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Critical Feminist Perspectives: A Collective Case Study of LGBTQ+ People of Color Ascending to
the California Community College Presidency

by

Samuel Santos Jr.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Tolani Britton, Chair

Professor Lisa García Bedolla

Professor Jabari Mahiri

Spring 2024

Abstract

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Professor Tolani Britton, Chair

The U.S. college presidency remains predominantly white and male. However, trend data over the past several decades have documented increased diversity by race, gender, and race and gender (Green, 1988; Melidona et al., 2023). Still, LGBTQ+ college leadership has not been included in instrumentation resulting in a paucity of literature, with only two empirical studies published to date (Bullard, 2015; Leipold, 2014) that include LGBTQ+ as central subjects in the study of the college presidency. Although these studies were significant in centering queerness in the college presidency, they had a limited sample of almost exclusively white participants. Similarly, scholarship on the college presidency centering on race, gender, and the intersections of race and gender, take no formal accounting of LGBTQ+ identities. Driven by the urgent need to raise visibility and expand the discourse on diversity in the college presidency, this qualitative dissertation study explored how Queer Men of Color (N = 4) characterized their ascension to the college presidency using a critical collective case study approach (Yin, 2013). This study employed the theoretical frameworks and analytical tools of intersectionality ((CRC, 1974; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000) and queer theories (Hames-Garcia, 2011; Warner, 1991; Watson, 2005), and the data collection process involved in-depth interviews, a demographic survey, and site visits to understand the career ascension to the college presidency for four Queer Men of Color. Despite their unique and varied experiences, this study found participants pursued purpose-driven pathways specific to the community college context, with an unplanned ascension to the college presidency. Participants reported supportive relationships and career-advancing opportunities as key affordances along their career pathways. At the same time, they described their career journeys as challenged by varied experiences of stress connected to their multiple marginalized identities, both as LGBTQ+ and as People of Color. Study findings offer empirical support that leaders with multiple-marginalized identities, specifically Queer People of Color, face nuanced yet similar barriers and affordances in ascending to the college presidency. Implications for policy, practice, and future scholarship from this dissertation contribute to a growing line of inquiry concerned with challenging hegemonic notions of leadership and promoting increased diversity in leadership ascension, inclusive of Queer People of Color, most especially the college presidency, in ways that more closely reflect our diverse student communities.

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Dedication

With heartfelt gratitude, I dedicate this dissertation to the six participants who generously shared their experiences and insights with me. Your bold, liberatory, and courageous leadership is an inspiration to us all, and your contributions have enriched this research and the practice of educational leadership immeasurably.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my deep gratitude to the many people who have supported me during my doctoral journey. It has been a challenging process, and I could not have achieved this milestone without the generosity and care of so many individuals. First and foremost, I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Tolani Britton, my chair, Dr. Jabari Mahiri, and Dr. Lisa García Bedolla. Your guidance, feedback, and support were essential in navigating the dissertation process.

Second, throughout my academic career, I've been supported by the most outstanding scholars, teachers, and supporters, who have matched my efforts and curiosity with transformative, life-affirming classroom experiences. At UC, Berkeley: Dr. Shannon R. Waite, Dr. Denise Sadler, Dr. Özge Hacifazlıoğlu, Dr. Tesha Sengupta-Irving, and my biggest cheerleader, Dr. Lihi Rosenthal. At the University of Texas at San Antonio, where I majored in Chicana/o Studies, Dr. Josie Méndez-Negrete, Dr. Marie "Keta" Miranda, Dr. Norma Elia Cantú, Dr. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, and Dr. Lilliana Patricia Saldaña. Finally, at San Diego State, Dr. María Nieto Senour, Dr. Nola Butler-Byrd, and Dr. Cindy Corey supported my learning in the Community-Based Block (CBB) program, where I learned counseling skills and expanded my understanding of justice in ways that still resonate with me today.

Third, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work alongside and under the leadership of exceptional higher education professionals. Their guidance and mentorship have shaped my professional identity and fostered my personal growth and development. I want to specifically mention Agustín Orozco, Nick Mata, Dr. Jan E. Estrellado, Dr. Emelyn dela Peña, Dr. Shaun Travers, Sharon Hoshida, Dr. Lidia Jenkins, Linda Shaw, Dr. Sara Henry, Dr. Joseph Greenwell, Dr. Liza Alonzo, Dr. Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Dr. Tomikia P. LeGrande, and Dr. Susie Brubaker-Cole. And, of course, my chosen family, Dr. Mona Hicks -- thank you for the love, encouragement, clarity, joy, and affirmations.

Being part of the inaugural cohort of the Leaders for Equity and Democracy EdD program has been a privilege. Olufemi A. Ogundele, you're the real deal. Thank you for being my ride-or-die through this process—we are just getting started! To my home group A: nives, Mai Xi, and Tyler, we have achieved this milestone together! Melissa, thank you for always looking out for me - you are brilliant, and I'm so proud of us. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my family. This degree would not have been possible without your support and encouragement.

To my husband, Marc, your love is all I need. Thank you for always believing in me.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is well documented that the U.S. college presidency lacks diversity. Results of the first (1988) and most recent (2023) American College President Study (ACPS) reported the demographic profile of college leadership remains predominantly White (92% and 72.7%) and (cisgender) male (90% and 61%), respectively (Green, 1988; Melidona et al., 2023). This is in stark contrast to college student enrollment, which more closely reflects our diverse U.S. demographics: Women continue to outperform men in both enrollment and degree attainment (Parker, 2021), and as of 2016, 45% of all undergraduate students identify as being a race or ethnicity other than White (Espinosa et al., 2019). Moreover, the American Association of Community Colleges recently reported in *The State of Community College Leaders: 2023* reported similar challenges to diversity in the college presidency, finding the typical community college president also remains predominantly White (69%) and male (58.6%), with slightly more racial diversity—15.7% were Black, 7.1% Hispanic, 3.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2.2% American Indian (Royal et al., 2023). Although research on diversity in the college presidency has been conducted on gender (DiCroce, 1995; Eddy, 2003; Martin & O’Meara, 2017; Woollen, 2016), race (Burmicky, 2022; León & Martinez, 2013; Vaughan, 1989), and race and gender (Chen & Hune, 2011; Cipres, 1999; Gasman, 2011; Harris et al., 2011; Holmes, 2004; Muñoz, 2009; Phelps et al., 1997; Oikelome, 2017; Ramos, 2008; Turner, 2007; Wilson, 1989), significant gaps persist.

Problem Statement: Continual Exclusion of LGBTQ+ Leaders (of Color)

Missing from the discourse in the study of diversity in the U.S. college presidency is an accounting for LGBTQ+ identities. Pervasive anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes in society are reflected in the exclusion of queer leaders as research subjects, specifically in survey measures failing to include LGBTQ+ identities or omitting queerness entirely (Carrotte et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2023). Illustrative of this point, it took 3 decades and the dissemination of seven surveys before the American College President Study included survey questions that would begin efforts to capture the LGBTQ+ experience. The 2017 publication, for the first time, introduced both sexual orientation and gender measures offering the options of “heterosexual/straight, gay/lesbian, bisexual, or other” and included an option for “other” in the gender category. The survey found 4.5% identified as non-heterosexual (3.3% of respondents identify as gay, lesbian, 0.5% identified as bisexual, and 0.7% identify as “other,”) and 0.1% identify as “other” in the gender category. (Gagliardi et al., 2017, p. 110). The results of the most recent ACPS study reported a modest increase, 6.9% of participants identified as non-heterosexual (5.7% identified as gay or lesbian, 1.0% as bisexual, 0.2% as other), no respondents indicated they identified as nonbinary or other (Melidona et al., 2023, p. 94).

Still, the erasure of LGBTQ+ communities persists in survey instrumentation examining the college presidency. Both the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) *The State of the Community College Leadership: 2023* (Royal et al., 2023) and the *California Community College CEO Tenure & Retention Study, 10th Update* (Mitze, 2022) conducted by Community College League of California (CCLC) failed to include any mention of LGBTQ+ identities. Thus, the historical and persistent exclusion of LGBTQ+ leaders in education has left the field with a dearth of literature on LGBTQ+ college presidents—almost all available scholarship has been done in the form of doctoral dissertations (Bullard, 2013; Coon, 2001; Englert, 2018; Moore, 2017). Furthermore, the two published empirical studies on LGBTQ+ college presidents (Bullard, 2015; Leipold, 2014) also present limitations. Specifically, these studies almost exclusively include

participants who identify as White, able-bodied, lesbian/gay, middle-class participants, and cisgender—those whose gender identity aligns with what is normatively expected based on sex assignment at birth (Aultman, 2014). The field of higher education leadership research has yet to adequately consider LGBTQ+ People of Color as a subject of scholarly inquiry. Despite the growing scholarship on diversity in the college presidency that has explored race, gender, race and gender, and White gay and lesbian identities, these studies are limited with race scholarship omitting queerness and queer scholarship omitting race. Thus, this dissertation study aimed to contribute to this gap in the literature by exploring the intersection of race and queer identities as they relate to how college presidents ascribe meaning to their ascension to the college presidency.

Research Questions

This critical collective case study aimed to investigate how Queer Men of Color serving as community college presidents characterized their career ascension. This research project responded to the continual erasure and exclusion of LGBTQ+ identities at the intersections of race in the college presidency by asking:

1. How do Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension to the California Community College presidency?
 - a. In which ways do these characterizations reveal key affordances and challenges along the pathway to the presidency?
 - b. What can be learned from these accounts to improve and expand efforts toward further diversifying the college presidency?

Through these research questions, this study offered insight into how leaders with multiple marginalities, People of Color, and LGBTQ+ identities, ascribe meaning to their ascension to the college presidency. The focus on race and queerness is not to assume other dimensions of identity do not also shape the experiences of Queer People of Color, such as class, (dis)ability, national origin, and religion. The focus here on race and queerness is to address a clear gap in the scholarship base and the practical need for more expansive thinking in supporting a broader base of capable leaders reflective of our diverse democracy.

Overview of Research Design

This critical collective case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) examined the career ascension and reflections from LGBTQ+ People of Color on their current tenure as community college presidents. A qualitative collective case study approach was selected as it allows for an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives on the richness and complexity of a bounded social phenomenon (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The data methods included two instruments. First, a pre-interview demographic questionnaire was adapted from the ninth American College President Study (Melidona et al., 2023) conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE). The purpose of the survey was to obtain information on career pathways and demographic data with a more queer-inclusive lens. The second method, a semistructured, face-to-face interview, explored how participants characterized their ascension to the college presidency and their reflections on their current presidential appointments. The research paradigm selected was critical theory specifically for its attention to power relations, which aligned with the application of intersectionality supported by queer theory to design and conduct this study.

Definition of Key Terminology

This working list of key terminology highlights central constructs at the foundation of this dissertation. This study aspires to acknowledge self-identification with specificity. The use of LGBTQ+, People of Color, Queer, and Queer People of Color are offered as inclusive umbrella terms. Language is fluid and evolving, the terms LGBTQ+ is used to describe and identify people within the queer and trans spectrum. Similarly, People of Color is used to identify people who identify as non-White, including the spectrum of identities categorized as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. This is no way to signal that there are not vast intragroup differences among members of either LGBTQ+ or People of Color and the myriad of intersecting identities that are salient at the individual level. This dissertation uses more precise language when referring to specific identities in the literature to recognize the diversity within this initialism. It will defer to the specific terms used by participants in relevant sections.

Cisheteropatriarchy: A system of power based on the supremacy and dominance of cisgender heterosexual men through the exploitation and oppression of Women and the LGBTQIA+ community. This includes oppressive discriminations such as heterosexism, cissexism, sexism, queerphobia, homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, binarism, etc. (Harris, 2011; Smith, 2006).

Critical Theory: Is concerned with analyzing, “competing power interests between groups and individuals within a society—identifying who gains and who loses in specific situations” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 90)

LGBTQ+: is one of many inclusive rainbow acronyms and umbrella terms (LGBT, LGBTQIA+) for people who self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, or Questioning (Haymer et al., 2020) with the “+” sign acknowledging the boundless expressions of gender identities and sexual orientations within the spectrum of our community.

People of Color: In the context of this research, it is used to describe the sociocultural experiences of non-White-identifying people, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. To avoid the flattening of specific racial or ethnic identities, this dissertation will use more precise descriptors of race and ethnicity as articulated by the participants in this research and or the relevant literature. Finally, the style guide of the American Psychological Association explains that racial and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized (citation), therefore, People of Color will be offered in caps throughout this study.

Queer: This term has historically been used as a derogatory synonym of *homosexual*, over at least the past 50 years, in at least LGBTQ+ contexts, the term has been used as a term of empowerment, specifically a critical and political identity that challenges normative ideas about sexuality and gender (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013). Acknowledging the historical tension between degradation and resistance, this dissertation uses queer as an affirming inclusive umbrella term when referring to the multiplicity of identities represented in the LGBTQ+ acronym. Further, Cohen (1997) asserted queer politics stems from work done by People of Color and other marginalized communities, an additional rationale for the use of queer in this dissertation study.

Systems of power: The beliefs, practices, and cultural norms on which individual lives and institutions are built. They are rooted in social constructions of race and gender and embedded in history (colonization, slavery, migration, immigration, genocide) as well as present-day policies and practices. Systems of power feed the structural barriers that are the root causes of inequity (West-Bey & Bunts, 2018, p. 1).

Systemic and structural racism: These forms of racism are deeply rooted in various systems, such as laws, policies (both written and unwritten), cultural practices, and beliefs that produce, condone, and perpetuate unfair treatment of People of Color. These forms of racism are

pervasive and widespread, and they result in the systematic disadvantage and discrimination against People of Color (Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, with appendices and works cited. Chapter 1 introduces the study, followed by a problem statement and statement of purpose, outlines the research questions, offers a rationale and significance, and concludes with key terms central to this dissertation. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature, including relevant empirical and theoretical scholarship that frame the study of Queer Men of Color in the college presidency, and concludes with an articulation and rationale for the theories applied in this study – intersectionality and queer theories. Chapter 3 defines the methodology employed in this study, including the research paradigm, research design, site and participant selection, data collection methods, the process used for data analysis, and the formulation of the final findings. Chapter 4 describes each case with findings, and Chapter 5 concludes this dissertation study with a discussion, implications, and conclusion.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter situates this dissertation study within the context of related empirical literature, scholarly material, and theoretical frameworks used to ground this research. The chapter concludes with the specific ways this dissertation study contributes to gaps in the current literature. The review is organized into three parts: (a) a review of intersectionality and queer theories, both of which collectively provide the conceptual basis for the design of this study; (b) a brief exploration of the historical and macro-level manifestations of power within higher education, loosely arranged via the *matrix of domination framework* (Collins, 1990); and (c) a review of empirical scholarship on race, gender, queerness, and their emerging relationships, within the context of higher education.

Conceptual Framework

This section's purpose is to describe this study's theoretical underpinnings. Maxwell (2013) described conceptual frameworks as “the system concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support or inform your research” (p. 39). This study applied a critical theory research paradigm. Denzin (2017) described a critical theory paradigm as power-conscious and emancipatory by describing critical qualitative research with a worldview committed to exposing and critiquing how inequality and discrimination shape society, moving from merely interpreting the world toward activating interventions that tackle injustice for an inclusive, participatory democracy. Aligned with this orientation, intersectionality and queer theories provide the conceptual framing for this dissertation as they illuminate and critique taken-for-granted concepts, social dynamics, and power relations.

Intersectionality

The literature on intersectionality is extensive and interdisciplinary (Carastathis, 2016; Chan & Henesy, 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Hancock, 2017; Wekker, 2017). Among the key concerns regarding the use of intersectionality as a critical social theory in research is the misuse and misapplication of the core concepts across various disciplines, including higher education scholarship (Harris & Patton, 2019; Haynes et al., 2020; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Bilge (2013) explained *doing* intersectionality refers to how scholars apply the theory in their work and explain its potential to advance a radical social justice agenda that unveils structures of inequity and transforms individuals, institutions, and society. This study maintains a broad reflexive stance through Hancock's (2017) articulation of *stewardship*, which asks, “How do we care for intersectionality? How do we use it in ethical ways? How do we preserve intersectional theory and methods for future generations of feminist scholars and activists?” (p. 23). Toward unlocking the potential of intersectionality, or *doing* of intersectionality, this section responds to the first questions, first, caring for intersectionality and, second, using intersectionality in an ethical way.

Caring for Intersectionality in Definition and Application

Fundamental to caring for intersectionality is grappling with the full complexity of definition and application and, first, defining intersectionality. This dissertation draws from an array of articulations of intersectionality applied in various chapters throughout this study (CRC, 1974; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000). Although definitions vary, each is unified in capturing the complex and cumulative ways multiple forms of identity membership interact with co-constructing systems of power, a lens to examine where power interacts and collides, where it interlocks and intersects (Crenshaw, 2017). Attending to a purposeful definition is an essential act

of care—toward avoiding a common pitfall referred to as an *ornamental use* of intersectionality as a buzzword (Bilge, 2013; Hancock, 2017). Examples of a thin use of intersectionality typically offer a cursory overview of the complexity of intersectionality by reducing the theory to a discussion of intersecting identity categories, absent a discussion of power (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Harris & Patton, 2019). This dissertation will regularly define intersectionality throughout this study to ensure clarity and fidelity to meaning and intended application.

Second, caring for intersectionality requires attending to the full complexity of the theory (Collins & Bilge, 2020)—beyond simply naming identity categories or assuming an additive approach (e.g., race + class + LGBTQ+ identities; Hancock, 2007), intersectionality is rooted in examining how at any given moment multiple interlocking systems of power impact how a person (based on their social identities) are permitted to navigate the world. The elusive concept of power and power relations requires articulating a purposeful stance or approach. For this study, the work of Collins (1990), who articulated a framework for situating the unique experiences of multiply marginalized individuals within a *matrix of domination* characterized by intersecting systems of power, grounds this inquiry.

