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Preparation for College and University Leadership before the Age of 40

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the skills and competencies needed for candidates to be hired as a college or university president before the age of 40. Using a phenomenological approach, participants who first obtained the position as a college or university president before 40 were interviewed. Using Clark's model of professional competencies as a conceptual framework, four themes were identified from the results. The themes include little to no mentoring at all, learn by either sinking or swimming; being in the right place, at the right time, with the right credentials; having the right education and experience matter for candidates seeking a college or a university president position; and having the interpersonal skills and the ability to work with others. The results of this study will help those seeking to acquire a position as a college or university president while under the age of 40 and for all others to better prepare future leaders in higher education.

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America's college and university presidents overall are now older and holding the job longer than at other times (American Council on Education, 2017). The position requires flexibility, expertise, and adaptability, especially since these leadership skills are critical to the manage higher education institutions with the ongoing twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial justice and equity. With the unprecedented turn of events of 2020 and 2021 has caused increased stress on presidential leadership in higher education. The presidency is more complex than ever, which can lead to failure on the part of leadership and job dissatisfaction (Thacker & Freeman, 2020). The management of the crises such as the COVID-19 and racial justice and equity pandemic requires well-trained leaders in higher education due to the vast changes in instruction delivery and leadership decision-making (i.e., facility closures, campus racial uprisings through protest, online instruction mandates, and leadership amongst rapidly shifting political climates) (Shaw & Freeman, 2020; Krisnamurthy, 2020).

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the experiences, skills, and competencies needed to obtain a college or university presidency position before the age of 40. Previous research related to the college presidency has generally focused on the skills needed to become a college or university president more generally. However, over 58% of sitting presidents are 61

years of age or older (American Council on Education, 2017). Higher education researchers predict a wave of retirements within the next decade (Forthun & Freeman, 2017). There has become an increased interest in preparing aspiring leaders earlier in their professional career to assume these roles. This project aims to provide a unique contribution to the literature by learning from the voices of leaders who have assumed college and university presidencies early in their careers, asking them to provide insights regarding the experiences, competencies, and skills that propelled them to leadership. Readers and particularly those who aspire to the presidency because the findings of this study have unearthed the hidden curriculum useful in how a person can be intentional about preparation for higher education presidential leadership. This research project also addresses an area that has been understudied which is the intersection of age and leadership.

Literature Review

US College Presidency

In 1640, Henry Dunster was elected as the first president of an institution of higher learning in the United States at Harvard College (Freeman & Kochan, 2013). Since the establishment of the position of the president, also known as a chancellorship, it has been a role that has both symbolic and substantive characteristics. As colleges have evolved over subsequent centuries, the role of the president has also changed. Since many of the initial colleges in the United States were established by various religious denominations, many of the first presidents had ministerial backgrounds (Rile, 2001). Over time expectations regarding the presidency have expanded and the range of disciplines and fields taught within these institutions increased. Now it is rare that a president is found to have earned a degree in religion that does not serve at a religiously affiliated college or university. Many presidents have degrees in a range of fields and disciplines including over 41% who have earned a doctoral degree in either education or higher education (American Council on Education, 2017).

The range of types of higher education institutions in the United States has been the envy of the world. Institutions described as a community, technical, for-profit, online, liberal arts colleges, and research universities represent just a few of the constellations of institutional types that provide postsecondary education for today's students. As diverse as the institutional types, there is a diversity in the background characteristics of presidents of these institutions. Although, a fraction of the overall population of higher education chief executive officers, women lead 30% of all postsecondary institutions in the United States while 17 percent of institutional leaders are people of color (American Council on Education, 2017).

