities as leadership skills and characteristics. These seven leadership skills and characteristics categories include: (a) Organizational Strategy, (b) Communication, (c) Resource and Information Management, (d) Partnerships and Collaboration, (e) Community College Commitment and Advocacy, (f) Create Lasting Change and (g) Significant Risk Taking.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the leadership skills and characteristics current community college presidents employ in addressing the issues they are facing as they seek to lead their institutions towards success. Issues that community college presidents face may vary in type and complexity, based on the cultural context of the institution. As such, the strategies and skills implemented when driving toward solutions will potentially also vary.

### **Theoretical Framework**

After studying interacting groups during the 1950s and early 1960s, Fiedler (1964) determined that the leadership approach that would be most effective when leading a group was based on the particular situation the group was facing, thus outlining the contingency leadership theory. Other researchers have contributed similarly based concepts and theories, including

Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid model, Hershey and Blanchard's (1969) situational leadership theory and Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership theory. Based on these collective theories, the idea that leadership is dynamic and changing, dependent upon the situation being addressed, serves to frame the researcher's thinking and the development of this study.

“Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 14). This theory posits that the leadership strategies needed to successfully navigate a particular issue vary based on the context surrounding the issue itself. Specifically, there is a differentiation between technical problems and adaptive challenges, as well as the leadership required in addressing these different types of issues. Technical problems are defined as problems that can be addressed utilizing the current knowledge base and through existing procedures. The solutions to technical problems are clear and well defined and exist within the leader's current expertise. As such, the leader can implement solutions to the problems by utilizing her or his power and influence (authority) to execute the solutions. Adaptive challenges require the leader to extend beyond their current expertise to create new capacity and aptitude (Heifetz et al., 2009). This new capacity and aptitude generation often requires an expansion of knowledge about the current situation and the realm of possible solutions. Once the elements of an issue are identified and clearly defined, the leader can better understand the strategies that will be necessary to seek out proper solutions and which stakeholders should be engaged in the process. Additionally, there is not always a clear distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges as some issues are a composite of both types. Addressing such issues requires shared responsibility for where the work is centered as well as what information is required, new or old, when formulating the solution to the issue (Heifetz et al., 2009).

“Adaptive leadership is an approach to making progress on the most important challenges you face in your piece and part of the world” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 3). The theory is based on the assumption that, unless something is genuinely important to the leader and their work, there is no reason for she or he to exercise leadership and take on the risk of changing things. This level of importance suggests that a leader must be deeply committed to her or his cause. Community college presidents are facing challenging times and are accountable for decisions that impact a wide range of individuals, including students, staff, and local community members. Given these vast responsibilities and accountabilities of community college presidents, it is clear that these individuals possess such commitments to the organizations they serve and the work they accomplish.

### **Research Questions**

The main questions that will be addressed within this study are:

1. *What kinds of issues are community college presidents currently facing?*

Given the changes that community colleges are currently facing, including increased expectations, limitations on resources and changing student demographics, it is important to better understand the specific issues that community college presidents contend with, from the perspective of individuals currently serving in these leadership positions. Knowledge about today’s issues can assist other presidents in developing solutions to appropriately and effectively address the issues. Also, this information can help inform the strategic planning efforts of community colleges as they look to the future.

2. *What leadership skills and characteristics are community college presidents utilizing when addressing the current issues (found from question 1)?*

Along with understanding the current issues, it is important to understand the methods and components of leadership that community college presidents are employing to appropriately address and overcome the issues that they are facing. This insight will be helpful for individuals aspiring to presidential positions within community colleges when thinking about their leadership development. Additionally, this information will assist graduate programs designed to prepare future community college leaders, as leadership development is foundational core of most programs. Given the anticipated shortage of community college presidents in the future, this knowledge will also assist in seeking out potential leaders to fill vacant positions.

3. *What congruences and/or conflicts exist between the leadership skills and characteristics utilized by community college presidents when addressing these issues (found from question 1) and the combined seven leadership skills and strategies adapted from the second edition of the American Association of Community Colleges competencies for community college leaders and the Aspen Institute's essential qualities for community college presidents?*

Since AACC and the Aspen Institute are national organizations that focus on advocating and informing the nation's community colleges, it is important to see if the recommendations they put forth around presidential leadership are reflected in today's practice or if other components should also be included. Leadership is a practice that continues to develop and change, so it is possible that new and/or different components of leadership may emerge when examining the practice of current community college presidents.

Understanding the issues that presidents are facing in today's community colleges will provide insight into the current practice. AACC and the Aspen Institute are advocacy organizations focusing on providing guidance and support for community colleges nationwide.

The recommendations they provide are grounded in the advice from experts within the area. By addressing the research questions above, connections can be drawn between this theoretical guidance and the practical application, allowing for continual improvement and revision within both research and practice.

### **Practical Significance**

This study will have practical significance that is deeply rooted in today's community college. Community college faculty, staff, and administrators, including presidents, who are currently facing today's challenges and doing the work necessary to see students through to success, as well as those who will continue this work into the future, will gain relevant insight from this study. These individuals may use what they learn from this study to more effectively address issues and institute change in their own settings.

The findings from this study will be valuable to members of community college boards of trustees, especially when making search and hiring decisions for a presidential position. It is important to have working knowledge of the issues that community college presidents deal with on a regular basis, as well as the leadership skills and characteristics they employ when addressing them. Targeting these skills and characteristics during the hiring process of an up and coming president will allow the board of trustees to make the best decision possible around who will best serve the institution.

The findings from this study will benefit future community college presidents. Insight gained from this study will assist those who are considering a community college president position in understanding the issues related to being a community college president. By knowing the skills and characteristics necessary to address today's issues, future presidents can assess their own skills and recognize areas they may need to gain more insight and/or training through

personal and professional development. The findings from this study may not be exhaustive however, so it will be important for future community college presidents to avoid becoming stagnant in their development and instead continue to seek opportunities to cultivate their leadership competencies. They can also use this knowledge to hire and develop leadership teams that can compensate for any areas in which they are lacking.

Similarly, directors of leadership development programs for future community college leaders will benefit from this study, as it will help to identify key issues that are currently facing community colleges. Through instruction and/or training, leadership development programs can provide individuals who have aspirations for leadership positions in community colleges a foundational skill set upon which to build. Since this study will focus on the leadership competencies and not methods of acquiring them, it will be important for directors of leadership development programs to continue to be innovative as they consider how aspiring leaders will polish their skills.

In all, knowledge about issues faced by community college presidents will help current and aspiring community college presidents better comprehend the challenging position and the skills needed to successfully navigate the position. Even though the competencies necessary to be a successful president will likely change over time, some leadership skills, like communication, are foundational and will remain consistent, even as community colleges change.

### **Scholarly Significance**

Research related to Heifetz's (1994) theory of adaptive leadership is mostly focused on business and industry outside of higher education. Understanding the ways in which community college presidents address issues will be useful today and into the future, as it will broaden the

perspective around adaptive leadership and deepen the connection between the theory and higher education.

