

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

ScholarWorks@UARK

Graduate Theses and Dissertations

12-2023

The Alumni Base Holds The Institution In Their Heart: Alumni Decision Making And Communication Strategies During University Leadership Change

Brandy Cox Jackson

University of Arkansas-Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), [Organizational Communication Commons](#), and the [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#)

Citation

Cox Jackson, B. (2023). The Alumni Base Holds The Institution In Their Heart: Alumni Decision Making And Communication Strategies During University Leadership Change. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/5164>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu.

The Alumni Base Holds The Institution In Their Heart:
Alumni Decision Making And Communication Strategies During University Leadership Change

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education

by

Brandy Cox Jackson
University of the Ozarks
Bachelor of Arts in Radio/Television/Film, 1999
University of Arkansas
Master of Arts in Journalism, 2007

December 2023
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Michael T. Miller, Ed.D.
Committee Chair

Suzanne McCray, Ph.D.
Committee Member

John W. Murry, Jr., Ed.D.
Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of the research was to understand how alumni executives make decisions and formulate communication strategies during university leadership change. The research was based on the trends found by the American Council on Education that the tenure of the college president has been on the decline since 2006 and is currently 5.9 years. Multiple factors have been identified in the literature that have led to this decline. The research focused on the largest constituency of most universities, its alumni base, and provides context and a description of decision making and communication strategies for alumni executives navigating leadership change. The research used interpretive phenomenology to understand the experiences of six Chief Alumni Officers (CAO) at public very high research universities from across the country. Interviews were conducted with each participant, and interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the data.

The research identified that Chief Alumni Officers must first think through the context of the presidential departure or hire to appropriately manage the process with alumni. Next, building valued relationships of respect with colleagues and alumni empowers CAOs to make decisions during the change. Third, messaging to alumni is very important and builds upon the direction of university communication by understanding the best ways to share messages that resonate with alumni. Fourth, university leadership change often involves a wide variety of reactions from alumni and there is no one, single alumni voice. CAOs have to be prepared to accept and manage feedback in an authentic way that values alumni voices and supports staff feelings. Finally, the greatest success for alumni executives to make decisions and communicate effectively is through access to the president in which the insights are valued and balanced to the mutual success of all involved.

The research provided a clearer understanding of the processes that take place for an external facing department during a presidential change. The findings generated a number of opportunities for future research to support more successful leadership transitions in the future. The study also included several recommendations for navigating the process from a high-level perspective that if heeded and implemented may support presidents in managing at least one key constituency in a time in which the position faces more demands and scrutiny than ever before.

Acknowledgements

Earning a doctorate was an incredibly lofty goal that I had not dreamed of pursuing for many reasons, lack of time being at the top of the list. So, I begin with an unorthodox acknowledgement of COVID-19. When the world stopped, I had time to explore who I was and who I wanted to be. Two women were my direct inspirations for pursuing this degree and continuing to push passed any barriers. First, one of my closest friends, Laura Jacobs, was completing her Ph.D. She traversed through the process as a mother of two teenagers while battling serious health concerns and navigating a very high-pressure job. Second, Cordia Harrington, a mentor and alumna, was recognized in October 2020 by Forbes in an article entitled *Go For It: America's Richest Self-Made Women on Founding Businesses After 40*. At the age of 43 and as a single mother she had sold her successful restaurant franchises to start her own business. I applied for the doctorate program one month after reading the article.

Thank you to Dr. Michael T. Miller, Dr. Suzanne McCray, Dr. John Murry, and Dr. Michael Hevel for their work and dedication to this outstanding program. To Steve Edmisten and Reba Pridgin, thank you for giving me my first job in higher education and encouraging me to grow at every opportunity. To my amazing National Alumni Board members: Don Walker, Ron Rainey, and Regina Hopper, I could not have done this without their support and belief in the alumni association. To my incredible team at the Arkansas Alumni Association, we have laughed, cried, and sometimes wanted to scream together in the pursuit of our conviction in what we do and our commitment to the Arkansas Razorback Family. Finally, I want to acknowledge and thank a woman who stepped into my life 25 years ago and has been a second mom to me with unwavering support and faith in everything I do. God gave me someone very special when Sharon Bale entered my life.

Dedication

My dissertation and my doctoral degree are dedicated to my sons, Zachary and Nicholas, and my husband, Stan, for their patience, love, and support. This degree means far more to me than anyone will ever truly know. It was my tether through multiple storms, so that I could be strong for these three people who are the center of my world. This accomplishment isn't just about a degree. It is about perseverance. It is the willingness to try things that scare you, to never stop learning, and to understand yourself in ways that enable you to know how and what to control to be a better person in both good times and bad.

When I look in the mirror today, I am reminded of my mother. I lost her 23 years ago when I was 23 years old. My mother died when she was 47. The timing is not lost on me.

My mom was something special. She was grace, intelligence, and kindness. She taught me the importance of professionalism and speaking with tact. I never sought this degree because of her, but I realize that in truth this is all very much a reflection of her and is dedicated to who she taught me to be. As a high school English teacher, she planted seeds and made the most vulnerable feel seen and heard. She carried herself in a way that others wanted to emulate. She was a woman of integrity both before and beyond her time. She taught a generation of students who grew and blossomed because of her. Her students and I carry her legacy, which I proudly embrace and strive to do her honor.

Finally, to Beth and Brenda, both of whom we lost in 2022. They were amazing women who cared deeply about others and gave far more to this world than they will ever know.

Table of Contents

Chapter I. Introduction to the Study	1
A. Context of the Problem	1
B. Purpose of the Study	3
C. Research Questions	3
D. Definition of Terms	4
E. Limitations and Delimitations	6
F. Assumptions	7
G. Importance of the Study	8
H. Theoretical Framework	9
Chapter II. Review of Literature	12
A. Introduction	12
B. Alumni Relations and the University President: A Brief History	13
C. The Changing University Presidency	18
D. Opportunities and Influence in Alumni Relations	24
E. Conclusion	33
Chapter III. Research Methods	37
A. Introduction	37
B. Research Design	38
C. Participants and Sample	40
D. Instrumentation and Data Collection	41
E. Data Analysis	43
F. Positionality	46

G. Reciprocity and Ethics	49
H. Trustworthiness and Rigor	50
I. Summary	51
Chapter IV. Data Analysis and Findings	52
A. Introduction	52
B. Summary of the Study	53
C. Data Collection	53
D. Data Analysis	58
a. Theme 1 Contextualizing the Transitions	60
b. Theme 2 Building Valued Relationships	64
c. Theme 3 Building upon the Lead of University Communications	69
d. Theme 4 “We don’t have one alumni voice. We have thousands.”	73
e. Theme 5 Access to the President	79
E. Chapter Summary	84
Chapter V. Conclusions and Discussion	86
A. Introduction to the Chapter	86
B. Summary of the Study	86
C. Conclusions	89
D. Recommendations for Practice	91
E. Recommendations for Further Study	93
F. Additional Limitations	94
G. Discussion	96
H. Chapter Summary	98

References	99
List of Appendices	105
A. IRB Protocol Submission Request	105
B. IRB Approval Letter	107
C. Participant Request Email	108
D. Email Follow Up	109
E. Informed Consent Document	110
F. Interview Questions and Field Protocol	112

List of Tables

Table 1	Participants and Interview Schedule	56
Table 2	Participant Experience	58
Table 3	Themes Identified from Interview Data	60
Table 4	A Template for Alumni Relations Planning During Presidential Leadership Change	92

Chapter I. Introduction to the Study

A. Context of the Problem

The tenure of the American university president has been on the decline since 2006. According to *The American College President: 2023 Edition Executive Summary* produced by the American Council on Education (ACE), the declining tenure began following the report in 2006 in which the average tenure for a president was 8.5 years. In 2011, the average dropped to 7 years; in 2016, the tenure dropped yet again to 6.5 years; and according to the latest report released in April of 2023, the current average presidential tenure was down to 5.9 years (Melidona et al., 2023). In addition, the report stated that “over half (55percent) of presidents planned to step down from their current positions within the next five years” (Melidona et al., 2023. p.4). At this same time, higher education is becoming more dependent than ever on private donor support and the number of annual alumni gifts are important to the future of fundraising. In 2019, *Inside Higher Ed* (Hazelrigg, 2019) reported that colleges were receiving larger donations but from fewer donors with declines or flattening in alumni giving rates. Post-pandemic in February 2023, Liam Knox reported in *Inside Higher Ed* that philanthropy was seeing dramatic inclines including alumni giving which was attributed to “efforts by alumni relations offices to adapt their fundraising efforts to the sensibilities and technologies of the new generation” (Knox, 2023, para. 15). Understanding the adjustments and support necessary for both presidents and alumni is at a critical juncture, the intersection of demand and expectation situates this research in an important position for academic research.

University presidents (or chancellors) are expected to build and maintain relationships and partnerships with all key stakeholders. Alumni are key stakeholders who possess wide-spread influence regarding the perceptions, advocacy, and financial support of these institutions (Thelin, 2019). Alumni relations (often manifest as alumni associations) is an important conduit

for external stakeholders at most colleges and universities and may provide for strategic positioning to better support universities into the future as scrutiny and questions continue to be significant obstacles for university presidents (Eckel & Kezar, 2011). Alumni associations have a responsibility to support continuity and promote understanding whenever an institution goes through significant changes, including leadership transitions. Many alumni executives face balancing the needs of the institution, the alumni, and the leadership during these periods of transition. This research documented how external constituent demands on university presidents could be strategically supported through collaboration involving tactical decision making and communication strategies in alumni relations.

Transition management has become a business in corporate and higher education industries, and leadership styles and approaches are abundant, ever changing, and growing areas of research (Kotter, 2012). A thoughtful and detailed approach to the processes taking place within complex governance structures of higher education alongside constituent expectations during leadership change appears to be lacking from the research and literature in higher education. For public research institutions, the presidential search is often a very public process. Committees are often assembled for the process and candidate information is available and scrutinized by multiple constituencies (Smerek, 2013; Brantley, 2019). Candidates are postured across campuses, meeting with senior administrators, faculty, staff, students, community members, among other open forums. According to Smerek (2013) in the *Review of Higher Education*, the process for finding a president can take at least a year at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars and has trickle down effects on staff, faculty, and administrative turnover. Monks reiterated the concerns in 2022 stating, “relying on a national search and using interim appoints for every senior position departure is costly in terms of direct hire expenses, and in

terms of bringing external hires up to speed regarding university practices, culture, and needs” (Monk, 2022, p. 598).

The current research examined the phenomenon for Chief Alumni Officers (CAOs) during this process and then explored the decision making and communication processes that are necessary for these executives during these transition processes.

B. Purpose of the Study

Alumni associations are important conduits for external stakeholders to connect with their alma maters at most colleges and universities. Structured alumni associations originated as record keepers and communicators for university graduates with the purpose of maintaining relationships with one another and cultivating philanthropic, charitable support (Pulley, 2014). Alumni associations have a responsibility to support continuity and promote understanding of the institution, especially at times when an institution goes through a significant change, including leadership transitions. Change is often complicated with presidents and alumni leaders balancing a multitude of concerns with a wide range of expectations. The purpose for conducting the study was to describe the decision-making processes and communication strategies for alumni association executives during leadership changes at public research-oriented universities.

C. Research Questions

1. How did alumni executives describe their decision-making processes during university leadership transitions?
2. How did alumni executives describe their involvement in the creation of communication strategies and messaging to alumni regarding leadership transitions?
3. What reactions did alumni executives receive during leadership change including their management of feedback?

4. How did alumni executives describe their success or failure in navigating changes in leadership?

D. Definitions

Alumni Board of Directors. An advisory board that provides recommendations and feedback to build community among alumni, focusing on engagement through local and national events. Alumni boards are often self-perpetuating with nominations received, reviewed, and voted up the sitting members, although some can be elected.

Alumnus and alumni. Alumnus is an individual male or female who is a former student of a school, college, or university. Alumni is the plural of alumnus. Practices vary as to when during attendance a student is considered an alumnus. An alumnus does not have to be a graduate.

Alumni Association. The organization or office that completes the functions of alumni relations. Alumni Associations may have an organizational structure that is independent, interdependent, or dependent based on agreements with the university in which it serves. Some but not all associations charge dues to be members. Interdependent and dependent associations (used for the purposes of this study) are often managed by university staff but may have with advisory leaders of representative alumni (Alumni Board of Directors) who seek to cultivate the alumni relationship between alumni and the institution after graduation. Alumni Associations and Chief Alumni Officers in this study do not report directly to the president. They operate with a reporting line between them and the president.

Alumni Relations. “The pursuit of alumni relations in higher education is the practice of building relationships, preferably long-term partnerships that endure across decades” (Pulley, 2012, p. 30). The practice of cultivating alumni to support their institution and for the institution

to support its alumni as a steadfast, mutual benefit relationship. Alumni relations programs build and strengthen relationships with students and former students, faculty, and friends. They keep alumni informed about the institution and in contact with each other by providing opportunities such as homecomings, reunions, and alumni club events (Pulley, 2012).

Institutional Advancement. The term used to describe the university division primarily responsible for bringing together the functions of public relations, alumni relations, and development to garner support for all the programs and activities of colleges and universities. (Skinner, 2019; Pisors, 2022)

Chief Alumni Officer. The Chief Alumni Officer is the employee designated by the university as the executive in charge of alumni coordination and engagement. Titles vary based on institution and therefore for the purposes of this research are based on the participants acceptance as a member of the Council of Alumni Association Executives.

Council of Alumni Association Executives (CAAE). As defined by the organization on its website under *A Short History of the Association*, “a charter membership of chief alumni officers founded the Council of Alumni Association Executives on July 8, 1989, in Washington, DC. Its mission was ‘...to advocate and sustain the value of alumni association self-governance by providing the information, policies, programs, technology, and network necessary to enhance alumni administration, higher education, and professional development’” (CAAE, n.d., 3rd column, para. 1).

Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). The Council for Advancement and Support of Education is the global nonprofit association dedicated to educational advancement professionals in alumni relations, communications, development,

marketing, and advancement services who share the goal of championing education to transform lives and society (CASE, n.d.).

Donor. “One that gives, donates, or presents something” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) including a gift of property, cash, investments, to a university.

University President. The chief executive officer of a university campus. The title chancellor may also be used based on the structure of the university. For clarity in the research, the term president will be used for either a president or chancellor who serves as the leader on the university’s central campus.

E. Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations and delimitations in research should be acknowledged, providing transparency and understanding of the relevance of the work and the scope in which it may support further research. The study included one-on-one interviews with human subjects. Therefore, limitations of observation include understanding the participants, as human subjects, exhibiting atypical behaviors in an interview process (Jacobs, 2021). In addition, depending on the time lapse between the phenomenon and the interview, memories, and perceptions of what occurred may have changed resulting in inflated or distorted responses. Weerts and Ronca (2008) addressed the need to consider the validity of event recall because asking for information in which subjects must recall information from many years ago can skew the accuracy of the event details. The timeline for the phenomenon recall is within the last five years, which may reduce the concern regarding recall but not eliminate it. The researcher also sought published communication sources during the phenomenon to verify the timeline and events as they took place.

There are limits to the number of phenomena researched. The participants in the sample were from public research institutions as defined in the sampling frame in Chapter 3. The scope of participants included does not represent all of higher education. There are alumni executives who were well established in the field and could offer valuable insight into the experience of university leadership change who did not fall within the scope of the defined institutions for this research.

My position in this research as a peer Chief Alumni Officer creates both a limitation and delimitation. I acknowledge that my own experiences in this role during two executive leadership changes possess the potential for researcher bias. Using interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology and co-construction, my use of self-reflection and understanding the phenomenon in my own job provides strong positionality to the subject and relatability to the participants in order to properly co-construct their experiences.

F. Assumptions

The research included three categories of assumptions: participants, associations, and university. First, is the assumption related to the participants' willingness to respond. The study accepted the assumption that participants were willing to participate and were forth coming and honest in their responses. The Chief Alumni Officers participating were selected with the understanding that they were in their respective leadership positions during a transition cycle of university executive leadership. Second, it was assumed that the institutions and the alumni associations have established relationships that support one another. All universities considered have either interdependent or integrated models (as reported in the 2022 annual operations survey for CAAE) which means that no association considered itself a wholly separate entity from the university and all CAOs are employees of the institution and not of a separate

independent alumni association. Finally, all Chief Alumni Officers were assumed to be invested in the alumni relationships and perceptions of the institution as integral reputational concerns of the alumni associations.

G. Importance of the Study

Colleges and universities often derive their organizational structures from charters that disseminate responsibilities and authority to the presidents or chancellors who then “rely on a cascading scaffold of offices and personnel to execute policy and implement activities of the institutions” (Miller & Nelson, 2005, p.25). When university leadership transitions, it positions a ripple effect of decision making, change management, and communication issues through every aspect of the institution including but not limited to academics, student life, athletics, as well as key external facing programs of the institution such as fundraising and alumni relations. The research has value to executive leadership and departmental leaders whose responsibilities require regular external facing communication and engagement.

The research was conducted to provide a significant resource to leadership in all areas of higher education to better understand the successful strategies for decision making, change management and communications during times of leadership change at the highest campus level. As qualitative research recommends, the study was conducted with transferability in mind and as a component of trustworthiness. Transferability involved thick description so that others who wish to use the research may find patterns and description that are applicable to transfer from one situation to another. The use of phenomenology described the phenomenon at different universities based on the life experiences of alumni executives as they made decisions and communicated with their constituents. This methodology allowed for the opportunity to establish research that is meaningful and transferrable. It provided insight and guidance for other leaders

who, as the data has shown regarding declining leadership tenure, will most likely experience the phenomenon at some point in their careers in higher education. Literature for alumni relations professionals in supporting presidential transitions is limited. Both alumni and university executives can benefit by increased knowledge and research on decision making and communications with alumni in order to better leverage resources and relationships for the benefit of their institutions.

H. Theoretical Framework

In higher education, transitions of leadership require faculty and staff to learn and adapt quickly to the vision of the new leader. For external relations professionals, especially in alumni relations, understanding and conceptualizing the appropriate agenda items can be critical to a successful leadership transition to maintain and grow relationships. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online (n.d.), the term agenda has two meanings: “a list or outline of things to be considered or done (para. 1)” and “an underlying often ideological plan or program” (para. 2). In understanding this basic process of leadership, the study relies on the framework of agenda setting theory to understand the decision making and communication strategies of alumni professionals during university leadership change.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) conducted the first recognized research that shaped the theory of agenda setting. Their analysis of the 1968 presidential election established that the media influences attitudes toward the issues and that by stressing specific issues the media influences voters regarding what is important (Smith, 2014). By shining a spotlight on specific issues, the media makes them important to the voters. Similarly external facing communicators such as alumni associations inherently use agenda setting to guide their decisions and communication strategies. “Researchers have explained multiple concerns in higher education

policy by using agenda-setting in order to better understand why different policy issues get addressed, why others do not, or why some policy issues take precedence over others” (Smith, 2014, p. 9).