One of the most concerning trends regarding the presidency position in recent years has been related to preparation for the presidency. As the world has become increasingly complex and expectations continue to rise, presidents are expected to have a diverse skill set to address the needs of various institutional constituencies. No longer being viewed exclusively, if at all, as the chief academician of an institution, presidents now use the majority of their time addressing concerns such as fundraising, budgeting, community relations, and strategic planning (Cook, 2012). Most presidents describe enjoying these aspects of the role. However, many of these

presidents are unprepared to engage in managing budgets prior to assuming their leadership positions. Lack of preparation, stress management, financial ineptitudes, and weak leadership skills lead to job terminations and contract non-renewals for many presidents (Thacker & Freeman, 2020).

These challenges mentioned above have become an issue because the institutional boards are tasked with the responsibility of hiring presidents and generally seek a seasoned leader to fill open vacancies. The American Council of Education (2017) found that 24% of current presidents have served as presidents previously. However, this has been alarming to some who have advocated for increased diversity in the background of leaders in these positions. One of the arguments shared by trustees is that there are perceived to be few qualified candidates with the experiences and skills needed to lead these complex institutions (Cathcart, 2020). The consequence has been that over 58% of today's college and university presidents are 65 years of age or older (American Council on Education, 2017). This statistic has encouraged researchers, and academic organizations, therefore, have become interested in the presidency to investigate the ways in which promising leaders could be identified earlier in their careers. These aspiring leaders of colleges and universities would be coached, groomed, and provided with the experiences that would ultimately prepare them for a higher education presidency.

The Role of Age in Leadership Development

Current American college and university presidents are older and holding the job longer than any other previous generations (King, 2007). According to King, the age of presidents is 63 years old and college presidents served an average of 6.5 years in that position, compared to a 7-year average in 2011 and an 8.5 -year average in 2006 (American Council on Education, 2017). While leadership researchers have hardly considered age as a substantial-quality; comparing age and performance is important to promote the next college and university presidents (Ng & Feldman, 2008). Zacher et al. (2011) discussed that there is a paucity of studies in the area (age of leaders) and this topic has been neglected by researchers. While researchers such as (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2013) focused on strategies for leading a multi-generational workforce, the research of age of leaders under the age of 40 in higher education institutions has not been published.

College and university presidents are the chief executive officers of institutions of higher education who are responsible for strategic leadership and administrative actions. Pamela and Frankie (2005) indicated that presidents must ensure that the standards and procedures in operational use within the institutions conform to the policies established by the college or university governing board of directors is being followed. Furthermore, presidents are responsible for representing their institution to the community, constituencies, government agencies, and other stakeholders. Holding the presidency position of a higher education institution requires relentless and complete commitment to the job (Dowdall, 2004). The job includes multi-tasking and setting priorities.

Leadership professional development and personal structures of every society evolve to fulfill the functions needed in that society (Schein, 1992). Each college and university will define its

leadership needs based on its mission and vision to accomplish its goals (Pamela & Frankie, 2005; Skinner, 2010). Other aspects, such as location and circumstances play a role in the leadership development that a college or a university president needs.

A president needs to have a broad understanding of local, national, and global trends and issues. A globally-minded president needs a range of skills and competencies to compete internationally as well as maintain a globally focused staff and faculty (Liu et. Al, 2020). Political competency and campus-wide unity are needed for successful leadership. As well as a desire and need for continuous professional and personal growth. Adherence to “transformational leadership” to trickle down to others in their institution provides for greater success in the presidency (Cooney & Borland, 2018, p. 20). The above-mentioned skills and necessities require continuous leadership development and job mastery for all presidents in higher education.

Professional development for the presidency will continue to change as colleges and universities are becoming increasingly competitive in many aspects. Meanwhile, higher learning institutions are changing demographically in age and ethnicity of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and board of directors. These changes will require board members to “change their preconceptions of what a president looks like” (Skinner, 2010, p. 10). Skinner proposed that college and university board members will need to recruit a younger generation of presidents with the skills and perspectives of understanding the current demands of education by a younger generation student. In addition, Skinner (2010) listed the qualities of the future presidents as a) strategic resource management, b) accountability, c) entrepreneurship, d) collaboration, e) change management, f) globalization, and g) board relations.