Since the creation of the AACC (2005) leadership competencies, research has been conducted that is directly related. Some studies looked at how presidents, vice presidents, deans and boards of trustees members perceive the importance of the competencies (Boswell & Imroz, 2013; Hassan, Dellow & Jackson, 2009; McNair, 2009). Other studies have looked at how community college presidents have developed and implemented the AACC (2005) leadership competencies (Duree, 2007; Eddy, 2012; McDonald, 2012; McNair, Duree & Ebbers, 2011; McNair & Phelan, 2012). Little research exists related to AACC's (2013) second edition of the leadership competencies. This study will contribute to the scholarly body of knowledge within this area.

It is important to note, however, that this study will be focused on the current landscape of community colleges and the issues they face at the time of publication. Although the relevance of the findings may diminish as community colleges change over time, the skills and practices found may be foundational to leadership within community colleges. Additionally, this study may still provide a framework that other studies can be built upon in the future.

### **Summary**

The role of a community college president is a challenging one. Given the changing expectations placed upon community colleges today, presidents are expected to not only ensure that the college is functioning properly but also plan and implement strategies for the future that will increase student access and success. This work requires exceptional leadership.

The purpose of this study is to examine the issues facing current community college presidents by answering the following research questions:

1. *What kinds of issues are community college presidents currently facing?*
2. *What leadership skills and characteristics are community college presidents utilizing when addressing the current issues (found from question 1)?*
3. *What congruences and/or conflicts exist between the leadership skills and characteristics utilized by community college presidents when addressing these issues (found from question 1) and the combined seven leadership skills and strategies adapted from the second edition of the American Association of Community Colleges competencies for community college leaders and the Aspen Institute's essential qualities for community college presidents?*

By examining these issues as well as leadership skills and characteristics employed when addressing them, information can be learned to assist boards of trustees, directors of community college leadership programs, and aspiring community college presidents. Such information can aid in recruiting, training, and developing community college presidents who will be more likely to make a positive impact on improving student success.



## Section II

### Presidential Leadership in Today's Community Colleges: A Literature Review

Community colleges are facing considerable changes, if not complete redesigns as they proceed through the twenty-first century (AACC, 2012). The traditional focus of open access has shifted to student completion and success. Despite the fact that many states are decreasing the amount of funds appropriated to higher education (Mortenson, 2012), the expectations for community college accountability are increasing (McClenney, 2013).

Such challenges require leaders who are well versed and dedicated to today's community colleges. Such leaders need to be driven to innovate in order to meet the needs of students and society of the future. The process of rethinking what to do and how to do it is going to take a leader that is committed to the challenge of leading institutional change and successfully navigating the issues that arise along the way. Institutional change does not happen overnight; change takes time. It will be important for an institution to have a president who can lead the change process to fruition (AACC, 2012).

Understanding which skills and characteristics a leader must possess in order to fulfill these tasks is essential for anyone who wishes to seek a presidential position at a community college in the twenty-first century (AACC, 2013). These insights are also valuable for higher education programs wishing to develop such leaders and for boards of trustees as they make decisions about hiring future presidents.

This literature review is intended to identify the previous scholarly work on the subject of community college presidential leadership competencies. Additionally, it will explore areas of research that have utilized the theory of adaptive leadership.

### **Databases, Key Words and Research Approach**

To identify prior scholarly work that was relevant to the literature review, different sources and search terms were used. The main databases used were ERIC (EBSCOhost), 1Search through Oregon State University Libraries, Education Research Complete, and Google Scholar. Examining the reference lists of articles that directly related to the topic provided additional scholarly sources to consider.

Key word(s) and phrases used in searches included the combination of the subject “president,” together with “leadership,” “skills,” “competencies,” “strategies,” “experience,” and “effective.” By combining these key terms with “community college,” “two-year college,” “junior college,” or “higher education,” literature related to the topic was found. In instances where satisfactory results were not achieved, broader terms such as “leader” and “education” were used to gain a wider range of results. Additionally, searches were conducted related to “adaptive leadership” and “adaptive leadership theory,” combined with “Heifetz,” to ensure that the results related back to Heifetz’s theory.

Given the current nature of this topic, studies related to leadership in higher education included in this literature review were limited to the past 16 years (2000 and newer). Such restrictions were not included on literature related to adaptive leadership since the original theory was only developed in 1994.

### **Definitions**

*Achieving the Dream (ATD)* - ATD is a network of institutions in higher education, coaches and advisors, policy teams at the state level, as well as investors and partners. The focus of ATD is to innovate and reform practices within community colleges to increase student success.

Adaptive challenge - Adaptive challenges are complex issues that can only be resolved through changing the beliefs, habits, priorities and/or loyalties of the individuals involved. Adaptive challenges require an expansion of the current knowledge base.

Adaptive leadership - Adaptive leadership is a theory focusing on how to lead during challenging situations by distinguishing between technical problems and adaptive challenges.

American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) - Through advocacy work at the national level, AACC supports more than 90% of America's community, technical, and junior colleges. AACC focuses on innovative programs, policy initiatives, research, and information. This organization is committed to leadership and service while serving as the unifying voice for community colleges nationwide.

The Aspen Institute - The Aspen Institute is an organization that deals with educational and policy studies. Their mission focuses on using enduring values to fostering leadership and assist in dealing with critical issues in a nonpartisan way.

Community college - A community college is a public, two-year institution of higher education that primarily awards associate degrees to students.

Community college president - Sometimes known as the chief executive officer (CEO), the community college president is responsible for overseeing the functions and operations of the college. The community college president reports to a board of trustees who are either elected or appointed.

Leadership competencies - Competencies are skills, knowledge, expertise, and/or abilities within a specific area. Leadership competencies are the competencies that are enacted when working in a leadership capacity.

Technical problem - Technical problems are direct issues that can be successfully addressed with the current base of knowledge through the expertise of an authority figure.

### **Overview of the Literature Review**

The literature review will begin by examining studies undertaken using the lens of adaptive leadership theory. It will then turn to a discussion of the literature related to leadership competencies.

### **Major Themes for Adaptive Leadership Theory**

In 1994, Dr. Ronald Heifetz first introduced adaptive leadership in his book *Leadership without easy answers* and continued to develop the theory and its practical application in subsequent books, including the book *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*, which he wrote in 2009 with Marty Linsky and Alexander Grashow. Adaptive leadership is seen as a way to understand “the relationship among leadership, adaptation, systems and change” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 13). The theory is rooted in scientific connections, drawing parallels between the evolution of human life for survival and the need for organizations to adapt to their changing environments, noting that both contexts require diversity, experimentation and change in order to achieve success (Heifetz et al., 2009).

In the review process, adaptive leadership was a component of literature within the fields of health care, military, and education. Although not every reference included represents a complete research study, the practical application of some journal articles deemed them necessary for inclusion in the literature review.

