STAKEHOLDERS AND POLITICAL CAPITAL:

INFLUENCES ON PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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(Under the Direction of Libby V. Morris)

ABSTRACT

Presidents of large, public research universities must communicate effectively to have a successful presidency. In today's world of social media and other forms of instant and ubiquitous communication, presidents need to make quick yet careful decisions about their messages. Higher education stakeholders expect frequent, personal, and authentic communication from their institution's leader, and a misstep can bring about the end of a presidency. The purpose of this study is to explore whether university presidents are willing to speak out on controversial or politically sensitive issues and how stakeholders and the president's political capital influence their communication decisions. In this study, the researcher attempts to extract which stakeholder groups have the most influence on presidential communication. The information obtained through interviews with five research university presidents and their chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors provides insight into how decisions are made regarding presidential communication and what factors are considered, including the influence of stakeholders and political capital. Higher education presidents and their senior advisors can use the insights gained through this research to consider (a) if and how they want to speak out on national issues, (b) how they are engaging with stakeholders, (c) which

stakeholders they are primarily engaging, and (d) what they are doing to earn and leverage their political capital through communication. The findings may corroborate their own practices and beliefs, or they may introduce them to new ideas and practices that can enhance their communication.

INDEX WORDS: Communication, Political Capital, Social Capital, Stakeholders, Universities, College and University Presidents

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2019

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December 2019

DEDICATION

To Emily and Will,

For your love, support, and patience. I am so proud and grateful to be your mom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The faculty of the Institute of Higher Education have been incredibly encouraging and supportive, and I have learned so much from each professor. I am grateful for the time and knowledge they each shared. In particular, I thank Libby Morris for her gentle, insightful, thought-provoking edits and suggestions, humor, and calming presence. I thank Leslie Gordon for motivating and reassuring me when I needed it most. For every member of Cohort 5, I cannot begin to thank them for sustaining me with their friendship, concern, humor, and encouragement. I never imagined I would find such amazing friends through this process. In particular, I am so grateful for Stacy Jones, my MP buddy, who pushed me forward every time I was discouraged or weary.

I thank my friends and colleagues at Georgia Tech who have cheered for me, and picked up my slack when I just could not get everything done. Jennifer Herazy, from Cohort 4, figuratively held my hand for two years as I doubted my abilities and my sanity at times. I would not have accomplished this without her. My former boss, G. P. “Bud” Peterson, has been a mentor and a caring friend who constantly gave me the freedom and the confidence to achieve this. I would not have started this journey without him pushing me past my comfort level academically and professionally. My present boss, Ángel Cabrera, helped me cross the finish line with his immediate support and encouragement. Monique Tavares, Sandi Bramblett, Stephanie Johnston, and Valarie Thomas have been beside me every step of the way and have endured me at my worst and celebrated me at my best. I am truly blessed.

Lastly, I thank my family for giving me the time and strength to do this. Your constant love—even when I am undeserving of it—is awe-inspiring. Emily, Will, Beth, William, Dad, Diana, Angie, Libby, and Kathi: Thank you. I am forever grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Effective decision making is an essential aspect of leadership, and decisions related to communication can determine the success or failure of a presidency. College and university presidents, just like leaders in other industries, use communication skills to learn, understand, teach, influence, and share with an array of stakeholders. Students, faculty, staff, donors, alumni, elected leaders, and many other stakeholders are looking for effective communication from their institution's leader, but they all may desire or hear a different message. The leaders themselves must determine which issues they are willing to address publicly and which are too controversial or politically sensitive to touch. As part of that decision-making process, presidents may take into account stakeholder influence and their own political capital—sometimes referred to colloquially as their *bank of goodwill*—to assess if they have the trust and power needed to address particular issues. They also must decide if they have the courage to withstand the potential consequences when influential stakeholders disagree on issues.

Looking through the lens of decision theory and a political framework, the impact that stakeholders and the president's political capital have on communication decisions will be examined. As the world seemingly gets smaller through the ubiquity of social media, university presidents are being called upon by the campus community and external stakeholders to comment on a wide variety of issues; some issues that have no direct bearing on their campus or others that may only impact a very small part of the university community. Speaking out on any issue, however, invites both praise and opposition, which can build or erode political capital. Schugurnesky (2000) defined political capital as power derived from the trust placed in a person by their followers. The president needs to have sufficient political capital—typically earned from

their stakeholders—to bring about change or achieve their goals, but once their limited supply of political capital is gone, so is their influence and impact, which may lead to losing their job.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Power and influence may not be words that come to mind when thinking of colleges and universities. Externally, higher education may be viewed as collegial environments where trusted colleagues find desired solutions without the use of power tactics. But power, or otherwise more gently termed as *influence*, is used by both internal and external stakeholders to achieve the outcomes they desire on a multitude of issues. One issue of particular interest is decision making on communication, verbal and written, by the president and university leadership.

Technology is changing the nature and speed of communication, and higher education leaders have used social media and other rapid and widespread means of communication for decades to recruit students and tell their institution's story (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canche, 2012; Wandel, 2008). However, the same leaders have found these communication channels can also be used to expose problems at the university or rebuke its leaders to a national audience, and those negative stories can overtake the narrative and cripple the effectiveness and reputation of the best institutions. The decisions university presidents and their senior advisors make on communication are vitally important. Although the scholarly literature includes reviews of communication decisions after the fact, there are few studies that attempt to help the reader understand presidents' decision-making processes on communication and the power dynamics that influence those decisions.

Instead of university presidents being national thought leaders speaking out on topics of importance and interest to the nation, their comments and writing are mostly directed to the campus community and those with a direct impact on the university itself (Bornstein, 1995;

Greenburg, 1998; Hesburgh, 2001; Sherman, 2013). The day-to-day job of a university president is more akin to running a small city (Kerr & Gade, 1986; Lazerson, Wagener, & Moneta, 2000). Both university presidents and city managers are high-profile leaders who are responsible for residents and daily commuters who live and work in their boundaries. That responsibility includes housing, infrastructure, police and public safety, medical care, dining, amenities, and more. Just as a city leader or politician, a university president has many stakeholders to consider when making and communicating decisions, goals, and initiatives.

Historically, the job of a college or university president has never been easy. Both the symbolic and managerial aspects of their jobs are filled with demands on time and attention that need to be parsed out to their large number of stakeholders who have different outlooks, needs, and expectations. There are positive aspects to being a president, but job security is not one of them. In fact, the first collegiate "master" in the United States, Harvard's Nathaniel Eaton, was fired in 1639 after only one year at the helm (Dennison, 2001). Most collegiate leaders fare better than one year on the job, but the expectations and pressures placed upon presidents are enormous.

Soon after the turn of the 20th century, presidents were called giants of education because they were known to speak out on issues of the day far beyond their campuses (Dennison, 2001; Greenburg, 1998; Sherman, 2013; Thelin, 2011). They had the renown and stature to be influential in many aspects of society. University presidents today are rarely considered national thought leaders and are less likely to speak out on national issues because of the potential adverse reactions and financial consequences that may accompany such attention (Coleman, 2018; Dennison, 2001; Hesburgh, 2001; Selingo, Chheng & Clark, 2017; Sherman, 2013).

Unfortunately, a university president today is typically only known outside their university or state if there is a significant problem or controversial event.

University presidents are called upon to frequently and transparently communicate with the campus community and external stakeholders. The decisions made on the issues they are willing to address publicly are significant because they can indicate the power dynamics behind the scenes that are driving the decision. Through this study, I will examine how those decisions are made, and who, or what, influences those decisions. The information obtained through interviews with five research university presidents and their senior advisors will provide insight into the influence of stakeholders and the president's political capital on communication decisions. The study will also shed light on the factors considered when a president chooses to speak out on controversial or politically sensitive topics. A review of the literature demonstrates scholars have not yet brought together decision theory in a political framework, university presidential leadership, communication, and stakeholders into one study to better understand the symbiosis that leads to decisions on communication in a public university setting.

Higher Education Context

Highest activity research universities (referred to as R1 institutions in the Carnegie Classification System) have the highest profile among degree-granting higher education institutions. This study will focus on large, public, R1 institutions, some of which are the flagship universities in their state. The presidents of R1 universities tend to have more statewide and national visibility than others because their universities have research and service missions that stretch beyond campus or state borders and because the large number of students and alumni make them more widely known. Also, some of these universities have successful athletics programs that bring national attention and build or enhance the university brand. Universities

ranked among the top 50 public institutions in the *2019 U.S. News & World Report's Best Colleges* (2019) edition are seen as the nation's premier public institutions. Being named the president of one of these universities can be considered the pinnacle of an academic career.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS; 2019), in the fall of 2019, the United States was home to 4,775 postsecondary degree-granting colleges and universities, which included private, public, not-for-profit, for-profit, religiously affiliated, secular, 2-year colleges, technical colleges, bachelor's-granting institutions, doctorate-granting institutions, liberal arts colleges, research universities, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges, and others. The IPEDS enrollment data for Fall 2016 (the latest available at the time of this study), indicate there were 19.8 million students enrolled in postsecondary degree-granting institutions in the United States. Enrollment in the nation's 115 R1 universities counted for more than 3.4 million of the total, so roughly 2.4% of the nation's higher education institutions educate more than 17.3% of the nation's enrolled students.

An institution's mission is the dominant factor in understanding its focus and goals. Research universities have a dual mission of knowledge transfer (teaching) and the creation of new knowledge (research), but their culture typically focuses on innovation and discovery (Altbach, 2011). The United States adopted the basic structure of research universities from Germany after the adoption of the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 and placed an emphasis on agricultural and industrial research (Altbach, 2011). These universities grew in size and complexity between the Civil War and World War I as research and public service became part of the mission of these taxpayer-funded institutions (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005).

The type of institution also determines the role its president must play (Selingo et al., 2017). Although presidents from any sector are expected to be managers, budget specialists, fundraisers, communicators, and strategic planners, other roles and the amount of time spent performing them can be dependent upon the institutional organization. Presidents of research universities require skills that may not be typical of college presidents. Altbach (2011) wrote:

> In research universities, presidents must have academic credibility and must display a deep knowledge of and respect for the academic mission of the institution. At the same time, they must be able to represent the university in society and must make the case for the centrality and importance of the institution. Modern academic leadership is an increasingly complex and multifaceted task, and finding talented leaders is difficult. (p. 68)

The American Council on Education (ACE) conducts a survey of U.S. college presidents every 5 years, with the latest survey being conducted in 2016 (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017). The data, gathered from more than 1,500 respondents representing all sectors of higher education, suggest the typical college president (a) is a White, married man; (b) has children; (c) is 62 years old; and (d) holds a PhD or EdD. Thirty percent of presidents are women, 7.9% are African American, and 3.9% are Hispanic. The average age of presidents has steadily increased since the initial ACE survey in 1986 when the average age of presidents was in the fifties (Selingo et al., 2017). Also, the average terms of presidencies are decreasing to an average of 6.5 years in 2016, compared to an average of 8 years from a decade ago (Gagliardi et al., 2017). These statistics vary by type of institution, but the general trends remain the same.

Results from the 2018 Survey of College and University Presidents by *Inside Higher Ed* and Gallup indicate 74% of public, doctoral institution presidents felt well prepared or very well

prepared for the media and public relations aspects of their jobs (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). Preparedness for media and public relations duties ranked 5th among 12 categories. In comparison, the only job duties that ranked higher in preparedness were (a) working with faculty members (90%), (b) academic affairs issues (86%), (c) financial management (84%), and (d) government relations (78%). This indicates most presidents feel a sense of comfort with the communication aspect of their job.

Significance of the Study

Effective communication is essential to a successful university presidency. Well-known and influential presidents have been fired or forced to resign because of an impolitic statement or a lack of communication that was interpreted as dismissive or uncaring. Presidents are expected to be trustworthy, fair, honest, caring, and credible (Eckel & Kezar, 2011), and those qualities should be exemplified in their speeches and writing. If a president does not lead with those values and make them evident through their communication, they may not have the support they need to successfully do their job. Jerry (2013) wrote, “For the leader to inspire and lead, however, the followers must be willing and able to be inspired and be led” (p. 348). If they lose the confidence, trust, or respect of the campus community, all their efforts could be for naught.

This study came about because, as the former chief of staff to an R1 university president, I have seen what I believe to be an increased demand for presidential communication. Anecdotally, I have seen that students in particular, but other stakeholders as well, want to hear often from the president directly on a multitude of issues. I have been involved in many conversations when the president and other senior advisors wrestled with a decision about whether to issue a formal statement, or send a message via social media, or not communicate at all about far-ranging topics. This led me to want to know if other presidents and their senior

advisors are struggling with these decisions, and if so, how they are weighing the risks and benefits of those communications and who, or what, is influencing those decisions.

The study will also include an analysis of whether the opinions and desires of stakeholders are a significant determinant in whether a president will write or speak out, especially about controversial issues and/or those of national importance and attention. If stakeholders are a determinant, are some more influential than others? With such a large number of stakeholders, it is difficult to keep them all equally informed and included. Each stakeholder group can convince themselves that they are the most important, whether that is true or not (Ruscio, 2017). They are not all of equal influence, power, or importance at any given time, but they all can drive decisions made by senior leaders of the university.

Lastly, the study explores whether a president's political capital is considered as a factor when making communication decisions. I propose, when weighing the advantages and disadvantages of speaking out on a politically sensitive or controversial topic, it is important for presidents to assess their own level of political capital to determine if their presidency can withstand the potential backlash. Critics of university presidents contend that senior administrators are too concerned about raising funds or alienating their governing board or government officials to tackle controversial issues (Bornstein, 1995; Dennison, 2001; Greenburg, 1998; Hesburgh, 2001; Sherman, 2013) which is directly related to their political capital and how many deposits they have in "the bank of goodwill" with various constituencies. If they have a significant supply of political capital, they may feel more willing to take on politically sensitive or controversial topics.

Communication is the output upon which this research focused, but the foundation is decision making by presidents, so decision theory undergirds the study. Whether decisions are

made in a fully rational way or by intuition derived from experience, it is important to note the process by which the decision is reached and who plays a role. In this study, communication decisions are also viewed through a political frame where stakeholder interest groups and coalitions develop and attempt to acquire and use power to achieve the outcomes they desire (Birnbaum, 1988).

A review of the literature reflects there is a scarcity of scholarly knowledge on the effects of stakeholders and political capital on communication decision making by presidents and their senior advisors. The findings of this study will help inform presidents and their senior advisors about the impact of power—both their own and their stakeholders' power—on communication decision making. It will provide insights into how presidents of some of the nation's most prestigious and well-known research institutions contemplate and manage these important issues and will aid new and sitting presidents in assessing the power dynamics that are part of the communication decision-making process. In today's fast-paced world, one misstep can end their presidency and irreparably damage the reputation of their institution.

Research Questions

The following research questions facilitate increased understanding of the political dynamics involved in presidential decision making on communication with internal and external stakeholders.

RQ1 How do presidents and their senior advisors weigh the risks and benefits of speaking out on politically sensitive or controversial topics?

RQ2 How do presidents and their senior advisors determine and describe the effect of stakeholder power and influence on their communication decision making?

RQ3 Which stakeholder groups are most influential? Always or is it situational?

RQ4 Does a president's political capital impact their communication decision making?

Definition of Terms

The following are terms used in the study that may not be commonly known, or that require a shared understanding to the researcher and reader.

Academic freedom: "Academic freedom means that both faculty members and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear of censorship or retaliation" (Nelson, 2010, Part 1, para. 1).

Political capital: For purposes of this study, political capital is defined in economic terms as the accumulation of resources and power that is built through relationships, trust, goodwill, and influence. There is typically an exchange of "goods" that results in either accumulating or losing resources through social and political interactions. Many times, it is compared to a currency (Bennister & Worthy 2012; French, 2011; Schugurnesky, 2000; Swartz, 2013).

Power: A common understanding of power is "the ability to get things done the way one wants them to be done" (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977, p. 4).

Stakeholders: This study will use the definition originally presented by Richard Freeman (1984) when he indicated that stakeholders are groups or individuals that either can be impacted by or are able to impact an organization and its objectives. Although Freeman used the term in the business sense, we will use it in academic sense to include groups such as faculty, students, donors, government leaders, governing board trustees, the media, etc.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is scholarly literature that focuses on effective college and university presidents, leadership, decision making, communication, political capital, and stakeholders, none could be found that fuses these topics together to study the communication decision making of university presidents and how those decisions are impacted by influential stakeholders and the president's political capital. The following literature provided a starting point to forge these disparate topics into a new body of knowledge.

The Role of University President

> *Every decade, about five thousand persons serve as college or university presidents. Over a term of office averaging less than 7 years, the president is expected to serve simultaneously as the chief administrator of a large and complex bureaucracy, as the convening colleague of a professional community, as a symbolic elder in a campus culture of shared values and symbols, and (in some institutions) as a public official accountable to a public board and responsive to the demands of other governmental agencies. (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005, p. 340)*

Opinions on the role, responsibilities, characteristics, and impact of the university president are easy to find. Former presidents, academic scholars, and in fact, according to Young (2018), almost anyone who has somehow been touched by higher education has an opinion as to what an effective college president should or should not do and be. It is a unique leadership role because of the environment in which it resides—one of shared governance with the faculty, loosely coupled structural systems, and constant attention and input from various stakeholders. However, effective presidents know the final decision rests with them (Fisher, Tack, & Wheeler, 1988) and they will reap both positive and negative attention on themselves and their institution.

Historically, in American higher education, college presidents have been chosen from and seen as extensions of the faculty, but large, research institutions today have different expectations of their leaders and often compare them to corporate CEOs (Selingo et al., 2017).

Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence and Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities published a study on the pathways that academic or other leaders take to become university presidents (Selingo et al., 2017). The authors used data from the 2017 ACE survey of presidents to support their contention that fewer presidents are hired from the provost position than in the past. Due to the predominantly external focus of presidents today, provosts, as the institution's chief academic officer, are increasingly used as internal specialists who primarily manage issues concerning faculty and students, while "the president is looking 'up and out,' focused on relations with the governing board, the public, alumni, and in many cases, political leaders" (Selingo, et al., 2017, p. 8).

The ACE study indicates the presidents surveyed believed being a strategist, communicator, and storyteller are the top three skills and behaviors needed for the job. Communication, both internal and external, is ranked near the top of presidential "duties" lists, and the survey results revealed 34% of presidents reported regularly writing about higher education in mainstream and scholarly publications (Gagliardi et al., 2017). As higher education presidents make decisions about communication to both internal and external audiences, they must fully understand the context of the situation and how it will be perceived by and impact stakeholders (Forester, 1984).

Boards are frequently looking for transformational leaders to inspire and energize the campus community or to repair past troubles (Selingo et al., 2017). Transformational leadership inspires, energizes, and creates a vision for followers (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989) and, conversely, transactional leadership is a relationship between leaders and followers that is based on the exchange of things of value or rewards (Bensimon et al., 1989; Mahdinezhad, Bin Suandi, Daud bin Silong, & Omar, 2013). Both forms of leadership are needed at times, and

effective presidents know that different situations and stakeholders require different tactics (Eckel & Kezar, 2011).

The desire for transformational leadership also existed at the turn of the 20th century, which many educational historians call the "Golden Age" when "giants" led the nation's higher education institutions. Presidents such as Charles Eliot and James Conant of Harvard University, Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins University, William Rainey Harper and Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago, James Angell of Yale University, and Benjamin Ide Wheeler of the University of California System, just to name a few, wrote and spoke often about current events and national issues (Bornstein, 1995; Dennison, 2001; Greenburg, 1998; Thelin, 2011). The presidents were sometimes better known outside of their campuses than they were on their campuses (Dennison, 2001; Thelin, 2011). In that era, boards of trustees intentionally hired presidents who embraced the role of being a public intellectual and who were considered innovative and visionary in their speeches and writing (Bornstein, 1995).

Today, although presidential selection committees may indicate they want transformational leaders, governing boards have placed a higher emphasis on hiring presidents who have administrative and managerial skills, have fundraising abilities, and are consensus builders and effective lobbyists (Bornstein, 1995; Greenburg, 1998; Hesburgh, 2001; Sherman, 2013). Boards prefer presidents who do not court controversy and potential negative attention. As Greenburg (1998) wrote, "Simply put, these men and women aren't leaders of national opinion anymore. When they do make headlines these days, it's usually because of scandal" (p. 17). Frequently, if a president chooses to take a stand on a political or particularly controversial issue, it must be with the approval of their board, because as the institution's voice, the president impacts the reputation of the institution (Bornstein, 1995; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Sherman, 2013).

Presidents today may be writing editorials or speaking out about noncontroversial higher education topics, but few have the freedom or gravitas to speak or write about noneducation topics that are in the headlines because of the damage it may do to their presidency or the institution itself.

The presidency of any college or university carries a symbolic role that is deeply indicative of the institution's culture (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005; Eckel & Kezar, 2011). Presidents are expected to embody and articulate the institution's values through their appearance at events, in speeches, and in writing (Birnbaum, 1992; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Young & Pemberton, 2017). Their words can paint the picture of the direction the president will take the institution as they exercise their role as the "face" (Eckel & Kezar, 2011, p. 283) of the university and the holder of the values and traditions that form the spirit of the campus community. Cohen and March (1974) contended external audiences exaggerate the power of the presidency based on the symbolic role they play, which can lead to a belief that the president is strong when times are good or weak when times are bad. The formation and adherence to these beliefs by internal and external stakeholders can elevate or, conversely, deflate a president's stature, power, and ability to effectively perform the job to which they have been entrusted.

Higher Education Context

> *Thus the organization of colleges and universities, the influence of the external environment, the multiple roles that presidents must play, and the constituencies they must please make it challenging for presidents to fulfill expectations. (Eckel & Kezar, 2011, p. 280)*

The organizational context of higher education leads to unique pressures placed on presidents because they are typically answerable to two bodies: (a) the faculty and (b) the governing board. Although the faculty cannot fire the president, through a vote of "no confidence," they can put intense pressure on the board to fire the president or to force them to

resign (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005). Pleasing two masters can be fraught with difficulty and danger, but a dual-accountability structure is standard in higher education. Since Harvard University's founding in 1636, U.S. universities have evolved from a presidential model of "first among equals" (Thelin, 2011, p. 11) in the faculty to large bureaucracies that must be managed by competent managers and overseen by governing boards (Eckel & Kezar, 2011).

As described by Birnbaum (1988), the four primary models of higher education institutions are (a) collegial (managing through consensus and collaboration), (b) anarchical (managing loosely coupled systems), (c) bureaucratic (managing through structure and process), and (d) political (managing through negotiation and bargaining). This study focused on the presidents of research universities, which have grown into large bureaucratic and highly visible institutions (Altbach, 2011). Having a president who understands and can successfully work in a shared governance and dual accountability environment is essential.

Although research universities are typically large bureaucratic organizations, there are always aspects of the other organizational contexts (Birnbaum, 1988). Faculty still operate under a mostly collegial model where they work to find consensus on academic and curricular issues through their systems of governance. Universities continue to be large, loosely coupled systems of weak connections between departments and units where decisions are made through *garbage can decision-making*, a term coined by Cohen and March (1974). Additionally, universities are political systems where interest groups and coalitions form to advocate and negotiate for what they want or believe is best for the university (Eckel & Kezar, 2011). Presidents must understand and work in all contexts and translate the academic environment to external stakeholders. Effective presidents know they are the ultimate decision maker and have the final authority and responsibility for the chosen paths (Fisher et al., 1988), and it is incumbent upon them to inspire

the campus community and external stakeholders to follow their vision and contribute to its success.

Stakeholders

> *Even though a complex exercise, the management of university stakeholders is required. In order to secure their place in the modern economy of knowledge, universities are being forced to carefully rethink their role and their relations with their various stakeholders or communities. This implies identifying the stakeholders, classifying them according to their relative importance, and, having done so, the establishment of relations with them. (Alves, Mainardes & Raposo, 2010, p. 162)*

The wide range of stakeholders—sometimes referred to as constituents—with whom university presidents engage brings complexity to communication strategy and delivery. Students, faculty, staff, alumni, and parents of current students may be the most obvious stakeholders, but others include (a) donors, (b) prospective students, (c) governing board trustees, (d) elected leaders, (e) accrediting agencies, (f) federal and state government agencies, (g) industry, (h) media, and (i) the local community (Alves et al., 2010; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Pereira & Da Silva, 2003). Each stakeholder group has an impact on the university through their own unique perspectives, expectations, and needs in regard to the messages they hear, receive, and disseminate about the university and its leadership.

Stakeholder theory was initially a business theory popularized by Richard Freeman in his 1984 publication, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Scholars have broadly defined the term as "individuals or groups [that] may influence or be influenced by the scope of organizational objectives" (Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2011, pp. 228-229) to "persons or groups with legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of corporate activity" (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p. 67). Stakeholder theory's foundation as a management philosophy calls for consideration of the interests and opinions of all stakeholders, not just financial shareholders, in a for-profit company because stakeholders impact profits and losses

(Alarcón-del-Amo, Casablancas-Segura, & Llonch, 2015; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mainardes et al., 2011). However, Donaldson and Preston (1995) went beyond consideration of the company's bottom line and asserted engaging stakeholders is a moral obligation of management.

In higher education, scholars have called for managers and organizations to seek out and engage stakeholders to better understand how they perceive and value the university (Alarcón-del-Amo et al., 2015; Alves et al., 2010; Kettunen, 2015) so they will be able to craft messages that speak to the various stakeholders and gain their support (Tierney, 1988). The views and opinions of those internal and external stakeholders can influence public perceptions of quality and organizational performance, thereby impacting enrollment, rankings, donations, and government grants, and contracts. However, not all stakeholders are equal in terms of "power, legitimacy, and urgency" (Mainardes et al., 2011, p. 236). It is incumbent on university leaders to identify all stakeholders, assess their levels of power, and attribute priorities to each of them (Alves et al., 2010; Mainardes et al., 2011).

Governing boards are among the most powerful stakeholders because they typically have authority based in law or policy and can overrule the university president. In particular, governing board trustees, who are able to hire and fire presidents, are an important constituency that presidents cannot afford to offend. The "Silent Sam" controversy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) placed a spotlight on confrontations between presidents and university boards who have differing views on crisis management and the roles each play. In January 2019, Chancellor Carol Folt announced she would proceed with the removal of the controversial Silent Sam Confederate statue from the campus and then step down as chancellor, perhaps because she knew she would have spent any remaining political capital she had and

governing after that would be difficult, if not impossible. The UNC Board of Governors dismissed her after she made the announcement. In what many consider a board driven by conservative ideology (Harris, 2019), the showdown demonstrated the ultimate power of a governing board.

European universities are experiencing active involvement from external boards as well. A survey of university rectors and faculty senate leaders on the increasing influence and pressure from European governing boards, which are comprised mostly of members external to the university, showed administrators and faculty valued the board's ability to bring outside perspectives and attention to the university, but they wanted them to act as "non-interfering allies" (Magalhães, Veiga & Amaral, 2018, p. 749) instead of decision makers. I speculate that similarly opinions would be held by U.S. university administrators.

Government leaders, especially in relation to public institutions, have an ever-increasing role and impact on universities through taxpayer funds that are dispersed at both the federal and state level and comprise a significant portion of university budgets (Alves et al., 2010; Mainardes et al., 2011). In the current political climate of sometimes outright hostility to higher education and extremism on both sides of the conservative-liberal spectrum (Jaschik, 2018; Parker, 2019; Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016), presidents and their communication experts must remain politically astute and alert to avoid allowing their words to be used as political fodder or as a wedge that could cause government leaders to reduce or deny monetary support for the university due to a perceived difference in political ideology.

At the same time that university leaders must be careful not to offend powerful government officials, students are requesting, and sometimes demanding, presidential statements on everything from campus situations to national political and social issues. However, what

students want may be in direct conflict with what alumni, faculty, or government officials want from their president and university. Balancing the needs and expectations of each stakeholder group is a careful and tenuous exercise. Students may not always understand the tension of satisfying multiple stakeholders. Students believe "the university exists only for them" (Ruscio, 2017, p. 26) and view themselves as consumers of an expensive product, and want their voices heard. Oftentimes, they do not understand university structures and the power positions held by both governing board trustees and government officials.

Faculty are also a primary constituency that presidents must consider. The power and influence of the faculty can differ due to their level of engagement in shared governance, the sector and mission of the institution, and their perceived access to the president. Faculty support is crucial because a vote of "no confidence" can be the end of the president's career (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005). Birnbaum (1992) contended some presidents lose faculty support but are not aware of it because the president may choose to only listen to positive feedback they receive from other stakeholders, typically external stakeholders. In referring particularly to the faculty, Die (1999) warned failure to consider some but not all campus stakeholders may lead to institutional crisis.

With the large array of stakeholders in higher education, there is an almost endless number of potential conflicts and compromises. Stakeholders' demands for access and information can be never-ending as well. The scholarly literature is limited regarding the influence of stakeholders, so this study helps to fill the literature gap by identifying the stakeholders that presidents' believe are the most influential when considering communication to both the internal and external community.

Communication

> *As the organizational voice, people look to the president for the official statement on important matters. His or her message matters, and as the figurehead of an institution, the president's response in a time of need can push the organization in very significant directions. (Gigliotti, 2016, p. 192)*

The days of giants, when university presidents held a national pulpit on education and noneducation issues alike are in our nation's past. Critics have asserted the power of governing boards and government leaders, and the need to constantly raise funds has caused presidents to retreat from speaking out on controversial or politically sensitive topics (Bornstein, 1995; Dennison, 2001; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Hesburgh, 2001; Sherman, 2013). Others have asserted strong leaders choose not to become college or university presidents because they are hampered from speaking out on topics of consequence, or they are not paid adequately for the time and effort given in the job (Dennison, 2001; Harris, 2019).

There are some national issues that have significant impacts on campus communities, and presidents choose to speak in hopes of helping or comforting the faculty, students, and staff. For instance, McNaughtan et al. (2018) analyzed responses from public university presidents to the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016, which was considered a traumatic event by some Americans. Forty-one of the presidents of each of the 50 state's flagship university issued a statement to the university community about the election. Of the nine presidents who did not issue a statement, 77% were in states with Republican governors. The authors concluded, with this and other quantitative information, the political climate of states had an effect on whether the president spoke out or not. The authors found presidents who did issue a statement used the opportunity to help the community make sense of what happened and to remind them of the university's values and culture. Some statements were proactive attempts to avoid dangerous behaviors in reaction to the election, while others were sent after negative

events happened on campuses. Some presidents only responded after they saw their peers doing so. McNaughtan et al. (2018) advised presidents of public universities should not be prohibited from speaking out on topics that have ramifications on their campuses and that "any event that compromises the safety or emotional well-being of members of their community requires a proactive response from campus leaders" (p. 546). These messages can be crafted carefully to avoid political ramifications, especially by leaders of public institutions.

Also on the 2016 presidential election, a 2018 study by *Inside Higher Ed* and Gallup asserted many college and university presidents issued statements criticizing the policies of the Trump administration and asked the 618 respondents if they, in their roles as presidents, had spoken out more on political issues in 2017. Reviewing the results of all higher education sectors, 55% of presidents said they spoke out more, and 67% of presidents of public, doctoral and master's institutions and 71% of private, doctoral and master's institutions indicated they spoke out more than they had in the past (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). Analysis of these survey results indicates the anti-intellectual rhetoric of the Trump presidential campaign and administration may be leading more presidents to speak out in defense of higher education and take stands on other issues more than they would otherwise.

Presidents may not want to be lightning rods on non-education-related issues of the day; however, they are the faces and voices of their institutions (Coleman, 2018; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Kirwan, 2018; Ruscio, 2017), and communication is a key component of the job (Fisher et al., 1988; Hopkins, 1986; McNaughtan et al., 2018). Their words carry added weight and are analyzed by various constituents who each view the comments through their own lens. For instance, former presidents Kauvar, Trachtenberg, and Gee (2018) complained, "Today's university presidents lose their First Amendment rights. Students today have little sense of

humor or irony or history. Words take on meanings you never contemplated" (pp. 194-195). Although their comments focus on students, in today's politically polarizing world, the same could be said of many stakeholder groups.

Studies delineating the attributes of successful college presidents have given important insights into the pressures placed on presidents to be thoughtful, strategic, enthusiastic, courageous, self-confident, positive, and controlled in their communication efforts (Fisher & Tack, 1990). As the leaders of their institutions, especially if they are considered transformational leaders, presidents are looked upon to provide the vision and engender the confidence of the faculty, staff, students, and others to persuade those stakeholders to accept the vision and join the president in acting upon it (Birnbaum, 1992; Jerry, 2013).

Communication was once viewed simply as a tool used by leaders to direct or influence followers, but instead, scholars, such as Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) and Ruben and Gigliotti (2016), have viewed leadership and communication as inseparable. The classic linear model of leadership communication is that a message is sent by a leader and received by a follower. That simplistic view of communication does not consider the receiver may not have understood the message as the sender intended (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Instead, communication should be viewed as a system that is a basic life process where senders and receivers have their own outlook, values, goals, styles, and life histories they bring to understanding the communication. Due to this, a receiver may hear or see a different message (verbal or nonverbal) than a sender is trying to communicate (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) contended leadership communication is both an act of transmission and of meaning making, otherwise known as sense making, which allows people to make sense or meaning of everyday occurrences and experiences. Although the leaders may not

have control of what happens in a certain situation, they may be able to control the narrative or context of how events are seen after the fact (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). They can use those opportunities to make meaning to further their attempts at transformational leadership.

Higher education leaders make meaning through the use of framing devices (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014), which have been identified by Young and Pemberton (2017) as (a) positive spin, (b) agenda setting, (c) communicated predicaments, (d) possible futures, (e) jargon, (f) vision themes, (g) catchphrases, (h) contrast, (i) metaphors, and (j) stories. Communicating vision has been identified as one of the major responsibilities of corporate leaders and college and university presidents (Argenti, 2017; Birnbaum, 1992; Kerr & Gade, 1986; McGovern, Foster, & Ward, 2002; Young & Pemberton, 2017), and presidents are frequently called to speak on and off campus at convocations, commencements, "state of the university" addresses, and speeches to civic and alumni clubs. Presidents have the opportunity to use these devices to frame their visions or their versions of events or circumstances, depending upon their audiences at the time.

Crisis communication, in particular, is an opportunity for presidents to frame the narrative of situations; when done well, this framing can improve circumstances. Conversely, a situation can worsen if communication is not done well. Stakeholders naturally look to the president as the voice of the organization and expect them to be the official spokesperson during times of trial. Their reaction during crisis can have a significant impact on the organization (Gigliotti, 2016). Presidents manage meaning during a crisis, and the way in which presidents exhibit leadership in crisis situations can construct their personal identity as well. Gigliotti (2016) identified four discursive themes of presidential identities during times of crisis: (a) caretaker, (b) comforter, (c) man of steel, and (d) institutional voice. He also identified two

tensions—"crisis leadership as a human act" and "crisis leadership as performance" (Gigliotti, 2016, p. 191)—and concluded by advocating presidents use crises as a communicative opportunities to define themselves to their stakeholders and take time to reflect after crises to prepare for and manage the inevitable future crises that will occur.

There are many forms of crises in higher education; some are physical, such as a tornado, earthquake, or campus shooting, and others are reputational and political (Brennan & Stern, 2017). Typically, there is not time to take an academic approach by fully studying the problem or involving stakeholders in the decision-making process, so presidents must make decisions quickly—frequently by intuition—and communicate them as accurately as possible. Brennan and Stern (2017) wrote, "By their words and deeds, leaders can convey images of competence, control, stability, sincerity, decisiveness and vision—or their opposite" (p. 127). Especially in a crisis, the media can shape stakeholders' views of presidents (Harris & Ellis, 2017). Presidents who do not perform well under the pressure of a crisis can thereby damage the institution's reputation and lose the confidence of the campus community (Brennan & Stern, 2017).

One particular example of this is a powerful case study that analyzed the communication aspect of racial incidents at the University of Missouri that led to the resignations of the university's president and chancellor (Fortunato, Gigliotti, & Ruben, 2017). The authors concluded the leadership's failure to respond to student demands, which had been circulated across campus and the nation through social media, was perceived as a lack of control. The lack of communication led to the belief or assumption that racial issues were not important to university leaders. Lessons learned from this event include presidents and other university administrative leaders should develop strong relationships with media, students, and other stakeholder groups before an incident happens. Leaders also need to predict or recognize issues

that may be rising to a significant level and possess the skills themselves, or have communication experts, who can craft timely, sensitive messages (Fortunato et al., 2017).

Inadequate, overly formal, unsympathetic, or defensive communication has contributed to the downfall of other notable university presidents in recent years. Former University of Southern California President Max Nikias was forced to step down in August 2017 after faculty pushed for his ouster in response to communication he sent about a sexual misconduct incident involving a USC physician (Tierney, 2018). Michigan State University's Lou Anna Simon resigned as president after she and her administration appeared defensive instead of empathetic following the revelations of a doctor's reported sexual abuse of female student athletes for more than a decade (Brown, 2018). In contrast, positive, affirming, and caring language can bolster a presidency, such as the case with Kent Fuchs, President of the University of Florida, when he called on his campus community to combat a White supremacist speaker with love (Stripling, 2017). His atypical appeal was widely regarded and his national reputation surged after his written and spoken communication was shared by social and print media.

Recent studies of communication expectations by the President of the United States and business executives provide interesting insights for university presidents as well. Scacco and Coe (2017) asserted the U.S. presidency has transformed from a rhetorical presidency to a ubiquitous presidency "wherein accessible, personal and pluralistic communications are the norm" (p. 298). Most of their study respondents indicated they wanted more communication from the president and that transparency was a key expectation; these findings were similar to a study of strategic communication by corporate executives. Argenti (2017) contended transparency is also a key factor in messaging and CEOs and presidents personally presenting the message is critical for its success. Stakeholders want to encounter the president visually, making them more personal and

relatable, and they expect authenticity in their leaders (Argenti, 2017; Scacco & Coe, 2017). Personable, charismatic leaders are more likely to connect with their stakeholders and use the power of persuasion to move their organizations and vision forward (Fisher et al., 1988).

With the advent of social media, it is no longer possible for the president to make a campus statement and for the message to remain only in the campus realm. Now, comments and statements are quickly disseminated through various social media channels, where external audiences see and express opinions on what is said (McNaughtan et al., 2018). Students receive most of their information through social media (Davis et al., 2012; Robinson & Stubberud, 2012), where information is delivered quickly and concisely and where a crisis can escalate from a small campus issue to a national embarrassment in moments (Selingo et al., 2017). It is rare that a president and their administrators have the time to review a situation, confirm details, draft a statement, receive feedback, and then disburse it to the campus community. If a response is not sent through social media channels in mere minutes, then the public perception battle can be lost with both internal and external stakeholders.

At the heart of it, communication is used to persuade and influence. Good communicators can help to build or define a common culture that can produce acceptance or belief in the values, vision, and goals of the institution (Fleuriet & Williams, 2015; Steyn, 2003). They can increase employee engagement through messaging that builds trust and commitment (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014). The use of strategic communication can help faculty, staff, and students through periods of change or distress and can overcome resistance to change when administrators have taken the time to fully understand their audiences and the most effective ways to communicate with them (Argenti, 2017). Communication as a “strategic tool through which planned and

intentional leadership outcomes occur" (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016, p. 467) allows leaders to influence their constituents and shape the outcomes they seek.

Political Frame

> *As politician, the president must be responsive to the needs of various constituencies whose support is critical to the maintenance of his or her position. The interests of groups and subgroups of faculty, students, alumni, elected officials and others whose actions may constrain presidential discretion must be considered and courted, and the president must often form coalitions and propose compromises that will permit peace with progress. (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005, p. 343)*

In the context of Birnbaum's (1988) four organizational structures—collegial, anarchical, bureaucratic, and political—the topic of presidential decision making in communication is viewed through the lens of a political frame. However, a political frame does not infer that the institution itself is characterized as a purely political institution because most institutions have aspects of all four of Birnbaum's organizational structures. Birnbaum (1988) described the political college or university as a "shifting kaleidoscope of interest groups and coalitions" (p. 132) where each strives to develop power and use it to get achieve their goals.

Bolman and Deal (1984) introduced viewing organizations through different perspectives, or frames, that bring clarity by filtering out some information while allowing other, more relevant information, to pass. They explained:

> Frames are windows on the world. Frames filter out some things while allowing others to pass through easily. Frames help us to order the world and decide what action to take. Every manager uses a personal frame, or image, of organizations to gather information, make judgments, and get things done. (p.4)

They identified four leadership frames: (a) structural, (b) human resource, (c) political, and (d) symbolic. To describe the political frame, Bolman and Deal (1991) wrote:

> The political frame views organizations as arenas of continuing conflict and competition among different interests for scarce resources. Political leaders are advocates and negotiators who value realism and pragmatism. They spend much of their time networking, creating coalitions, building a power base, and negotiating compromises. (p. 512)

Bolman and Deal (1991) asserted leaders who understand the political frame, including university presidents, are perceived as better managers and leaders. Also, those who are considered the best leaders are oriented toward both the political and the symbolic frames.

In the political frame, presidents must be able to (a) identify and assess special interest groups and coalitions that each have their own agenda or objective (Bensimon et al., 1989), (b) determine the relative power of the interest groups and coalitions (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), (c) mediate and negotiate the inevitable conflicts between these groups, and (d) problem-solve solutions that will appease each enough to be able to move forward with an agenda (Bensimon et al., 1989; Birnbaum, 1988; Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005; Eckel & Kezar, 2011). Successful presidents must understand and be able to articulate the culture and values of their institutions so they can align coalitions around common goals and objectives (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005). The complexity of this task is enormous, and they must use their own powers to lead amidst strife.

Power and Political Capital

> *Indeed, the reality is that deans—and the same point can be made about chancellors, presidents and other senior administrative leaders—who engineer dramatic change in response to a changing environment, generally must spend large sums of political capital to do so and, in the current higher education calculus, the rate of capital expenditure is generally inversely related to longevity in the position. (Jerry, 2013, pp. 349-350)*

Salancik and Pfeffer (1977) defined power as “simply the ability to get things done the way one wants them to be done” (p. 4). In a political frame, as it relates to universities and their

leaders, power can be built through networking, coalition building, reciprocity, and negotiation with stakeholders. French and Raven (1959) identified five bases of social power that are used to influence and control the actions of others. They are (a) legitimate power, provided by social and legal systems; (b) reward power, by providing rewards; (c) coercive power, by threatening punishments; (d) expert power, by someone's perceived expertise; and (e) referent or charismatic power, by being well-liked or by people identifying with the person with power. University presidents can possess all of these bases of one-way power and typically use them to influence and have a desired impact (Birnbaum, 1989). Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum (1989) contended university presidents are most likely to lead with referent, charismatic, or expert power. Stakeholders also have power and they either authentically possess power (e.g., governing boards, lawmakers) or attempt to develop power (e.g., faculty and student coalitions) to exert influence on issues that are important to them (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977).

It is often assumed presidents are the most powerful people on college campuses because they have been given authority by a governing board to lead and manage the campus (Eckel & Kezar, 2011). To effectively set the vision and goals and to manage the people, processes, and property, a president must have an adequate supply of political capital. The concept of political capital is credited to Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist who identified three forms of capital: (a) economic, (b) cultural, and (c) social (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991). Political capital is a derivative of social capital (Bennister & Worthy, 2012; French, 2011; Schugurnesky, 2000; Swartz, 2013), which refers to an aggregate of resources built through coordination and cooperation of social interactions and organizations that allow for social advancement (Bourdieu, 2001). As with political capital, social capital has a cumulative effect and can be earned and lost.

While social capital is generally described in relation to groups, political capital can pertain to groups and individuals. Political capital is also built on trust and is an accumulation of resources and power built through relationships, trust, goodwill, and influence. Political capital is often illustrated in economic terms. There is typically an exchange of goods that results in either accumulating or losing resources (French, 2011; Swartz, 2013). Stakeholders are the drivers of a president's political capital. Strong support for a president and their policies can put political capital deposits in the "bank," while negative reaction or a lack of confidence in the president can indicate significant withdrawals from that pool of capital.

Having political capital is vital to the ability of a campus leader to lead. Leaders typically have the most political capital when they are first elected or hired, so it is important to parlay it into action quickly since it is likely to diminish over time (Bennister & Worthy, 2012; Bensimon et al., 1989; French, 2011; Kirwin, 2018; Swartz, 2013). French (2011) wrote, "Political capital is intangible, volatile and inherently unstable" (p. 218). Leaders are continuously gaining and losing political capital through their words and actions and how those impact and are perceived by stakeholders. Political capital and power are closely aligned because presidents need political capital to be able to use power—in whatever form it may take—to advance their vision and achieve their goals.

The concepts of social capital and political capital align with the principle of "fuzzy logic" because there are no accurate measurements or agreed upon definitions (Cox, 2007). There are definite inputs and conclusions, but there is no precise measurement instrument to determine the amount of social or political capital an organization or person enjoys. Schugurnesky (2000) characterized political capital as a "dynamic concept" (p. 5) that varies over time and context. It is a feeling or a belief based on observation and outcomes.

Bennister and Worthy (2012) analyzed six aspects of political capital, but their "performance approach" (p. 10) is especially germane to leadership communication and its impact on political capital. The authors assert that rhetoric and oratory are particularly important ways to inspire and engage followers. Speakers not only have to carefully consider the words they say but also the way they say them to fully enhance their capital (Bennister & Worthy, 2012). Communication with stakeholders is an important mechanism that can either earn or spend political capital. Strategic communication that is thoughtful, inclusive, empathetic, and timely can gain or maintain influence (French, 2011), while dismissive, divisive, and slow communication can result in a loss of political capital.

The context of events is also a critical factor. For instance, President George W. Bush was believed to have earned immediate gains in his bank of political capital in response to his actions after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Schneider, 2005). Crises on college campuses, such as the incidents at the University of Missouri discussed earlier, can have an immediate negative impact on a president's influence and power (Fortunato et al., 2017; Gigliotti, 2016; Prywes & Sobel, 2015). Trust, charisma, transparency, and authenticity are all aspects of communication that are judged often and can have a substantial impact on a leader's tenure.

As presidents and their senior advisors make decisions about communications to campus and external stakeholders, do they consider their political capital? This study explores whether a president's political capital has an impact on the decisions they make whether to issue a statement to the campus and immediate stakeholders, or to tackle an issue of national importance. If presidents believe they have a significant level of political capital, does that give them a higher level of confidence to address controversial or politically sensitive topics?

Conversely, if presidents are facing pressures and have spent their political capital in other areas, will they decide to forego the chance to wade into political or controversial waters to spare the power they have left? Using decision theory as a base, university leaders were asked to articulate the factors that are part of the decision-making process.

Decision Theory

> *Decision theory instructs the decision makers to calculate the odds, lay the best bet they can, and await the outcome. (March, 1994, p. 29)*

Decision theory guides the research to aid in understanding and analyzing the effect of stakeholders and political capital on communication decision making in higher education. In this study, decision theory is viewed in an intentionally broad sense. Its usage and application has a long history and many variations, such as rational, intuitive, dual process, and strategic decision making, from an array of scholarly disciplines such as economics, education, business, and political science. As scholars have explored decision making through various arenas and by different actors, more is known about the process of how decisions are made and what influences those decisions. In this context, administrative and executive decision making is at the heart of the research questions. College and university presidents, and their senior staff members, must make decisions—oftentimes complex decisions—about how, when, where, and why they want to communicate with the university's stakeholders or a national audience. The process by which those decisions are made can provide insights into the personality, values, and relative experience of the decision maker and shed light on the influence of stakeholders who sway those decisions.

The pioneer of administrative decision making is Herbert A. Simon wrote *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organizations*, first published in 1947 and updated several times. He is primarily known for his work in the area of

rational decision making, but later in his career he also wrote about the effects of intuition and values on decision making. Simon (1997) called decision theory "the heart of administration" (p. xi) in the preface to his seminal work on the topic.

The focus of early scholarly writings on the topic is rational decision making, which is typically described as a step-by-step process that includes (a) recognizing and analyzing the problem, (b) determining how to resolve it, and (c) making and initiating a plan of action to resolve the problem (Krepel, 1990). People who engage in rational decision making are assumed to have all the facts and data at their fingertips and know all the potential alternatives (March, 1994). They are also assumed to know the consequences of each possible decision, the values and preferences of the people the decision effects, and the necessary time to make the decision (Forester, 1984).

Simon furthered knowledge about rational decision making by developing the theory of bounded rationality, in which he contended that rationality is bound by human behaviors and limitations. For instance, we are bound by the amount of information we have, the limits of our minds, and by time (Forester, 1984; March, 1994; Simon, 1997). In real time, decisions rarely can be made in a purely rational structure since it is unlikely that a decision maker would know all the possible alternatives and consequences (March, 1994). Also, often there is a need to make decisions quickly and the decision maker cannot take the time necessary to gather and analyze the data that would produce a fully rational choice. In the higher education context, Birnbaum and Eckel (2005) contended that, "Presidential authority is limited, complete understanding of the scope and complexity of the enterprise exceeds human cognitive capability, and unforeseen changes in demographic, political, and economic conditions often overwhelm campus plans" (p. 346), which speaks to bounded rationality.

Because decisions are bound by these realities, the decision maker can instead *satisfice*, meaning that a decision is reached that is satisfactory but may not be optimal (Birnbaum, 1988; Forester, 1984; Simon, 1997). Due to the constraints mentioned previously, the decision maker sometimes must simply move forward with the available information and their perceptions of the alternatives or consequences (Forester, 1984; March, 1994; Simon, 1997). One can surmise modern day university presidents must satisfice frequently due to the time constraints of communicating quickly during or after a crisis, or without full knowledge of stakeholder preferences or consequences.

Forester (1984) furthered Simon's work on bounded rationality by discussing specific bounds placed on the decision maker. He refers to one such bound or limitation on rational choice as social differentiation. The actors—whether they be clients in a business domain, or students, faculty, or other stakeholders in an academic domain—have different insights, opinions, and interpretations of a problem. In this scenario, the executive no longer has one stakeholder with whom to be concerned but many who may desire different outcomes. University presidents are regularly in socially differentiated environments where they must work with many stakeholders to understand their concerns before decisions are made.

Simon attributed much of his early thinking on administrative decision making to Chester Barnard, but Simon did not fully accept Barnard's writings on nonlogical processes of decision making (Simon, 1997). Barnard (1936) detailed in a speech at Princeton University of the logical—or reasoned—decision-making process, and about the non-logical process, which he characterized as "unable to be described in words or by reasoning," and instead "are made known by a judgment, decision or action" (p. 302). Conscious and unconscious efforts such as

study, experience, and beliefs create these non-logical reasonings in our minds (Barnard, 1936; Simon, 1997).

Another word that is used to indicate these judgmental decisions is *intuition*, which is understood as being able to "frame problems rapidly and identify course of action long before they are able to articulate their reasoning as to why that course of action is appropriate" (Hodgkinson, Sadler-Smith, Burke, Claxton, & Sparrow, 2009, p. 287). Barnard (1936) contended executives may not have the time or information to make decisions, and many executives use their intuition to make quick judgments. Even though the decision maker does not have adequate time to fully study and understand the situation at hand, they typically have great confidence in the decisions made as a result of their intuitive instincts (Simon, 1987). Simon (1987) later asserted, "Hence, intuition is not a process that operates independently of analysis; rather, the two processes are essential complementary components of effective decision-making systems" (Simon, 1987, p. 61), where we access large "chunks" of information or patterns stored in our memory and are easily able to retrieve it in a similar situation.

As enhanced data from the field of cognitive neuroscience provides a more detailed and enhanced understanding of intuition, scholars have continued to deepen their knowledge and to heighten intuition's significance. Descriptions of it changed from simply good judgment and common sense (Barnard, 1936) to a dual-process cognitive function that includes both judgment and logic (Hodgkinson et al., 2009). Matzler, Bailom, and Mooradian (2007) contended intuition is a "highly complex and highly developed form of reasoning that is based on years of experience and learning, and on facts, patterns, concepts, procedures and abstractions stored in one's head" (p. 14), instead of its earlier interpretation as just a "gut feeling."

The previous works mentioned were focused on administrative or executive mangers in a business setting, but Birnbaum (1988) discussed the concepts of rational and intuitive decision making in relation to the collegiate arena. Birnbaum asserted the best higher education administrators would be those who are able to both process data and use their intuition as they made decisions. They advised presidents should strive to depend more on their intuition when making decisions, especially if they have a reservoir of knowledge and experience to draw upon.

Few scholars have published studies on decision making in the context of university and college presidents. Articles concerning higher education decision making tend to concentrate on student decisions and college choice or faculty decisions in matters of curriculum and pedagogy. However, decision making in a crisis has been included in scholarly studies, such as one involving the University of Missouri, when the chancellor and president were fired after campus racial tension erupted into a national story (Fortunato et al., 2017) or about the actions taken during and after the mass shooting at Virginia Tech (Davis, 2008).

University presidents face more than their fair share of crisis situations where intuitive decision making is necessary to be able to respond quickly with authority. Presidents are expected to provide decisive leadership but are also looked upon to show concern, caring, and grief alongside their communities (Gigliotti, 2016). The immediacy of the situation rarely gives presidents time to know all the facts or have a solid understanding of alternatives and consequences, and as human beings, often their own emotions enter into their decisions. As in the case of a campus shooting, the uncertainty of the situation and the emotional response of the community may be important factors as the president and their senior leaders make decisions to protect and communicate with their campus community. Sayegh, Anthony, and Perrewé (2004) asserted emotions are not adjacent to decision making, but instead are an “essential element in

decision making under crisis" (p. 195) as emotion acts as "grease in the wheels" (p. 193) to facilitate decision making.

The president's personal values also play a role in their decision making. Keast (1996) argued administration itself is "a value-laden activity" (p. 5), and the values possessed by the decision maker and the values of the organization are fundamental to the decisions that are made. In contrast, Simon (1997) acknowledged ethics (a word he used interchangeably with values) have a role in decision making, but Keast (1996) asserted that Simon separated values from fact and wrote, to be assessed, values must be made into organizational objectives. Simon (1997) asserted values, such as fairness, respect, or excellence, cannot be adequately measured and therefore are not part of rational decision making.

By examining communication decisions through the theoretical lens of decision making and through a political frame, I have sought to learn if a president's accrued or diminished political capital has an impact on the decisions they make as to how and what they communicate to the campus community and outside stakeholders.

Conclusion

> *Indeed, it is the rare president who has the time, expertise, and independence to establish a leadership role in national affairs. The college presidency has become more complex in scope and administrative responsibility and is circumscribed by the pressures of multiple, fractious constituencies. (Bornstein, 1995, p. 57)*

The review of literature did not produce a guide or framework for communication decision making by university presidents, nor did it produce research distinctly related to university presidents and their consideration of stakeholder power and political capital as they make these decisions. The stakes are higher than ever with social media that allow for the sharing of a misstatement or impolitic phrase instantly (Kirwin, 2018), so thoughtful, careful, and politically savvy communication decisions are vital to a successful presidency.

This study examines decision making by university presidents and the impact that their perceived political capital has on their communications decisions. Higher education leaders have many stakeholders to satisfy, and their viewpoints, perceptions, and opinions can vary greatly. Presidents must use their political abilities and knowledge to work with each stakeholder group and consider the effects their decisions have on these groups, and therefore, what impact their decisions have on their political capital.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

University presidents may not be viewed as giants as they were a century ago, but their written and verbal communication to invested stakeholders garner attention and can provide the impetus for great achievements or stymie their efforts to make progress for their institutions. This research explores how presidents and their senior advisors determine and decide what issues to address publicly and what effect political capital and stakeholder influence have on communication decision making. In today's world of ubiquitous and fast-paced communication, good decisions about communication can be the difference in being an effective president, or not being a president at all.

To make meaning and gain significant insight into this topic, one-on-one, in-person, or phone interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of university presidents, their chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors. The data collected in these interviews were analyzed and written in a basic qualitative study narrative. The following research questions facilitate increased understanding of the topic:

RQ1 How do presidents and their senior advisors weigh the risks and benefits of speaking out on politically sensitive or controversial topics?

RQ2 How do presidents and their senior advisors determine and describe the effect of stakeholder power and influence on their communication decision making?

RQ3 Which stakeholder groups are most influential? Always or is it situational?

RQ4 Does a president's political capital impact their communication decision making?

Methodological Approach

Basic qualitative research is the optimal method for this study because, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), it can be used to interpret and make meaning of the administrators' decision making experiences about communication. This approach is "based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23), and a person's reality is built through social interactions. Basic qualitative research allows the researcher to interpret the participants' understanding of the topic. In this study it is used, through the collection and analysis of interview data, to explore how presidents and their senior advisors determine their actions, articulate their experiences, and make meaning of political capital and stakeholder influence as factors in the decision making process. The data have been reviewed inductively and comparatively to allow the formation of themes.

Participant Selection and Research Sites

A purposeful sampling of five institutions was selected from among public research institutions (R1 Carnegie classification) that were ranked in the top 50 of *U.S. News & World Report's 2019 Best Colleges* (2019) rankings. Interviewing four participants from each of the five institutions provided data saturation, or redundancy, and the opportunity to effectively compare differences and similarities of experience in R1 institutions to enable the development of themes and generalize results for this higher education sector. Only public research universities were chosen for this study to maintain consistency by institution sector and because of the national and statewide visibility of presidents of these large institutions. These public institutions share the defining characteristic that they receive state government funding and thereby are subject to similar political pressure and influence due to their status as state-sponsored institutions. Interviewing officials from institutions ranked in the Top 50 of this

nationally recognized publication helps to provide a consistent level of perceived institutional quality, although scholars disagree about the validity or accuracy of such rankings (Rothwell, 2018).

Access to the presidents who were interviewed was gained through professional contacts the president of Georgia Tech and I had with other research university presidents and their senior staff members. After reviewing the list of the magazine's Top 50 institutions, a prioritized list was made based on location, similarity of mission and academic reputation, and likelihood of being able to interview the president. The president of my institution contacted the first five presidents on the prioritized list to inform them that they would receive an email from the researcher asking them to participate in the study. Following the initial contact, an email was sent to these five presidents to provide the information they would need to decide if they would be willing to be interviewed and if they would allow several of their senior staff to be interviewed as well (see Appendix A). My email detailed the topic and purpose of my research, the staff members I hoped to interview, and a request to meet in person for the interview on their campus in a location of their choosing.

Four presidents readily agreed to participate and one did not return repeated calls and emails. After waiting 2 weeks, the president of the next institution on the prioritized list was called, then emailed the study information, and agreed to participate. I also reached out to one former president who had unique experiences that I thought could add to the depth of the study, but that president did not return repeated email requests. After each of the five sitting presidents consented to be interviewed, their chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors were contacted by email and informed of their president's willingness to participate and to ask for their participation through an in-person, on-campus interview (see

Appendix B). All senior staff members agreed to participate once they knew their president had also agreed, so the final pool of participants included four senior leaders from each of five R1 institutions.

I visited four of the five campuses of the participants. It was not possible to travel to the fifth campus on the date the president could meet. Their insights were particularly important to include, so I decided I would prefer to interview that president by phone rather than move on to another president and institution. In all, seven interviews were conducted by phone and 13 were conducted in person. Initially, for those with whom I could not meet in person, I requested a videoconference so it would feel more like an in-person interview and so I could see the facial reactions to the questions asked. However, the first three people asked said they preferred a phone conversation, so I did not ask the other four and instead had phone calls with all those with whom I could not meet. Although a phone call is not ideal due to the lack of a natural rhythm and flow to the conversation when it is face-to-face, it was the best option available to ensure that the people holding the same four positions at each institution were interviewed.

As part of the interview, I asked each president which individuals aided them in making communications decisions. As detailed in the findings, those positions differed at each institution. I chose not to pursue snowball sampling and stay consistent at each institution with only the four participants outlined earlier since there was no consistency to the other senior advisors they depended upon. Those four positions—president, chief of staff, communications director, and government relations director—were chosen because of their interaction with both internal and external stakeholders and their knowledge of the broad issues impacting higher education and the nation. They also interact with an array of stakeholders, both internal and

external, which enables them to evaluate and understand how presidential communication impacts the university and its stakeholders.

The interview subjects were demographically diverse. Twelve were men and eight were women. Although attempts were made to include at least one woman president, all five presidents interviewed were men, so there may be a gendered perspective in their responses. Forty-three presidents in the Top 50 institutions were men (as of June 2019), so it was difficult to find women presidents at the universities that met the established selection criteria. The age range for participants was wide—from their 40s to their 70s—but most were in their 50s. The least experienced had been in their role for only three months and the most experienced had been in their current or a similar role with their institution for 26 years. Many had experience in the private sector prior to being hired at a public higher education institution, particularly among the communications directors. All the presidents had faculty status, and several of the other participants also had faculty status or taught courses as adjunct faculty or professors of practice, so there was a distinct grounding of their comments to the core missions of teaching and research. Their varied demographics and experiences were a direct benefit to this study and each interview was insightful and unique.

Methods for Data Collection

Face-to-face or telephone, voice-recorded, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the university presidents, chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors at the five selected institutions. The interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes or in the period indicated by the participant. Gaining access to the people in these positions, especially a university president with an often-intense daily schedule, may not have allowed an interview for a full hour, so timing was intentionally flexible. The interviews with the presidents

generally lasted 30 minutes or slightly longer, due to the demands on their schedules; however, most of the senior advisors allowed the full 60 minutes for their interviews.

It was intended that the interviews would be conducted without the participants seeing or being informed of the questions prior to the interview to guard against them having scripted or staged responses. In particular, presidents typically have communications staff that prepare them for their appointments and speaking engagements, so it was important to avoid someone else potentially providing them answers or talking points prior to the interview. However, the chiefs of staff at two institutions requested the questions in advance and I complied with the request. Each interview began with a review of the participant consent form and an assurance of their right to decline to answer any question, or to stop the interview at any time. They were further assured of confidentiality and that of their institutions.

The interview questions were piloted with the chief government relations officer from my current university, and this interview was not included in the final study. Piloting the interview allowed me to not only practice interviewing in a comfortable situation but also provided feedback on the clarity of the questions and whether questions were appropriate and necessary. It also allowed me to create new questions I had not previously considered.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to allow flexibility in the questions and answers as the conversation developed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews addressed aspects of the research questions and included components such as decision making, communication style and strategy, stakeholder influence, and political capital (see Appendix C). After the initial introduction of the topic, each interview began with a prompt about the overall communication style or strategy of the president. This question was chosen to give them a question that would start the conversation on a positive note. In the first four interviews that were

conducted, each participant was asked about the president's decision-making process so I could explore if they leaned more toward a rational or intuitive approach to most of their professional decisions. I was somewhat disappointed that direct questions did not illicit full answers and participants did not provide much information other than that the president used a combination of rational and intuitive processes. In subsequent interviews, the question was not asked directly but instead was evaluated as specific examples were given of decisions on whether to communicate or not on a particular topic.

Next, I moved to questions about the influence of higher education stakeholders and whether particular stakeholder groups are more influential than others in the communication decision-making process. Participants were asked to identify which stakeholder groups they considered to be most influential and why, and if the influence from those groups remained constant or if it changed according to the situation. Lastly, they were asked to discuss the effect of political capital on their communication decisions and to give an example of a situation where the president's political capital impacted those decisions.

Document Analysis

Document analysis was used to further identify and understand the forms of communication used by presidents and the institutions and media coverage of the events discussed. Document analysis is described as the examination of written and electronic documents that allows for interpreting meaning, understanding and knowledge (Bowen, 2009). For the situational examples the participants provided, I searched the Internet and social media—primarily Twitter since it was given as the most common platform used—for documentation of the communication distributed by the university and/or the president as a primary source and a sample of media accounts of the incident as a secondary source. This enhanced validity of the

participant's recollections of statements made and actions taken, and also provided insights into the external reaction of the media or public on the situation described. Those examples are not included in this document or its appendix to protect the identity of the institutions and their leaders.

Data Analysis

After the completion of each interview, the voice recordings were transcribed and imported into MAXQDA (Version 2018.2), a qualitative data analysis software program. In this tool, the data were initially coded through an open-coding process to identify any data that may have been useful and fit the themes that were emerging. The coding categories followed the primary topics found in the literature, such as stakeholders, political capital, and leadership communication. As themes and categories emerged, I conducted *axial coding*, also known as *analytic coding*, where the open codes were grouped together to better interpret and make meaning of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Creswell (2014) recommended, I coded, reviewed, and analyzed the previous data while still interviewing other participants, so themes could be identified and the interview protocol could be adjusted if necessary. As the data collection phase ended, strong themes emerged through coding and the interpretations and descriptions are detailed in the findings and results in subsequent chapters.

Trustworthiness

Three primary methods were used to enhance trustworthiness: (a) triangulation, (b) member checking, and (c) peer review. *Triangulation* refers to using multiple sources of data and comparing and cross checking to increase internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Four officials (the president, chief of staff, communications director, and government relations director) were interviewed at each research site. Multiple perspectives from the same institution

aided in triangulating the data. The evaluation of primary and secondary source documentation such as the social media accounts, website statements, and media accounts described earlier also enhanced validity.

After the data were analyzed and the findings were written, each interviewee was given the opportunity to member check, which allows the participants to review the findings and provide feedback about its accuracy. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), member checking ensures there are no misinterpretations of the findings. Lastly, a colleague at my home institution with experience in the area of presidential decision making on communication reviewed the findings and gave feedback on the themes and interpretations reached through data analysis. This ensured that the findings resonate with someone other than the researcher (Creswell, 2014) who understands the subject matter but did not contribute to the findings.

Researcher Positionality

As a former chief of staff to a university president, I believe it is important to know the context, back story, and agenda of the stakeholders who want the president's time and attention. I view almost every situation with an eye toward context. I ask what is causing this person to take their position, what they want to achieve, what their agenda is, who it helps, and who it hurts. In partnering with the president to make decisions on communication, as a former chief of staff, I understand stakeholder agendas and motivations, intentions, and perceptions. It is also important to understand the president's level of political capital to be able to advise when and how they should comment on issues or situations that may be harmful or helpful to the president and the university. My experiences have led to my desire to study the influence of stakeholders and political capital on presidential communication, but it could also bias my interpretations and findings.

My career began in the political and governmental arena. I worked for a congressman and then was a writer for a political newsletter. Those experiences honed my interest and skill at watching, listening, and learning about political capital and stakeholder agendas. I use those skills and experiences to make judgments about actions and communication that should or should not happen. As a chief of staff, most of these attributes served me well; however, as a researcher, I understand the need to guard against potential bias and a false sense of confidence in understanding their position or point of view. I made every attempt to allow the data and information lead me to conclusions instead of drawing my own conclusions, due to my own experiences and decisions.

Method Limitations

Data were collected by interviewing the executive leaders indicated earlier at five research institutions. Scheduling and conducting 20 interviews was difficult at times due to the busy work schedules of these executives, and I was not able to have in-person interviews or 60-minute interviews with all participants. This lack of consistency in the data collection method and time may slightly influence the data or the data analysis, which could be a limitation of the study.

Another potential limitation is the number of interviews and whether the data provided enough information to be considered even somewhat representative of all university presidents. Also, the five institutions studied were all public R1 universities, which limits the applicability of the findings to large, research universities. Findings may not be applicable to college and university presidents in other sectors of higher education.

The choice to include government relations directors as study subjects posed unintentional limitations as well. When designing the research, I believed government relations

directors have a broad, yet also specialized view, of presidential communications that could add substantial context to the findings. At my home institution, the government relations director is a close advisor to the president, but through this research I discovered that may not always be the case at other institutions. Interviews with people in the government relations position produced rich data about political capital and the political frame through which this study was viewed; however, the fact that I included administrators in these specialized roles may have skewed the data. People in positions of provost, general counsel, chief operating officer, and other roles with broader institutional responsibility may have provided a more generalized view of presidential communications that may have more closely supported the data from presidents, chiefs of staff, and communications directors. Instead, the data from government relations directors was more specific than broad. Choosing to interview government relations directors and not other administrators may be considered a limitation of the study.

Conclusion

This study used a qualitative research approach through in-person, voice-recorded interviews as the method of data collection. Analysis of the interview data and primary and secondary source documents produced the identification of themes and findings that contribute to scholarly knowledge of communication decision making employed by university presidents and their senior advisors, especially as they considered the impact of stakeholders and political capital on those decisions.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In today's age of instant and constant communication, university presidents are under pressure to speak to a myriad of issues both proactively and reactively. Planned, strategic communication can identify narratives and messages that enhance the reputation of the institution and the president and build cohesive culture and brand (Argenti, 2017; Fleuriet & Williams, 2015). Conversely, everyday issues or crises can result in requests for statements from media, students, faculty, and many other stakeholders, and they all have different intentions and agendas. Requests relate to campus issues or higher education topics in general, but some individuals or groups want statements of support, comfort, or disapproval of actions or events that have happened far away from any college campus or without any tie to higher education or its mission.

Presidents from five R1 universities ranked in the Top 50 of the *US News & World Report Best Colleges* (2019) publication and their chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors were interviewed to understand how communication decisions are made at the campus level and who or what impacts those decisions. The findings generated from the interviews brought forward several themes that are discussed in this chapter. First, it is an accurate perception that presidents rarely speak about issues far beyond their campus due to political polarization, the risk of alienating funders, and stakeholders becoming easily offended. However, they are more likely to speak out if their comments align with institution's mission or values, or strategically set the stage for legislative or board support, or demonstrate support for a segment of campus that is hurting. Regarding stakeholder influence, the most influential stakeholders in communication decisions are students, faculty, governing boards, and

government leaders, depending upon the issue and their ability to effectively use their bases of power. Lastly, a president's political capital does influence whether presidents are likely to speak out on controversial or politically sensitive issues.

Observations

Colleges and universities are mission-driven organizations that empower individuals through education and benefit society through producing a more highly educated citizenry. Communicating the value of higher education has never been more important as public opinion polls continue to show a diminishing confidence in higher education institutions (Jaschik, 2018; Parker, 2019). However, university presidents today rarely take on the role of national spokesperson or thought leader about the value of higher education or other topics, as presidents in the turn of the 19th to 20th century were apt to do. One university president explained:

> I think that higher education is not held in the same high esteem as it was. I mean now, if you look at all the polls and you look at all the criticism that we're receiving, I think that our voices may not carry the weight that they once did.

Presidents are the face and voice of the university and must use the status of their position and their innate abilities to garner support for their institution from a variety of stakeholders. Representing the university well without causing negative attention is a fundamental requirement of their jobs.

Expectations of university presidents, like those discussed by Scacco and Coe (2017) about the President of the United States, are that they are approachable, open, transparent, and almost constantly engaged with their constituencies. When asked to describe their president during interviews, senior staff members used words such as genuine, humble, collaborative, warm, believable, positive, principled, adaptable, and candid. It is not surprising that these close

advisors use positive descriptions of their presidents because they each have a responsibility and a need to bolster the reputation of the institution and its top leader. However, while doing so, they must manage the tension between showcasing the president as a strong leader who embodies those qualities and has important things to say while managing the risk of over-exposure and belittling the role of the president by having them speak out on issues of little consequence.

One government relations director expressed support for presidents speaking out by saying, "These are well compensated, well educated, highly exposed individuals and to me it's appropriate for them to weigh in." However, most of the presidential advisors I spoke to do not want to run the risk of the president taking controversial stands that could harm the institution, particularly with funders such as elected leaders and donors. Pressure from stakeholders who want to hear from the president seems to be increasing with each disaster or crisis. They want presidents to communicate frequently on issues ranging from weighty, to trivial, to mundane, and communications professionals help presidents navigate those idealistic expectations. One long-time communications director explained:

> First of all, it's a manner of managing his time. Secondly though, I want from a communications perspective . . . . There needs to be cache to the president speaking on an issue. And we run, much like a corporation. We run a $1.5 billion business, just look at it that way. The CEO in a $1.5 billion business is not weighing in on the quality of food in the cafeteria, right? And so we need to think of it that way a little bit more.

Setting realistic expectations can be difficult as communication is used to create a personal brand for the president as an approachable yet respected authority in the field while also building a brand for the university as one of the nation's most esteemed and exciting research universities.

A theme throughout the interview sessions was a belief that stakeholders now want to hear everything directly from the president, not from other university officials. If a statement does not come from the president directly, then somehow stakeholders feel the president does not care about them or the issue at hand, or the groups become inexplicitly competitive and complain that the president cares more about Group X than Group Y if the president posted a comment or made a statement about one group but not another. A communications director expressed about meeting increasing expectations for communication:

> I go around and talk with peers and go to conferences and am involved in different committees. We're all talking about it and we have been for the past four or five years. What's the right balance of that? I mean, it really varies among institutions.

Most presidents expressed how they have struggled with choosing the issues to speak to publicly, which will be discussed in more detail in response to Research Question 1.

At the forefront of everyone's mind when the interviews took place in the summer of 2019 was how they had been responding—or choosing not to respond—to tragedies such as the April 27, 2019 synagogue shooting in San Diego, California, or the March 15, 2019, shooting at two mosques in New Zealand. Although it was not the intention of the interviewer to focus on communication responses to these and other tragedies during the interviews, many of the interview subjects spoke of struggling to determine if, when, and how to issue statements of condemnation for the actions, expressions of condolence, or support for the members of the campus community that were affected by these acts. University administrators are mindful of stakeholders and their changing expectations, but also have seen, among their colleagues, the consequences of poorly timed or impolitic communication, or the aftereffect of remaining silent.

Some university presidents independently engage with stakeholders using social media as a way to reach them in a more personal and immediate way. Others depend on their communications staff or other campus leaders to communicate on their behalf. Whatever method, platform, or channel they use, they all expressed how important it is to communicate proactively, purposefully, and personally to create or perpetuate the persona of an engaged, caring, authentic leader of a respected research institution. They know that their jobs just may depend on that.

Interviews performed through the summer of 2019 with university presidents, chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors explored presidential communication and the influences on those decisions. The findings related to each research question are described throughout the remainder of the chapter.

Research Question 1: How Do Presidents and Their Senior Advisors Weigh the Risks and Benefits of Speaking out on Politically Sensitive or Controversial Topics?

The succinct answer to this question is that most of the time presidents and their senior advisors determine the risk is too great, so they do not speak out on politically sensitive or controversial topics. Governing board members, legislators, donors, and other funders are watching closely and want to support institutions with positive stories to tell, such as the university's economic impact on the state, the accomplished students they are graduating, or the success of the football team. Presidents believe it is important to use their voices to speak to issues that have a direct impact on their institution. One experienced president said, "I think that a lot of us are concerned about the ability to move the institution forward if we're always the lightning rod for positions on issues." Although they are reluctant to take on national issues that

do not have direct impact on education, they are also carefully considering the risks and benefits of all university or presidential communication.

Expectations of the role of the president and how the president uses communication is also perceived to be changing as fast as communication platforms are changing. When discussing the role of the president as a national thought leader a century ago, one government relations director shared, “That was the expectation. If you were gaining this knowledge, your responsibility was to share that knowledge and develop systems and processes that would guide our nation. That is not the expectation now.” Participants expressed their frustration that the stature of the president is being eroded. A communications director said, “In this day of social media and instant access to people, there’s an expectation that I can ask the president any silly thing that I want and he’s going to respond.” This makes wise communication decisions even more important as presidents attempt to strike the balance between being seen as an approachable “everyman” while also being a respected educator and academic leader.

As described in 21st-century literature that classifies decision making as a dual process cognitive function where decision makers use both judgment and logic (Hodgkinson et al., 2009), presidents use aspects of rational and intuitive decision making when confronted with communication decisions. When asked about the process for making these decisions, many said it is dependent on the situation and that they make both rational and intuitive decisions. If the situation allows an ample amount of time to plan the statement or comment, they will pull together their close advisors and have a thorough discussion after analyzing any available data. They take stakeholders’ interests into account and put together a plan of action. However, many communication decisions are reactive in nature and they may have to satisfice, as described by Herbert Simon (1997), because they do not have all the data, time, and understanding of the

problem needed to make a purely rational decision. Many of these decisions must be made quickly to answer a question from the press or to distribute a statement on social media, so many do as Birnbaum (1988) advised and choose to depend mostly upon their experience in higher education and their knowledge of their stakeholders to make a quick, intuitive decision.

When asked who is at the table to advise the president on the risks and benefits of specific communication decisions, there was a long list of advisors. The most commonly named advisors were (a) the president's chief of staff, (b) communications director, (c) provost, (d) chief financial officer/chief operations officer, (e) student affairs vice president, and (f) the general counsel. Also, depending on the specific topic of the communication, they indicated that subject matter experts such as campus police, diversity and inclusion leaders, government relations directors, and others are invited to the discussion. These campus leaders bring their expertise and experience with different stakeholders to help the president think through all angles. When asked to describe the decision-making process, a communications director said:

> People, I think, people want to know, is there a formula? Can you put these inputs into an algorithm and have them spit out a yes, no. And you can't, right? And it sounds like a cop out, so you have to take all of this individually, but you really do. And I think for us, it's working through . . . . Okay, does it affect us? What is the level of effect? What are the range of stakeholders that are going to have opinions on this sort of thing? And you weigh all of those things, and you make a decision. Speak or not speak. If the answer is yes, who's the right person? And, you continue to just work through it, all of them, which slows the process. But, you have to be thoughtful. Because this day and age too, you don't have the luxury of making a statement and having people not notice it. Because

somebody's going to notice it, and somebody's going to comment on it, and the possibility of it going viral obviously increases every day, right?

One of the leading questions considered by presidents and their senior advisors is if the topic is germane to their campus. A communications director asserted, "If we are going to comment on things, they are going to be things that affect what we do and the people here that we serve." There are not hard lines of distinction with some issues though. Immigration is an example. National immigration policies impact research universities in particular because of the number of international students who desire either an undergraduate or graduate degree from prominent U.S. research institutions. However, immigration is also a hot-button national political issue that has the potential to divide constituencies. Speaking out on an issue such as that can pull a president and their campus into a swirl of unwanted attention. "I feel like as president and as higher education professionals, we're constantly in the fray no matter what we do," said a chief of staff, "Why would we go searching for an opportunity to be further in the fray on an issue that's not directly related?" It is typically deemed safer to stay silent on these issues with national implications beyond their campus.

Society's current temperament also plays a role into their decisions whether to speak out. Several people interviewed lamented that everyone is easily offended today and if they speak in favor or support of one group then they may offend another. "We live in a highly polarized environment today. And everybody goes tribal. They go to their respective points of view," said a long-time communications director who has seen audience sensitivity increase, which he attributes to the influence of social media. Crafting meaningful messages that appeal to audiences across political and social spectrums is becoming more challenging.

During each interview, the participant was asked to share an example of a time when their president chose not to speak out because of a divisive, political, or controversial issue. Each participant gave examples, but to protect the anonymity of the participants, no identifying information is given here. Examples revolved most frequently around athletics, financial impropriety, race, gender and sexual identity, and issues brought forward from the White House. For instance, one university president received extreme pressure and threats when he chose not to allow a student-athlete with a criminal record to enroll at the institution. Fervent college athletics fans and athletics donors who give large sums of money can be difficult to manage even under the best of circumstances. In the example shared, many alumni and fans wanted a statement from the president explaining why he would not admit the student, but the president chose not to speak at all on the subject because of student privacy concerns and also to not further inflame the situation.

Issues of race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual identity are particularly sensitive, and presidents and their senior advisors indicated their hesitancy to speak out on these topics. Many universities located in the southeast have histories that include slavery and racial discrimination and frequently deal with the dilemma of heritage versus hate in the recognition of the past. Conservative legislators in some of these states make it difficult for university representatives to speak out as strongly as they would like on issues of diversity, acceptance, or unity for fear of losing funds. Many participants indicated they speak only in broad terms about being a welcoming and diverse community instead of speaking of particular groups that may ultimately be hurt instead of helped by drawing attention to them.

The political divisiveness of our nation has also stopped presidents from speaking out about national issues. One communications director referred to the “outrage of the day coming

out of the White House." Several presidents spoke of their role as educators and how they attempt to help students understand the effect and consequences of speech. They used examples of declining requests to speak on certain topics as an opportunity to help students understand how the world works. In sharing an example of students wanting him to issue a statement on an environmental issue, a president remembered he told them:

> There's a whole lot of things that I feel like I have a lot of responsibility for and authority over. This is not one of them. So, sometimes, I'm just pretty blunt with students and say, this is not relevant to what we're trying to accomplish as a university. I can have all sorts of personal opinions, and you can as well. But, when I speak, I speak for the institution, and this institution doesn't have a position on that issue.

Another president shared:

> But some [students] really just want you to stand up, and what I've said to some, "Hey, look. If I stand up and make a big issue about this it's actually going to get worse. And funding's going to get cut, or people will come out fighting harder. If you're really trying to achieve a goal that's not the strategy you want to use. There's a better way to try to achieve your goal."

One of the pillars of higher education is academic freedom, and another is the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech. Universities have historically been places where the free exchange of ideas is not only valued, but encouraged among faculty and students. However, a Gallup poll of 3,000 college students indicated students support free speech but also support limits on free speech if what they are hearing is against their values, as demonstrated when students have shouted down controversial campus speakers (Selingo, 2018). University

administrators are caught in the middle of situations where lines are blurred. A president explained:

> We're going to be responsible and sensitive to the constituencies and those who could potentially be offended by the types of speakers that come to campus. But we're going to truly uphold, as we say we do, the right to freedom of speech and academic freedom. We're not going to shut down things that we think are just going to offend people.

The ideological divide is strong on college campuses, and presidents are hesitant to use their own freedoms to speak out on politically sensitive or controversial topics unless they are an expert in that field of study and can speak under the auspices of academic freedom. One first-time president explained:

> One of my jobs is to foster free speech. I worry that if I come out on one side or another of, I don't know, take an issue like gun rights or abortion. I'm actually killing speech on campus because there will be some who'll be afraid to speak out publicly once they know that the president has taken an opposite position.

Although academic freedom is a foundational belief of academia, as described by the American Association of University Professors (n.d.) 1940 statement, university administrators are frequently caught in the middle between the academic freedom and free speech rights of faculty and students and the growing distrust of external stakeholders.

Several interviewees, especially the government relations directors, expressed that they do not believe the concept of academic freedom is understood by those outside the academy and one said, "the term doesn't play well" in the country's current political climate. A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center indicated 79% of Republicans believe quality of higher education is declining because of liberal professors who share their social and ideological views as they teach

(Fischer, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Parker, 2019). This can be a point of contention between stakeholder groups, especially if universities are in states where the majority of state government leaders, governing board trustees, and even private donors identify ideologically as conservative.

Presidents identified some circumstances in which they feel comfortable making statements or comments. Although it is not an exhaustive list, the presidents and senior advisors interviewed expressly mentioned that they are more likely to speak out if their comments (a) align with institution's mission or values and highlight how the university is serving the state, (b) strategically set the stage for legislative or board support, and (c) show support for a segment of campus that is hurting. A review of primary source documentation such as Twitter posts from the president or institution and website statements or news stories verify that presidents use communication platforms to bring attention to issues that such as those detailed above. Making a statement still may be a leap of faith on some issues, but most felt with the right story or topic and careful consideration of the consequences, the institution's reputation can be enhanced.

Alignment With Mission and Values

Senior administrators frequently depend on the institution's mission, vision, and values to guide them in many circumstances, including communication. As leaders of research institutions, some of those interviewed felt an obligation to speak out on topics that further the research mission of the university. Topics such as climate change were brought forward as examples of issues that may be controversial, but the intellectual value of sharing the results of research are too important to ignore. One president said, "We're going to stay true to our values and our values are that we will be that leading, global, public, research university that's not going to back down or back away from challenging issues." That seems almost antithetical to the earlier assertion that presidents are not speaking out on controversial or politically sensitive issues, but

presidents expressed that they are more willing to push the envelope and speak to these issues if it hits the sweet spot of aligning with the educational mission and the institution's values.

They are also more willing to speak to the academic aspect of controversial issues if they are joined by their colleagues. Higher education associations such as the Association of American Universities (AAU), the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), and the ACE frequently ask member institutions to sign on to advocacy letters or statements of support for topics impacting higher education. Presidents and institutions align with these organizations because joint advocacy for higher education to Congress and federal agencies is an important and needed role, but institutional membership also brings the advantage of buffering presidents from having to draw attention to their universities by standing alone on an issue of national importance.

A topic that public research university presidents say they enjoy talking about is their institution's public service and workforce development missions. Embedded in every public institution's mission is an obligation to serve the state that funds it. Workforce and economic development through job creation are positive topics to tout to taxpayers and elected officials. The president that earlier expressed reticence to being a "lightening rod" on issues said:

> Now, the one area where I've been willing to be a lightning rod for the state is in economic development on the critical issues of workforce development and what research universities are about with regard to generating economic prosperity and all those kind of things. But, I mean, that's not really controversial, that's just reminding people, we're not just over here hanging out.

Many communications directors want to find opportunities for their president to receive national attention, but without the risk of being perceived as divisive or offensive. Demonstrating how

universities serve the nation and grow the economy are particularly effective at elevating the visibility of the university and the president.

Garnering Support

Presidents spend many of their working hours interacting with stakeholders to induce them to support the university's mission and vision. Communicating to them in a transparent and open manner builds trust and garners favor from all stakeholders. A communications director advised, "You have to talk to people the way they understand and you have to sound authoritative, you have to sound honest, you have to sound as though you are not hiding anything." As a taxpayer-supported institution, there is an expectation that university officials will be forthright instead of defensive, so the tone and delivery of messages to these stakeholders is vital. Individuals have their own values and political beliefs, and those can be impediments to stakeholders embracing the president or the institution if their beliefs differ. Most senior advisors advocate for their president to be publicly apolitical. One chief of staff described their governing board and legislature as conservative, and said they are very careful about what they say and how they say it so they do not run the risk of offending those important funders and supporters. A government relations director said they are very careful with wording, and the president "likes to make sure he understands whose ox this is going gore" if they say something that could be politically sensitive.

A president honestly expressed, "So there's no doubt that I weigh carefully the potential impact on our campus. Because I mean, I'm an executive officer of this university. If I know what I say is going to have a negative impact on the university from the legislature, I have to be careful about it." The president's voice gets more attention than all others at a university and securing financial resources and other forms of support is one of their primary duties. They must

be careful with their words while also trying to be the authentic, genuine, and transparent leader that is wanted and expected.

Support for Campus Community

A fairly new phenomena in the past several years are increased requests for academic leaders to express their sympathy or concern for groups of students or particular subsets of the campus community when an off-campus tragedy or death affects them. Presidents and their senior advisors are attempting to find a consistent way to manage these situations so they can express support and concern as appropriate, but so they do not feel obligated to express their sympathy any time a group is affected. At each of the institutions where interviews were conducted, this issue caused the most uncertainty as to frequency, the level of impact, and whether the communication should come from the president or other administration officials. Just months before the interviews, there were attacks at two Muslim mosques in New Zealand and one at a Jewish synagogue in California. Some presidents believed if they expressed sentiments of sadness for one religious group, then they must also do so for the other to avoid judgments made about their level of care of any one group. One president expressed:

> I think sometimes those are the hardest calls, right? I mean, you have this human impulse to say, "Geez, I'm sorry." But sometimes you have to restrain that because all you need to do is just Google today's tragedy. There are 20 every day that you could comment on, and there will be students who are connected to that.

Many interviewees referred to this as a slippery slope. They want to reach out to students or others in the campus community who are hurting, but even those messages ring hollow if they are issued with every national headline. A president commented on the needs of the students by saying:

> I think we're also dealing with a generation of students that need adult validation more than students in the past have. And so they're looking to see what university leaders say about something. And if they don't—and then they draw all sorts of conclusions if you don't say something and say something that's consistent with what they want you to say.

The president and their personal style and philosophy has generally driven how their administration responds to tragedies or other national events. Some do reach out to the campus community after almost each tragic event so the community will know that they are aware and they care. Other presidents have taken an opposite view and either do not send out any messages if a tragedy does not directly impact campus, or they will have a vice president or lower level official send a message to particular campus groups that may be impacted. This is done so that group knows the administration is aware and cares, but they are not using the president's voice for every situation.

Another aspect of the conversation is about the use of social media to connect with the campus community, alumni, and other stakeholders. Some senior leaders have established a policy where expressions of sympathy are delivered only through social media channels from either the institution itself or the president. They reserve campus email for official communications or statements on policy or campus events. These processes and procedures are a work in progress though for most campuses. The speed of change in communication platforms and the reducing attention span of audiences has forced them to be nimble and to manage these and other communication decisions on a case-by-case basis.

Research Question 2: How Do Presidents and Their Senior Advisors Determine and Describe the Effect of Stakeholder Power and Influence on Their Communication Decision Making?

Higher education administrators are keenly aware of the vast array of stakeholders they have and the subtle differences in communicating to them. Although the presidents and their advisors spoke about the pressure they receive from some stakeholders, they were hesitant to credit stakeholders with having the power to determine their style, frequency, platform, or urgency to communicate with a broad audience. As strong, successful leaders, these presidents did not give the impression that they would succumb to stakeholder pressure, but instead that they would make decisions that they believe are in the best interest of the institution.

In a large, bureaucratic organization such as an R1 university, the president is not always the person who hears the clamor of rising stakeholder unrest. Although presidents do not want to be isolated from their constituencies, in such a large organization it is unlikely that they can be attuned to all stakeholders and their issues of interest. The staff manage many aspects of administration, including communication, and present issues and decisions that need to be made to the president when they rise to a certain level of urgency or importance. Many times, it is the staff's duty to initially assess which stakeholders are impacted, the number of those impacted, and how much power those groups possess and can use to influence the outcome they desire. Today, that is done frequently by the communication staff as they monitor social media and email to be aware of the issues that may be gaining traction.

Once the president is aware and involved, then they will weigh the factors presented—through a political frame that includes the power of the stakeholders, coalitions that have been built, and resources that are impacted—and decide whether to make a statement about the

situation or refrain from commenting publicly. Many times the stakes are high in these decisions because they demonstrate the president's ability to accurately read the situation and to make tough decisions. With so many aspects to consider, presidents cannot always make the right call at the right time. One president honestly said, "There are a number of judgment calls and I haven't always got it right" when deciding whether or not to use the president's voice to address an issue.

While they may not feel compelled to bend to stakeholder pressure to comment on every issue, in their interviews, presidents and senior leaders did identify the stakeholder groups that have more influence than others as they create communications strategy and messaging. Mentioned most often were students, faculty, governing boards, and government leaders. Some leaders expressed that although they keep these groups in mind, they do not change what they say to each. A government relations director asserted about his institution's president, "Relating to stakeholders—his message is his message. He is aware of his audience but he doesn't necessarily change his message depending on his audience."

Others were more open to recognizing the nuances that are at play with different audiences. A communications director acknowledged, "I'm trying to think, who's affected, what are the potential downfalls on this?" and a chief of staff said, "For me at least, I try to think of any communication through the lens or through the ears of how different groups will receive it." Most acknowledged that they know they cannot keep everyone happy. A statement to the campus may make an alumnus angry or a message meant for legislators may anger faculty who disagree. A president said:

> And I tend not to think about it in terms of "Gosh, this is going to tick off alumni or faculty" because the answer is, of course. Anything you say is going to, and if you don't say it, it's going to. So it's kind of liberating in that way once you get to that point.

Wise presidents and their advisors understand that they may need to go to groups individually or follow-up a written communication with a visit to ensure they know their opinions are valued. One president who spent the majority of his career as faculty leader said:

> The constituency is important. Who the audience is, it does matter. And while I'm consistent in what we're staying true to our values, I have had to go and explain to certain groups why we did it and that messaging may be slightly different just in terms of trying to get them to understand why we said what we said and the medium in which we use to send the message.

Each stakeholder group may require a little finesse to help them understand the complexities that senior administrators must manage as they interact with various stakeholders. There may not be a one-size-fits-all solution when communicating to people from different generations, political affiliations, economic means, and level of loyalty and dedication to the university.

Research Question 3: Which Stakeholder Groups Are Most Influential? Always or Is it Situational?

As explored in the preceding section, presidents and their senior advisors acknowledged the pressure that internal and external stakeholder groups place on the president and senior administrators. There are many stakeholders to consider, but the stakeholders that they mentioned most often and seemed to have the most influence were students, faculty, governing board trustees, and government leaders. They indicated that each situation is considered

separately and they did not identify one or more stakeholder groups that are always more influential than the others. When talking about stakeholders, a communications director said:

> And so like it or not, we represent them all in some way, shape, or form. And so the challenge is how do you be mindful that you've got folks across the spectrum, especially today, when the world is so much more polarized than it ever was.

Interestingly, one of the largest stakeholder groups was not identified as one of the most powerful. Alumni were mentioned during several interviews but no one brought them forward as a powerful influencer. Perhaps it is because there are typically hundreds of thousands of alumni for large R1 institutions, but each may have had different experiences at their university depending on their age, race, residency status, etc. and they are rarely of one mind or coalesce to form a powerful lobby.

Taking a deeper look into the four most highly identified stakeholder groups will provide insight into how presidents and their senior advisors work to keep them informed and persuade them to support the university.

Students

As is said frequently, universities would not exist if it were not for the students, so they are a vital stakeholder. Most administrators will echo those sentiments. A chief of staff who came to the position from the faculty said:

> The students are what we're here for. We're here to teach our students, and so there's very much a concern of wanting to make sure the decision making is made with our students in mind and the campus community in mind.

However, having a campus filled with mostly 17 to 24 year olds can be challenging as they leave their parents and grow to become adults while at college. This can make communicating with them unpredictable and exasperating at times.

Student organizations can also be a source of upheaval to a campus if they are espousing a cause or taking a stand against the administration. A chief of staff characterized their fervent stances on issues as, "It's just that relentless drumbeat of a particular student group or organization that just doesn't let it go" that can challenge any communication strategy or plan. One university president was quoted by his communications director as saying, "My job would be so easy if I didn't have fraternities and athletics." There are many good aspects to athletics and Greek life on a campus, but they are emblematic of the passion they inspire as vocal stakeholders who care deeply about that aspect of the university.

For many students, the transition from child to adult happens at college and their needs and expectations change during their years of attendance. As discussed earlier, today's first-time college students seem to need "adult affirmation" and often they want that through communication from the president. A chief of staff astutely said that they believe students are looking for a paternal or maternal figure in the president and they want to hear that the president cares for them. One communications director said,

> But in college, you know, things are a bit different. And we have to kind of explain to them sometimes, you know, we're not here to hold your hand and we're not here to tell you every single time something goes wrong.

Although students are important stakeholders, they generally are not what drives communication from the administration. The president and senior leaders will react, inform, and teach them

through communication, but rarely do they speak out solely because a subset of students want or demand it.

Faculty

Just as students are essential to a university so are faculty. They carry out the dual mission of teaching and research at R1 universities and are vital to building a culture of discovery, intellectual curiosity and development, and innovation. Through shared governance, they also have a role to play in the governance of the university, and therefore carry some authority, especially on academic matters. However, relations between administrators and faculty can be tenuous and sometimes even hostile as they clash over issues that arise because of the nature of a bureaucratic and loosely coupled institution.

Reactions of faculty and their influence on presidential communication were mixed during the interviews. Several government relations directors expressed frustration that faculty do not understand the political and funding ramifications of the ideas they express and why legislators may not view them positively, especially when it comes to requests for salary increases that will help the university to attract and retain the best faculty. When asked about faculty influence, a communications director said:

> They are on my mind. In all honesty, I'm not sure that they're on my mind as much as some other groups because I think there is a feeling there's always going to be a certain amount of grumbling no matter what you do.

However, that same communications director later said that he encourages his president to tweet about the faculty and their successes as much as he does about athletics to show an appropriate balance.

Administrators are appropriately hesitant to try to stop the faculty from speaking out on issues of their choosing. A chief of staff said that despite their frustrations with the faculty, "Are we going to go out and limit what our faculty say or do or make a comment on? I don't think so." Presidents would rarely infringe upon the faculty's rights to academic freedom. Although faculty cannot fire the president, a vote of "no confidence" can end a presidency quickly, so they are not a constituency to take lightly. Saluting them through presidential communications can have a positive impact, but in the interviews there was no indication they hold great sway over presidential communications.

Governing Boards

Higher education governing boards for public universities are structured differently in each state, so experiences and practices can certainly differ, but the governing board has a vested interest in the reputation and strength of the university. Some universities have greater autonomy than others, but generally, keeping the board informed of what is happening on campus is vital. While most universities do not require approval from the board on statements, press releases, or social media posts, it is important to keep them informed, especially if news coming out of the university is negative. When asked about the board's reaction to politically sensitive or controversial communication, a senior official said, "If we're going to send out a message of support, we do have to think about who's running our state and who's running our educational system. How are they going to feel about that?"

The board hires and fires the president of the institution, so they can set parameters for communication if they so choose. One campus communicator said their board has made it clear that they do not want the president to speak out on the "social issues of the day." Another government relations director who works closely with their board said about the president

speaking on sensitive issues, “I mean, he’s not doing these things in a vacuum. I’m sure there are times when he speaks and the board might kind of cringe,” but that the president would not speak about something truly controversial without running it by the board chair first. Some board chairs prefer to have the spotlight themselves. A participant gave an example of a board chair who made it clear that they would be the person “out front nationally,” so presidents must be savvy and adapt to their boss’ desire to be the chief spokesperson for the institution or higher education system.

On the other hand, having a board chair or system president that wants the spotlight can be helpful and shield the president at times when they are willing to take responsibility for a controversial decision that brings the president under fire from other constituencies. A government relations director explained, “There are times when it is most appropriate for the board chair to be quoted and to take on an issue, and we’ve done that.” Tuition increases or changes in the admission policy are examples that the board may speak to since they have final approval. Although the governing board may not dictate the day-to-day communications of the president and his senior advisors, they are critical stakeholders and their viewpoint and reaction are considered as decisions are made.

Government Leaders

As significant funders of public universities, state elected leaders have a great deal of influence and are on the minds of most university leaders as they make communication decisions. In fact, in most states the government is the institution’s largest single donor and expect to be viewed in that manner. A communications director admitted, “We are very aware of the outsized influence they have, given the amount of money that they provide.” Although one president asserted his legislature has never threatened to pull funding because of communication

they do not like, many presidents have felt the pressure applied to them to reign in students and faculty who are speaking on issues outside of the politician's comfort zone.

As the political winds periodically change, the president and their advisors must be attuned to the legislative tolerance for messages or statements that could cause concern. In each interview, I asked how they made the decision whether or not to speak out when there are opposing stakeholders. For instance, there may be students who want the president to speak out on a social justice issue, but the state legislature is conservative and will express its collective displeasure if the president communicates their own support for the students in this matter. In this situation, the government relations director generally advises the president. A chief of staff said:

> Sometimes he [the government relations director] is successful at making them understand how legislators and others may read into statements, etc., but sometimes he is not. Some issues are perceived by administrators and communicators as so important that they have to be said regardless of if legislators will get angry or not.

Others discussed potential consequences, especially financial consequences. A government relations director warned, "To get in their [legislators] lane when they hold the purse strings is very, very treacherous ground." Communications advisors are also aware of the balance that must be reached. One expressed, "You know that it's hard because you're worried about funding. You're worried about the support that you need for everything." Although this may be well known to presidents and their top advisors, most of the campus community do not understand the dynamics of managing a relationship with elected officials. A communications director said:

> And I think the hard thing to be able to communicate very well [to the campus community] is we can make some big, bold statement and let the world know how we feel as a campus, and then kind of put a big X on our back from the legislature.

A government relations director expressed that although he understands the need for consistency in messaging, communication to campus and to elected leaders has to be different. It may be easy to placate campus with a statement but at the same time external constituents may be angered. Many presidents make a significant effort throughout the year to build relationships with legislators and other elected officials so they can mitigate those tense situations when they arise. When legislators are open to it, presidents and government relations directors spend time helping legislators understand the concept of academic freedom and that a president cannot necessarily "reign in" the students or the faculty who are saying something the legislators do not like. It is often a tense balance, and two-way communication is vital.

Research Question 4: Does a President's Political Capital Impact Their Communication Decision Making?

Political capital cannot be built or maintained without effective communication. For a president to have trusting relationships with stakeholders, they must be perceived as having open and transparent communication channels. If the president is believed to be authentic, honest, and willing to listen, then they can build the goodwill that allows them to have significant influence with stakeholders. Throughout the interviews, political capital was spoken in terms of a "bank of goodwill" from which deposits are made through positive experiences and withdrawals are made through negative experiences and I explored whether presidents and their senior advisors kept the president's level of political capital in mind as they made communication decisions. For most, they may not have explicitly thought about their political capital level when analyzing

communication decisions, but through the conversations it became clear that high or low political capital has an impact on whether presidents and their advisors felt like they had the ability to speak out on controversial or politically sensitive issues.

Political capital does not apply only to matters of politics and governance. It is present in social interactions that depend on believability, likeability, and trust. A chief of staff said about the university president:

> But what I'll say is so much of his social capital is connected to his political capital, so his genuineness, his staying true to values, his transparency—those lines between the social and political there bleed, and for him, I see very much that's true. And so because people trust who he is and know where he's coming from, that lends greatly to the predictability of it and his political capital.

During the interviews, some of the presidents displayed humility when they said they didn't think their own political capital is a factor in their decision making, but I would assert if they truly do not think about it, they should. As president, their political capital is the university's political capital in many instances, so as he or she is perceived, that is also how the university is perceived. One president said, "So, I think on building our university's political capital while indirectly I'm building my own, I would hope. But I'm being authentic. I'm not saying something that I don't believe in." He views the university's political capital as helping his personal political capital, which demonstrates that it can be a two-way street.

Just as with a financial bank account, both deposits and withdrawals are inevitable. No one can only make deposits, nor is that advisable. To accomplish goals, sometimes it is necessary to make a withdrawal in the short-term to build something sustainable for the long-term. A government relations director explained:

> That is what you're going to rely upon when things go south. The quality of your relationships. The quality of your trust. The quality of your believability and it's tough. It is really, really tough because political winds are so unpredictable, unwieldy. They don't give notice and they really are hard to see coming at any given time. And so that's why those deposits are so important because the only thing you know for sure is that you're going to need to make withdrawals. That's all you know. You will have to withdraw at some point.

Before it can be spent, it must be earned, and how that is done may be different with each stakeholder group. Building capital with students may require more social media posts or stopping by the student union just to shake hands and be seen. With alumni, it may be periodic newsletters that let them know all the exciting things happening at their alma mater. For faculty, it could be showing up at the faculty senate meeting, celebrating discoveries by faculty researchers on Twitter, or acting on their complaints about policies that they find restrictive. There are many groups and many tools in the political capital toolbox, but communication in one form or another is at the heart of them all. A veteran president admitted:

> There's capital with alumni. There's capital that you have with your students; that you have with your faculty. Sometimes they'll give you a pass, other times they won't. So, for all that, it is pretty well calculated. "Probably don't want to say this right now in this setting, but maybe it's okay here." But all of that comes into play.

Knowing what to say and what not to say to each audience is part of effective leadership and part of building or maintaining political capital.

Establishing trusted relationships is the best way to build capital. Presidents spend many hours visiting legislators in their home districts, shaking hands with alumni and fans at athletic

events, and going to visit faculty and staff throughout campus to thank them for their work. One senior advisor characterized it as “a full-time strategy” to build goodwill. If it is done well, that strategy works and the president is perceived as a popular and well-liked leader who can accomplish their goals.

A relatively new way of building social and political capital is through social media. Presidents now are using social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to demonstrate their frequent interactions with stakeholders. A president said he uses social media to show people he is not sitting in the president’s office all day, but instead he is an active part of the community. That exposure has given him credibility, and people feel like they know who he is, even if they don’t know him personally. Another president advised that a president has the most political capital when they are new to the job so it should be conserved wisely by not using too much of it early before having to make the tough decisions that may have a cost down the line.

Presidents and their advisors appear to be shrewd about how to protect against losses of political capital. Although it may disappoint some stakeholders when the president will not speak out on a topic, presidents weigh the potential cost of doing that. One president said, “I definitely have chosen not to speak out on things that students would like me to largely because I viewed it as not critical enough to warrant potential loss of political capital.” Leaders make hard choices and sometimes there are winners and losers in each situation, but trying to maintain a balanced score sheet is important.

Although people may not even be aware they are learning a lesson, if they are watching, presidents are teaching effective leadership through the use and conservation of political capital and how it is impacted by communication. One communication director said:

> I think that's a challenge because people want us to make those big, bold statements, but we're much more effective by being smart, using the political capital of the people on our campus, and working within the system behind the scenes to make the changes that ultimately the people really want anyway when we start those conversations.

Presidents and their senior advisors may not always explicitly identify the impact of political capital on their communication decision making, but it is clear that they work to build it and understand the consequences of spending it.

Conclusion

Through analysis of the data, findings emerged that allow us to better understand the impact of stakeholders and political capital and the delicate balance presidents must find as they make decisions regarding communication. Presidents recognize that their careers are tied to their university and they do not want to put either in the line of fire. Instead, they "keep their powder dry" for bigger battles that may come later where they will need their bank account full of the political capital they have earned through their communication to campus and beyond.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore presidential decision making regarding communication to internal and external audiences and to understand the influence of stakeholders and the president's own political capital on communication decisions. This chapter includes a summary of the key findings of the research and a discussion of them in the context of the literature on communication, decision making, stakeholder influence, and political capital, before reviewing them through the lens of decision theory and a political framework. The chapter will conclude with implications for practice by university presidents and their senior advisors, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research on this topic.

The findings and implications were thematically compiled through interviews conducted using these research questions as the foundation:

RQ1 How do presidents and their senior advisors weigh the risks and benefits of speaking out on politically sensitive or controversial topics?

RQ2 How do presidents and their senior advisors determine and describe the effect of stakeholder power and influence on their communication decision making?

RQ3 Which stakeholder groups are most influential? All the time or is it situational?

RQ4 Does a president's political capital impact their communication decision making?

Through data from 20 interviews with presidents, chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors, themes emerged when discussing presidential communication and the factors that influence decisions related to presidential communication. The dominant themes were (a) presidents rarely speak about issues far beyond their campus due to political polarization, the risk of alienating funders, and stakeholders becoming easily

offended; (b) presidents are more likely to speak out if their comments align with institution's mission or values, strategically set the stage for legislative or board support, or demonstrate support for a segment of campus that is hurting; (c) the most influential stakeholders in communication decisions are students, faculty, governing boards, and government leaders, depending upon the issue; and (d) perceived political capital levels have an impact on whether presidents are likely to speak out on controversial or politically sensitive issues. All these come together to give credence to the belief expressed by Dennison (2001), Hesburgh (2001), and Sherman (2013) that today's university presidents do not claim the role of national thought leader as did the presidents who were considered giants of the past and that stakeholders and the president's political capital play a role in that.

Discussion and Implications

One relatively new government relations director called university presidents "mini rock stars" for their status on campus and beyond. Students will stop them to take a selfie; alumni ask to shake their hand or get an autograph; and they have thousands of followers on social media. They make big and small decisions about communication every day, yet rarely do they take the time to dissect their thoughts, actions, and decisions as they were asked to do in interviews. As educators, most like to gather facts and data, but today's world of instant access and answers make intuitive, quick decisions necessary. They make those decisions with the help of advisors, but they also use their own experience and knowledge of their university and its stakeholders. Presidents also have an innate feel for their own level of political capital and how far they can push the envelope in speaking out on controversial or politically sensitive topics. Even with that knowledge and star power, presidents today rarely address issues outside of their own campus.

The presidents and their chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors explained the risks are great and the benefits are small to having a president speaking out on national issues. They may have the opportunity to receive some attention and make their name known outside their state, but it seems that negative news travels faster than positive news, and they take the chance of losing the support of stakeholders and making withdrawals from their bank of political capital.

Effective presidents recognize not only the power of their stakeholders but also their needs. Student needs for affirmation and a direction for their passions, faculty needs for validation and academic freedom, governing board trustees' need for pride and acclaim for their institution, and lawmakers' need for influence and control all have an impact on the communication choices and decisions of a university president. With this knowledge and understanding of their stakeholders, they can take each decision on a case-by-case basis to quickly decide who they need to support, comfort, or placate in their message. Most of their communication choices are not about whether to speak out on a controversial or politically sensitive issues; most are about whether they use the power and stature of the president's voice to shine a light on an issue, a celebration, or a tragedy.

The major findings are reflective of the time the study took place. It is widely believed in 2019 that the United States is in a time of political polarization where many people go to extremes in their political beliefs and in their support of a candidate or party (McNaughtan et al., 2018; Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). This political polarization has an impact on leaders and their assessment of whether it is prudent to speak out courageously on large or small issues. Also, social media has changed the dynamics of communication and leaders are understandably cautious about what they say because statements could go viral at any time.

Prior to discussing the implications of the findings, it is important to place stakeholder expectations in the proper context. Presidents of universities can personify the institution they lead (Eckel & Kezar, 2011), and the findings show presidents and their senior advisors are well aware that stakeholders want to hear directly from the president. As Coleman (2018), Eckel and Kezar (2011), and Kirwin (2018) said, presidents are the face and voice of the university. Receiving communication from lower level administrators does not satisfy many stakeholders who want to know that the president is aware and cares about the situation. Even with that knowledge, some presidents purposefully choose not to make statements on every issue and intentionally have their provost, vice president for student life, vice president for diversity, or other subject matter experts respond on behalf of the institution. One president said although he felt pressure from his presidential colleagues to replicate their practice of responding to most issues of the day, he has chosen not to be drawn into that practice. He believed the community needs to know other campus leaders are capable and have the authority to speak on behalf of the institution.

The idea of the ubiquitous presidency, as characterized by Scacco and Coe (2018) about the President of the United States, also appears to apply to the collegiate level. Stakeholders want to see and hear their presidents frequently. Just as corporate CEOs and other leaders, university presidents are counted on to make meaning of situations and frame the narrative of the situation (Argenti, 2017; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Gigliotti, 2016; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Argenti (2017) contended presidents personally presenting the issue is critical for success, and I contend some presidents and their senior advisors would agree.

Social media can provide that personal communication instantly to a wide audience (McNaughtan et al., 2018). It has become the channel of choice for presidents and their campus

communicators to quickly make a statement, demonstrate support, express concern, or share their sympathy to their campus communities and beyond. Several presidents and their communications directors spoke of the double-edge sword of social media where it can rapidly share their thoughts or positive stories to a large audience, but it can also spread incorrect information or agitate the public and prematurely force action on an issue. Social media platforms are also being strategically used to personalize the president and allow stakeholders to feel as if they know them. This can lead to increased trust in the university's leadership and a heightened reputation for the president. In this context, the following themes emerged and are supported by the literature.

Presidents Rarely Speak About Issues Far Beyond Their Campuses

In this study, presidents expressed their hesitancy to speak on politically sensitive or controversial issues that happened beyond the borders of their campuses due to political polarization, stakeholders being easily offended, and the risk of alienating funders. Since the 1990s, scholars have lamented the lack of courage by presidents in their communication and the lack of thought leadership those presidents could provide to the nation (Bornstein, 1995; Greenburg, 1998; Hesburgh, 2001; Sherman, 2013). However, history tells us that thought leadership was an expectation of the job at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century (Bornstein, 1995; Dennison, 2001; Greenburg, 1998; Thelin, 2011). Today, governing boards and elected leaders may say they want transformational presidents to lead their institutions, but, in practice, they tend to hire transactional leaders that get the job done without courting negative attention (Selingo et al., 2017).

A substantial portion of a university president's job is spent fundraising (Bornstein, 1995; Dennison, 2001; Sherman, 2013). Acquiring resources is especially important today as many

state governments have reduced funding since the Great Recession (Mitchell, Leachman, Masterson, & Waxman, 2018). Presidents expressed they are not willing to jeopardize potential donations from alumni and other donors, or government allocations from the state or federal government, by speaking about national or controversial issues because it is too risky to the long-term health of their university and to their own career. That should be considered a practical reality, not a lack of courage. More than one president used the expression that they "stay in [their] own lane" when it comes to communication. Stakeholders want them to speak out on issues for various reasons, but the presidents, their chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors that were interviewed viewed issues through the eye of whether it impacted their campus, and if it did not then they were unlikely to comment.

Interestingly, the 2018 study by *Inside Higher Ed* and Gallup indicates 67% of public doctoral and master's institution presidents self-reported they had spoken out more on political issues in 2017 than they had previously (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). That number is surprisingly high in light of the comments by the presidents interviewed for this study. Although they may have sent a letter after the 2016 election to calm the campus or to stress the institution's values in light of the election results, the participating presidents did not express that they have spoken out more on political issues. In fact, they indicated they are increasingly cautious about speaking out on national issues as a direct result of the political divisiveness of the country.

Closely aligned with the country's political polarization is the ease with which people seem to be offended by speech. Several presidents bemoaned they cannot make a statement of support for one group without unintentionally offending another, which has led to the institution not addressing the issue altogether or to having a lower-level administrator make a statement instead of the president. Lending the president's influential voice to a political or potentially

divisive issue is not something these presidents and their senior advisors were willing to do because it could harm the university or the president's personal reputation and brand.

Situations When Presidents Are More Likely to Speak Out

As detailed in Chapter 4, presidents indicated they are more likely to speak out on issues that either align with the institution's mission or values, strategically set the stage for legislative or governing board support, or show support for a segment of campus that is hurting. Even politically sensitive issues such as climate change or gun rights could be addressed if discussed in the realm of advancing knowledge through teaching and research or protecting the campus community. As the campus leader, the president is looked upon to uphold and display the values of the university (Birnbaum, 1992; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Young & Pemberton, 2017) and to support the mission of the institution by supporting the work of the faculty and students. Keast (1996) argued the president's personal values also play a role as they are making decisions impacting the university and that assertion was upheld in this research.

One president expressed that his personal values made him want to send a note of condolence when a campus group is impacted by a tragedy, such as a mass casualty event that impacts a certain segment of the population. However, we live in a world where, unfortunately, these events are happening more frequently and decisions must be made about how often and to what level these communications of sympathy or concern are sent. Research by McNaughtan et al. (2018) found 41 of the 50 presidents of flagship universities disseminated communication either proactively or reactively regarding the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States because they were concerned about the reaction of the campus community. This demonstrates that, although it was political in nature, many presidents felt that it was important to communicate with the campus either as a show of support and/or to express concern about

safety and mental health resources. Each president and their advisors must make that decision in relation to their own campus and their own values.

Interviews with the subjects also indicated that presidents may use their bully pulpit to discuss issues of national importance such as job creation or immigration if it demonstrates their university's positive impact. However, in these circumstances, many times they do so in collaboration with one or more of the higher education associations so they are not stepping out on a limb by themselves.

Most Influential Stakeholders

Higher education literature provides longs lists of stakeholders, including students, faculty, parents, alumni, staff, government leaders, governing boards, media, accrediting agencies, donors, industry, the local community and many more (Alves et al., 2010; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Pereira & Da Silva, 2003). Through the vast number of stakeholders, this study attempted to discern which groups are the most influential regarding presidential communication. Through interviews, four groups were discussed more often than others: (a) students, (b) faculty, (c) governing boards, and (d) government leaders. As Mainardes et al. (2011) asserted not all groups have the same level of power, legitimacy, and urgency, so those that are able to form coalitions based on these factors can use their collective power to influence university leadership.

As indicated in French and Raven's (1959) concept of social power bases—including (a) legitimate power, (b) reward power, (c) coercive power, (d) expert power, and (e) referent or charismatic power—each stakeholder group has different bases of power they exercise to influence decision making. Students have legitimate power as providers of financial resources the university needs, and coercive power when they threaten the peace of the campus community over an issue of importance to them. However, students may not understand how they can best

use those forms of power and may not coalesce enough interest to significantly sway the administration. The interview subjects recognized the influence students can have, but they did not indicate that they planned messages based on student interest or advocacy because it is rare for them to coalesce a large group with the same objectives and goals.

Faculty enjoy legitimate power through shared governance and expert power through their knowledge and expertise about their disciplinary area or about university tradition and culture. Although faculty cannot fire the president, they can have an influence on their effectiveness through a vote of no confidence. Few, if any, presidents can withstand such a vote, which places pressure on the board to find a new president (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005). If faculty utilize their legitimate and expert powers cohesively, it can be very effective; however, interviewees did not ascribe much power to the faculty at research institutions because they are disbursed throughout a very large and bureaucratic institution, and there are few issues in which they are all interested enough to come away from their own work to challenge the administration. In short, the power is there but is rarely used.

Governing boards rely mostly upon legitimate power because the oversight and governance of the university rests with them, but they can have and use all of French and Raven's (1959) bases of power. They may reward presidents to promote the behavior they want to see, but they can also coerce presidents through threats of punishment if the president is acting outside their authority or in defiance of the board. Some long-time board members may have expert power or even charismatic power, but they all have referent power since the board is typically the final decision point on university issues. They may use their power in more subtle ways than students or faculty by quietly ensuring that the president knows their boundaries when it comes to communicating to stakeholders. In interviews, both presidents and their chiefs of staff

indicated they would not communicate something controversial without the approval of the board.

Lastly, government leaders were mentioned often as having an oversized impact on communication coming from the university. State legislatures are often the majority funders of public universities and their opinions have the power of money behind them (Alves et al., 2010, Mainardes et al., 2011), so their reactions are considered when making communication decisions. Like governing boards, government leaders can have all five bases of power at their disposal and use them judiciously to achieve the effect they desire. In the current divisive climate, political leaders also have the ear of their supporters and can sway them regarding the value of higher education (Jaschik, 2018; Parker, 2019). Interview subjects, especially the government relations directors, spoke of working throughout the year to interact with legislators and other government officials in an attempt to build trusting relationships, so their powerful influence can be used to support the university instead of hurt it.

Although issues come and go and coalitions in stakeholder groups form and disperse depending on their passion for the issue, the four stakeholder groups detailed in this section have the greatest and most consistent opportunity to impact communication decisions at universities. Most other stakeholder groups, including alumni, are large and amorphous and rarely possess the incentive or ability to mobilize in the numbers and influence needed to get the result they desire.

Impact of Perceived Political Capital

As Bourdieu and other sociologists theorized and described, political capital fluctuates over time (Bennister & Worthy, 2012; French, 2011; Swartz, 2013). An analysis of the interview data indicates that university presidents are aware of their political capital levels and work throughout the year to keep the balance at a level that gives them the ability to pursue their goals

and objectives. Knowledge of their political capital level is somewhat intuitive. As Cox (2007) said, there is no accurate measurement of social or political capital, so when it is considered, it is more of a gut feeling than a data point. However, presidents know they need a sufficient amount of capital to lead, and communication is an important component that can be used both to earn and spend political capital.

Political capital was approached in the study through the question of whether presidents would be willing to risk the capital they had earned (or been given as a new hire) to communicate about controversial topics. The findings indicate presidents rarely speak out on controversial topics because they know careless or impolitic communication can harm their agendas, imperil resources, and even cost them their jobs as presidents of influential research universities.

The interviews also yielded data about the use of communication to earn political capital. In their study, Bennister and Worthy (2012) discussed using rhetoric and oratory as ways to engage and inspire stakeholders, which builds capital. Several presidents and their senior staff members detailed how they use social media not only to introduce themselves and form a personal bond with their constituencies, but also to stay engaged and demonstrate their care and concern for the community. This modern method of building political capital early in the presidency through frequent, open, and transparent communication is becoming a best practice for a strong start to any presidency.

Implications for Theory and Research

This study rests upon the dual foundations of a political framework and decision theory. The process by which presidents make decisions regarding communication and the factors that impact those decisions—including stakeholder influence and levels of political capital—are vital

to understand how presidents perform one of their primary duties; using communication to inform, persuade, and make meaning of issues and events affecting the campus community.

Political Framework

A political frame was chosen as the underpinning for this study because large, public, research universities are inherently political and bureaucratic organizations. Viewing communication decisions made in this environment through a political frame accounts for the competing interests that presidents must negotiate to successfully lead a university. Birnbaum and Eckel (2005) equated the university president to a politician because of the need for the president to be responsive to various stakeholders to retain their job. Although presidents appear to primarily think of themselves as educators who would rather leave politics to elected leaders, in reality, they undertake many of the same activities as professional politicians.

Presidents confirmed in interviews that they pay close attention to their stakeholders and the formation of interest groups in those broad stakeholder categories of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and others. Presidents and their senior advisors strive to be proactive in their interactions so that personal contact will build trust and political capital, and at the same time, mitigate unrest or disengagement from the university. It also gives them the opportunity to hear directly from the stakeholders and work with them to negotiate and problem solve. Many presidents and senior advisors expressed the importance of communicating proactively, purposefully, and personally to create or perpetuate the persona of an engaged, caring, and authentic leader, which sounds very similar to what politicians attempt to do with their constituents so they can win elections.

Bolman and Deal (1991) found leaders who understand and work in the political frame are perceived as better managers and leaders than those who do not. When defining their idea of a political frame, Bolman and Deal described political leaders as realistic and pragmatic, and

they indicated that successful leaders in this frame use networking and compromise to build a power base to achieve their goals. A hallmark of this frame is that interest groups and coalitions organize in an attempt to develop their own power and use it to achieve their goals. Some stakeholders authentically or legitimately possess power such as governing boards or lawmakers, while others attempt to develop power (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). In this study, only elected officials and members of the governing boards were identified by participants as interest groups that consistently used their power to influence the president. Although the data collected suggests that students and faculty have moments of influence on certain issues, there was little evidence to suggest that members of their large communities galvanize to make consistent and lasting impacts. I speculate other stakeholder groups, such as alumni, are simply too large and diffuse to coalesce and rarely have a meaningful influence on the communication decisions made by their institution's president.

Viewing decision making about communication through a political lens helped to frame the impact of stakeholders on those presidential decisions. Power and influence were aspects of each research question considered. To maintain their leadership position, presidents of R1 universities must weigh the political risks and benefits of their decisions, understand the strength and influence of stakeholder groups, and build and spend political capital to effectively communicate with the university community and to maintain the authority to lead.

Decision Theory

The other foundational element of this study is decision theory to understand the process by which decisions are made about the risks and benefits of speaking out and to determine stakeholder influence. The latest scholarly literature about decision theory has denoted the use of both rational and intuitive processes, called *dual-process cognitive function* (Hodgkinson et al.,

2009). When asked about their decision making processes regarding communication during interviews, most participants who directly answered the question said they relied on both rational and intuitive processes. Most did not attempt to describe the process, but simply said "both" when asked which process they practiced. Even presidents who have served in their position 3 years or less, who are assumed to have less experience to draw upon when intuitively making decisions, said they use both processes.

Since most interview subjects did not elaborate on their decision-making process, it is not possible to clearly outline the steps taken to make communication decisions. It can be surmised from the interviews that (a) they seek and use the advice of senior leaders such as provosts, chiefs of staff, communications directors, and others; (b) they take into account data and facts when they are available; (c) they consider stakeholder reaction; (d) they rely on their personal values and the values and mission of the university when they make decisions that they believe are in the university's best interest; and (e) they quite often feel compelled to make quick decisions because of social media or stakeholder pressure, although that does not mean they always succumb to that pressure. To fully understand their decision process, it may require that a researcher be embedded in the situation to observe their style and process.

Birnbaum and Eckel (2005) contended the complexities of leading a university are beyond a human's cognitive ability and the pace of change in conditions is such that plans become overwhelmed quickly. Even in the best circumstances when the decision-makers have all the information available and the time to consider the impact and consequences of the message they plan to send, it is still impossible to know how each stakeholder group will receive it (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Presidents and their communications directors must make the best decisions they can with the information and the time that is available. A decision flowchart might

help, but for now, this is an individual process and there is no published best-practice model of presidential decision making.

Implications for Practice

A research university is a place of innovation, discovery, teaching, and finding solutions to some of the world's most pressing problems. Leading these universities takes special abilities. Altbach (2011) called leading a research university "an increasing complex and multifaceted task" (p. 68). The expectations placed on presidents by stakeholders could overwhelm the strongest leaders, but academic leaders are still seeking R1 university presidencies. To be president of a prestigious university and potentially leave a legacy for that university, the state, and the nation, is enticing for many, but, increasingly, presidents have little room for error and poor communication can lead to the end of a career.

This study, which included higher education leaders from five highly ranked R1 universities, confirmed presidents are unlikely to take the risk of speaking out on a controversial or politically sensitive topic because they believe it would threaten their ability to effectively perform their job. The polarization in the political climate and the risk of offending the university's government funders and donors is enough to make public university officials tread lightly on topics that do not directly impact their campus community.

However, engaging communication could be more important now than ever and can be a powerful mechanism for earning the political capital leaders need to advance their agenda and achieve their goals. A campus communication strategy and plan should drive the decisions about when and through what channels communication occurs for the institution and the president. As a result of their strategic thinking about communication, several presidents and their chiefs of

staff, communications directors, and government relations directors shared some words of wisdom for presidents:

- Let the institution's values lead you in your messages and statements;
- If you desire to have a national stage, speak to issues about which you are passionate or have expertise;
- Use social media early in your presidency to gain political capital by being personable, accessible, and authentic;
- Whenever possible, let your vice presidents or other senior leaders speak for the university so the community hears other voices and knows that someone other than the president can represent the institution in good and bad times;
- Use social media to send an expression of sympathy so the message is personal and does not have the weight of the university behind it; and
- Strategically plan what situations require a response or statement so there is consistency in messaging from the president and the institution.

Regarding interactions with stakeholders, the findings of this study indicate governing boards, government leaders, students, and faculty are the dominant stakeholders when considering communication decisions. However, social media can be used to turn the spotlight on any person or group who has felt neglected or unheard by university leaders, so all stakeholders are important. One chief of staff said they think of stakeholders as spinning plates. They may not all spin at the same rate, but each needs attention so none of them come crashing to the ground. Advisors to the presidents especially expressed that they spend a great deal of time making sure the president engages with as many stakeholder groups as possible—even if only through social media—to ensure that they feel connected and valued.

It is an exciting yet somewhat scary time for university leaders. Higher education presidents and their senior advisors can use the insights gained through this research to consider (a) if and how they want to speak out on national issues, (b) how they are engaging with stakeholders, (c) which stakeholders they are primarily engaging, and (d) what they are doing to earn and leverage their political capital through communication. They have ascended to the mountaintop of higher education by being hired as the president of a research university where the challenges and opportunities are both plentiful. Their decisions about how, when, and why to communicate are an increasingly important indicators of success or failure.

Limitations

After collecting and analyzing the data and reviewing the effects of the research design, I outline the unintentional limitations that surfaced in the following. As discussed in Chapter 3, the limitations due to the research design included (a) potential lack of applicability to all university presidents since the sample was limited to R1 universities, (b) lack of consistency in data collection methods due to scheduling difficulties with participants, (c) the choice to interview government relations directors, which may have skewed the data toward a more political viewpoint instead of the broad viewpoint possessed by the other interview subjects, and (d) a lack of literature that synthesizes presidential decision making, communication, stakeholders, and political capital into one study.

During the interviews, it became apparent that the close relationship shared by the participant and the president may have hindered them from seeing faults in the president or their decision making. Also, since many times these senior advisors were part of the decision-making process, they had a vested interest in supporting the process undertaken at their institution to make decisions about communication. I do not doubt the participant's honesty or willingness to

share positive and negative aspects of the topic, but the chief of staff, communications director, and government relations director at these institutions are some of the closest advisors to the president and may not see some of the negatives that those outside the inner circle may see.

A corollary is that these participants may not have been as willing to provide examples of poor decisions or communication failures on the part of the president or the institution. Part of their job is to elevate the institution and the president. They manage problems as they arise, but as a former chief of staff myself, I can surmise that they spend a great deal of time celebrating the positives and downplaying the negatives. This could have contributed to the lack of criticism or examples of failures.

Through analysis, a temporal limitation was also discovered. The unique political polarization of the country in 2019 has been different than any other time in recent history, so presidents and their senior advisors were still learning to maneuver in this minefield. The outcomes of the study with regard to the lack of willingness to speak out on politically sensitive or controversial topics may have been especially limited because of the timing of this study. As political circumstances change, their willingness to be national thought leaders may also change.

Lastly, to maintain the anonymity of the institutions and the participants, statements and Twitter posts were reviewed both before and after the data collection to align the qualitative data with the recorded communication itself. However, none of those documents or posts are included in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research explored influences on presidential decision making, in particular, the influence of stakeholders and political capital on their communication decisions. As discussed earlier, political capital is not only related to government and politics, it is an important

component of the president's relationship with all stakeholder groups. Future research could further investigate the connections between political capital and stakeholders and their impact on presidential decisions far beyond those involving communication. Scholarly literature in this area is sparse. Several scholars have discussed the duties and roles of university presidents (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Kerr & Gade, 1986, 1987; Ruscio, 2017), but there is a lack of literature that focuses on the influence of stakeholders on presidential decisions.

There are other areas of potential scholarly value that could be explored. One of the limitations discussed earlier was that the participants chosen for this study were all very closely aligned with the president, so they may have been biased in their perceptions. It would be additive to this study to conduct a similar study, but from the perspective of the stakeholders themselves to learn more about their perceptions of presidential communication and their attempts to build social capital in an effort to influence presidential decisions.

Also, the faculty are one particular group that has a unique perspective on the topic of presidential communication. One chief of staff offered that typically presidents have some degree of experience as faculty so they understand the faculty lens on issues, but most chiefs of staff, communications directors, and government relations directors do not come from the faculty experience. In light of that, it would be fascinating to understand how those senior advisors with and without faculty experience differ in their insights and understanding regarding this topic.

Another area of further exploration could be to focus on presidents of institutions in other higher education sectors to determine if their concerns are similar and can be translated to other settings. As iterated in this study, presidents of R1 institutions may be more identifiable in their state and in the nation because of the influence of their university, but does a state college or regional university president have the same concerns or perceived limitations on their

communication? It would be worth exploring if presidents of all sectors feel equally anxious about the reactions by governing boards, government leaders, and other stakeholders.

Other changes in the research design could also produce different results. For instance, a case study that calls for researchers embedding themselves on one campus for six months could produce greater insights into the decision making process. Similarly, a case study in a university that suffered a dramatic setback because of a disastrous communication decision could provide important insights for university presidents. A comparative study of institutions in different regions of the country could produce data that indicate a regional or political bias to the decisions made. Much like Young and Pemberton (2017) analyzed presidential speeches for framing devices used to shape the vision of their institution, presidential speeches could also be analyzed for levels of identifiable political correctness.

Lastly, during interviews, social media was a frequent topic due to its wide-ranging influence, and its positive and negative impact. A study of presidents and their use of social media, especially platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, etc., would be timely and instructional to other presidents. Also, it would be informative to know how many presidents engage on social media themselves and how many have their communications staff post on their behalf.

Conclusion

Presidents of highly acclaimed research universities have earned a place among the stars of the educational world. They have the opportunity to position themselves as national thought leaders on issues of global consequence, but most university presidents choose to stay out of the communication spotlight. Only the rare university president believes that the benefits of speaking out on a national stage outweigh the risks of alienating stakeholders who may disagree with

stances taken on behalf of the university. Presidents are hired to acquire resources, improve graduation rates, prepare a workforce for the state, and be the institution's chief cheerleader and marketing officer. They spend time building relationships with various stakeholders and the political capital they need to advance their institution and their career. The risks of speaking out in world that is politically polarized, easily offended, and instantly connected is too great for many who have arrived at the peak of their academic career.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email for Presidents

PI: Libby V. Morris
Co-PI: Lynn M. Durham

Dear President X,

Thank you for talking with Georgia Tech President G. P. "Bud" Peterson about participating in my dissertation research. I am delighted to provide this additional detail and request for an in-person interview with you.

As the chief of staff to a university president for the past 9 years, I have become increasingly interested in influences on presidential communication. As a doctoral student in Higher Education at the University of Georgia, my dissertation is focused on the influences of stakeholders, as well as the influence of a president's perceived political capital on their decisions regarding communication with the campus community and beyond.

I am requesting an hour of your time for an in-person interview to explore how you and your senior advisors determine and describe the effect of stakeholder power and influence on communication decision making, and also if and how your perceived political capital with those stakeholders impacts your decisions regarding communication. I will send a separate email to your chief of staff, chief communications officer, and chief government relations officer asking them for an interview as well.

Your participation would be voluntary and confidential, and there are no expected risks. Neither you nor your university would be identified in the study. I would like to schedule a time to visit you in your office for an interview lasting up to one hour. At that time, I will provide a consent form and ask your permission to record the interview for analysis purposes. Once the dissertation is submitted and approved, the recordings will be destroyed. However, you may also choose not to be recorded and still participate in the study.

I understand the demands on your time and appreciate you considering this request. Please respond to this email (lmd75416@uga.edu) or call me at ***.***.****. If you agree to participate, I will work with your executive assistant to schedule a date and time at your convenience. I will also contact the senior advisors mentioned above to request their participation as well.

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,
Lynn M. Durham

Ed.D. Candidate, Institute of Higher Education
The University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602
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APPENDIX B

Recruitment Email for Senior Advisors to the President

PI: Libby V. Morris
Co-PI: Lynn M. Durham

Dear X,

President X has graciously agreed to be interviewed as part of my dissertation research. I would also like to interview you and several of your colleagues as part of this study.

As the chief of staff to a university president for the past 9 years, I have become increasingly interested in influences on presidential communication. As a doctoral student in Higher Education at the University of Georgia, my dissertation is focused on the influences of stakeholders, as well as the influence of a president's perceived political capital on their decisions regarding communication with the campus community and beyond.

I am requesting an hour of your time for an in-person interview to explore how you, as a senior advisor to the president, determine and describe the effect of stakeholder power and influence on communication decision making, and also if and how your president's perceived political capital with those stakeholders impacts decisions regarding communication.

Your participation would be voluntary and confidential, and there are no expected risks. Neither you nor your university would be identified in the study. I would like to schedule a time to visit you in your office for an interview lasting up to one hour. At that time, I will provide a consent form and ask your permission to record the interview for analysis purposes. Once the dissertation is submitted and approved, the recordings will be destroyed. However, you may also choose not to be recorded and still participate in the study.

I understand the demands on your time and appreciate you considering this request. Please respond to this email (lmd75416@uga.edu) or call me at ***.***.****. If you agree to participate, I will work with your assistant to schedule a date and time at your convenience, hopefully the same day as my interview with your president.

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,
Lynn M. Durham

Ed.D. Candidate, Institute of Higher Education
The University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602
lmd75416@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. This interview is completely voluntary and you may stop at any time or decide not to answer any specific question. I will not identify you or use any information that would make it possible for anyone to identify you any verbal or written aspects of this study. There is no expected risk to you for helping me with this study. There are no expected benefits to you either. May I begin?

I am studying the factors that affect presidential decision making in relation to communication decisions. In particular, I am interested to learn the impact of stakeholders regarding communication decisions and if political capital is a factor in decision making regarding communication. For purposes of this study, I define political capital in economic terms as the accumulation of resources and power that is built through relationships, trust, goodwill, and influence. Do you have any questions for me before I begin?

Decision Making

- Presidents make decisions all day, every day. How would you describe your/your president's decision making process?

Communication

- How would you describe your/your president's overall communications style or strategy?
- Specifically thinking of decisions regarding communication to internal and external stakeholders, how is the decision making process changed from what you previous told me?
- If you/your president are thinking about speaking out or writing about a controversial issue, on whom do you/your president depend to advise you regarding communication decisions?

Stakeholders

- Tell me what stakeholder groups come to mind when you/your president are making communication decisions.
- Which stakeholder groups do you consider more powerful than others and why?
- What makes them powerful and how do they have an impact on your university?
- Do those influential groups you just identified always have more influence than others or is it based on the situation?
- Some scholars have opined that presidents today no longer take public stands on issues of national importance. Do you think this is true? If so, why or why not do presidents speak out on issues?

Political Capital

- I am interested as to whether a president's political capital influences their communication decisions. How does your/your president's political capital play a role in communication decision making?
- I would like get your reaction to a scenario. Your students want you to make a public statement on a social justice issue but you know that some powerful legislators will be

angry if you make such a statement. With issues like this that are politically sensitive or controversial, how do you/your president decide whether to make the statement or not?
- Can you share with me a time when you made a decision NOT to communicate about a certain issue because of the impact it would have on your available political capital to be able to effectively do other aspects of your job?

Closing

- I appreciate your time and don't want to take too much of it, so let me wrap up by asking, Is there anything that I failed to ask that you would like to add to this?
- Is there any senior advisor other than the chief of staff, communication director, and government relations director that you include in communication decisions? If so, do you think it would be helpful to me to talk with that person?
- If I need clarification after I have transcribed this, may I email you with questions?