Conceptual Framework

There is a significant gap within the extent of literature regarding the relationship between age and leadership within college presidential positions. Particularly, virtually no peer-reviewed literature was found by the authors that discussed or researched age as a factor in the preparation for the college and university presidency. However, various non-academic authors have suggested ways in which early career professionals can advance quickly and successfully within their professions. For example, Rockwell (2013) shared ten concepts that would help transform organizations by integrating young professional leaders. According to Rockwell, young professionals should employ the following strategies if they would like to be successful and advance early and quickly within their chosen industry, which include:

1. Expect to prove yourself.
2. Stand up to those who look down on you by delivering great results.
3. Enthusiasm with endurance gets things done.
4. Bold confidence isn't brash arrogance.
5. Maintain optimism.
6. Ask questions before challenging ideas.
7. Humility, which isn't playing dead, always trumps arrogance.
8. Hang with “young” elders.
9. Prioritize.

10. Work on yourself while working in your position. How are you developing your leadership? (para. 6)

One of the industries that has been identified as friendly to advancing young leaders early in their careers is in the field of information technology. The Kauffman Institute (2019) found that 80% of start-ups sampled were led by individuals under the age of 45. Salam (2014) argues that other industries could do similar:

Who doubts that there are young people in other institutions — non-tech firms, for example — who wouldn't knock it out of the park if given a chance? But they're not. And if you don't get at-bats, it's really hard to get better. The tech sector is unique because of the Cambrian explosion of tech entrepreneurship: a proliferation of enabling technologies (Amazon's cloud computing to build a backbone, Apple's iOS and Google's Android marketplaces to facilitate distribution, oDesk to find talent, GitHub to share code, etc.) have lowered barriers to entry, lowering the cost of entrepreneurial at-bats. So, we see more young people in leadership roles, and also more people with heavy accents, autism spectrum disorders, and other qualities that might make it hard to climb a corporate ladder...Rather, I am suggesting that we think more about the way that firms in oligopolistic or heavily regulated sectors might stifle innovation by rewarding entrenched insiders and limiting opportunities for newcomers to make a mark (para. 6).

According to Clark (2004), there are three aspects of a successful leader, which include (a) personal attributes; (b) competencies; and (c) performer outcome. Personal attributes include general cognitive ability (linked to internal knowledge), crystallized cognitive knowledge (linked to learned experiences), motivation, and personality. Competencies include problem-solving ability, social judgment skills, accumulated knowledge, and professional skills. And performer outcome is the degree to which a leader has performed their duties (Clark, 2004). In this study, two aspects of Clark's model guided us: personal attributes and competencies. Both aspects can be captured, in part, by a president's background and preparation for the role of presidency; however, it was not possible to capture these attributes and competencies in full. Moreover, we were not able to access the performer outcome. We sought to understand presidents' preparation for and pathways to the presidency. We were also able to capture aspects of the motivation and the personality of those presidents that we interviewed in the study. Clark's (2004) model advocates for leaders with appropriate competencies and personality traits for specific positions and environments and advises those selecting leaders to hire with these concepts in mind. We posit that these competencies are acquired as a leader moves through the academic pipeline but can also be gained outside of academe in similar environments. Clark also notes that leadership traits and competencies can be passed to future leaders through mentoring if done in a conscientious manner.

Methodology

The study utilized a phenomenological research approach. This qualitative method was chosen because it enabled us to investigate a topic that has been understudied and theorized. For this

study, we are examining the relationship between age and higher education presidential leadership. Phenomenology provided the opportunity to highlight the lived experience of those interviewed in this study. The main tenant of phenomenology is the investigation of human experience (Adams & Van Manen, 2012). The lived experiences are then interpreted and categorized together into different themes.