**Healthcare.** Within the field of health care, adaptive leadership principles guided the complex work being done at the patient level (Anderson et al., 2015; Thygeson et al., 2010) and

at the clinic level (Raney, 2014). Additionally, adaptive leadership guided the preparation of future leaders (Bailey, et. al, 2012; Kendall-Gallagher & Breslin, 2013).

Viewing the practice of medicine as adaptive leadership was the focus of the article written by Thygeson et al. (2010). By viewing organizations and human beings as complex adaptive systems, the authors explained how to implement six principles of adaptive leadership to better the medical practice and properly address challenges of the medical world. They posited that within the current medical practice, there is an overuse of less-complex, technical solutions for medical issues that should actually require adaptive work to solve properly. They believed that, by improving provider-patient relationships, their model shifts away from the technical solutions and focuses on supporting adaptive patient work. Although there is no research to support their claims, the authors believed that the benefits of their model are not only relevant to medical practice but could also impact medical research.

Chronic illnesses are often complex and unpredictable. As such, Anderson et al. (2015) explained how Heifetz's adaptive leadership framework could be applied to chronic illnesses, creating The Adaptive Leadership Framework for Chronic Illness. The proposed new framework was not studied directly in this article, but the authors provided suggestions for how research utilizing The Adaptive Leadership Framework for Chronic Illness could be conducted in the areas of symptom trajectory and collaborative work. They believed this tool would allow for expanded perspectives for conceptualizing, providing care for and studying chronic illnesses.

Through a case study approach, Raney (2014) described how a community health center in a large metropolitan area was able to increase innovation and achieve financial stability. The center made conscious decisions over a five-year period to collaborate the efforts of administration and clinicians to implement strategies focused on the principles of adaptive

leadership and mindfulness practices. These strategies included seeking out perspectives from stakeholders, moving “toward suffering, risk, possibility, and resilience” when in crises and staying committed to visioning about possibilities for the future (p. 319). The challenge to implementing such changes was that innovative practices often involved taking risks, which was harder to do with limited resources. Although Raney’s study provided in-depth, informative data regarding changes that were made within the center, the results may only be reflective of the particular center and the dynamic of its employees, making it less generalizable to other community health centers.

Kendall-Gallagher and Breslin (2013) explained that students who earn a doctor of nursing practice (DNP) degree need to be prepared for the adaptive work necessary to perform at the highest level of the practice and to become leaders that will transform the health care to a more quality focused system. The Commission of Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) has eight DNP core competencies that accredited programs need to follow. The researchers redesigned a 15-week course to align the competency of “Organization and Systems for Leadership for Quality Improvement and Systems Thinking” with the model of adaptive leadership (Kendall-Gallagher & Breslin, 2013, p. 260). Given the relative newness of the course implementation, little analysis was provided on how the course was evaluated and adjusted after the pilot year.

Leadership within health care should not only be practiced by administration, but should be implemented throughout the system, including at the patient care level. Bailey et al. (2012) described the Adaptive Leadership framework and how it can be implemented throughout the practice of nursing. Through five research exemplars within nursing, the authors outlined the phenomenon of interest and research problem, and then applied the Adaptive Leadership

framework to articulate the technical and adaptive perspectives that were present in each exemplar. The framework focused on practitioner-patient interactions and increasing stakeholder abilities within the process. Even though the authors highlighted research exemplars within nursing, additional research should expand upon the current knowledge base in order to ensure that the Adaptive Leadership framework becomes fully integrated into scholarly work and nursing practice.

**Military.** In his article, Cojocar (2011) acknowledged that the Army already incorporated adaptive leadership into some of their training practices and methodologies. After a brief review of adaptive leadership within the Army's current leadership doctrine as well as Heifetz's et al. (2009) practices of adaptive leadership, Cojocar (2011) recommended changes to the military decision making process (MDMP). The process outlined would allow commanders and their staff to observe and analyze a mission that needs to be accomplished, interpret and design possible courses of action, and then experiment and compare the different courses of action to see if it needs further adaptation. Cojocar indicated that this process of MDMP would be more effective in response to the types of threats that the Army faces in conflict situations.

**Education.** In the educational context, qualitative case studies and personal encounters are used to highlight the appropriateness of the theory of adaptive leadership for addressing complex situations (Randall & Coakley, 2007; Randall, 2012; Wolfe, 2015).

Randall and Coakley (2007) analyzed two case studies with the adaptive leadership model. The first case study involved a four-year college that had moved from an urban to a suburban location, specifically looking at the leadership process the president and subsequent interim president employed when faced with serious fiscal crises. The top-down approach with little stakeholder input that was taken from the beginning of the process proved to be detrimental

to the challenge that faced the institution and ultimately ended with the college's closure. The second case study involved a once prestigious program at a university that was facing significant enrollment declines. The new chair of the program knew that serious changes needed to happen in order to revive the program and input from key stakeholders, including faculty and students, would be essential to the process. Previous short-term fixes were not sustained. The department needed to change parts of its culture, as well as behaviors and attitudes, and develop new curriculum. Through a series of steps, which the authors analyzed using Heifetz's adaptive leadership model, the department completed the change initiative and realized an increase in enrollment. Although the adaptive leadership model was not the only one that the authors could have applied to the case studies, it was useful in explaining the failure and success of these two case studies.

In order to study the process of how one upper-division university worked to transform into a four-year institution, Randall (2012) utilized a qualitative case study approach. She focused on the ways in which two critical committees implement leadership to enact the first phase of change in the transformation process. The adaptive leadership model framed the process employed by these committees as they worked through resistance to create lasting change. Despite the fact that the university successfully made the transition to a four-year institution, the author only studied the first six months of the two-year process, so it is unclear if the adaptive leadership model was most appropriate for the final phases of the transformation.

In her article, Wolfe (2015) reflected back on a three-year process of reforming the general education program at Nebraska Wesleyan University from the adaptive leadership framework lens. She highlighted the work that the university had done in the processes of diagnosis, observing, interpreting, and intervening. She also described how curricular change



was ultimately adaptive in nature, given the final result was a combination of preservation and loss. The university maintained high-impact practices and global learning, yet discarded old options to develop new thematic course threads and learning and assessment options. Although this article did not present a formal research study, it still provides insight as to how the adaptive leadership framework can be applied to complex situations in a higher education setting.

The summaries of these studies and articles highlight how the adaptive leadership, when applied appropriately within the higher education context, can result in sustainable change and reform.

**Summary on adaptive leadership.** The theory of adaptive leadership lends itself to many different contexts, including healthcare, military and education. Although most of the available literature focuses how the theory might be applied in the practical setting, some case studies do exist as a means of grounding that application using research. More research could be done to make a direct connection between the adaptive leadership theory and community college presidents.

### **Major Themes for Leadership Competencies**

Through the literature review, two themes emerged around the importance of the AACC (2005) leadership competencies and the pathways to obtaining and effectively using the competencies. Additionally, another theme was found around leadership when facing challenges and crises.