According to Collins (1990), oppression and resistance are linked and shape each other within a matrix of domination, explained it is “far more complex than a simple model of permanent oppressors and perpetual victims” (p. 292). Second, each matrix, the organization of power through dominance and resistance, is unique—that is, the arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression and matrices of domination—is historically and socially specific and must be identified and outlined in each specific sociopolitical context. Third, oppression and opportunities for resistance are exercised along four domains of power: *structural* (organizes power via large-scale organizations through laws, policies, and practices), *disciplinary* (enforces power via large slow, moving bureaucracies), *hegemonic* (justifies power and the right to rule or dominate), and *interpersonal* (how a multiply marginalized person experiences day to day interactions). This framework is referenced throughout this study and serves as a heuristic device toward unearthing, how multiple marginalized identities intersect at the micro level, or interpersonal domain of power, to reveal interlocking systems of oppression (i.e., racism, heterosexism, sexism, White supremacy) at the macro level or structural domain of power (Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989).

Caring for Intersectionality in Genealogy and Citation Practices

Although the term *intersectionality* was coined in the seminal work of Crenshaw (1989), Hancock (2017) imparted the importance of extending the arc of “intersectionality-like” thinking. Thus, caring for intersectionality requires acknowledging the robust genealogy of intersectionality-like thinking. First, the action imperatives of intersectionality originate outside of the academy, with a rich and flourishing tradition that can be traced to social movements heavily influenced by Black Women and other Women of Color (Chun & Shin, 2013). Hancock (2017) and Harris and Patton (2019) called for a recognition of the *foremothers* of intersectional-like thinking – intersectional-like thinking dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the work of Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Frances Harper, Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, and many others. These Black Women worked to activate a political consciousness through writing, poetry, and advocacy toward upending chattel slavery, lynching, and sexism, with a goal of accessing and activating full citizenship rights and participation in U.S. democracy (Jackson, 2021; Yee, 1992; Yellin, 1994).

In a second example of intersectionality’s activist roots in social movements, Collins and Bilge (2016) referred to the 1960s and 1970s as a period characterized by the convergence of social

movements, where racially marginalized groups united to confront the systemic disparities facing People of Color, Women, and sexual minorities. This time period serves as a critical point in the genealogy of intersectionality. The genesis of activating Women of Color in articulating systems of power as interlocking arose out of necessity—being neither fully seen in either racial justice or gender equity movements (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Hancock, 2017; Harris & Patton, 2019). In short, although Women of Color experienced some rewards, they also experienced the limits of their participation in gender and racial justice movements. This critical time period activated epistemologies that critiqued prevailing knowledge and articulated systems of power as interlocking some examples include Black feminism (Davis, 1983; Dill, 1983; hooks, 1981, 1984), Chicana feminisms (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981; Bernal, 1998; Rivera, 1973), and Asian feminisms (Chow, 1987; Fong, 1978; Wong, 1980; Woo, 1971).

Queering Intersectionality

Although a comprehensive discussion on the contributions of Women of Color is warranted, it is beyond the scope of this study. However, caring for intersectionality and germane to this dissertation study includes the seminal contributions from Queer Women of Color to the discourse on intersectionality. First, the Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977, written by self-identified Black Lesbian feminists: Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier, Cheryl Clarke, Akasha Hull, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Chirlane McCray, and Audre Lorde. This work is credited with coining *identity politics* to describe the unique position of Black women facing various forms of oppression. The declaration emphasized economic, sexual, and racial oppression and made the struggle on all fronts key to its emancipatory politics. The group offers a powerful explanation of its liberatory potential:

We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women, this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.

The declaration of the Combahee River Collective is an essential citation when referencing intersectionality, as it explicitly names systems of power as interconnected and calls for broader collective resistance strategies.

Second, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color* is also a cornerstone in intersectional-like thinking. This anthology, comprised of essays, interviews, testimonials, poetry, and art, coedited by self-identified Chicana Lesbian feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga (1981). This work centers the voices, experiences, and standpoints of Black, Chicana, Asian, Native, and other Women of Color as they express and name the multiple systems of power (white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, heteronormativity, imperialism) as interlocking and provide bold examples of resistance within the larger discourse of justice. Specifically, these texts directly address the outsider status faced by Women of Color within both a (White) feminist movement and larger racial justice movements, which often discount(s) or ignore(s) gender, naming the critical intragroup differences that women of color face within both feminist and antiracist movements. Importantly, they use their lives to theorize intersectionality-like thinking; these

contributions remain just as relevant today as they were at the time of their first publication over 4 decades ago.

In summary, caring for intersectionality necessitates honoring the intellectual labor of Black Women and Women of Color, as an essential practice of stewarding intersectionality. The political and consequential nature of citation practices has been underscored by many academics who assert that ignoring the genealogy of intersectionality has led to the marginalization and erasure of Women of Color, necessitates corrective measures that recognize and credit their contributions to scholarship (Bilge, 2013; Carastathis, 2016; Collins, 2015; May, 2015; Moradi et al., 2020; Keuchenius & Mügge, 2021). To this end, this dissertation traces and acknowledges the long arc of intersectionality-like thinking by naming a few of the many Women of Color who, in activist spaces, served as the foremothers of intersectionality, not as an academic theory, rather out of necessity, an expression of unjust power relations that persist, even today.

Queer Theory

Queer theory critiques the systems of cissexism (Puckett et al., 2021) and heteronormativity (Warner, 1991) that work as interlocking systems of power to institutionalize and regulate sexual and gender expressions. First, *heteronormativity*, coined by queer theorist Warner (1991), describes how heterosexuality is framed as the hegemonic norm in society, positioning queerness as “other.” Numerous scholars contribute to this framing by highlighting the marginality of non-heterosexual experiences (Butler, 1990; Hames-García, 2011; McRuer, 2003). Second, *cisgender*, coined by Sigusch (1991), describes the gender identification of individuals who experience that their assigned sex aligns with their assigned sex (determined at birth based on genitals, often codified in official governmental documents) aligns with their gender identity (a person's sense of self along the spectrum of gender, commonly expressed in a binary system of male or female). Serano (2007) explained that cisgender or cissexual designates “people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned” (p. 12). Puckett et al. (2021) described a *system of cissexism* that defines the cisnormative experiences of trans people in everyday life. These may include “non-affirmation” (e.g., “misgendering” by using incorrect pronouns) and the stress experienced upon hearing how other trans* people are oppressed.

Together heteronormativity and cissexism work as interlocking systems of power that heighten body vigilance, compelling queer bodies to regulate how they embody or resist gender and desire expression, most impactfully for trans, queer people, who describe living in a state of high alert as they continuously disrupt dominant systems of (cis)gender and heterosexual hegemony (Connell, 2010; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2019; Wirtz et al., 2020). Queer theory, then, as a field of study, challenges and disrupts “traditional” notions of gender, gender expression, sexual identity, and sexual expression by naming the various systems of power, namely heteronormativity and cissexism. Thus, queer theory provides a framework for resisting heteronormativity (Watson, 2005) and systems of cissexism. Further, queer theory is an exercise in discourse analysis; it takes very seriously the significance of words and the power of language (Giffney, 2009).

Still, queer theory has also been critiqued for centering a white, middle-class, cis-hetero dominant narrative (Riggs et al., 2019). Hames-García (2011) challenges the field of queer studies and scholars who frame queer theory, the critique of gender, binaries, heterosexism, as new approach offering alternative genealogy of past and ongoing considerations of class, gender, race, and sexuality including the work of many Queer People of Color as predating the popularity of queer theory. By ignoring the rich scholarship of Queer People of Color, queer theory then creates a hierarchical structure that centers a White, gay, middle-class, heteronormative narrative rendering

the rich heterogeneity of the queer spectrum of experiences informed by race, class, ability, nation, as “othered,” within the LGBTQ+ discourse and broader mainstream narrative of queerness.

Historical and Macrolevel Manifestations of Power Within Higher Education

Central to applying intersectionality is attention to the various interlocking structures of power that shape the lives of individuals with multiple marginalized identities (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Furthermore, using intersectionality as a theoretical lens, and tied to the roots in social movements, accounting for sociohistorical forces of marginalization—positioned within historical, economic and political contexts. This section applies intersectionality toward uncovering how systems of power actualize within the context of higher education. Specifically, *the matrix of domination* (Collins, 1990) serves as an organizing frame for relevant scholarship. As Collins (1990) asserted, any matrix of domination has two attributes: first, each is unique—the arrangement of any particular *matrix of domination* is socially and historically contextual. Many scholars from the interpretive community of intersectionality underscore the importance of examining macrolevel structures, not just microlevel structures, stating the criticality of attention to both as necessary in implementing intersectionality to its full potential (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Guidroz & Berger, 2009; Luft & Ward, 2009; May, 2016). This brief review explores how some macrolevel forces manifest within higher education as a context for the focus of this study— Queer Men of Color in the college presidency.

As a review, the structural domain *organizes power* via large-scale social institutions (e.g., the legal system, the housing market, banking, schools) by systematically developing laws, policies, and procedures that regulate and organize hierarchies of citizenship rights. Meanwhile, the disciplinary domain of power *enforces power* via bureaucratic processes or operationalizes organizational protocol to operationalize the structural domain of power (Collins, 1990). As these domains are critically linked, this section offers examples, rooted in historical context, of how large-scale social institutions (structural)—education, medical, legal, and legislative systems are implicated in enforcing, via large-scale bureaucracies (disciplinary), unjust power relations for racial, gender, and sexual minorities within the context of higher education.

Organizing and Enforcing White Supremacy

White supremacy, as a system of power, is ingrained into the establishment of U.S. higher education, and its imprint remains palpable (Patton, 2016). Although this can be demonstrated in multiple ways, two examples are reviewed to help situate this study: the institutional ties between higher education and (a) the violence and dispossession of land from Native Americans and (b) the exploitation of Black people via chattel slavery (Auslander, 2010; Beckert et al., 2017; Brophy, 2008; Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, 2006; Clarke & Fine, 2010; Green, 2015; Rainville, 2019; Stein, 2016). Only in the past two decades have our nation’s founding colleges and universities embarked on a more accurate accounting of the convergence of race, property, and oppression and its role in shaping higher education in the United States (Patton, 2016).

The Roots of the Racial Order, Enslavement

From even before the United States of America's inception in 1776 through 1865, the legal institution of human chattel slavery—which included the enslavement of Africans and African Americans—was widely practiced, mostly in the South (Tise, 1990). Mapping the domains of power framework—the large-scale institution here, the nation’s first government (structural domain) comprising the 13 colonies authored and ratified the Articles of Confederation, which upheld the institution of slavery (disciplinary domain) by prohibiting the banning of the importation

of slaves (U.S. Const. art. I, § 9), the counting of enslaved Black people as three fifths of White inhabitants of each state (U.S. Const. art. I, § 2), and a “fugitive slave clause,” requiring an escaped enslaved person to be returned to their owner (U.S. Const. art. IV, § 2). Specific to the context of higher education, people who were enslaved provided labor for a century and a half at the oldest colleges and universities in the United States. Several of America's most revered colleges—from private institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Rutgers, and Williams College to public colleges such as the University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina all have direct links to legacies of human bondage (Wilder, 2013). Housed at the University of Virginia, the Universities Studying Slavery (USS), a consortium of over ninety institutions in the United States, Canada, Colombia, Scotland, Ireland, and England, collectively focus on accurately accounting for how their respective institutions benefited from the slave economy, sharing best practices on addressing these connections (Universities Studying Slavery, 2022).

The Roots of the Racial Order, Dispossession of Land, and Denied Access

Second, the manifestation of power within the structural and disciplinary domains can be traced to the nation’s first public colleges and universities. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 and the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 established the three institutional categories of the land-grant system, now known as the 1862, first land-grant institutions, 1890, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and 1994 tribal colleges and universities (TCUs). Here, the federal government (structural domain) organized laws and policies through congressional action (disciplinary domain) which codified macro-level discriminatory policies that continue to resonate today.

The First Morrill Act of 1862, passed by congress and signed into law by the President Lincoln, expropriated Indigenous land acquired through treaties and outright seizures, through the development or sale of associated federal land grants to create the land-grant college system of agricultural and mechanical arts colleges to promote the education of (White, male, Christian) U.S. citizens of average means (Croft, 2019). It has been reported that the U.S. government seized 10.7 million acres from more than 250 tribal nations to benefit 52 U.S. colleges in this process, granting each state 30,000 acres of public land (Stewart-Ambo, 2021). Further, the First Act established at least one college in every state to be “accessible to all, but especially to the sons of toil” but not every person—this was 3 years before chattel slavery was abolished. So, although these institutions expanded access to those of “average means” to thousands of farmers and working White people previously excluded from higher education, they were not broadly accessible to Women, Black, or other People of Color (Williams, 2020).

Still, even after the Civil War and abolition of chattel slavery, Black People (and other People of Color) were not permitted to attend land grant universities of 1862 (Watkins, 2024). Toward addressing the state-sanctioned discrimination against Black people, the Second Morrill Act of 1890 designated 19 institutions as land-grant universities in states where segregation and discrimination prevented Black students from attending public land-grant institutions of the First Morrill Act (Williams, 2020). Unlike the First Morrill Act of 1862, which provided funding and 30,000 acres of land in every state for historically white Land-Grant Universities, the Second Morrill Act of 1890, for historically Black Colleges and Universities, only mandated that funding for education be distributed annually on a “just and equitable basis” as deemed by the state, with no allocation of land (Davison, 2022). Further, a recent report for the federal government announced that the land-grant universities of the Second Morrill Act have been underfunded by at least 12.8 billion dollars over the last thirty years across sixteen states. (Harris, 2023). Similarly, the 1994

TCUs received modest support, with researchers noting nothing similarly sized in terms of funding or land that was offered to 1862 institutions (Williams et al., 2022). Both HBCUs and TCUs were founded to remediate race-based discrimination, yet this discrimination is further compounded by the inequitable distribution of resources to support HBCUs and TCUs in the same manner 1862 land-grant universities have been supported.

Mapped to the domains of power, large-scale institutions at the structural level (the federal and state governments) operationalized and legislated a two-tier system inequitable system, where White-only, land-grant institutions were assigned 30,000 acres, large portions of which were seized from Native communities, and then permitted to discriminate against Black and Indigenous communities in both admissions and allocation of federal and state resources (disciplinary domain), supported by pervasive racist beliefs that justify (cultural domain) persistent discriminatory treatment. Thus, the formation of land-grant institutions is a prime example of how historical macrolevel forces via the convergence of race, property, and oppression shaped and continue to influence the nation's higher education system (Patton, 2016), rooted in legacies of sexism and white supremacy.

Collectively, these examples: the legacy of chattel slavery and its benefits to higher education, the dispossession of land from Native Americans, and the subpar support of Black land-grant institutions offer some insight on a historical legacy of white supremacy at a macro level, the effects of which are still felt today. These examples of unjust power relations are offered as macrolevel examples that contextualize how the historical exclusion of racial and gender minorities is baked into the system of higher education. Further, this context provides the critical linkage between the historical overt practices of discrimination and the current landscape of higher education that reports the college presidency as remaining older, White, and male (Melidona et al., 2023).

Queers, Education, and the Legacy of Exclusion Structural and Disciplinary Domains of Power

This second section of macrolevel forces, organized with the structural and disciplinary domains of power, contextualizes the organization and application of unjust power relations for those with LGBTQ+ identities. Specifically, this section discusses seminal literature, historical events, and administrative levers of violence targeting LGBTQ+ communities. This evidence elucidates how LGBTQ+ communities were ostracized on and off college campuses. The mid-20th century offers examples of a groundswell of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment codified—laws, Presidential Executive Orders, and the pathologizing of queerness.

Mapped along the domains-of-power framework (Collins, 1990), a clear case of LGBTQ+ exclusion, domination, and subjugation emerges. First, in 1950, a Senate subcommittee report titled *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government* concluded, “It is the opinion of this subcommittee that those who engage in acts of homosexuality and other perverted-sex activities are unsuitable for employment in the Federal Government” (U.S. Senate, 1, p. 19). Second, this was immediately followed by the 1952 Executive Order 10450, enacted by President Eisenhower, barring gay and lesbian Americans from federal employment. The momentum to ostracize LGBTQ+ communities was codified in 1952 with the inaugural publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM, 1952). The American Psychiatric Association (APA) listed homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disturbance (Drescher, 2015). It was not until the third APA publication of the DSM in 1974 that homosexuality was removed as a disturbance. Meanwhile, the trans community first appeared in the DSM-III (1980) under the

category gender identity disorders, which was used to categorize “transsexuality, gender identity disorder of childhood, and transvestic fetishism.” The DSM-IV (1994) combined “transsexualism” with “gender identity disorder of childhood” into an overarching heading/diagnosis of “gender identity disorder.” In the DSM-V (2013), the category revised the diagnosis name to “gender dysphoria.” Critical to note here is that not all trans people experience “gender dysphoria,” and not all people who experience “gender dysphoria” are trans identified. In both examples, pathologizing homosexuality and gender identity as disorders, we find linkages to the matrix of domination and Collins’s (1990) four domains of power. The medical diagnosis (structural); the enforcement and punishment for identifying with either gay or trans (disciplinary); the identification and naming by the society of gay/trans as abnormal/deviant (cultural); and the rejection of queer people by employers, families, and close social networks (interpersonal) represent the four domains. These pivotal sociohistorical events can be mapped to college campuses. The legacy of purging LGBTQ+ faculty and students first emerged in the 1920s and peaked in the 1950s.

Enforcement of Domination – The LGBTQ+ Purge in Education

The earliest documented assaults on LGBTQ+ students and faculty are referred to as Harvard’s Secret Court. In the spring/summer of 1920, an ad hoc committee led by acting Dean Chester Noyes Greenough investigated charges of “homosexual activity,” resulting in eight students, one alum, and an assistant professor being pushed out of Harvard University (Paley, 2002; Wright, 2005). Due to the taboo nature of discussing sex and the failure to recognize these acts as discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities, a complete history of purging queer people on college campuses is lacking. During the 1940s, LGBTQ+ students and faculty members were systematically removed from universities across the United States. This was done through coordinated efforts by the administrative structures of campus health services, university police, faculty, and administration. The goal was to purge the campus of LGBTQ+ communities. Some of the universities where queer students and faculty were targeted include the University of Texas, where at least ten faculty members and over a dozen students were documented to have been removed in 1944; the University of Missouri, which counted approximately five students; and the University of Wisconsin, where five collegians, including some recent veterans attending college with the support of the GI Bill, were removed in 1948 (Nash & Silverman, 2015).