Population and Sample

This study aimed to examine the lived experience and preparation of college and university leadership before the age of 40. The population for the study was presidential leadership within the 6,502, 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). A purposeful sample of presidents who assumed higher education presidencies before the age of 40 were invited to participate. The participants of this study were presidents who assumed higher education presidencies before the age of 40. The principal investigators recruited potential participants using a variety of resources (e.g. professional networks, university websites, and academic and professional conferences). Announcements about the study were distributed through e-mail Listservs. Additionally, participants were selected using snowball sampling (i.e., asking those who joined the study to recommend others who might meet our criteria). When participants contacted the principal investigators, they received an in-depth explanation of the study and emailed recruitment material pertaining to the study. All participants' email correspondence was printed off as a method to collect contact information in scheduling individual interviews and focus group sessions. All email correspondence was deleted from the computer within one week. Only the principal investigators had access to this information in a password-protected sub-directory on their desktop office computers. The printed email was stored in a locked file cabinet to protect the participants' confidentiality. Following this procedure, the hard copy of their email was destroyed.

Nine participants were interviewed for this study. All participants obtained a presidency position before the age of 40. The average age of participants at the time of being hired into a presidency position was 33. Seven participants identified as male and two participants identified as female. Four participants were presidents at a four-year university, four participants were employed at a community college, and one was at a four-year college. Specifics of the participants' sociodemographic information are in Table 1.

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics table

Name	Gender	Age	Type of Institution	TCU^(a), HBCU^(b), or PWI^(c)
William	Male	37	University	PWI
Mason	Male	28	College	TCU
Jacob	Male	28	University	HBCU
Michael	Male	39	Community College	TCU
Elijah	Male	37	University	PWI
Alexander	Male	36	University	HBCU
Ethan	Male	27	Community College	TCU
Emma	Female	32	Community College	TCU
Mia	Female	36	Community College	HBCU

Note. All participants were given pseudonyms.

^(a) TCU stands for Tribal Colleges and Universities. ^(b) HBCU stands for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. ^(c) PWI stands for Primarily White Institution.

Data Collection

The participants were asked to participate in a study about the experiences, skills, and competencies needed to obtain a college or university presidency before the age of 40. The sample for this study consisted of an initial population sample of approximately 20 college and university presidents. A consent form, given to participants prior to the start of the study, informed participants that they can choose not to participate or discontinue their participation anytime during the study. Through this form, the participants were assured that confidentiality will be maintained, that their participation is strictly voluntary and that they may end their participation at any point during the interview.

The participants were interviewed individually between 30 and 45 minutes. The individual sessions were audiotaped. No names or any other identifying information were associated with the participant's responses. Only participant ID numbers were placed on the demographic forms and transcribed interviews. Handwritten notes were also taken during the sessions. Permission for audiotaping was a part of the informed consent form and was requested verbally at the start of the interview. Once gathered, the principal investigators transcribed the data from the interviews. Subsequently, the data is stored in a locked file cabinet that is accessible only by the principal researchers.

Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) described data analysis as making meaning out of the data, which includes reducing and interpreting what other researchers have reported or read and observed in a study. For this study, the data were collected over a period of a year. During this process, the transcriptions were reviewed repeatedly, and the primary analysis was conducted. Throughout this process, we were primarily focused on determining the coherence of the data collected and the extent to which it deepened our understanding of each president's experience (Patton, 2002).

The data were coded and organized into categories and overarching themes were identified. To validate themes, after careful review of data, the researchers compared them with the original description of the phenomenon being studied. The results of the data analysis were reviewed, and a member check was conducted to clarify and ensure the validity of the description of the phenomenon by the participants. Furthermore, exigencies concerning anonymity and confidentiality of participants had been respected in the findings as recommended by Kewir and Munge (2015).