Branding is an important element to communication strategy and found a place in agenda setting based research such as that conducted by Ragas and Roberts (2009) who showed the link between company brands and branding communities. Witzig (2018) directly used this approach for her dissertation research stating, “the importance of this finding likely applies to university brands. This perspective of agenda setting becomes important if universities are deploying messaging... to reframe an audience’s perception” (p. 11). As alumni associations work to connect and serve university graduates and move them from connection to engagement to giving, agenda setting would support the functions of alumni relations to focus the alumni on the university’s best attributes, especially during times of leadership transition.

The concept of time within Kingdon’s (2011) theoretical framework for agenda-setting may also be relevant to the framework of the study. There are three key elements of time in agenda setting during a leadership transition. First, the time frame in which the search for the university leader took place. Second, the time frame from the announcement of the newly selected president to the beginning of tenure can add to the process. Third, the time it takes from when a leader begins the job until policy and strategic plans can be implemented is critical to the capacity for an alumni association to set its agenda for communication to alumni. These aspects may correlate to “the time-frame in which efforts of persuasion occur in policy called the policy window” (Smith, 2014, p. 10). The policy window is part of the policy stream (Kingdon, 2011). The framework sought to provide some clarity in understanding how university leadership and alumni associations prioritize their decisions. The framework was intended to provide additional

transparency to how alumni association executives prioritize university initiatives during a leadership transition.

Chapter II. Literature Review

A. Introduction

Bourgeois (2016) affirmed, “as citizens of our institutions, we can make the future of presidential leadership more hopeful by assuming greater collective responsibility for success” (p. 18). The purpose of this literature review was to provide context and comparison of the needs of alumni on the journey to becoming donors, alongside the expectations of university presidents during leadership change which include building relationships with these key stakeholders. This literature review contextualized the opportunities that exist relative to presidential expectations and alumni support. The review provided a basis to understand researched expectations and needs of these relative but separate entities in a way that positioned the qualitative research to describe and map out the decision-making processes and communication strategies for alumni executives during leadership changes at public research-oriented universities.

The literature addressed in the chapter provided three specific areas of concentration to contextualize the research. The chapter first addressed the history of alumni relations and the university president to better understand both the origins and evolution of the roles. Next, the literature reviewed delved further into the complexities facing university presidents today and contributing to the decline in tenures. The chapter then reviewed the research on relevance and impact of alumni relations in higher education today. These three areas then contribute to the chapter’s conclusion identifying ways and areas in which presidents and alumni offices could work better together for greater success which contextualizes the importance of the research of this dissertation.

The literature was developed based on three key items: career and working knowledge; doctoral coursework and readings; and literature searches based on this knowledge and experience. The main search engines used were through the University of Arkansas Library

search engines and Google Scholar. Keyword searches included: alumni engagement, alumni giving, university president/chancellor leadership, and university president/chancellor tenure. Articles were then cross-referenced and Shepardized to acquire more depth of literature when applicable. Collected articles were then reviewed for direct relevant information pertaining to this research and limited to the year 2000-present.

B. Alumni Relations and the University President: A Brief History

Alumni relations is documented to have begun when Yale University elected the first class secretary who “kept track of records” for the class in 1792 (Miller, 1993, p. 237). According to 1917 writings from the Association of Alumni Secretaries (AAS), the intent of this position at Yale was to “hold the members of the classes together and enabling them to keep track of one another, and possibly keeping them in touch with the affairs of the university” (Shaw et al., 2017, p. 10). Kimball (2015) documented that the Yale Alumni Fund “incorporated in 1890 and began the first annual fund drive in 1891” (p. 180), which is widely recognized as the first and longest consecutive alumni annual fund in American higher education. The fund was started by small groups of alumni without Yale administration. According to Kimball (2015) “independent groups of alumni initiated the new ventures and departed from the customary approach to [elite] fundraising at their alma mater, while the administration tagged along behind” (p. 165). Following the success at Yale, Charles W. Eliot encouraged the endowment of the Harvard alumni fund. These fundraising processes “introduced the mass campaign in higher education between 1915 and 1925” (Kimball, 2015, p. 183). Into the 1920s, many other colleges and universities believed in these fundraising practices and established annual alumni solicitations and multiyear fundraising campaigns (Kimball, 2015).

In the first half of the 20th century, as more students graduated from college, the impact and significance of the alumni influence and the profession of alumni relations matured with more organized alumni associations being established on college campuses. According to Thelin (2019), administrations were not prepared to handle alumni. There was an increasing recognition that there were “no formal provisions or precedents for managing alumni relations or synchronizing their administrative agendas with the alumni group activities” (Thelin, 2019, p. 197). Therefore, Thelin (2019) explained that over time administrations had to find compromises “to encourage alumni activities and to concede to their involvement in college sports, in the vague hope that this distraction would keep them from meddling in serious academic business” (p. 198).

The profession of alumni relations strengthened its position within higher education from 1910 to 1930 with the formation of three national organizations. These organizations represented three fundamental components of alumni relations: alumni secretaries, alumni magazine editors, and alumni fund operators (Sailor, 1930). Following on the foundations of the alumni secretary, the first national organization to be established was appropriately the Alumni Association of Secretaries.

The Association of Alumni Secretaries created the *Handbook for Alumni Work* in 1917 and the *Manual of Alumni Work* in 1924 (Sailor, 1930, p. 340) to establish formal expectations of alumni relations professionals and to document the founding of the alumni relations profession whose primary purpose was to track alumni while also providing activities and raising funds from their alumni (Skinner, 2019). The next professional group in alumni relations to organize was the editors of alumni magazines who formed the Alumni Magazines Association in 1918 (Sailor, 1930). The Association of Alumni Funds was then formed in the early 1920s (Pulley,

2014; Sailor, 1930). Each formation of professional organizations within alumni relations for alumni officers supported the legitimization and professionalism of the work.

In 1927, these three organizations came together to form the American Alumni Council (AAC) (Pulley, 2014, p. 8). In their initial conversations, the alumni professions defined the role of alumni in fundraising and support of their institutions, stating:

Alumni giving may be said to take three forms: A) Individual gifts or bequests, usually stimulated by direct contact and solicitation as between the prospective giver and the President of the university B) Campaign.... Organized on a big scale to reach as many people as possible with a large definite objective. C) The Alumni Fund. (Kimball, 2015, p. 189)

The AAC included 249 institutions. The first AAC conference was held at UNC Chapel Hill and in its second year the AAC elected its first female president (Pulley, 2014).

In the 1940s, the AAC began working together with the public relations officers of the American College Public Relations Association (ACPRA) when they realized there were overlapping interests and membership between the two organizations (Skinner, 2019). The overarching work for both organizations was outreach and engagement with external constituents.

In 1958, the Ford Foundation funded a conference co-hosted by these two organizations to explore how to better advance understanding and support in higher education (Skinner, 2019). It was the product of this conference, the Greenbrier Report, that defined the concept of institutional advancement. The Greenbrier Report recommended “the appointment of an administrative coordinator at each institution who would work in harmony with the president to

oversee alumni relations, fundraising, and public relations” (Skinner, 2019, p. 26). In addition, the report also recommended that the AAC and ACPRA merge.

This transition for alumni relations can be reviewed in parallel with the evolution of the university president. According to Eckel and Kezar (2011), the position of president had “no training or career ladder” (p. 284) and was considered more of a “first among equals” when higher education was first forming in America (p. 284). Cooney and Martin (2021) also addressed the evolution of the president:

Since higher education’s founding at Harvard University in 1636, the role and responsibility of higher education presidential candidates has evolved primarily from the clergy to academic leader of the 19th century whose influence and authority extended well beyond the campus locally, statewide, and nationally. (p. 19)

By the late 1800s, the concerns of the influence of the position began to cause tensions as the role of the president and the university grew. Eckel and Kezar (2011) explained that “presidents in this era began to diverge from the past as they were more removed from students and teaching and became more involved in the management of their increasingly complex institutions” (p. 284). By the 20th century, a bureaucratic model was emerging in order to address concerns, management, and processes for these multilayered institutions. Presidents began to be viewed as “captains of industry and finance” (Eckel & Kezar, 2011, p. 285) ultimately moving them further away from students and the origination of the university president.

During this same time period, university administrators were recognizing and determining that fundraising could no longer be a peripheral activity (Thelin, 2019). For many universities fundraising had been a direct responsibility of the president’s office. When not part of the president’s office, it had been the responsibility of the alumni association as part of the

annual fund. Miller (1993) referenced the 1960s and 1970s as a time that “the use of alumni programming became more systematic and procedural as attention was focused on the techniques of solicitation and cultivation” (p. 237). Skinner (2019) points out that conflicts began to significantly rise with the increases in designated development staff in the 1960s. Additionally, alumni officers were struggling with being tasked with increased demands to fundraise while greater expectations for other alumni programming grew as well (Skinner, 2019, p. 37). In the 2014 report by CASE that documented the first 100 years of alumni engagement, Steve Hall, Vice President of Alumni Relations at Boston University said, “as institutions professionalized fundraising as distinct from alumni engagement, those of us in alumni relations sort of lost our way” (Pulley, 2014, p. 46).

In 1974, as recommended by the Greenbrier Report, the established professional organization of the American Alumni Council (AAC) joined with the American College Public Relations Association (ACPRA) to form the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) “to continue and to further develop sound relationships between education institutions and their support constituents” (Skinner, 2019, p. 27). When it formed, fundraisers were not a part of the two predecessors’ organizations to CASE. The continued growth of development offices on college campuses along with this merger set the stage for conflicts within institutional advancement that exist today. Alumni directors and programs who originated the roles of record keepers and annual fundraisers have seen these duties moved to other professionalized areas of institutional advancement, and the area that was the smallest component of the Greenbrier Report in 1958 has now become the prominent feature of CASE and institutional advancement. CASE president John Lippincott acknowledged the current struggle and lack of appreciation for alumni

relations in the scope of institutional advancement when he stated that “institutions treat alumni relations operations as the stepchild of advancement” (Pulley, 2014, p. 2).

C. The Changing University Presidency

The University President has a wide range of expectations and constituents. As Bourgeois (2016) discussed, university presidents are often looked upon as the rare superhuman leader who has a brilliant, compelling vision and who can: attract seven-figure gifts on a regular basis; enlist passionate, generous board members; recruit, motivate, and retain faculty and staff; enroll gifted students; provide insightful editorials on current local, national and international events; and, in his or her spare time, ameliorate neighborhood issues. (p. 11)

With these towering expectations and growing demands for university presidents, it becomes clearer about the issues that are contributing to the decline of presidential tenures. An article from *Inside Higher Ed* in July 2023 quoted Admiral William H. McRaven, former chancellor of the University of Texas system as listing the complexity of managing “donors, alumni, the faculty, students, state legislators and regents, among others” (para. 4) on a daily basis as contributing to the American president being one of the toughest jobs in America. And one in which “nobody ever seems completely satisfied” (Lederman, 2023, para. 4).

Tekniepe (2013) in his quantitative research addressed some of these issues in the framework of push-pull motivation theory that can lead to turnover. Tekniepe (2013) wrote that “push factors are generally characterized as pressures that force leaders from their current position” (p. 145). This may include conflict with boards and external stakeholders as well as “negative perceptions of the leader’s ability to adequately manage the fiscal affairs of the organization” (p. 145). Harris and Ellis (2018) reported on push factors for involuntary turnover

in American higher education in order to bring awareness to challenges facing presidents. Using data collected from 256 NCAA Division I institutions with 1,029 presidential terms of office and 775 turnovers (interim presidents excluded), the researchers determined seven categories for involuntary turnover. The main two were controversy and loss of confidence. Pull factors on the other side “are those that position the leader in a favorable light, thereby facilitating his or her opportunity for professional, financial, or personal advancement into other positions or organizations” (Tekniepe, 2013, p. 145).

This section provides analysis of some of the factors relevant to external stakeholders that presidents should consider during leadership transition. Push-pull factors are relevant to assist presidents in being successful. For this particular research, data reflect opportunities in which alumni relations could assist presidents in moving push factors to pull factors or preventing them from ending their tenures. The push pull factors found thematically in the research included organizational culture, communication strategies, and fundraising needs. Each of these factors have corresponding relationships with alumni relations to be addressed later in this review of literature. Research included primarily qualitative research. The research examined a variety of perspectives ranging from community colleges to women presidents, and private and public institutions. This diverse perspective better assists in providing transferrable insights to support the contextual understanding and positioning for future research on presidential transitions and alumni relations.

In 2005, Eddy used the theoretical framework of sense making to conduct a phenomenological study of nine community college presidents. Phenomenology was an appropriate choice of methodology in order to create meaning using the interviewees own words. Eddy (2005) cited the use of Weick’s (1995) seven principles of sense making. Eddy’s (2005)

findings provided insight to the perspectives of college presidents and knowing how they focus during leadership transitions. Eddy (2005) found that presidents must identify campus needs of the past and establish appropriate priorities for the future. Eddy (2005) wrote that “understanding the past is the first step in understanding institutional culture... presidents acknowledge the need to take time getting to know the campus and community” (p. 716).

Although most presidents use past experience to guide them, the research also stressed the importance of continuous feedback stating, “without reflection or campus feedback, leaders may not learn as much or adjust their leadership to be most effective in the given context” (Eddy, 2005, p. 723). Thacker and Freeman (2021) also reiterated these findings noting that presidents should seek interactions with key constituents and feedback from trusted colleagues or peers. In addition, the continuous examination of meaning based on past and current situations in context with feedback from constituents support cultural awareness and the ability to make the decisions that are more relevant to the organization (Eddy, 2005). This reflection and feedback is an area in which cultivating alumni relationships could be beneficial.

Smerek (2013) used sense making similar to Eddy (2005) but unlike Eddy (2005), Smerek (2013) used grounded theory to analyze presidents’ experiences. The rationale for this was to elaborate on the concept of sense making instead of developing a completely new theory, which is typically the intent of grounded theory. Smerek (2013) conducted open ended semi-structured interviews of 18 presidents. Smerek found that presidents need “total immersion” (p. 380) much as an ethnographer needs total immersion in a research setting. Through this process, they seek to understand the reality of campus members and “understand these localized, shared meanings to better interpret what was going on and better manage the uncertainties of their position” (p. 380).

Tierney (2008) examined organizational culture as a key component in decision making for leaders, requiring one to look beyond the structure and examine the participants' interpretations of the environment. These interpretations were shared assumptions based on historic, symbolic, and current environmental beliefs. Tierney pointed out that, "as decision-making contexts grow more obscure, costs increase, and sources become more difficult to allocate, leaders in higher education can benefit from understanding their institutions as cultural entities" (p. 26).

Oikelome (2017) contributed to the literature of culture by pointing out that understanding institutional fit is critical for presidents to appreciate the organization as it looks today and to better project for the future. Institutional fit "involves being strategic in incorporating skills and abilities, acquiring critical information, and matching characteristics, attributes, and identity" (p. 33-34). Oikelome (2017) studied the pathways for women to ascend to leadership in higher education through a phenomenological study of White and African American female university presidents. The use of this method allowed the subjects to tell their stories in the own words and "give voice to, explore, and compare how [the presidents] made meaning of and perceived the impact of race, gender, and other identity structures on their journey experiences to college presidency" (p. 26). The research found four key points: "mentorship, seizing opportunities, leadership development, and understanding institutional fit" (p. 34). Through mentors, prospective leaders can receive advice, encouragement, and support. In Eddy's (2005) research the influence of mentors was also referenced, "as these individuals began to construct their ideals of leadership, they were making choices to either model the behaviors of those mentoring them or consciously choosing to not model the leaders in which they were in contact" (p. 712). Brantley (2019) supported the need for leadership development

by discussing that institutions must devote resources and build programs to support women and people of color to take on greater responsibility.

In the Harris and Ellis (2018) research mentioned earlier in the chapter, 23% left for financial controversy followed by board loss of confidence at 20%, both of which may be viewed as push factors that could be mitigated by better understanding the campus and stakeholder, leadership development, and skill preparation. Among those skill areas was financial acumen, both management and fundraising. Specifically, for this research the opportunity exists with alumni to support fundraising. As Bourgeois (2016) noted,

ongoing drops in state and federal resources have left universities of all sizes struggling for new sources of revenue. Philanthropic support is the most obvious alternative, so today's institutional leaders are expected to serve as chief fundraiser and friend-raiser.

(p. 15)

According to McNaughtan et al. (2019) fundraising was one of the top areas that presidents felt unprepared to manage. Bourgeois (2016) also reported that presidents spent more than half their time with external stakeholders, donors, and fundraising. Therefore, fundraising can be deduced to be essential to the role of president. Alumni are a primary donor base and the ability to better develop relationships and propensity to increase alumni engagement and fundraising will be addressed in the next section.

McNaughtan et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative case study interviewing university presidents and communication vice presidents at flagship universities. The intent was to provide insights into what sitting presidents perceive to be important considerations for communication. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) (as cited by McNaughtan et al., 2019) "three step approach to coding qualitative data: open coding, axial coding and selective coding" (p. 1434) was used to

analyze the data. McNaughtan et al. (2019) noted, “the presidents stressed understanding the audience with one president explaining that particularly in a public university, you cannot underestimate the complexity, diversity, and expanse of the stakeholder groups” (p. 1434). Another general guide was to craft a team; however, McNaughtan et al. (2019) made no reference to utilizing outside stakeholders to vet communication which may be an area for improvement and relationship building with alumni.

University presidents help those in and around an organization make sense out of the circumstances that confront them, particularly during changing and uncertain times (Bourgeois, 2016). McLaughlin (2004) pointed out that “as leaders, presidents operate in the symbolic realm where images and interpretations are often more salient than what actually occurs in any situation” (p. 7). With the current reduction of presidential tenures, presidents may find it more difficult to establish one’s symbolism or immerse in the culture. Thacker and Freeman (2021) conducted a phenomenological study of university presidents. The research affirmed the significance of a president as a symbolic leader, but it also explained that it is a “highly intersubjective space” (p. 646). This space is one in which the leader and the public must interact with knowledge and understanding of how one views the other and vice versa. Thacker and Freeman (2021) found that all actions and communications carry meaning and must be relatable to the audience, effective communication and creation of positive symbolic leadership requires a leader to be agile and able to adapt between a variety of groups and settings, including student, faculty, alumni, board members, and other key stakeholders. McLaughlin (2004) also noted that presidents are expected to produce “vision statements,” and although not always created with substantive meaning, these statements are important to respond to a “deep need in people to feel connected to something bigger than themselves” (McLaughlin, 2004, p. 7). McNaughtan et al.