The purge continued into the 1960s—the most egregious credited to the state of Florida. The State Legislature created the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (The Johns Committee, Laws of Florida, 1956, Chapter 31498). Renewed in subsequent sessions, the 1961 legislation specifically expanded the charge of the committee to investigate “the extent of infiltration into agencies supported by state funds by practicing homosexuals,” resulting in the firing of 39 university professors and deans and 71 public school teachers (Graves, 2006, 2009, 2014; Poucher, 2014; Schnur, 2014). Additional examples include the Oklahoma legislature’s approval of HB 1629, Oklahoma’s “Teacher Fitness Law” (1978), permitting the firing of LGBTQ+ teachers for “public homosexual conduct” (Rosky, 2017). Meanwhile, in California, the Briggs Initiative holds the record as the first attempt at a state-wide ballot referendum (Proposition 6, 1978) that aimed to “dismiss and deny employment who has engaged in public homosexual activity or public conduct.” The referendum failed.

These consequential cases, and there are others, are critical examples of the more significant point—the numerous overtly discriminatory laws, policies, and publications that sought to further an agenda to demoralize, denigrate, and disappear LGBTQ+ folks from public life, including university campuses. Applying the domains-of-power framing, these key examples

elucidate that LGBTQ+ communities were systematically targeted as inferior subjects unworthy of place and space on college campuses (cultural domain). State-sponsored discrimination in the form of laws, legislative committees and pathologized mental designations organized by the federal government and APA (structural domain), while the enforcement of these laws, rules, and policies maps to the disciplinary domain. The normalized notions of deviance and disease (cultural domain) and finally, the state-sponsored discrimination imposing fear in the settings of employment affecting the lives of countless LGBTQ+ people maps to the interpersonal domain.

Summary

The goal of this research was to explore and make visible the dimensions of race and queerness in career pathways and ascension to the college presidency.

This review of literature identifying the macro-level historical conditions, the roots of white supremacy and heterosexism in higher education, offers the necessary context toward understanding why higher education has and remains unwelcoming of leaders who disrupt the racial and heterosexist order and notions of college leadership. Although discourse on the study of the college presidency has only recently begun to consider intersectional identities, namely Women of Color, this research is limited to gender and race, only, absent the consideration of LGBTQ+ identities, discussed in more detail in the sections below.

Empirical Research, Race, Sexuality and Leadership in Higher Education

The final section of this literature review examines empirical scholarship on race, gender, queerness, and their emerging relationships within the context of higher education; research on diversity in the college presidency concludes this chapter.

Race and College Leadership

Data support the centrality of Whiteness in college leadership. White men continue to hold the largest share of uppermost faculty positions and full professorships, in academia (Espinosa et al., 2019) and are the most highly represented demographic of the college presidency: 83.1% of male college presidents were White men in 2017 (Gagliardi et al., 2017), and 74.8% in 2023 (Melidona et al., 2023). Additionally, as of 2021, nearly 80% of trustees at private colleges were White, and nearly two thirds were male, according to the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, while at public institutions, 65% were White and 63% were men (McBain & Powell, 2021). White supremacy is ingrained into the establishment of U.S. higher education, and its imprint remains palpable (Patton, 2016). Beginning with access to leadership, the first university presidents in 1636 were White men selected from the ranks of the clergy or ministry (Reuben, 1996). This trend continued for presidential selections until the early 20th century. Since 1986, the American Council on Education has published nine studies on the U.S. college presidency, examining leadership attributes and ascension pathways and documenting some measures of compositional diversity. Table 1 offers a snapshot of the identity categories of gender and race. This table is offered as context to help frame one dimension of the problem of practice at the center of this dissertation study, the compositional diversity of the U.S. college presidency.

Table 1

Characteristics of College Presidents 1986–2023 by Race and Sex

Identity	1998	1990	1998*	2000	2002	2007	2011	2017	2023
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men	90	88	–	81	79	77	73.6	70	61
white	93	90.4	–	89	87	86.4	87.4	83	72.7

Note. * Despite persistent efforts, this study could not be located and is not available in digital format.

Race and Sexuality and the College Presidency

Research on the interconnectedness of gender, race, and sexuality in higher education is a slowly emerging field. In “LGBT and Queer Research in Higher Education: The State and Status of the Field,” Renn (2010) offered the following themes of literature in the field from 1974 to 2010: visibility, identity development, and campus climate, each domain almost exclusively focused on collegians. Most relevant for this discussion, the author offers that a review of queer scholarship reveals how White, able-bodied, and middle-class are assumed norms (Renn, 2010). In a second critical review on queer collegians of color, Duran (2019) offered a comprehensive review concluding that progress has been made in scholarship on sexuality and race. Some of these examples include how queer collegians negotiate climate and identity, and race, with a tailored focus on the experiences of Black (Blockett, 2017; Coleman et al., 2020; Means et al., 2018), Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander (AAPI; Chan, 2017; Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016; Strayhorn, 2014), Latina/o (Duran, 2020; Peña-Talamantes, 2013), and trans identities (Garvey et al., 2019; Simms, 2021).

Despite the growing scholarship on race and sexuality among collegians, there remains a dearth of research on LGBTQ+ People of Color in faculty or leadership roles. Research on diversity among faculty has explored race and racism (Brayboy, 2003; Dade et al., 2015; Stanley, 2006), Women of Color in faculty (Evans, 2007; Harley, 2008; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Turner, 2002; Turner & González, 2011). Although studies on LGBTQ+ faculty (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Garvey & Rankin, 2018; LaSala et al., 2008; Messenger, 2011; Morales-Diaz, 2014; Vaccaro, 2012) have been critiqued for centering the experiences of White persons and omitting the spectrum of LGBTQ+ experiences (Nadal, 2019). The limited research available covers the following topics: an overview of the experiences of LGBTQ+ People of Color in higher education (Aguilar et al., 2017), the experiences of multiracial faculty and nonbinary trans faculty (Harris & Nicolazzo, 2020), and the pipeline for LGBTQ+ faculty of color (Nadal, 2019). Finally, as previously mentioned, the two empirical studies on the experiences of LGBTQ+ college presidents (Bullard, 2015; Leipold, 2014) included only White cisgender participants, offering no mention of race or other intersectional identities.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities are prime settings for inquiry to deepen understanding of how inequities by gender, race, and LGBTQ+ identities are upheld and reproduced. One specific line of inquiry in postsecondary settings includes exploring how LGBTQ+ education leaders of color ascend to the college presidency. Specifically, understanding how LGBTQ+ college presidents of color at California Community Colleges characterize systems of power as they ascend and in their current tenure as leaders offers critical insights toward supporting further diversity in the college presidency. The experiences of LGBTQ+ People of Color are not merely an issue of inclusion; it is also a matter of justice. The dearth of literature on LGBTQ+ People of Color sets the context and pressing need for this study.

This chapter reviewed related empirical literature, scholarly material, and theoretical frameworks used to ground this research, organized into three parts: (a) a review of intersectionality

and queer theories, both of which collectively provide the conceptual basis for the design of this study; (b) a brief exploration of the historical and macrolevel manifestations of power within higher education, loosely arranged via the *matrix of domination framework* (Collins, 1990); and (c) a review of some empirical scholarship on race, gender, queerness, and their emerging relationships, within the context of higher education. Next, Chapter 3 discusses the methodological approach that supported this inquiry.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodological approach that guided this inquiry and is organized into seven sections: (a) research approach, (b) research design, (c) preparing for the case study, (d) data sources, (e) establishing trustworthiness, (f) analytical approach, and (g) summary. The research questions that informed this study were:

1. How do Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension to the California Community College presidency?
 - a. In which ways do these characterizations reveal key affordances and challenges along the pathway to the presidency?
 - b. What can be learned from these accounts to improve and expand efforts toward further diversifying the college presidency?

Research Approach

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described research paradigms as the ontological, epistemological, and methodological ideas held by the researcher's "net" and the "taken for granted" elements of a paradigm as "first principles, or ultimates" (p. 183). The research paradigm for this study was based on critical theory. The term "critical" denotes the ability to question the underlying theories and methods of knowledge, to pose inquiries that challenge the commonly accepted beliefs, and to recognize the influence of power and social status in different phenomena (Denzin, 2017). Guba and Lincoln (1994) described the ontology of the critical paradigm as historical realism, the view that reality has been shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values. Critical theory's epistemology is subjectivism, which is based on real-world phenomena and linked with societal ideology. In sum, a critical theory paradigm was selected for the current study because it centers on the experiences of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups and challenges the power structures that sustain systemic oppression (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Related, Capper (2018) explained critically oriented epistemologies include queer theory and intersectionality, the theoretical frameworks that grounded this critical collective case study.

Methodological Approach

Aligned with the research goal of understanding the career ascension of Queer Men of Color to the college presidency, qualitative methods provide a systemic inquiry into social phenomena by facilitating the exploration of rich contextual data about people's lives (Bowleg et al., 2003; Patton, 2002). Furthermore, a case-study approach (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) was selected for its in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives on the richness and complexity of a bounded social phenomenon.

Research Design

The research design section further explains the selection of a case study approach, research setting, sampling strategy, recruitment strategy, and participant selection.

Case Study Design

This study was guided by the work of leading case study methodologists: Merriam (1998), Stake (1995), and Yin (2018). During the research design phase, which Yin (2013) described as creating the blueprint for case study research, meticulous decisions were made regarding the specific type of case study design as well as binding the unit of analysis. First, a multiple-case study

(Yin, 2013), also known as a collective case study (Stake, 1999), was selected, as it allows for two or more cases to investigate the same phenomena. The difference between the single and multiple case studies is the research design; however, they are within the same methodological framework (Yin, 2013). This study used four distinct cases, which allowed for the exploration of a range of experiences (Baxter & Jack, 2008), useful for comparison and contrast, and to gain new analytical insights on the research aims of this study, Queer Men of Color serving in the community college presidency. Second, binding the case: Another critical aspect of case study research is delimiting and defining the case or unit of analysis. Yin (2013) and Stake (1995) have suggested binding the case ensures the study remains reasonable in scope. Suggestions on how to bind a case include (a) by time and place (Creswell, 2003), (b) by time and activity (Stake, 1995), or (c) by definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Here, the unit of analysis was bound to LGBTQ+ People of Color serving as California Community College presidents.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at four distinct colleges within the California Community Colleges system to facilitate maximum variation in sample characteristics (Yin, 2013). The California Community Colleges is the largest system of higher education in the nation, with more than 1.9 million students attending its 116 colleges in the 2022–2023 academic year (“Key Facts,” 2024). The Board of Governors for the California Community Colleges sets policy and provides guidance to its colleges, which are organized into 73 districts, and each district has a locally elected board of trustees charged with the operations of the colleges. The colleges operate under a system of shared governance. The State's 73 community college districts vary in size and composition, with 49 of the districts consisting of a single college and the remaining 24 districts containing two or more colleges, with the multicollege districts averaging three colleges but having as many as nine. The system is also distinct for its student population: one third report they are the first in their family to attend college, and more than 70% are people of diverse ethnic backgrounds (“Key Facts,” 2024). The research sites for this study were four separate colleges within the California Community Colleges system. Table X offers an overview of the research sites for the study.

Table 2

Research Sites

Pseudonyms	Student headcount	District type	Setting description	Federal designations: Minority Serving Institution (MSI) status
Serrano Community College	13,000	multicollege district 1 of 3	150 acres of sloping hillside land.	(1) Hispanic Serving Institution
Tamyen Creek Community College	17,500	multicollege district 1 of 2	constructed on 112 acres of what was once a turn-of-the-century wine-producing estate	(1) Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (2) Hispanic Serving Institution
Miwok Valley Community College	15,506	multicollege district 1 of 2	combines small college environment with more than 60 acres of modern facilities	(1) Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (2) Emerging Hispanic Serving Institution
Chumash Beach Community College	34,450	single college district, with 2 campuses	first campus occupies 112 acres in suburban area, while the main campus is a 30-acre site in an urban setting	(1) Hispanic Serving Institution

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who were most likely to provide relevant and useful information (Kelly, 2010). This strategy involved identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals exceptionally knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In a qualitative research study, a relatively small and purposively selected sample may be employed (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to increase the depth (as opposed to breadth) of understanding (Palinkas et al., 2015)—the sampling strategy aimed for maximum variation within the purposefully selected participants (Patton, 2002). Recruitment was flexible and occurred over 6 months, and while recruiting, three participants out of a total of eight were not selected as they did not meet all three inclusion criteria. In addition to the pilot case study, five participants were identified, with four agreeing to participate in the study.

Recruitment Strategies

Participants for this study were college presidents, described by qualitative researchers as elite participants, subjects with high decision-making authority within a formal or informal organization (Morse, 2019). To gain access to these participants, the following strategies were used: (a) leveraged existing sponsored connections from professional networks (Dicce & Ewers, 2020) in NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and LGBTQ Leaders in Higher Education, (b) used current education and employment credentials to gain direct and indirect access (Mikecz, 2012), and (c) relied on purposive and snowball sampling (Maxwell, 2013).

Participant Selection

The inclusion criteria consistently, reliably, uniformly, and objectively identified the research population, with all three required to participate in the study.

1. Currently serving as a California Community College president
2. Self-identify as a Person of Color (non-White)
3. Self-identify as an “out” member of the LGBTQ+ community

The study yielded a sample of four participants for the study. Table X offers a preview of participants. A more detailed description of each case is offered in the Overview of Cases section in

Chapter 4. The terms describing ethnic identity, LGBTQ+ affiliation, and gender identity are the preferred self-identified terms each participant used.

Table 3
Research Participants

Pseudonym	Ethnic identity	LGBTQ+ affiliation	Gender identity	Job title
Dr. Hughes	Nigerian, Black	gay	man	President
Dr. Madsen	African American	gay	man	President
Dr. Naranjo	Latino, Cuban	gay	cisgender male	President
Dr. Playa	Latino	queer	cisgender male	Superintendent and president

Preparing for the Case Study: Pilot Case Study

As Yin (2014) recommended, a pilot study was conducted as part of the research process to refine the research methodology and data collection plans before conducting the main study. The pilot study involved two additional participants and was highly influential in two ways. First, in updating questions from the semistructured interview guide and, second, adjusting the data collection format for the interviews from Zoom to in-person interviews, in the offices of each participant. The pilot study also provided the opportunity to practice interviewing with participants (Prescott & Soeker, 1999). All these improvements are documented in a reflective memo (Dooley, 2002) and have been used to update the final case study protocol accordingly, contributing to the larger chain of evidence in the case study database. Tables 4 and 5 offer insight into both the participants and the research sites for the pilot study conducted in advance of the dissertation study. The terms describing ethnic identity, LGBTQ+ affiliation, and gender identity are the preferred self-identified terms each participant used.

Table 4
Pilot Study Research Participants

Pseudonym	Ethnic identity	LGBTQ+ affiliation	Gender identity	Job title
Dr. Salazar	Chicana	queer, pansexual	cisgender-female	President
Mr. Zepeda	Latino, Mexican-American	gay	cisgender -male	Vice president, Student Services

Table 5
Pilot Study Research Sites

Pseudonym	Student headcount	District type	Setting description	Federal designations: Minority Serving Institution (MSI) status
Dr. Salazar	6,500	multicollege district 1 of 4 colleges	six-story, 165,000 square foot urban campus	(1) Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (2) Hispanic Serving Institution
Mr. Zepeda	25,000	single college district	38-acre main campus less than two miles from the beach and six satellite campuses	(1) Hispanic Serving Institution

Data Sources

In case study research, the researcher collects extensive data on the individual(s), program(s), or event(s) (Leedy & Omrod, 2001). The three data sources for the current study included a pre-interview demographic questionnaire (see Appendix X), an in-person interview using a semistructured interview guide (see Appendix X), and the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER) completed by each college. A brief description of each data source is provided in the sections following the ethical assurances secured for this study.

Institutional Review Boards Approval – Ethical Assurances

In keeping with ethical research practices, to protect the rights and welfare of all human participants, and compliance with federal, state, and university policy, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of California, Berkeley was secured before data collection. After securing IRB approval, outreach via email clearly stating the study objectives was sent to potential participants to request participation in the research and to request an in-person appointment to conduct the interviews. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained, providing each participant with an understanding of the research project and requiring agreement as a voluntary participant. The informed consent protects participants' privacy and ensures confidentiality (Yin, 2014). The approved IRB application, informed consent document, and outreach email stating research objectives are found in Appendix X.

Pre-Interview Demographic Questionnaire

Questions were adapted from the ninth study, the American College President Study (ACPS), conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) in 1986; this study is one of the most frequently cited sources of information on the college presidency (Melidona, 2023). The following edits were made: (a) questions were reduced from 70 to 15; (b) topics explored included career pathways, identities, and family; and (c) substantial changes were made to questions related to gender and sexuality identity, as the ACPS survey offered limited options. This questionnaire aimed to understand key affordances and barriers influencing career ascension for participants; this instrumentation was added to the case study protocol for consistency and to address any challenges in capturing this level of detail during the semistructured interview. Finally, as the sample size of this study was relatively small ($n = 4$), these data were not intended to essentialize these experiences as representative of any one identity category but rather offer a more accessible way to understand nuances and complexity.

Semistructured Interview

According to Taylor (2005), interviews are the most popular approach for gathering qualitative data, and the semistructured format is the most often used interview strategy (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Yin (2013) characterized interviews as essential for case study evidence since most case studies are about people bound within a specific context. Interviews are also aligned with the goals of case study research, seeking in-depth understanding within the real-life context (Naz & Aslam, 2022). A semistructured approach allowed the interview questions to remain focused on critical issues related to the research questions while simultaneously allowing participants some flexibility and latitude in describing their experiences and opinions toward particular issues (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Finally, a semistructured interview guide (see Appendix X) was developed to make the most of interview time, explore an extensive range of questions in a more methodical, thorough, and consistent manner (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), and maintain the interview's focus.