Limitations

While this study provides new information on hiring and experiences of college and university presidents under the age of 40, there are limitations to this research. Many of the participants interviewed are from TCUs or HBCUs. The institutions represented are smaller with less research focus than other larger universities. Although we attempted to have larger data to represent men and women, only two females participated in this study. This could be because most college and university presidents are male, and the inclusion of women college or university presidents has been a challenge for various researchers (Freeman et al., 2016) In addition, the selection of participants was done through snowball sampling. The snowball sampling method combined with phenomenological data analysis only allows for the findings to be generalized out to the participants interviewed.

Findings

The central question for this study is, what are the skills and competencies needed for the preparation of university and college presidents before the age of 40? From this and the follow-up questions, four themes were identified from the data, *little to no mentoring at all, learn by either sink or swim; being in the right place, at the right time, with the right credential; having the right needed education and experience matter for candidates seeking a college or a university president position; having interpersonal skills & the ability to work with others.*

Little to No Mentoring at All, Learn by Either Sink or Swim

The theme, little to no mentoring at all, learn by either sink or swim, was identified through the development of coding and sorting categories of the data. While some of the participants spoke about mentoring by receiving support and assistance from close individuals, most of them indicated that they had to learn on the job. According to the participants in this study, when it came to mentoring or receiving any support, Jacob, who was a president at a university, clearly expressed it by saying “I did not receive any mentoring, I had to learn to either sink or swim”. While another participant, Michael, who was a president at a community college, “I had a little mentoring and had to learn on the job”. Clearly, from these participants, mentoring was not a process used to groom them for a college or a university president position. Other participants relied on past academic positions and used their experiences to know how to lead. Ethan, a president from a community college, stated:

This position comes with complexities, ambiguities, emotional demands and, understanding academic and political climates. This can be very exhausting...Many of my experiences came from my previous positions such as being a Director of Student Academic Affairs.

Some college and/or university presidents who participated in this study gave credit for their success to individuals who guided them and provided support when needed but kept mentoring to a minimum. Mia who was a president of a tribal college spoke about mentoring, “Had to give credit to several tribal colleges or universities presidents and a medicine man. All of these men were Native Americans, and three of them were successful in their academic career positions.” Emma who was only 32 years of age when she assumed the position of a college president. She explained her early years of being a president of a tribal college as:

Once I became a president from 1982 to 2000, I was the first president of my college. There was some mentoring from other TCU presidents. They were unbelievably generous with their time to answer my questions, especially during annual meetings. I also received support from the Bureau of Indian Affairs on how to run a college. I had to learn on the job.

The experience of receiving little mentoring to no mentoring at all varied among each participant. Elijah became the president of a university by the age of 37. This university president discussed mentoring by giving credit for mentorship to his father and grandfather. Elijah explained “My dad and grandfather were presidents and they inspired me to become one. They also mentored me.” Elijah continued by saying “before I was a president, I was VP of Academics for seven years, which helped...I have been a president now for 28 years and gained an enormous amount of experience.” While mentorship was to a certain degree a factor for some of these colleges and universities presidents to become successful in leading a higher education institution, the majority did not receive mentoring, or if they did, it was limited.

Being in the Right Place, at the Right Time, With the Right Credential

Many of the participants talked about how they were appointed or selected to become either a college or university president. The theme, being in the right place, at the right time, with the right credentials, emerged. Each participant told how they were either appointed or selected for the position. William, a president at a university, specifically discussed how he became a college president during the two terms that he served. During his first term, William explained:

During the time of 1975, the talent pool was not very large. So, it was easier to be selected for the position. Of course, the board had confidence in me even though I was only 37 years of age. After I served for several years, I ran for governmental positions, and when the same position became available again, I applied and got the job. I have to say, the second time I ran for the College President position, it was a little harder as the pool of candidates was larger.

Emma mirrored this similar experience to becoming a college president by stating “I was the only educated and well-informed candidate on higher education on my reservation. There were not many people that applied for the position, so, there were not many options. I was there with the right education at the right time.” Mason, a president at a college, discussed how he applied and was selected for the position by stating, “The president got another job, and I was nominated by a member of the university organization to the position. I expressed my interest, applied for the job, and less than a month later, I became president.” For many of the participants, the sheer luck of having the education and experience needed continued to echo in their description of how they were selected. For example, Elijah said, “the university board wanted a lawyer, and I was there at the right time.” In addition, Elijah explained that “It was helpful that I was from a young age well-known in my community and many parts of the state.”

There was almost universal consistency between the participants on how they became a college or a university president. One category which emerged in identifying this theme was finding the right fit. The participants had some connections to their institution before being appointed or selected for the presidency position. As Ethan remarked, “I was only 27 years of age, and I was pursuing a doctoral degree. The college had many presidents that came and left. I was asked to be an interim until a new president gets selected. All of a sudden, at a board meeting, they asked me to become a permanent president, and I accepted. I have been a president since 2004.” The right candidate did not mean the most educated or someone with the most experience, but someone with an understanding of the college or the university mission and deemed by the board as an individual who can deliver on the mission and vision.

Having the Right Needed Education and Experience Matter for Candidates Seeking a College or a University President Position

The third theme that arose from the participants was having the right needed education and experience matters for candidates seeking a college or university president position. The participants felt that having higher education knowledge is important, academic experience is crucial, being a political junkie helps, and being a professionally well-connected individual is the final key to becoming president. All these qualities were discussed by the participants in relation to their selection or appointment to their presidency position. Even though each presented their case differently, their emphasis was on what the college or university needed in its new president. As Michael explained:

There were 15 presidents in 17 years. The college has/had many issues. They wanted someone with good knowledge about the Higher Learning Commission. They wanted someone who has good knowledge to run the college. They wanted someone whose experiences are vast and understand the mission of the college and its culture. I was selected because I had what they wanted for a new president.

While education and experience were emphasized by the participants, the kind of experience, almost, in every case differs. For example, as Elijah remarked, “I was working for the university, they had some legal issues, and the board wanted someone who understood the law. I am a lawyer, so the process of selecting a university president was easy.” Mia, on the other hand, said:

“Before I worked for my tribal college, I worked at different higher education institutions in various programs with different management experiences such as run grants, run schools, run a dorm and all of these helped me when I returned to my reservation to start the college.” This trend manifested itself in the interviews with all the college or university presidents. They spoke about the importance of understanding what the board needs from its next president. Jacob commented, “some want a president who is a transformational or a transactional leader, it is important to try to read their minds.”

When it comes to education, the participants did not refer to a major or a certain degree that is necessary to have to become a college or a university president. They, nonetheless, spoke about having a higher education degree rather than a degree in the education field, business, or law. In addition to education and experience, Mason spoke about himself as a “political junkie.” He explained by saying “for a president of a college, you have to deal with students, faculty, staff, board members, community, donors and state and federal legislators and others” Since the stakeholders are diverse, so should the experiences a president has in working with individuals from different backgrounds and at different levels. Alexander remarked, “a person needs to become well-seasoned before becoming president.” It was this understanding as one of the reasons that what the participants believed the board members saw in them as a potential college or university president.

Having Interpersonal Skills and the Ability to Work with Others

The final theme identified from the data collected was having interpersonal and the ability to work with others. Several of the participants discussed that one of the reasons that propelled them to be selected or appointed to the presidency position was their perceived or known ability to work with others. Elijah remarked, “We need to have an understanding of all academic and non-academic departments and a person’s ability to work with them...you need to sit with them [staff] and understand what each person’s roles are.” Mia further added to the importance that college or university president “know your staff, can integrate well with other people, and develop human relation skills... your employees will help you and support you if you can relate to them and if you show them that you care about them.”