(2019) echoed this stating that a president shared “when they communicate, they must not only share their thoughts on the particular issue but must also help their constituents on campus understand how the issue will affect them” (p. 1439). This ability to communicate effectively amongst diverse constituents comes full circle to the importance that a leader must understand the culture in which they work.

The literature regarding presidential leadership has contextualized the needs of university presidents during transition and as it relates primarily with stakeholder expectations.

Opportunities have been identified in which alumni relations may provide support to a university president during leadership transition: including understanding history and culture of the institution, vetting communication to better reach the audience, and positioning alumni as future donors to meet the needs of universities today.

D. Opportunities and Influence in Alumni Relations

Weerts and Ronca’s (2008) clearly articulated the importance of alumni research stating, “in the increasingly competitive marketplace of higher education, colleges and universities are examining new ways to leverage the influence of their graduates for the benefit of their institutions” (p. 275). This section reviews literature that has researched alumni connections and giving to their alma maters. Specifically, the research was intended to better understand potential correlations to support the needs and expectations of university presidents. Articles reviewed provided a wide range of methodologies, theoretical framework and sampling. The populations researched were primarily in the United States (US) with the exception of two case studies in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland. One study also provided comparisons between institutions in the US and Italy. This provides a wide scope of research to better understand alumni relationships. Additionally, there was a mixture of private and public universities researched in

this literature. The data reviewed provided four categories that built upon one another in supporting alumni engagement and giving to the university. The literature addressed the student experience and the transition to alumni engagement and reviewed the opportunities for communication to influence alumni giving. Each of these elements related to the needs of the university president today and, by analyzing the research, can better support collaboration by alumni relations and presidents for greater success.

The relationship between student experience and alumni engagement was consistently referenced in the research reviewed. Weerts and Ronca reported in 2008 that “alumni donors who reported high levels of academic engagement while an undergraduate student were 1.88 times more likely to volunteer at the university” (p. 287). Weerts and Ronca (2008) conducted research of alumni donors to “create a profile of university alumni who are poised to support their alma mater through volunteer time, professional expertise, and political advocacy” (p. 275). The research provided important literature for the alumni and fundraising professions, “introducing a more comprehensive framework to understand overall alumni support for an institution beyond financial support” (p. 276). Weerts and Ronca (2008) explored both social exchange theory and expectancy theory in an alumni context for their research. Social exchange theory supported the ability to identify the costs of volunteering versus the perceived benefits received by the university. The use of expectancy theory argued that alumni create expectations around their role with the university and determine whether or not they will be successful in supporting the institution (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). This quantitative study used a binomial regression model with a sample size of 1,076 observations or survey responses (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Although their research was primarily examining the propensity of alumni donors to also volunteer, one key finding supported the student experience as an indicator of engagement with

the institution. They suggested “institutions that focus on building high quality academic programs may also be strengthening their alumni program many years later” (p. 289).

Frisby et al. (2019) followed by Cownie and Gallo (2021) built upon the relational findings to provide links between student experience and alumni engagement. Frisby et al. (2019) stated that “building alumni relations begins before students graduate, the relationships with institutions, and by extension faculty, develop with undergraduate students are foundational to the types of relationships alumni will maintain with their university” (p. 161). Frisby et al. (2019) used a mixed methods questionnaire that “examined rapport and memorable messages and their potential influence on alumni identification, institutional commitment, and support behaviors” (p. 161). Frisby et al. (2019) focused on the memorable messages that alumni recollected from interactions with faculty as key in building relationships. The authors also noted that “connecting with faculty integrates the student’s identity into the university identity” (Frisby et al., 2019, p. 168).

While conducting a small-scale study in the United Kingdom, Cownie and Gallo (2021) found that:

academics emerged as a central focus for gratitude. Exceptional academics were described in terms of the rapport they built with students, the feeling of personal connection established, the quality of ideas shared, the care and effort extended in their specific role...Such interactions appear to harness the emotional dimension of university life. (p. 793)

Cownie and Gallo (2021) claimed to conduct “the first study to place its key focus on experiences of feelings and expressions of gratitude amongst alumni” (p. 798). The research examined the experiences of alumni in relation to the potential contributions (not specifically

monetary) to the university and current students. The research used relationship marketing theory to propose “gratitude as a powerful driver of relational concepts including trust and commitment and intentions related to future behaviors” (Cownie & Gallo, 2021, p. 789). In addition, it built upon the work of Weerts and Ronca (2008) in considering social exchange theory in building alumni relationships. Using both, the research considered “the implications for alumni’s expressed willingness to interact with academics or institutions in the future” (Cownie & Gallo, 2021, p. 789). Gallo (2013) pointed out that engaging alumni may focus on interactions in which “alumni build on their affiliations, affinity and often nostalgia of university life” (p. 1154).

In 2013, McDearmon sought to break ground in measuring how alumni role identity could influence the likelihood of giving. Similar to the examples from Bourgeois et al. (2016) regarding how the drops in state and federal funding impact presidents, McDearmon (2013) viewed these declining funds in relationship to the demands that institutions will continue to place on alumni to provide private philanthropy. Although research on college and university alumni had increased, most research focused on alumni giving rather than the individual’s decision-making process or connectivity to the institution as a catalyst for giving. McDearmon (2013) used an online survey assessing three dimensions of alumni role identity in a random sample of alumni at a large, public research university in the Midwest.

McDearmon (2013) used the theoretical position of Sheldon Stryker’s symbolic interactionism offering (as cited by McDearmon, 2013):

symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980/2002) states that the enactment of a role is determined by choice in which the individual in question determines their own status within a particular classification dependent upon their behaviors. (p. 287)

McDearmon (2013) used this theory to understand alumni tendencies to give more if they identify more closely with the institution. McDearmon's (2013) findings "suggest that alumni with increased role identity may be more likely to support their institution through attending events, volunteering, joining the alumni association and making financial contributions" (p. 298). The overarching recommendation from McDearmon's (2013) study was to harness opportunities provided by personal relationships in order to strengthen the sense of identity with the institution. Learning from this and the previous research, university presidents and alumni relations should work together to connect faculty relationships with alumni to strengthen rapport with faculty and alumni constituents.

The articles so far have all provided dynamic and high-quality data that support the future of alumni engagement. However, each also had some limitation providing consideration in further research. Because of the limited scope of McDearmon's (2013) sample, further research at other institutions would be beneficial for consistent transferability beyond a large public research university. Weerts and Ronca (2008) made an important point that related to much of this research which considered the validity of event recall, meaning that asking for information in which subjects must recall information from many years ago can skew the accuracy of the event details. Frisby et al. (2019) research did acknowledge some levels of inconsistency both in the hypothesis of their research and as it may connect to other research regarding the student experience: "rapport during the undergraduate degree may not have long term effects as initially argued in this study's rationale. Instead, continuing rapport and interaction beyond graduation may be the more important predictor of alumni behavior" (p. 168).

This information did provide opportunities for future and research to support the continuing connection as universities should seek to engage students "effectively through the

transition to alumni status” (Cownie & Gallo, 2021, p. 798). The student experience does not stand alone. The culture of the university must be continued after graduation providing opportunities for alumni relations professionals and administrators to understand, embrace, and perpetuate the culture of the institutions. Frisby et al. (2019) noted, “many of these strategies are spearheaded by the alumni relations offices to build and maintain relationships without effectively leveraging positive relationships faculty may have already built with students” (p. 169).

The following articles build upon the previous research regarding engagement and analyzed how alumni offices strive to sustain these relationships and ultimately build upon them for future philanthropic giving. In Gallo’s (2013) research, one interview participant described alumni relations as the “way to keep the blood flowing through the alumni network, so that graduates have the opportunity to engage with each other and the university” (p. 1154). The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) released an article in May of 2021 that reaffirmed the need for long-term planning and investment in alumni relations which said,

It is important to remember that successful fundraising is most often the consequence of strong and steadfast engagement that has creatively and systematically deepened donors’ involvement with an organization. Alumni relations plays a fundamental role in this complex work. (Cates, 2021)

Levine (2008) addressed the perception that often faces alumni relations because of the difficulty to quantify success in immediate results compared to fundraising. This makes the perspective from which Levine (2008) pursued the research even more valuable. Levine stated, “although alumni may certainly enjoy hearing from their alma mater, there is no empirical

evidence that shows what the correlation is between an institution's efforts and alumni donations back to the school" (p. 178). Because the limited research on this correlation, Levine (2008) conducted a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to "determine whether there is a pattern of association between communication and alumni giving" (p. 184). The questionnaire was mailed to 250 Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) member, mid-sized (1500-15,000 students) private universities within the United States. Private colleges were chosen in order to compare more similar funding models. Keeping in mind that quantifying the influence of an alumni publication is a challenge, Levine (2008) began with a very broad hypothesis that "sending more communications pieces to their alumni would have greater giving levels and participation rates than their peers who sent fewer communications pieces" (p. 182). The findings showed "no connection between the overall number of communications pieces sent to alumni and alumni giving – either in dollars donated or participation rates" (p. 194). However, the research was able to pinpoint positive effects on giving based on specific communication pieces. Levine (2008) specifically found:

More-frequently sent alumni magazines were associated with higher alumni giving participation rates and giving levels both for general giving and for the annual fund.

More-frequently sent alumni electronic newsletters were associated with higher giving levels to the general fund, but not to the annual fund. (p. 194)

Gallo (2013) also addressed communication in his research asserting that

alumni communications are a platform to promote the university's news to the wider alumni community to foster a pride in their alma mater while allowing alumni to gain a better, wider understanding of the breadth and reach of their alma mater's impact beyond their own area of study. (p. 1154)

Newman and Petrosko (2011) complimented these findings in their research regarding alumni membership. Their research found that greater awareness directly supported greater feelings of satisfaction and perceptions of the university. This was not surprising that alumni members who receive more frequent communication are therefore more likely to express feelings of satisfaction. These findings illuminate the relationship between alumni, the alumni association, and the university as factors that alumni associations may be able to influence through programming and communications (Newman & Petrosko, 2011).

This research was important to the literature of alumni relationship and giving to the institution because membership in a dues paying alumni association equates similarly to alumni giving as “behavioral outcomes that assume a level of commitment and positive regard for the alma mater” (Newman & Petrosko, 2011, p. 739). The research of Newman and Petrosko (2011) was important and relevant research to the literature review and provided important data for alumni connection and propensity to pay dues to be a member of the association. “The design was a combination of descriptive and correlational/predictive methods” (p. 744) using logistic regression to predict the “dichotomous outcome variable group membership, either member or nonmember of the alumni association” (Newman & Petrosko, 2011, p. 744).

Francioni et al. (2021) aimed “to enhance this stream of research by further investigating and testing trust antecedents and outcomes, especially when it comes to donations” (p. 86). More specifically, the research objectives of the study were twofold: first, to deepen the investigation of the alumni’s trust and “to analyze the possible relationships between commitment and support and attitude toward donations” (p. 86). The United States of America (USA) and Italy were chosen in order to take advantage of the contrast between the two countries. The researchers used an online survey with confidentiality and anonymity. In the USA, a market research company

recruited participants in order to control quotas of gender, age, and area of residence. The market research company obtained 318 valid responses using the same questions for all participants (Francioni et al., 2021). Francioni et al. (2021) found that

American students become involved in the university's life to the point of transforming this engagement status into trust and then into support and affective commitment, which in turn leads to positively influencing attitudes toward donation. (p. 99)

This culmination of trust and commitment is the ultimate goal for alumni relations work and support for the university. Gallo (2013) reported on this as a time in which alumni have developed a "mature, deep and altruistic relationship with their alma mater" (p. 1156). This is also the time in which university advancement utilizes alumni records to "identify major gift prospects, matching interest, affinity and active engagement and support to the university to complementary areas of financial need at the institution" (Gallo, 2013, p. 1156).

This literature review has provided some key opportunities that alumni relations professionals could use in supporting the relationship of the university president with university alumni. However, the research had some limitations which should be considered when building future research. The research involved two small case studies, which although valuable for the methods and research, may need additional scalable review in American universities. The comparative study between the USA and Italy was informative, but the use a marketing research firm for the USA portion of the study which could change the response rate and outcome. The methodology and findings for all research was useful and likely transferrable, but as different countries and universities have different cultures and values on philanthropy, these factors could present bias in the findings. Additionally, none of the research for alumni involved interviewing or phenomenology, which presents an opening for future research. Similar to McDearmon

(2013), Newman and Petrosko (2011) tested only graduates from one “public doctoral-granting research, land-grant university in the South” (p. 743).

Overall, the research did provide a strong scholarly position to pursue opportunities that benefit both alumni relations and presidential transitions. Building upon and supporting the continuation of faculty relationships is considered essential, and Frisby et al. (2019) recommended, “engaging faculty in the alumni relations process more strategically should become a valued best practice” (p. 169). The research also showed that strategic communication and cultivation of identity and connection to the university have the potential to influence alumni giving (Levine, 2008). As Cates (2021) wrote:

Making sure that a robust and active alumni relations program exists to support broad-based advancement endeavors is paramount for institutional growth and a key reason that institutional leaders should continue to prioritize them as a complement to fundraising, even during times of unprecedented challenge. (section 2, para. 4)

E. Conclusion

It is imperative to this research to reiterate the environment in which university presidents and alumni relations professionals are navigating today. This situation has only exacerbated since McDearmon (2013) originally wrote:

With the decrease in state and federal support of colleges and universities reported almost daily in the news, it is only logical that these institutions will look to their graduates for greater levels of support. In order to make this possible, institutional advancement professionals need to find ways to let all alumni know that they are still important parts of their college or university even if they have not stepped onto campus in years. (p. 301)

As presidential tenure declines and the need for private donor support rises, this literature review provided a framework to understand the connecting components in which one entity could assist the other for greater success. University presidents must be aware of the demands of multiple stakeholders. At the same time, the largest collective group of stakeholders, alumni, has a department tasked with supporting both the stakeholders and the university. Therefore, it would be mutually beneficial for the alumni relations department to be charged with and relied upon to provide data that drives strategy for alumni to support university presidents during leadership transition.

Based on the literature review, data provided a perspective of cyclical and intersecting sets of relationships. At its essence, this process begins on the campus with relationships between students and faculty. These relationships build upon the culture of the institution which the literature championed to be key to successful presidential leadership. Therefore, step one is to understand and support campus culture and student-faculty relationships. Weerts and Ronca (2008) reiterated that “campus administrators must be aware that student experiences on campus today play a role in predicting alumni support for tomorrow...In short, providing a high-quality educational experience is critical to garnering future support from future alumni” (p. 289).

The literature also describes that the relationship should not stop upon graduation; and therefore, engagement and communication are key components to maintaining and growing the feelings of gratitude, trust, and connection that alumni have with campus. Presidents are advised in the literature to communicate and understand their audiences. This is another opportunity for alumni relations professionals to support presidential transitions both in providing guidance and supporting alumni centric communications. These communications have been shown to be significant in alumni giving which addresses an important concern for university presidents and

the future of higher education fundraising. Alumni are key constituents in the future of fundraising which provides a conclusive and metric driven reason for collaborating and coordinating between presidents and alumni relations in strategic messaging and decision making.

Literature for alumni relations professionals to support presidential transitions is limited and is being sought out by professionals across the country according to conversations with members of the Council for Alumni Association Executives. This literature review provided a scholarly basis for much needed future research. The results of this review provided insight into the importance of qualitative data focused on alumni relations professionals similar to those conducted of presidents. Further research will contribute to the literature on alumni relations and advancement. It will also provide transferrable descriptions of how leaders consider constituents in communication strategy and decision making.

Quantitative and qualitative research methods provide important vantage points from which to analyze this phenomenon in higher education in which presidential tenure is on the decline while the demands for leadership and private philanthropy are on the rise. The use of multiple research techniques in this literature review assists in guiding the framework and methodology for future study. The quantitative research as examined here provided tactical opportunities for understanding alumni motivations to engage and give, while the qualitative research offered insight into the personal experiences that guide strategic thought in personal processing and decision making. Utilizing the knowledge gained here in understanding presidential leadership, the most appropriate research method was determined to understand the leadership techniques for alumni executives, while applying the correlation in this research to examine if and how alumni offices and university presidents are working together to tackle these

issues. Therefore, a phenomenological method was used with semi-structured interviews to research decision making and communication strategies of alumni executives during university leadership change to provide a significant contribution to the scholarly literature of alumni and advancement research.

Chapter III. Research Methods

A. Introduction

As university leadership tenures steadily decrease (Melidona et al., 2023), the transition process for alumni executives is an important area to research. The implications for senior staff and particularly alumni relations leaders during these times of leadership change lacks significant research or transferrable road mapping for higher education professionals. The current study contextualized the problem within alumni associations and researched the group experiential themes that provide a guide for immediate use as well as a platform for future research on the intersection of presidential transition and the role of alumni associations and chief alumni officers.

The research was a qualitative study using phenomenology. The research purpose and questions positioned the study for a qualitative approach because it sought to understand and describe the processes that occur during leadership transition. By using qualitative methods, I went beyond the ‘what, where and when’ of events and decisions to better investigate the ‘why and how’ of decision making and communication strategies. As qualitative researchers, we aim to gather in-depth understanding of human action, interactions, and reactions to phenomena. In doing so for this research, I developed a qualitative framework based on a constructivism epistemology and pragmatic paradigm to provide a strong philosophical basis for the use of phenomenology and the qualitative research method.

Because “qualitative research must be fundamentally concerned with the nature of reality and knowledge production” (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 27), the researcher must understand one’s own perspective of reality in relation to the research. This particular research inquiry required a constructivist approach through interactions that can co-create an

understanding of the reality experienced by an individual and allow the truth to be constructed through the experiences of the individuals in the specific situation. More deeply, the research utilized the pragmatist paradigm as best articulated by John Dewey. Kelly and Cordeiro (2020) discussed that Dewey's work provided the perspective that all human experience involves some amount of interpretation. It can be concluded from the readings on Dewey that by understanding the knowledge and actions of others, one may interpret and reflect on the information in order to produce new actions and knowledge. Pragmatism through Dewey's guidance moved beyond scope of just the individual toward a focus of both the individual and the broader human experience. This can be particularly effective for researching organizational structures and processes: "using pragmatism, research working in organizational settings can move beyond objectivists conceptualizations" (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020, p. 1).

B. Research Design

The research relied on phenomenology and more specifically interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology to understand and describe the decision making and communication strategies of alumni executives during university leadership changes. Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology was an appropriate methodology for the study because it focused on the relationship between the person and the event with the goal to make sense or meaning of the phenomenon. The outcome was to understand and describe the context of participants connected to their environments (experiencing similar phenomena) and, ultimately, to understand how the phenomenon was socially situated for alumni associations in higher education which influenced decision making and communication strategies for chief alumni officers.