Institutional Self-Evaluation Report

Every 7 years, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) conducts a rigorous review process to ensure colleges are maintaining their accreditation eligibility requirements, adhering to accreditation standards, and following commission policies. The process begins with each institution creating an Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER), which the college's participatory governance committee compiles. The ISER thoroughly analyzes the college's data, providing a self-reflective assessment of how it meets the ACCJC's standards. The ISER of each institution was used to compile case study overviews and contextualize the setting of each participant in this study.

Establishing Trustworthiness

This section explores strategies to establish trustworthiness in this study, including reflexivity strategies, a case study database, and triangulation of data sources (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity

The distinguishing characteristic of feminist qualitative research is the emphasis on reflexivity and reflection throughout the research process (Travers, 2001). Reflexivity was practiced using three of the four reflective practices organized by Walsh's (2003) typology of reflective practices, as well as peer debriefing. A brief discussion of each strategy is provided below.

Personal Reflexivity

Personal reflexivity asks qualitative researchers to expose the assumptions, expectations, reactions, and unconscious responses impacting their research (Finlay, 1998). As numerous scholars have stated, in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary tool for data collection and interpretation, and the behaviors of the researcher influence the direction of findings (Ellis & Berger, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Finlay, 2002; Merriam, 2002; Pillow, 2003).

To this end, the following statement is offered to acknowledge personal reflexivity. My personal and professional background influences this research in the following ways: I am a first-generation college student, a Person of Color, and an out member of the LGBTQ+ community, explicitly identifying as a Queer Person of Color. I have served as a student affairs practitioner for 20 years at various postsecondary institutions, described using the Carnegie Classification as three R1 very large public universities, one large private R1 university, and one very large California Community College. My experiences as a Brown, non-white-passing Chicano are always

intertwined with my queerness and class background as a first-generation college student and professional. I share a sentiment with others in the academy, most especially at R1 institutions, who feel and experience exclusion.

This research project is borne out of my desire to support the visibility of Queer and Trans People of Color in finding acknowledgment in the academy through scholarship, teaching, and leadership, and to contribute to applied liberatory practices that support improved compositional diversity from the myriad of intersectional identities reflective of our diverse democracy. I work to be reflexive in using the scholarship by Queer People, Women, Women of Color, and Black and Indigenous communities by ensuring proper citation practices and acknowledging the long and deep genealogy of liberatory thinking. Finally, stewardship informs my research and praxis. I regularly reflect on the tensions between my consumption and contributions inside and outside the academy and across my various communities. This includes reflecting on how I benefit from, endure, and resist unjust power relations. These rich personal and professional experiences consciously and unconsciously influence my research.

Interpersonal Reflexivity

The second reflexive practice, interpersonal reflexivity, is concerned with the relationship between the researcher and participants (Walsh, 2003), and must include an analysis of the power dynamics at play (Finlay, 2002). Given the deeply personal aims of this research, explorations of identity and career ascension, and the unique power relationships at play, interviews were conducted on the campus, and in the offices of all four participants. Additionally, reflective memos were generated at the conclusion of each in-person interview.

Methodological Reflexivity

The third reflexive practice employed in this study was methodological reflexivity—focusing on the meaning of methodological decisions and ensuring they are ethical, rigorous, and paradigmatically aligned (Olmos-Vega, 2023). Specific examples of methodological reflexivity occurred in the data analysis process of this study. During the data analysis process, reflective memos were created to assist with coding the raw data and establishing final themes.

Peer Debriefing

A final component of the reflexive practices for this study also included peer debriefing, the collaborative process in qualitative research that involves sharing and discussing research findings, interpretations, and methodological approaches with peers. This included at least two weekly meetings with a fellow doctoral student, to consult on all steps of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998).

Case Study Database

A case study database (Yin, 2013) is an orderly compilation of all of the data from a case study, and the purpose is to demonstrate the specific makeup of each case and the variety of participants and data sources used, including the way participants were recruited and sampled as it relates to each case (Yin, 2013). A case study database was created for the present study and contains audio recordings of each semistructured interview, interview transcripts, preinterview demographic questionnaires, publicly available biographies, and institutional self-evaluation reports.

Triangulation

Triangulation allows for the championing of multiple perspectives and helps to identify multiple realities rather than aiming to uncover a single truth (Stake, 2000). Using multiple data sources is a hallmark of case study research and a strategy to enhance the study's credibility (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Data triangulation was achieved in this study through the use of preinterview questionnaires, semistructured interviews, and the use of institutional self-study reports to support the study's methodological rigor (Patton, 2002).

Analytical Approach

The data analysis process for this study followed the reflexive thematic analysis approach, described as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) is a 6-phased approach, presented here as linear, yet the authors emphasize it is an iterative and reflective process that develops over time, with encouragement to move between the six identified phases: data familiarization, generating initial codes, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and concluding with a report of the final themes. A review of the six stages is presented to describe the analytical approach applied to this study.

Data Familiarization

The primary data source in this study was the in-person semistructured interviews. Each interview was recorded to ensure accuracy and then transcribed by a human transcriptionist at rev.com. The service provided a nonverbatim transcription, cleaned up to remove filler words, stammers, and was lightly edited by the transcriptionist for readability. Data familiarization was achieved by listening to the recording of each interview and reading each of the transcripts twice with a focus on developing initial impressions on the depth and breadth of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Additionally, following each in-person interview, a reflective memo (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023) of key ideas, concepts, and impressions was generated. For each interview, all three pieces of raw data—the audio file, complete transcription, and reflective memos (Morse & Richards, 2002; Starks & Trinidad, 2007)—were organized via the case study database (Yin, 2014), creating an audit trail as one approach to support the trustworthiness of the study (Halpren, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Generating Initial Codes, First Phase of Iterative Process

During the second phase of data analysis, initial codes were developed, guided by the research aims of the study. An inductive coding approach was selected for its ground-up approach, where the researcher derived codes directly from the data. Free of preconceived notions of what the codes should be, inductive coding allows theory or narrative to emerge directly from the raw data (Creswell, 1998). Coding was approached by identifying important sections of text and attaching labels to index them as they relate to a potential theme guided by the research aims (King, 2004). Boyatzis (1998) explained a “good code” (p. 1) is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon. In this stage, each transcript was given initial codes, which were refined for a second and third round of coding, generating both a code book and companion reflective memo for each round of coding. To improve trustworthiness, two consultancy meetings with the Berkeley Data Lab and peer debrief meetings supported the evaluation and refinement of the codes. Next, all raw transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative software MAXQDA. Subsequently, transcripts were coded a fourth and fifth time, and code books four and five were also reviewed in peer debriefing sessions. Reflective memos were generated for each version of the codebook.

Initial Theme Generation

The third phase involved sorting and collating all the potentially relevant coded data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme organizes a group of repeating ideas and enables the researcher to answer the study's aims (Ryan Bernard, 2003). As the coding approach was inductive, the themes identified were strongly linked to the raw data. Guided by the research questions and final codes, thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001), web-like illustrations that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text, were used to generate themes. Peer debrief meetings continued during this phase, along with reflective memoing.

Reviewing Themes

During this phase, the coded data were reviewed and matched to themes to ensure they formed a coherent pattern aligned with the research aims. The validity of individual themes was considered to determine whether the themes accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were once again coded a sixth and final time. During this phase, themes that did not address the research aims directly were noted, and other themes were broken down into more separate themes aligned with the specific research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were reduced into a smaller set of significant themes that succinctly summarized the text and research aims (Attride-Stirling, 2001). To ensure the validity of the themes, the final themes were compared and mapped to the codes and raw data to ensure all conclusions were firmly grounded in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debrief meetings continued during this phase, along with reflective memoing.

Defining and Naming Themes

During the fifth phase, Braun and Clarke (2006) directed researchers to determine what aspect of the data each theme captures and identify what is of interest about them and why. Here, each theme was assessed to determine how each fit into the overall story about the entire data set in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A third consultancy with Berkeley Data Lab was initiated to ensure the themes were sufficiently clear and comprehensive. Additionally, peer debriefing continued to help ensure clarity and alignment with research aims. Lincoln and Guba (1985) advised investing sufficient time to develop the themes increases the probability of developing credible findings. Peer debrief meetings continued during this phase, along with reflective memoing.

Producing Thematic Analysis Report

The final phase, as Braun and Clarke (2006) described, concludes with the researcher establishing themes to support a final analysis and write-up of the report. The thematic analysis report is called to be concise and account for data within and across themes. Here, reflective memos and prior coding notes were used to generate two versions of a brief report that provided a thematic analysis specifically for the research aims of the study. The final report was used to create a summary of findings, which is presented in Chapter 4.

Summary

The chapter outlined the methodological decisions guiding this study and was organized as follows: (a) research approach, (b) research design, (c) preparing for case study, (d) data sources,

(e) establishing trustworthiness, (f) analytical approach, and (g) summary. Next is a discussion of the case overviews and findings.

CHAPTER 4: CASE OVERVIEWS AND FINDINGS

The chapter is divided into two main sections: case overviews and results. The case overview section provides a critical summary of each case presented in both table and narrative format. This lays the foundation for the presentation of findings. The second section summarizes three key findings in a table format, followed by a detailed description of each finding. The chapter concludes with a summary and continues to the discussion chapter.

Case Overviews

The case overviews, in table and narrative format, do not offer the full range of what was learned in the study nor do they cover the entire lives of the participants. Instead, they offer insights on critical factors that have shaped both their personal and professional identities on their ascension to the presidency. Creswell (1998) described biography as a form of inquiry to study an individual's experiences told to the researcher or found in documents and archival material. The case overviews for this study are presented from an asset-based perspective, and wherever possible uses the specific language shared by participants, most especially when describing salient identities and impactful experiences. Related, these overviews are brief, distilled to offer the most critical information germane to the study, with a specific focus on how participants characterize and shape their personal and professional identities. Finally, LGBTQ+ People of Color are not a homogenous group, readers are encouraged to approach these profiles and reported experiences with caution and avoid oversimplifying or essentializing these cases and experiences as representative of the full complexity of any racial or LGBTQ+ affiliation. To acknowledge the complex nature of individual and group identities, my reporting, interpreting, and analyzing data from this study will be done with careful attention to the diversity within groups, which is often overlooked (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Sources for the case overviews, both the table and narratives, include interview transcripts, pre-interview demographic questionnaires, publicly available biographies, and institutional self-evaluation reports. Finally, these case overviews provide the necessary context that frame the key findings of this study.

Table 6
Overview Profile of Participants, Identity and Career Pathway

Pseudonym	Self-reported salient identities	Highest degree earned	Tenure in current role*	Last two immediate prior positions
Dr. Hughes President	Nigerian, Black man, gay, father, immigrant	EdD, Curriculum and Teaching	2 years, 5 months	(1) Interim College President (2) Vice President Academic Affairs
Dr. Madsen President	African American, gay male, first-gen, husband	PhD, Educational Leadership	3 years, 3 months	(1) Vice President Student Services (2) Dean of Students
Dr. Naranjo President	Latino, Cuban, immigrant cisgender male, gay, first-gen, partnered	PhD, College Student Personnel Administration	3 years, 3 months	(1) College President (2) Interim College President
Dr. Playa Superintendent- President	Latino, queer, single father, first gen, partnered	EdD, Community College Leadership	2 years, 7 months	(1) Interim Superintendent-President (2) Vice President Student Services

Note. as of October 2023, time of the in-person interviews

Case 1: Dr. Hughes – Serrano Community College

Dr. Hughes, whose preferred pronouns are he, him, and his, was appointed as the college president at his institution after serving as interim during the COVID pandemic. Unlike other participants in the study, his pathway to the presidency was via the academic route, having previously held the roles of academic school dean and vice president of academic affairs within the same institution over a period of nearly two decades. In this way, he is distinguished from other cases as a “grow your own,” college president. Further, he is a published poet, a single-father, and reported being the only Black administrator in his entire college district when joined in 2007. Dr. Hughes holds a terminal degree in education with a specialization in curriculum. He articulated his most salient identities as: Nigerian, Black man, gay, father, and immigrant. He serves as college president at 1 of 3 colleges in a multicollge District reporting to a district chancellor who reports to a locally elected board of trustees.

Serrano Community College (SCC) opened in the late 1960s and sits on 150 acres of sloping hillside land and boasts a student enrollment of 13,000 students. One of the important distinctions of SCC’s culture and practice is the integration of instruction and student support. This work was recognized last spring when SCC was named a finalist for a prestigious national award, selected out of thousands of community colleges in the United States, the award recognizes American colleges excelling in areas of student achievement and success. Additionally, SCC is a federally designated minority serving institution, securing its designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in 2017.

Case 2: Dr. Madsen – Tamyen Creek Community College

Dr. Madsen, personal pronouns are he/him/his, currently serves as the fourth president of Tamyen Creek Community College (TCCC) since its founding in the late 1960s. He reported his path to the presidency as unplanned, ascending through a 25-year career in student services to his current role. A product of the community college, where he earned his associates degree, his highest degree earned is a PhD in educational leadership. Dr. Madsen reported his most salient identities as African American, gay male, first-generation college student, husband, and dog parent. This is Dr. Madsen's first presidency, he is the only participant who has not served in an interim president role, and also the only participant who moved from out of state for his presidential role. Further distinguishing this participant, Dr. Madsen reports his personal and professional identities as strongly shaped by having been raised, studied, and employed in the southern region of the United States. He serves as college president at one of two colleges in a multicollge district reporting to a district chancellor who reports to a locally elected board of trustees.

TCCC sits on 112 acres of what was once a turn-of-the-century, wine-producing estate, and currently serves more than 17,500 students. Nearly 80% of the TCCC student body identifies as non-White. Related, TCCC is a federally recognized minority serving institution with two specific designations as both a Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) and HSI.

Case 3: Dr. Naranjo – Miwok Valley Community College

Dr. Naranjo, whose personal pronouns are he, him, and his, is the only participant currently serving in his second community college presidency. He ascended to his first presidency on an interim basis before serving in that role for 3 years, describing his ascension as unplanned. His career pathway is framed by both his extensive experience in the field of student services which spans over 3 decades and his impressive academic background. He holds a PhD in college student

personnel administration from one of the most prestigious public universities in the country and notably began his educational journey in the very same community college system where he earned his first academic credential, an Associate in Arts degree. Dr. Naranjo has received numerous awards and produced scholarships focused on expanding educational access and support, both of which reflect his commitment to student success and equity, making him both a scholar and educational leader. He described his most salient identities as, Latino, Cuban, immigrant cisgender male, gay, first-generation, and partnered.

He serves as college president at one of two colleges in a multi-college district reporting to a district chancellor who reports to a locally elected board of trustees. Miwok Valley Community College (MVCC), established in the late 1980s, combines a small-college environment with more than 60 acres of modern facilities and equipment, and is distinguished by its reputation for having one of the highest 4-year institution transfer rates.

Case 4: Dr. Playa – Chumash Beach Community College

Dr. Playa, whose personal pronouns are he, him, and his, currently holds the position of community superintendent-president of Chumash Beach Community College (CBCC). He is the only study participant who serves as both a college president and district superintendent, with a direct reporting line to the local elected governing board of trustees. Like other participants, he framed his ascension to the presidency as unplanned. He assumed the presidency on an interim basis during the COVID pandemic. Prior to this, he held the role of vice president of student services at the same district where he now serves as president. Dr. Playa strongly believed his early experiences as a community college student have been instrumental in shaping his educational and career trajectories. Having attended two community colleges before transferring to a premier 4-year public institution, he earned his bachelor's degree, master's degree, and Doctor of Education with a specialization in community college leadership all within the public education system. His distinguished academic background is further complemented by his extensive teaching experience and various leadership roles at both the state and national levels. Dr. Playa reported his salient identifies as Latino, queer, a single father, first-generation, and partnered.

CBCC opened its doors in the late 1920s and is one of California's largest community colleges, with more than 34,000 credit and noncredit students enrolled each academic year. The college is currently a federally designated HSI and an AANAPISI.

Findings

The main research objective of this dissertation was to explore the experiences of Queer Men of Color who ascended to the college presidency. The research questions were:

1. How do Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension to the California Community College presidency?
 - a. In which ways do these characterizations reveal key affordances along the pathway to the presidency?
 - b. In which ways do these characterizations reveal key barriers along the pathway to the presidency?
2. What can be learned from these accounts to improve and expand efforts toward further diversifying the college presidency?

Summary of Findings

This critical collective case study relied on three sources of data: a pre-interview demographic questionnaire, an on-site, in-person, semistructured interview conducted in each participant's office, and the Institutional Self Evaluation Report (ISER) of each participant's site. The analysis process yielded three key themes. First, all participants described their career pathway as motivated by a strong sense of purpose and their rise to the community college presidency as unplanned. Second, participants identified supportive relationships and career advancement opportunities as key factors in their ascension to the presidency. Finally, the key challenges were characterized by the unique ways each participant experienced stress associated with their multiple-marginalized identities. Table X maps the research questions from this study to a summary of the findings, followed by a more detailed description of each finding, organized across the three aforementioned main themes.

How do Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension to the California Community College presidency?

- a. In which ways do these characterizations reveal key affordances and challenges along the pathway to the presidency?
- b. What can be learned from these accounts to improve and expand efforts toward further diversifying the college presidency ?

Table 7

Summary of Findings

Research questions	Findings
RQ1: How do Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension to the California Community College presidency?	Career ascension was characterized as: (a) motivated by a strong sense of purpose: personal experiences with community college, and the mission and impact of community colleges, and (b) unplanned
RQ1(a) In which ways do these characterizations reveal key <i>affordances and challenges</i> along the pathway to the presidency?	Affordances were described as: (a) supportive relationships both professionally (mentors, sponsors) and personally (familial and networks of support) (b) career advancement opportunities (interim appointments and leadership development programs) Challenges to ascension was expressed through the unique ways each participant described the stress associated with their multiple marginalized identities as: (a) experiences of heterosexism (b) experiences navigating racism (c) intersections of racism and heterosexism

Theme 1: Career Pathway Driven By a Sense of Purpose With Unplanned Ascension to the Presidency

The central objective of this study was to gain insight into the journeys of Queer Men of Color who ascended the college presidency. As a starting point, all participants were offered the following prompts to gain insight on the unique experiences of each participant.

1. What draws you to this work? What's your "why" for this work?

2. Why have you chosen to share your leadership talents within the California Community College system vs. Cal State, UC system, private?

In all cases, participants characterized their career pathways as driven by a clear sense of purpose. They emphasized two subthemes: (a) prior impactful experiences with the community college system and (b) drawn by the mission of the community college system, most especially its distinguishing feature as the most broadly accessible system of public higher education. Second, one additional and surprising unifying response was that every participant described their ascension to the role of community college presidency as unplanned.

Sense of Purpose for Career Path

Responses generated two primary motivating factors that influenced the participants' decisions to lead within the community college system. The first factor was prior impactful experiences with the community college system. Participants reported prior experiences with community college shaped their motivation to lead within the specific context of the community college system. The second factor was described as a values alignment with the mission of the community college system. Specifically, participants explained the mission of community colleges as the most broadly accessible postsecondary option with the highest levels of diversity in the student population, as central to their purpose and motivation for leading within the community college system. Each of these subthemes are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Motivating Factor 1: Prior Impactful Experiences With Community Colleges

All participants in the study attributed their motivation to lead within the community college system to overwhelmingly positive experiences as community college students and, in one instance, as a community college faculty member.

The first example, Dr. Naranjo, a first-generation college student and immigrant to the United States, credits the community college system as a transformative force that shaped his personal and professional identities. He referred to his experience with Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS), a state-funded program that supports first-generation and historically marginalized students in achieving their academic goals, workplace skills, certificates, degrees, and/or transfer to a 4-year college. In his own words, he shared, "I am a product of the California Community College, which is something that I'm also very proud of . . . it cemented my commitment to stay and lead in the community college system." Dr. Naranjo also explained, as a first-generation college student, he struggled with confidence as he began his postsecondary journey. Through EOPS, he found community, gained experience with public speaking, which helped his confidence, laying the foundation for both academic and career ascension in ways he never imagined possible.

Dr. Playa and Dr. Madsen, the other two participants who began their education journeys in the community college system, echoed Dr. Naranjo's positive experiences. First, Dr. Madsen who shared his experiences as a first-generation college student attending community college, as supporting his his socioeconomic class ascension, shared:

I grew up extremely poor, but luckily I . . . have a mother that always said that we should never allow our present situation to determine where we end up in life. And that stuck with me throughout my life. She always said, "Nobody's better than you, and you're no better than anybody else as well." Those are things that truly stuck with me. And I think that as a result of all of that, that's why I am where I am today and that's why I respond to others in

the manner in which I do and serve here in this specific context, at community college level . . . it changed my life and now I can help and serve others do the same.

Second, and similarly, Dr. Playa, also a first-generation college student, attributes the community college as having a central role in shaping his personal and professional identities, specifically attributing his community college experiences as the impetus for change in his life, not only class ascension, but as a liberatory space to find his personal agency, and attributed his experience as a community college student as expanding the life outcomes and possibilities as young and single father. He explained that community college was:

The catalyst for breaking generational cycles of poverty, abuse, and all these things really for me was the community college. . . . If I didn't have that opportunity to go to school and someone who barely graduated high school and didn't have those opportunities, my whole life wouldn't look the way it looks. My daughter's life wouldn't look the way it looks.

Finally, as the only participant who did not attend community college as a student, Dr. Hughes offered his perspective as a faculty member in the community college system. He explained community college affirmed his professional identity, specifically, his deliberate orientation toward responsive practices and approach to supporting students and his various identities, which he described as “my approach to being in the world,” he explained:

I came here as an immigrant. I didn't have family in the area when I first came to the US. I am gay, and we were constantly trying to find support and family that affirms you within the community and external community . . . and it was a college community that rewarded and supported my approach to being in the world and my approach to student success and my approach to engagement and to community building.

All four participants shared a unifying perspective: Prior life experience within community college settings provided them with significant support, community, and opportunity. This experience was so impactful that it motivated them all to pursue professional careers within the community college setting.

Motivation Factor 2: Community College Context as a Desirable Site to Serve

The second motivating factor reported by participants as shaping their career pathways specifically to lead within the community college system is the distinct mission and student population served by community colleges.

Participants noted the overarching mission of community colleges, as the most broadly accessible postsecondary option with the highest levels of diversity in the student populations, served as a central motivating factor for their leadership. For example, Dr. Madsen shared:

I found that with the community college, so many of the students that I was dealing with, they grew up in situations similar to mine, and they saw the community college as a way to move beyond their present situation.

Dr. Madsen earned his first academic credential, an associate's degree in accounting, from a community college, and, again, connected his upbringing in a lower socioeconomic, single-parent household. While Dr. Playa explained a similar sentiment of serving historically excluded and marginalized students, he added reflexive dimension of integrating his values as an equity-minded leader into professional identity, he shared:

My leadership is defined by what I call really thinking about our most vulnerable populations . . . students who are struggling with housing insecurities, basic needs, childcare, former foster youth, formerly incarcerated. So that's really the lens that I bring to the role that I think has been different than other presidents that I've worked for.

Distinct from other participants, Dr. Playa emphasized his motivation to lead within the community college system stems not only from the mission and student populations served within the community college system, he specifically differentiated community colleges from R1 institutions, those with an elite designation given by the Carnegie Classification of Institution of Higher Education to universities with the highest levels of research activity (Carnegie Classification, 2023). He explained distinct feature of community colleges offering the most broadly accessible admissions:

It's an open access institution, and I teach at USC, so I love the pedigree and the environment and the stimulation and all that stuff that I get being at a R1, but you don't get the same students. And I think it comes down to, for me, that we're an open access institution and that this is oftentimes really the mechanism that uplifts people out of poverty.

In a second related example, Dr. Naranjo discussed the accessibility of community colleges and named the common negative stereotype that often positions community colleges as inferior to other postsecondary systems. In doing so, he acknowledged that his thoughts on the subject had changed over time and noted a values alignment with his decision to shape a professional identity within the community college system. He explained:

I remember having to go internally through this sense of I just went to a minor league and the sense of positionality, and the systems and this pecking order where you got the UCs, the Cal States, and then the community colleges. It took me a little bit of time to re-shift that thinking for myself. But I went through that process that I'm sure a lot of people do, and then eventually realized prestige is a construct and it's not always what people pretend it is . . . when I think about greatest impact and where the majority of students of color, low income, first gen go down the line are enrolled . . . it's in the community college system . . . my firm commitment to stay and lead within the space is . . . congruent with my overall values

In a final example, Dr. Hughes explained his personal experiences influence his motivation for leading in the community college system. When he came to the United States for college, he felt isolated, lacked support on campus, and struggled with questions of identity, a common experience for many college students. Dr. Hughes framed community colleges as offering opportunities for unique emancipatory possibilities. He shared:

For me, my presidency has always been about how do we make sure we create a place, a space, an environment that embraces the full student? And in embracing the full student, put systems in place that then propels their success, even when they can't see it . . . that's my why. It's about giving voice, finding voice, creating community. It's about ensuring that we have a system that is very clear in its purpose

Here, Dr. Hughes offers the critical distinction that the systems and structures are the challenge, not the varied and diverse identities of community college students. Further, his framing of the role of

the college presidency suggests a liberatory praxis – listing as part of his work, supporting students in finding voice and experiencing a sense of belonging as critical elements of their experiences and a central factor motivating his leadership. In conclusion, all participants characterized their pathway as driven by a strong sense of purpose to lead, specifically within the community college system, shaped by impactful experiences and the distinct mission and student population served by community colleges. This theme offered one surprising dimension, discussed in more detail in the next section.

Unplanned Ascent to the Community College Presidency

All of the individuals who participated in the study reported that they were not expecting to become a college president. Initially, their aspirations were for mid- to higher-level administrative positions, such as dean of students, vice president, or department chair. Each participant had a unique and uncharted reluctant or surprising path that led them to their current position as a community college president. Dr. Hughes captured this experience succinctly, “I didn't have a college presidency in my vista when I started.” Dr. Hughes continued:

I really, honestly, I don't even think I had a deanship in my vista when I started. I was probably, I was like, well, maybe I'll become department chair at some point. And that was it. It wasn't about planning a career in the beginning. It really was about teaching and learning. And as I progressed, as I said, I realized, okay, this deanship is giving me the opportunity to support the faculty and support staff.

It is worth noting that participants offered a range of reasons behind their unplanned ascensions, demonstrated with two distinct examples. First, Dr. Naranjo was the only participant who identified the role of search firms, responsible for overseeing up to 92% of college presidential searches (Wilde & Finkelstein, 2023), as facilitating his unplanned ascension to the presidency. He shared that search firms identified him as a strong candidate for the multitude of presidential vacancies in the community college system. He said:

I had no aspirations to be a college president. It wasn't even, I'd say, in my 8th year, and mind you, after maybe 4 or 5 years as a VP, my mentors, and others in search firms, people are constantly calling, knocking on my door.

A second distinction was shared among two participants, Dr. Playa and Dr. Madsen. They explained in similar ways their unplanned ascension stemmed from the perceived misalignment with their values. Dr. Playa articulated his concerns with an expectation that he would need to compromise core values, and shared:

So my initial thing was I wanted to be a dean of students. That was my real aspiration. . . . But then as I started working, I just was super frustrated with the system. I didn't feel like the system was designed to support students like myself . . . so, I think initially I didn't think the presidency was within reach because I felt like I was going to have to change so much of my core values. I would have to give up so much of my core values to be able to play politics to serve in that role.

The notion of politics, or “playing the game,” was also expressed by Dr. Madsen, who named his perceptions of the profoundly political nature of the role of the college president as a central factor in self-selecting out of ascending to the role. He explained:

I said I never wanted to be a president because I've always said I don't like playing games. I don't like politics. I've always said that. And I thought that, as a president, I was going to have to play games and be involved in a lot of politics.

All the participants in the study, with discernable differences, reported that their ascension to the community college presidency occurred unexpectedly. Participants in this study described their career paths as purpose driven yet with an unplanned ascension to the community college presidency. All participants in the study have ascended to the community college presidency, with one participant on his second presidency. Thus, understanding the supportive factors that led to their success is critical for implications for practice. The second finding in this study, discussed next, directly addresses this question.

Theme 2: Ascending to the Presidency: The Role of Supportive Relationships and Career Advancement Opportunities

Participants in this study reported various factors that supported their ascension to the college presidency. The two most cited categories were supportive relationships (both personal and professional) and career advancement opportunities. The latter was mainly in the form of interim presidential appointments and participation in leadership institutes and fellowship programs. Table X offers a high-level overview for which specific affordances each participant used in their ascension to the presidency.

Table 8
Affordances

	Supportive relationships	Interim presidency	Formal presidential leadership program
Dr. Hughes	X	X	X
Dr. Madsen	X		X
Dr. Naranjo	X	X	
Dr. Playa	X	X	X

Supportive Relationships

In recounting their journey toward becoming a college president, each participant highlighted the significance of having supportive relationships. These relationships were categorized as mentoring relationships, sponsorship by senior leaders within their organizations, strong familial ties, and, in some instances, supportive peer relationships and networks. To better organize the diverse reporting of supportive relationships, the study's findings are discussed under two separate contexts: professional and personal, with examples to illustrate each.

Professional Context: Mentoring in the Workplace

Although all participants named supportive relationships within professional settings as significantly contributing to their ascension to the college presidency, they were reported with significant variability. First, in naming, participants articulated these relationships in a variety of ways: mentorship, supportive supervisors, and career sponsorship. Similarly, the associated behaviors included a variety of long- and short-term behaviors from face-to-face meetings with regular follow ups, emotional support, feedback on work challenges, coaching on career mapping, being put forward and identified by senior leaders with significant influence on decision making for career development and advancement opportunities.

Among the four participants, three highlighted the importance of having mentors who consistently encouraged their growth and development toward achieving the position of a college president. These mentors demonstrated their support in a variety of ways as reported by participants. For example, Dr. Madsen shared his experience with a mentor who not only named a college presidency as possible within his career trajectory but also invested in his leadership by supporting him with two separate leadership development programs. He stated:

The president . . . says to me, "I think you're going to be a college president one day . . . and so she asked me to go to this executive leadership institute that's sponsored by the League for Innovation in the community college. I went to that just to satisfy her, not because I wanted to become a college president. But the purpose of the institute was to prepare people for that. I was like, "I have no desire," . . . and then this same president wanted me to apply to become an Aspen fellow with the Aspen Institute. I'm like, "For what? I don't want to be a president. I'm vice president. That's all I want."

Despite his reluctant participation in formal presidential leadership development programs, it was only after attending his second formal leadership program, at the insistence of a former supervisor, the Aspen Rising President Fellowship, that prompted Dr. Madsen to consider a college presidency.

Dr. Naranjo provided a unique perspective on mentorship support. He is distinguished among the four cases by having the longest amount of administrative leadership experience, and is the only participant on his second community college presidency in this study. He highlighted the importance of longevity in mentorship relationships. Throughout the interview, Dr. Naranjo mentioned one mentor and former supervisor with whom he still maintains a mentoring relationship. This mentor has provided guidance, coaching, and feedback during critical points in his career ascension from being a dean to becoming an associate vice president, then vice president, and eventually a college president. Dr. Naranjo also reported a broad network of long-standing mentors, distinguishing him from others, among whom is at least one retired former community college chancellor. He explained:

[Name of mentor] first hired me . . . right out of my doctoral program. And at the time he was the VP of student services . . . years later he knew I was not happy and was starting to figure out what my next step . . . and he kept saying, "You're ready for a vice presidency." I said, "No, but I've only been a dean for 3 years." "It doesn't matter. Look at the portfolio you have . . . and compare that to a small community college." . . . over time mentors and people that constantly were pushing and challenging me to consider the role was I think a factor . . . I've had some incredible supervisors.

In a related example, Dr. Hughes shared the details of a long-standing mentoring relationship that lasted nearly 30 years, similar to Dr. Narnjo's experience. He explained how this mentoring relationship helped him advance in his career by providing him with specific, highly visible opportunities, such as committee assignments, conference presentations, and high-profile speaking engagements. One distinguishing element of this case is his reference to women as the primary source of mentorship in his career. He explained:

And I had people in my life, mentors, educators, mostly women who said, "You can do this." I remember having a VP, when I was a faculty member, and she said, "You'll be a dean one day." And I just kind of laughed at her. She's like, "No, you can do it. And we'll help you get there." She would say, "Okay, here's a conference coming up. You got to go present there." or, "Here's a work group that you need to be a part of because they're

assessing faculty workload in the teaching of English, so you need to be a part of that project.” And this person, even when I was applying for the presidency, she was someone I called, and I’ve known her since 1995. And she was like, “So here’s some questions you need to ask yourself. Here’s some questions.” And she was just helping me build capacity. So I had people who saw in me what I honestly didn’t see in myself at the movement from faculty to dean . . . and I was given opportunity and I took opportunities that would allow me to lead. And the vice presidency really became that. It was kind of the next step. I was doing the dean thing and I was doing the lead dean thing. I think folks were just like, “This is your next step.”

However, not all participants provided examples of supportive workplace mentoring relationships. Three participants explicitly named career mentors. Dr. Playa, the one outlier, described his relationship with a community college academic counselor, who critically impacted his educational pathway, supporting him as a single father as he transferred to a 4-year university. He shared:

But I was really lucky that I had a counselor at the community college, a Latino male, who I could see myself in, and he really mentored me and helped connect me with services . . . I was able to transfer to UC Irvine. I moved into family housing with my daughter, and that was the first time in many years that my life stabilized.

Although this theme revealed most participants had positive experiences with their mentors, there were two instances where negative experiences were shared, with specific examples. Dr. Playa shared one of these experiences, where his physical appearance was the primary topic of discussion during a lunch meeting with a former mentor. This experience has had a lasting impact on him, and he vividly recalled the conversation:

“You’re so talented, but you don’t dress the part.” I literally had a president take me to lunch and say he wanted me to start wearing suits. And I was like, “No.” He then said, “Grow your hair out, shave your mustache.” Basically assimilate into the culture of higher ed. And I was always like, “I’m not doing that. I’m going to maintain who I am.”

Dr. Naranjo shared a second example of a negative experience with a mentoring relationship. He recalled being offered unsolicited advice from a mentor and former college chancellor who felt it critical to persuade Dr. Naranjo not to disclose his LGBTQ+ identity during the interview process for the college presidency. He explained, “One of the folks that had been mentoring . . . me from my early vice presidential days to start applying to presidencies, [a] retired chancellor, advised me not to not out myself in the search process.”

He did not take the advice of this mentor, and despite this negative experience, he shared that he still found value in the relationship, and strongly encourages and mentors and sponsors career ascension. In recounting their journey toward becoming college president, each participant highlighted the significance of having supportive professional relationships. This was also mirrored in personal relationships, which are discussed next.

Supportive Familial Influences

Throughout reflections on career pathways and ascension to the presidency, and even beyond questions on key affordances, participants explained supportive and influential familial connections were and remain a critical anchor in their career pathways and ascension to the presidency. For example, 2 of the 4 participants named parenthood and their identities as fathers

impactful, with the other two explicitly naming their roles as uncles. Additionally, all participants spoke of their partners and navigating queer relationships in the workplace as part of their career ascension. The emergent subtheme is leveraging familial relationships and responsibilities as a supportive factor in career ascension.

Beginning with Dr. Madsen, he framed his leadership story, specifically his career pathway, by regularly grounding his responses with references to his mother and her critical impact on his career journey. He said emphatically:

Oh, it's all my mom. Oh, it's my mom, my mom. Growing up, we didn't recognize, or I didn't recognize the struggle that my mom endured. And one of the goals in my life is always to make my mom proud because now I recognize the sacrifices that she made. Yeah, that's a driving force for me . . . she's always loved and supported me so much...

Strong familial bonds and references to parenthood provided a rich array of examples. Dr. Playa and Dr. Hughes emphasized the importance and influence of fatherhood on their career ascension pathways. The integration of their roles as parents into their career pathways was common among both articulations. First, Dr. Playa explained:

. . . things that are very influential for me in terms of my leadership, I was a young single father, and so at 19 . . . I became a parent. And so that was really defining for me . . . so when my daughter came to live with me when she was about a year and a half. . . . My daughter, I'm very proud. In fact, it's kind of interesting that you're interviewing me today because this is her 1st day as a tenure track English faculty member at [local community college]. . . So, she's in the family business. . . . So, I think obviously education is something I passed on to her.

Similarly, Dr. Hughes spoke of the role of fatherhood in his job search process and explained that he chose to disclose both his LGBTQ+ identity and parenthood at the same time. In addition to the subtheme of parenthood, participants also referenced the critical role of intimate partners in their career progression. They referred to their partners by various names, such as boyfriend, domestic partner, partner, or husband. In one example, Dr. Naranjo describing a spectrum of identity-based events stated:

It's actually been very natural and open and to bring my partner to some things to navigate multiple spaces . . . we're in our third cohort of a Puente program, speaking like I did at our Latinx history opening celebration, and being able to bring my sense of identity into that space or going into our Pride Scholars for an event or an activity. . . . And so it's important to me because I do know that being out is impactful.

This aspect of the study highlighted the various ways participants relied on partners for support, which encompassed assistance in advancing their careers, accompanying them to work events, and upholding a positive public image while carrying out their job responsibilities.

Dr. Madsen offered more specific insight on career navigation. He recalled the conversation with his husband after being offered the college presidency. His description captures a specific example of support, which required them to relocate across the country for the job opportunity. He shared:

I got the position. And then my husband was like, "Oh my God, are you going to take it?" he's the type that's like, "Well, whatever you want, dear. Whatever you want, that's what

we're going to do.” He's like, “No, this is your career . . . I can work from anywhere.” And so he's like, “I guess we're moving to California.” That was it.

In a final example, Dr. Playa added a critical component of support was relying on other college presidents of color, and even referenced other participants in the current study. He explained:

So I have a handful of college presidents of color like..we regularly socialize together. We talk, I can say, “Hey, I'm dealing with this issue. What do you think?” And so we really rely on each other for consultation. And so that community of support of other college presidents has really helped me too

The study results highlight the importance of supportive relationships, both professional and personal, in promoting career development. These supportive relationships were identified as crucial and consistent, taking many forms, such as mentoring, sponsorship, familial bonds, and peer networks. Along with supportive relationships, career-advancing opportunities were also identified as a significant factor in supporting career growth, discussed in the next section.

Career Advancement Opportunities: Interim Presidency and Formal Presidential Leadership Programs

A second factor in supporting career advancement for Queer Men of Color was interim presidential appointments and participation in leadership development programs, categorized as (a) interim presidential appointment opportunities and (b) participation in leadership development programs.

Career Advancement Opportunities: Interim Presidential Appointments

The need for interim college presidencies has become more prevalent due to the increasing number of planned and unplanned departures of college presidents, with the average tenure steadily declining over the last decade (Melidona et al., 2023). In the current study, 3 of the 4 participants secured their first college presidencies by serving as an interim college president, namely Dr. Hughes, Dr. Naranjo, and Dr. Playa. In all three cases, they were eventually appointed to the permanent role after their respective districts conducted a formal search process. In describing their interim presidential appointments, each participant noted the unplanned nature of their ascension to an interim presidential role. Dr. Hughes and Dr. Naranjo had served for over a decade in their respective districts before ascending to interim presidency. In contrast, Dr. Playa served 2 years before assuming the interim presidency.

In the first example, Dr. Naranjo describes the unplanned of ascension as well as the benefits of having a solid familiarity with his district before serving as interim:

We had this unanticipated opening. And so the chancellor where I was, asked me if I would be interim for a year with an opportunity to apply if I chose to at the end of that year. And I did. And so I also always thought after being . . . 11 years as a VP, I always thought it was going to be more glamorous to start somewhere new where you start from fresh, but I also knew there were incredible insights to being the internal candidate because you know firsthand, the good, the bad, and the ugly

As previously mentioned, this was Dr. Naranjo's first interim role and permanent presidency. At the time of data collection, he was serving in his second college presidency.

Similar to Dr. Naranjo, Dr. Hughes described his ascension to the interim college presidency as sooner than expected and frames his long-standing tenure with the district joining in 2007, at that point, 12 years, as a strength for his candidacy:

And the presidency I fell into . . . I'd been a dean for 9 years and had been a vice president for almost 3 years. And the chancellor at the time called me and said, "We're looking to have an acting president. Are you interested?" And I said, sure . . . they also have the luxury of having grown their own president [me].

Further distinguishing Dr. Hughes is that this was his second senior leadership role for which he first served as interim at the same college. Before becoming vice president of academic affairs in his district, he also served in an interim capacity for nearly a year.

However, the third participant who served in an interim role offered a vastly different experience of his ascent. Dr. Playa characterized his ascension as forged through local campus challenges with an unplanned departure of the district's president, the larger national context of the COVID pandemic, and national protests calling for racial justice due to persistent police brutality sparked by the public murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. He explained:

And so I think in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the pandemic and everything that happened, and especially in a place like [our community] where there was significant civil unrest, I was the only leader that was really leaning in at the moment to deal with . . . I'm talking about campus administration to really deal with what was going on. And so I think I showed and displayed some leadership during that time that caught the attention of the board. And so when the opportunity became available, I think the board saw me in a different light.

Dr. Playa's case is unique compared to other cases in this study. He reports directly to the local governing board as the district president and superintendent. He explained the various calculations he considered in ascending and securing his interim role:

And so that demographic shift in the board created an opportunity for someone like myself to serve in a place . . . that was considered probably one of the top flagships in the state. You know I'm emotionally stable. You know I care deeply about students. You know I'm fair. You know I'm just. I may not look [like] what you think the president should look like, but do you want to roll the dice and see what you get?

Although there is no consistent trend among all four cases, it is noteworthy that all three individuals selected as interim college presidents were eventually appointed permanent presidents after formal searches. Another career advancement factor that the participants frequently mentioned was participation in formal leadership development training programs, discussed next.

Career Advancement Opportunities: Formal Leadership Development Programs

Formal training programs for aspiring or newly appointed college presidents are paramount for community college presidents' success (Royal, 2023). These programs are categorized into two types: first, for aspiring college presidents and second, for new or recent college presidents. Three of the four participants in the study attended at least one nationally recognized leadership program before and during their tenure as presidents: Dr. Hughes, Dr. Madsen, and Dr. Playa. One unexpected finding arose in the data on training programs. Dr. Naranjo, the only participant serving in his second community college presidency, is the only participant who has yet to participate in formal presidential leadership development programs. He explained:

I wish I had participated in something like that because I believe it might've prepared me with the mindset, not necessarily the skillset, but the mindset of this is what it takes, this is how it aligns with your competencies, your values, your commitment, and that may have

maybe shaped that next level of my trajectory. . . . I can see value in participating in these leadership opportunities and experiences within similar affinity groups because I think that allows you to explore aspects of your own journey, experience around institutional racism, race, gender.

Although the other three participants in the study had engaged in formal leadership development programs, their experiences differed significantly. Dr. Madsen, for instance, participated in two formal programs before becoming the college president, but he was initially reluctant to attend. He framed his attendance as an effort to appease his supervisors, who strongly encouraged his participation. He recalled his response as, “For what? I don't want to be a president. I'm vice president. That's all I want.” In contrast, Dr. Playa participated in two of the most popular and prestigious presidential programs, which he felt were necessary to prepare himself for the college presidential leadership. He stated, “So because you're not seen as legitimate in the eyes of some faculty. And so I knew that okay, so what am I going to do? I'm going to check every damn box.” Distinct from Dr. Playa and Dr. Madsen, Dr. Hughes will soon be participating in a presidential fellowship program for sitting presidents who have been in their roles for at least 3 years. In describing his leadership preparation, he stated, “All of these experiences help to give me not only the competencies that are necessary to do this job that I'm doing right now, but they also help me to shape a vision.”

To summarize, the second theme—factors that supported ascension to the college presidency—revealed participants placed great importance on having supportive relationships and career advancement opportunities. However, this is only one aspect of the picture. The subsequent theme delves into the obstacles participants faced in their journey toward becoming college presidents.

Theme 3: Barriers to Ascension – Navigating Multiple Minority Stress

Participants in this study reported challenges in a variety of ways when discussing their ascension and tenure in college presidency. While research has explored how LGBTQ+ People of Color, specifically collegians (Blockett, 2017; Duran, 2018; Garcia & Duran, 2022; Harris, 2003; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Strayhorn, 2013) and faculty ((BrckaLorenz et al., 2023; Galarza, 2019; Nadal, 2019) experience college campuses, there is no empirical research on how by Queer People of Color ascending and serving in the college presidency experience challenges.

Here, intersectionality, as a power-conscious framework, supports examining oppression for marginalized communities at the macro and micro levels. Chapter 2 discussed some relevant literature and explored the manifestation of power through the macrostructures of: higher education, the federal government, and the practice of medicine. Towards a microlevel analysis, the matrix of domination (Collins, 1990) supports understanding how the day-to-day experiences of power relations are experienced at the individual level. The Queer Men of Color in this study shared several challenges or barriers in their ascension and tenure in the college presidency, with distinct experiences informed by the full complexity of their lives. Still, consistent patterns emerged when participants expressed the stressors of racism, heteronormativity, and the interplay between racism and heteronormativity. These stressors are presented under the subthemes heterosexism, racism, and the intersection of heterosexism and racism.

Heterosexism

For LGBTQ+ people, decisions about passing, covering, concealment and disclosure are personal decisions with no right or wrong approaches. Disclosure of LGBTQ+ identity is an

ongoing and lifelong process (Mallory et al., 2021). A recent study by UCLA's School of Law William's Institute found many LGBTQ+ people avoid discrimination and harassment in the workplace by not coming out to their supervisor and coworkers, with half (50.4%) of LGBTQ+ employees reporting that they are not open about being LGBTQ+ to their current supervisor and one quarter (25.8%) are not out to any of their coworkers (Sears et al., 2021). Within the context of personal life, participants recounted experiencing heterosexism in blatant ways, such as being ostracized by religious communities, being disowned from family members, concern for the safety of family members and others in countries who may be harmed for supporting them. While in the context of work, participants recalled experiencing more subtle expressions of heteronormativity, such as mentors encouraging them to remain in the closet, weighing the disclosure process with potential supervisors in interviews, and challenging experiences as college students.

Personal Life Disclosure

At different moments of my personal, educational journey and career, I didn't always feel like I could be my whole self, that I had to hide parts of my identities and leave them at the door because if I was my whole self, that would be too much for some people.

Dr. Playa's narrative offers insight on the LGBTQ+ disclosure experience: dynamic, contextual and impactful, he recalled this story from nearly two decades ago. While all four participants shared early experiences of disclosure were impactful, three candidly discussed their struggles when navigating the disclosure or *coming out* process in their personal lives. These three examples likely fit the *blatant* defined form of prejudice, "It is hot, close, and direct" (Meertens & Pettigrew, 1997, p. 54). Drs. Hughes, Naranjo, and Playa each shared poignant accounts of their disclosure journeys, highlighting the lifelong nature of this process and the challenging and sometimes traumatic experiences encountered. Dr. Playa was the only participant who continues to experience alienation from a family member, he explained:

My dad asked, what is this? My dad hasn't spoken to me in 18 years since I came out. He won't even talk to me. I walk into a room, he gets up and leaves the room. He won't be in the same space with me all because I'm gay.

Dr. Playa explained this impactful experience has shaped how and why he is so insistent about disclosure in every domain of his life, now, partially as an act of defiance or resistance and mostly to support others who may be struggling like he has in the past.

The next two examples of blatant heteronormativity have similar attributes offering transnational complexities, Dr. Hughes immigrated from Nigeria to attend college and Dr. Naranjo immigrated from Cuba when he was a boy, further they each expressed religious conflicts. Dr. Naranjo framed his coming out process as delayed. At 26, he began exploring disclosure:

I grew up in a fairly conservative religious home. . . . I went to a Seventh-Day Adventist school, Christian school from the fourth grade to the 12th grade. I was very involved in church. All those things contributed in many ways to my closeted experience for so long . . . when I came out, I also felt I didn't have a place within a spiritual community and specifically a faith-based community. And it took me also very many years to reconcile and to reclaim, if you will, both aspects that I don't have to neglect one over the other

His feelings of isolation were further compounded by also feeling an identity conflict with his ethnic identity, he explained:

I never felt quite at home even after I came out, I felt like my home base was more around my ethnic racial identity and it's taken me years to, one, have a comfort level . . . to want to publicly be affiliated beyond my Latinoness. And I think part of that is just over the years trying to find the balance and the congruence between all of the aspects of who I am. I think as an immigrant, there was a very strong focus on education, like a lot of immigrant families.

Dr. Hughes shared a similar sentiment on congruence taking time in his disclosure process. Further, his case is not only distinguished by the transnational nature, religious conflict, his distinct experience included immigrating to the United States, alone, right out of high school to attend college, and early experience in a first attempt to begin the disclosure process, which he did not further elaborate, prompted him to wait until graduate school to more fully explore disclosure. Further, he offers insights on the troubling dynamic of the necessity to account for his family's safety in his disclosure process. He shared:

I came here as an immigrant. I didn't have family in the area when I first came to the US. I am gay, and we were constantly trying to find support and family that affirms you within the community and external community . . . so gradually came out to family members. And I come from a very highly Catholic family. It's Nigeria where not at that time, but subsequently, there was a law made against being gay, and it still is on the books. And if you help gay people, you can be turned in, and you can go to jail.

A discussion of early personal life experiences with disclosure was not explicitly part of the research protocol, rather this information was shared when asked about impactful life experiences that shared their education and career paths. These examples of blatant heteronormativity offer helpful context to understand how participants navigate disclosure in the workplace as shaping their career pathways.

Workplace Disclosure, and (Mostly) Subtle Experiences of Heteronormativity

Although all participants navigated both the personal and professional domains regularly disclosing their LGBTQ+ identities, they reported distinct approaches during the interview process. Additionally, they also offered examples of how heteronormativity manifests in the workplace, likely fitting the category of a *subtle*, defined form of prejudice—"cool, distant, and indirect" (Meertens & Pettigrew, 1997, p. 54) expressions of heteronormativity. Some examples included: being advised by a mentor and retired community college chancellor not to disclose LGBTQ+ identity in any presidential search process, accusations of being overly supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, supervising a direct report who regularly expresses anti-LGBTQ+ views on social media and then having to defend the employee's rights to free expression to colleagues, and confronting heterosexist attitudes and stereotypes.

Disclosure During the Interview Process. All participants shared insights on their approach to navigating how they disclose their identities during the significant stages of the job search and employment process, during which they carefully evaluated potential employers for LGBTQ+ affirming signals and consistently disclosed their LGBTQ+ identity. Dr. Madsen began with the posting, "I'm always looking at the discrimination statements . . . do the statements talk about sexual orientation? . . . and if they don't, I wouldn't even consider the position." Approaches

to navigating disclosure were handled in two distinct ways, direct and immediate versus more measured.

First, two participants exemplified an unflinching practice of navigating the disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identity. Dr. Madsen recalled informing one potential supervisor during the interview process that should know he is “a gay man who is married to a white man.” Dr. Madsen further explained, “When events happen, if people are bringing their spouses, you need to know, I am going to walk in with a white man. You need to know that.” Similarly, Dr. Playa reflected that he leads by disclosing his LGBTQ+ identity in professional contexts in bold ways he described, being “queer, loud, opinionated, and [not] dress[ing] a certain way.”

In contrast, the other two participants share a more phased approach to disclosure. Dr. Naranjo explained that he reserves disclosure until he is a finalist or is offered the position.

[Since graduate school] . . . every job search . . . where I was a finalist and/or ultimately received a job offer, I disclosed to my supervisor. That's my choice. I've heard pros and cons, but once I am about to accept a position, it's very important for me to get an initial read on the comfort level, how one responds, the effect in which they respond to give me a sense of, do I even need to be thinking about this or not? So that's important.

Similarly, Dr. Hughes explained upon joining his current institution in 2007 that he took a phased approach by first disclosing to his supervisor, then colleagues and faculty before fully disclosing to the larger campus community:

I was out with the college president once I started the job. And then, gradually, I came out with my faculty in the division. And by the time I became vice president, I was bringing my then boyfriend to events and championing and working with the LGBTQ student groups here. So it was a progressive sort of awareness of self that then led to a commitment to supporting others who are in the similar situation

This study revealed a diverse range of experiences among participants as they navigated the disclosure process, both personally and professionally. However, what united them all was the significant challenges they faced, with some continuing to deal with the aftermath of revealing their queer identities.

Racism

As anticipated, most participants, three of the four, cited specific experiences with racism along their career pathways and even after ascending to the role of college president. These participants referenced specific personal experiences with blatant racism with the two specific examples. First, an example of pay disparities where a participant recounted learning he was offered a significantly lower starting salary as compared to his white colleagues in the same job classification, despite having more education, an earned terminal degree, and more quantifiable qualifications such as over a decade of teaching at an R1 and numerous statewide appointments. He explained:

When I was brought in here as vice president, I was paid \$20,000–\$30,000 less than my two white counterparts who were academic and business. And after a year, I confronted the president about it . . . “I want my pay brought up.” And she was like, “You're ungrateful.” And I said, “How am I ungrateful?” And she was like, “You make \$200,000 a year. You don't think that's enough?” And I said, “This isn't about what I think is enough. This is that my colleagues who are doing this, my white counterparts who are doing the same job are

making \$20,000 to \$30,000 more than me. And let me ask you this.” I go, “Of the three of us, who sits on national boards? Who sits on statewide boards? Who's an appointee by lieutenant governor on committees? Who's on the chancellor's office fiscal advisor?” I said, “Who teaches at an R1 university? Who's published in the last year?” And I mean, I said . . . “One of them doesn't even have a doctorate. The other one . . . do I even need to keep going?” I said, “So how do [you] rationalize with their experience you feel they are entitled to this salary? And yet I bring all of this to the table and you're saying your response to me is I'm ungrateful.” You can imagine that was not a great conversation between me and my president.