**Viewed importance of leadership competencies.** Community college presidents, trustees, and other administrators perceived that the AACC (2005) leadership competencies accurately reflect the skills most commonly used when leading in the community college environment (Boggs, 2012; Bonner, 2013; Boswell & Imroz, 2013; Hassan et al., 2009; McNair,

2009; Plinske & Packard, 2010). The following studies were included in this review because they either directly or indirectly related to the AACC (2005) leadership competencies, specifically within community college settings.

To determine the relative importance of the AACC (2005) leadership competencies, Hassan et al. (2009) conducted a study using a convenience sampling of community college presidents and board chairpersons in New York and Florida. Fifty-nine out of a possible 116 respondents completed a descriptive, nonexperimental, 45-item survey, and researchers conducted paired sample t-tests for differences by matching the president and board chair within the same college. Overall, each of the competencies had a mean value of 4.3 or above (5 being high importance, 1 being low importance), and no significant differences were found between the ratings of the presidents and board chairs. This result was not surprising, as it is difficult to rank a competency that has been identified as a leadership skill or ability as being of low importance. By having the participants rank order the competencies, researchers may have been able to better see if some competencies were perceived as more important than others. In the study, researchers also sought experiences that provided development to practicing community college presidents, and on-the-job experiences emerged as the most helpful for leadership development. Despite having a high response rate and clearly addressing the practical significance of the leadership competencies to both presidents and board chairpersons, the findings from Hassan et al. (2009) may not be easily generalized to other states that have different structures for their community college governing boards.

McNair (2009) conducted a study to focus on the perception of the AACC (2005) competencies of the leaders of California's community colleges and to consider which additional competencies could be acquired through a doctoral program specifically leading to a doctorate of

education (EdD). Upon completion of a pilot study with eight community college leaders in California, presidents, academic senate presidents, chief business officers, CEOs, chief instructional officers, and chief student services officers were solicited from community colleges across the state. Out of 1,071 potential participants, 113 leaders participated. Most responses showed “agree” or “somewhat agree” to items representing the competencies, indicating the perceived importance. Once again, it was not surprising that individuals who hold important leadership positions within the college rate leadership competencies as essential for effective leadership. In addition, results indicated that organizational strategy was the only competency that could be developed through a doctoral program and recommended professional development as a means of gaining other competencies. Given the relatively low response, the researcher could have made adjustments to the study design to allow for greater participation, such as extending the five-day response window. A larger sample would have increased the generalizability of the results, even if only within the state. Additionally, a larger sample would have provided the study with greater internal validity by ensuring the findings accurately represented reality.

Plinske and Packard (2010) conducted a study that focused on characteristics, competencies, and professional experiences believed to be important for community college presidents as seen by trustees. Using the Delphi process, researchers worked with 44 locally elected trustees in the state of Illinois. The results included 15 characteristics, 13 competencies, and 17 experiences that were of greatest consensus of trustees as being important for community college presidents. The researchers compared their findings to those established by Ruah (1969) and found that many of the characteristics, competencies, and professional experiences viewed as important were almost unchanged for nearly four decades. Although the competencies of Plinske

and Packard (2010) were not directly related to the AACC (2005) leadership competencies, similarities exist between the two. It may be difficult to generalize the findings from Plinske and Packard (2010) due to the fact that it was limited to only one state with locally elected trustees. Findings from states with different structures for their board of trustees may show alternate expectations and desired qualities for their community college presidents.

Boswell and Imroz (2013) conducted research to determine how community college presidents, vice presidents, and deans in Pennsylvania viewed the AACC (2005) leadership competencies as important for effective leadership. An online survey assessing 45 behaviors, values and attitudes was distributed to 213 potential participants. Researchers utilized descriptive statistics on the 57 responses that they received. The findings were that each of the six competencies had a mean value of 4.28 or above (5=extremely important, 1=not important), which was similar to findings from Hassan, et. al (2009) in New York and Florida. Despite having nearly 27% response rate, Boswell and Imroz (2013) cannot increase the generalizability of the study conducted by Hassan et al. (2009), except in aggregate response form. This is because Boswell and Imroz (2013) utilized a different sample population, namely presidents, vice presidents, and deans, compared to the sample population of presidents and board chairpersons of Hassan, et. al (2009). Additionally, Boswell and Imroz (2013) only utilized a limited number of descriptive statistics to present their findings. If the sample had included more respondents, the researchers would have been able to conduct statistical comparisons to determine if differences existed between the subpopulations of respondents.

Bonner (2013) focused her dissertation research on the leadership skills and characteristics that community college presidents believed were necessary to be successful in the present day and in the future. The study also sought to determine how those skills and

characteristics compared to the 2001 AACC Taskforce findings and how the leadership characteristics played out in the field. Through a multi-case study approach, Bonner (2013) interviewed nine community college presidents from one Midwestern state, including those at the early-, mid-, and senior-level of their career. Leadership skills and characteristics emerged from the analysis and were grouped into five themes: (a) the need to have wide interests and expertise in several areas, (b) the ability to learn on the job, (c) consistency of views, (d) the all-consuming nature of the role and (e) looking ahead. Even though Bonner (2013) carefully selected her participants so as to represent college presidents throughout their career, her results cannot be easily generalized given the small sample size from only one state. Additionally, although the first edition of the AACC leadership competencies was developed in 2005, Bonner (2013) referenced the earlier 2001 AACC Taskforce findings throughout her study. Had she utilized the more recent AACC literature, Bonner (2013) would have contributed to a more current body of scholarly work.

The summaries of these studies help to identify the characteristics, competencies, and experiences that were viewed as important to possess by community college presidents. It is important to remember that studies involving self-reported perceptions are subject to individual bias from each respondent. Given the strong leadership that is required of a community college president, it is not surprising that many studies indicated ratings of *important* or *very/extremely important* on all factors related to leadership qualities. By utilizing some quantitative techniques or by having participants compare the skills to one another, some researchers may have been able to determine if any factor(s) had a higher perceived importance than another. Similarly, although these studies highlighted the perceived importance of the competencies by many important

figures within community colleges, they do not thoroughly address how the competencies are utilized as part of effective leadership within community colleges.

**Pathways to obtaining leadership competencies.** It is essential to understand how to develop leadership competencies in order to be a successful leader who endures at an institution. The competencies necessary to be a successful community college president are not acquired through one pathway, but rather through experience, education, professional development, and mentoring (Duree, 2007; Fox, 2008; Hassan et al., 2009; Malm, 2008; McNair et al., 2011; McDonald, 2012; McNair, 2009; McNair & Phelan, 2012). The following studies were included in this literature review because they provide insight from community college presidents on their developmental journeys, through both quantitative and qualitative research designs.

Duree (2007) focused his dissertation research on examining the demographics, backgrounds, career pathways, leadership programs and educational preparation, and the leadership competencies necessary to be a community college president. Through the creation and implementation of “The Community College Presidency: Demographics and Leadership Factors Survey,” Duree collected and analyzed responses from 415 community college presidents nationwide. Findings of the research included the importance of an earned doctoral degree, mentor-protégé relationship, and the perceptions of the AACC (2005) competencies. Additionally, five common challenges emerged: fundraising, student enrollment and retention, legislative advocacy, economic and workforce development, and faculty relations. Even though Duree (2007) had a 38.2% response rate for his study, the results only reflected the viewpoints of currently sitting presidents in 2007 and may have been influenced by local and/or national issues that were being faced at the time. By repeating the study design with the same individual at some point in the future, the longitudinal data could show if community college presidents, in

aggregate, still feel similarly about the leadership challenges that are being faced and/or they could articulate how the faced challenges have changed over time.

McNair et al. (2011) sought to determine what presidents perceived as gaps in their preparation for community college leadership positions by providing additional analysis of previous research. Duree (2007) conducted a national survey for his doctoral dissertation and included an open-ended question, asking presidents to identify what they wish they could have done differently to prepare for their leadership position. Through qualitative analysis of the data of the 282 narrative responses, McNair et al. (2011) found that 11 themes emerged, including those of the AACC (2005) competencies. The overwhelming consensus of the data also indicated that the skills necessary for community college leadership positions are not developed through a single way. Given that the data from this study were collected using an open-ended, narrative response question on a survey, the researchers had to interpret the responses and their meanings. The individual biases of the researchers may have influenced how they interpreted the data. By allowing for follow up clarification with the respondents through member checking, the researchers could have had opportunities to clarify any vague or ambiguous responses.

McNair and Phelan's (2012) study focused on the influence of the AACC (2005) leadership competencies on the practice of current community college presidents. Researchers selected six community college presidents/CEOs who had exemplary reputations as leaders and familiarity with the competencies for interviews. Through qualitative analysis of their responses, themes emerged related to the pathways to a presidency, development of leadership competencies, integration of the competencies into practice, and necessary competencies believed to be missing from the AACC (2005) competencies. Having various positions across campus as well as seeking out opportunities for learning were the most prevalent means of

obtaining the leadership competencies. Although the participants in the study were geographically diverse and represented various types of institutions (urban, rural, and suburban), it is unclear if the study had enough representation to allow for transferability, given that it was restricted to only six participants.

The studies summarized work to illuminate the pathways that are taken by leaders to obtain a community college presidency position. Although many of them indicated similar findings, none of them specifically address nontraditional pathways to a community college presidency, such as leaders coming from outside the community college setting, which may be more prevalent given the proposed shortage of community college presidents. More research in this area would broaden the scholarly knowledge base.

**Facing challenges with leadership.** Several studies have indicated that, in order to effectively respond to the challenges that community colleges are facing today and into the future, presidents will need to be well versed with the AACCC (2005) leadership competencies (Malm, 2008; Murray & Kishur, 2008). Additionally, several studies indicated that utilizing a multi-framed approach was critical when dealing with challenges and crises (Bolman & Deal, 2014; Eddy, 2012; McArdle, 2013; McDonald, 2012; Sullivan, 2001). The following studies were included in this literature review because they specifically focus on addressing challenges within the community college setting with leadership competencies, skills, and processes.

Malm (2008) conducted guided conversations with six community college presidents in Maryland to determine what challenges and uncertainties community college presidents were facing. Additionally, Malm looked for which organizational processes were being implemented and which leadership approaches the presidents were employing. Through qualitative analysis, challenges emerged around fiscal issues, internal cultural concerns, employee recruitment and



retention, external community relationships, campus infrastructure growth, student access to baccalaureate degrees, and new learning programs and demands. When addressing these challenges, organizational processes related to strategic planning, activities of budgeting, human resources, decision-making, and leadership were implemented, although no universal approach for effective change processes or leadership was found within the data. The findings of Malm were not directly related to the AACC (2005) leadership competencies; nevertheless, connections could be drawn between the two. Given the limited sample size of this study and the fact that it was conducted within one state, the findings cannot be easily generalized to the broader population of community college presidents.

Murray and Kishur (2008) studied decision-making processes of community college presidents. Through case study methodology, researchers compared interviews of 13 community college presidents who described their experiences when confronted with unexpected and major challenges. Although the study was limited to only presidents who are accountable to public boards of trustees, researchers were able to categorize the challenge narratives into four themes/categories: financial, personnel, political, and public relations. Researchers summarized the results into best practices for dealing with major and unexpected challenges in community colleges. A similar study could be conducted amongst community college presidents at colleges with different governing structures to see if the findings are comparable.

Bolman and Deal's (2014) book entitled *How Great Leaders Think: The Art of Reframing* stemmed from their original four-frame model. In this text, the authors described the four different frames of leadership within their theory, including structural, human resources, political, and spiritual. Through multiple case studies, they explained how effective leaders often have strengths within particular frames. Challenging situations can involve areas where leaders

feel less comfortable, but managing to reframe situations and navigate using a multi-framed approach can result in successful outcomes.

Eddy (2012) summarized her own study from 2010 where she focused on how community college presidents used the AACC (2005) leadership competencies. Through interviews with community college presidents, members of their leadership team, and faculty leaders, it was clear to Eddy that the competencies often worked in tandem. This finding led to a holistic view of the competencies and the creation of four clusters: (a) Inclusivity (Communication and Collaboration competencies): the process of allowing for shared leadership and organizational learning; (b) Framing Meaning (Organizational Strategy, Communication, Collaboration and Advocacy competencies): the process of sense making and interpreting campus events, as well as focusing attention; (c) Attention to the Bottom Line (Resource Management, Organizational Strategy and Advocacy competencies): the process of making decisions driven by attention to costs and achieving greatest possible outcomes; and (d) Systems Thinking (Organizational Strategy, Communication and Professionalism competencies): the process of seeing connections between actions and reactions. Eddy (2012) also advocated that the contextual competency should run throughout each of the clusters. Eddy's original study in 2010 was limited to focusing on only 12 community college presidents, including a total of 75 interviews. Although she worked from a rich collection of qualitative data, the findings may not be easily generalized to the entire population of community college presidents.

Understanding how community college leaders approach leadership challenges was the focus of McArdle (2013). A mixed-methods approach was utilized through Bolman and Deal's (1990) Leadership Orientation Survey (self) and a description of a critical leadership challenge that leaders were currently facing. Data from 18 presidents and 102 administrators from

academic affairs, student affairs, and business affairs were received and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings from the quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis did not agree; the quantitative data indicated that the majority of leaders utilized a multi-frame approach when responding to critical leadership challenges yet the qualitative data did not show such an approach but rather a single frame, such as human resources. Differences in the findings may be attributed to the differences in the nature of the data collection and analysis process. When responding quantitatively, a participant may be more easily able to articulate how they utilize a multi-frame approach to a challenge; however, when describing the specific details of responding to a challenge, it may be that the focus is on one particular vantage point of the challenge at hand, which would leave the qualitative data illuminating a singular frame approach.

Within the summaries of these studies, it is apparent that leadership competencies are utilized when addressing the complex challenges that community college presidents face and often they are utilized in a multi-faceted approach. Given that most of the studies summarized were focusing on qualitative methods, the results, although often rich and descriptive in nature, tend to be less generalizable to the larger population of community college presidents. More research could be done to see if the leadership competencies needed to address today's challenges within community colleges are universally agreed upon and used.

**Summary on leadership competencies.** The literature review indicated that leadership competencies are perceived to be very important by not only community college presidents but also trustees and others who work in leadership positions in community college. These competencies are obtained through experience working in community colleges but also through increased education and professional development, and mentoring. The competencies developed

by community college presidents will assist them in facing the dynamic and complex challenges of the changing community college environment.

### **Summary**

The available literature provides some insight about how adaptive leadership has been utilized within different contexts, including the health care, military, and education fields. Some of the literature centers on how the theory of adaptive leadership should be implemented versus studies of actual implementation, but it was still included to provide a practical application perspective. This study will add to the knowledge base by utilizing adaptive leadership as the theoretical framework. Currently, very little research exists connecting adaptive leadership to community college presidents, so this study will also gain insight in this area.

The literature also provides insight to the perceptions of community college presidents, trustees, and other administrators on the AACCC (2005) competencies for community college leaders and how many leaders acquired such competencies. Similarly, the literature outlines challenges that community college leaders face and how the AACCC (2005) leadership competencies are utilized in meeting those challenges. By including studies from only the past 16 years, the findings and conclusions are relevant to today's community colleges and their leaders, even given the rapidly changing nature of community college landscape. Despite this, the literature does not include any research focusing on updated competencies from 2013, which presents a gap that this study will assist in addressing.

Based on the findings from this literature review, this study will focus on articulating the types of issues (technical versus adaptive) community college presidents are currently facing, as well as which leadership skills and characteristics they are employing while addressing the issues. The intent will also be to see how these skills and characteristics relate to the current

edition of the AACC (2013) leadership competencies and the Aspen Institute's essential qualities for community college presidents. The next chapter will detail and discuss the methods for the proposed study.

## Section III

### Design and Methods

Within this section, the methods used to properly address the research questions will be identified and justified. The researcher's positionality and the philosophical approach will be described. The process of gathering and analyzing the data will be reviewed, including the protection of human subjects and means for ensuring credibility and consistency in the research. Finally, limitations of the study and an anticipated timeline will be presented.

### Research Questions

The main question that will be addressed within this study is:

1. *What kinds of issues are community college presidents currently facing?*

Given the changes that community colleges are currently facing, including increased expectations, limitations on resources and changing student demographics, it is important to better understand the issues that community college presidents contend with, from the perspective of individuals currently serving in these leadership positions.

The second question that will be addressed within this study is:

2. *What leadership skills and characteristics are community college presidents utilizing when addressing these issues?*

Along with understanding the current issues, it is important to understand the methods and strategies community college presidents are employing to appropriately address and overcome the issues that they are facing. This insight will be helpful for current community college presidents and those individuals aspiring to presidential positions within community colleges. Additionally, with so many current community college presidents facing retirement, it is predicted that there will be a shortage of individuals to fill the vacancies. Insight gained from this

study may help graduate programs design and implement curriculum to prepare future community college leaders.

The third question that will be addressed within this study is:

3. *What congruences and/or conflicts exist between the leadership skills and characteristics utilized by community college presidents when addressing these issues (found from question 1) and the combined seven leadership skills and strategies adapted from the second edition of the American Association of Community Colleges competencies for community college leaders and the Aspen Institute's essential qualities for community college presidents?*

Since the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and The Aspen Institute are national organizations that focuses on advocating and informing the nation's community colleges, it is important to see if their recommendations for leadership competencies and essential qualities are reflected in today's practice or if other competencies and qualities should also be included.

### **Positionality**

The qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world. Rather, the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied. A gendered, historical self is brought to this process. This self, as a set of shifting identities, has its own history with the situated practices that define and shape the public issues and private troubles being studied (Denzin, 2001, p. 3).

The researcher is a white, female, full-time faculty member and part-time graduate student in the Pacific Northwest with experience in education at the K-12 and community college

levels. Despite the researcher's faculty status, her current position affords her the opportunity to have supervisory duties for staff, students, and other faculty. This non-traditional faculty role allows the researcher unique insights into the challenges associated with the work of leadership positions and the processes of leading change with groups of people. The researcher recognizes that she will contribute bias to this study and will work to acknowledge and control for any bias throughout the research process. Additionally, the researcher recognizes the power differential between herself and the study participants, given that she is a faculty member and study participants are administrators. This power differential may not allow the study participants to feel fully comfortable with disclosing the requested data.

### **Philosophical Approach**

For this study, the researcher takes an interpretive philosophical approach. Interpretive research focuses on the life experiences of individuals as well as the meanings that the individuals make of those experiences (Denzin, 2001). By understanding the life experiences of community college presidents and the leadership they employ when within these life experiences, practitioners in community colleges as well as advocacy groups like AACC and the Aspen Institute can refine their knowledge of the skillset necessary to be a successful community college president.

Narrative inquiry is the process of studying experience. This experience is detailed and shared in the form of a story. "When people tell stories, they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness. It is this process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 7). The experience itself is the phenomenon that is being studied (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Through narrative inquiry, the



researcher will collect data from community college presidents on the issues they have faced within the reality of their leadership role, and the skills and characteristics they have found helpful or not helpful in the process of solving those issues. The phenomena of the current study are the ways in which each president addresses the issues that she or he faces and the leadership competencies she or he employed in the process. By examining the stories that are told of the lived experiences, the researcher will be able to identify which strategies and tactics used in addressing the issues are most meaningful and important to the presidents. Although many similarities exist between community college environments and the broad issues that they deal with, each institution has a unique culture. This allows for variance across institutions, making it important to analyze the phenomenon as a whole from the individual president's narratives.

### **Data Sources and Description of Data**

Through a qualitative approach, data will be collected from participants who will be asked to detail significant issues they have faced within their current position in order to gain a better understanding of their experiences. The following will present the participant selection, the interview protocol, and secondary sources of data.

### **Participant Selection and Invitation**

This study will use homogeneous sampling to purposefully identify and interview 10 community college presidents, each with tenure of at least three-years in their current position. Data for this dissertation will be collected from on-site interviews with current community college presidents at their institutions. To be eligible for this study, participants must be employed at a community college that is accredited through the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) and the institution must have an annual student FTE of 1250 or greater. By narrowing the potential participants to only those from NWCCU accredited

institutions, participants will have similar expectations for educational quality and institutional effectiveness, based on NWCCU standards, while still serving demographically and geographically diverse populations. By selecting presidents from institutions with annual student FTE of 1250 or higher, the institutions are large enough to have shared experience. Institutions smaller than 1250 student FTE may have expectations and responsibilities that are unique only to presidents of extremely small institutions. Additionally, participants must have a tenure of at least three years within their current position. This tenure will allow the participant to have a sound understanding of the current landscape of community colleges as well as enough depth within their current position to discuss issues that have been both successfully and less-successfully navigated. If presidents are still able to make changes that result in significant accomplishments related to student success and completion under a shorter tenure, it is likely that the accomplishments occurred in spite of the president, not as a direct result of their leadership (AACC, 2013). Thus a longer tenure suggests that the president has had more opportunity for success within their position.

The researcher will analyze the composition of current community college presidents at institutions accredited through the NWCCU. Once identified, potential participants will be contacted directly, via email or telephone, with a description of the study and an invitation to participate. Given the busy nature of community college presidents, it will be appropriate to identify and invite a minimum of 20 to 25 presidents who match the above stated selection criteria. It is anticipated that acquiring at least 10 interviews will be necessary for this study, understanding that the researcher's goal is to reach saturation of the population within the NWCCU. This point of saturation will be achieved when sufficient rich and thick data has been collected and coded, such that no new themes emerge (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Upon confirmation

from a community college president, an interview will be scheduled. Interview times will be scheduled in coordination with each president's schedule.

### **Interview Protocol**

Data will be collected from one-on-one interviews with the community college presidents, using a semi-structured format. The interviews will be conducted in person and audio recorded. Given that most community college presidents feel comfortable speaking and sharing their experiences with others, there is little concern about being able to acquire adequate data using this format. Presidents will be asked to sign a consent form to participate in the study. Question sets will be used to guide the interview and follow-up questions based on individual responses may be asked to increase clarification (See Appendix A). The questions are designed to have presidents discuss both issues that they directly face within their current position, as well as respond to how they would navigate a hypothetical, pre-determined issue, and what issues they believe will be important for future community college presidents to consider. The questions also collect information about the presidents' perceived cultural context at their current institution, as well as their demographic and background data.

If necessary, participants may be contacted for a second interview via the telephone or Skype in order to clarify previously collected data or provide additional data. Since a relationship will be established during the first in person interview, following up via telephone or Skype will still allow the researcher to collect meaningful data. Telephone/Skype interviews will also be audio recorded. Upon completion of the interview process, participants will be sent a note of appreciation for their participation. Once the entire study is complete, participants will be provided a copy of the abstract and offered a copy of the dissertation.

### **Analyses**

Narrative analysis is the most appropriate technique for this study, given that presidents will be sharing the issues they face through their personal stories. It is through these stories that they will make sense of the situations they faced and the methods utilized to address them. The stories told by the presidents will be first-person accounts of their experiences and will create the narrative text that will then be analyzed.

Once the interviews are transcribed into written text, the transcriptions will be loaded into the Dedoose software program for coding. The data will be coded using a qualitative process informed by Charmaz's (2006) methods in grounded theory. Coding is the means of naming different segments of the data in ways that will categorize and summarize what the data represents. This process of coding allows the researcher to interpret the data in an analytical way. When developing qualitative codes, segments of the data are taken apart and named in succinct ways. Then the researcher proposes an analytic tag that represents the underlying idea interpreted from the segment (Charmaz, 2006). The data will go through multiple readings and refining of codes, in order to make sure the codes clearly represent all components of the narratives. Once the coding is complete, these codes will be explored for themes and patterns based on the leadership competencies implemented when addressing issues. The researcher will use the descriptions outlined by AACC (2013) and The Aspen Institute (2013) to assist in coding the narratives based upon the seven leadership skills and characteristics: (a) Organizational Strategy, (b) Communication, (c) Resource and Information Management, (d) Partnerships and Collaboration, (e) Community College Commitment and Advocacy, (f) Create Lasting Change and (g) Significant Risk Taking. Other naturally derived codes will be used for leadership employed that do not fit within these leadership skills and characteristics.

The researcher will begin by analyzing the stories of the significant issues that each president has specifically faced (lived experience). This will give data regarding the leadership skills and characteristics that presidents actually employ. Although the actual issues may range considerably by institution, the data will be compared across presidents to see if the leadership skills and characteristics employed are related or differ based on similarities in their self-described cultural contexts. Similarly, the researcher will analyze the descriptions of how the presidents would address the manufactured issue (hypothetical experience). This will give insight as to the leadership skills and characteristics that have perceived importance by each president. Again, the responses will be compared across presidents based on the cultural contexts of the institutions to look for alignment.

The researcher will next compare the issues that presidents believe will be important for consideration in the future (predictions). As leaders, presidents need to have a complex understanding of the community college as a whole, which includes its past, present and future states of being. Once again, these predictions will give insight as to what leadership skills and characteristics the presidents believe to be most important as part of leading community colleges into the future. The researcher will then compare skills and characteristics that each president employed in the lived experience to those suggested for the hypothetical experience and those suggested for the predicted future, to look for commonalities and/or differences.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher will look for patterns or themes within the skills and characteristics. From this, the researcher will determine whether these skills and characteristics compare to the leadership competencies and/or the essential qualities advocated as necessary for successful leaders. Alignment between the findings from this study and the AACC (2013) competencies and/or The Aspen Institute's (2013) qualities will assist in verifying the

relevancy and prevalence these groups' advocacy around leadership. If themes emerge that differ from those outlined by AACC (2013) and The Aspen Institute (2013), the researcher will make note of the differences and make suggestions for future research.

### **Procedures for Ensuring Credibility and Consistency**

As part of the process of conducting qualitative research, the researcher should take measures to ensure credibility and consistency. It is important that the data collected are accurate to the reality experienced and the results presented are consistent to the data collected (Merriam, 2009). However, since this study will take an interpretative approach, the researcher will rely on a non-foundational perspective, indicating that no fixed or "univocal truth" exists (Angen, 2000, p. 384). Rather, the interpreted truths presented will be from the perspective of the researcher, based on the experiences shared by those who lived it.

In this study, the researcher will utilize member checking as a means of increasing the credibility of the data collected (Merriam, 2009). This process will involve soliciting feedback from some of the study participants on the findings from their data, to limit the possibilities of misunderstandings and misinterpretations (Merriam, 2009). Given the high demand on the schedules of study participants, it may not be realistic to expect all participants to complete the member checking process.

Additionally, the researcher will practice reflexivity by reflecting on her "biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). This process will not be used to distance the researcher from the study, but rather to assist readers with understanding how the researcher will arrive at her final interpretation of the data, since "interpretive research depends on the intersubjective creation of meaning and understanding" (Angen, 2000, p. 383).

The researcher will also seek adequate engagement in the data collection process by including sufficient participants in the study to strive for saturation of the emerging findings (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This process will allow the researcher enough time collecting data to look for differences within the understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009).

Overall, the researcher focus on both ethical and substantive validation throughout the entire research process, to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the work (Angen, 2000). Ethically, this validation will include ensuring that there is practical value in this research to the community of practitioners as well as value to related research in the future (Angen, 2000). Substantively, this validation will require the research to be written thoughtfully and carefully, to ensure that the understandings and the conceptual developments, which may be unique to the culture of community college education, are communicated effectively (Angen, 2000).

Prior to conducting the actual interviews, the researcher will conduct a sample interview with a community college president that meets the selection criteria set up for the study, as outlined previously. During this sample interview, the researcher will practice the interview protocol but also seek feedback from the president regarding whether he or she believes the protocol will accurately result in the desired data being collected. The researcher will fine-tune the interview protocol based on suggestions from the president.

### **Strategies for Protection of Human Subjects**

Since this study will involve human subjects, the researcher will complete all steps required of Oregon State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in order to ensure the protection and ethical treatment of the participants. Given the nature of the study and its participants, as well as the structure of the research process, the researcher anticipates an expedited review process.

The participants of this study will be known to the researcher through the direct identifier of the participants' names. The intent is to protect the privacy of the participants by keeping their identities confidential. Although names and personal information will be collected from the participants, only initials will be used in the interview transcription process and pseudonyms will be used in the analysis and reported discussion of the findings, in order to minimize the chances of a breach in confidentiality (Seidman, 2006). A link between the direct identifier and pseudonym will exist but will only be available to the researcher and the principal investigator of this study.

Data will be only accessed by the researcher, and the principal investigator if necessary. The data will be stored on the researcher's computer that has a fully patched operating system and applications as well a firewall protection. Additionally, the data will be backed up to the researcher's OSU Google Drive. Signed consent forms, audio-recorded data, transcribed data and the link between the direct identifiers and pseudonyms will be stored for a minimum of three years post study termination. Confidentiality will be kept to the extent permitted by the technology being used. Information stored online can be intercepted, corrupted, lost, destroyed, or contain viruses. In the event of a known breach in confidentiality, participants will be notified.

The potential risks associated with this study come from the information that is discussed in the interviews. Interviews could touch on topics that are difficult or feel uncomfortable when shared openly.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations associated with this proposed study. Such limitations include:

- All of the community colleges within the NWCCU may be experiencing similar issues, based on geographic and structural similarities of the institutions.



- The issues experienced by the presidents from community colleges within the NWCCU and from the small sample may not be reflective of issues being faced across the country.
- The researcher has personal and behavioral biases that will impact the way the researcher designed this study, will conduct the research and will analyzed the data and report the findings.
- The participants in this study may not feel comfortable fully sharing their experiences, given that some information may be sensitive to the institution and/or individuals involved.

Despite the limitations that exist, it is important to gain in depth insight into how community college presidents address issues they face. Such knowledge can assist to better articulate the necessary skills when serving in a community college presidential position.

### **Timeline**

The sequence of events and anticipated timeline for this research is as follows. Each subsequent step assumes appropriate approval/acceptance from the previous one:

- The researcher will present the research proposal at the dissertation proposal meeting - Winter Term 2017.
- The researcher and major professor (principal investigator) will submit documentation to Oregon State University's Office of Research Integrity for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Winter Term 2017.
- The researcher will recruit potential participants based on approved criteria from the IRB - Winter Term 2017.
- The researcher will travel and conduct interviews with participants - Spring/Summer Term 2017.

- The researcher will transcribe and analyze the data. This process may occur simultaneously with the previous step - Spring/Summer Term 2017.
- The researcher will complete the analysis of the data and report on the findings Summer/Fall Term 2017.
- The researcher will provide the major professor with the written dissertation - Summer/Fall Term 2017.
- The researcher will provide the dissertation committee with the written dissertation - Summer/Fall Term 2017.
- The researcher will present the study and findings at the dissertation defense meeting - Summer/Fall Term 2017.
- The researcher will complete any additional revisions required by the dissertation committee - Summer/Fall Term 2017.

### **Summary of Methods**

Guided by a narrative inquiry approach, using semi-structured, in-person interviews, qualitative data will be collected from ten community college presidents to capture their experiences with addressing issues they faced in their current positions. Through qualitative coding and subsequent analysis, patterns and themes will be identified within the data. First, the leadership skills and characteristics described by the presidents will be analyzed and compared across presidents based on lived experiences, versus hypothetical experiences and predicted future issues. Then, the leadership skills and characteristics used when addressing the issues will be compared to the AACC (2013) leadership competencies and The Aspen Institute's (2013) leadership qualities. Leadership skills and characteristics outside of those articulated by AACC

(2013) and The Aspen Institute (2013) will be noted for future research. The findings and implications will be presented in the following chapters.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Question Guide

#### **Question Set 1.** Demographics questions.

These questions are designed to give the researcher a better understanding of the demographics and background of each participant. It will also help the participant to settle into the interview and become more comfortable, as these are questions that they can easily answer. Some of this information can be acquired through other methods (press release, college website, etc.) but these questions will be asked of each participant in order to insure the researcher has accurate data.

- How old are you?
- How do you describe your ethnic identity?
- Describe your education background.
- How long have you worked within the community college setting and in what positions?
- How long have you worked at this particular community college?
- What experiences have you had that you feel most shaped your leadership style and strategies?

#### **Question Set 2.** Understanding the cultural context of the institution.

These questions are designed to gain insight to how each participant perceives the cultural context of their institution, knowing that the issues they face and how they address them may very based on their cultural context.

- How do you describe the cultural context of your institution?
- What factors do you believe have the greatest positive impact on the cultural context of your institution?

- What factors do you believe have the greatest negative impact on the cultural context of your institution?
- What strategies do you use to successfully navigate the cultural context of your institution?

**Question Set 3.** Understanding the issues that presidents face.

- Describe the most significant issue you have faced within your tenure as president at this institution, that you feel you were successfully able to address?
- Describe the most significant issue you have faced within your tenure as president at this institution, that you feel you were less successful in addressing?
- How has your approach to addressing issues changed over time?

**Question Set 4.** Addressing the common challenge.

- Describe how you go about addressing the issue outlined in the following scenario:

It is the middle of the fiscal year and your state has made adjustments to the state budget that results in a 15% budget deficit for your current institution. State law requires you to operate within a balanced budget. Your institution has faced declining investment in higher education from the state level for the past decade, leaving your institution with less than desirable reserve funds and this has some board members expressing discontent. Additionally, in the last budget cycle, you had to make the difficult choice to cut the \_\_\_\_\_ program, which had been part of the institution almost since its inception. This cut was largely unfavorable within the local community and the local paper published multiple commentaries regarding the cut.

**Question Set 5.** Looking to the future.

By having the participants look ahead to the future, it provides a natural end to the interview and could also posit areas for future research.

- What significant issues do you believe will be facing community college presidents of the future?
- How are those issues dissimilar to the issues that current community college presidents face?
- What do you believe will be the most important things for future community college presidents to consider when addressing those future issues?