Data collection and analysis for phenomenology requires some key components. First, phenomenology understands the importance of the lived experience. Second, central to

phenomenology and understanding the lifeworld is reduction to understand one's relationship to the research specifically for interpretive rather than descriptive purposes (Given, 2008). Next, is co-constructing the phenomenon through semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Finally, the use of reflexivity and constant comparative analysis of the data allowed the personal experiential themes to be collected and to construct the group experiential themes that provide solid thematic conclusions.

The value of phenomenology was that it prioritized and investigated how human beings experience the world. Lived experience and the life world are essential to understanding human existence. Understanding a phenomenon through lived experience and a participant's life world allows for powerful insight and understanding for future actions and reactions. Through reduction, the researcher did not bracket the phenomenon away from the world but instead related the researcher's self-understanding to better frame the phenomenon being researched (Given, 2008). These pre-understandings are not bracketed; instead, they are integrated and become part of the research findings, being considered valuable guides that make research more meaningful (Matua, 2015). In some types of phenomenology, reduction is intended to be a bracketing approach that separates the researcher's pre-existing knowledge of the subject from the present research. However, for the purpose of interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenology, the reduction of understanding one's position and experience with the phenomenon was used to better understand the larger contextual issues of the phenomenon (Matua, 2015).

"Reflexivity describes the process in which researchers are conscious of and reflective about the ways in which their questions, methods and subject position might impact on the data" (Sloan & Bowe, 2013, p. 1297). During reflexivity the researcher used empathy and relevant prior experience to support interpretation of meanings. The data collection utilized human

interactions as a subjective experience and as recommended used a small purposive sample and in-depth interviews (Given, 2008). The samples and interviews assisted in the ability for the researcher and participant to work closely together in gaining understanding and co-construction of the phenomenon and the processes around it. Sloan and Bowe (2013) better articulated this process through Van Manen's phenomenology which "allows the researcher to use experience common to the researcher and the participant to conduct a structural analysis of what is most common, most familiar and most self-evident to the researcher" (p. 1298).

Creswell (2007) described in-depth interviews as the primary means of collecting information for a phenomenological study. The selection of participants was also critical to the understanding of the phenomenon and being specific about the sample as those who have directly experienced the phenomenon.

C. Participants and Sample

According to Tie et al. (2019), "a researcher purposefully selects participants and/or data that can answer the research question" (p. 5). To best support this research, purposive sampling was used to define the sampling frame. The sample was curated from alumni executives who are members of the Council of Alumni Association Executives (CAAE) and used the data from the CAAE Annual Surveys and the Carnegie institutional rankings to best identify comparable participants. CAAE survey data included 89 member institutions as of July 2022 with 83 being from the United States and 74 reporting to be public.

First, a list of all interdependent or integrated alumni associations was culled from the larger group, then cross referenced the list with the Carnegie website for Public Very High Research Universities (Research I), which reduced the list to 32, not including the University of Arkansas. The list was then narrowed to undergraduate alumni populations less than

300,000. There were 24 institutions that met these parameters. The next step was to confirm which chief alumni officers had been in their positions for at least five years and have led their organizations through a presidential change during those five years from 2018-2023. The research (via internet search) indicated that 11 institutions met the criteria. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), phenomenological research recommends 3-10 participants.

The research concept was introduced at The Winter Institute for the Council for Alumni Association Executives on February 10, 2023, during a presentation on the foundation of alumni relations. Upon IRB approval (see Appendix A and B include request form and approval letter)), each potential participant was contacted via email to confirm that the participant and the institution met the parameters and verify interest and willingness to participate (see Appendix B for the sample recruitment email.) Most contacted CAOs were interested in the research however four declined because they did not meet the sampling criteria, and one did not respond.

D. Instrumentation and Data Collection

Rosenbaum et al. (2016) discussed the relevance of semi-structured interviews because of the ability to “maximize the breadth of interactions between the researcher and the interviewee” (p. 5). In addition, this interaction strongly supported the interpretive and hermeneutic perspective for interviewee and interviewer to co-construct the phenomenon. The semi-structured protocol allows for flexibility to adapt and respond to the interviewee as well as test new questions that come to mind during the conversation meeting the objectives for an in-depth interview. The interview protocol (see Appendix C) was developed drawing on both my own professional experiences as well as the literature reviewed for the study. The interview protocol was tested with three CAAE members who did not meet the parameters of the research sample as leaders. The interview protocol was adjusted during the interview process when it was

determined that the interviewees answers segued directly to communication strategies before addressing the questions regarding feedback. This was consistent for all interviews. Much of the ability to adapt and be relaxed in the interview process was not only knowledge of the subject matter but also the ability to record and use transcription software of Otter AI and Zoom transcriptions. This allowed for greater focus on the interviewee and engagement as an active listener, responding in a thoughtful way to comments as well as digging deeper into the meanings and purpose in the interviewee's responses and taking field notes throughout the interviews.

Following each interview, journaling was a key data gathering component to reflect upon the immediate feeling and emotions expressed by the interviewee and interviewer which may not be translated in a simple transcription. Techniques similar to observational research provided an initial guide for creating memos that support the data collection process. This was an important analytic process to store ideas generated and then document through interacting with data. Tie et al. (2019) also explained that "memos are reflective interpretive pieces that build a historic audit trail to document ideas, events, and the thought process inherent in the research process and developing thinking of the analyst" (p. 4). As a result, immediately following the conclusion of each interview, I set aside up to 30 minutes to reflect on the interview and provide my thoughts, reactions, and impressions of the spoken and unspoken content of the interview using memos in my journal.

Transcriptions were used to identify large codes and establish personal experiential themes that allowed for constant comparative analysis among all data sets. Open coding was the initial coding system that allowed for a wide review in order to find general fields of key words and phrases. The research was reflexive throughout the process with constant comparative

analysis to be used to ensure that theoretical saturation had been met. Each interview was transcribed and returned to the participant to assure that the correct ideas are expressed. This member checking process allowed participants to correct or elaborate on ideas or specific comments if needed. Only one participant asked for large redactions to protect anonymity.

Theoretical saturation is critical and was pursued with the potential of additional support for review and meeting of this expectation. As Given (2008) noted “theoretical saturation means seeking data to identify and fill the properties of a theoretical category. Researchers often erroneously believe that they have achieved theoretical saturation when their data become repetitive” (p. 3). Therefore, peer and mentor review of the data analysis supported clarity in determining when theoretical saturation had been met. Themes were sent to the research advisor and a recent graduate of the Higher Education doctoral program to review and provide feedback on the process.

E. Data Analysis

The interview protocol was established to support the following objectives: provide a semi-structured interview with flexibility to achieve an in-depth interview and dialogue; create a field note structure with recorded transcripts and real time data collection; and to organize questions that met the objectives of the research questions. I began the interview by establishing rapport and sought understanding of the overall context of the interviewees relationship to the phenomenon. These questions included:

A. Tell me a little bit about your position and how long you have been in this role?

B. Can you share the timeline and set the scene for leadership transition at your institution?

i. When did the previous leader resign? Were there any significant considerations?

- ii. How long was the search process? Was anyone from the association involved?
- iii. Can you walk me through the announcement and timeline of the transition to leadership?

Next, I targeted questions that specifically addressed Research Question 1: How do alumni executives describe their decision-making processes during university leadership transitions?

These questions include:

- A. What were some of the critical concerns or issues happening for the alumni association during this time?
- B. Did your processes or decision making change because of the leadership transitions at the university?
- C. Can you describe at least one decision that was impacted by the change and how you adjusted?

I found that the interviewees responses often led to the questions regarding the communication strategies and moved to the questions that addressed the next research question: How do alumni executives describe their involvement in the creation of communication strategies and messaging to alumni regarding leadership transitions?

- A. Who was in charge of the communication strategy to alumni?
- B. When and how was your office included?
- C. What key considerations did you include in strategizing the message?

The communication strategies themselves brought in the subject of feedback and led to the next set of questions to address the research question: What reactions so alumni association executives receive during leadership change and how do they manage that feedback?

- A. What are some of the common mediums that alumni use to share their thoughts?

B. How did you prepare alumni staff for the potential feedback?

C. Did you take any specific measures to manage the change for your constituents?

Finally, questions wrapped up targeting the effectiveness of the processes used in address alumni during university leadership change which is the final research question: How do alumni association executives describe their success or failure in navigating changes in leadership?

A. Can you describe the feedback from staff and alumni during this process?

B. Do you feel the association was successful managing the transition? Why or why not?

C. Did you feel your role was more transactional or strategic?

D. What would you do differently or recommend to others for the future?

Interviews of approximately one-hour were conducted using video conferencing software, including MicroSoft Teams or Zoom. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by Otter.ai. The interview protocol provided direction throughout the process. During the interviews, I reflected upon personal experience and actively focused on not contributing that personal experience when asking probing questions in order to avoid influencing interviewee responses. Constant reflexivity was critical to the research process. Reflexive journaling was also used following each interview and throughout the analysis to interpret and catalog the observations during the interviews as well as to objectively review the thoughts, feelings, and interpretations. The transcripts of each interview were reviewed and sent to the participants for any clarifications. I then began the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) model to make notes and memo, establishing Personal Experience Themes from each interview and the Group Experiential Themes.

I read each case separately to immerse myself in the personal experience for the participant and avoid bias of one interview on another. I organized sections of each transcript to

address the research questions. Exploratory notes were made by highlighting and summarizing important answers to the questions. The transcripts with notes were then printed for additional review and notations. I read the transcripts again to make supplementary notes providing deeper understanding and interpretation of the experiences. Following the guidance of Lewthwaite et al. (2017) I moved away from the original text and used the exploratory notes and memos to construct Personal Experiential Themes (PETS). I compared the PETS side by side to identify phrases or words that were consistent with each case, then established the Group Experiential Themes (GETS) to answer each question. I also separated strong thematic words from the GETS and wrote the words on separate paper and worked through the connections between the words and themes to derive greater understanding of the participant perspective and interpret the experience. I studied all PETS, GETS, and connections in relation to the original research questions, and identified the themes that addressed the questions. As recommended by Smith et al. (2009) I reviewed the original transcripts for richness within the text to validate the themes with verbatim quotes to ground the interpretation with detailed examples. Electronic files and scans of the handwritten notes offered an audit trail to support the analysis description and replication of the process for future research (Nowell et al., 2017).

F. Positionality

My position in the research was as a peer to alumni executives in the purposive sample, and I sought to understand their decision-making processes during times of leadership transition on their respective campuses. Through the process of reflexivity, I found that my position in relation to this research went much deeper than position relative to my interviewees. My career experiences have shaped my epistemology and ontology. I have built on this self-understanding to better analyze my research moving forward with a critical and objective eye to find more

meaningful results. I sought to first bracket my experience and my feelings out of the analysis and then pull my knowledge back in writing for conclusions, future research, and discussion. My positionality and understanding of the subjects and phenomenon was important in writing the analysis and findings in a way that was understandable, bridging various structure and title variations while also redacting or paraphrasing information in a way that supported anonymity of the participants.

I have often looked at the world from the perspective of understanding how things have come to be how they are. As I have developed in leadership, I have become more and more aware and disturbed with the power relationships that exist and how the historic power paradigms continue to shape perceptions and the future of my profession. As a White female in my mid-40s with 18 years of professional experience in higher education, I have sought and fought to build my career with the broadest possible knowledge base and a strategic mindset to leave things better than I found them.

My career in higher education began in 2005 at my undergraduate alma mater as the director of alumni relations. The university had a student population of less than 700 and a relatively small alumni base. This alumni association had no dues paying membership model. My job goals were focused on engagement and annual giving to the university. The experience and knowledge gained at that institution uniquely provided me the opportunities to learn and understand all facets of the university business. I was selected to serve on the Board of Trustees endowment committee and participated in the reaccreditation of the institution with the North Central Higher Learning Commission. I embraced every opportunity provided to me in that smaller environment. By my early-30s I had earned a master's degree and the designation as a Certified Fund-raising Executive (CFRE). My experience and holistic understanding of

fundraising afforded me my next opportunity as a development officer at a Division I Land-Grant institution in the central United States. Even in looking at that career move, I requested a position that would glean insight into the broader understanding of the institution. The position allowed me to sit on the Dean's Advisory Council and the Provost's Cabinet. By taking that position, I learned more about academia and the expectations surrounding academic leadership.

Specific to this research as hermeneutic and interpretive is the position I hold at the University of Arkansas. I became the Executive Director of the Arkansas Alumni Association in 2014. I was the first female ever to hold this position. I was also the first alumnus of the university to run the alumni association in more than 30 years. Into the second year in my role, the university's chancellor retired, with an appointment of a six-month interim during the search for a new chancellor. The new chancellor began in January 2016 and launched a process to develop the university's guiding priorities. By August 2016, my direct supervisor (Vice Chancellor for Advancement) and person who hired me resigned, and an interim vice chancellor was named internally then eventually promoted to the full-time position by January 2017. With my 20 person staff and 30 member board, we wrote a strategic plan in 2018 for the years of 2019-2023.

In March 2020 we endured COVID-19 and a shutdown of all our normal events and engagement operations. We used our strategic plan as a tether in the storm of uncertainty. In June 2021, our chancellor resigned abruptly with an acting chancellor named for a few months. An interim chancellor was named in August of 2021. The official search began in Spring of 2022. The interim chancellor was named a finalist date in August 2022. After a very public and highly debated process, the interim chancellor was appointed to a three-year term as chancellor in

October 2022. Because of all these experiences, my relationship to the participants and the phenomenon, I have the knowledge base that uniquely positions me to lead this research.

G. Reciprocity and Ethics

The relationship between interviewee and interviewer is one that had been established through relationships among alumni professionals in the Council for Alumni Association Executives. Therefore, the development of rapport and trust is one that had been built from previous professional associations and continued to be built through this research process. Ethical guidelines established by the American Psychological Association (APA) were reviewed and considered in the process. Additionally, reflectivity was critical to the researcher understanding any ethical dilemma as they arise or recognize them once they have occurred and seek guidance in clarifying any ethical concerns.

Ethics related to reciprocity must also be addressed. Because this is a peer research project, there is little need for any financial appreciation for participants and could be considered unethical to pay them for participation. Token gifts were sent out of respect for participation and candor, but they were sent as a thank you gift and not initiated in the beginning of the research or perceived as a payment.

Finally, University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and consent forms were critical components to maintaining ethics and accountability (Appendix B and C)). According to Jones et al. (2021), consent forms for research participation should include notice that participation is voluntary; the purpose of the research; the procedures and duration of the research; as well as confidentiality, risks and benefits for participants.

H. Trustworthiness and Rigor

Researchers such as Nowell et al. (2017), along with Stahl and King (2020) among others often cite Lincoln and Guba (1985) for establishing areas of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility relied on the relationship built between the researcher and the participants. Nowell et al. (2017) provided suggestions “to address credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data collection triangulation and researcher triangulation” (p. 3). Stahl and King (2020) outlined a variety of triangulation options. The most appropriate for the research topic and participants was environmental triangulation in which a similar phenomenon occurs in more than one location (Stahl & King, 2020). Peer debriefing is recommended in two categories for establishing rigor. Both credibility and dependability called for peer debriefing (Nowell et al. 2017). Therefore, the research used transcription review and clarification by the participant as well as requesting a review of data by the research advisor and a former doctoral classmate who graduated from the program within the last year. Dependability also required transparency for the research process and data to be available for audit. According to Nowell et al. (2017):

Audit trails provide readers with evidence of the decisions and choices made by the researcher regarding theoretical and methodological issues throughout the study.

Maintain records of all data, field notes, transcripts and reflexivity on the process and have a reasonable expectation that another researcher could draw similar conclusions.

(p. 3)

All qualitative research recommends transferability as a component of trustworthiness. Transferability involves thick description so that others who wish to use the research may find patterns and description that are applicable to transfer from one situation to another. Finally,

once credibility, transferability and dependability are all achieved, the research should be able to provide confirmability that articulates “how the researcher’s interpretations were derived from the data” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3).

I. Summary

The chapter explained the use of qualitative research as the appropriate method for this dissertation. By understanding the positionality of the researcher and the relationship to the phenomenon and the diligent selection of qualified participants, the researcher met the objective that “interpretive phenomenological research results in a detailed interpretation of the meaning and structures of a particular phenomenon as it is experience first-hand” (Matua, 2015, p. 24). Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology was clearly the method by which the phenomenon of decision making and communication strategies for alumni executives could be explored in a framework that allowed for transferrable and useful knowledge to a larger scope of senior staff in higher education experiencing similar phenomenon on their campuses. Using a pragmatic approach, the research is important and meets the goal that “all research should emanate from a desire to produce useful and actionable knowledge” (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020, p. 3).

Chapter IV. Data Analysis and Findings

A. Introduction

The research on the decision making and communication strategies of alumni relations is extremely timely as the university presidential tenure continues to decrease based on reports from the American Council on Education (Melidona et al., 2023) and the demands on university presidents is at an all-time high. Dr. G. David Gearhart stated these concerns in *Inside Higher Ed* addressing the decline in university presidential tenure and the controversies surrounding high profile resignations:

Being a college or university president may, in fact, be the toughest job in America... It's become a very difficult position to do the right way. There are so many groups out there that a college president has to try to appease. (Moody, 2023)

The research in the study addressed a key item that Gearhart referenced and comes at a critical time to provide insight and thoughtful description of presidential transitions, specifically for a department that is tasked with supporting the longest-term constituency of an university: its alumni.

The chapter includes the data collection and analysis for four research questions as well as providing a contextual understanding of the participants and their experiences with presidential leadership change. The research questions addressed four important areas of leadership transitions for senior leadership at universities: decision-making processes; communication strategies; feedback management; and factors for success or failure during the transition. The six participants interviewed all had long tenures in the alumni relations profession and had experiences with multiple presidents.

B. Summary of the Study

The abrupt resignations of five presidents over the course of a week during the summer of 2023 highlighted the trend from the American Council on Education survey that “presidential terms are shrinking across higher education” (Moody, 2023, para 31). Given this trend, the role of alumni relations in these transitions is an important area to research. The issues and implications for senior staff and particularly alumni relations leaders during these times of leadership change lacks significant research. Research and applied scholarship could be used to create and implement better decisions for institutions and their constituents in the future. The current study sought to contextualize the problem within alumni relations and provide an understanding and interpretation for immediate use as well as a platform for future research on the intersection of presidential transition on alumni and their Chief Alumni Officers. As noted by Gearhart (Moody, 2023) as well as described in the literature, the expectations of college presidents in the United States today is multifaceted with demands from a wide variety of stakeholders who at any point in time can jeopardize the president and institution.

The purpose for conducting the study was to describe and interpret the decision-making processes and communication strategies for Chief Alumni Officers during leadership changes at public research universities. The research used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). By using qualitative methods, the research went beyond the what, where and when of events and decisions to better describe and understand the why and how of decision making and communication strategies.

C. Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used as the sampling framework. The sample was curated from Chief Alumni Officers (CAO) who were members of the Council of Alumni Association

Executives (CAAE). Six CAOs at public very high research institutions, according to Carnegie classifications, agreed to and participated in the study. The participants were from diverse regions of the US and no two participants were from the same state. These participants were selected based on their relevant experience with the phenomena having experienced a transition in university leadership on their campus within the last five years while they held the position of CAO. For the purpose of data analysis and reporting, participants were assigned pseudonyms by the researcher. Pseudonyms were used as much as possible to relay direct attribution. However, in some cases the details shared provided description and direct conflicts that could reveal the identity of the participant or the university. In such cases, no pseudonym was used. These instances were kept to a minimum through paraphrasing. Additionally, each participant reported to an individual who reported to the institution's president, meaning that none of the participants reported directly to the president.

Semi-structured interviews have typically been used to support the interpretive and hermeneutic perspective for interviewee and interviewer in co-constructing a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). The semi-structured protocol allowed for flexibility to adapt and respond to the interviewee as well as test new questions that were prompted during the conversation. I prepared the interview protocol drawing on both my own professional experiences as well as the literature reviewed for the study. The ability to adapt and be relaxed in the interview process is not only knowledge of the subject matter but also the ability to record and use transcription software. Because of this, I was able to completely focus on the interviewee and engage as an active listener, responding in a thoughtful way to comments as well as digging deeper into the meanings and purpose in the interviewee's responses. My knowledge of the positions and subject

matter also allowed me to provide educated options in how to describe situations in the analysis that could be extremely identifiable of the participants or their institutions.

Interviews lasting approximately one hour were conducted with each participant using video conferencing software, including MicroSoft Teams or Zoom, depending on the participant's preference. I began the interview by establishing rapport and seeking to understand the overall context of the interviewee's relationship to the phenomenon. Next, I targeted questions that specifically addressed each research question proposed in the study. Finally, questions completed the interview by asking the interviewee to reflect upon the effectiveness of the processes used in addressing alumni during university leadership change. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by Otter.ai but not video recorded.

Because I am a colleague and peer to each participant and have been a member of the Council of Alumni Association Executives with them for more than seven years, the participants and I were comfortable in the dialogue. This comfort level added to my ability to ask probing questions, but also created a process of participants answering questions that were originally included as semi-structured but were answered in other parts of the interview, meaning that not all semi-structured interview questions were asked during the interview. However, the protocol with all questions provided guidance and direction throughout the process. For the interviews, I reflected upon personal experience but actively focused on not contributing personal experience to the interview process in order to reduce bias or undue influence on the interviewee. The process of constant reflexivity and distancing was critical for the research process. Reflexive journaling was also used following each interview and throughout the analysis to interpret and catalog the observations during the interviews as well as to objectively review the thoughts, feelings and interpretations. The transcripts of each interview were read and reread, compared

with the audio recordings, especially to clarify word phrases or inflection and tone of the participant in certain responses. I began the IPA model to make notes and memo, next, established Personal Experiential Themes (PET) from each interview and then derived the Group Experiential Themes (GET).

Table 1.
Participants and Interview Schedule

Participant Pseudonym	Date of Interview	Time	Location	Length
Mike	June 1, 2023	9 a.m.	Zoom	50 minutes
Beth	June 2 2023	9 a.m.	Teams	50 minutes
Don	June 2, 2023	11:30 a.m.	Zoom	1 hour and 10 minutes
Janice	June 2, 2023	1 p.m.	Zoom	47 minutes
Brenda	June 5, 2023	2 p.m.	Zoom	1 hour
Steve	June 6, 2023	2:30 p.m.	Zoom	45 minutes

In step one, I reviewed and clarified the Otter.ai transcripts for each interview and sent them to the participants for review and additional clarification. I then read each case separately to immerse myself in the personal experience for each participant and avoid bias of one interview on another. I then pulled sections of each transcript as it directly or indirectly addressed the research questions. Exploratory notes were taken in Microsoft allowing for time stamping on each note. For the exploratory notes, I highlighted and summarized critical answers to the questions. The transcripts with notes were then printed for additional reading and memoing. I read each transcript again with the notes and made additional notes in the margins that further interpreted the experience of the participant. Next, I moved away from the original text and used the exploratory notes and memos to construct Personal Experiential Themes (PETS). I read the

PETS side by side and compared phrases and words that were consistent with each case, then narrowing the results to a list of Group Experiential Themes (GETS). Then, I extracted strong thematic words from the GETS and reserved a room at the university library to utilize the white board to write the words and work through the connections between the words and themes. This process was similar to the final step described by Lewthwaite et al. (2017) which explained that clusters could be connected and aggregated to derive the greater understanding of the participant perspective and interpret the experience. At this point I reviewed all PETS, GETS, and connections in relation to the original research questions, and I memoed the themes that addressed the questions and went back to the original transcripts to determine the richness of the text that authenticated the themes and provided verbatim quotes as recommend by Smith et al. (2009) to ground the interpretation with precise examples from the cases. The use of electronic files through much of the process and scanning of the handwritten notes into electronic files supported the audit trail that can be verified to replicate the process in the future. According to Nowell et al. (2017), “audit trails provide readers with evidence of the decisions and choices made by the researcher regarding theoretical and methodological issues throughout the study” (p. 3).

As described above, the research used IPA to describe and interpret the experiences of CAOs during leadership change. The interview transcripts were analyzed and interpreted using the IPA approach. Group experiential themes were emergent, addressing the research questions to describe decision making, feedback, communication strategies and overall feelings of success or failure through the transition.

D. Data Analysis

Six participants from the Council of Alumni Association Executives and Carnegie defined very high research universities met the sampling criteria established for the study. However, in addition to the general criteria for selecting the participants, it is critical to the research to understand the experience of the participants, their relationship with their institutions, and the climate of presidential change in which they have worked. The introduction section of the interview protocol provided relevant information that contributes to the understanding of the participants and their environments.

Table 2.
Participant Experience

Total Years of Higher Education Experience	Number of institutions	Years in current role as Chief Alumni Officer	Total number of Presidential Transitions in Career
15-20 years	1	10-15	1-5
25-30 years	3 or more	5-10	6-10
25-30 years	3 or more	5-10	15-20
30-35 years	1	15-20	6-10
25-30 years	1	15-20	1-5
30-35 years	1	5-10	1-5

All participants in the study had been the CAOs at their respective institutions for at least five years and reported to a Vice President or similar position who reported directly to the president of the university. The participants ranged in career experience from 18 years to more than 32 years in higher education. The majority of the participants are alumni of the institution

they serve. Two participants had higher education experience of more than 26 years at multiple institutions and were not degreed alumni of their current employing institutions. Five participants had experienced a change to their direct supervisor in the last five years, and all participants had been involved in some version of organizational structure change within their divisions. Two were moved to interim upper-level positions then moved back during the presidential changes. Two had larger scope engagement responsibilities predetermined in their positions while two others had seen their roles expanded to include additional engagement/advancement responsibilities. Three participants were male and three participants were female, and all identified as White.

While the research focused on the experiences of the participants having been through a presidential change within the last five years (2018-2023). The depth and breadth of the participants experiences included presidential transitions that ranged from three transitions to more than 20 in the course of their higher education careers. Because of these situations and experiences of the participants, the research scope of the presidential transitions discussed by the participants included an unanticipated depth to the knowledge base of the participants and the learned experience that prepared them for the transition faced within the last five years specific to the research. Additionally, the search process for the presidents were inconsistent, with some using external search firms and some not. Also, it is important to note, as expressed by several participants, some of the transitions discussed in the interviews occurred during the pandemic adding complexity to the way in which searches and transitions occurred.

Based on the data, an overarching theme will first be presented. The overarching theme is critical for context and understanding the saturation thematic that was found from all participants in the overall research. The thematic analysis continues with group experiential themes that

address each of the research questions. The following table provides an overview of the themes that were emergent and will be explained in the analysis.

Table 3.
Themes Identified from Interview Data

	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3	Research Question 4
Theme 1 Contextualizing the Transitions	Theme 2 Building Valued Relationships	Theme 3 Building upon the Lead of University Communications	Theme 4 “We don’t have one Alumni Voice. We have Thousands.”	Theme 5 Access to the President
1.1 Eroding Confidence in Presidents	2.1 Respect Empowers Decision Making	3.1 Messaging for Alumni	4.1 Building Space for Feedback	5.1 Knowing Your Value Proposition
1.2 Moving on from Beloved Presidents	2.2 Planning in Purgatory	3.2 Providing the Largest Targeted Communication Reach	4.2 Balance and Authenticity	5.2 Maintaining Relationships
1.3 Alumni Perspectives in the Process	2.3 Making Tough Calls	3.3 Making it Personal	4.3 Supporting Staff	5.3 Navigating Priorities of Short-term Presidents versus Long-term Constituents

Theme 1: Contextualizing the Transitions

Because of the range of experiences, it is important in the analysis to first contextualize the transitions and the alumni experience within those transitions. Therefore, the first theme addressed the overall descriptions of the campus climate and alumni experience during the presidential departures and expectations for the next hire. These themes are important context for the research and the experience of the participants but do not directly answer the research

questions, which have been addressed following this theme. In the interviews as the participants discussed the background of their experiences, the climates of the change involved: loss of confidence in presidents; scrutinized hiring processes; managing the transitions of long-term, beloved presidents; and when and how the alumni perspective was considered in the process. The first subtheme described situations in which the campus members or board expressed some expression of no confidence in the president. The second subtheme expressed by multiple participants was how to manage the transition when a long serving, beloved president leaves. The participants shared that following the departures there were examples and experiences of either a desire from officials to hear the alumni voice in the process or expressed desires from alumni to be heard in the process moving forward.

Theme 1.1: Eroding Confidence in Presidents

In at least three presidential transitions, the campus had experienced votes or expressions of no confidence. Don shared that within a few months, the faculty “came down on [the president] and had some version of a no faith vote.” This no confidence vote was among concerns regarding the hiring process that led to the resignation of the president. Beth shared that there had been significant “discomfort or a lack of confidence at the time.” Beth also discussed that the president had “also not embrace[d] the alumni population and donor population” or did not appear to try to gain familiarity with processes or priorities of the institution and this “really left [the president] in an isolated situation.” A third participant also managed through a president who received a vote of no confidence from the board but was allowed to finish the presidential term, “[The president] had kind of some really tough political issues with the board that [the president] survived.”

Theme 1.2: Moving on from Beloved Presidents

Participants shared that departures of long term and beloved presidents also needed careful consideration. The sense of loss needed to be balanced with an appreciation for the past with optimism for the future. Janice shared,

I wish we had done a better job of communicating. Here's what [the leadership] did over the last nine years and here's how the campus has grown. I think we were so worried about the big shoes that we just didn't really do that...Here's what we were able to accomplish under [the] leadership. Imagine the possibilities for the future.

Janice now deals with skeptical alumni who have already expressed reservations about the new president, such as, “Well, [the president] seems very smart. We'll see.” Brenda and Don expressed that the retirement and departures under positive circumstances offer much more time for planning and thinking through transition strategies and stakeholder engagement.

Theme 1.3: Considering Alumni Perspectives in the Process

Whatever the circumstance of the president's departure, the CAOs found that alumni became more vocal during a presidential transition and wanted to be heard in the search process. This insight was important to the research as it showed that proactive alumni interactions in the search process are important rather than just reactive as the original interview and research questions had prepared for regarding feedback. Beth shared that the university system leadership valued alumni while the campus president had lacked understanding of the external expectations, culture, and mission embraced by alumni. Steve also expressed issue with lack of focus or concern for alumni voice:

The biggest thing is the structure of the selection process. You know, we worked really hard to be in the room, but we realized that the last time it didn't matter if you were in the

room if you didn't have the votes. So, this time we just put all of our energy into trying to help make sure that the selection committee understood what was best for our university. In the last administration we had been really kind of pushed aside. I mean, it was really a challenging season.

Don has dealt with multiple transitions in the last five years. He said,

At the end of their [search] process, they just named the guy. That was something that the university leadership decided to change [in the next search]. Because the community would have aired their grievances if they had known about it going in. By the time they got to this most recent search, the final candidates were known and basically paraded publicly around and had a few different public forums with students and such. So we were able to promote to any alumni that were interested.

Research Question 1: How did alumni executives describe their decision-making processes during university leadership transitions?

Decision making for CAOs did not stop simply because a university leader changed. In answering the research question, the CAOs clearly outlined the strategic factors that were considered throughout the leadership change and the decision-making processes. Overall, CAOs described the importance of building relationships that were valued by multiple constituents and maintaining those relationships through the transition process. In these relationships, CAOs described how feeling and being respected empowered their ability to make decisions. CAOs also described the complexity and vulnerability of planning in the arena of uncertainty that Don referred to as “purgatory.” The valued relationships with colleagues and alumni supported CAOs’ feelings of stability to make decisions. This feeling of stability in the relationships made CAOs stronger when tough decisions ultimately had to be made.

Theme 2: Building Valued Relationships

The participants in the study shared a variety of experiences in the decision-making process during leadership transitions. The central theme focused on descriptions of the importance of the relationship built by the CAO with both the president and vice president (direct supervisor) of the institution. There was an emergent connection between feeling valued by the president and vice president in relation to the descriptions of empowerment to make decisions. Additionally, the participants shared details of very tangible and tactical decisions that sometimes involved difficult decisions made during the transitions as well as the overarching sentiment that was described as “purgatory” when pausing and managing through the change process.

Theme 2.1: Respect Empowers Decision Making

When CAOs feel respected and believe the work of alumni relations is valued by the president, decision making is empowered and managed with more clarity by the Chief Alumni Officer. When the new leadership understood and valued alumni as a key stakeholder, the alumni executives felt more emboldened. One participant sits on the president’s cabinet even though not reporting directly to the president. This participant had access to the university’s board leadership during the transition and therefore felt empowered while making critical decisions during the transitions. Beth shared that the system board always valued alumni relations even when the campus president didn’t give that appearance. For Beth, the retrospective discussion on the recent presidential departure created a clear mood shift when thinking about the lack of value previously compared to the value felt today by the current president. Beth shared:

Under our failed presidential leadership, I feel like we failed [the president] in [their] leadership... not prioritizing alumni relations. I think ultimately led to the president's

demise because there was never the priority of alumni relations and exposure and outreach was never elevated to the President's Office.

Steve felt empowered describing that the feelings of leadership who understand the alumni relations role has made the alumni relations work feel stronger. “[The president] is committed to helping us to be successful. And so that it makes you a little more bold.” The very clear theme was emergent that hiring leaders in Advancement who respect and understand the impact of alumni to an institution is important. Comments from another participant shared the loss of empowerment and agency felt when disrespected. This was seen when the participant was removed from access to the president and into a minimized role. This participant (name undisclosed to protect anonymity) also shared, “I think that's because of [the president's] lack of knowledge [of alumni relations] ... [the president] sort of ceded some of that decision making in terms of what alumni engagement looks like overall... I think that's definitely a decision that's affected our organization.”

Theme 2.2: Planning in Purgatory

Decision making was described as often being left in limbo while presidential changes were in process. Participants expressed the uncertainty that exists during these times of change. These times in between leadership found continued consistency in the importance of the relationship a CAO has with alumni and with colleagues to manage through the transition process. It also expanded dialogue on the theory of agenda-setting, or the lack thereof, during these times when expression of desire for vision and direction from leadership was emergent. Specific to the participants in this analysis and consistent with the idea of “planning in purgatory,” that is, trying to navigate continued work in very difficult transitional periods, was noted in a number of examples. In some cases, it was as basic as reducing, canceling, and

eliminating events and activities. Others struggled with trying to guess or identify new or unspoken priorities. This interim or in between stage of the transition was also noted to greatly impact, delay, and even cancel fundraising efforts.

Don shared both ends of this “limbo” decision making. First, he said,

We had to take a lot of things off the calendar as this was going on because there was a purgatory moment. Where we weren't sure what [the president's] status was and so we basically cut [the president] out of our calendar that was planned.

Don continued and explained that in the “uncertainty of leadership, we delayed the campaign public kickoff by a year. So I think the biggest repercussion in presidential transitions during a campaign is when's the sweet spot of going public.” Ultimately, Don's university launched the campaign after the new president arrived and used it as an opportunity for the president's “coming out party.” Brenda also felt the impact of the transition during the public launch of a multi-billion dollar campaign:

We were just launching the public phase of that campaign. And so that was a pretty significant decision. And [the president's] role in the campaign as we went public. After [the president] came on board, what were we going to do for the public facing? [The president] set about doing a listening tour with alumni.

Steve was one participant who searched for ways to keep alumni engaged during the interim and transition phases:

There's a 6-month gap, and so we knew that we had to try to keep people engaged. And so we put together an engagement campaign around, volunteering to mentor students and talk to them about their experiences... So, we really tried to focus our communication about readying the ship for the next leader. No matter, how you feel about the facts that

our current president was leaving, at this point as an institution, the decision's been made. We've got a responsibility. This helps set the next person up, whoever that may be, for success, and we want to start having conversations about what to do next and how that continued to impact the institution.

Janice discussed the desire to learn the new president's priorities to connect with alumni in order to create a strategy to get the president out with the people. The changes left many questions to be addressed because the CAOs want to be able to support the new president and need to know the vision. Janice expressed,

The decision making is 'here's where we're going.' 'Here's where we're moving forward,' getting [the president's] support around that. And again, we need the vision from [the president]. I mean, that's what this comes down to. So it's cloudy. ...That's in limbo now in the expectation because [the president] has such very big shoes to fill.

Theme 2.3: Making Tough Calls

Even when the participants described the environment of the transition as very difficult, decisions needed to be made and the work of the institution needed to continue. The relationship and respect between the CAO, supervisor, and president can certainly assist in the process. Additionally, once the new president begins, some alumni and stakeholder programs were eliminated based on the president's preferences. Mike and Janice both eliminated similar programs in their associations. For Mike, he eliminated alumni committees based on the president's feeling that the work was not appropriate or needed. He said,

[We] ended a program that the president didn't need grassroots help with. This included eliminating a committee of the alumni board... We had a standing committee of our board...we sunset the whole thing after a couple of years. I just looked at everybody and

we talked to the board and I said, look, we want to use our volunteers in an appropriate way and right now. So we need to kind of reset what we're doing here.

Janice on the other hand felt that she was not completely prepared with what to share with her alumni volunteers during the interim. Several of her programs were temporarily suspended without clear communication as to what was happening or would be happening in the future. Volunteers who served on these committees in turn felt like they were not doing what was needed or valued. Janice shared, "it's basically halted our efforts for last year, and I have an entire committee dedicated to [this program]." She told committee members that the situation was not their fault, but had other thoughts on how she might have handled it better, saying,

In hindsight, now it's like, oh, I should have told the committee like do something else for a year or just you know I'm gonna give you a gift of time. When we get new chances, gonna be back up and running, but there's nothing for you to do.