The salary of college administrators at public community colleges are readily accessible, as state law sets minimum qualifications and requires local governing board approval for all administrative hires at publicly noticed meetings, including the proposed starting salary. Months later Dr. Playa became interim president, replacing the supervisor he references, and then, eventually, after a full search was named the permanent president/superintendent of the district. Second, Dr. Madsen explained:

When you have a member of your board say to you that you would've been better at the other school because there are more whites at that institution than at this institution or that a certain group of people tend to have issues with people whose skin is darker than theirs, I'm like, it can be unsettling.

Publicly available records explain that a panel of board members and administrators found probable cause that the board member had, in fact, subjected Dr. Madsen, “to unlawful harassment and discrimination on the basis of race or color.” In reflecting back on the experience, he explained:

I didn't expect, as the president, to encounter racism from within. I didn't. Clearly it wouldn't happen here. That was a major shock, major shock . . . even though I was the, I would say the victim in this situation, that it was going to be my job to try to bring some healing to the situation, unfortunately.

Related, three participants emphasized either being a numerical minority in their districts or the first of their race to serve in the role of president. The most recent analysis by the American Association of Community Colleges reported around 69% of community college leaders were White (Royal et al., 2023). Dr. Hughes shared, “It's challenging because . . . even at the highest levels, I'm the only [Black] executive . . . so I'm the only person who is above the dean level in this district, when we're talking about Black leaders in the district, in the college district, I'm it. Similarly, Dr. Naranjo, the first Latino president, shared:

Whenever you're the first, this always still amazes me that in this day and age, still going to college investitures or what have you, and it's still the first Latina, the first out, the first woman, the first whatever, and I'm the first Latino president in this college's, soon to be 40 year history. And all of those pieces I think, are just a reminder, just like it was me reviewing this directory and trying to find more out presidents of color that progress has been made, but it certainly isn't representative of the students we serve

Intersections of Racism and Heterosexism

For participants in this study, race, and LGBTQ+ identities are intricately intertwined not just as they relate to their identities but also: three mentioned the expectation that they are exceptionally prepared, three offered specific examples of heightened levels of scrutiny and

feedback, yet all expressed a keen awareness of the symbolism of their roles, most especially to students.

I'm one of those people and a lot of professionals of color will tell you this, that we want to make sure that our resume is spectacular. And particularly as a gay person and as a gay Black man, it was kind of like, okay, when I go to the bat, I want to make sure that they can't say no for some reason.

Dr. Hughes's statement summarizes a sentiment shared among most participants in this study, and suggests the convergence of white supremacy and heterosexist dominance will only allow access to exceptional LGBTQ+ People of Color. Related, Dr. Playa was unique among all participants for having his physical appearance scrutinized:

I know if I wanted to rise, that I would have to be better than everybody because I'm out queer Latino. I had presidents attempt to "mentor" me and say, "You're so talented, but you don't dress the part." I literally had a president take me to lunch and say he wanted me to start wearing suits. And I was like, "No." "Grow your hair out, shave your mustache." Basically assimilate into the culture of higher ed. And I was always like, "I'm not doing that. I'm going to maintain who I am."

Participants also mentioned a heightened awareness of how they are perceived as being overly focused on equity work - attributing this meaning to their intersectional identities Dr. Hughes shared, "Intersectionality enriches you, but intersectionality can also be incredibly stressful, it can be a burden . . . one challenges . . . how do I lead the DEI work without people assuming it's because of who I am and what I look like and who I love?" Dr. Playa shared that after making the same decision as his white predecessor on faculty sabbaticals he was on the receiving end of an email campaign and recalled a specific email where a faculty member shared, "All you talk about is minorities and gays." In two other examples: feedback on a Black Lives Matter message characterizing it as too tame and stating they expected more "being in your skin and in your personhood," despite the fact that other colleges in the district had sent nothing. Second, a request to cancel LGBTQ+ Pride Month celebrations because it conflicted with Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage month with community members citing that given the uptick in AAPI hate crimes the community should not have to share the month.

Despite the scrutiny, all participants expressed congruence on the symbolism of their work naming for students who share their intersectional identities, and others on the margins. After securing his current and second presidency, the campus posted the bio and photo of Dr. Naranjo, the posting disclosed his LGBTQ+ identity, he received an email from a student who shared how seen and inspired he felt by having a president who reflected his queer and Latino identities. Dr. Naranjo explained, "I do know that the symbolism and what it means to students is very powerful, and I don't ever think about it until it's brought to my awareness, even though I think intrinsically, I understand that it is."

Summary

The chapter provided case overviews and results from this study. The case overview section offered a critical summary of each case, and the second section summarized the three key findings from this study. The study findings conveyed how participants ascribe meaning to their ascension to the presidency, their motivation for educational leadership, along with characterizations of affordances and challenges along their respective pathways to the college presidency. In the next

chapter, these findings are paired with relevant literature and intersectionality, the conceptual basis for this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter begins with a summary of the study and its findings. It then continues in the following order: a discussion of the implications of the results, limitations of the present study, and recommendations for practice and future research areas.

Summary of the Study

This dissertation research explored how Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension and tenure in the U.S. community college presidency. It employed a qualitative methodology with a critical collective case study design guided by a critical theory research paradigm. The study used intersectionality and queer theories as a conceptual basis, and data were collected through in-person interviews, transcribed using Rev.com, and analyzed using MaxQDA software. The following research questions guided the study:

How do Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension to the California Community College presidency?

- a. In which ways do these characterizations reveal key affordances and challenges along the pathway to the presidency?
- b. What can be learned from these accounts to improve and expand efforts toward further diversifying the college presidency ?

Summary of Findings

This study illuminated the experiences of Queer Men of Color in their ascension to the community college presidency. Three key results emerged from the data:

1. All participants characterized their career pathway as being motivated by a strong sense of purpose and their ascension to the presidency as unplanned.
2. Second, supportive relationships and opportunities for career advancement were key affordances in career ascension.
3. Third, and finally the unifying barrier to ascension was the unique ways each participant described the stress associated with their multiple marginalized identities as: experiences of heterosexism, navigating racism and the intersections of racism and heterosexism.

Discussion

This discussion section maps to the three key findings discussed in the previous chapter: motivation for educational leadership and characterizations of affordances and barriers. Applying an intersectional analysis to these findings requires recognizing power relations as a dynamic process. Through this lens, participants are neither infallible heroes nor helpless victims - intersectionality recognizes their ability to act within oppressive systems while emphasizing how systemic structures can impede their progress (May 2015). Thus, in this study, participants have ascended to holding executive leadership roles with high levels of compensation and positional authority, yet they still faced distinct challenges posed by unjust power relations, as described in the third finding.

How do Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension to the California Community College presidency?

Strong Sense of Purpose

Participants in this study expressed strong motivation to work in higher education, specifically within the community college context, citing the mission and diversity of the student population as influential factors. Furthermore, their prior experiences as former community college students, and in one case a faculty member, motivated them to return and serve in leadership roles. Although there is little research exploring the specific motivation of college presidents, a sense of

purpose to the community is consistent with Turner's (2007) seminal study of women of color who made history as the “first” of their gender, race, and ethnicity to become presidents of public colleges or universities. Participants in both studies shared the desire to serve their communities, driven by the mission of public education. In the present study, participants were distinguished by their decision to return to the community college setting despite their qualifications to lead in more prestigious contexts. Three participants identified as first-generation college students and credited their community college experience as a vehicle for social mobility, describing their experiences as transformative.

Applying Collins's (1990) *domains of power framework*, participants in this study, LGBTQ+ People of Color, embody a resistance by securing positions of authority to use bureaucratic resources (disciplinary domain) toward a humanistic end, changing the system from the inside out their ascension also challenges the *cultural domain* which legitimates oppression and the right to rule, in this context through white supremacy and heteronormativity. This theme opens a new avenue of potential inquiry worthy of exploration—as the leaders in this study can offer critical insights on strategies to facilitate more diversity in the college presidency. Furthermore, given the declining average tenure of community college chancellors, superintendent or presidents fell to 5.1 years from 6.9 years from 2000 to 2010 due to retirements and shorter tenures (Mize, 2020), leaders such as these are critical to further support efforts to diversify the presidency in ways more reflective of our diverse democracy.

Unplanned Ascension to the Presidency

Participants in this study each describe an unplanned ascension to the college presidency, stating they never aspired or saw themselves in the role. Further, two participants initially rejected the idea, fearing it would require them to compromise their values. This theme is consistent with the limited number of previous studies exploring the experiences of lesbian and gay college presidents (Bullard, 2015; Leipold, 2014), who also found most participants did not plan to ascend to the college presidency.

Furthermore, this theme is unsurprising. Visibility remains a longstanding challenge facing the LGBTQ+ community in academia, evidence that heteronormativity remains durable over time. For instance, the most recent studies on college presidency conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), *The State of Community College Leadership: 2023* (Royal et al., 2023), and a second example by the Community College League of California (CCLC) *Community College CEO Tenure & Retention Study. 10th Update* (Mize, 2022), there is no mention of LGBTQ+ identities. This erasure mirrors the 30-year history of research by the American Council on Education via the *American College President Studies* (Cook & Kim, 2012; Corrigan, 2002; Green, 1988; Ross, 1993; Ross & Green, 2000), which excluded LGBTQ+ identities from all survey measures until the 2017 study (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Thus, it is troubling and understandable that all participants described their rise to the community college presidency as unplanned and, in two cases, rejected notions of ascending to the presidency outright. Academia, and most recently, the state, CCLC, and AACC, the national advocacy organizations for the nation's approximately 1,200 community colleges, still do not acknowledge the existence of LGBTQ+ community college presidents.

Moreover, this finding further exemplifies how higher education, as a system, remains deeply committed to organizing, implementing, and justifying heteronormativity, deeming queer students and leaders alike unworthy as subjects of research. Thus, the theme, an unplanned ascension to the presidency, indicates that the longstanding erasure of queer people by the academy has, in some ways, become internalized by LGBTQ+ communities. The significance of this finding,

then, underscores the necessity of higher education to position and value LGBTQ+ communities as worthy subjects of inquiry by incorporating LGBTQ+ communities, including those at the intersections of race, gender, and class, in quantifiable and visible ways, scholarship and reporting are one place to start. Perhaps this may encourage and support future LGBTQ+, LGBTQ+ People of Color to ascend to the presidency.

In which ways do these characterizations reveal key affordances along the pathway to the presidency?

Supportive Relationships

Participants in this study named supportive relationships as critical to their personal development and essential in supporting their career ascension. Although supportive relationships were not reported in the scholarship on lesbian and gay college presidents (Bullard, 2015; Leipold, 2014), these findings are consistent with data that shows supportive familial relationships, mentoring, and career sponsors are critical for the success of Women of Color (Muñoz, 2009; Smith-Adams, 2022; Tran, 2014; Turner, 2007). Women of Color, some of whom are also queer, like participants in this study, exist and persist at the whim of white male domination and patriarchy. Gause's (2021) research offers a power-conscious analysis of mentoring relationships by explaining, "White privilege has a built-in mentoring network that people of color cannot access" (p. 78). Scholars and practitioners have responded to this need with culturally specific mentoring programs (Commodore, 2016; Gutierrez et al., 2002; Padilla & Martinez, 2020), indicating exciting new directions in supporting more diverse candidates in navigating the systems and structures that norm and support the "typical" college president at male, white and straight, across all systems of higher education (Melidona et al., 2023; Royal et al., 2023). Through the lens of the *matrix of domination* (Collins, 1990), supportive relationships can be read as a resistance strategy at the interpersonal level, whereby communities othered under white and heterosexual hegemony find and build community, supporting others who are othered. These findings suggest institutions espousing commitments to supporting more diversity in leadership can meet words with actions by facilitating ways for LGBTQ+ People of Color and others on the margins to build and access supportive networks and relationships within the workplace.

Career Advancement Opportunities

In addition to supportive relationships, two career-advancing opportunities were vital in supporting the pathway to the presidency: leadership development programs and the opportunity to serve in the interim presidency role. First, leadership development programs are listed in the literature and are among recommendations by advocacy organizations as a best practice in facilitating career ascension. Second, 3 of the 4 participants in this study earned their first presidential appointments by serving as interim college president, for which they were all eventually appointed permanent president. Using interim leaders in higher education has been a standard practice for decades (Browning & McNamee, 2012; Diaz et al., 2022; Huff & Neubrandner, 2015; Whitford, 2021). However, some have scrutinized this practice for harming diversity in leadership. The "glass cliff" metaphor describes a practice of appointing leaders who bring gender or racial diversity to a higher profile perilous position (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2011; Ryan & Haslam, 2005), resulting in them being blamed, terminated, and replaced if they do not produce results quickly (Cook & Glass, 2014). The research base on this topic is conflicted as this practice has been described as content specific and nuanced (Morgenroth et al., 2020). In the present study, 3 of the 4 participants each served in their interim roles before securing permanent positions, and all four of the presidents in this study began their tenure during the COVID pandemic and period of

continual civil unrest sparked by the public murders of multiple Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement. Although each successfully navigated their respective colleges through tenuous times, a deeper analysis of the power relations at play might also note that all participants in the present study are male identified. Still, these presidents are considered the first in their roles as LGBTQ+ People of Color.

The overwhelming body of scholarship (Billings, 2019; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Rivers & Barnett, 2013; Timmer & Woo, 2023) on the glass cliff emphasizes that given the deeply entrenched prototype of a white heterosexual male in leadership, the appointment of Women, People of Color, and LGBTQ+ leaders, and those at the intersections are offered a high-risk proposition as they may be seen as expendable and better scapegoats. Thus, this finding indicates that while interim leadership opportunities may appear helpful, further research is necessary to understand the risks and benefits of interim roles. Doing so will ensure interim presidencies are facilitated in ways that support diverse candidates' success. While interim opportunities may be one way to promote greater diversity, the unsettled research on the glass cliff phenomenon requires a measured approach and further inquiry.

In which ways do these characterizations reveal key barriers along the pathway to the presidency?

Experiences of Heterosexism, Disclosure of LGBTQ+ Identity

Although disclosure of LGBTQ+ identity in professional settings was shared as a point of pride in this study, most participants also shared challenging experiences during the onset of their disclosure in their personal lives, offering experiences of familial alienation and identity conflicts with race and religion. First, regarding workplace disclosure, the results of this study—disclosure of LGBTQ+ identity as a point of pride in professional settings—coincide with the limited empirical research on lesbian and gay presidents (Bullard, 2015; Leipold, 2014), which found participants named disclosure as a critical part of shaping their professional identities. Further, previous research has established that LGBTQ+ disclosure in the workplace increases trust, work satisfaction, and well-being at work (Fletcher & Everly, 2021; Hur, 2020; Lloren & Parini, 2017). Thus, this finding supports the importance of appropriate and culturally responsive policies and practices to not only comply with non-discrimination laws but to ensure LGBTQ+ communities, including LGBTQ+ People of Color, experience a sense of belonging and support in the workplace.

However, regarding disclosure in the personal lives of participants, this finding yielded a subtheme of identity conflict with race and religion, which is consistent with several studies that indicate LGBTQ+ disclosure and religious conflicts (Buchanan, 2001; Ginicola & Smith, 2011; Sherry et al., 2010), race conflicts (Bowleg et al., 2003; Bridges et al., 2003; Herek & Gonzalez-Rivera, 2006), and race and religion conflicts (Severson et al., 2014; Smallwood et al., 2017). These studies indicated disclosure among communities of color is compounded by the burden associated with a perceived higher risk of alienation from their ethnic and religious communities and families.

Three participants in this study expressed the weight of their identity conflicts with disclosure occurring in late adolescence through graduate school. The significance of this finding offers insight into how colleges and universities must look downstream and continue to provide LGBTQ+ collegians and graduate students the necessary support and resources to navigate the disclosure process, most especially those traversing multiple marginalities, race, religion, ability, and others. Finally, this finding of *challenges in LGBTQ+ disclosure* exemplifies the continuum of oppression and resistance. Despite facing various obstacles in their personal lives to disclosure, such as familial rejection and cultural or religious clashes with their identity, all participants made deliberate decisions to disclose their LGBTQ+ identity openly in their professional lives as they

advanced in their career pathways to their role of community college president. LGBTQ+ disclosure was described in various ways: during the interview process, attending LGBTQ+ events, bringing partners to campuswide functions, and wearing apparel to signal their membership. Disclosure allowed college presidents to be role models and sources of support for LGBTQ+ students and colleagues, expand conversations on equity and create a more affirming tone in integrating and embodying queerness and race. While no empirical research has explored the impact of Queer College Presidents of Color on Queer Collegians of Color, two key studies (Duran and Peréz, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019) highlight the significance of relationships between Queer Collegians of Color and Queer Faculty and Staff of Color who serve as fictive kin thereby fostering a sense of community and belonging on college campuses. These actions serve as a form of resistance to heteronormativity, challenging both compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity. In their everyday actions, these leaders are queering the community college presidency and acting as agents for social change.

Some Experiences of Racism

Two of the four participants characterized specific experiences of racism in their ascension and tenure in the college presidency. The first accounted for his experiences with pay disparities, attributing his lower compensation as compared to his white colleagues to racial bias, compounding his frustrations with his superior academic credentials and leadership experiences. There is no current research exploring pay disparities for Queer Men of Color. Nevertheless, Dr. Playa's experience supports the documented research on persistent pay gaps for others at the intersections, namely, Women of Color. A recent study (Kochhar, 2023) reported that Black women earned 70% as much as White men and Hispanic women earned only 65% as much. Dr. Playa's response in confronting his supervisor directly with the pay disparity between his compensation and his White colleagues is an example of resistance. Here, he exercises agency, fully aware of the potential backlash. In the second example, Dr. Madsen's experience of overt anti-Black racism, confirmed by an external review, is aligned with historical and contemporary research that asserts white supremacist ideologies within higher education (citation).

Navigating Multiple Minority Stress, Intersections of Racism and Heterosexism

While higher education is recognized for its potential to provide opportunities for personal empowerment and political resistance, it has historically been acknowledged as a critical organizing macro structure of domination at the systemic level. Participants in this study offered critical insights into their experiences of oppression at the level of personal biography (Collins, 1990). Through personal biographies, the participants in this study shed light on their experiences of oppression at an individual level, highlighting the interlocking and interactive nature of systems of oppression (Collins, 1990) and the related stressors experienced in career ascension. Despite the small sample size, participants shared various experiences via personal biography on how varied manifestations of overlapping systems of power informed their ascension to the college presidency. While as a collective, these four participants share a group identity as Queer Men of Color, critical within-group variations emerged. Acknowledging both the shared group identity and the critical variations within the group identity (Dill & Zambrana, 2009) is critical to avoid essentializing the Queer Men of Color in this study.

First, Dr. Madsen - with the shortest tenure in the California Community College system, three years - emphasized his experiences as a gay Black man and contextualized his ascension and stress through the prism of race and racism. Throughout his career ascent, he reported multiple overt experiences with anti-Black racism, including in his role as college president. Dr. Naranjo, the only participant in his second presidency, emphasized his experiences as an immigrant from Cuba with a deep connection to religion. He contextualized his ascension and stressed through the prism of the religious conflict centered on his deeply held and valued Mormon background, as compared

to Dr. Hughes, who also shares an immigrant experience and is the only participant who has ascended and remained at the same college for nearly two decades. He emphasized his experiences as a gay Black man, contextualizing his ascension and stress through the prism of his immigrant experience. Finally, Dr. Playa - the only participant serving as both a President and Superintendent reporting directly to the Board of Trustees - contextualized his ascension and stress through the prism of class and familial alienation due to disclosing his queer identity.

This brief description of the variability among the Queer Men of Color does not indicate that participants should be reduced to having a single primary stressor -- instead is offered to indicate the wide variability of intragroup differences. Here, there is no single, Black or Latino or immigrant, or Queer experience. Each is part of a collective group identity with the highest amounts of variability and difference. Rather than reducing participants to a single primary stressor, it is crucial to acknowledge the wide range of intragroup differences that exist. While there is a shared group identity among Queer Men of Color, there is no single, definitive "Black" or "Latino" or "immigrant" or "Queer" experience. Instead, each individual's experience is influenced by a variety of intersecting factors, resulting in a high degree of variability. Despite this significant variability among a relatively small sample size, each participant in this study demonstrated an awareness of intersectionality, explicitly referencing systems of power and their respective positionalities as Queer Men of Color and the related challenges they experienced in career ascension. These findings align with existing research on the multiple minority stress experienced by LGBTQ+ People of Color (Balsam, 2011; Cyrus, 2017; Díaz et al., 2001; Zamboni & Crawford, 2007).

Challenges faced by Queer Men of Color in the college presidency were expressed through various levels of stress associated with heterosexism, racism, and both. Unfortunately, discourse around the college presidency often examines participants' intersectional identities as only race, gender, or queerness rather than considering the complexity of their experiences as LGBTQ+ People of Color. As such, this group is often marginalized across all dimensions of inquiry. The existing research on gay and lesbian (white) college presidents (Bullard, 2015; Leipold, 2014) provides only a cursory overview related to stress and does not coincide with the findings of this study. More research is needed to understand the nature and dimensions of stress experienced by LGBTQ+ People of Color in the college presidency. However, the participants in this study are likely to be inherently resilient due to their ability to ascend to such positions of leadership.

Limitations

All research has limitations (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), and this study is not an exception. First, the exclusion criteria delimited the current study to participants who were self-identified People of Color, out members of the LGBTQ+ community, and currently serving as a community college president. Thus, the sample is limited in two ways: size and diversity. In terms of size, there were only four cases for the final study. In terms of diversity, while participants represent a broad range of identities: four first-generation college students, two immigrants, intraracial diversity from Black and Latino communities, and various queer identities, missing is a broader spectrum of gender identities, more racial diversity, and broader queer representation at other historically excluded intersections, such as disability, those with undocumented status, among others. Explicitly missing from this study is accounting for the experiences of queer women, trans and gender nonconforming leaders, as well as those at the intersection of queer and Asian-American, Pacific Islander diaspora, Native Americans, and multiracial identities.

Second, there were time limitations. The data collection process, specifically the semistructured interviews, occurred over two weeks, and there was only one in-person interview

per participant, ranging from 62-78 minutes. Third, data triangulation: data sources were limited to a brief demographic questionnaire, one-in-person interviews, and institutional self-studies. These constraints restricted external validity and reliability, and the findings are not generalizable. Fourth, the case study methodological approach has its limitations. It is a descriptive method, not an explanatory one. Therefore, the phenomenon can only be described, and no conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect. Case studies are limited in scope and may not be representative of a population (Yin, 2004). Nonetheless, this research addresses a dearth of literature on educational leaders at the intersections of race and queer identities, a population rendered invisible in scholarship.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study challenged the dearth of research on LGBTQ+ College Presidents of Color, focusing on their characterizations of ascending to the community college presidency. This research, a doctoral dissertation, is offered as an entry point into a line of research that is ripe for further investigation in a number of ways. There are a number of recommendations for future research. First, include queer people. In qualitative and quantitative studies, all survey instrumentation must begin addressing the erasure of queer-spectrum communities by including adequate queer-inclusive survey measures. This includes smaller scale studies, including doctoral dissertations, exploring diversity and the college presidency, and most especially larger scale studies conducted by professional and advocacy organizations, namely the ACE, the AACC, and the CCLC. Both the AACC and CCLC have released CEO retention studies in the last two years, and neither mentioned LGBTQ+ leaders, while ACE began adding LGBTQ+ measures in 2017. However, many would argue that these measures are not expansive enough to capture the spectrum of the queer experience, the sexual orientation measures are limited to the options of, “heterosexual/straight, gay/lesbian, bisexual, or other” and gender category perpetuates the gender binary and cissexism with the “male or female,” and “other” options in the gender category. Second, future studies should expand population samples. This can be done by increasing the sample size of LGBTQ+ college presidents, with more and continued research to explore LGBTQ+ People of Color with a more diverse population sample, including LGBTQ+ college presidents and leaders in the K–20 education continuum.

Third, conduct a replication study of LGBTQ+ White college presidents that explores similarities and differences in their ascension to the presidency. Fourth, expand future lines of inquiry to explore the role and impact of search firms and HR practices, the role of local governing boards, workplace satisfaction and reasons for departure, and continued research on affordances and barriers to ascending to the college presidency. Fifth, to enhance the study's trustworthiness, the data sources could be expanded to mixed methods, including more interviews, structured observations, questionnaires, and additional documents with quantitative measures.

Recommendations for Practice

This study highlighted the urgent need to address the erasure of LGBTQ+ leaders in postsecondary education leadership and scholarship, specifically centering the contributions and experiences of LGBTQ+ People of Color. Using the findings from participants and related literature the following implications for practice are offered to advance expanding leadership opportunities and ascension in ways that are inclusive of our diverse democracy, most especially LGBTQ+ communities.

However, before any meaningful implications for practice can occur, conditions for LGBTQ+ learners, workers, and leaders must be acknowledged and addressed. Research on the school climate for LGBTQ+ youth continues to report that both a troubling and alarming number of

LGBTQ+ students face harassment and violence within the K–12 system (Kosciw et al., 2022; Kosciw & Cullen, 2002), and scholarship on various forms of discrimination and bias indicates similar working conditions for LGBTQ+ adults (Corlett et al., 2023; Hebl et al., 2002; Sears et al., 2021). Structural interventions are needed at all levels of government, including federal, state, and local, along with regulatory agencies like the U.S. Department of Education. All levels of education, from K–12 to higher education, must make good on the guaranteed protections for LGBTQ+ communities to learn and work free of harassment, exclusion, and discrimination, as per federal laws Title VII and Title IX.

That said, the following implications for practice are offered to support diversifying the college presidency, inclusive of LGBTQ+ leaders. First, at an institutional level colleges and universities must develop coherent approaches grounded in successful promising practice gleaned from literature and the experiences of LGBTQ+ People of Color and other historically excluded leaders who have ascended to the college presidency. This research proposes culturally tailored mentorship programs, sponsorship for specific career advancement opportunities such as interim leadership opportunities, leadership development programs, and support with obtaining the requisite skills and credentials to ascend.

Second, institutions must also actively track and assess campus climate by adopting and implementing more comprehensive measures to ensure employees are fully safeguarded against all forms of discrimination and harassment in the workplace to ensure the full potential of our diverse workforce, inclusive of LGBTQ+ communities, is supported and cared for.

Third, the entire search process must be scrutinized. As search firms are credited with supporting as many 92% of all college presidential searches (Wilde & Finkelstein, 2023), they play a critical role in supporting or challenging diverse candidate pools. Search firms must expand their cultural humility to include continued education on LGBTQ+ communities. This includes the visible and invisible ways they perpetuate heteronormativity throughout the search process, beginning with inclusive language in the job posting, training of hiring committees, remote and on-campus interviews, through extending a final job offer.

Fourth, advocacy and research organizations, such as the ACE, the AACC, and the CCLC, should speak directly to communities: Women, People of Color, the LGBTQ+, others, and those at the intersections of identities to more thoughtfully and effectively understand barriers, then use their organizations to develop, support, and promote promising practices to increase diversity and retention in the college presidency.

Conclusion

This critical collective case study aimed to explore how Queer Men of Color characterized their ascension to the community college presidency. Driven by the urgent need to expand inquiry to support leadership more reflective of our diverse democracy, this research project offered an intersectional analysis of the college presidency through the experiences of four participants. This study found all participants described their career pathway as motivated by a strong sense of purpose and their rise to the community college presidency as unplanned, with supportive relationships and career advancement opportunities as key supports. At the same time, the primary challenge was various characterizations of stress associated with their multiply-stigmatized identities along their career pathways to the presidency. This dissertation study highlights the urgent need to create a more inclusive and equitable higher education system where diverse leadership is recognized and supported and systemic barriers to diversity and inclusion are addressed and eliminated.

In their presence and everyday existence, these college presidents are role models and sources of support for LGBTQ+ students and colleagues, expand conversations on equity, and create a more affirming tone in integrating and embodying the intersections of queerness and race, among other identities. In doing so, these leaders are queering the community college presidency and acting as agents for social change by leading in emancipatory ways.

“Can any one of us here still afford to believe that the pursuit of liberation can be the sole and particular province of any one particular race, or sex, or age, or religion, or sexuality, or class?” (Lorde 1984, 140)

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Letter



Subject: Seeking Participants for Dissertation Research

September 29, 2023

Dear _____,

I am Samuel Santos, a doctoral candidate in the Leaders for Equity and Democracy EdD program at the University of California Berkeley. I'm writing to see if you would be willing to support my dissertation project. I am conducting a multiple-case qualitative study about the experiences of LGBTQ+ college presidents (**IRB# 22023-07-16551**). From an asset-based perspective, this study aims to understand how LGBTQ+ college leaders make meaning of their ascension to the college presidency. The topics explored will include career pathways, intersecting social identities, and a minimal exploration of your current tenure in the college presidency.

The time commitment is no more than 75 minutes – a brief demographic questionnaire and one interview lasting approximately 60 minutes.

Please note that to participate in this study, you must fit the following criteria:

- Currently serving as California Community College president.
- Identify under the umbrella of LGBTQ+

Your participation in this research is voluntary. I hope this research influences efforts to diversify the college presidency. This dissertation study will mask the participants' identities and any identifying information specific to the college campus. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I have also listed the contact information of my dissertation chair, the principal investigator supervising my research.

Thank you for your consideration of supporting my research.

Sincerely,

Samuel Santos Jr.
 Doctoral Candidate
 Leaders for Equity and Democracy (EdD)
samuelsantos@berkeley.edu
 415-902-0114

Dr. Tolani A. Britton
 Associate Professor
 University of California, Berkeley
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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY

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SAN FRANCISCO SANTA BARBARA SANTA

Consent to Participate in Research: *LGBTQ+ College Presidents Dissertation Study*

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

Key Information

- You are invited to participate in a doctoral research study. Participation is entirely voluntary.
- This study aims to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ leaders who have ascended to the college presidency.
- The time commitment is relatively minimal, approximately 75 min, and includes:
 - (1) a brief demographic questionnaire, which will take no more than 15 min to complete; and
 - (2) an interview, which should take no longer than 60 min
- Risks and discomforts may include minimal distress when reflecting on your experiences related to challenges in career navigation.

Introduction and Purpose

My name is Samuel Santos. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Leaders for Equity and Democracy Ed.D program in the School of Education. I invite you to participate in my doctoral research study, which aims to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ college presidents. This research is being conducted under the supervision of my dissertation chair, Dr. Tolani Britton, a professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Britton can be reached at tabritton@berkeley.edu.

Procedures: If you agree to participate in my research, there are two parts. You will be asked to complete a survey online to provide general demographic information, and information related to your career pathway. The second part is an individual interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The recording is to collect accurate information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. The purpose is to generate an accurate transcript and support an attentive exchange. After I complete my data collection and analysis, the recording will be destroyed/deleted, and I will share the key themes with you and other participants.

Benefits: There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is hoped that the research will help to raise awareness of the importance of supporting LGBTQ+ leaders, with the

potential to inform and improve practice in ways that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ in leaders in the college presidency.

Risks/Discomforts: Risks and discomforts may include minimal stress when reflecting on experiences related to addressing topics of equity and injustice when discussing: race, racism, sexism, inequitable hiring practices, campus climate, and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. You are free to decline to answer any questions you don't wish to or to stop the interview/focus group at any time.

Confidentiality: As with all research, confidentiality could be compromised. As some interviews will be held online, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Precautions will be taken to minimize this risk, and we will treat all information shared during the interview as confidential. Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. While the results of this study may be published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used. If applicable, identifying information about the institution will not be disclosed without your consent, and a pseudonym will be used instead. The audio recordings will be transcribed within one month of the interview to minimize the risks of a loss of confidentiality. The investigator's notes and transcriptions will have identifiers removed and replaced with a code. The investigator will maintain a key that links the codes to identifier information, and this will be kept in a password-protected folder in secure cloud storage. When research is completed, transcriptions will be saved for possible use in future research. Identifiable data, including the key that links codes to identifiers, will be retained for up to three years after the study is completed. If you agree to participate in possible future research, your contact information will be kept for up to 5 years after completion of the study.

Your personal information may be released if required by law. Authorized representatives from the University of California may review research for data purposes such as monitoring or managing the conduct of this study.

Compensation: There is no compensation for this study at this time. Your willingness to participate is appreciated and will contribute to research related to leadership studies, specifically diversifying the college presidency.

Rights: Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in the study. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop participating in the study at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research study, answer any questions, or participate in the study, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research, please contact me, Samuel Santos, at samuelsantos@berkeley.edu. The faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Tolani Britton, a professor in the School of Education. Dr. Britton can be reached at tabritton@berkeley.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the University of California at Berkeley's Committee for Protection of Human Subjects at (510) 642-7461 or email subjects@berkeley.edu. This research has been approved by UC Berkeley Institutional Review Board Protocol ID: 2023-07-16551 (Tolani Britton).

Initials: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Semi-Structured Interview

Research Questions:

How do Queer Men of Color characterize their ascension to the California Community College presidency?

- a. In which ways do these characterizations reveal key affordances and challenges along the pathway to the presidency?

INSTRUCTIONS: Good morning/afternoon

1. My name is Samuel; my pronouns are he/him/his. Thank you for sharing your time with me; your schedule must be hectic as college president.
2. Do you have any questions about the informed consent form? As a reminder, this interview is entirely voluntary; you may skip any questions or conclude this interview at any time. I will leave you a copy of the informed consent form.
3. The length of the interview is approximately 60 min. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I hope you feel comfortable saying what you think and how you feel. It is my goal to challenge the researcher-participant barrier by co-constructing ideas. If any questions need clarification or you'd like to edit, I invite you to co-construct this project with me.
4. If it is okay with you, I will record our conversation. The purpose is to generate an accurate transcript and support an attentive exchange. After I complete my data collection and analysis, the recording will be destroyed/deleted, and I will share the key themes with you and other participants.
5. Do you consent? Do you have any questions for me before we get started? How about your preference on a pseudonym?

I. Introductory Question:

1. Please tell me more about you – family, friends, education. How would you describe yourself outside of the role of college president?

II. Pathway to the Presidency

1. What brought you to a career in higher education? Please tell me about your journey.
2. What influenced your decision to pursue the college presidency? When did you first know that you wanted to become a college president?
 - a. Probing Question:
 - i. Why do you do this work? What's your why for this work?
3. Why have you chosen to share your leadership talents within the California Community College system vs. Cal State, UC system, private?
4. Which significant experiences have informed your pathway to becoming a college president?
 - a. Probing Questions:
 - i. How would you characterize critical support key affordances, if any, for your ascension to the college presidency?
 - ii. Which barriers, if any, would you identify that challenged your ascension to the college presidency?

5. From your experiences, which strategies would you offer as the most effective for navigating the college presidency?
 6. How is this role similar to and different from what you imagined it to be?
 7. As a college president, how would you describe the nature of your interactions with various constituencies (students, staff, faculty, the board of trustees)?
 - a. Probing questions:
 - i. In which specific ways, if any, do you feel most celebrated?
 - ii. In which ways do you feel most challenged?
 8. How would you describe yourself in terms of your social identities?
 - a. Probing Questions:
 - i. Which have been the most salient within your career? Within your presidential role?
 - ii. How would you connect any of these identities to opportunities and/or challenges?
 - iii. How do your identities inform your role as a college president?
- III. Efforts to Diversify the Presidency
1. What are some of the most important lessons you've learned in your ascension to the college presidency?
 2. Which 2-3 recommendations would you offer to colleges and search firms to improve diversity in the college presidency?
 3. What are 1-2 accomplishments you're most proud of leading as a college president?
- IV. Do you want to share anything we still need to cover or that I may have missed?