The participants explained that being in such a position requires more than academic or theoretical knowledge gained from years in academic classrooms. Alexander commented, “a person needs to know beyond academics, knowing the culture of the institution is extremely critical...a person also needs to have organizational leadership, can be mediator and negotiator, and have the ability to cooperate with others.” Elijah further explained that for aspiring presidents, “they need to have an understanding of almost all departments within the job...shadowing a president or having a president as a mentor helps also.” All of the participants expressed the importance of the characteristics and knowing a president of a college or a university must-have. Michael listed some of the dispositions that he viewed as essential for the presidency position, which are “understanding accreditations, have full understanding financial management, understanding how to work with stakeholders, academic affairs, academic culture, and having charisma.”

The college and university presidents were generous with sharing the roles of what a president does. They talked about the critical role of leadership that they play in their institutions and some of the tasks that they do daily. Mason encouraged young leaders who seek the position of a college or university president to become “a vice president, learn to work with accrediting agency team, and listen to what others have to say.” Emma expressed the need to cooperate with others, “systematic mentoring for a potential president by having institutional succession planning could allow for a smooth transition and allows to keep the institutional culture intact especially at a small college like ours.” The participants discussed how their work is much easier when they have a solid team working with them. Navigating the challenges and figuring out solutions to those challenges take time and effort and as Ethan said, “a president cannot do everything by him/herself, it needs to be a team effort, where everyone does their fair share.” Leaders need to know how to work across different generations as Al-Asfour and Lettau, (2014) recommended and in multicultural settings (Al-Asfour & White Shield, 2015).

Discussion

In the study, the college and university presidents discussed experiences of how they became presidents at their higher education institution before the age of 40. Four themes emerged from the coding analysis with the nine participants. These themes intersected with the conceptual framework of both Rockwell’s (2013) characteristics of young leaders and as well with Clark’s (2004) competencies and attributes of leaders.

All the participants in the study had little or no mentoring in their new roles when gaining the presidency at their institutions. The theme suggests that these were “sink or swim” situations for the participants when they began their presidencies. Participants like Jacob and Michael mentioned learning on the job and needing to make decisions without guidance from others. Ethan drew experience from his past academic previous positions. Those participants who did have mentoring experience available to them were from tribal communities. Mia and Emma shared mentoring given to them by leaders in their tribal communities. Presidential positions are highly demanding and require complex problem-solving and leadership skills (Dowdall, 2004). The participants in this study expressed a lack of mentoring and guidance during their first times as university presidents. Presidents under the age of 40 need a specific skill set of confidence, resiliency, and humility (Rockwell, 2013). This would be particularly important for those who lack more formal networks of professional support.

Another theme identified was “being in the right place, at the right time, with the right credentials.” The participants mentioned that they were often chosen from a small pool of candidates for their first presidential position. William and Emma referenced that their original appointments as young presidents had a smaller pool of talent to consider when they were appointed. All participants had the right educational or professional experience with institutional knowledge prior to beginning their presidency. Ethan and Elijah mentioned previous connections and knowledge of their institutions that allow for selection in their position. A positive relationship with their college or university when starting a new presidential position demonstrates personal attributes and competencies that are desired by the campus governing board (Clark, 2004).

The “educational experience” was also a common thread for the participants in their selection to serve as a president. Elijah possessed a law degree that was a requirement for the board. Mia had various experiences at other higher education institutions that could be translated to assist her in her presidency. Prior educational experience and understanding of institutional culture and history provide confidence to the college or university governing board that the president has the best interest of the institution in mind (Pamela & Frankie, 2004). Institutional knowledge of campus culture and community can also assist in reducing stress in leadership. This can help reduce turnover and failure that many college and university presidents may experience if they are unprepared for the complexities and dynamics of their institution (Thacker & Freeman, 2020).

The final theme identified in the data from the participants was a “need for strong interpersonal skills and the ability to work with others”. This skill is a vital skill in today’s global and diverse economic and educational environments (Liu et al., 2020). Multiple types of skills and competencies are needed to be a successful campus president under the age of 40. Elijah and Mia emphasized the need to get to know all aspects of the institution and the need to understand multiple roles on their campus. This requires an understanding of transformational leadership to help lead and encourage those working under the president to utilize their leadership skills (Cooney & Borland, 2018). Self-awareness, charisma, and problem-solving are vital to the success of all young presidents. Continuous leadership development and skill-building are required for young leaders' success (Rockwell, 2013).

Implications for Policies and Practice

This research provides vital insight into the experiences of college and university presidents who began their position before the age of 40. With the pending retirements of the baby boomer generation and a new generation of college and university students, the need for better prepared administrative leadership is evident (Chambers & Freeman, 2020). While anti-discrimination policies and best practices determine that a diverse age of faculty is valued in higher education, the practice has shown that age discrimination is still an issue that needs to be addressed. There is a need for greater policies and practices to strengthen promotion and tenure for younger faculty. This should be done based on merit rather than seniority in position (Chambers & Freeman, 2020). Tenure and hiring committees need greater rates of professional development on all forms of combating implicit bias and increasing diversity.

Hiring authorities like college or university governing board of directors or an equivalent are encouraged to widen presidential position searches to include candidates of younger ages and time served in a faculty position as long as they would be an appropriate fit for the position. As referenced above, the quality and quantity of a prospective president’s work should be a greater indicator for success rather than years in service. It is suggested to consult with partner institutions to discuss best practices in hiring a younger president.

Greater emphasis on training a new generation of faculty and staff is needed for better developed and prepared higher education administrators. From the interviews above, there is a great need

for more mentoring and guidance for up-and-coming presidents. This is particularly true for diverse populations of new leaders. We suggest the creation and implementation of wider mentoring and leadership development programs for mid-level professionals who are interested in advancing in their careers in executive leadership.

Finally, greater preparation of graduate students is needed to prepare a new generation of campus leaders in any academic program. A mentoring or pipeline program would be helpful for meeting with interested students who might become presidents or senior administration during their professional careers. The program should focus on professional and leadership development as well as job shadowing for graduate students to prepare their professional and personal goals for leadership.

Future Research

As mentioned above in the limitations section of this paper, this study contains only a limited view of the experiences of the nine individuals interviewed. While this study is one attempt to shed light on the skills and competencies needed for those to be hired as a college or university president before the age of 40, this should be followed by other research at a large scale to address different dimensions of the experiences of young presidents from a variety of different types of higher education institutions. This study focused primarily on HBCUs and TCUs. The need for examination of the experiences of young presidents in primarily PWIs is needed to provide additional insight to research in the field of higher education academic presidency. This would also include state schools, larger research-based universities, and more.

The participants were majority male. More diversity in participants is needed to widen the experiences and expand the viewpoints past just the experiences of those who were interviewed. This includes sampling different populations including more women, LGBTQA-identified individuals, those from different religious communities, and other forms of identity-based diversity. A final recommendation for future research is to provide updated interviews with younger presidents that are generation x or millennials. A new generation of leaders will provide a unique perspective of their experiences in obtaining a presidential position before the age of 40. This is particularly important in the light of events that may occur such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of unforeseen political climates within the American political system and even in the world-wide scene.

Conclusion

University presidents who began their position before the age of 40 is a rare research phenomenon. The research presented above provides insight into the experiences of those who began high-profile and highly stressful positions often with no mentorship or guidance. The presidency at institutions of higher education is a complex and stressful position. Successful presidents need to provide leadership, guidance, and have expertise in many different aspects of their campus and institutions.

From the interviews described above, often the young president is put into a position of leadership based on being in the right place at the right time while possessing a unique skill set that is needed for their institution. The findings also indicate that greater amounts of guidance and support are needed to help beginning college and university presidents prepare and succeed in their new roles. Being a president of a higher education institution before the age of 40 might be a rare phenomenon, but it is possible especially when an individual *being in the right place, at the right time, with the right credentials*.

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