These programmatic decisions impacted the actions of alumni volunteers and board members, both in terms of their direct work and how they felt about the institution. Presidential controversy also impacted magazine production because of pages and articles about the president, requiring direct conversations and contact to create that content. One participant (pseudonym not used in order to share detail and maintain anonymity) shared the decision to pull a president's article because of the instability of the president's tenure:

We were at deadline and [the editor] was coming to me saying, 'Is this guy gonna [leave] between my print deadline and my mailing deadline? What do I do with these 2 pages?' ... And, so I'm on the phone. Literally on the phone with the chair of the board saying, 'Am I excluding this guy or not?' Cause I knew that there was a consequence no matter what that decision was. And we were going to print. And the board president could not

answer that question... So, I made the call to cut this president completely out of the magazine before he resigned. And by this point, I knew the president personally well...

And, like the hardest moment for me is when I had to pick up the phone, call him and tell him, 'I'm cutting you out of the magazine.'

Therefore, the answer to the research question is that decision making during leadership change is constant and the relationship with colleagues and the incoming administration supports a CAOs ability to make effective decisions and better support alumni in understanding the decisions and the opportunities with the new leadership.

Research Question 2: How did alumni executives describe their involvement in the creation of communication strategies and messaging to alumni regarding leadership transitions?

All participants described the process of following the lead of university communications in the creation of communication strategies and messaging to alumni during presidential transitions. From this emergent broad theme, participants also expressed subthemes of developing alumni focused messaging, utilizing the distribution mechanisms of alumni offices as the largest vehicle for reaching constituents, and getting more personal in the communication process with one-on-one outreach and conversations.

Theme 3: Building Upon the Lead of University Communications

The central theme regarding communication strategies was not surprising as presidential transitions are communicated and positioned from the top of the organization and operated through central University communication offices. Each participant echoed this in their own words. The subsequent themes for communication strategies were also consistent. The descriptions provided more insight into the transitions and opportunities to leverage the resources and knowledge of alumni leaders. Don described being included through the process, but at times

“the campus university communications team knew all the secrets... but we were at the table as to when and how to distribute.” Another participant acknowledged being removed from direct communication during the transition despite having the closest access to the university’s largest constituency. Even for those who may not have always felt they had direct engagement, the CAOs expressed the importance and ability to share the central message in ways that most appropriately resonated with alumni. Steve and Janice both reiterated the need for agenda-setting from the president to know the “top 5 or 6 things he wants us to focus on. So we are helping to disseminate that information” and “We need your vision and we need to understand where we want this campus to go in the next 5 to 10 years.”

Theme 3.1: Messaging for Alumni

When the time came to reach out to alumni with the messaging of transitions, each CAO expressed the important role for themselves and their team members to be the subject matter experts in focusing the message for alumni. Steve shared this directly:

It's up to us to determine that we are looked at as the experts in the room on how to send a message to alumni. The call will be us to say, ‘Okay, how should we best send this information to alumni so that they will read it, and understand it?’ and that's because we spend a lot of time bragging about the open rates ... I have a really strong communication staff that works really, really hard to do good work and that's just been noticed.

Beth believed that the alumni focus had always been embedded in leadership transitions or critical announcements of the institution. She co-wrote communication that was “put in front of the [President’s] communication team to make sure that they were comfortable with it...It was drafted by us and then approved by them and then implemented by us.” Brenda also described the messaging as something her team crafted:

We have the boiler plate...It's our responsibility to represent the university in a right way. But we are free to be able to craft that ... You have to be smart about it. It has to be relevant to the alumni body, and it can't be at odds with the messaging, but we can trim it. We can package it as appropriate. By sharing this message, I know what the message is. I know what the university is telling me and what it will do for me.

For Janice, she felt that she had to make her expertise known and was pleased that the feedback was well received by the new president. “We know how to hold high level events. We know how to do briefings. They wrote the talking points with the [president]. I didn't like them at all. And so I give feedback on that. I mean, it was just, it was the wrong messaging.”

Theme 3.2: Providing the Largest Vehicles Reaching a Broad Base

When discussing communication strategy during presidential transitions there was simply no way to get around the importance and the reach of the alumni communication vehicles. As Mike asserted, “we're still certainly involved with it because a lot of the major channels that we use to send this sort of information out actually come under the alumni association brand.” Beth shared the similar emphasis on email, “communication that goes out through email to all of our alumni base channels, initially it was an email.... Then, we profiled in our alumni magazine.” Don stressed the magazine stating “we own the largest vehicles for communications to the community... We have the largest database that's probably not particularly unusual. So the university communications team works with our communications team on big announcements.” For Brenda, the alumni magazine was key, “our alumni magazine is the primary vehicle that gets that information out to all alumni, parents and friends that's managed by our Alumni Association.” She also shared that the messaging was embedded in all of their communications.

Steve said,

Email is by far the number one, just because it's direct access to people. We really segment the audience down, to segment the messaging down to a point where it interacts with each audience that we're trying to target in a positive way I don't think you can send out an email to 50,000 people saying, hey, this is what we're trying to do and expect everybody to get the message, because different age groups, different people are gonna see different types of messaging different. And so we try to do things that tie it back to something that they remember when they were in school... We just try to make it as personal as we can when we send that communication.

Theme 3.3: Making it Personal

According to the participants, the communication strategy must find a way to connect on a deep level with alumni. As Steve mentioned, starting to make the communication more personal in email, all CAOs expressed the importance of making sure the conversations were happening when needed. Even just getting out ahead of an announcement with a phone call or personal email to alumni volunteers and donors was important. Mike shared, “whether it's with our board directors or [a local] club board, whoever we might have. They get a little bit of a heads up ... I may choose to, I have a window to maybe make a few phone calls.” The personal level is also where a transition emerged to managing the feedback process. As participants expressed, the large email distribution also gave people an avenue to provide quick feedback and the result in a mass communication that becomes a personal one-on-one response. Mike said “communication that goes out through email to all of our alumni base... It comes from us and the alumni association and all of those responses are tracked by us as well.”

The descriptions provided by the CAOs answered the research question by clearly articulating the communication strategy during leadership change as beginning with the University process which incorporates strategic components and opportunities for alumni relations. CAOs know how and when they are needed in the process including the use of the overall message that can be curated for alumni, utilizing the communication vehicles to reach the broad base quickly and efficiently, and finally, in prioritizing personal, one-on-one communication when appropriate. This personal approach was often very important in handling feedback which led into the next research question.

Research Question 3: What reactions did alumni executives receive during leadership change including their management of feedback?

As the communication strategy led into the discussion and description of alumni feedback, the participants echoed the same sentiment regarding the reactions of alumni to university leadership change. The theme being overwhelmingly that reactions come in a wide variety of perspectives because there is not one alumni voice. Within this general understanding and theme from participants, three subthemes were emergent. First, most alumni associations have organized and planned processes for their response to feedback. Next, when considering the response to the feedback, CAOs balanced the diverse thought and perspectives related to the change and were extremely cognizant of presenting the university in the best possible way while remaining authentic to their own feelings. Finally, CAOs were also mindful of the way in which they support and train their staff to handle feedback.

Theme 4: “We don’t have one alumni voice. We have thousands of alumni voices.”

Although the term alumni voice is often used as a collective or consensus, the participants made it very clear that when it came to listening to alumni and communicating with

them, that any allusion to one voice is a misconception. All participants found that at their institutions it was during the transition that alumni began to come forward and share their individual voices.

Universities teach, train, and graduate diverse people with many varied perspectives and opinions. As these graduates leave, their voices may be scattered across the country and around the world, but they are still very diverse and sometimes polarizing. Mike shared that during the presidential transition on his campus the alumni voices were more “split than ever before.” Brenda was the most vocal about this delineation of voice “we have alumni on all sides of the aisle and I think one of the things is I can't take a side...We don't have one alumni voice. We have thousands of alumni voices. There's not a collective voice of the alumni want this, or the alumni believe this.” For Don, he found that his team was not prepared for the “fallout” and the variation in opinion:

Not everyone agreed. Feedback was far more voracious and emotional...So, somehow we were needing to be there and acknowledge how difficult this was for everybody. But also build our own communications plan and strategy. That was, we were in a crisis.

Related to these reactions and comments, several subthemes were derived from the participants comments. The first was to build space to listen to alumni in conversational settings or listening tours. The second was more personal to the CAO in how they balanced their position in the conversation with authenticity to oneself, understanding of the alumni, and commitment to the university. Another important component of receiving feedback was how to support staff during this transition process.

Theme 4.1: Building Space for Feedback

In order to manage the range of feelings experienced by alumni, many CAOs described the organized process in which they received and responded to feedback whenever possible. Some of the process began where Research Question 2 ended, making sure the message gets out in a personal way to key donors and volunteers. Mike and Beth both shared very direct strategies in responding to feedback in an one-on-one format, as compared to Brenda and Steve who focused on using larger listening tours to gather feedback.

In the one-on-one approach, it was about first building a standard response to any individual who made contact but transitioned to monitoring and reviewing individual messages for escalating responses based on the individual and the concerns expressed. Mike said,

We work to alert the proper folks... we've kind of done this many times. So we kind of go into the feedback mode, how we have the information fed up the ladder... We have kind of a cursory response. 'Thanks for your feedback. We'll add this to our information. We'll send that to make sure it gets to the right place.' As that elevates, it becomes a little more personal and we want to make sure we share that, across different leadership on campus.

Beth chose to handle all feedback herself as well as to pass it on to others when appropriate because so much of it came in electronically. She then compiled it and weighed the responses for the best person to respond based on the relationship with the university, but she did say "I do reply to every bit of feedback that comes in."

Participants also described the processes and importance of listening tours as a mechanism for understanding what the broader alumni audiences were thinking. There was the sense of needing to understand the ideas, concerns, and thoughts of alumni and others and what

they wanted to accomplish and to prepare accordingly. Don experienced the most volatile situations due to the controversy around hiring for the president at his institution:

After the resignation of the first president, we launched into feedback sessions from the community and we invited alumni and donors to those. It was a necessary part of the healing process, necessary part of the process to add transparency and leadership. But the transparency sometimes is not pretty. And sometimes it feels like our role is to show how pretty we are. And, then we had to kinda go through our own healing process from that. And we did.

Brenda and Steve also had scheduled listening tours and the alumni offices drove those conversations. Brenda explained,

[The president] set about doing a listening tour with alumni that we were involved with very heavily and helping plan those as [the president] kind of did a listening tour of shaping the future of where [the president] wanted to take [the] plan. It was small group discussions, people talking with one on one and so it wasn't just a talking head. It was really a discussion. So folks in the audience would have prompts and questions and talk among themselves and then present out.”

Brenda believed the intent of these conversations was to support and provide context of the transitions in a more personal setting. Steve called his events “listening sessions.” In many ways these sessions were described similarly “keeping them in the loop on the process most of the time.” For Steve this was specifically to counteract feelings of distrust from alumni under the previous administration and previous presidential selection process.

Theme 4.2: Balance and Authenticity

CAOs described their awareness of balancing their positions throughout the communication and feedback processes. They recognized that they must position their institutions in the most positive way possible while being authentic and genuine with their alumni constituents. There was a concern at times of appearing “foolish” as Beth discussed the importance of always being in “lockstep” with the institution and whomever is in the presidential role. Mike felt concerned at times as he reported issues to the president’s office about not appearing as a “squeaky wheel.” While Don’s experience showed the need to balance the transparency of sometimes showing the dark side of institutional issues that can produce negative and disheartened feedback. Steve and Brenda both took a very neutral approach when dealing directly with the feedback, as Brenda shared her strong stance in her role through the process:

Our role is to provide an avenue for all voices to be heard, and not to take aside or advocate for that. And that's what I feel my role is. Our role is to educate, inform and provide opportunities for alumni to give feedback from their perspective, from their viewpoint from their experience, and all that we ask is that we do that in a way that's respectful, that is mindful of differing viewpoints, that we're not mean that we bring kindness to that conversation.

Theme 4.3: Supporting Staff

When managing feedback and sometimes contentious conversations, it was very important to CAOs that they realize and prepare for the fact that many other staff members aside from themselves and other university leaders would be receiving the phone calls, emails, and sometimes in person feedback. These staff themselves may have feelings and opinions on the change which must be addressed as well. “We had our own staff and campus callings. Angry in

lots of different directions over lots of different things. We're having lines out our own office doors,” Don stated. There can be the sense of a need to “shield the rest of the team from some of that feedback,” Beth shared. Ultimately, each leader looked to address those feelings and prepare staff to handle the feelings and opinions of others. They know that preparing and supporting staff to handle these situations is important to the health of the organization. Mike and Brenda both provided detailed accounts of their approaches to supporting staff. Mike said,

It was a touchy time even though we were able to retain everyone. They were working from home for the first time. They weren't as connected as they were. They're worried about budget issues and so, there was just a lot going on during that time, more than just a leadership change. But I think from that perspective, they needed some, support around, when they were hearing from [alumni]. What were the talking points we could provide them? How can we help educate them about the process and what it looked like and how this is going to be okay? So from that perspective, it was a lot of listening and informing and, you know, having that sort of opportunity...Coach and communicate, over communicate, if you will, and then also give them the tools they needed to do their job.

Brenda also shared:

Giving staff the tools, to know what is their role and their role is to listen. Their role is not to be abused. So sometimes when people have very strong feelings about the direction that the university is going to and it doesn't mean that it aligns with where they would like to see it go, and sometimes they feel like they have a venue to share that frustration. So we do training with our staff on managing conversations. We can basically say, you know, if you're upset about something, ‘we hear you and will pass that along to the president's office’. But the President's office has to look at the university as a whole

and with all these different viewpoints and try the best path forward so we give them those tools as staff but we also give them the tools that if people are not being respectful, permission to say, ‘you know, obviously, this is an emotional topic for you. But you've crossed the line and we can no longer speak.’

Therefore, these themes answered the research question by acknowledging the breadth and depth of feedback during leadership change, allowing and preparing space for feedback, while balancing personal feelings and job responsibilities and supporting staff throughout the complex process.

Research Question 4: How did alumni executives describe their success or failure in navigating changes in leadership?

In answering the question about how alumni executives describe successes or failures during leadership transitions, the research provided one overarching theme resonating with each of the participants: access to the president. The ability to be accessible, heard, and trusted for the executive’s expertise on the subject matter was definitive. Within this larger theme, subthemes were also identified, providing more depth to the complexities of this access and recommendations on how to best manage and support the relationship of transitioning presidents to support success.

Theme 5: Access to the President

Chief Alumni Officers considered themselves subject matter experts representing an institution’s largest constituency. Because of this belief in their work, participants described their successes and failures during leadership change as often relating to the level of access they had to the incoming president. The access was not described as an exclusive relationship, but rather more broadly open for dialogue in which the CAOs felt welcomed to share their viewpoints and

experience. As all participants either had at least 15 year careers in higher education and/or are personally alumni of their institutions, they felt a vested interest and expertise in the ability to advise a president during the transition.

Janice was relieved and surprised when the new president accepted her feedback and asked her to communicate directly with her, going so far as to ask her to be the person beside her introducing her to people. Beth articulated the appreciation of access to the president and the president's team, stating that it was important

For [the president] to open the door and tell staff how important alumni relations is to [the president] has been made all the difference honestly, as far as success, we are in a completely different situation. Now we're trying to meet all of [the president's] very broad expectations of alumni relations where in the past we were fighting for relevancy and time and exposure from the President.

Steve and Brenda both described the importance of building the relationship, getting in front of the president, and spending time with the person as soon as possible. Don reiterated that having a presence in decision making enabled him to support the transition and not be "an afterthought when it comes to prioritizing the president's schedule." Another participant explained the importance of alumni relations in comparison to the expectations of other roles in advancement sharing:

I don't think our vice chancellors for advancement are hired to [represent all alumni]. I don't think that's their role... But I do think that's important. So, how do presidents and chancellors, especially new ones, seek out and find the voice of alumni that could give them a sense of what's going on in the alumni base as a whole.

In one participant's experience it was believed that

part of our success was that we did not have a vice president for advancement in place during the majority of the transition planning, so that alumni relations could arise to priority level with our President [who] was receptive to that. But I do often think about the barricade, that us being a part of advancements sometimes creates.

Brenda, too, expressed concerns about the ability to build the relationship through direct access.

Brenda discussed that the layers in which information is disseminated can cause barriers to efficiency and understanding. “If that can come directly to your chief alumni person, to be able to figure that out sooner than later of just what the likes are and how do you set up [the president] for success?” Brenda described the frustration that, “Sometimes if it comes through three different layers, you miss it, and you don't have it? And then everyone kind of loses on that.”

Theme 5.1: Knowing Your Value Proposition

Knowing your value proposition was strongly articulated by Don who said:

I think it's extraordinarily important to already know what your value proposition is by the time you hit presidential transition. Presidential transition is the moment for the university leadership to roll out their best practices and best values. If alumni association leadership goes into that period of transition uncertain of its foothold, uncertain of what is the added value and feels like it's their moment they have to prove their message they're behind. If you are already at the table, if you're already known by the deans and the provost office and the communications office that this is one of the pillars of the community that the president needs to leverage and understand that value. Then you're gonna be positioned that way. If you're not in a position of placement and empowerment going into this, this is not the moment you're gonna get.

This was a well-articulated expression of what appeared all participants wanted to share. The participants appeared to understand their value proposition, and the questioning aspect of their comments was how to express it in a way that was heard. For instance one participant recalled a meeting where he did a presentation on alumni engagement metrics and felt like it was the first time the president heard him because with the president's academic and career background, the numbers and metrics resonated. Brenda also addressed a concern that there is "a tendency for people in alumni relations to want their presidents to know everything that we do." Her assertion in this need to share everything was that it did not convey value with a president who has limited time and needs direct impactful information. She suggested asking the question,

How do we curate our programming to meet their needs, and if we can curate it, and not give them so much information, but tailor our communication of what we're doing in a bite size, reasonable, impactful way that it will help them achieve their goal?

Theme 5.2: Maintaining Relationships

Participants consistently echoed Brenda's statement, "you have to have that trusting relationship. You have to have that trust with your Vice President and Vice President." This theme has been discussed three times in the current analysis. Critical in the discussion around the relationships with presidents was the potential that they come and go and change with every transition. Two participants who had a highly engaged and alumni focused president wondered how to maintain that consistency through future transitions without feeling like they had to fight for attention.

As Janice mentioned, she felt as if she should be planning for the transitions, but planning for more than just the relationship with the president; it includes relationships built across campus that are often impacted by the leadership transitions. "It's also that impact of just to have

your go-to people and then they're gone. It's like, well, I have to build a new relationship or, you know, or try and figure out how to navigate.” It was clearly identified as a concern as most participants had changed direct supervisors between them and the president in the last five years. Mike said “you lose a little bit, that relationship that you've had in the past or some of that goodwill you built up with past leadership.” Ultimately, the relationship that has to be maintained is the one between the university and its alumni. According to Don,

It is integral for the university leaders who select and onboard a new president to understand that alumni stakeholders are a must. The highest resource a president can leverage for the work that he or she are going to do. And, and, and you can't just pull that lever when you need them. You have to engender trust in the relationship. So that when you need them, they're there for you.

Theme 5.3: Navigating Priorities with Short-Term Presidents and Long-Term Constituents

This subtheme was an important thought in the conclusion of this analysis and lends itself to future research and discussion that will be presented in Chapter Five. The participants in the study all viewed their alumni as the long-lasting constituency of the institution. Alumni have invested their time and money in the campus as students and if properly engaged could continue to invest well into the future, but what does that mean to a president whose current average tenure is less than six years? “I think some people don't understand, especially when you get to alumni, because it's such a long term, what we're doing,” said Mike. He felt that he heard more about “go get me donors, go give me support for this project or that project. I need it right now and not necessarily a long-term approach.” Mike also understood the environment but offered the opportunities for placing each within context:

These [presidential] positions are so much bigger than used to be. These president jobs are complex, they're political. There are so many different constituencies. Our alumni, their stories, successes, efforts they have are really sort of the products of why we do what we do. And so I think from our perspective, and we're also the constituency that's not on campus every day. So you can become the forgotten constituency pretty quickly. Don took these thoughts and pushed them even further, saying “there is only one permanent stakeholder in an university and it is its alumni base. Faculty come and go, students graduate. Staff come and go. Governors come and go. But, the alumni base owns the institution in their heart.”

In answering the research question, CAOs described their success or failure in managing presidential leadership as contingent on the access to the president to support them and provide critical knowledge of the alumni base. Through this access, CAOs felt success or failure in their ability to understand the president’s expectations and provide the alumni value proposition, maintain relationships, and navigate the priorities of the president with the expectations of the alumni.

E. Chapter Summary

In an article for *Inside Higher Ed* in July 2023, Bob Dickeson was quoted saying, I think institutions, whether they’re journalism institutions, business institutions or higher ed institutions, benefit from stability and continuity that comes from long-term relationships with leadership. And if there’s excessive turnover, I think, the institution suffers (Moody, 2023, para. 33).

In addition, Dickeson affirmed that, “presidents have to hit the ground running, which he believes makes it difficult to do the job. Oftentimes leaders need at least a year or two to get their bearings and figure out the institution’s inner workings” (Moody, 2023, para. 34).

The chapter provided phenomenological research to support ways in which alumni relations executives can, and in fact do, help presidents do exactly what Dickeson suggested: “hit the ground running” (Moody, 2023, para. 35). The participants in the research addressed key factors to support their decision making and communication strategies during leadership change. As long-serving alumni relations professionals, they are the subject matter experts who support presidents during transition to meet the needs of this long-term constituency. Therefore, based on the current issue in higher education of decreasing presidential tenures, presidents could use the data gathered here to help manage and build relationships with alumni stakeholders. The findings showed that the relationship among executive leadership is the key to building trust and respect for alumni leaders, enabling decision making that will endear alumni to their new presidents and even more to their alma maters. Additionally, alumni leaders should be trusted to craft messaging that builds on the relationships alumni have with their alma maters and creates support for the presidents. Presidents and alumni executives must respect that all alumni are different with vested interests and opinions regarding their universities. Space must be created to listen and respond with authenticity while at the same time supporting staff through sometimes volatile feedback. Throughout the transition process, the research indicated that it is the ability for alumni leaders to have access to their presidents which overwhelmingly dictates success or failure not only for the alumni relations leader but for the president as well.

Chapter V. Conclusions and Discussion

A. Introduction to the Chapter

University presidential tenures continue to decline (Jesse, 2023) while dependence on private donor support continues to rise. The reasons for the departures are varied but many journalists and scholars suggest that it is the increasing expectations and wide variety of constituents to appease that makes the position so volatile (Jesse, 2023; Moody, 2023). This research pinpointed one constituency, an institution's alumni base, as an important group to begin to understand. Through understanding, leaders may better support positioning of presidential transitions through the descriptions of decision making and communication strategies of alumni executives during presidential leadership change.

The chapter provides a summary of the study, including answers to the research questions, conclusions from the research, as well as providing a few strategic opportunities for better practice into the future. Through these themes, the research has provided transferable guidelines that could be used in preparing for presidential transitions. It has also inspired considerations for future research as well as opened up discussions regarding the perceptions and future of alumni relations on college campuses.

B. Summary of the Study

The trend of declining university presidential tenure positions the research as timely and relevant for higher education today. The largest constituency of most universities is its alumni. The research studied the feelings and descriptions shared by Chief Alumni Officers (CAOs) at public very high research universities (Research I) institutions when managing through presidential leadership change. Based on the most recent report from the American Council on Education (ACE), the average tenure of a university president is less than six years (Melidona et

al., 2023), and alumni executives acknowledged that they will most likely face a presidential transition and must be prepared for it. This research is also relevant to multiple senior leaders at universities as this presidential trend also impacts their work, decision making, and communication strategies.

The literature identified the history and intent of alumni relations work and its importance to alumni communications, connection, engagement, and ultimately fundraising. The literature also addressed the demands of being a university president in today's culture and political environments. With so many constituencies and demands, the research pinpointed the Chief Alumni Officer as a subject matter expert who may provide key resources to support successful presidential transitions. The conclusions addressed in the chapter offer connection to the literature including the opportunities for relationship building, prioritizing agendas, communicating effectively to alumni as well as the importance of receiving feedback as addressed by Thacker and Freeman (2021).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to understand the experiences of Chief Alumni Officers. Six CAOs, from public Carnegie Research I institutions and members of the Council of Alumni Association Executives who had experienced at least one presidential transition in the last five years were interviewed with detailed memoing and transcription. The transcripts were studied for Personal Experiential Statements and Group Experimental Statements that addressed and answered the research questions. The researcher's knowledge of the subject matter was also important to the interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology and utilized reflexive memoing and journals to interpret and understand the descriptions of the participants.

Research Question 1: How did alumni executives describe their decision-making processes during university leadership transitions?

Chief alumni officers participating in the study described their decision making as being driven by relationships with others, especially senior institutional administrators, during presidential transitions. They also stressed relationships with key alumni in deciding how to proceed with various activities.

Research Question 2: How did alumni executives describe their involvement in the creation of communication strategies and messaging to alumni regarding leadership transitions?

CAOs indicated that the majority of communication was centrally developed and delivered by central administration, but that they played a critical role in making communication messages personal and assuring that they were delivered to the wider alumni audience.

Research Question 3: What reactions do alumni executives receive during leadership change including their management of feedback?

Chief Alumni Officers believed it was their responsibility to listen and acknowledge the feelings of a variety of alumni voices. In order to manage through the feedback and multiple viewpoints, CAOs first planned for the feedback through direct and group interactions. Additionally, CAOs learned to balance the direction and demands of the institution with the feelings of alumni while remaining authentic to oneself and personal views. The feelings of staff throughout these processes were also critical to both listen and manage their reactions well as train them on how to manage the reaction of others. Therefore, these themes answered the research question by acknowledging the breadth and depth of feedback during leadership change, allowing and preparing space for feedback, while balancing their personal feelings and job responsibilities and supporting staff throughout the complex process.

Research Question 4: How did alumni executives describe their success or failure in navigating changes in leadership?

During leadership change, access to the president was believed to be critical to success or failure. Chief Alumni Officers need to know and communicate their value before, during, and after the transition. This also meant building and maintaining relationships especially with a direct supervisor and the president to support trust. Finally, understanding and managing the agenda setting of potentially short-term goals versus long term constituents assisted the Chief Alumni Officer's ability to balance and plan for realistic expectations that create success rather than set-ups for failure. In answering the research question, CAOs described their success or failure in managing presidential leadership as contingent on the access to the president to support them and provide critical knowledge of the alumni base. Through this access, CAOs felt success or failure in their ability to understand the president's expectations and provide the alumni value proposition, maintain relationships, and navigate the priorities of the president with the expectations of the alumni.

C. Conclusions

1.The context of a presidential transition is key for Chief Alumni Officers to provide the strongest support through the change. Knowing the context of departures and hires while adapting to the needs of the new president and understanding the needs and wants of alumni is a significant role for Chief Alumni Officers in managing university leadership change.

2.The decision-making process for alumni executives requires strong relationships with campus constituencies and alumni volunteers. The stronger the relationship and respect the more empowered a Chief Alumni Officer feels to make the decisions needed in the unstable times during university leadership change.

3. Alumni executives are critical in curating the university's message to reach alumni with information that resonates and matters to them. Utilizing mass communication tools and the traditions, history, and wide-range of alumni expectations, CAOs as subject matter experts are able to convey messaging that supports a stronger transition for a new president.

4. Because alumni as a constituency do not have one singular voice but rather many varied voices and opinions, there are multiple conclusions to be drawn from this research regarding feedback during university leadership change.

- a. Alumni executives are prepared for feedback and plan ways in which to receive feedback.
- b. Alumni executives balance their own feelings in these situations and consider their job duties, role with the institution, and authenticity in how they communicate and respond to alumni.
- c. Alumni executives manage staff who need support during leadership change both in the staff concerns about transitions but also in helping staff to manage alumni feedback.

5. Chief Alumni Officers who have closer access to the new president during leadership change feel more successful in navigating the transition for their alumni constituents and for the presidents themselves. CAOs often report through another senior leader to the president, so the relationship among these three individuals is crucial to understand and process agenda setting that supports a successful presidential transition.

D. Recommendations for Practice

1. Build relationships

Chief Alumni Officers should build relationships of trust and respect with a variety of constituents, similar to that of a president. There are four strategic directions for alumni executives to focus: supervisor and president; strategic campus colleagues; organizational staff; and alumni volunteers. One key factor to mention in this analysis is that each of these relationships has the propensity to change. As some participants shared in the research, it is not simply the concerns of a presidential transitional but that relationships built across campus also change during transition and relationships have to be rebuilt. Therefore, relationship building is an ongoing process as leaders transition, supervisors leave, colleagues change, staff members come and go, and even our alumni volunteers often have board term limits. In this research, the long-term constituents and the long-term leaders were most often Chief Alumni Officers themselves.

2. Communicate the value of alumni

Based on this research with most participants having more than 15 years of alumni relations experience and being deeply connected to their institutions, the concept of value proposition seemed to be a standard that they knew and can recite. However, they also acknowledged that not all alumni officers feel this way and frequently in today's higher education market the alumni value proposition is an afterthought. They also believed alumni as an afterthought contributed to unsuccessful presidencies. The ways in which alumni value is tracked and judged has continued to evolve; so, metrics and numbers are important to build today where they were not the focus of the origination of alumni relations. Chief Alumni Officers must

evolve with the landscape of higher education and provide value proposition in a way that university leaders will respect and lean into the value of investing in alumni.

3. Plan for transition

As one participant shared, planning for presidential turnover should be prepared for similar to the crisis communication strategies of the last twenty years. Based on the current data, most alumni professionals will manage through a presidential leadership change at least once in their career and potentially multiple times. Therefore, the research provides critical themes that could begin the framework of the transition plans that alumni executives as well as other leaders on campus could utilize to manage through the leadership change.

Table 4.

A Template for Alumni Relations Planning During Presidential Leadership Change

Context	Decision Making	Communication Strategies	Feedback	Tools for Success
Evaluate how the President departs	Build key relationships	Consider the University's message	Be prepared for multiple opinions	Seek access to the new president, prioritize the agenda with what alumni want to know
Evaluate how the President is hired	Planning through the limbo with short term attainable goals within your control	Be trusted to communicate to alumni what they need to hear	Plan for feedback venues and space	Continue to seek out key relationships and build on them through this process
Evaluate what alumni need to know and how they are feeling	Be willing to make tough decisions	Utilize broad base communication vehicles effectively	Support yourself and staff during this time	Balance the needs of short time priorities with long-term feelings

E. Recommendations for Further Study

1. Research the utilization of alumni relations by presidents and vice presidents

Not only had all the participants managed through a presidential transition, but most had experienced a transition of their direct supervisor who reports to the president change in the last five years. For most, this transition had the greatest impact on their feelings of value. Therefore, further research on the utilization of alumni relations by president and vice presidents could be critical in better understanding the value that institutions place on alumni relations and by learning more about what leadership wants and expects could assist alumni relations professionals in articulating their value proposition in a better way that resonates and supports presidential transitions.

2. Research alumni professionals at other institutions

As described in the limitations of this research, the purposive sample limited the experiences shared in the research. Expanding the research to other alumni executives at various institutions of differing sizes and scopes may provide different insights into the presidential transition process. An exploration in small private liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and comprehensive universities would expand both the recommendations for Chief Alumni Officers as well as provide additional tools for success for those working with presidential transitions.

3. Research alumni association presidents (engaged volunteers)

The research focused on career alumni relations professionals. However, alumni association presidents who serve in volunteer capacities as engaged alumni of their institutions also provide important interpretations of presidential leadership change. These engaged alumni may serve on presidential search committees and receive feedback in a more personal way than that of paid alumni professionals.

4. Research the consequences of short term versus long term priorities

This research area may be more difficult to track quickly. However, this could present an opportunity for an important long-range review of the priorities of short-term presidents and the effects on long term constituents. For example, 1) how will fundraising be impacted into the future if emphasis on mass alumni giving is deemphasized to stress only major giving? 2) will the increase in online classes reduce the connection and relationship alumni feel to the institution and therefore reduce major alumni giving into the future?

5. Research search process changes after failed presidencies.

Three of the participants described the changes in search process and/or specific inclusion of alumni in the search process following a failed presidency. This also correlates to a statement in a 2023 *Inside Higher Ed* article in which Dickeson said,

Trustees should interrogate their search processes to understand what went wrong. And while some failures may be inevitable, Dickeson argues that board has to take responsibility and ask hard questions to guide trustees forward (Moody, 2023, para. 45).

F. Additional Limitations

University organizational structures and reporting lines for alumni are not consistent. The purposive sample utilized the identification of Chief Alumni Officers from the Council of Alumni Association Executives who self-identified their alumni programs as interdependent. However, in the process of the research it was found that University titles for these positions as well as job duties were inconsistent. In the research, it was the charge of alumni relations by the institution that was the focus of the study and was able to be maintained for the validity of the study. The titles and reporting structures did make anonymity a concern at times.

The title of the research was originally labeled as “alumni association” decision making and communication strategies based on the researchers bias and generality that all alumni relations can be labeled as an alumni association. Although this was addressed in the definition of “alumni association,” it is important in these limitations to address that the research revealed a couple of crucial points in that original assumption. Alumni structures within universities are varied and regularly change due in some part to vice presidential change which may or may not be the result of presidential change. Second, an alumni association by definition is an extremely broad term to generalize a group of individuals with a common bond and the “association” itself cannot be interviewed and is not the actual participant in the research. The Chief Alumni Officers were the participants; and therefore, it is the feelings and descriptions of these individuals that is the subject of the research and meets the intent of representing the concept of alumni associations. The Chief Alumni Officer is charged by the university to represent the alumni.

Protecting the anonymity of the participants also created some limitations as it was important not to share specific details regarding some presidential changes. Disclosure of the specifics of some presidential transitions and hires would easily identify the institution that the CAO represented and therefore disclose the participant. In addition, some decisions that were made also had to be carefully denoted or retracted from the quotes of the participants. For instance, if the programmatic changes made during presidential change were described with too much specificity it could also identify the CAO. Anonymity was important to the research process. However, it also inhibited the ability in sharing some of the findings to give the full explanation of how and why the theme emerged with a specific CAO.

G. Discussion

Agenda setting in transition

Alumni relations requires trust and respect of both the institutional culture and its broad alumni base. Alumni relations builds trust and respect through two primary areas of communication and relationships. Communication flows both in sending and receiving messages with alumni. In managing both directions, alumni relations must employ a professionally developed skill set to make this happen in a way that engenders trust and respect. In addition, alumni relations, much like fundraising, is both art and science. It is comprised of nuanced relationships that are long-term relationships. In the current environment of short tenured presidents, this research and its participants articulated that the need to set agendas with the long game of alumni relations in mind is critical for the future welfare of the institution.

This research has presented a template for planning during the transition and in doing so sets a framework for agenda-setting that is appropriately assessed and identified on the basis of the person's experience and role at their respective institution. Alumni relations executives and senior administrators across campuses inherently manage the agenda setting process during times of change as they understand their roles and their responsibilities to constituents and colleagues. This template simply outlines in more specific terms the steps to support a more successful transition process.

Questions for the profession

Alumni Relations as a profession does not have a set curriculum or career. The curriculum in higher education or fundraising touches very little on the nuances and attributes of successful alumni relations professionals. These professionals may build skill sets: writing, storytelling, financial management, people management, public speaking, etc. The numerous job

descriptions that are open every day across the nation for these positions outline these skillsets. But what is it that presidents and vice presidents really need in these positions and are they considering this work beyond immediate monetary results? The continuous change in organizational structure and expectations allows people to keep their jobs or to move to new jobs because universities are always hiring and changing to find a better way to do things or just a new way to do things. But are they investing in what they have. With the presidential tenure apparently unstable, how do we support and invest in an alumni profession that may provide institutional stability?

The Future

Alumni relations is a long-game, and quite frankly one of the longest running programs in the history of higher education. Society questions higher education because we live in a world of instant and immediate gratification and results. We have lost sight of the building of the intellectual and the people who will think beyond themselves. Our classrooms and our campuses are experiment stations for human development and growth to produce multilevel thinkers, leaders, and doers who we should want in our society and cultivating our humanity.

These relationships built on college campuses are what build alumni relations of the future. If we teach quick wins and easy answers to achieve degrees and subsequently have leaders who build advancement models which propagate the same, we will see the million- and billion-dollar campaign shrink along with the dwindling government support, because no one is caring for the long-term gain of the relationship. There is a quote often shared with proverbial reference that “blessed is the person who plants a tree whose shade you do not expect to sit.” Our universities take students as seeds and, nurturing them with diligence to grow upon graduation. Alumni relations work is to continue to connect with them and support their growth with a

special network and long-lasting relationships. In turn, we will find alumni through the years who have grown in success and philanthropic interests to give back to their alma maters. If we focus on what they can do for us without committing to supporting them through their journey, they may ultimately give to those who did support their journey and future presidents and universities will be left searching for shade. As participant Don said, alumni are “the highest resource a president can leverage for the work that he or she is going to do. And you can't just pull that lever when you need them. You have to engender trust in the relationship. So that when you need them, they're there for you.”

H. Chapter Summary

Declining university presidential tenure is an important issue in American higher education. Chief Alumni Officers represent a university's largest constituency. Therefore, this research has explored the processes of CAOs during these times of transitions. The study conducted in-depth research that provided both phenomenological data on how CAOs support their alumni through the process and also how CAOs feel they can support successful transitions for presidents.

This chapter has answered the research questions, provided informed conclusions regarding alumni decision making and communication strategies, as well as offered recommendations for future research and discussion points for alumni relations, advancement professionals, and university leadership for greater success in presidential transitions.

References

- Bourgeois, S. (2016). The presidency in higher education. *Journal of Business and Management*, 22(2), 11-21.
- Bowman, K. D. (2017). The erosion of presidential tenure. *Public Purpose*.
<https://www.aascu.org/MAP/PublicPurpose/2017/Summer/TheErosion.pdf>
- Brantley, A. (2019, August 5). A call to action regarding succession planning and sustainability. *Higher Ed Today*. <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2019/08/05/call-action-regarding-succession-planning-sustainability>
- Council of Alumni Association Executives. (n.d.). *CAAE Short history of the Association*. CAAE. Retrieved July 31, 2022, from <https://www.alumniexecutives.org/short-history-of-the-association>
- Cates, D. (2021, May 1). Investing in alumni. *Currents*.
<https://www.case.org/resources/issues/may-june-2021/investing-alumni>.
- Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. (n.d.). *About case*. Retrieved July 31, 2022, from <https://www.case.org/about-case>
- Cooney, M. A. & Martin III, Q. (2021). Pathways to the presidency. In M. T. Miller & G. D. Gearhart (Eds.), *The Changing Role of College and University Leadership* (pp. 18-35). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6560-5.ch002>
- Cownie, F., & Gallo, M. (2021). Alumni gratitude and academics: Implications for engagement. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(6), 788–802.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1820457>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches* (5th ed). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J.D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.) Sage Publications.
- Eddy, P. L. (2005). Framing the role of leader: How community college presidents construct their leadership. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 29(9-10), 705-727. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920591006557>
- Eckel, P. D., & Kezar, A. J. (2011). Presidents leading: The dynamics and complexities of campus leadership. In P. G. Altbach, P. J. Gumpert, & R. O. Berdahl (Eds.), *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political, and economic challenges* (pp. 279–311). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Esposito, J., & Evans-Winters, V. (2022). *Introduction to intersectional qualitative research*. Sage Publications.
- Francioni, B., Curina, I., Dennis, C., Papagiannidis, S., Alamanos, E., Bourlakis, M & Hegner, S. (2021). Does trust play a role when it comes to donations? A comparison of Italian and US higher education institutions. *Higher Education*. 82, 85-105.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00623-1>
- Frisby, B. N., Sidelinger, R.J., Tatum, N.T. (2019). Alumni Recollection of Interaction with Instructors and Current Organizational Identification, Commitment, and Support of the University. *Communication Reports*. 32(3), 161-172.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08934215.2019.1636107>
- Gallo, M. L. (2013). Higher education over a lifespan: a gown to grave assessment of a lifelong relationship between universities and their graduates. *Studies in Higher Education* (Dorchester-on-Thames), 38(8), 1150-1161.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.833029>
- Given, L. M. (2008). Phenomenology. In *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 615-619). Sage Publications. <http://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n189>
- Harris, M. S., & Ellis, M.K. (2018). Exploring involuntary presidential turnover in American higher education, *The Journal of Higher Education*, 89(3), 294-317.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2017.1390969>
- Hazelrigg, N. (2019). Donations to colleges are up, but number of donors is down.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/06/20/donations-colleges-are-number-donors-down>.
- Jacobs, L. H. (2021). *Symbolism or substance: Factors influencing campus messaging decisions and their alignment with institutional values*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Arkansas]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/4349>
- Jesse, D. (2023, April 14). Portrait of the Presidency: They are less experienced than ever and eyeing exits. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 69(17), 6.
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2021). Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education. *Fundamental Elements and Issues, 2nd Edition*.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003090694>
- Kelly, L., & Cordeiro, M. (2020, July 1). *Three principles of pragmatism for research on organizational processes*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799120937242>.
- Kimball, B. (2015). Democratizing fundraising at elite universities: The discursive

- legitimation of mass giving at Yale and Harvard, 1890-1920. *History of Education Quarterly*, 55(2), 164-189. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24481674?pq-origsite=summon&seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents
- Kingdon, J. W. (2011). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. (2nd ed.). Pearson Education Inc.
- Knox, L. (2023, Feb.14). Higher education Charitable Giving up by Double Digits. *Inside Higher Education*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/02/15/donations-higher-ed-had-biggest-boost-20-years>
- Kotter, J.P., (2012). *Leading Change*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Lederman, D. (2023, July 18). College President as the ‘Toughest Job’? Military Hero Doubles Down. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2023/07/18/academic-leader-toughest-job-military-hero>
- Levine, W. (2008). Communications and alumni relations: What is the correlation between an institution’s communications vehicles and alumni annual giving? *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 8(3-4), 176–197. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ijea.2009.2>
- Lewthwaite, B., Wilson, K., Wallace, V., McGinty, S. & Swain, L. (2017). Challenging normative assumptions regarding disengaged youth: a phenomenological perspective, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(4), 388-405, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1252867>
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Matua, G. A. & Van Der Wal, D.M. (2015). Differentiating between descriptive and interpretive phenomenological research approaches. *Nurse Researcher*, 22(6), 22-27.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187.
- McLaughlin, J. (2004). Leadership, management, and governance. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2004(128), 5-13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.161>
- McNaughtan, J. L., DePue, B. W., & McNaughtan, E. D. (2019). The road already traveled: Communication advice for higher education leaders. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 33(6). 1431-1441. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-11-2018-0351>
- McDearmon, J. T. (2013). Hail to thee, our alma mater: Alumni role identity and the relationship to institutional support behaviors. *Research in Higher Education*, 54(3), 283–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-012-9271-6>

- Melidona, D., Cecil, B. G., Alexander C., & Chessman, H.M. (2023). *The American College President: 2023 Edition—Executive Summary*. American Council on Education.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). What is qualitative research? In *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.), 3–21. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Agenda definition & meaning*. Merriam-Webster. Retrieved July 31, 2022, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agenda>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Donor definition & meaning*. Merriam-Webster. Retrieved October 14, 2023, from <http://www.merrm-webster.com/dictionary/donor>
- Miller, M.T. (1993). Historical perspectives on the development of academic fund raising. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 20(3), 237.
<https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=806ee587-e550-47ae-9e38-8b817312dbed%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwLHNzbyZzaXRIPWVob3N0LWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=9312221897&db=tfh>
- Miller, M.T. & Nelson, G.M. (2005). Does a new broom sweep clean: The new provost and administrative turnover. *Journal of Research in Education*, 15, 24-35.
- Monks, J. (2022). University presidential searches: an empirical examination of internal versus external hiring. *Eastern Economic Journal*, 48(4), 580–601.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41302-022-00223-0>
- Moody, J. (2023, Aug. 1). Why are so many college presidents resigning? *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2023/08/01/abrupt-presidential-exits-underscore-jobs>
- Newman, M. D., & Petrosko, J. M. (2011). Predictors of Alumni Association Membership. *Research in Higher Education*, 52(7), 738–759. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-011-9213-8>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 160940691773384.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Oikelome, G. (2017). Pathway to the president: The perceived impact of identity structures on the journey experiences of women college presidents. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 19(3), 23-40. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i3.1377>
- Pisors, J. (2023). *Fundraising Challenges and Expectations Facing University Presidents: A Qualitative Multiple Case Study Analysis of Public University Presidents*. [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation]. Texas Tech University.

- Pulley, John (2014). 100 years of Alumni Engagement. *Council for Advancement and Support of Education*.
- Ragas, M. W., & Roberts, M. S. (2009). Agenda setting and agenda melding in an age of horizontal and vertical media: A new theoretical lens for virtual brand communities. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 86(1), 45-64.
- Rosenbaum, D., More, A. M., & Steane, P. (2016). Applying grounded theory to investigating change management in the nonprofit sector. *SAGE Open*, 6(4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016679209>
- Sailor, R.W. (1930). The American alumni council. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 1(6), 339-341. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1974320>
- Shaw, W.B., Embree, E.R., Upham, A.H. & Johnson, E.B. (1917). Association of Alumni Secretaries. *Handbook of the alumni work*. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t0dv1fp58>
- Skinner, N.A. (2019). The Rise and Professionalization of the American Fundraising Model in Higher Education. *Philanthropy & Education*, 3(1), 23-46. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2363816093?accountid=8361&pq-origsite=summon>
- Sloan, A. & Bowe, B. (2013). Phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology: the philosophy, the methodologies, and using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate lecturers' experiences of curriculum design. *Quality & Quantity*, 48(3), 1291-1303. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-013-9835-3>
- Smerek, R.E. (2013). Sensemaking and new college presidents: A conceptual study of the transition process. *Review of Higher Education*, 36(3), 371-403. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2013.0028>
- Smith, E. A. (2014). *State Funding Decision-Making for Higher Education Institutions During Capital Campaigns* (1640906475). [Doctoral Dissertation, Middle Tennessee State University]. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/state-funding-decision-making-higher-education/docview/1640906475/se-2>
- Smith, J.A., Flower, P., and Larkin, M. (2009). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 6(4), 346-347, <https://doi:10.1080/14780880903340091>
- Stahl, N. A., & King, J. R. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44(1), 26-29. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/expanding-approaches-research-understanding-using/docview/2467348904/se-2?accountid=8361>
- Strauss, A., Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for

- Developing Grounded Theory, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Stryker, S. (2002). Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version. Caldwell, New Jersey: The Blackburn Press. (Original work published 1980).
- Tekniepe, R. J. (2013). Linking the Occupational Pressures of College President to Presidential Turnover. *Community College Review*, 42(2), 143-159.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552113516671>
- Thacker, R. S. & Freeman, S. (2021). Avoiding derailment: symbolic leadership and the university presidency, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 24(5), 632-652. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1631388>
- Thelin, J. R. (2019). *A history of American higher education* (3rd ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tie, Y. C., Birks, M., & Francis, K. (2019). Grounded Theory Research: A design framework for novice researchers. *SAGE Open Medicine*, 7, 1-8.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2050312118822927>
- Tierney, W. G. (2008). *The Impact of Culture on Organizational Decision Making*. Stylus.
- Weerts, D. J., & Ronca, J. M. (2008). Characteristics of alumni donors who volunteer at their alma mater. *Research in Higher Education*, 49, 274-292.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9077-0>
- Weick, K. E. (1995). Sensemaking in organizations. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Witzig, L. (2018). Are universities "selling" online programs through agenda setting? (2193793061). [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Missouri].
<https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/are-universities-selling-online-programs-through/docview/2193793061/se-2>

Appendices

Appendix A. IRB Protocol Submission Request

IRB QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose for conducting the study will be to describe the decision-making processes and communication strategies for alumni association executives during leadership changes at public research-oriented universities.

2. Are you collecting data about living individuals? Yes

a. Are you collecting data through intervention or interaction with these individuals?
Interaction. One on one interviews.

i. Do you have access to identifiable private information about these individuals? No.

1. What data are you collecting? Interview transcripts, field notes, and journaling

2. Is the data publicly available? No

a. Is the data accessible online? No

ii. Beyond the basic Participant Types (children, UofA Students, adults, etc.) named elsewhere in this application, do you have a target population (particular group of people) you want to recruit? Yes

1. Describe your target population.

I selected alumni association executives who are members of the Council of Alumni Association Executives (CAAE) and used the data from the CAAE Annual Surveys and the Carnegie institution rankings to best identify equivalent participants. CAAE includes 89 member institutions as of July 2022. Seventy-four are public and 15 are private institutions. First, I pulled a list of all interdependent or integrated alumni associations, then cross referenced the list with the Carnegie Mellon website for Public Very High Research Universities, which reduced the list to 32 not including U of A. I then narrowed the list to undergraduate alumni populations less than 300,000.

iii. How are you recruiting participants? Sending out email inviting participants.

iv. Provide a brief description of the procedures involving the participants. One hour interview, in person or via zoom. Questions will be supplied ahead of time to provide the participant with an opportunity to collect appropriate details if needed.

- v. How long are the procedures likely to take? One, one hour interview.
- vi. How will information be given to people to get their informed consent to participate in this research? Informed consent documents will be sent to the participants prior to the interview and required to be returned signed before the scheduled interview.
- vii. Does data collection rely on a scheduled event, such as a convention or specific date? No
- viii. How will your data be collected? Include all that apply: Field notes and journaling will take place on paper. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.
- ix. How will your data be stored? electronically
- x. How will that data be kept secure? Secure box file with access only by the researcher
- xi. Minimal Risk is defined as risks of harm not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Will participants be exposed to more than minimal risk? No.
- xii. Are there any direct benefits to the participants for participating in this study? No
- xiii. Will the proposed research involve deception or the withholding of information from participants? No
- xiv. Will the proposed research necessitate medical clearance from a physician prior to participation? No
- xv. Will the proposed research involve gathering biological samples (blood, tissue, etc.)? No
- xvi. Does the research require review by a non-UofA IRB? No
- xvii. Does this research require approval from another institution or agency, such as a school or privately owned business? No

Appendix B. IRB Approval Letter



To: Brandy A Cox
From: Douglas J Adams, Chair
IRB Expedited Review
Date: 05/01/2023
Action: **Expedited Approval**
Action Date: 05/01/2023
Protocol #: 2304463247
Study Title: Alumni Association Decision Making and Communication Strategies during University Leadership Transitions
Expiration Date: 04/19/2024
Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

Appendix C. Participant Request Email

Dear [NAME]:

I am writing to ask for your participation in a research project I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation in higher education at the University of Arkansas. As your colleague in CAAE, I know you to have in-depth knowledge on our processes in alumni relations, and I am interested in your perspectives on my research topic. Based on my review you meet the parameters of my purposive sample having been in your role during a university president or chancellor transition in the last five years at a public, very high research institution. If you do not meet these parameters, please let me know.

Having been in higher education for more than eighteen years with nine years in my current position and having recently welcomed my third chancellor into his role, I am researching the decision-making processes and communication strategies of alumni executives when faced with university leadership change. I believe this research can be productive and useful for our colleagues in Alumni Relations and Advancement. I would like to conduct a one-hour interview via Zoom or Teams. The interviews would be audio recorded for transcription purposes but not video recorded. You would also be sent a copy of the transcript to approve or update any items discussed. Pseudonyms will be used for the transcription and in the published research to support anonymity and confidentiality.

If you are willing to participate, please send me an email regarding your availability for the last week of May or first week of June.

Thank you so much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Brandy Cox Jackson, MA '07, CFRE

PhD Candidate, Higher Education

Appendix D. Email Follow Up

Good afternoon!

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this research. Attached you will find an informed consent letter and the interview protocol that I will be using for our conversation. If you could please respond to this email that you have read and consent to the interview process and to be a participant in this research, I would greatly appreciate it.

I'm very pleased that this research will represent institutions from across the country and has a strong sample of participants which is appropriate for the research method of phenomenology. These varying perspectives will also allow for stronger results with greater anonymity in the process. As a point of information, I will ask at the beginning of the interview for a preferred pseudonym if you have one. This is the name I will use for all transcriptions and in the dissertation.

Thanks again,

Brandy

Brandy Cox Jackson, MA '07, CFRE

PhD Candidate, Higher Education

Appendix E. Informed Consent Document

I, _____, volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Brandy Cox Jackson from the University of Arkansas. I understand that the project is designed to gather information that influences senior advancement professionals when making decisions and communicating to external constituents during university leadership change.

I will be one of approximately eight people being interviewed for this research.

My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one on my campus will be told.

I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

Participation involves being interviewed by a researcher from the University of Arkansas in an one-on-one setting either in person or via teleconferencing technology. The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. Notes will be written by the researcher during the interview. An audio recording of the interview and dialogue will be made. If I don't want to be taped, I will not be able to participate in the study.

I understand that the researcher will not identify me, or my organization, by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions. Faculty and administrators from my campus will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw

notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects at the University of Arkansas. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the Institutional Review Board may be contacted through contacting Iroshi (Ro) Windwalker, IRB coordinator at the University of Arkansas by telephone email, irb@uark.edu.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I have been given a copy of this consent form.

My Signature Date

Printed Name Signature of the Investigator

Appendix E. Interview Questions and Field Protocol

Alumni Association Decision Making and Communication Strategies during University

Leadership Transitions

University of Arkansas

Time of interview: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Title: _____

Institution: _____

Years at institution: _____

**THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY ABOUT
DECISION MAKING BY ALUMNI ASSOCIATIONS DURING UNIVERISTY
LEADERSHIP CHANGE.**

**I AM PROVIDING YOU WITH AN INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOU TO
REVIEW AND SIGN, IF YOU AGREE. AS NOTED, YOUR IDENTITY WILL BE
HELD IN STRICTEST CONFIDENCE AND YOUR IDENTITY WILL NOT BE
LINKED DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY WITH THE STUDY FINDINGS.**

**FIELD NOTES WILL BE COLLECTED USING THIS INTERVIEW GUIDE. A
SEPEREATE DETAILED TRANSCRIPTION WILL BE PROVIDED FOR REVIEW BY
THE PARTCIPANT FOR ACCURACY.**

**YOUR PARTICIPATION IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY AND YOU MAINTAIN THE
RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AT ANY TIME.**

BEFORE WE BEGIN, DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

DO I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION TO BEGIN?

Should you have questions or concerns about this survey, please contact my Dissertation Director, Dr. Michael Miller (mtmille@uark.edu), University of Arkansas,

SECTION I: Rapport and Background

1. Tell me a little bit about your career.
2. What is your current position and how long you have been in this role?
3. How many leadership transitions have you experienced in this role or previously?
4. Can you share the timeline and set the scene for leadership transition at your institution?
 - When did the previous leader resign? Were there any significant considerations?
 -
 -
 - How long was the search process? Was anyone from the association involved?
 -
 -
 - Can you walk me through the announcement and timeline of the transition to leadership?

Section II. Decision Making

1. What were some of the critical concerns or issues happening for the alumni association during this time?
2. Did your processes or decision-making change because of the leadership transitions at the university?

3. Can you describe at least one decision that was impacted by the change and how you adjusted?

Section III. Communications

1. Who was in charge of the communication strategy to alumni?
2. When and how was your office included?
3. What key considerations did you include in strategizing the message?
4. What are some of the common mediums that alumni use to share their thoughts?
5. How did you prepare alumni staff for the potential feedback?

Section V. Evaluating the Process

1. Can you describe the feedback from staff and alumni during this process?
2. Do you feel the association was successful managing the transition? Why or why not?
3. Did you feel your role was more transactional or strategic?
4. What would you do differently or recommend to others for the future?
5. Is there anything else you want to add that we haven't covered?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY!