Non-Traditional Paths to Presidencies of Higher Education Institutions in Michigan

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NON-TRADITIONAL PATHS TO PRESIDENCIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MICHIGAN

by

Daryl Joseph Delabbio

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Teaching, Learning and Leadership
Dr. Van E. Cooley, Advisor

Western Michigan University
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The number of college and university presidents coming from a career path outside of higher education has seen a steady increase, from just under 10% in 1986, to over 15% in 2001 (Corrigan, 2002), yet little is still known about this growing population. This qualitative study examined four current or former presidents of institutions of higher learning in Michigan who were elected to their positions without having experienced the traditional academic career path commonly associated with college and university leaders. Four presidents, along with their current or former chief academic officers and two current or former members of the governing boards that appointed these presidents, were interviewed to determine: (1) the factors that motivated these non-traditional presidents to seek such appointment; (2) how past experiences benefited such individuals in their role as president; (3) any obstacles that existed; and (4) any significant differences in the leadership qualities necessary to lead an institution of higher education versus those necessary to lead a governmental, non-profit, or private organization.

The most significant findings of the study are: (1) non-academic presidents were usually affiliated in some manner with the institution prior to being named president of that institution; (2) the past experiences of the non-traditional president are no less
valuable, and in many respects more valuable, than past experiences of a traditional
president; (3) non-traditional presidents bring a “sense of urgency” and “measurables” to
the campus community, as well as a different point of view; (4) leadership skills from the
public, private, and non-profit sectors are transferable to higher education; (5) there are
more similarities than differences between public/non-profit administration and higher
education administration; (6) traditional institutions of higher education cannot be
operated entirely like a private business, and individuals with non-traditional backgrounds
who are considering a move into higher education believing that such institutions can be
run like private businesses, will in all likelihood fail; (7) while barriers and obstacles do
exist for non-traditional presidents, they can be successfully overcome; (8) non-traditional
presidents surround themselves with strong leadership teams; and (9) it is critically
important that the person and the institution are a “fit” for one another, with the person
embracing the mission, culture, and tradition of the institution.
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this challenge.

Daryl Joseph Delabbio
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Institutions of higher education increasingly face crisis after crisis, from declining revenues and increased costs (Astin, 2004; Quinn, 2004), to lack of confidence in their ability to meet the needs of the students and the society they serve (Smith, 2004). This is no surprise because in the current environment of greater demands for quality products and services, combined with increased competition and declining revenues, institutions of higher learning are not alone: governmental and non-profit agencies, as well as the private sector, are all faced with the challenges and opportunities of “doing business.”

Compounding the financial challenges facing higher education are the political environments in which public colleges and universities exist. To appease lawmakers, federal and state government officials are looking at ways to limit tuition increases. However, college and university officials assert that tuition caps result in questionable budgeting techniques, such as raising tuition to the highest levels allowed even during times of financial security to make up for revenue potential shortfalls in the future (Klein, 2004).

When all is said and done, what colleges and universities can and cannot do comes down to their financial capacity to effectively manage their ambitions. To that end, institutional goals have to be balanced with available resources. Exacerbating this challenge for public institutions (versus private colleges and universities) are the political realities they face, which include receiving a portion of their revenues from government funding, over which they have little influence, and state and federal mandates that limit their ability to raise non-governmental revenues. As a result, a special report in The
Chronicle of Higher Education, observed that leaders of institutions of higher learning “will experience financial pressures that could reduce a hardened corporate CEO to tears” (2003, p. A1). This is not inconsistent with the results of a comprehensive survey, also conducted by The Chronicle, which reported “financial issues permeate almost every facet of the top job on campuses” (Selingo, 2005, p. A26).

At the center of the action is the college or university CEO: the president. It is in this office and with this person that the buck stops. It is here where decisions are made that will affect the institution and all of its constituencies. No one disputes the fact that presidents of colleges and universities play key roles in the development of their institutions and contribute to the communities beyond the immediate borders of the campus. Kerr and Gade (1987) suggest that the contributions of presidents will be noted in the annals of their respective institutions “as the central characters in the continuing drama of each school” (p. 29). And while there have been several observations related to the declining power, effectiveness, and influence of the position (Bomstein, 2003; Kerr & Gade, 1997; Martin & Samels, 2004), no one questions that the president is, both literally and symbolically, viewed as the leader of the institution (Kauffman, 1980; McLaughlin, 1996a; Rhodes, 1998; Shapiro, 1998; Zwell, 1999), and that the effectiveness of the institution is dependent upon the effectiveness of its leader (Whetten & Cameron, 1985). Barwick (2002) believes that the presidency is “a very special position, totally unlike any other in education” (p. 8). As a result, he notes that applicants for the position “must create ways to gain depth and breadth of experience to shape themselves intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically for a leadership challenge unlike any they are likely to encounter” (p. 8).
In addition to the financial constraint impacting institutions of higher learning and its impact on leadership, two other phenomena have attracted the attention of scholars: the decline in the number of quality candidates for presidencies at community colleges, colleges, and universities (Barwick, 2002; Fain, 2004; Kauffman, 1980; Kirkland & Ratcliff, 1993; Marchese, 2001; Martin & Samels, 2004), and the declining job tenure among presidents (Alton & Dean, 2002; Kelly, 2002; Martin, 2000; Padilla & Ghosh, 2000; Padilla, 2004; Perry & Koenig, 1998). Historically, it has not been uncommon to have 300 or more presidential positions in higher education open in any given year (Alton & Dean, 2002; Birnbaum, 1988; Cole, 1976; Stoke, 1959). There appears, however, to be increasing concern about job tenure issues and why turnover in the position is increasing, as well as a dearth in candidates for the position. In an alarming observation, Martin and Samels (2004) note that,

As fewer and fewer candidates apply for the position, as its power base becomes more anemic, and as many new appointees are not lasting long enough even to complete one regional accreditation cycle, the pressures on presidents to leave often emerge with the first board agenda. (p. 7)

In their seminal work on college and university presidencies, Cohen and March (1974) outline the career path individuals normally take to ascend to the role of president. They conclude that this route emphasizes academia, whereby individuals first obtain a doctorate, then move through the academic ranks as a full-time faculty member, department chair, dean, academic vice president or provost, and finally, ascend to the presidency (Cohen & March, 1974). Since this landmark treatise, numerous studies (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Moore, Salimbene, Marlier, & Bragg, 1983; Salimbene,
1982; Socolow, 1978; Wessel & Keim, 1994) acknowledge that the traditional path to the presidency of an institution of higher learning generally involves one or more previous positions in academia, though they may not follow the purist route outlined by Cohen and March. Thus, having an academic background is not only accepted as being the normative path, but also appears to be the preferred path, at least from the perspective of academicians. Based on a study conducted on the selection of college and university presidents for the three-year period of 1959-1962, Bolman (1965) concluded that academicians were the preferred candidates, and observed that it was the “age of the academic man as leader” (p. 201). Such a traditional path recognizes the commitment and vested interest that academicians have in the leadership of institutions of higher education, and the traditional model of shared governance prevalent in such institutions (Association of Governing Boards, 1996; Peck, 1983).

While the traditional career path that involves one or more positions in academia continues to be followed by the vast majority of presidents, evidence suggests that non-traditional candidates are being looked at more closely as viable options to lead institutions of higher education. According to a report by the American Council on Education, the immediate prior position held by approximately 15% of all college and university presidents in 2001 was from outside of higher education, compared with less than 10% in 1986, and approximately 60% of all presidents have experience outside of education (Corrigan, 2002). This number may be significantly higher if one considers specialized institutions such as business, law, and chiropractic schools, where presidents with nonacademic experience increased from 7.8% in 1998 to almost 15% in 2001 (Basinger, 2002).
Consistent with this national trend, within the past ten-to-fifteen years, there has been a number of college and university governing boards in Michigan, representing both public and private institutions, that have appointed to the presidency persons who have not followed a normative route. This is of note since Michigan is the site for this research.

Problem Statement

In light of the significant responsibilities assigned to presidents of higher education institutions, it is important to consider and understand who they are, where they came from, and how they have prepared themselves for the pivotal role they play within their institutions, their communities, and society. Most studies regarding college and university presidents are quantitative in nature (Arman, 1986; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Cohen & March, 1974; Ferrari, 1970; Moore, Salimbene, Marlier, & Bragg, 1983; Oglesby, Windham, & Tuerk, 1996; Plotts, 1998; Rottweiler, 2005; Salimbene, 1982; Wessel & Keim, 1994), focusing on statistics related to demographics such as gender, age, educational background, and career path. With few exceptions (Alejandro, 2004; Barrax, 1985; Covert, 2004; Davies, 2005; Levin, 1998; Neumann & Bensimon, 1990), there has been little in the way of qualitative research related to presidential characteristics and identifying career paths leading to presidencies, let alone studies devoted to understanding the aspirations, motivations, and challenges they have faced. The closest study the researcher discovered is one recently completed by Glover (2005), which analyzes new, first-time presidents and their transitions into office based upon varying career backgrounds.

In essence, while both quantitative and qualitative studies provide a brief glimpse into the significant amount of literature related to presidential career paths and personal
and professional characteristics, modest attention has been given to learning about those
individuals who have not taken the normative career path to the presidency. Given the
increased numbers of non-traditional presidents being appointed by governing bodies, it
is important to learn more about these leaders by obtaining in-depth information about
the type of individuals they are, what motivated them to move into academia from a
private, public or non-profit organization, and what skills and unique insights they bring
to their positions, particularly as a result of their non-traditional career paths.

In addition, with so much job turnover in the office, institutional governing boards
are continually faced with the daunting task of recruiting and selecting new leaders.
Complicating this intricate process is the concern that a decreasing number of qualified
individuals are expressing interest in presidential positions (Fain, 2004; Kelly, 2002). As
a result, more governing boards may need to look at candidates with non-traditional
backgrounds to serve as their institution’s leaders.

Research Questions

It was the intent of this study to provide information on the phenomenon of non-
academic individuals pursuing (or being pursued) and acquiring the position as president
of colleges and universities in Michigan. The following research questions were
developed as a foundation to ascertain the opportunities and challenges presented to
individuals who have changed from a career in non-academic settings—such as a
corporate or a governmental organization—to that of higher education, specifically the
position of president.

1. What motivated non-traditional academic leaders to consider assuming the
   position of president of a college or university?
2. How have past professional experiences of such non-traditional academic leaders prepared these individuals for the position of a college or university president?

3. How similar and different are the demands of the position of college or university president in comparison to previous positions in a non-academic setting?

4. What barriers or challenges have non-traditional academic leaders found in their respective backgrounds (education and experience) that had to be overcome to effectively function as president?

5. How have prior leadership experiences been an asset to these non-traditional academic leaders and their respective institutions?

6. What advantages and disadvantages, if any, exist by not having taken the traditional path to the position of college or university president?

7. What advice can be given to someone who is considering making the transition from a non-academic setting to a leadership position in higher education?

The perspectives of the individuals participating in the study (current and former presidents, governing board members, and chief academic officers) provides an in-depth description of the specific challenges, obstacles, advantages, and disadvantages these non-traditional presidents have experienced.

Rationale for the Study

The State of Michigan hosts 28 community colleges and 44 public and private colleges and universities (excluding technical institutes, schools of law, theological seminaries, and for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix). The role of such institutions extends far beyond the boundaries of individual campuses. Leaders of these institutions have to plan, organize, lead, and control their own organizations, but must
also ensure that their respective institutions are catalysts for the future development of their respective communities and the state. They are also viewed not only as leaders of an organization, but also as community leaders, and as such their presence and influence extends far beyond the campus. In 2001, the American Association of Community Colleges surveyed presidents to identify the most important skills for future leaders. Responses included the ability to forge partnerships, improve and maintain relationships within and outside the college, and develop a vision for the institution, as well as financial planning, communication skills, political savvy, and adaptability (Boggs, 2003). Many of these skills are not typically associated with traditional academic backgrounds.

The insight of individuals who appoint these leaders (members of the governing body), as well as those who work closely with him or her, specifically the chief academic officer (academic vice president or provost) is also important. Persons charged with the responsibility of recruiting a college president and providing policy direction to the institution can provide a unique perspective into the characteristics they believe essential to the success of the institution. Thus, this study is important because it can assist those charged with the responsibility for recruiting and selecting college and university presidents. In light of the fact that there are fewer candidates interested in seeking these leadership positions, governing boards and search committees may be increasingly required to think about individuals who do not fit the traditional “mold” of a college or university president. As such, the insights provided by participants of this study can be of value as institutions for higher learning look for alternative candidates that might not otherwise be considered. In addition, some of the benefits and opportunities that such candidates offer can be explored.
The perspectives offered by chief academic officers are also important, as close associates of presidents from traditional academic backgrounds as well as from the non-traditional track. Some of the challenges and obstacles faced by non-traditional presidents could possibly be avoided or minimized by obtaining a candid assessment of the process as viewed by academic vice presidents, as well as the vantage points offered by governing board members and the non-traditional presidents themselves.

In summary, this study reviewed and assessed non-traditional paths to presidencies of institutions of higher learning in Michigan. The objectives included determining: (1) the factors that motivated these non-tradition presidents to seek such appointment; (2) how past experiences benefited such individuals in their role as president; (3) any obstacles that existed; and (4) any significant differences in the leadership qualities necessary to lead an institution of higher education versus those necessary to lead a governmental or private organization. Obtaining answers to such questions provides a framework for further research, including, among other things, whether governing boards should consider looking outside of academia for individuals to lead their institutions and whether presidents with non-traditional career paths have experiences similar to their peers who have experienced the normative path. While the project’s scope is geographically limited to Michigan, there is a fair representation of non-traditional presidents from a broad range of Carnegie-classified colleges and universities.

In addition to interviewing four current or former college and university presidents, the researcher also interviewed two current or former members of each of the governing boards involved in the selection of the non-traditional president, as well as the
academic vice president/provost of each institution. These additional participants provided the researcher with more detailed information that proved not only useful in the analysis, but also a different perspective for analysis.

The research was phenomenological, examining on a personal basis those individuals who have been appointed to presidential positions without having benefit of the traditional background and experience in academia, as well as close observers to these selected presidents. The study was exploratory in nature, with open-ended questions, and with no attempt to fit responses into any predetermined categories. As was anticipated, some themes did emerge from the interviews and analyses.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study attempted to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon of nontraditional paths to college and university presidencies within the state of Michigan. The geographic boundaries of the state, therefore, are also boundaries to the research. As a result, the physical boundaries and cultural differences that may exist in other locations may preclude the results from being readily generalized to other regions.

The sample size was limited to four institutions of higher learning, representing a broad spectrum of Carnegie-classified institutions in Michigan: one large research university (Carnegie classification of Doctoral/Research Universities – Extensive), one mid-sized state university (Carnegie classification of Masters Colleges and Universities I), one traditional private college (Carnegie classification of Baccalaureate Colleges – General), and one private “system” college/university (Carnegie classification of Specialized Institutions – Schools of Business and Management). Since the researcher
was interested in those individuals who have not taken the normative path to the presidency, the sampling is purposeful and small.

Another limiting factor to the study was the time constraints of the participants, including the researcher. The demanding schedules of the individuals and the desire of the researcher to respect their time constraints could have potentially limited the comprehensiveness of the study. However, the participants were extremely gracious with their time and did respond to all questions in detail and in a manner that allowed the researcher to capture the essence of the phenomenon.

Finally, the perspectives reflected in this study will be those of the individuals interviewed, both primary participants (current and former presidents) as well as the secondary participants (current and former governing board members and chief academic officers). The perspectives each participant brought to the table were viewed through their own individual eyes and did not reflect the same experiences as their counterparts. College and university presidents share many of the same duties but there are some differences in the duties and priorities required by the position at different institutions. The internal and external cultures of institutions within the State of Michigan can vary greatly. Some presidents will almost certainly be required to devote more time to fund-raising than others. Presidents of small institutions will probably have a closer relationship with students than those at large universities. Public college and university presidents interact more frequently with the state legislature than presidents of private colleges and universities. The differences in the daily activity of the presidents by institution was a possible limitation, since different skill sets may be expected or required for them to be successful at their particular institution.
Conclusion

It was the intent of the researcher to obtain a clearer understanding about the aspirations and motivations of current and former college and university presidents who came to their respective positions from a non-academic setting, including the challenges they faced and the benefits and/or detriments that accompany not having the traditional academic background and career path that most college and university presidents possess. This was deemed important to study, given the dearth of qualitative investigations on the motivations of individuals who do have not the traditional background in higher education to become leaders of institutions of higher learning and the growing need to look outside the career paths that have been traditionally pursued. The balance of this dissertation will include a review of related literature (Chapter 2), a discussion regarding the methodology to be used (Chapter 3), the research findings (Chapter 4), and conclusions, observations, and a discussion of future research opportunities (Chapter 5).
CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of college and university presidents who have not taken the traditional academic path to the position by obtaining in-depth information about the type of individuals they are, what motivated them to move into academia from a private, public or non-profit organization, and what skills and unique insights they bring to their positions, particularly as a result of their non-traditional career paths.

The normative path for college and university presidents resides in academia; that is, they work their way up the academic ladder, some taking the normative career path as outlined in Cohen and March (1974), others by serving in various capacities within academic institutions (Covert, 2004; Moore, Salimbene, Marlier, & Bragg, 1983; Salimbene, 1982; Wessel & Keim, 1994). A growing number of college and university presidents, however, are coming from outside of the normative academic route, yet very little is known about them.

This chapter will review the college presidency from a number of different perspectives or frames. The first perspective profiles the personal and professional characteristics that constitute the position of president, both from a historical context as well as from a contemporary point of view. In addition, the specific characteristics of the position are discussed, from the perspective of those who hold or who have held the position.

Following the review of personal and professional characteristics is a discussion about the importance of the recruitment and selection process, including issues related to
succession management by institutions of higher learning, preparation for the position, and a discussion of internal versus external candidates. The final section of the literature review focuses on the various analyses that have taken place regarding the career paths leading to the position of president and some of the advantages and disadvantages of taking various routes, including the obstacles faced by individuals taking the non-traditional path.

Personal and Professional Characteristics of College and University Presidents

The concept of identifying and studying the types of individuals who serve as leaders in any organization is common. Similarly, the subject of leadership has received more than its fair amount of attention, especially during the past several decades. So it is understandable, and not unexpected, that there are many studies profiling college and university presidents. Studies on the career paths and academic training for college presidents have a long history. Kruse and Beck (1928) studied presidents of state teacher colleges and state universities, asking about professional backgrounds, academic preparation, and tenure. Knode (1944) studied the academic backgrounds of state university presidents for the year 1941, comparing those results with the backgrounds of presidents from the same institutions in 1916, and concluding that there were definite trends, among them that more presidents were coming directly from an administrative position than from the professorship. In 1948, Kunkel investigated the personal and professional demographics of college presidents as of 1945. Since that time, the research of these issues has changed little as study after study asked the same questions in an effort to quantify and understand those individuals serving as leaders in higher education, although different approaches had been taken. For instance, Carmichael (1969)
differentiates his research by making comparisons between the backgrounds and traits of junior college presidents with those of business executives.

Earlier studies relied on data from sources such as the Bureau of Education Statistical Circulars (Kruse & Beck, 1928), and Who's Who in America (Knodel, 1944; Kunkel, 1948). Latter research is based upon surveys developed and administered directly by investigators to the institutions and individuals being examined (Arman, 1986; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Carmichael, 1969; Cohen & March, 1974; Corrigan, 2002; Ferrari, 1970; Green, 2000; Plotts, 1998; Tunnecliffe & Ingram, 1969; Wessel & Keim, 1994).

One of the first comprehensive studies on the career paths and educational backgrounds of college presidencies was performed by Ferrari (1970). Ferrari concentrated his analysis on career patterns, occupational mobility, and social-personal characteristics of presidents and made a cross comparison of presidents on the basis of public and private institutions. He also compared careers of presidents with careers of business and government executives. Ferrari found that presidents were highly educated (75% with an earned doctorate), with careers primarily in academia (86% having prior experience as a college professor and 60% attaining the rank of full professor), and on average 53 years old. The average tenure at the time was eight years.

Shortly thereafter, another major contribution to the research of college and university presidents was performed by Cohen and March (1974). It was in this study that the normative career path for college and university presidents was first defined and articulated. It was also here that the authors presented their controversial theory of
colleges and universities as "organized anarchies," stating that institutions of higher learning are difficult to manage for those who are charged with their leadership:

The American college or university is a prototypic organized anarchy. It does not know what it is doing. Its goals are either vague or in dispute. Its technology is familiar but not understood. Its major participants wander in and out of the organization. These factors do not make a university a bad organization or a disorganized one; but they do make it a problem to describe, understand, and lead. (p. 3)

The works of Ferrari (1970) and Cohen and March (1974) spawned increasing interest in the backgrounds—academic, professional, and personal—of college and university presidents, as evidenced in the studies of Atwell (1980), Barrax (1985), Arman (1986), the American Presidents' Study series of the American Council on Education (1986, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2002), Plotts (1998), Salimbene (1982), Wessel and Keim (1994), Birnbaum and Umbach (2001), and Covert (2004), to name just a few. Studies varied in nature, with some focusing on different classifications of institutions (e.g., community colleges versus four-year institutions), others investigating types of institutions (e.g., private versus public) and institutional subtypes (e.g., private Christian colleges and universities), some limited to studying particular geographic regions of the country (e.g., Midwest), and some involving career paths based on gender.

What have these studies demonstrated about the person who is a college or university president? A couple of broad generalizations can be made. Salimbene (1982), in addition to her important contribution identifying variations in the Cohen and March (1974) model of career paths of college presidents, observes that "until the mid-1960s it
was assumed that all chief administrators were male Caucasians, with the result that these characteristics were not even discussed in research articles" (p. 40). For instance, Tunnecliffe and Ingram (1969), in their report of 935 presidents from both public and private institutions based on data for the decade 1955-1965, outlined the following profiles of college presidents: State universities – a *man* with a doctorate whose last position was in academic administration; state colleges – a *man* with a doctorate in education, whose previous position was in academic administration; church-related (other than Roman-Catholic) – a *man* with a doctorate in liberal arts, education, or a professional field, with the previous position in academic administration or government; private institutions – a *man* with a doctorate, who previously was a college administrator, either academic or nonacademic (emphasis added). Salimbene’s study concluded that the academic presidency in 1982 continued to be dominated by married, middle-aged, white males. Ten years later, Sagaria and Johnsrud (1992) made the claim that Caucasian males continue to be overrepresented, while females and minorities are underrepresented, in the administrative ranks of higher education. This trend has continued with the most recent comprehensive presidential profile acknowledging that the office continues to have significant numbers of individuals who are married, middle-aged, white males (Corrigan, 2002).

Arman (1986) investigated the academic and experiential backgrounds of college presidents and chief academic officers in public and private institutions, including community colleges, in Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois. The study evaluated the presidential career ladder model described by Cohen and March (1974) and Salimbene (1982), but also focused on personal and professional demographics of presidents. Arman concluded...
that college administrators are primarily male, between 45 and 55 years old, and Caucasian.

In 1986, the American Council on Education (ACE) published the first of its *National Presidents' Study* series, providing comprehensive data on college and university presidents from all sectors of higher education. Four follow-up reports have been published (1990, 1995, 2000, and 2002), and present detailed demographic information about education, career paths, length of service, age, marital status, religious affiliation, gender, and race/ethnicity. Each subsequent edition to the first one makes a comparison between the most recent survey and the 1986 report, providing a rich source of research on trends in the profession.

The first report profiled 2,105 presidents and found that males accounted for 90.5% of presidencies, with an average age of 52.3 years, and an average tenure of 6.3 years. Eighty-five percent of college presidents were married. Only 8.1% were minorities. Almost 77% held doctorates, and 10% of the presidents’ immediate prior position was outside of academe. The most recent report (Corrigan, 2002) profiled 2,594 presidents and found that the percentage of presidents who are women more than doubled (from 9.5% in 1986 to 21% in 2001), with an average age of 57.5 years, and the average tenure was 6.6 years. Eighty three percent of presidents were married. Minority representation increased to 13%. Seventy six percent held doctorates, and 15% of the presidents’ immediate prior position was outside of academe. Consistent with the trend for an increasing number of presidents having a non-traditional path background, 30% had never been college professors, compared to 25% in 1986.
Plotts (1998), while limiting his research to president members of the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), found the typical CCCU president to be a Caucasian male, married, and between 51-60 years old. In fact, all CCCU presidents were male and married. The CCCU president most likely earned a doctorate in the field of education (50%) from a research institution. He had served at his institution for less than ten years and frequently entered the presidency from outside higher education. Those who entered the presidency from within higher education were most likely to have been the chief academic officer (22.4%) immediately prior to assuming the presidency.

In a qualitative study that looked at demographic characteristics of college presidents, Alejandro (2004) performed a qualitative analysis on the backgrounds of 57 presidents from public universities in five southern states (Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia). Although he limited his research to a specific region, Alejandro’s conclusions do not differ from those of previous analyses; that is, the typical university president is a Caucasian male, in his 50s, married, and holds a doctoral degree.

And in one of the more recent studies on the academic presidency, Rottweiler (2005) looked at the demographic and career profiles of doctoral/research universities by institutional type, control (public or private), and reputation. In each of the four subcategories that made up the 1994 Carnegie classification (Research I, Research II, Doctoral I, and Doctoral II), the typical president is “a White, 61 year-old male who has earned a PhD in the social sciences” (p. 110).

It can be seen that historically the majority of college and university presidents hold terminal degrees (either a Ph.D. or an Ed.D.) And while more than 20% of sitting
presidents do not have a doctorate, little has changed over the years as a doctorate is consistently considered a basic requirement for the position (Atwell, 1980; Dowdall, 2000; Moore, 1986; Ross & Green, 1990).

Characteristics of the Higher Education Presidency

Much has been written about the college presidency, both in terms of the characteristics inherent in position as well as the challenges that exist, especially during the past 50 years. As challenges increase, so will interest in the position. A great deal can be learned from current and past presidents. The literature is rich with observations from those who have personally experienced the position, and who can attest to the characteristics and challenges of a position that Carbone (1980) calls “splendid agony” (p. 86).

For example, Stoke (1959), in one of the most respected memoirs of a college president, made a number of observations about the key roles that a president plays in the life of an institution, first observing that in their earliest years, higher education was either dominated by or closely related to churches, and the college or university president was a minister, whose primary qualifications included conducting chapel services, teaching moral philosophy or being a role model and were considered were more important than administrative experience. He writes that, “It is interesting to note that Woodrow Wilson was the first nonclerical president at Princeton; and Harvard always had ministerial presidents until Charles Eliot. Yale did not break the tradition until 1899, and Dartmouth until 1916” (p. 2). Kauffman (1982) contends that the early college presidents were the colleges; where the college identity “became a reflection of his character, leadership, and personal success” (p. 13).
With this transformation of colleges and universities moving from close association with religious denominations to more secular institutions, expanding their missions and variety of offerings, and increasing in importance, the position of president changed. Stoke (1959) observes that while “the college president as the Man of Learning has been giving way to the Man of Management,” what did not change is that the position and the institution are “inseparable” (p. 3).

Where Stoke (1959) concentrated on the ministerial aspects of the position, Fisher (1984) focused his observations on the power that a president has and can use, and he offered insights into how to exercise power both within and outside of the institution. He comments that “Presidents often fail to understand the value of the presidential position—the platform atop the tower—to their ability to accomplish legitimate and essential institutional goals. As a result, many fall short of their purpose and do not understand why” (p. 2). He suggests that presidents be “friendly phantoms” learning to be everywhere and nowhere, being absolutely accessible yet always remote (p. 54).

Conversely, Bornstein (2003), in one of the more recent commentaries on the presidency, reflects on the “legitimacy” of the position, stating that the president as an intellectual has been “supplanted by legitimacy generated by competent management of internal affairs, leadership in community and economic development issues, and resource acquisition” (p. 6). From appointment to retirement, Bornstein reasons that there are not only many opportunities for presidents to provide legitimate leadership to an institution but also many obstacles or threats that are faced that can detract from such legitimacy, and that if a president fails, so does the institution.
Rhodes (1998), speaking from 18 years of experience as president of Cornell University, observes that the job of a college or university president involves "maintaining the fragile equilibrium of the campus" (p. 12), and not necessarily being a noble leader. He asserts that the college president can be an influential, important, and powerful person: influential because the future leaders of the world sit in college classrooms; important because it is on the college campus where "knowledge—the foundation of the future—is created (p. 12);" and powerful because of its influence and wide-ranging leverage, by championing creativity, creating alliances, and supporting transforming goals.

The essential tasks of a president, Rhodes (1998) claims, are to define and articulate the mission of the institution, develop meaningful goals, recruit talent, build consensus, create the climate, and provide resources. Of these tasks, the most important, and most difficult, include defining the institution's mission and develop its goals. This cannot and should not take place in a short amount of time or in a vacuum. In its report on the academic presidency, the Commission on the Academic Presidency created by Association of Governing Boards (1996) argues that is incumbent upon governing boards to require that presidents develop a vision and work with the president to accomplish the vision. Corrigan (2002) states that college presidents are often chosen because they "embody the values of, and are prepared to meet the particular challenges associated with" (p. 23) the institution. The president is seen as "the personal embodiment of the institution’s values" (p. 15), and McLaughlin (1996a), quoting Reisman, calls the president the institution’s “living logo” (p. 8).
Conversely, Hahn (1995) suggests that the success of presidents depends on the collective efforts of the campus community. He argues the success of presidents is usually gauged on three things: the support received by stakeholders, longevity in one institution, and—conversely—on mobility from one institution to another. To the point of support, Hahn believes success is a three-legged stool (of which not all legs are equal): support of the board, faculty, and executive officers. These three constituencies are most important, but others include students, alumni, staff, and the community. Hahn reasons that success should be based on working with leaders to solve institutional problems, acknowledging such problems exist and persist, and that they must be dealt with head-on. Colleges should focus on their expectations of presidents in a more thoughtful way, and he suggests the following characteristics of successful presidents: (1) understanding, showing scope and curiosity, subtlety and accuracy in their thinking; (2) strong values, especially being humane, progressive, and idealistic; (3) calm, knowing that crises will arise, but how they respond is indicative of the type of person they are; (4) courage, of their convictions, to accept criticism, to do the right thing; and (5) fairness, being consistent and showing integrity.

According to Sederberg (1999), a former state senator (with a Ph.D.) turned college president, the position involves three primary elements: representing the university at numerous functions, adjudicating differences of opinion between various institutional players (vice presidents, deans, and faculty), and addressing administrative issues such as personnel and budgeting. It is his view, one he admits is biased, that the interpersonal skills he gained as a legislator are more useful than the academic skills of a scholar to fulfill the obligations of a college or university president. He concludes that the
political skills of communication, being able to easily meet and talk with people, and building coalitions are as necessary in the academy as they are in the political arena.

Shapiro (1998) provides a contrast between college and university presidents from the mid-1800s to presidents of today, and asserts there are more similarities than there are differences. From Shapiro’s perspective, a key leadership challenge of the president is to serve as a bridge between the governing board and the intellectual community, so that both can come to understand and appreciate the roles each plays in society. He observes “there has always been the necessity for the American university president to champion the interests and aspirations of the academic community to the broader society and to play a role in ensuring that the academic community is in touch with society’s interests and needs” (p. 67). Not unlike Rhodes (1998), Shapiro contends that in the leadership role, a president must outline the vision of the institution, and to not only pursue the vision, but also to inspire all stakeholders to support it. No different than any other practitioner of leadership, he believes effective presidents create collaboration among all stakeholders to embrace and pursue whatever vision is articulated.

From Shapiro’s (1998) vivid descriptions of four presidents in the 1800s and early 1900s, and the impact each had on his respective institution, one can understand the closely held belief that presidents should be academicians first and administrators second. Each president came from a background in teaching and scholarship. Each made it a point to continue teaching as they carried out their administrative functions, holding to the belief that “responsibility for the intellectual training of their students was intimately bound up with a personal and direct responsibility of their moral training and sensibility” (p. 78). Contemporary presidents, according to Shapiro, are largely viewed as being
symbolic leaders, where any influence may be sporadic and determined by events not entirely within the control of the president. They are, in essence, caretakers of institutions.

But in his comparison of four early presidents to their contemporary counterparts, Shapiro (1998) believes similarities exist, including: (1) the need for internal and external communication, although the scope of communications that now exists is significantly greater than in the past, especially in the area of relations with state and federal lawmakers; (2) the president’s engagement with the campus constituencies, although the subject matter has changed from dealing with ordering supplies to decisions on parking garages and pension plans; and (3) the structure of decision-making, including the responsibility for ethical leadership. It is here where Shapiro suggests that while the moral responsibilities are no less than prior requirements, they differ. In his view, the president’s responsibility is not to teach other members of academic community what appropriate beliefs may be, it is rather to be an example of personal integrity and to “protect and project the academic vision of the modern American university and the intellectual culture encompassed therein as a social institution that serves the long-term interests of the society that supports it” (p. 93).

It is clear from the observations of those who have held a college or university presidency that the position is complex, filled with multiple and often competing roles (i.e., scholar versus administrator). What is universally accepted is that the president is viewed as part and parcel with the institution, someone who is expected to represent the interests of the institution to the world at large. It is a role that requires a person who can not only perform the lofty task of defining and articulating the institution’s vision, but
someone who can also deal with the financial and personnel issues that leaders are expected to handle with aplomb.

The Importance of Recruitment and Selection

It is not a new phenomenon that approximately 300 or more presidents leave office on an annual basis (Alton & Dean, 2002; Birnbaum, 1988; Cole, 1976; Stoke, 1959). As a result, governing boards become charged with the most important decision they are faced with: the search and selection of a new leader (Fisher, 1991). The process of recruiting and selecting a new chief executive is not only a costly and time-consuming activity that involves large numbers of people (Birnbaum, 1988; Cole, 1976), but the consequences for making an error can be significant, because hiring the right person “can make the difference between an outstanding institution and one in trouble” (Zwell, 1999, p. 7). According to Bornstein (2003), the management of the process to select a new president can “enhance or detract from the legitimacy of an institution, internally and externally” and is viewed as a significant moment, signaling to the world the institution’s “sense of itself, its mission, and its future” (p. 165). And Clausen (1997) contends that when a presidential selection process is conducted, the institution is “putting its future on the line” (p. 24).

Complicating this turnover is the significant amount of interest the search and selection of a college president generates. Public institutions must comply with open meetings acts and sunshine laws, although private institutions are not subject to similar requirements. Bornstein (2003) states that for public institutions, everything about a presidential succession is scrutinized, including the search consultant, final candidates,
degree of unanimity about the final selection, and even who will be attending the inauguration.

Despite the importance of the decision, however, institutions of higher learning are not as sophisticated as business or industry when filling presidential vacancies (Birnbaum, 1971; Selingo, 2005). In the private sector, the outgoing chief executive often plays a significant role in the development and naming of his or her successor. In most colleges and universities, the incumbent president usually does not participate in this process. Moore, Salimbene, Marlier, and Bragg (1983) believe that colleges and universities do not identify and groom potential leaders, but rely on a "policy of 'natural selection'" (p. 501). Coupled with the lack of succession planning is the growing concern among observers that the number of individuals who are applying, or having their names placed in nomination, for leadership positions in higher education is declining. Both Kelly (2002) and Fain (2004) observe that academic positions which once drew 100 to 200 responses now generate 40 to 50, even for presidencies. Of greater concern than the lack of quantity, however, is the lack of quality applicants.

Evidence suggests that using consultants can improve the quality of presidential candidates. Fouts (1977) was an early proponent of using consultants, and argues that a general advertisement or solicitation letter from the search committee would do little more than draw the attention of marginal candidates or candidates who are actively looking for a new position. Consultants can shake the bushes and actively recruit qualified candidates who might not otherwise consider a position. Consultants also have the advantage of knowing which candidates could "fit" the particular institution performing the search. Dowdall (2004), however, acknowledges that higher education is
a relative latecomer to use consultants in the recruitment process, much as it is in succession planning.

The trend toward using search consultants in higher education parallels the same trend for the rest of the non-profit world; using search consultants was rare in the 1970s, but by the 1980s they were becoming more common. In the corporate world, search firms run the job market. (p. 141)

A great deal has been written about the selection process (Birnbaum, 1988; Fisher, 1991; Hogarty, 1992; Kauffman, 1980; McLaughlin & Riesman, 1985), so there is little need to discuss the process in any great detail here. Suffice it to say, the recruitment and selection of a college president can be complex, for “Outside academe, it is hard to find such an intricate dance with so many partners, such a process-laden, symbol-strewn procedure” (Hahn, 1995, p. 14).

What is worth some discussion, however, is what Kauffman (1980) believes is the most important step in the process: that the institution first conduct a comprehensive evaluation of its specific needs, based upon its current situation, and develop a statement of qualifications for the position (p. 20). Others agree. McKenna (1972) contends that the presidential selection process should be based on a match between the needs of the institution and the qualifications of the individual, a view also held by Fouts (1977), Hogarty (1999), and Atwell and Wilson (2003). McLaughlin and Riesman (1985) believed that a clear sense of who should lead the institution is essential for a successful search. Simultaneously Bornstein (2003) maintains that, “the succession process provides an important opportunity for constituents to evaluate their college or university’s strengths, challenges, and opportunities, and to identify the characteristics important in
the next president” (p. 179). Levin (1998) suggests that as one president leaves and a successor arrives it can be viewed as the end of one organizational life and the beginning of another, and Atwell and Wilson suggest that “it is rare for a single candidate to possess all the needed skills, so it is important to identify the ‘must haves’” (p. 28). Thus, it appears to be universally held that objectively and realistically assessing the current situation, defining the needs of the institution, and identifying the characteristics provide the basis for the remainder of the search and selection process.

**Internal v. External Candidates**

Given the fact that those following a non-traditional path to the presidency will be external candidates, it is important to review the literature as it relates to candidates that emerge within the organization (internal candidates) and those who are recruited from other academic organizations. In any institution, there is always the possibility that a search will include the potential for one or more internal candidates to surface. Sagaria and Johnsrud (1992) suggest that promotions are the primary method of career advances for college and university administrators, especially at levels below vice president or academic dean. The question becomes one of whether the internal candidate or candidates have the necessary qualifications and support to be viable candidates for the presidency. Bensimon (1991) asserts that it is rare for an “insider” to be appointed president when she writes, “In most cases, the appointment of a new president means bringing in someone from outside the institution” (p. 637).

In a study of presidential appointments over a three-year period, Bolman (1965) found that a preference existed for the selection of outside candidates. Birnbaum (1971) believes external candidates are preferred to internal candidates, and hypothesizes that
because internal candidates are known by the governing body, faculty, and staff, they will focus more on the candidate’s weaknesses and less on their strengths. In his study of 171 institutions in the State of New York, Birnbaum found approximately 29% of the presidents had been employed by their institutions immediately prior to their appointment, while 44% came from other academic institutions and 25% came from outside collegiate organizations, which led him to conclude that unlike the business and industrial sectors, “only rarely is there a clearly identified successor within the institution itself” (p. 135). And in a 2005 survey of college and university presidents, The Chronicle of Higher Education found that only 19% of the 764 respondents were selected within their own institution (Blumenstyk, 2005). Dowdall (2003) believes that internal candidates are more thoughtfully scrutinized in their own institutions than if they were involved in a search at another institution (¶ 4). And Mary Patterson McPherson, a former college president, quoted by Blumenstyk, suggests that hiring from the outside is often the right choice, stating “A lot of places need the refreshment” (p. A28).

Dowdall (2003) also suggests that in addition to internal candidates, some “quasi-internal” candidates may surface: those candidates who were formerly with the institution but moved to another institution. These individuals, she observes, have certain strengths, such as being familiar with the institution, can be viewed to some degree by search committees and governing boards as an internal candidate, and may have gained valuable experience in another setting. Conversely, they may also have weaknesses, such as not having had a good experience with the institution performing the recruitment or not having the same philosophy of education espoused by the institution.
In a separate study, Birnbaum (1988) contends that succession practices of colleges and universities differ from those in business and industry because institutions of higher learning tend to fill presidential positions from a pool of external candidates, even though administrative positions below the presidency are likely filled through internal promotions. In addition, Socolow (1978) concludes that most institutions show a strong predisposition to hire the known over the unknown and for positions other than for the presidency, an internal candidate usually has the edge for administrative positions. Corrigan (2002) also found there was a decrease in the number of presidents being appointed to their position if they were employed in the same institution (21% in 2001, compared to 30% in 1986). Ross and Green (1990), however, argued that “there is more internal mobility than meets the eye” (p. 69). While there may be a perception that positions are filled through national searches, many positions are not advertised and a good portion of those advertised are filled with internal candidates. In their study, 32% of presidents selected were internal candidates, and “40 percent of presidents of specialized institutions were most likely to be recruited internally” (p. 70).

Overall, however, it appears that if someone wants to move up, they have to move out. Sagaria and Johnsrud (1992) site numerous studies that demonstrate that most career advancement at the administrative level is intra-institutional and acknowledge that careers are built by changing positions and institutions. Nonetheless, Hahn (1995) suggests that as an institution assesses its needs, it should look inward and ask if the qualities already exist on campus before looking to the outside.
Preparation for the Position

As noted previously, institutions of higher learning are not recognized for being as sophisticated as business and industry in succession planning for leadership. Kauffman (1980) acknowledges that while higher education provides preparation for almost every known profession, it doesn’t necessarily provide the same type of preparation for college presidents. Munitz (1995) goes so far as to suggest that such a practice of grooming leaders is frowned upon in academia: “Colleges and universities often distrust persons who set out to learn the difficult craft of university administration and who discuss their leadership aspirations openly” (p. 15). Bolman (1965) has a different take on the same notion when he laments that faculty-turned administrators were “deflected from the scholar’s life when they became actively engaged in administrative work below the level of president” (p. 201).

As a result, Fisher (1984) asserts that before their appointments, most presidents know very little about the role. And a 2005 survey of college and university presidents conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that “barely 41 percent of the respondents said they felt ‘very well prepared’ for their first presidency” (Blumenstyk, 2005, A28). Bornstein (2003) argues, however, that the college presidency is not a typical profession for which one can be adequately prepared, which is similar to the view held by Reisman (1978), when he writes that there is no career line that prepares a person for the position. Cohen and March (1986) offer an almost tongue-and-cheek description of presidential careers when they write:

A presidential career is an after-the-fact invention. A future president moves from one position to another, establishing with each move an
apparent success at the previous position, but with little or no career planning by the organization or (in most cases) by the individual. A career is a backward-looking description of those movements. It is rarely a plan. A person is very easily deflected from completion of the full presidential “career.” (p. 25)

Stoke’s (1959) view is more respectful: a president gets the job “not necessarily because he wants it but because other people want him to have it” (p. 11). And some suggest that academics do not look favorably upon administration as a career, accepting a role as department chair or dean with some reluctance and, perhaps, taking one’s turn in what is considered a temporary role (Ross & Green, 1990). In fact, Kauffman (1980) repeatedly calls the position a temporary role of leadership, rather than a profession or a career.

While not as irreverent, Moore, et. al. (1983) agree with the view held by Cohen and March (1974) that little planning takes place by either the individual or the institution that leads to a specific route to the presidency. Similarly, Ross and Green (1990) contend that in academia, few individuals who begin their careers as educators have the intent to become administrators, writing that “For the most part, academics ‘fall into’ careers in administration” (p. 67).

The low rate of internal promotion to the presidency may be the result of a lack for formal training programs to move administrators from office to office, which prevents them from gaining valuable experience in all aspects of the institution (Birnbaum, 1971). Moore, Salimbene, Marlier and Bragg (1983) believe college presidents, unlike their counterparts in business and industry, are more likely to gain their experience by being
employed at a variety of institutions, rather than spending their careers in one organization.

There also appears to be reluctance for individuals to independently apply for the presidency of a college or university without being encouraged or nominated. Some of this comes from the fact that most individuals prefer their candidacies remain confidential. More prevalent, however, is the view that the job should seek the candidate, and not the opposite (Stoke, 1959), or it is preferable that a person be nominated for the position, rather than apply (Ross & Green, 1990).

This should not, however, dissuade institutions of higher learning from taking steps to become more sophisticated in their ability to prepare individuals for leadership positions in their own institutions. In his study of career paths of presidents and chief academic officers, Arman (1986) made a number of suggestions for improved academic preparation of presidents and chief academic officers, including the development of in-service training, internships, and curriculum to assist faculty who desire to prepare for administrative positions, incorporating the insight from currently employed administrators for professional development programs. He also recommends provisions be made for the orderly transition of leadership by governing boards and where appropriate “planning should occur, with input from all segments of the college community, to reduce the need to search for qualified people beyond the campus” (p. 113).

The Normative Path

There have been numerous attempts to outline a definable career path that leads to the presidency and there are definite opinions regarding what credentials are necessary to
succeed in that role. The first major study that articulated a normative route for the presidency was done by Cohen and March (1974). In it, they defined the traditional route as a series of moves up a ladder, from professor to department chair to dean to academic vice president to president, and admit that variations can exist. Without hesitation, however, they boldly claimed that “Future presidents are academics” (p. 24).

Figure 1. Normative career path of college and university presidents (adapted from Cohen & March, 1974)

Salimbene (1982) and Moore, et. al. (1983) contend that the normative path outlined by Cohen and March can be viewed in two ways: prescriptively, which indicates the successive positions an individual should occupy and what specific career experiences the president should have prior to assuming the position; and descriptively, focusing on those elements which past research has shown to compose the most commonly traveled route to the position. Regardless of whether viewed prescriptively or descriptively, the underlying assumption of this normative path—which was previously discussed in more detail—is that the college president is an academic first and an administrator second (Salimbene, 1982).

Successive studies (Alejandro, 2004; Arman, 1986; Atwell, 1980; Barrax, 1985; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Oglesby, Windham, & Tuerk, 1996; Plotts, 1998; Wessel &
Keim, 1994), have either confirmed, refined or expanded upon the discussions on the route or routes taken by individuals to the presidency. In the final analysis, however, Cohen and March (1974) observe that the presidency represents the peak of a person's career for most individuals, a view also shared by McKenna (1972) and McLaughlin (1996a).

Salimbene (1982) was one of the first studies following Cohen and March (1974) to elaborate on whether there could be identifiable career paths leading to college and university presidencies, comparing the Cohen and March model against career data of chief executives. The results of her research show that the normative career path as outlined by Cohen and March does not represent the actual career experiences of presidents. Salimbene identifies 15 career path variations, with the position of faculty member serving as the entry position to the presidential career line (Figure 2).

Salimbene's (1982) research confirms that individuals who held any combination of positions comprising the presidential career path are likely to hold them in the order identified by Cohen and March (1974) and serving as a faculty member was the initial position held most often by presidents. She goes further, however, by identifying limitations of the Cohen and March path. According to Salimbene, holding the five positions in the normative path did not preclude the possibility that presidents served in other positions before becoming president, nor did it allow for "skipping positions."

Salimbene (1982) concludes that the Cohen and March (1974) career path does not describe the actual career experiences of a significant proportion of presidents, thus making it difficult to paint a single picture of the "typical" president. Nonetheless, a president can be characterized as an academic, an individual who began his/her
professional career as a faculty member and moved into administrative ranks prior to the presidency. Her second conclusion is that career paths vary by institution type.

![Variations on the Normal Presidential Path](image)

**Figure 2.** Variations on the normal presidential path. Source: Salimbene (1982)

Presidents, while mobile, tend to be mobile within a particular classification of institutions. Where an individual moved to one institution that differs from previous institutions s/he served, s/he may have moved down in institution type but up in position.

Salimbene’s (1982) work was followed up by Moore, Salimbene, Marlier, and Bragg (1983), who looked at the career patterns of deans in addition to those of college presidents. They observed that career paths are “developed by establishing those sequentially ordered, common positions that commence with a single- or fixed-entry position and culminate in a single, fixed top position” (p. 501). Each president’s career history was analyzed to determine whether the individual had ever held the five positions described in the Cohen and March (1974) career ladder. The results found that only 3.2% held all five positions; 19.3% held four of the five positions; 30.8% held three of the five positions; 32.1% held two of the positions; and 14.8% missed four of the positions. Only 4.5% came from outside of academia. Not unlike other studies, it was concluded that

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most presidents coming from within academia start out as faculty and that the "provost position seems the most potent for predicting a subsequent move to the president" (p. 513).

Arman (1986) evaluated the presidential career ladder model described by various authors, and while his study was limited to Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois, it does suggest a career ladder involving entry to college administration is as a faculty member, followed by progression into the administrative positions of department or division chair, dean or provost, and ultimately president. His research confirmed previous studies relating to the career paths of presidents. More than half of the college administrators, especially in four-year institutions, began their careers as faculty members. The study also demonstrated that community college administrators most closely resembled the traditional demographic pattern of college administrators and that private college administrators were least likely to resemble the traditional view.

In one of the few qualitative studies looking at career paths, Barrax (1986) sought to uncover similarities and differences in the career profiles of women and men in similar positions at a college or university, focusing on educational and professional—not personal—factors. In reviewing the related literature on career paths, the author saw emerging themes related to how individuals achieved positions. Those themes included: (1) mentorship and sponsorship, where the mentor not only functioned as a role model, but also provided individuals who exhibited potential with opportunities to succeed and offered career guidance and advice; (2) networking or "connecting," which could produce potential sponsors for the aspiring manager; (3) possession of academic credentials; (4) competence in managing; and (5) personal traits such as ambition, self-confidence,
career-mindedness, aggressiveness, interpersonal and communication skills. Studies referenced that role models and mentors, contacts, credentials, and experience were all contributing factors to women in higher education moving up the administrative ranks.

Barrax (1986) studied 30 administrators (15 male and 15 female) in three institutions in the University of North Carolina system. The administrators held positions in a cross section of administrative areas at the level of assistant dean and above. The findings note some similarities and differences between the genders. Of the similarities, both males and females credit their selection to a higher position the result of the visibility of their involvement in a variety of on-campus activities (primarily committees) that allowed them to demonstrate their interests (formal networking) and more than 75% of both genders had mentors or role models in their educational and professional experience. Differences cited include a history of taking risks, achieving change successfully, and being progressive, (83% of females compared to only 17% of the males) and 78% of the females felt that previous administrative experience in lower-level positions was a critical factor, compared to 44% of the males surveyed.

From a more global perspective, Moore (1986) prefers to view administrative careers as a map—preferably from an aerial view, rather than as a career ladder. She believes that careers don’t just move up or down with fixed points of entry and exit, but careers also move in and out and can be circular in nature. Moore prefers the term map because it “has the virtue of depicting a variety of aspects of movement including distance, access and egress, interconnections, and even dead ends” (p. 27). A basic benefit of the career map is that, as viewed from the air, one can see movement along all routes. Moore distinguishes between two important dimensions of career mobility:
movement up the hierarchy (career ladder) and the movement across institutions. She asserts that the larger percentage of administrative movements in higher education is the career ladder, where about 60% of administrators made their most recent career move within the institutions they served (with the exception of presidential moves).

Moore (1986) relates the observations of others that most movement among institutions is confined to institutions of the same type. Thus, "experience within an institution of similar type appears to be virtually as important as experience in the functional job category for which the institution has a vacancy" (p. 29). The normative path of career movement up the ladder, as identified by the majority of scholars, is reinforced when the chief academic officer position is a primary stepping stone to the college or university presidency. She cautions, however, that the chief academic officer is also frequently filled by persons who have had no prior administrative experience.

Lateral moves are also emerging for presidents as well. More chief executives are hired that have filled the role previously, and Moore (1986) suggests that while "the high degree of institutional mobility among presidents is striking" (p. 30) and institutions prefer outsiders for presidents, the preference is for those presidents to come from similar institutions. The author coins the term "road warriors" for those individuals who are externally mobile and move within and out of institutions of higher learning on a regular basis and end up in higher administrative capacities, including the presidency.

"Parachutists" are those who enter higher education for the first time and usually do not land in higher level positions. While there are presidents who are "parachutists," at the time of the study they represented fewer than 5% in four-year institutions (18% in two-year institutions). According to the author "the typical parachutist usually lands in
positions on the periphery where the links between academic institutions and other enterprises are the closest" (p. 31), such as deans of law or medical schools who may come directly from their practices.

Moore (1986) believes that the doctoral degree is a basic passport to a leadership position in higher education, although the field where the doctorate is earned is less important than simply having it. She also cautions that any rigidly designed or timetable-style career advice should be viewed with caution; careers in administration rarely fit the common pattern.

Kanter (1979), on the other hand, identifies four career tracks for academic administrators: (1) the faculty track, noteworthy because people become eligible for faculty work based on one set of criteria, but then move to administration where an unrelated set of skills is necessary; (2) lower middle-management jobs requiring technical skills; (3) higher middle-management jobs requiring both faculty credentials and some technical expertise; and (4) top leadership positions. Unlike other studies, Kanter states that for the latter positions it is “almost impossible, for a number of reasons, to identify the paths that lead to jobs such as president, academic vice president, or chief administrative officers” (p. 4). Her contention is that the skills that qualify persons for such positions in one institution may disqualify them in another institution.

Kanter (1979) observes that career ladders in nearly every job in academe are short, and difficult to cross from one to another. Growth for administrators comes from expansion of job functions rather than by promotion, or growth via a change in title to recognize many years of contributions to the organization, again rather than through promotion or a challenging new assignment.
Focusing on definable characteristics, Wessel and Keim (1994) identify the career patterns of private four-year college and university presidents, noting that nearly 61% of presidents entered higher education as faculty member, 13% as administrators in a non-academic area, 10% as president or chancellor, and 16% from other administrative and academic positions. Twenty-three percent served as academic vice president immediately prior to becoming president and 19% served in positions outside of higher education; 15% as president or chancellor at other institutions, and 12% as non-academic vice presidents.

The authors suggest two career “ladders” leading to the private, four year college presidency. The first is an “Academic Career Pattern” identified by Cohen and March (1974), later expanded with variations by Salimbene (1982) and Moore, et al. (1983). This “ladder,” shown in Figure 3, outlines 14 variations, all of which involve movement up the institutional ranks from an academic background.

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*Figure 3. Academic career pattern. Source: Wessel & Keim (1994)*

The second “ladder” is identified as an “Administrative Career Pattern,” where no or very little faculty experience exists but where individuals have demonstrated extensive administrative experience (Figure 4).
Variation 15 16 17 18 19 20 21
President • • • • • • •
Senior Administrative Staff • • • • • • •
Entry/Middle Level Administrative Staff • out acad • • • • •

Figure 4. Administrative career pattern. Source: Wessel & Keim (1994)

Wessel and Keim (1994) conclude that most governing boards “... choose presidents whose work history includes academic experience, usually in the form of a faculty appointment” (p. 223), which they generalize to suggest that boards want their presidents to have such academic experience and conclude that “An individual who aspires to a private college or university presidency would best prepare himself/herself by obtaining experience as a faculty member” (p. 223). Some colleges do bypass the academic experience, but only if the candidate has demonstrated considerable and successful administrative experience. And under some circumstances, the position is filled by those with extensive administrative experience both within and outside of academe.

Zwell (1999) also identifies two different career tracks for presidents, each with a different set of competencies needed for success. In the professional career track, the “practice competencies” of teaching and research are developed. In the administrative career track, the key competencies are administration and leadership, both of which have different sets of skills and requirements. In the administrative competency, the skills include being results oriented, managing performance, planning, setting priorities, and
organization, whereas in leadership, the skill sets developed include political sensitivity, personal credibility, influence, relationship building, and vision.

In two separate discussions, Dowdall (2000; 2001) suggests there are both good and challenging backgrounds as one aspires to the position, one of the best of which is to already be a college president, especially a successful president. Like other observers, she notes that the classic path to the presidency is fundamentally academic, because “It is the norm against which candidates are often judged” (2000, ¶ 4). In her research, the job most previously held by a president is vice president or executive vice president, with deanships as the second most common route. From the perspective of a consultant, who also has an academic background, Dowdall (2000) believes not having a doctoral degree is a serious limitation and most search committees like to see a presidential candidate with experience as a full-time faculty member (including successful tenure review) and a record of scholarly productivity. She cautions that someone who does not have a traditional academic background should seek those institutions valuing that particular path.

Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) identify four career paths to the college presidency. Two paths are labeled traditional: scholar, those who have full-time higher education teaching experience and the two previous positions have been in higher education; and steward, non-teachers whose prior two positions were in higher education administrative positions. The two non-traditional paths are identified as: spanner, persons who have been in and out of academe throughout their careers and the most recent positions prior to becoming a college president have been outside of academe (Moore’s analogy of a “road warrior”); and stranger, those individuals who have never taught and
whose previous two positions were outside of higher education (similar to Moore’s metaphor of “parachutist”) and are summarized in Figure 5 below. The authors state that 89% of all presidents followed the traditional paths (scholar, 66.3% and steward, 22.4%). Of the 11% who made up the non-traditional presidents, 7.4% were spanners and 3.9% were characterized as strangers.

![Figure 5. The career trajectories of college presidents. Source: Birnbaum & Umbach (2001)](image)

In addition, Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) make a number of conclusions that have implications for leaders in higher educational settings, asserting that candidates with any number of combinations of education and experience have become presidents of colleges and universities. They recommend, however, that if one aspires to the position of president, he or she should: (1) earn a Ph.D. in the arts and sciences, similar to Moore’s (1986) conclusions, because “The data clearly indicates that the Ph.D. is the first step in the career ladder of most college presidents” (p. 214); (2) gain full-time teaching experience, especially early in their careers; and (3) obtain administrative positions with increasing responsibility. Most interesting was their observation that presidents who followed the stranger path to the presidency have been almost exclusively Caucasian.
males. This is evident in this current research project, where the current and former Michigan presidents being examined are Caucasian males.

Overall, there is overwhelming evidence that the majority of presidents come from an academic background (Atwell, 1980; Cohen & March, 1974; Corrigan, 2002; Dowdall, 2000; Dowdall, 2001; Kanter, 1979; McLaughlin, 1996a; Moore, 1986; Moore, Salimbene, Marlier, & Bragg, 1983; Salimbene, 1982; Wessel & Keim, 1994). As Socolow (1978) observes, "Senior positions in academic administration have long been the almost exclusive province of those who have served for a substantial time in academe, moving from one rung of the ladder to the next—most often from professor to chairman to dean to vice president to president" (p. 42).

The Non-Traditional Path

There is a reason why the normative path is considered so, but it is not the only route, as noted by Birnbaum and Umbach (2001). And in some cases, it may not be the preferred route (Association of Governing Boards, 1996; Atwell & Wilson, 2003; Bartwick, 2002). As early as 1980, Carbone (1980) wrote, "A surprisingly large number of presidents did not move up the academic ladder at all: instead, they came from outside academe and climbed over the ivy walls" (p. 7). Although he did make the caveat that moving into the presidency from a non-academic background was apparent when looking at all institutions as a group; if public institutions were taken separately, the more traditional route is prevalent.

This observation has not changed much in the past 20 years, as Plotts (1998) found in his analysis of the paths of presidents from the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), where current presidents frequently entered the position from
outside higher education, particularly from a position of church ministry. And like individuals following the normative path, those who entered the presidency from within higher education were most likely the chief academic officer immediately prior to assuming the primary leadership position.

According to Atwell and Wilson (2003), who are proponents of considering candidates from the non-traditional career path, there will be an increasing disconnect between skills needed to lead institutions of higher learning and the qualifications of their leaders if the pool of college and university presidents is drawn primarily from scholars. They base their claim in part on the fact that one of the first responsibilities of leaders is to “help the faculty and other stakeholders understand the hard choices ahead for colleges and universities while keeping policymakers focused on the growing demand for student access” (p. 25). It is not unreasonable, they suggest, to draw from nontraditional administrative ranks as an institution’s needs evolve and change, and where the nontraditional leader has demonstrated skills honed within large organizations, not necessarily academic in nature.

In a report from a National Commission on the Academic Presidency created by the Association of Governing Boards (1996) to look at governance of American colleges and universities and whether such institutions are prepared for present and future demands, it was suggested that governing boards consider selecting presidents who come from nontraditional backgrounds. Dorich (1991), in a study of presidents coming from the development and institutional development area, argues that “choosing a leader with only academic experience is no better than choosing one who has worked only in advancement” (p. 8). He goes on to quote the President of Livingston University, Asa
Green, who stated that he was "increasingly convinced that academics frequently have problems as presidents because they lack management skills" (p. 8).

While he does not go so far as to strongly endorse a non-traditional president, Munitz (1995) suggests higher education requires a restructuring in its management process, which is difficult given that "Universities do not change easily" (p. 9). Munitz argues a transformation in higher education leadership is required. He points his finger at faculty, trustees, and administrators, noting all have a stake in the institution and must rethink how higher education will function. The skills of the 70s, 80s and even 90s may not be the skills necessary to lead in the 21st century. Interestingly, while he believes the three most important attributes a presidential candidate must have are a strong record as a teacher and scholar, some administrative experience without controversy, and "a proper disdain for academic management" (p. 14), he does not rule out looking outside of academe for a president, and suggests "The narrow qualifications for a college president should be broadened" (p. 14).

This same view is held by Bartwick (2002), who believes that because more presidents will be retiring than the number of qualified candidates available, governing bodies are being encouraged to look at individuals from student services and outside academia. And again looking at matching the needs of the institution with the qualifications of an individual, Covert (2004), whose research involved non-traditional presidents from a student services background, concluded that institutions often express a clear need for candidates possessing "non-traditional" backgrounds in areas such as enrollment management, community building, and church relations.
There are, however, significant obstacles that must be overcome by non-traditional candidates, not only those from outside academia, but also from non-academic positions within institutions of higher learning.

Obstacles for the Non-Traditional President to Overcome

While the normative path is generally considered the preferred path to the presidency by those who are in academia, it is also recognized that many alternative routes exist. And if one subscribes to the necessity of matching the institution’s needs with the right candidate, which as previously noted many scholars and observers do, appointing a non-traditional president may be the preferred route to take. Given, however, the unique nature of the position, which blends the academic with the administrative (Bensimon, 1991), there are some obstacles that governing bodies and non-traditional candidates should understand.

The first obstacle is the most obvious: resistance from the faculty. Kauffman (1980; 1982) argues that professors are critical of all leadership styles and the exercising of any presidential authority (1980, p. 7), let alone from a president who is not one of them. He writes:

It has been my own observation that intellectuals, especially scholars, generally find distasteful the hurly-burly world of practical affairs—the “market-place,” with fund raising, budgets, the “selling” of an endowment or a building to a businessman, and the like. Those whose role expectation of the president is that of ‘scholar among scholars’ decry the public relations efforts and executive function assumed by modern presidents. (1982, p. 14)
Bornstein (2003) relates that in 1949, Rollins College hired a non-academic as its president, who immediately ran into legitimacy problems because he was not an academic. Clausen (1997), in observing that universities are looking for business and corporate individuals to be their new presidents, suggests these candidates might be unacceptable to a university faculty, so he asks “How can a university president, whatever his or her background, govern effectively without the support of faculty?” (p. 25). The Association of Governing Boards (1996) note that in a system of shared governance (that is predominant in institutions of higher education), there is a tacit understanding that while the governing body has legal responsibility, it has delegated much of its power to administration and faculty. Faculty expects to be consulted on most, if not all, important decisions, with “consultation” being synonymous to “consent.”

Silber (1988), a former college president, believes that a college president who is not an educator will not be an effective leader:

There are, of course, college presidents who have little or no academic background, who have no educational ideas, and who have neither plans for the future of their institutions nor any notion of what should be expected of students. It is quite natural that such administrators delegate everything to the faculty and students; because of their lack of minimal qualifications, they clearly should never have been appointed in the first place. (p. 14)

Silber (1988) contends that effective university presidents must be “first, foremost, and always educators” and boldly proclaims that if a president from a nonacademic background succeeds, it is because the individual has the native genius of a
“folk educator,” rather than managerial skills. (p. 14). Part of his argument stems from the fact that crucial decisions about faculty selection, retention, and tenure will not be left to others if a president is truly an educator and that a college president who fails to carefully review the files of faculty fails to meet his or her most important responsibilities. This is not unlike the view of Kauffman (1984) who states that the “faculty is the core of the academic enterprise” and that presidents, as well as governing boards, “must be concerned with faculty morale, creativity, and renewal” (p. 8). Stoke (1959) believes the most important and difficult task of a president is to recruit and retain the best faculty possible. Knapp (1969) argues that faculty members believe the academic institution is unlike other organizations so the techniques used in business and governmental settings are not easily transferable to colleges and universities. It is, therefore, no wonder why faculty resistance might exist for someone who does not come from an academic background.

It is, however, important to understand there is a difference between being an academic and being an administrator, an observation articulated by Knapp (1969), when he astutely observes that “the president is neither manager nor educational leader, but both, . . . he must mesh management with education so that the institution he heads will neither go under financially nor die a slow death academically” (p. 55). Bensimon (1991) agrees, stating that the two worlds inhabited by presidents, the administrative and the academic, have distinct values and beliefs, so the behavior of the president is subject to different interpretations. She believes that the faculty’s interpretation of a president’s actions will be impacted by how those actions are taken. “But the main factor in faculty’s assessment of a new president is their perception of or sense of the extent to which the
president’s gestures take into account their own definition of reality by considering their situation and expectations” (p. 641). That is to say, faculty will positively view the president if he or she takes on the role of faculty, sharing faculty beliefs, values, and patterns of thinking.

A major element in the selection process, according to Birnbaum (1988), is that “Leaders are likely to be considered legitimate to the extent that group members are involved in selecting them” (p. 495). The expectation is that a president who is selected by representatives of constituencies will be able to exercise more influence than one selected without constituent participation. In referencing the symbolism attached to the decision-making processes, Birnbaum asserts that appointing a president with some background in academia is in some ways preferable because college and university leaders “can be successful only to the extent that they are seen as committed to the core values of the academic enterprise” (p. 501).

A second obstacle can be tradition. Dorich (1991) observes that “academia is still based on tradition. And tradition is slow to change” (p. 11). In one of the more recent studies, for instance, Kaplan (2004) found that proponents of shared governance commonly expressed fear that executives from outside academia are being appointed as college and university presidents.

From the perspective of the profession itself, Jencks and Riesman (1968) argue that most college and university presidents see their role as one that protects faculty (p. 18), echoing Stoke (1959), who believes the president must “defend the academic life to those who understand it less well” (p. 117). Stoke goes further by suggesting that in addition to trying to understand the psychology of faculty, the president must also make
administrative accommodations for them, such as approving sabbatical leaves, providing varied committee assignments, and making provisions for tenure regulations. Stoke is not alone in his philosophy, as evidenced by the writings of Herman Wells (1965), a long-time president of Indiana University, to his presidential colleagues:

Remind yourself daily that administration must always be the servant, never the master, of the academic community. It is not an end in itself and exists only to further the academic enterprise. It follows, therefore, that the least administration possible is the best. (p. 71)

Buxton, Prichard, and Buxton (1976), in their survey of at least one college president in each state, observe that many presidents are “strong proponents of the necessity for the academic president to be first and foremost a scholar” (p. 79) while others emphasized the need for having significant management skills. The latter is especially true in the area of finances. However, most presidents are in their positions as a result of a “strong acculturation in the American educational system” (p. 79). And Kauffman (1980), consistent with his theme of ministerial duties, contends that the principal identity of presidents often lies with their profession and not with their temporary offices (p. 39).

A third obstacle may be the search committee. Munitz (1995) believes that search committees should look for individuals who are risk takers, movers and shakers, and questioners of the status quo. He asserts that for an institution to move forward with truly transformational leadership, with professionally trained individuals, means “to depart from higher education’s traditional view of campus leadership as the last bastion of proudly amateur management” (p. 15). Reporting that at least a dozen universities have
annual budgets of more than $1 billion and hundreds of colleges and universities have operating budgets of a quarter billion dollars or more, Munitz suggests that higher education is big business and should be managed and led with that understanding.

Birnbaum (1988) states that plausible candidates are those who have worked in similar institutions; whose previous institutions were as or more prestigious than the one performing the search; who have had successful administrative and academic experience; who have had some previous association with the institution; and/or who is a prestigious individual. This belief is affirmed by Richard Chait, a professor of higher education at Harvard university, who notes that institutions of higher education think they have to “marry up the ladder” by recruiting a leader from a higher ranked institution in order to be considered successful” (Blumenstyk, 2005, A28). Wessel and Keim (1994) indicate that some colleges do bypass the academic experience, but only if the candidate has demonstrated considerable and successful administrative experience. And under some circumstances, the position is filled by those with extensive administrative experience both within and outside of academe.

The candidate may be an obstacle. McKenna (1972) argues that at times a president may be hired from the corporate world based upon a board’s intent on shaping the position into the board’s image, only to be forced out as a result of student and faculty protest. Just because someone has been successful in the corporate world does not guarantee success as a college or university president. “The transition . . . can produce cultural shocks from which good men do not recover” (p. 460). The view that selecting presidents who behave like CEOs could have negative consequences is also held by Collins, quoted in Pulley (2004). Like Sederberg (1999), Collins believes universities
have more in common with legislative bodies, with diffuse structures and multiple constituencies that require decision making by consensus, than they do with corporations.

Summary of Literature Review

While numerous studies about the college presidency have been included in this review of the literature, there are many more that have not been referenced. The intent was to take a sampling of the observations most pertinent to the subject matter being explored. As expected, there are a variety of characteristics displayed by college and university presidents and several strongly-held beliefs regarding the background and influences that contribute to the success of both the person and the position, and what both the person and the position require.

From the earliest studies to the most recent, a number of general observations can be made about the college presidency. First, while there have been notable increases in representation of minorities and females, the majority of presidents have historically been, and continue to be, white, middle-aged, married males.

Second, while there have been increases in the number of presidents with non-traditional backgrounds who have been appointed, the majority of presidents have been, and continue to be, academicians, not only by nature of their career paths—with a faculty position as the entry point—but also due to the fact that a high proportion have historically held, and continue to hold, doctoral degrees.

Third, while it is generally recognized that internal promotional opportunities are the norm for most administrative positions in higher education, evidence suggests that external, rather than internal, candidates are preferred candidates for the presidency.
Fourth, while normative routes to the presidency have been identified and various career “trajectories” have been associated with the normative route, there does not appear to be a planned sequence by either the individual or the institution in terms of career or succession planning, respectively.

Fifth, there are a number of obstacles that face candidates who have not followed the normative career path, including tradition, the predisposition of institutions to recruit individuals whose careers have been framed by academia, resistance on the part of faculty, and candidates who do not understand or value the intricacies of academic life.

Finally, the selection process is crucial, and institutions cannot ignore the advice of those who recommend that the first step in the selection process is the need for the institution to perform its due diligence and determine its needs and desired future state of affairs, develop a realistic profile of the preferred candidate, and “fit” the person to the position and to the institution. Kauffman’s (1980) observation that “a new leader cannot be imposed” (p. 36) is wise counsel.

The literature is rich with quantitative data about the personal and professional demographics of college and university presidents, as well as personal reflections from presidents themselves about the characteristics and traits necessary to not only function, but excel, in the position. There is, however, very little in the way of qualitative analyses on their career paths of college and university presidents and even less is known about the motivations of those who have not followed the normative career path to the position and the successes and challenges they have had as nontraditional presidents as viewed both by themselves and those who hired and/or worked for them. It is the intent of this study to help fill this gap.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to investigate the phenomenon of presidents of institutions of higher learning who have achieved the position without following the normative academic career path generally accepted and associated with the position. The researcher was specifically interested in developing an understanding of where non-traditional presidents come from; how they prepared themselves for the pivotal role they serve within their institutions, their communities, and society; why they were hired; and the advantages and disadvantages of not traveling the traditional academic route to the presidency. Because subjects included in the study were asked questions that require thoughtful, in-depth responses, the research project was ideally suited to be qualitative, which is a “process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15).

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), data from qualitative research is “soft,” that is, it is comprised of information obtained from interviews, observations, and case studies. Information gained from qualitative research is descriptive in nature; that is, data is provided in narrative form, rather than by numbers or statistical procedures. The researcher is interested in capturing the perspective of the individual being studied, as well as the perspective of his/her associates. Emphasis was placed on, in the terms of Arminio and Hultgren (2002), the “qualis” (what it is), where meaning is sought through an engagement with others, in this case, the presidents, members of the governing boards, and the chief academic officers (academic vice presidents/provosts) of the institutions. In
essence, the goal of qualitative research is not only to understand, but to present information in a manner that enables others to understand (Whitt, 1991).

There has been little in the way of qualitative research used to identify career paths leading to presidencies, let alone to understand the aspirations, motivations, and challenges they have faced. Even less is known about those presidents who have not taken the normative career path to the presidency. It is crucial to learn more about these leaders by obtaining in-depth information about the type of individuals they are, what motivated them to move into academia from a private, public or non-profit organization, and what skills and unique insights they bring to their positions, particularly as a result of their non-traditional career paths. This is important given the increase in numbers of non-traditional presidents being appointed by governing bodies. Through this inquiry, it was anticipated that common themes would emerge and that these themes could be used to address the research questions posed in this study.

A Phenomenological Study

While there are several different ways in which to perform qualitative research, the method for this particular study was phenomenological, where the actual experiences of a number of individuals (college and university presidents) about a specific phenomenon (taking the non-traditional path to the position) were examined in detail. As a result, it was the researcher’s intent to obtain a description of the “essence” of the experience.

In any qualitative study, the outcome desired is for the researcher to understand the perspectives of the subjects being studied by viewing the phenomenon in the same manner as they themselves view it. Thus, the research questions were developed to explore the meaning of the experience from the perspective of the subjects (Creswell,
1998). In addition, the researcher’s intent was to, in the words of Seidman (1998) and Whitt (1991), “make meaning” out of the experience and to understand how participants make sense out of a situation. As a result, through qualitative inquiry, stories emerged, and through those stories, knowledge surfaced (Ospina & Dodge, 2005).

Primary Data Collection

According to Creswell (1998), in a phenomenological study, participants must be “individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being explored” (p. 111). The researcher, as the primary “instrument” of data collection, interviewed current or former presidents of four Michigan colleges and universities who have not experienced the academic path traditionally followed by presidents of higher education institutions. The traditional academic path is operationally defined as having held faculty and/or administrative positions in an institution of higher learning for a majority of the individual’s career, and immediately prior to being appointed to the position of president (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001). The sample size of four institutions of higher learning in Michigan represented a spectrum of Carnegie-classified institutions (1994): one large research university (Doctoral/Research Universities – Extensive), one mid-sized state university (Masters Colleges and Universities I), one traditional private college (Baccalaureate Colleges – General), and one private “system” college/university (Specialized Institutions – Schools of Business and Management). In addition to the four presidents, three other individuals from each institution were interviewed. The persons included two current or former members of the governing boards who were involved in the hiring processes, and the current or former chief academic officers (academic vice president or provost) of each institution at the time the individual was president.
Questions for these individuals were developed in such a manner as to supplement the information gained from the questions that were asked of the presidents. Thus, the researcher interviewed 16 individuals in total.

The first step taken was to identify presidents who met the criteria of having a non-traditional background. Based upon the review of academic backgrounds of presidents of colleges and universities in Michigan, there were approximately six or seven current or former presidents who met the qualifications of what Bimbaum and Umbach term “stranger,” those individuals with little or no traditional academic background. The second step in the process was the development of potential interview questions to be asked of the individuals participating in the study. The questions were open-ended to prompt the interviewee to relate more information than just yes or no answers. The questions initially developed were field-tested on three sitting presidents of institutions of higher learning in Michigan who met the criteria of not having the traditional academic background. The presidents were asked to review the questions for content, not to answer them or provide data to the researcher. Modifications to the survey instrument were made as a result of the suggestions offered by the interviewees as well as by others familiar with the proposed study, including two professors at Western Michigan University and a college president following the “traditional” path.

Data collection started with an examination of the resumes of the primary subjects to familiarize the researcher with the professional history of each president. The researcher obtained the resumes from the websites of each of the institutions or obtained the resumes directly from each president who participated in the study. This was followed by establishing an appointment with the participant for a personal interview at a time and
place that was convenient for the interviewee. It was anticipated that the most convenient location would be in the office of the interviewee, and this proved to be the case.

Every effort was made to interview the participants face-to-face. Of the 16 individuals who were part of the study, 15 were personally interviewed and only one was interviewed by telephone because of distance limitations. In all cases, regardless of whether personal or telephone interviews were conducted, all participants received the interview questions at least two weeks prior to the scheduled interview to allow them time to reflect on the questions. It was originally anticipated that the interviews with the presidents would take between 90 and 120 minutes and that interviews with trustees and academic vice presidents/provosts would last approximately 60 minutes. In reality, the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes.

The researcher complied with the requirements of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) standards by obtaining the written consent of all participants. It was originally anticipated that it would not be difficult, given the limited sample of individuals identified as being non-traditional presidents, to identify the presidents or their institutions. However, the researcher stated that if one or more of the participants did not agree to the use of their names, the confidentiality of all participants would be protected and no names would be used. While the presidents themselves were willing to have their names used, some of the other participants were not. In compliance with the approval received by the HSIRB, the researcher did not specifically identify individuals who were interviewed as "President One," "President Two," "Governing Board Member Three," "Provost 4," etc. In addition, the use of pseudonyms was not used, primarily because the preference of the researcher was to make the study more
realistic than pseudonyms would have allowed. Instead, participants in the study have been identified in generic terms (i.e., "According to one President . . ."); "Three of the Chief Academic Officers acknowledged that . . ."); etc.).

With written permission from the subjects, the interviews were audio recorded to allow the researcher to pay close attention to the responses, rather than having attention diverted by taking notes and asking the interviewee to repeat answers. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into printed form. Since the researcher was concerned about interpreting the data as accurately as possible, the written transcriptions of the interviews were reviewed by the researcher, as well as with the interviewees, for accuracy and to clarify any questions that might have existed. Of the 16 interviews, six were transcribed by a person employed by the researcher and 10 were transcribed directly by the researcher.

The interview responses were categorized and coded for analysis, using the process described by both Creswell (1998) and Patton (2002). From this, an analysis was made based on the responses and divided into various themes that surfaced from the interviews. The findings were then written in the form of a report relating the outcomes to the individual research questions.

Included within any phenomenological study is the process of reflection by the researcher. By taping and transcribing the subject interviews, the researcher was able to reflect on the individual responses to determine meanings contained within the responses. In addition to reviewing and analyzing the transcripts, the researcher also spent time reviewing the audio tapes. Reflecting on the responses of all the subjects enabled the
researcher to document, explore, and evaluate not only the individual responses of the participants, but also their collective responses and the themes that surfaced.

Ethical Considerations

One of the characteristics important in any research, but especially in qualitative research, is the ability to develop a relationship of trust between the researcher and the subjects (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). It was the intent of the researcher to ensure that trust was developed and maintained with each participant throughout the process. This was done through a number of processes, as outlined below.

It is the obligation of the researcher to respect the rights and needs of the participants (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2000). In order to accomplish this, a process of informed consent was followed. That is, the researcher: (1) obtained written permission from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) of Western Michigan University to conduct the study, as noted above; (2) clearly identified, verbally and in writing, to each participant the objectives of the study, the data collection methods and processes to be used; (3) obtained the written permission of each individual who was asked to be interviewed, making it clear that s/he was volunteering to participate in the study; (4) made individual transcripts available for review by each participant, for verification of data; and (5) provided each participant with a draft copy of the results for review and clarification.

To assure confidentiality while performing the research, all the data was stored in a locked file cabinet at the home of the researcher. Data was stored in standard record storage box with covers. All data files were in order and properly identified. All audio tapes of participant interviews were locked in the file cabinet until the completion of the
research and write ups were verified by the participants. Following that, pursuant to
requirements of the HSIRB, the audio tapes were destroyed.

Upon completion of study, data will be moved to Western Michigan University
for at least a three-year period. Records pertaining to research that is conducted will be
accessible for inspection and copying by authorized representatives of the department and
the student doing the research. The risks of participating in the study were insignificant.

Validation of Data

According to Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000), there are three threats to
validity that must be addressed in qualitative research: (1) accurate descriptions; (2)
threat of personal biases; and (3) reaction of interviewees to the researcher that may
impede acquisition of data. As mentioned previously, it was the intent of the researcher to
ensure accurate information by providing participants with a written transcript of the
interview as well as a copy of the draft findings so that any inaccuracies or
misrepresentations could be eliminated, which Creswell (2003) terms “member-
checking” (p. 196). The researcher also used “peer debriefing” (Creswell, 2003) to
review and question the study “so that the account will resonate with people other than
the researcher” (p. 196).

As the researcher was the primary data collection “instrument” in the study, it is
important to understand if there were any biases that exist. The researcher’s interest in
this topic results from the fact that he is an individual that has spent an entire career in
local government management, but chose to pursue a Ph.D. in higher education
leadership, without benefit of having work experience in any institution of higher
learning. Thus, he could be considered a “stranger” as defined by Birnbaum and Umbach (2001).

However, the researcher has been a student of management and leadership for 32 years, and a practitioner for 29 years, more than 20 of which have been as the chief administrative or executive officer in three different organizations. Like Sederberg (1999), who believes that an institution of higher learning has more in common with a government organization than a private corporation, the researcher is familiar with the organizational structures and issues (multi-member governing body, multiple constituencies, etc.) that college and university presidents face. While every role is individual, the researcher believes that understanding the role of a chief administrative/executive officer in a governmental organization enhanced, not detracted from, the research setting.

Finally, in terms of participant reactions to the researcher impeding acquisition of valid data, it was anticipated that because each individual selected for participation was provided specific information disclosing the nature and purpose of the study, and was provided the opportunity to not participate or withdraw at any time during the course of the study, that there would be little or no resistance on the part of those being interviewed to participate. This proved to be the case in this study. In fact, as the researcher performed the study, all participants were gracious with their time, there was strong encouragement to perform the study, and there was genuine interest in the results of the study.
Summary of Methodology

Overall, the study involved interviews with 16 individuals: four current or former presidents with a non-traditional background, four current or former chief academic officers who worked closely with the non-traditional presidents, and eight governing board members (two from each institution) who were part of the process to hire the non-traditional president or who had worked closely with that individual during his tenure at the institution. Interviews were transcribed and copies of the written transcripts were provided to each person interviewed. The transcripts were coded and themes emerged as a result of the analysis. The results of the study are found in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study endeavored to learn more about college and university presidents who have not followed the traditional academic path as initially described by Cohen and March (1974). The questions asked of study participants were designed to obtain in-depth information about the type of individuals these non-traditional presidents are, what motivated them to move into academia from a private, public or non-profit organization, and what skills and unique insights they brought to their positions, particularly as a result of their non-traditional backgrounds.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the results of research findings and an analysis of the data resulting from personal interviews that took place with four current or former non-traditional college and university presidents, four current or former chief academic officers (academic vice presidents/provosts) who worked with the presidents, and eight current or former college and university governing board members who were involved in the hiring of the non-traditional president, either by virtue of being on the institution’s governing board at the time of appointment, or by being on the search committee. Data were collected from October 2005 through January 2006. Questions asked during the interview were open-ended to allow for in-depth responses. Some responses led to additional questions, which enabled the respondents to elaborate further on their answers, thereby adding to the richness of the descriptions contained in this analysis.

The researcher followed the process outlined by both Creswell (1998) and Patton (2002) for data analysis, which included identifying key words and phrases, organizing the information thematically, interpreting the meanings of phrases, and analyzing the
meanings for what they revealed. A delimitation process was used to eliminate irrelevant, repetitive, and overlapping data. During this process, data were examined and any unnecessary information was eliminated from further consideration and analysis.

As a result of this process, the interviews resulted in the emergence of four common themes from the three groups: (1) non-traditional presidents understand, appreciate, and value the missions of their respective institutions; (2) the past experiences of non-traditional presidents have prepared them for the challenges of leading an institution of higher learning; (3) non-traditional presidents face obstacles, but they can be successfully overcome; and (4) non-traditional presidents surround themselves with strong leadership teams. The following provides a brief description of the themes identified from each individual group, followed by the combined major themes that emerged.

The Presidents

As noted in Chapter 2, many studies (Alejandro, 2004; Arman, 1986; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2002; Plotts, 1998; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1992; Salimbene, 1982; Tunnecliffe & Ingram, 1969) found that certain characteristics are both historical and common to individuals serving as presidents of institutions of higher learning. Those traits included being Caucasian, male, middle-aged, and married, with an earned doctorate. This trend has continued with the most recent comprehensive presidential profile demonstrating that the office of president continues to consist of significant numbers of individuals who are married, middle-aged, white males (Corrigan, 2002). In addition, presidents who followed the stranger path, as identified by Birnbaum and Umbach (2001), have been almost exclusively the province of white males.
It is important to acknowledge these demographics because the historical and common characteristics associated with presidents in general, and the traits associated with the non-traditional president specifically, exist in the four current or past presidents who participated in this study. All are Caucasian, male, middle-aged, and married. They are also highly educated, each possessing at least a master’s degree, one possessing a law degree, and one holding both a doctorate and a law degree.

Seven research questions were posed to the presidents. The intent was to: (1) determine the motivations of non-traditional academic leaders to move into the realm of higher education leadership, (2) determine how past experiences prepared them for the positions, (3) discern any similarities or differences that exist between academic and non-academic leadership positions, (4) identify any unique challenges that non-traditional academic leaders faced in their positions as a result of their non-traditional backgrounds; (5) ascertain advantages and disadvantages that exist for non-traditional presidents; and (6) solicit advice for someone considering a move from a non-academic organization to a leadership position in higher education. Based upon the research questions, six themes emerged.

Theme One: Strong Prior Leadership and Enjoy Being Challenged

Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds previously enjoyed leadership positions in other professions, and enjoy being challenged. The backgrounds of the four individuals include a mix of government (federal or state), non-profit, law, and business. Two individuals in particular enjoyed eclectic careers prior to becoming president: one individual possesses a law degree and held high-level leadership positions in banking/finance and the federal government, while the other—also a lawyer—held high-
level positions in banking/finance and in the gas and oil business. Of the other two individuals, one spent a majority of his time in high-level positions in the government sector and the other was involved exclusively in leadership positions in the non-profit health care industry. Each individual enjoyed the positions they held prior to becoming a college/university president. As one respondent stated,

"I was very happy. I was making a lot more money; probably three times as much money. My banking colleagues [some of them] thought this was just . . . crazy. I was doing very exciting international kinds of things and it was a good career. I remember one of my most important mentors over the years really advised me against it as he said, "They think very well of you at [the Bank]. Why do you want to do this right now?"

Said another, "I was doing extremely well in terms of where the industry that we had created was headed, and the travel opportunities for meaningful influence. I did a lot of restructuring of Third World debt. Then I got to help set up a new . . . company, and it was extremely rewarding. I was making a lot of money."

While each respondent had his own perspective on the reasons for becoming president of their respective institution, all four had one common thread: the challenge that the position offered. They all saw an opportunity to move from a position where they had a significant degree of experience, knowledge, and acumen to a position that enabled them to grow professionally and to expand their skill sets further. "It's a matter of the pleasure of being tested and seeing if you can rise up to the complexity of the issues of the day," one president noted. Two presidents specifically mentioned that they were
"intrigued" with the prospect of moving from a leadership position in one domain to a leadership position in higher education. As one president recalled, "I knew about a third of the people on the search committee and I'd been engaged in this fundraising committee, so it was an intriguing idea. I said, 'Well, I certainly would consider it,' but it was a bolt out of the blue."

At the same time, the presidents also understood that while they may have enjoyed success in their past professions, there was also a need to understand and appreciate the unique nature and characteristics of academic leadership. One president acknowledged that he would have failed in his attempt to lead a university if he had tried to manage it like a manufacturing operation or a hospital. Another president observed,

If you come in believing that because you've been in business or because you've been in government, you can now show up and reveal to these poor, unenlightened, sheltered individuals who've been off in their ivory towers all this time, the ways of real decision-making, and real customer service—if that's your orientation, stay home.

It is evident that non-traditional presidents are not strangers to leadership positions, and recognize the unique nature of leading an institution of higher learning. It is also evident that they enjoy being challenged, personally and professionally, and are motivated by those challenges.

Theme Two: Prior Connection with Institution

Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds held an affiliation with, and have an affinity for, the schools they led or are leading or have "bought into" the mission and culture of the institution. Three presidents had some previous association with the college.
or university they were recruited to lead. Two individuals were alumni of the institutions they headed, with one observing that, “you just simply do not get those types of opportunities to go home very often . . . Going back home was of enormous appeal.” In the other instance, the person was serving on the institution’s governing board when he was recruited to apply for the position. In all three cases, it appears that had there not been some prior affiliation with the institution, none of the individuals would have considered the profession. Two presidents explicitly expressed that the thought of leading a college or university would not have entered their minds, had a prior affiliation with the institution not existed. One president summed it up in this manner:

I've said many times this is the only institution I would do this for. I was doing extremely well both in terms of where the industry that we created was headed, and the travel, opportunity to influence . . . I would not have considered it for any other place and I still wouldn't.

Interestingly, the literature is relatively silent regarding any relationship between prior affiliation with an institution of higher learning prior to becoming its president. However, Davies (2005) found in his study about the manner in which non-traditional presidents construct their presidencies that four of the six non-traditional presidents he studied had “. . . personal connections to their universities and most likely could not have been presidents at other universities” (p. 168). He reported that three of the four presidents held degrees from the institution they later served while the fourth was associated with the institution through his political connections. The two remaining non-traditional presidents were individuals who, “while not having personal connections to
their universities, brought distinctive symbolic relationships from their backgrounds to the mission and culture of their respective institutions” (p. 169).

The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Davies (2005). One president, not previously affiliated with the institution he now leads, had extensive experience in government and saw further opportunity to serve the public, noting his appreciation for “the opportunities I’ve had to work in the public sector because the public sector is very important to our community life.” In addition, he was attracted to the institution and its mission:

I was impressed with the level of community support here. I was impressed that the faculty here was student-centered and student-oriented and I was impressed this was a university still in the process of creating itself as opposed to a job that would be sort of a maintenance kind of a job. This still is an institution becoming what it is, so the particulars . . . were attractive the more I got to know about [the institution].

Regardless of whether the individual held a prior affiliation with the institution or bought into the mission of the institution, all four presidents held a healthy respect for the tradition and culture of their college or university. One president reported that he brought “an admiration for the work that’s done here” to his institution and “a respect for what higher education is.” Another president argued,

Make very sure you know what the mission of the institution is and that you buy into it 100%. Because if you don’t, when the tough times come you’re not going to stick around, you won’t succeed, you won’t
appreciate the hassle because you’re not going to be 100% committed
to what’s happening. You really have to fit. If I ever did this at an
organization that I was lukewarm about . . . I wouldn’t survive.

Similarly, the presidents held—or developed—respect for the culture and
traditions of higher education. “I’ve learned a lot [including] . . . to respect the field
more,” one president said. “I’ve gained a greater appreciation for higher education; what
it means to people; what it means to our faculty.”

It appears that non-traditional presidents have strong personal feelings associated
with their institutions. Three of the four presidents had an affiliation with their respective
institutions, two as alumni, and one having been on the governing board immediately
prior to appointment. In addition to the familiarity with the institution coming into the
position, each president developed respect for the uniqueness of higher education in
general.

Theme Three: Previous Experiences Valuable

Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds found that their past experiences,
regardless of whether they came from the private, public, or non-profit sectors, prepared
them for the challenges of leading an institution of higher learning. All four presidents
found their past professional experiences to be beneficial as they moved into the realm of
higher education. Two of the four presidents had served in government, either at the state
or federal level, and both found that the experience they gained in that environment was
invaluable. As one president asserted, “Leadership in a public university involves
recognizing and honoring the legitimate concerns of multiple constituencies . . . And
that’s very much the same as any kind of public leadership.”
This was echoed by the other president with a public sector background, who observed, “Government is a lot closer to the nature of a university than is the private sector.” This is consistent with the view held by Sederberg (1999), a current university president with a background as a state legislator, who believes that the same hallmark—dealing with the legislative process, multiple constituencies, and governing boards—exists in higher education. As one president opined:

It’s much more similar than it is different. It is leading a large public endeavor which means you are in the light of day . . . you have multiple constituencies, and you are trying to optimize and advance an institution’s purpose in the face of physical challenges and multiple viewpoints about where you ought to be going.

The other president believed that his background in the public and private sectors, plus his law degree, all paid dividends when it came to leading a public university. It all came together quite naturally, really. I had practiced law and tax law for a number of years and of course any big institution has its share of legal questions. I found that to be very helpful, as I have found it to be helpful in running other big organizations. The finance banking was helpful because in any big organization there are also lots of major financial issues. I had run both big government agencies and chunks of big private sector banks, and though I’ve seen different kinds of organizations and thought a lot about organizations and how to manage them. That combination came [into play] very nicely.
Having the experience of being exposed to public policy, to the state legislature, and the U. S. Congress, was also viewed as very helpful to three of the presidents. One of the presidents who did not have public sector experience but due to his positions in the health care field was able to interact with the state legislature on a regular basis, believed that an understanding of the public policy process is essential to his work as a college president, even though he leads a private institution, and used the example of student aid to illustrate his point. “The Pell grants and state grants are all controlled by public policy.” This same president likened his experience in the non-profit health field, specifically dealing with medical staffs, to college and university presidents having to work with faculty.

Working with medical staffs is very similar to working with faculty so having spent time with medical staff, [I can say that] faculty is actually much easier than medical staff. . . . The faculty is a separate body within the institution much like a medical staff is in a hospital. So that prepared me very well to work with faculty. Not having the pedigree, the Ph.D. and the background, what I did have is a sense of how a body within an institution functions. Medical staffs are separate entities, they have bylaws. Faculty senates are sort of organized in that way. They . . . act as a unit within the organization. That prepared me well, too.

He also believed that reporting to, and working with, the university’s governing body is very similar to his experiences reporting to and working with non-profit boards in his other positions. His familiarity was augmented by an understanding of the role of a governing board member from the perspective of having first served on the board of
trustees of the institution he now heads, as well as his experience participating on other community boards. This was, in his mind, a significant advantage that helped him, especially during the first six months of his tenure.

The president who came from an exclusively private-sector background agreed that his work in finance and the law were helpful, but he cautioned that “it would have never worked to just come in here and be an expert in law and finance.” He also pointed to his service as a member of the governing board of an institution of higher learning (not his own), as well as his familiarity with the school as a graduate, his passion for the institution’s mission, and his experience in fundraising for the institution as being critical components in his background that prepared him for the position. “The finances started shaping up, the admissions got better, we raised a huge amount of money—I think that helped a lot,” he recollected. This is consistent with an observation made by one of the other presidents, who said “I think if their whole career has been in business, I think it’s probably a mistake.” He went on to surmise that private sector experience combined with significant service responsibilities, such as being on the governing board of an institution, could serve an individual well.

These results are consistent with the findings of Glover (2005), who performed a qualitative study on new, first-time college presidents and how they initiated change during their transitions into office. Fifteen presidents were interviewed, included eight who came from a non-traditional background. The non-traditional presidents in Glover’s study believed that their background “helped them primarily because of their leadership experience from which they drew, the perspective they conveyed coming from outside higher education, and the relevant skills that they applied in their roles as college
presidents” (p. 135). Glover found that compared to traditional presidents, the non-traditional presidents “brought significant leadership and managerial experience, leading a variety of major organizations, businesses, and public positions” (p. 136).

All four presidents have multiple leadership experiences in the private, public, and non-profit sectors. Regardless of where they gained their experience or the specific expertise they possessed, all presidents interviewed found their background to be valuable as they took on the challenge of leading an institution of higher learning.

**Theme Four: Decision-Making Process Different**

Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds have had to become acclimated to the more deliberative decision-making processes that exist in higher education and do not allow real or potential opposition to initiatives and change affect their decision-making or policy recommendations. All four individuals acknowledged that the decision-making process in institutions of higher learning is a far more deliberate one, and involves more time than making decisions in private, non-profit, and governmental settings. Decision-making, according to one president, “doesn’t operate on election cycles; there’s a longer time horizon.” Another president responded there was always pressure to get things done in the private sector and government, “some of it self-imposed but some of it very real” that he didn’t feel existed as deeply in his role as a university president. “My experience in running big organizations made it just abundantly clear to me that it’s important for this university to decide some key things to get done,” he said.

In referencing their previous experiences outside of higher education, each president spoke about urgency, regardless of whether it was business, government, or non-profit. As one president stated, “Everything I did in health care was urgent. You
didn’t have to run it through 100 different [boards]—we had a task force and work
groups and all that— but you couldn’t noodle on something for two or three years.” He
went on,

There’s a comfort, a familiarity, in higher education that is very hard
to change. So you come in as an outsider, a non-higher education guy,
and you say ‘Let’s do this.’ Well, this is how you do it: you have to
form committees, you have to get students involved, and in two years
there is a semblance of a recommendation . . . which is something
I’ve had to learn to appreciate and acclimate and embed myself more
into the culture of the university . . .

Another president indicated that while working on a strategic plan for the
institution, he wanted as part of the dialogue a consensus of the faculty and board on
where the process and the institution was headed, prior to proceeding with it. He
rationalized “once we [get] that we’re going to go there. If we need to re-think some
things, we will; but we’re not going to agonize over it and re-think it every time, we’re
just going to go do it.” And one president readily admitted that his impatience with the
decision-making process at his institution “has caused some friction.”

However, while there was a sense of frustration that each individual expressed at
the deliberative process that exists in higher education, including use of multiple
committees, there was an acknowledgement of the importance of a longer decision-
making process by one president, who argued

The real benefit of long-term time horizons is that you really take on
more of a steward’s role knowing that you will make decisions that
will have an impact 10, 15, or 20 years from now. That is a powerful reality that causes you to be very careful and deliberate in your decision-making because there really is a significant impact for the long term. Governmental leadership . . . believes that almost anything you do can be undone by the next team coming in. You hope and wish things would have a 20-year tail on them but you don’t think that’s really very likely. Here, you are well aware of the fact that what you do, in many cases, will have a 20-year tail on it.

The orientation of these leaders to be focused on results and moving the institution forward led one president to muse, “the consensus around here, of people who’ve been here before I came or came when I came, is that the pace . . . is much faster than it was before.”

The backgrounds of the four individuals are such that they are accustomed to having a significant amount of authority and are used to “making things happen.” Each individual possessed confidence in his ability to make decisions, as well as in his ability to develop and articulate a vision for his institution. Two presidents were candid about the specific agendas they had coming into their positions. One was immediately interested in crafting mechanisms to contain tuition costs, reinvigorate the university’s commitment to undergraduate education, and increase study abroad. In the other instance, returning to and enhancing the strong liberal arts tradition of the school was of primary importance. Both individuals moved forward with their agendas without regard to how they might be viewed. As one of the presidents said, “If you satisfy one group you are
going to alienate somebody else . . . It’s a political situation where you’re going to be in
the middle of crossfire frequently.”

A third president did not have a specific agenda in mind when he was first
appointed, but the institution was transitioning, with a number of campus acquisitions and
mergers taking place, so his agenda was pre-established by the initiatives of the previous
administration and governing board. The fourth president had no specific agenda and no
major institutional initiatives were underway. As a result, the individual noted that he
didn’t feel encumbered by his position as president, noting that his next job wouldn’t
necessarily be in higher education, thus

It gives you more freedom to simply proceed as you believe is
appropriate and not be worrying that if you take a courageous step that
is somewhat anathema to the established understandings or conventions
of higher education that somehow it’s career ending. You certainly
shouldn’t do something that’s anathema to the conventions of higher
[education] if it’s the wrong thing to do, but occasionally you have to
help an organization cross into a new look or a new perspective.

In all cases, the presidents believed that they could look at the institution with a
fresh perspective and offer alternative methods to address problems and issues. One
president argued that, “Higher education is a very stable, staid type of culture. . . From a
business standpoint, let’s move the organization, let’s change course, let’s address the
changing environment . . . I think that’s where outside presidents . . . bring in a different
approach to running an enterprise.” Other presidents agreed, one noting that “I think I
contribute by bringing both the different vantage point and a different skill set than a
typical president would have who had come up through the ranks.” Another president referred back to his professional background, but also found that his “tremendous amount of travel” provided him with “a passion for internationalizing perspectives around here.”

The four non-traditional presidents expressed frustration with, and a need to become more acclimated to, the deliberative decision-making processes of higher education. They also agreed, however, that there were legitimate reasons for such a process. At the same time, non-traditional presidents do not feel encumbered by the deliberative decision-making and bring a different perspective to the position and the institution.

**Theme Five: Relationships**

Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds have an ability to establish and maintain solid and positive relationships with a variety of individuals. As previously mentioned, all four presidents found their previous experiences served them well as they moved into leadership positions in higher education. The also have an innate understanding of people and have worked hard to develop and maintain relationships with their governing boards, the faculty and staff, the community, and other external parties. This is not inconsistent with the advice of numerous authors (Dowdall, 2000; McLaughlin, 1996; Stoke, 1959), who assert the importance of developing and maintaining relationships as a trait necessary for a successful president.

Each president believed that his success was based, at least in part, on the team he developed. One president, reflecting on his background in law and business, commented that “Getting the right people in the right positions in important.” This same president humbly observed that he “had good people to learn from.” Another president had similar
sentiments when he stated that “You have to be humble—you have to allow people to be successful and basically take a second chair and then realize when things aren’t going well you’re back in the first chair.”

A third president, as he characterized several aspects of his leadership, asserted that building a “good team and motivating them has been the most important thing that I’ve done . . . We’ve built a really solid team.” This same aspect was echoed by another president, as he outlined his philosophy of leadership: “Leaders facilitate and help others to do what they need to do and can do.”

In describing the process that led to his appointment, one president believed that the governing board was looking for someone who, “had demonstrated they could work with multiple groups, could identify and hire talented people—which I think I did here—and help lead the organization.”

In addition to developing a strong administrative team, another common element dependent upon relationship-building present throughout the discussions was what one of the presidents termed “the grant of legitimacy and authority” coming from both above and below them. All four presidents acknowledged that faculty governance exists, that there is the need for such governance, and that it is necessary to respect it. “You absolutely have to come in with a respect for faculty governance,” one president observed. He recognized that “When you are in a university setting with the faculty governance process . . . there is a grant of authority from below you in the hierarchy of the organization. Faculty has a significant role in determining fundamental educational processes by which the institution operates.” He further cautioned that if a person with a non-traditional background does not respect the fact that academic governance is real and
legitimate, "I think [s/he is] in for a pretty rough ride and you may not be able to accomplish what the institution needs you to accomplish."

All four presidents held an admiration, and respect, for faculty. One president summed up his feeling about faculty by saying they are the "backbone" of the institution. Another president, in discussing one way of showing faculty members respect in his particular institution, started referring to Ph.D.s as "doctor," and instructors as professors:

That's something I feel strongly about and is part of recognizing how important that is to our higher education culture. It wasn't done before. In addition to being new, I also understand the value of it [having a Ph.D.] and appreciate it. Let's recognize people for having accomplished a significant achievement. I also refer to [faculty] as professors and not instructors. That's me having now taken on the culture and showing it respect. . . . I did it because there is need not to lose that.

And while another president indicated that one of the major adjustments he had to make when first appointed to his position related to the independence of faculty, he also believed that it was a necessary characteristic for colleges and universities to embrace. He went on, "I don't really think you can have the vitality of a campus unless you have that [faculty independence]. So I wouldn't change it."

The presidents also emphasized the need to work with their governing boards and with other stakeholders associated with their respective institutions, which is consistent with Stoke's (1959) argument that higher education cannot be understood unless there is an understanding of governing boards. All of the presidents had well-established
relationships and were familiar with at least some of the members of their governing boards prior to being appointed, in three instances because of their past affiliations with the institution (one himself being on the governing board), and in the fourth case through his role in government. "I've had extremely good relationships with my board members," one president, who noted he knew one-third of the board members when he was appointed, said. "I have had absolutely no conflicts with my board in 10 years. I think that came out of my previous experiences; being on boards . . . I understand what they're looking for and I think I can keep the information flow and the decision-making at exactly the right level to make that work." Another president acknowledged that his work in government enabled him to work with legislators, one of whom was on the institution's governing board when he was appointed.

The ability to develop and maintain relationships with a variety of individuals is viewed as an essential leadership skill and one that non-traditional presidents have demonstrated repeatedly in their past positions as well as in their roles as leaders of institutions of higher learning. They are able to interact with many different constituencies that have benefited both them their institutions.

Theme Six: No Insurmountable Obstacles

The obstacles faced by non-traditional presidents are not insurmountable and may be more perceived than real. As noted previously, there are a number of potential obstacles that the non-traditional president faces. The most obvious is resistance from faculty. Kauffman (1980) argued that professors are critical of all leadership styles and the exercise of any presidential authority. Silber (1988) asserts that a college president who is not an educator will not be an effective leader. He contends that effective
university presidents must be "first, foremost, and always educators" (p. 14). Similarly, Claussen (1997) suggests that candidates who mirror corporate leaders are likely to be viewed as unacceptable to faculty, and asked, "How can a university president, whatever his or her background, govern effectively without the support of faculty?"

The four presidents found that while faculty resistance was present, it was not difficult to overcome, at least from their perspectives. There was recognition that obstacles existed, but as one president put it,

I think at the point you show up as a non-traditional president, people immediately work from some caricatures of wherever you come from. If you come from business, then you’re going to be a businessman and you’re not going to understand education and all you’re going to care about is the bottom line. . . . so you have to overcome those things, but I didn’t think they were much of a challenge to overcome.

Another president acknowledged that there is skepticism about a new president, regardless of whether that individual came from outside of academia or from another institution. "I think that some faculty, not most, assume that the president is of a different breed than they are, even if they are an academic in real life. I don’t think in the end there was a problem, particularly after the first year or two," he observed. And a third president said being non-traditional "was initially purported to be a barrier. . . . In the end it wasn’t at all."

While only one president specifically mentioned not having a Ph.D. was, at least in his mind, a shortcoming, the one president who possessed a doctorate indicated that it was essential, "At [this institution] they wouldn’t hire a president without a Ph.D., at least
at that stage they wouldn’t, and I don’t think they would in the future.” It was this same president, interestingly, who declared that he “was most worried about the academic affairs side of things, because that’s the one that I had the least direct involvement in. It turned out not to be a major problem because I studied it hard and I had good people to learn from.” Three of the four presidents mentioned that the lack of familiarity with the academic side of the equation was something in which they felt initially uncomfortable, with one president candidly remarking that, “It stinks not coming up through the academic track.”

Nonetheless, all four presidents universally believed that any barriers of being non-traditional are more perceived than real, and any such barriers that existed were mitigated early in their tenures. They also understood that they were under a microscope and being closely scrutinized. “Being aware of the prism through which people look at you as you came in and then being straightforward as you engage people,” one president identified as a trait he believed was necessary. Each individual worked hard to develop an understanding of the role of faculty in the governance processes of their respective institution, which relates to Theme Five. “I’ve gained a greater appreciation for higher education,” another president reported. “What it means to people, what it means for our faculty. The bond that [faculty] have with our students and the true passion they have for education is remarkable and is something I really didn’t have.”

There is no question non-traditional presidents face obstacles that presidents with traditional academic backgrounds do not face. However, from the perspectives of the presidents, the obstacles are not insurmountable and can be overcome.
Chief Academic Officers (CAOs)

Each president acknowledged the importance of having a strong team of people working with them, especially in the office of the chief academic officer (CAO). One president called his former CAO “a very good mentor.” Another president called his CAO his “biggest asset.” All four presidents subscribed to Fisher’s (1984) view that “In spite of what has been said about vice presidents being equal, the president’s single most important professional associate is the chief academic officer, the prime conduit to the faculty and the president’s de facto number two officer” (p. 87).

Interviewing four current or former CAOs for this study provided an opportunity for these individuals to reflect on the non-traditional presidents they worked with and offer a variety of insights and perspectives about their experiences. In some instances, there was very little discrepancy between the perspective of the president and that of his chief academic officer. In other instances, there was some minor divergence of opinions. Each CAO, however, had a healthy respect for the non-traditional president, and all believed the non-traditional presidents have performed well for their respective institutions.

The four questions asked of the CAOs were designed to: (1) determine what barriers, obstacles, or challenges the non-traditional president faced; (2) understand how prior leadership positions of the president have been of value to both the individual and the institution; (3) examine what advantages and disadvantages existed by the president not having taken the traditional academic path; and (4) offer advice to a person who is not part of academia considering a position in higher education. The following four themes emerged from the discussions.
Theme One: Culture/Traditions Exist and Matter

It is important for non-traditional presidents to recognize and respect that organizational culture and the tradition of higher education exist and matter. A common theme throughout the literature is the influence of culture and tradition in academia, and how slowly academia changes (Dorich, 1991). This theme also emerged consistently throughout the discussions with CAOs, whose belief in the culture and tradition in higher education cannot be overemphasized, along with the importance of the president understanding and appreciating not only the institution’s history, but also the culture or philosophy of higher education in general. One CAO summed it up by saying that there is a “fraternity feeling in higher education that doesn’t exist in a lot of [organizations].”

When it came to barriers or challenges faced, understanding the culture of higher education generally, and the institution specifically, were the first things mentioned by three CAOs. One CAO, in particular, noted the strong tradition of shared governance is something a non-traditional person might not fully appreciate. Similarly, alluding to the highly participative culture of higher education, another CAO reported,

Almost everybody that works in higher education is . . . well educated and they are used to being valued in ways that employees in other kinds of institutions might not be. So a president just can’t come in and start ordering people around. They have to understand that there is an expectation here that “I will be asked what I think; I’ll be given an opportunity to participate in some kind of consensus-building exercise” so that ultimately when a decision is made lots of people feel like they maybe own a piece of that decision.
One CAO acknowledged however, that “Sometimes—not always—but sometimes the endless debate in an effort to form some kind of consensus . . . really stands in the way of effective organizational development and moving on.” At the same time, the CAO did go on to point out, “I just can’t think of any other kind of organization in the modern world where employee governance plays such a critical role.”

The CAOs also believed, for the most part, that while the backgrounds of the non-traditional presidents—including prior affiliations with the institution—helped them understand the culture of the institution, a learning curve does exist for non-traditional presidents. As one CAO observed, “I think that lack of experience of what goes on in the trenches . . . required a longer-than-one-would-have-hoped-for learning curve.” Another CAO concurred, offering “Higher education is unique in many ways and I think there’s probably a steep learning curve for someone to come in and really understand how an educational institution in many ways might be different from other kinds of institutions.”

As noted previously, the four non-traditional presidents are individuals who had to become more acclimated to the deliberative decision-making process that takes place in higher education. Recognizing the non-traditional president as persons who have been “in charge” most of their careers, one CAO observed, “you can see the potential conflict there. I think it’s partly a difference in style and partly a difference in culture.”

Conversely, it was acknowledged that not having been part of the culture and tradition of higher education could be beneficial. One CAO candidly admitted “Higher [education] is just a kind of Byzantine place. It has a culture of its own; it has traditions that people adhere to without really even thinking about them.” Another CAO agreed, arguing, “the traditions in academics are traditions but they don’t always make sense.”
And a third CAO believed that not having a clear understanding of the culture of higher education and how it operates,

Makes it far easier for [the president] to challenge it—which is good for us . . . He can ask us, “Why the hell is it taking so long?” So, we had to be able to answer that question. And by answering that question, we discovered sometimes, you know what, it does take too long . . . And so I think by him sometimes asking those kinds of questions simply because he doesn’t understand causes us to say, “Whoa, wait a minute. That’s a good question. I think we better do some self-examination here to see how strongly we should be defending our practices. Do they really stand up? Would they pass the test?” . . . I’ve been at the place almost 40 years and you know, sometimes he’ll ask these questions to defend something and I’ll say, “I don’t know where that came from or why. But, gee, that’s a good question, maybe we ought to rethink that.”

One CAO, however, suggested the fact the president was not burdened by accepted institutional practices and was more inclined to question why things were done a certain way was indicative that the president was not part of the institution and had not traveled the traditional path. It was “also the mark of someone who has not participated in enshrining those values and practices so he doesn’t have to defend them.”

Regardless, each CAO believed the non-traditional president embraced the mission of his respective institution. One CAO commented that the president not only
embraced the mission of the institution, but “really emphasized taking us back to our roots.” Another CAO made a similar observation,

One of the reasons he was hired is that he so completely embraced the mission of the institution. He knew it first-hand; he was articulate about it, and I think that was one of the things that was very impressive about him: Even though he hadn’t been closely connected for a while, he could articulate the mission. . . I am impressed with how deeply committed to it he has been since he’s been there. I’ve always valued that. Whereas someone else can gain that, he had it coming in. He knew what we were doing, why we were doing it. That was a huge plus for him.

Thus, according to CAOs, it is not enough for a non-traditional president to bring leadership skills to an institution. They must also genuinely embrace the mission of the institution they lead.

*Theme Two: Non-Traditional Presidents Must Prove Themselves*

In addition to becoming familiar with and embracing the culture of the institution and higher education, presidents face several other obstacles, especially faculty resistance or suspicion. It is critical to recognize that while obstacles exist and can be overcome, non-traditional presidents must “prove” themselves in order to successfully do so.

“People in the institution. . . I think always look a bit askance at somebody coming in who hasn’t come up through their ranks some how, or hasn’t been in the classroom, or hasn’t published anything,” noted one CAO. As a result, the president was going to have to “prove that he could be president even though he has never been a faculty member.”

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This was not only the common observation of the CAOs interviewed, but as noted previously it was also a recurring theme in the literature, especially from faculty members. The CAO went further, acknowledging that “He has to prove himself open to academic life to me, too.” Another CAO put it this way, “I don’t think he fully appreciated, coming from the outside, really how involved and hard-working the majority of the faculty are. So that set up . . . from the start, a bit of rancor.”

And while the presidents generally acknowledged their initial discomfort with the academic side of the institution, a couple of the CAOs believed there was a greater learning curve than would have been necessary had the president come from a traditional background, even if it were from another institution of higher education. “It’s understanding what happens on the shop floor . . . that required some time for him to sort of come to terms with and for the campus to come to terms with him,” one CAO asserted. Another CAO argued, “So with [the president] coming in, who’s never been in higher education, it’s going to present us with a whole different set of challenges than somebody else would.”

The CAOs also acknowledged “the prism,” as one president suggested, in which the presidents were viewed. “I think it’s a challenge to feel comfortable in a world that you know is watching you so carefully and watching to see if you know what you’re talking about,” said one CAO. Another CAO was more blunt, “A president coming into higher education from outside is naturally going to feel some inadequacies, have some doubts.” One CAO believed there was “some mutual learning” that took place, from both the president and the campus community. “It’s got to be frustrating to someone who has not lived with it, not appreciated it, doesn’t understand [it],” he sympathized.
The CAOs freely pointed out, however, that over time they saw the non-traditional presidents become more comfortable in their roles. "[He] came to have a better understanding of the guts of the university and the work on the shop floor and what faculty [does]," one concluded. Another CAO, responding to a question on faculty resistance, noted resistance existed initially, but

A couple of things helped him a great deal. One, he is a very quick mind. He read a lot. He could carry his own in a lot of conversations with people from various disciplines. I think they respected his mind and that became clear.

One CAO suggested that while the president has not completely overcome some of the initial obstacles, he has done so "a lot more than when he came here." Another observed that some might view a non-traditional president as not being a scholar, but in this particular instance at this university, "I think quite quickly that became a non-issue." He went on to say that some will,

Argue that if individual X is not a strong scholar, he can't possibly lead a university, which is after all an intellectual and scholarly endeavor . . .

So that played against him initially, but I think that really sort of dribbled off as a critical factor.

Just as the non-traditional presidents found there were obstacles to overcome, CAOs noted the existence of obstacles, as well. CAOs also believed the presidents were able to overcome most of those obstacles.
Theme Three: Previous Experiences Valuable

The previous backgrounds and experiences were valuable to non-traditional presidents, according to the CAOs. While many believe that college presidents should be scholars (Buxton, Prichard, & Buxton, 1976; Jencks & Riesman, 1968; Kauffman, 1980; Stoke, 1959), others argue that leadership, financial management, fundraising, and political skills are essential for one to be successful as a college president (Atwell & Wilson, 2003; Bartwick, 2002; Sederberg, 1999). Whether politically savvy, experienced with fundraising, familiar with the institution, or having experience in the non-profit sector, the background each president brought to the institution was deemed valuable by the CAOs. “This guy,” one CAO argued, “was one of the most politically savvy presidents that we’ve had... He understood what pulled the strings downtown and he understood what pulled the strings in public opinion.” As a result, the president was able to push the university on a number of issues rather than waiting for the issues to be pushed on the university. Before the president’s arrival, the CAO noted, the institution, Seemed to be going through two or three years or longer of being on the front page every day with some stupid story... or some other transgression that the university was supposed to have committed against somebody or other. That almost stopped over night when he got here. [He] kept us off the front page or he made sure that most of the time we were on the front page it was for good reasons. ... I just think as an outsider, especially a political animal himself, he was intensely sensitive to those kinds of issues—for the good of the university.
Another CAO pointed out “Working in politics is just about as hard in terms of herding cats as it is working with faculty and students and these complex organizations.” The CAO went on to note that the president’s background in government was “probably good training,” because it provided practical ways to negotiate. According to this CAO, the fact that the president knew “an awful lot of people,” and knew “how to pull together a political alliance” was also helpful to the institution.

Having an ability to know, interact with, and understand the corporate/business community was viewed as a positive by two CAOs in particular. One CAO reflected on the change in higher education:

I started at [institution] in 1961. Even in my lifetime there have been huge changes in how colleges are run, what the obligations are, and probably one of the best ways to illustrate this is that every member of the administration, when I was first there, taught at the institution. . . . It has become a business. . . . We have borrowed much from the world of corporations and businesses more recently. If a president doesn’t have that when he/she comes in, then they learn it quickly. . . . Just one example of that is fundraising—being able to work in the corporate world in terms of fundraising. I think it is clearly an advantage to be able to come in with that kind of experience.

Another CAO, in discussing the president’s ability to work with the governing board, observed that “the board [of trustees] is full of business people primarily. They all speak the same language. I think it’s easier for [president], or [president], or others to
make an easy connection with the board . . . He has made a splendid connection with his board.”

As part of their backgrounds in other sectors, the presidents brought a different perspective to the campus. As noted previously, the presidents themselves universally believed that academic institutions lacked a “sense of urgency.” This was not disputed by CAOs, who believed their respective presidents brought a stronger “sense of urgency” and need to their institutions. As one CAO argued, “He brought a very, very strong sense of measurables with him to campus.” Another CAO reported,

We were used to a very deliberative process. Some would say a slow, deliberative process. He wanted action, so on the one hand that could cause some tension, but overall I thought it was good. He was focused on what we were trying to do and wanted to accomplish that. I welcomed that. I welcomed someone who was going to help achieve, as long as I could also convince him of my agenda . . . He was results-oriented, action-oriented and not deliberate. He had a quick mind; he came to his conclusions quickly. I liked that.

In addition to urgency and measurables, non-traditional presidents also brought a fresh view to the institution, which the CAOs thought could be advantageous, as in the case of one CAO musing that coming in without the academic background brought “a freshness to the perspective you get when you’re coming in without that baggage.” As a result, another CAO asserted that “the outsider is probably, all other things being equal, much more inclined to lead change.”
CAOs believed the experiences and skill sets brought to the institutions by the non-traditional presidents were valuable. Bringing a different perspective, working with different constituencies, and the ability to work with their respective governing boards were viewed favorably by CAOs.

Theme Four: Delegating, Listening, and Learning are Critical

As noted previously, non-traditional presidents understood they did not work in a vacuum and were quick to give credit to their respective staffs. The CAOs, in turn, believed it critical for the non-traditional president to delegate the “academic stuff” to the CAOs and also believed they were able to do so. “He said when he was hired that he would be hiring a provost who had a strong academic background,” one reported. “That kind of [non-traditional] background . . . can be very dependent on a provost or chief academic officer and [the president must] be willing to delegate a lot or responsibility and leadership to them in terms of the academic programs.” Another former acting provost said it was crucial for a president to allow his staff to “speak to power” as a way to provide proper balance to leadership:

The basic practice in universities hasn’t changed in 100 years . . . But bringing in an outsider, with a very strong personality, with no one from the inside to work with, is almost a recipe for disaster. There was a happy convergence of talents here that really permitted [president] to be effective, and that was [the provost] . . . [The provost] had a very good sense of the institution, and not afraid to call him out. And call him up . . . There needs to be—especially if you’re hiring an outsider—
an effective countervailing set of ideas to sort of try to keep things in balance.

Another CAO said “Be sure there is an academic leader and delegate the academic to that person. Encourage them, empower them, etc., but make sure that person is the academic spokesperson.”

At the same time, two CAOs referenced the fact that the new presidents brought in a new team, or a partially new team, and the inherent dangers in doing so. As one stated, “It is not all that unusual for a new president to come in a build a whole new senior leadership team . . . And I think the disadvantage of that can be that you’ve just completely changed the institution because the history is gone.” In this particular instance, the new team was necessitated in part because of a reorganization taking place due to the merger of three institutions. It was also due, in part, to the fact that the president “wanted a new team.” Another CAO cautioned, “if you come in as an outsider, be careful who you bring with you . . . [President] brought in about four or five people . . . at one stage or another. I think only one really displayed superior talent and ability on this campus.”

According to CAOs, it is important for non-traditional presidents to delegate the academic side of the institution to CAOs.

Governing Board Members

Given the critical role a governing board member plays in the recruitment and selection of a college or university president, two current or former board members of each institution were interviewed as part of the data collection process. In order to obtain the perspective of why a non-traditional president was elected by the respective
governing body of the institution, it was important to interview governing board members who were not only on the governing board at the time of selection, but also members of the search committee, if a separate search committee was employed by the institution. In one institution's case, one of the two trustees interviewed was a member of the search committee while the other was not. In another instance, one trustee was on the search committee and subsequently became a member of the governing board. In the other instances, the trustees were part of, or chaired, the search committee while a member of the board.

The five questions asked of the governing board members were designed to: (1) determine the factors leading to consideration of a non-traditional candidate to be elected as the institution's president; (2) identify what barriers, obstacles, or challenges the non-traditional president faced; (3) understand how prior leadership positions of the president have been of value to both the individual and the institution; (4) examine what advantages and disadvantages existed by the president not having taken the traditional academic path; and (5) offer advice to a person who is not part of academia considering a position in higher education. The following five themes emerged from the discussions.

Theme One: Concern, Passion, and Vision

It was the consensus of all eight governing board members that the individual who was elected as president of the institution demonstrated a sincere concern, passion, and vision for higher education and for the mission of the institution. "We clearly wanted someone who was in tune with the value system of [the institution]," asserted one trustee. "Our goals were to have someone who was committed to the values." Another trustee, from the same institution, observed that the non-traditional candidate "not only bought
into it, he had been a part of it his entire life; he understood it and understood what it really was about and what it had to be in the future . . . he was a solid believer in the vision and mission of [the institution] . . . he was deeply concerned about the education here.” Other board members from different institutions had similar responses. One trustee reported that the president not only embraced the mission of the university, “he lived the mission.” The trustee went on,

He was very good about laying out that vision. . . . He knew how to take education and make it work; make it work for the larger masses, and to me that’s the mission of [institution]. You go beyond the theoretical; you teach your students how to take that theoretical knowledge and go out and put it in practice so it benefits society. I think he knew that; he just knew it.

The discussion, however, went beyond the institution itself. Several trustees reported it was important for the president of the institution to have a passion for higher education in general. One trustee pointed to a long history of interest by the president in higher education as a result of his work in government, “He has had a passion for education reform since the ‘80s.”

Vision is a common theme running through literature on leadership. Burns (1978) stressed the importance of the leader to have and articulate a vision to his/her followers. According to Clarke and Crossland (2002), the goal of a vision is twofold: to provide a direction and to inspire, which is not inconsistent with Fullan’s (2001) view about purpose and organizational sustainability. The organization’s vision should also provide an answer to the questions of opportunity and purpose. And Rhodes (1998) claimed that
the essential tasks of a college or university president are to define and articulate the mission of the institution, develop meaningful goals, recruit talent, build consensus, create the climate, and provide resources. Of these tasks, the most important, and most difficult, include defining the institution’s mission and develop its goals.

To this point, a number of trustees emphasized the propensity of the non-traditional presidents to move the institution to a higher level. “His conviction of where he felt education had to go was solid,” stated a trustee from a public university. “He could really see his role as pushing us to a higher level, academically.” One trustee reported that another president “had this vision about how we could move the university within its mission to another level, and he was always looking at that . . . always thinking about ‘how can we move the university to the next level?’”

Another trustee observed this same president as having “a global vision, he brought it to campus, and then he used his tool sets that he came to campus with to make it happen. He had a commitment to it and did extraordinarily well making it come to fruition.”

Valuing and embracing the mission is due, at least in part, to individuals having an affiliation with the institution. As noted above, three of the four presidents were well acquainted with their institutions prior to becoming president, either as a graduate of the institution or as a member of the governing board. This was of value to the presidents, according to governing board members. “The fact that he was a graduate of [institution] was a plus for us,” observed one trustee. Two trustees from another institution believed likewise, also noting that the president’s family—not just the individual himself—had a long association with the university. “I think you look at your job in a different way—not
that you can’t give that kind of service if you aren’t a graduate of the institution—but I do think it influences your point of view to some degree,” one trustee stated.

But even the one president with no prior affiliation with the institution was viewed as being a “fit” for the institution. Both trustees noted the non-traditional president “fit what we wanted,” as one suggested. The other trustee reported that, “Even as a non-traditional candidate, probably the only criteria that he didn’t meet was the fact that it would have been nice to have someone with a doctorate and academic experience, but it wasn’t required.”

According to governing board members, it is important for the institutions’ leaders to have a concern and passion for not only the institution’s mission, but also to have a passion for higher education. The governing board members believed the non-traditional presidents demonstrated such passion, and believed it was one ingredient for their being able to successfully lead the institution.

*Theme Two: Ability to Overcome Being a Non-Academic*

Not unlike the views held by both the presidents and the chief academic officers, trustees also believed being a non-academic in an academic environment was the biggest single barrier that the non-traditional president faced and that he had to earn the respect of the academic community. Seven of the eight governing board members mentioned not being an academic as one of the disadvantages the non-traditional president had, and needed to overcome. Several trustees believed the “issue” of being non-traditional was more of a concern to the faculty than it was to the trustees. However, one trustee also suggested it was the concern on the part of several members of the board if the
individual’s skills in the public sector would “... be able to translate well into the context of academia.”

One trustee put it this way, “without having that strict academic background, it was easy [for people] to take shots at [the president] because, well he’s not an academic after all. What does he know? While he’s taught, he’s not published; he doesn’t do research.” The other trustee from the same institution put it a different way,

The biggest challenge was dealing with the academics. And I’m saying this not to demean academics, but this is the way they think. They somehow believe that if you are a Ph.D. . . . nobody knows their area like they do and nobody can even comprehend it and if you work in the business world, you have to be—from a mind standpoint—inferior to the academic mind.

Echoing the same theme, one trustee put it in the perspective of “lacking a connection” with the academic community. Similar to comments made by one CAO, the trustee stated the lack of understanding derived from being a faculty member was a deficiency that could have proved difficult to overcome:

Now some of the non-traditional presidents have had government experience and other business experience and perhaps at some time during their career had done some teaching as adjunct, but that’s a whole lot different than understanding completely the problems, the connections, the interfacing of the faculty with the administration, the president and provost.
This resonated with another trustee, who argued, “Clearly one of the disadvantages is that he really had to learn the academic side of the business—and that is our business.”

As a result, it was the task of each of the non-traditional president to “prove” he belonged in the role. Five of the eight trustees specifically mentioned the need for the president to prove himself and to earn the respect of the academic community. One summed it up this way, “There were some who said, ‘Buddy, you’re going to have to really prove yourself to us. We’re going to make you work for our respect.’” And in one particular instance, a trustee pointed out the president also had to prove himself “to alumni and sports fans and . . . the other pieces of the university.” This observation is consistent with the views of Fisher (1984) who asserted alumni are an often overlooked constituency and “without a strong and positive base of alumni support, a president is bound to fail” (p. 173).

As universally as the trustees believed being a non-academic was the biggest single obstacle faced by non-traditional presidents, they also held that their institution’s president was successful at overcoming that obstacle. It was not uncommon for a trustee to state that over time the president was able to prove himself and earn the respect of the campus. This finding was consistent with the opinions of the presidents and chief academic officers.

What was interesting, however, was the manner in which presidents went about “proving” themselves. The relationship skills each president possessed was critical in the manner in which they started to build support for their administrations. “He was so calm in the way he went about meeting with people,” one trustee observed. “[He] was not one
to take credit for himself; he gives credit to others.” The trustee went on to relate that the president recognized the resentment and “didn’t thumb his nose at it. He understood.”

Another trustee from the same institution said the president, when first appointed,

Spent a lot of time in the beginning just meeting with small groups—faculty groups and student groups—listening. And I think that over time they began to respect him and understand he really wanted to understand where they were coming from and that he knew his weakness was in the academic area and therefore he was going to pick the best provost he could for the institution.

A president from another institution used book clubs as a way to acquaint himself with faculty, staff, and students. “[He] gave very careful thought to how he was being introduced, and how he was being connected with the professors, with the faculty, and with the students,” one trustee noted. In addition, the president

Visited every department, whether it was an academic department or an administrative or support department and met with the staff and the faculty and talked to them directly . . . And I think that was to his credit, I mean, he wanted to know what was going on . . . and he got to know what was going on at [institution] in very short order.

A fellow trustee agreed, commenting “I’ve never met anybody like him, where he has the ability to deal very effectively and very solidly with the academic community at the same time he can deal with me as a business person.”

Being able to listen, exhibiting a willingness to learn, and accepting the input of others were traits also deemed as characteristics that helped the presidents overcome
obstacles. "He’s done a very nice job of listening,” a trustee remarked of one president. One trustee observed of another president, “He’s a very inspiring leader who is so willing to learn from other people and there’s nothing he is not interested in.” A governing board member noted that the president of a third institution sought advice on a regular basis from his predecessor. “He used to confer with [his predecessor]. A lot of people don’t know that.” Having a positive relationship with the president emeritus is viewed by both Bornstein (2003) and Martin and Samels (2004) as desirable.

In addition to using their skills in developing relationships, presidents found acceptance on the campus through their accomplishments on behalf of the institution. As one trustee observed, “When people saw, for the most part . . . the progress that the university was making, and the public support that the president had generated for the university, I believe then that the skepticism and some of the criticism began to die.”

Similar to both the presidents and the CAOs, the governing board members believed being a non-academic was the biggest hurdle that non-traditional presidents faced. The trustees also acknowledged the presidents had to “prove” themselves to the campus community. Like the two other groups, the governing board members believed the presidents were successful in being able to overcome the obstacle of being “an outsider.”

Theme Three: Previous Experiences Valuable

Without exception, governing board members believed that regardless of background, the prior experiences and skill sets individuals brought to the position were valuable and relevant. While all trustees pointed to the general leadership abilities of the presidents, most trustees identified specific skills the non-traditional president brought to
his role, especially in the areas of finances, fundraising, and political connections. 

"[He] knew [state] appropriations better than anyone else," one trustee confided. The trustee went on,

And the fact that our state appropriation was, has been, still is, and probably will be [an issue] for a long, long, long time, it meant that really a great deal of focus had been and needed to continue to be on that, on the appropriations and working with the legislators. He knew the legislators, he knows the process, and so in that regard we felt he was very valuable to come in at this time when as the University is growing . . . this appropriations problem [is becoming] worse and worse.

A trustee from another institution had similar feelings about its president. "The greatest attributes that attracted me to [him] and made me confident with his selection were his commitment to promoting global understanding, his depth of knowledge about financial matters, and his connections in Washington, D.C." And the other trustee from the same institution observed the president "deplored waste," and was always looking at "where we could get the most bang for the buck."

In addition to financial expertise, several trustees identified the previous experiences of individuals to raise funds as a critical skill for the institution. "The college needed to establish a larger source of funds for its foundation," one trustee asserted. As a result, "fundraising was extremely important." Another trustee related that the ability of the president to "connect with major donors has been a huge, huge thing for [the institution]."
For example, I'll tell you what he did with me. I didn't know him very well, and when he became president . . . he called me one day and said that he had known some of the things I had done as an entrepreneur, and he said, "Can I spend a day with you?" So he and his wife came [to the city] and he said, "I'd like to see your businesses." So we spent a full day and all he did was ask me questions, and I had a wonderful day. First of all, somebody that showed interest in what I was doing—and a real interest . . . because he ended up the day and he said, "You know, all the things that you've done I really wanted to do too sometime in my life. You know, you've done it in a remarkable way." Well, I had such a good time with him because he had the ability to relate to me . . . And it was a real interest and he's done . . . just a remarkable job of connecting with the potential major donor community.

While the fiscal condition of the institution was important, one trustee acknowledged the need to balance the finances of the university with its mission. The trustee noted the financial acumen that the individual brought to the position, and to the institution, was "essential" and that he "grasped the financials [of the institution] extremely quickly because of that previous background," and he also didn't use the "bottom-line" as an excuse for not doing things. "He saw the university’s needs, didn’t try to say everything’s got to be focused on the bottom line. He honored the mission and vision of the university."

Finally, at least one trustee from each of the four institutions commented that the president was "bright," "exceptionally intelligent," "solid," or a "quick learn." One
trustee repeatedly emphasized the president was a “unique person.” Three trustees also mentioned ethics and integrity as important characteristics they saw in their respective presidents. One trustee went on to argue, “Character, integrity, and creativity count more in higher education than in any other profession.”

Just as the presidents and CAOs found the background and skill sets of the non-traditional president beneficial, the trustees as a group also believed this to be the case. Of particular importance to trustees were the financial skills that presidents brought to their positions.

*Theme Four: Development of Strong Team*

Non-traditional presidents recognize their shortcomings and compensate by developing a strong team, especially the chief academic officer. “One of the things we had to work on,” one governing board member observed, “is that we wanted him to spend more time remembering that he wasn’t going to get the job done by himself. It was going to take the staff and particularly the academics.” Not unlike the presidents and the CAOs, the governing board members believed one component that added to the president’s success within the institution was the importance of having a solid staff to support his efforts. One trustee asserted that 90% of the president’s job in the particular institution was fundraising, and the other “10% is surrounding yourself with the people who are able to carry out the rest of what’s going on here . . . and [continuing] to look a the vision and the mission of [the institution].” The trustee went on to state the president . . . is a man who has learned how to surround himself with people who are better than he is—each in their respective area. We always talk about that in the business world where if you think you are an 8 out of
10, a lot of managers hire 7s and 6s and 5s, and make sure nobody runs over them. [The president] is a 10, but I think he looks for 12s and he has done just an incredible job of pulling together a key-person support staff.

A trustee from another institution believed one of the first things the president did to add credibility to his presidency was to appoint the interim provost, who was held in high regard by the academic community, as the official provost. “[The provost] played a key role in helping the non-traditional president have credibility with the faculty,” the trustee suggested. Another trustee from the same institution agreed, “[The president] I think, very effectively resolved any of those initial qualms by immediately reappointing [the interim provost] as provost.”

One trustee stated the president admitted he would “rely heavily” on the provost he selected to provide leadership and direction in the academic arena, “I mean, he knew that he would not be able to fulfill that position [academic expertise].” By doing so, the president was able to “focus on the external” needs of the university. Another trustee believed the president and provost had a “great team relationship” and they “worked very well together.”

If they ever had any disputes, it was never public. And I think they respected one another so fully that they could hash things through and come to decisions that were in everybody’s best interests . . . Because he brought in, engaged, and embraced [the provost] very fully, immediately, and that just set the whole tone. You had no way of
Knowing if that would work over time, but it did . . . it worked very well.

Just as one of the CAOs believed it was critical for the president to have people who were willing and able to “speak to power,” several governing board members found it was necessary for the president to seek out, as one trustee put it, individuals on campus who would “not tell you what you want to hear, but what you need to hear.” The trustee further cautioned that a president needs to find people s/he can trust and confide in. Another trustee from a different institution suggested the president look at the “whole organization, not just deal with staff. They’ll only bring you things that they want you to hear.”

Trustees as a group believed it was important for the non-traditional presidents to have a strong relationship with their respective CAOs, and that the presidents were able to build a strong administrative team to assist them. In addition, several trustees emphasized the importance of the presidents having people they could go to who would not be afraid to offer honest assessments.

Theme Five: Different Perspective and Impatience

With their various backgrounds and experiences, trustees also believed the non-traditional presidents brought a different perspective to the institution and did not “fall into the old tradition that ‘we can’t touch that’ because it’s sacred ground,” as one trustee observed. “They will ask more questions.” A trustee from another organization agreed, I think from the board’s perspective, to look at issues and problems in a non-traditional way, it was a real advantage to have a president or a candidate who was not traditional. It gave a sense of, “Yeah, this
person can look at that from a balanced perspective, not a prejudiced perspective.”

Other trustees made similar comments. One noted that “One of the big advantages is that he didn’t come in with any preconceived notions as to what ought to happen; he studied the organization, he studied the problems, and set up strategies to fix the problems.” Said another,

From my perspective, I found a person who was not bound to say,

“What have we done? What’s the long-standing past practice?” But he would think outside the box and say, “What could be?” I mean, he would take the vision, articulate it, and then find the ways to get to it.

And I don’t think that always happens.

One benefit a different perspective brought to the institution was that decision-making on even the most routine actions is improved. “You know, you get in a rut. A new person comes in and says, ‘Look, you want to accomplish X, but there’s another way of accomplishing X.’ And maybe there is another way and a better way.” Even the most routine decisions may be subject to error, one trustee argued, because “you don’t look at your work so carefully because you’ve done this so many times.” As a result, the decision can “come back to haunt you.”

This finding was not inconsistent with what the CAOs believed and the presidents themselves acknowledged. While governing board members agreed that the different perspective brought to the institution by a non-traditional president was a significant benefit, an equally collective belief among trustees was that impatience in dealing with the decision-making processes in higher education was a potentially detrimental
characteristic of non-traditional presidents. This finding, too, was consistent with what
the CAOs and presidents believed.

When talking about the "slow" decision-making process, a trustee stated that it
was "another conflict that [the president] had to put up with, particularly not being an
academic, because he does move fast—sometimes too fast." Another trustee believed the
institution's president was impatient, but not intolerant. Although decisiveness in a leader
is a positive characteristic, there were concerns about how presidents might deal with the
deliberative process in higher education. When addressing the challenges facing
presidents, a trustee stated the president had to "adapt to the board and campus
expectation of their participation in decision-making, and that's not something that's as
readily accepted by people who come from the outside." Another trustee put it this way,

He is a man who has a bit of impatience; he doesn't like the amount of
time it takes in order to get something moving and accomplished . . .

He also knew where he wanted to go, and even when the conversation
was going in that direction, he tried to push it faster and as a result of
that he got a lot of people irritated, too.

In discussing one president's tolerance of academic governance, a trustee believed
that "he was much more proactive in giving [the faculty] things to react to rather than
waiting for them to generate ideas at their end and bring them up to him for acceptance or
rejection." This same board member believed the president "did learn sensitivity. He
learned that you . . . do try to build a consensus. And then he had people around him that
he'd assign the task [of] going out and getting a consensus so there was buy-in." Other
trustees agreed.
I was chair of the evaluation committee ... and we had taken a little
trip together ... I sat along the river with him for two hours and we just
talked face-to-face about things that he had to change. And I said “I’ve
sat in committee meetings with you, and as a result of that I see that
you run over people because you are quick to jump—even though it’s
moving in the direction you want—you’ve got to let it happen. Because
people are going to take more ownership in what happens rather than
you jumping.” But he has learned that beautifully.

Trustees, like presidents and CAOs, believed non-traditional presidents bring
fresh perspectives to the institutions they lead. This trait is universally viewed as a
valuable trait for the institution. Trustees also viewed the non-traditional presidents as
having impatience with the decision-making processes of higher education, a trait
acknowledged by both presidents and CAOs.

Putting it all Together: Combined Themes

While each of the three groups projected their own perspectives onto the non-
traditional president, four common themes emerged from the discussion: (1) non-
traditional presidents understand, appreciate, and value the missions of their respective
institutions; (2) the past experiences of non-traditional presidents prepared them for the
challenges of leading an institution of higher learning; (3) non-traditional presidents face
obstacles and barriers, but they can be successfully overcome; and (4) non-traditional
presidents surround themselves with a strong leadership team.
Theme One: Valuing the Institution's Mission

Each of the three groups believed the non-traditional presidents embraced the missions of their respective institutions. In three instances, the president had been acquainted with the institution, either by virtue of obtaining his undergraduate education (two individuals) or by serving on the governing board (one individual). Two presidents spoke fondly of the “unique opportunity” to serve their alma maters. In addition, all three presidents, without hesitation, noted they would have never considered leading an institution of higher learning had they not held a prior affiliation with the college or university. In the fourth instance where the president had no prior affiliation with the institution, it was acknowledged by the president, the chief academic officer, and both trustees that his grasp of the institution’s mission and culture was unquestionable, and that he was committed to the niche that the university had established for itself. “The particulars of [the institution] were attractive the more I got to know about [it],” the president explained.

The comments of the presidents, as it related to their affinity for their institutions, met with agreement from the chief academic officers and the governing board members. The fact that the president “so completely embraced the mission of the institution,” was one of the reasons he was hired, stated a CAO. Another CAO said the president not only embraced the mission, “but really emphasized taking us back to our roots, which I also applauded.” The CAO went on to elaborate,

Roots in this sense: access, as best we can, to sons and daughters of ordinary people; engagement in community problem-solving at the community level instead of making everybody come to us; being

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practical in our research, always looking for applications in the research. Now, he was re-establishing a balance there, he wasn’t saying pure research wasn’t important and all that kind of stuff, but he absolutely went back to the roots of the institution, and that was really principally one of his great messages.

This resonated with a trustee from the same institution, who recalled that the president “knew how to take education and . . . make it work for the larger masses; . . . you go beyond the theoretical.”

One CAO, reflecting on a president calling for a strategic planning session within the first couple of years at the institution, said the president “fully supported” the institution remaining its Carnegie classification and divisional sports level and “was adamant about keeping both of those as our niche.”

Another CAO agreed the president embraced the mission of the institution, but argued the president would likely not have embraced the mission of another institution:

It’s an easier transition for someone in business to come here and be a CEO of a business university, I think than it would be to go to a traditional liberal arts institution . . . He’s very much committed to our mission that we prepare students to go to work, get jobs, pay taxes, make a contribution . . . It’s an easy buy-in for him.

Having a prior affiliation with the institution and its values were deemed important characteristics by governing board members. Although they did not use that sole criterion in electing the non-traditional president, it was a consideration. One trustee in reflecting on the two finalists for the presidency, felt that while one traditional finalist
was a very competent individual, he “was a person who didn’t really carry that strong—what shall I say—knowledge, support, buying in to the vision of . . . education as I saw it and as I thought we ought to be seeing it.” As a result, the non-traditional finalist who held the values of the institution and stated “he was deeply concerned about the education [there]” was selected.

Other trustees commented the presidents from their institutions had “an insightful understanding of the university,” or not only embraced the mission, but “lived the mission.” In the latter case, the trustee acknowledged “I think that’s one reason why I really valued his leadership style and I must admit we didn’t have many conflicts . . . because we just had the same mindset about where [the institution] needed to go.”

Thus, all three groups believed it important for the presidents to have an understanding and appreciation for the culture and mission of the institution.

*Theme Two: Previous Experiences Valuable*

All 16 persons interviewed for this study agreed the past experiences of the presidents were valuable to both the individual and the institution, regardless of whether the president came from the public, private, or non-profit sector, and prepared the non-traditional president for the challenges of leading an institution of higher learning. Presidents, as they contemplated on their backgrounds, expressed not only a desire to be professionally challenged but also a confidence in their general leadership abilities. For instance, the two presidents with experience in the governmental arena found that leading governmental agencies was not dissimilar to leading a college or university, one remarking that, “government experience dealing with constituencies with public issues was a key background.” Likewise, the two presidents who did not have government
experience found various components of running a university are parallel to running a business, although one cautioned, that while “there are many aspects of this that are just like a business . . . there are parts of it that are not like a business.” He also acknowledged his past experiences could not be integrated into the position without having some understanding about higher education:

When you’re talking about the curriculum and you’re talking about what kind of research, scholarship, and art you want produced, you’ve got some different goals and different metrics. Keeping that separate is important.

More than one president believed they brought both a “different vantage point and different skill set than a typical president would have who had come up through the ranks,” as one president commented. In addition to underscoring their general leadership abilities, the presidents believed the specific skill sets they brought to the position were valuable. One president, with a background in finance and the law observed he would not be “surprised if one-quarter of what I do has something [to do with] the law and then another half of what I do has something related to finance.” He also found his experience in fundraising, even in a volunteer role, was very useful. Another president viewed his background in health care, specifically the financial aspects, as important asserting that he was “in a field [where] that [experience] was going to be a guide, a precursor of what’s going to happen in higher education as far as funding.”

Glover’s (2005) study discovered similar results. The transferability of prior leadership skills, the different perspective—primarily a broader, more enthusiastic view—brought business experience to the institution, especially the ability to “sit with
corporate leaders and talk to them” and proved to be strengths that traditional presidents may not bring to the institution.

The CAOs also believed the past experiences of presidents were beneficial. Two CAOs, from different institutions, commented that their presidents were “politically savvy” and understood the political process, to the benefit of their respective institutions. Not coincidentally, these same CAOs also found their presidents had strong interpersonal skills and were able to develop and maintain strong relationships, especially with the institutions’ governing boards. As one CAO stated, “He had the strong support of the board and that cut him a lot of slack to move forward.” The fact that two presidents had also served on governing boards—one for the institution he now leads—also was beneficial. One CAO believed the experience did acquaint, at least in part, the president with “some culture of higher education.”

Another CAO’s comments resonated with those of the president of the same institution, observing

There are probably more similarities in health care and education than there would be maybe if he had come from manufacturing . . . working with faculty and professional people in higher education isn’t . . . terribly different than working with doctors and nurses.”

And just as one president believed that the fundraising experience he brought to the position, and institution, was beneficial, the CAO from that institution commented that it was “clearly an advantage to be able to come in with that kind of experience” because it has “become such a huge part of college presidents now.”

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The CAOs also acknowledged, and appreciated, the different perspectives that non-traditional presidents brought to the institution. One CAO’s comments summed up the feeling of the others:

He wasn’t burdened by accepted practice . . . If you grow up in an environment long enough, you start boxing yourself by saying, “well, you know, we do it this way.” You catch others saying “well, why do we do it that way?” But you never quite catch yourself in your favorite little traps about, “Well, we do it this way and you couldn’t possibly do that.” He wasn’t burdened by a lot of that.

Governing board members held similar feelings about the backgrounds the president brought to the position and to the institution. Being politically savvy and having connections at the state and national levels were pointed to by several trustees. One trustee, in particular, asserted that the person brought a level of prestige and stature to the position and the institution,

I felt it was very important that this president, whoever he or she might be, be someone that brought prestige to the position; someone that would attract national attention. So that was another thing that intrigued me about [the president]—this was a man of stature.

Fundraising—whether private or public—was another skill set that two of the non-traditional presidents brought to the position and the institution, according to several trustees. One trustee felt strongly about this when observing that “At the end of the day, if you can’t raise money then your college isn’t profitable, and you can’t do the things that improve your curriculum.” Another on several occasions remarked that the ability of the
president to "connect" with the donor community was not only necessary, but critical, in order for the school to enhance its financial position.

Like the presidents and CAOs, governing board members were also cognizant of the different perspectives brought to the institution by the non-traditional president. One trustee suggested that the president’s "thinking outside the box" led to compromise decisions that benefited the institution:

[He] was just energized. Also, the people sitting back doing traditional things, if [he] came up with something that was really crazy, they would tell him why it wouldn’t work. And then he would think about something else out of the box and somewhere in the middle they would meet and it would work.

In addition to the past experiences and the different vantage points individuals brought to the presidencies, it was not uncommon for both CAOs and governing board members to point out personal characteristics of the individual. Several CAOs and trustees repeatedly mentioned their respective presidents were intelligent and a "quick study." Similarly, being able to establish and maintain relationships, while a skill, was also characterized by some respondents as a "gift." And more than one trustee discussed the "uniqueness" of the "individual" as opposed to the non-traditional background he brought to the position.

While there was a strong consensus that the non-traditional background was beneficial, there was one president who indicated he would not have been considered had he not possessed a doctorate. This was affirmed by both the CAO and the two trustees from that particular institution. One trustee noted it was out of respect for the academic
community that the trustees believed it was essential for the president to hold a Ph.D. The trustees from other three institutions believed that while it would have been preferable for the president to have a doctorate, it was not essential, nor did it influence their election processes.

The background and skill sets brought to the position by the non-traditional presidents were viewed by all three groups as valuable to the institutions. This was especially true as it relates to the financial acumen each individual possessed, regardless of whether it was in the public, private, or non-profit sectors. Fundraising skills were also important, especially for the presidents of private institutions. Finally, each group emphasized the different perspectives that were brought to the position and institution by the non-traditional president.

**Theme Three: Obstacles and Barriers Can be Overcome**

The existence of obstacles associated with non-traditional presidents is well documented in the literature. While Bornstein (2003) observes that while the success of non-traditional presidents cannot be predicted, “they may have greater problems in achieving legitimacy” (p. 28), Glover (2005) found the two general areas that non-traditional presidents found as disadvantageous were related to “academic orientation: deficiency in teaching and research experience leading to greater understand of and credibility with faculty, and the desire for greater academic credentials” (p. 145).

The three groups included in this study readily acknowledged barriers faced by non-traditional presidents, the most common being that they were “not academics.” This general statement spawned several ancillary obstacles, including the need for presidents to “prove” themselves and gain credibility with faculty, the fact they might not
understand or appreciate shared governance, the perception that the institution would be operated like a business and the academic foundations would be ignored, and institutional jealousy. Presidents, for instance, admitted that to some degree there was a level of uneasiness in dealing with the academic community. Three presidents, in particular, were quick to acknowledge lack of full-time faculty experience as a potential obstacle. One president summed it up by stating,

I don’t have embedded, ingrained empathy based on experience for what it is—that the critical asset of this institution, being the faculty, go through in developing their courses. I guest lecture a lot of courses and help team-teach courses and I’ve been around the environment a fair amount but it is different to observe it and partially participate in than to actually do it. Ultimately you are a better baseball manager if you played baseball yourself. You’re a better factory manager if you actually worked the shop floor yourself. I would be a better president if I had been a faculty member for that reason; to have a better innate and empathy for the actual work.

This sentiment was echoed by another president, who noted that as someone who “was not raised and bred on higher education . . . you really don’t get the full flavor of it until you are part of it.” And another president commented,

I think there is skepticism about anyone that becomes a president. I think that some faculty, not most, but some, sort of assume that the president is of a different breed than they are, even if they are an academic in real life.
Chief academic officers did not disagree with the observations of the presidents, all four alluding to the strong historical culture and tradition of higher education and the need for the president to “prove himself” to the campus community. “You’re inside or you’re outside,” one CAO argued. “They very fact that he was nontraditional was a barrier to his acceptance on campus, so I think he was given . . . more scrutiny from that point of view, out-of-the-corner of your eye point of view.” As a result, “he had to prove himself first before he could really get on with doing anything.” Another CAO felt that while there was concern the president was not considered a “scholar,” there was “more concern about . . . what he would say sometimes . . . demonstrating that he really didn’t know what was going on in the trenches; he didn’t understand the nature of the job because he never had to do it.”

Governing board members held similar opinions. Referring to the institution’s president, one trustee observed “He had to sell himself of at least being capable of being an academic.” Another trustee from a different institution believed there was “some jealousy to overcome because there had been a few [internal] administrators that had applied [for the position].”

Proving themselves with internal stakeholders (faculty, staff, alumni, etc.) was not the only obstacle for non-traditional presidents. While all four individuals indicated they were “well received” by their traditional presidential colleagues, two specifically indicated they thought they had to “prove themselves” to that particular group.

Understanding the relationship between the faculty and the administration was a critical skill, according to a trustee. “Now some of the non-traditional presidents have had government experience and other business experience and perhaps at some point during
their career had done some teaching as adjunct, but that’s a whole lot different than understanding completely the problems, the connections, the interfacing” of faculty and the administration.

It was, however, the consensus of all three groups that the non-traditional presidents were generally successful in overcoming most obstacles they faced. As one president stated,

When all the stereotypes that one would throw out about somebody who has been in fiscal management in a relatively conservative administration and so you have to overcome those things but I didn’t think they were much of a challenge to overcome . . . I just had to be aware of it.

Other presidents agreed, with one noting that while he was first concerned about the academic affairs of the institution, he “studied it hard” and as a result it “turned out not to be a major problem.” Another president, reminisced that during the course of his tenure “I found out how to deal with that and how to understand [it] in the context of the whole situation.”

Similarly, CAOs believed obstacles faced by the non-traditional presidents could be—and most were—overcome. Once CAO put it in this context:

Anyone coming to an institution that comes from outside has some challenges in terms of history, relationships, but that’s a barrier that many of them overcome quickly. They’re usually on a learning curve about relationships of the institution with other organizations but there are many of those that have been established for a long time that many
people don’t know about, so that lack of information can be a barrier in terms of how they interact. That’s not a significant one I don’t think.

It’s like any person coming into a new job from outside. That’s not unique to this arrangement.

Other CAOs believed that while it did take time, their respective presidents gained acceptance by the campus community. One CAO, talking about a non-traditional president from another institution observed, “I know people at [institution] had great reservations about [the president] because he was not an academic, at least some of the faculty I talked to, were less than enthusiastic about [him] but . . . he is well-received today.” Another CAO referring to the president’s ability to change the way the public viewed the institution was “frankly no small item.”

The trustees were almost unanimous in their belief that the president from their respective institutions was accepted and able to overcome many of the obstacles presented to them. Some based their opinion on observations of the manner in which the president conducted himself and how he dealt with individuals. One trustee noted the president “has learned how to adapt.” Another trustee suggested the strong interpersonal skills of the president served him well when he first came to campus “He had the personality to include them, brought them in . . . I truly felt this man had a sense of passion for listening to people.” A trustee from another institution observed that the president “was wide open and so he could speak to people on almost any level.”

Other trustees pointed to the activity that happened on campus as a result of the president as contributing to overcoming obstacles. According to one trustee,
[The president] felt it necessary not only for himself but for the institution . . . to have a template for his administration . . . I think began to erode some of the skepticism and the university began on a path of furious activity because [he] was, and still is, a workaholic, and it didn’t make any difference to him if it was one o’clock in the morning or if it was one o’clock in the afternoon; if he needed to talk with you . . . your phone would ring . . . He was very energetic . . . and I think that energy and that commitment and that explosion of energy and ideas to kind of steer the university to something positive [He] overcame [skepticism] to a large degree.

Each of the three groups acknowledged that not having an academic background was the most significant obstacle faced by non-traditional presidents. As a result, the presidents had to take measures to prove themselves to the academic community. Each group recognized that the presidents—for the most part—were able to overcome this obstacle.

*Theme Four: Developing a Strong Leadership Team*

Higdon (2003) argues that while vision and leadership are important attributes for college president to have, “hiring and retaining the right senior managers is also crucial to moving the institution forward” (p. C1). Many of the respondents in this study believed there was a propensity on the part of non-traditional presidents to surround themselves with strong leadership teams. One president acknowledged this when he reflected,

I think there are several aspects of the leadership. One is internally and

I think that having built a good team and motivated them has been the
most important thing that I’ve done . . . I’ve hired or promoted the
entire cabinet since I’ve been here. We’ve built a really solid team.

Another president believed that the governing board was looking for someone
with “broad leadership skills . . . It was more of a person who had demonstrated s/he]
could work with multiple groups, could identify and hire talented people—which I think I
did here—and help lead the organization.”

Several of the presidents made it a point to recognize the importance of the chief
academic officer, one calling his CAO “my greatest asset,” and another referring to his
former CAO as a “good mentor,” and that he hired “a great new provost a year after I got
here.” One president made it clear, emphasizing the role of his leadership team, that the
initiatives he felt strongly about were a collective effort, “I had a whole agenda
ultimately, not I, but we the campus and that was very important, had a whole agenda as
to undergraduate education.”

The CAOs agreed it was important to have a solid management and academic
team working with the president, but had a slightly different perspective. One CAO noted
the president indicated he would be hiring a provost with a strong academic background,
due to a recent retirement of the former CAO, admitting that “I think he needed
somebody who had some [academic] background. I don’t know if he was advised to do
that or he just knew that he needed to.” Another CAO reflected the “happy convergence
of talents here that really permitted [the president] to be effective.” A third CAO
emphasized it was important for the president to empower the academic leader and
“make sure that person is the academic spokesperson.” One CAO emphasized not only
the importance of a strong team, but cautioned it was critically important for the president
to be able to find people on campus who know the institution and are willing to speak candidly with the president about institutional matters, those “who have a very good sense about the campus, and can play that counterpoint role to you as an outsider.”

One trustee, in particular, agreed, asking “How do you build that trust between a new leader and a significant person who can, if they are supportive of you or if they are not supportive of you, make or break your presidency?” As a result, it is important, the trustee concluded, “and I’m sorry to say this, knowing who you can trust, whose advice you can trust [is critical].” As a result, the trustee also commented that the president “engaged in conversations about the inner workings of the university” with a number of people on campus.

Governing board members also concluded it was important to have a strong leadership team for the president to work with. And all of the trustees who mentioned this aspect of the presidency believed their respective presidents had created such a team. One trustee was quick to point out that the CAO was “very important” to the president. Another trustee from the same institution said the president and the CAO had “a great team relationship.” Another trustee, in reporting that one of the first things the president had to do was to select a provost, emphasized the importance of selecting a strong academic administrator because the focus the president was on external relations, which was “what we really needed at the time.” One trustee said more than once that the ability to assemble the proper team was one of the biggest attributes the non-traditional president brought to the institution.
Each of the three groups recognized the importance of having strong leadership teams to assist the presidents in leading their institutions, and that the presidents had enough confidence in their abilities to develop strong teams.

Summary

While each group, and each individual, brought their own perspectives into the dialogue, it became clear that non-traditional presidents brought value to their institutions. For all of the groups, it was recognized and deemed important that the non-traditional president understand, appreciate, and value the missions of their respective institutions as well as the overall culture of higher education. It was also apparent that the background and experience of the non-traditional presidents, regardless of sector, prepared these individuals to deal with the complexities of leading institutions of higher learning. And while it was consistently acknowledged that non-traditional presidents face obstacles, especially in the area of faculty resistance, they were successful in generally overcoming those barriers. And there was a recognition that it was important for the non-traditional president to develop a strong management team, which the presidents did accomplish. Figure 6 on the following page summarizes the themes from each group as well as the four common themes, and Tables 1, 1a, 2, 2a, 3, and 3a in Appendix D provide a summary of group themes and key themes by participants of each group.
### President Themes

1. Enjoy leadership positions and being challenged
2. Hold an affiliation with, and have an affinity for, the institutions or have “bought into” its mission and culture
3. Believe past experiences prepared them for the challenges of leading an institution of higher learning
4. Require becoming acclimated to more deliberative decision-making processes and do not allow opposition to initiatives affect decision-making
5. Ability to establish and maintain relationships with a variety of individuals
6. Obstacles faced are more perceived than real

### Chief Academic Officer Themes

1. Important to recognize and respect culture and tradition
2. Obstacles exist and can be overcome, but non-traditional presidents must “prove” themselves
3. The previous backgrounds and experiences were valuable to non-traditional presidents
4. Delegate the “academic stuff.” Listen and learn

### Governing Board Member Themes

1. Non-traditional presidents exhibited a concern, passion, and vision for higher education and the institution
2. Being a non-traditional president was a barrier, but it was not insurmountable
3. The previous background and experiences were valuable to non-traditional presidents
4. Non-traditional presidents recognize their shortcomings and compensate by developing a strong team
5. Two common traits of non-traditional presidents: different perspective and impatience

### Common Themes

1. Non-traditional presidents understand, appreciate, and value the missions of their respective institutions
2. The past experiences of non-traditional presidents have prepared them for the challenges of leading an institution of higher learning
3. Non-traditional presidents face obstacles and barriers, but they can be successfully overcome
4. Non-traditional presidents surround themselves with a strong leadership team

*Figure 6. Summary of group themes and common themes*
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH, CONCLUSIONS

Overall Summary

Historically, it is not uncommon to have 300 or more presidential positions in institutions of higher learning open in any given year (Alton & Dean, 2002; Birnbaum, 1988; Cole, 1976; Stoke, 1959). From 1986 through 2001, there has been a significant increase in college and university presidents coming from non-traditional or non-academic backgrounds (Corrigan, 2002) as outlined by Cohen and March (1974). While, as Bornstein (2003) asserts, this is not a new phenomenon, relatively little is known about the motivations of these individuals to seek the position or their governing boards to elect them.

Many of the studies on the academic presidency have been quantitative in nature, focusing on demographic characteristics (Arman, 1986; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Ferrari, 1970; Moore, Salimbene, Marlier, & Bragg, 1983; Plotts, 1998; Wessel & Keim, 1994) such as gender, age, educational background, and career path of college and university leaders. Few studies have been qualitative, and there has been little research regarding non-traditional presidents.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain information regarding the phenomenon of non-traditional individuals acquiring positions as president of institutions of higher learning, focusing on their motivations, the types of individuals they were, how their non-traditional backgrounds benefited or encumbered their ability to successfully adapt to academia, what skills and insights they brought to their positions, any real or perceived obstacles that existed, and how these obstacles might be overcome.
Information was collected through interviews with four current or former
presidents with non-traditional backgrounds, as well as four current or former chief
academic officers and two current or former trustees from each of the institutions
associated with the presidents. This investigation was based upon, in the words of
Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), the subjective experiences of the research participants,
expert informants who shared their perspectives on the phenomenon.

Four common themes emerged from the study: (1) non-traditional presidents
understand, appreciate, and value the missions of their respective institutions; (2) the past
experiences of non-traditional presidents have prepared them for the challenges of
leading an institution of higher learning; (3) non-traditional presidents face obstacles and
barriers, but those obstacles can be successfully overcome; and (4) non-traditional
presidents surround themselves with strong leadership teams.

Research Questions

Research Question One

The first question asked about the motivations of non-traditional academic leaders
to consider assuming the position of president of a college or university. College and
university presidential careers have been viewed as an “after-the-fact invention” where
little planning by the individual results in a specified route leading to the position
(Moore, et. al., 1983). By and large, the four non-traditional presidents interviewed as
part of this study do not contradict the assertion, nor does the assertion connote negative
consequences.

All four individuals were highly motivated and developed an impressive resume
of successful leadership experiences in the private, public, or non-profit sector prior to
assuming the presidencies of their respective institutions. They enjoyed challenges, and possessed the confidence in their leadership abilities to succeed. While past successes do not necessarily translate into future achievement, two of the presidents had or have experienced successful tenures with their institutions of more than ten years at the time this research took place, and the other two individuals were both in their fifth year of service with no internal desire, or external reason, to leave. Motivations were, generally speaking, based upon past leadership experiences, service, and the intrinsic value of being professionally challenged. This is consistent with the views of James McNaughton Hester, a long-time non-traditional president at Long Island University, who was motivated by his interest in service, leadership, and making a contribution to society (cited in Bornstein, 2003).

What was initially surprising, but upon further reflection less so, was three of the four presidents had an affiliation with the school they led or currently lead: two being alumni and one having served on the institution’s governing board. As a result, there was also a personal appeal to lead the institution that transcended the professional desires and challenges associated with it. This was supported by the similar responses made by each individual, asserting that becoming a college or university president would not have entered their minds had it not been for the prior affiliation, familiarity, and affinity they had for the institution. The chief academic officers and governing board members also found that having a prior affiliation with the institution was a positive attribute, primarily because it helped acquaint—at least partially—the non-traditional president with the culture of the institution specifically, and the culture and tradition of higher education in general.
This is similar to the findings of Davies (2005), who revealed that four out of six non-traditional presidents he studied held prior affiliations with their respective institutions. Bisoux (2003) found the same with Brian Barefoot, an alumnus of Babson College in Massachusetts, who was selected to be its president in 2002. Gregorian and Martin (2004), however, observed that many new presidents are not aware of the history of the institution. Having an acquaintance with the culture and history of an institution is valuable, because Bornstein (2005) argued a major problem that exists for someone outside of academia, or who is not familiar with the institution, is fitting into its culture.

It was also interesting to observe that the two presidents who—by their own admissions and those of the CAOs—had “an agenda” were alumni of the institutions they led or are leading. Because there was not only an affinity for the school but also a deep concern on the part of both individuals to make sure their respective institutions were adhering to their missions, as viewed from their perspectives, they viewed their roles more as a “calling” or “ministry” than a “job.” So although a unique opportunity and challenge was presented to the individuals, there was also a motivation to move the institutions toward a future envisioned by them, perhaps stemming from their perceptions of the institution when they were students. The CAOs and the trustees of the two institutions viewed the motivations of these two presidents similarly, noting the long associations both individuals had with the institution and the desire to return the respective institutions to their historical roots.

Research Question Two

Research question two asked how past professional experiences of non-traditional academic leaders prepared these individuals for the position of a college or university
president. It is the general consensus of the literature that institutions of higher learning
are not recognized for being as sophisticated as business and industry in planning
leadership succession (Birnbaum, 1971; Birnbaum, 1988; Moore, et. al., 1983; Munitz,
1995). One of the dichotomies of higher education is that while it exists to prepare
students for almost every known profession, it does not provide the same type of
preparation for college presidents (Arman, 1986; Kauffman, 1980). Part of this may be,
as Dowdall (2001) and Munitz (1995) argued, that acknowledging one’s aspirations for
being a college or university president are frowned upon in some circles. On the other
hand, Barwick (2002) suggests the presidency is “unlike any other [position] in
education” (p. 8), and applicants therefore must find ways to gain a variety of experiences
to prepare themselves for the position.

Cohen and March (1974), along with Moore, Salimbene, Marlier and Bragg
(1983), believe there is little career planning on the part of either the individual or the
institution. Fisher (1984) asserts that before their appointments, most presidents know
very little about the role. However, both Reisman (1978) and Bornstein (2003) argued
that the college presidency is not a typical profession for which one can ever be
adequately prepared. Kauffman (1980) and Ross and Green (1990) refer to the position as
a temporary leadership role, not a profession. It has also been suggested there should be a
more concerted effort to train potential college and university leaders (Selingo, 2005).

Regardless of their respective backgrounds, all four individuals felt their past
experiences were of significant benefit on their journey toward becoming a college or
university president. The two individuals who had governmental experience found it to
be invaluable as they negotiated their way through the complexities of university
administration and dealing with multiple and often conflicting constituencies. Similarly, the one president who came from the non-profit health care field suggested there were marked similarities between leadership in a health care organization and working with physicians compared to heading an institution of higher learning and working with professors. The president with extensive private sector experience believed his background in running several businesses prepared him well for academic leadership.

The presidents, in addition to the general leadership skills they brought to the presidency, also had specific skill sets they found to be valuable. All four individuals had significant experience in financial matters. Considering presidents are involved so heavily with the fiscal issues of their institutions (Martin & Samels, 2004; Selingo, 2005), it is no surprise that having familiarity, and acumen, with finances would be viewed as a benefit to both the individual and the institution. Trustees in particular emphasized the financial skills the non-traditional presidents possessed.

In addition to financial prowess, two non-traditional presidents believed their backgrounds in law were of significant benefit. The trustees from the two institutions, however, were less concerned about the legal background than they were of the leadership, financial, and fundraising skills of the presidents. Governmental and non-profit backgrounds were viewed by presidents as comparable to leading institutions of higher learning, especially in dealing with multiple and conflicting demands, working with governing boards, and understanding the public policy process. The CAOs and governing board members concurred. One president brought fundraising expertise to his position as president of a private college. The CAO and both trustees from that institution emphasized this experience as being invaluable. Given the increased emphasis on the
need for fundraising skills for academic leaders (Martin & Samels, 2004; Strout, 2005), this was not surprising.

The ability to work with governing boards is a necessary skill for university leaders (Bornstein, 2003; Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1991; Selingo, 2005). The two presidents who serve or served on a governing body (one for the institution he leads and one for another institution of higher learning) believed their board experience was valuable because they developed insight into the policy-making perspective that trustees have.

In essence, these non-traditional presidents demonstrated that many of the leadership experiences and skill sets they acquired in previous positions are transferable to institutions of higher learning. Since all the presidents enjoyed being challenged, viewed the position as a way to broaden their skill sets, and had confidence in their ability to manage and lead complex organizations, this is not surprising. One could surmise that the literature is accurate in depicting there is no one best way to prepare for the academic presidency and many career routes, including non-academic ones, have resulted in successful tenures. One could also conclude that while one may not be able to prepare him or herself for the position *per se*, one can take measures to be prepared.

*Research Question Three*

The third question focused on the similarities and differences the demands of the position of college or university president are in comparison to previous positions in a non-academic setting. Fisher (1984) commented on the need for the president to be visible and in touch with the campus community, referring to this as a recognition of the "fundamental importance of people" (p. 68).
Two presidents mentioned that attending numerous on- and off-campus functions are expected of the president. One described the number of events he was invited to attend as "endless." The other president acknowledged that while the student, faculty, social, and athletic functions he attended resulted in more hours spent "working," these particular activities were not as demanding as those functions required by his previous positions. He found such activities at the university to be a necessary part of developing and maintaining relationships. Other than this expectation to attend faculty, student, fundraising, and community events, the presidents didn't express any other differences or similarities on the demands of the position. What the presidents did comment on, however, were the similarities and differences of the presidencies in comparison to their other leadership positions.

For example, the two presidents with governmental experience found leading a college or university was not altogether different than leading a governmental organization. Similarly, the one president who spent his entire career in the non-profit health care field prior to moving into higher education argued that the experiences between leading a health care organization and an institution of higher learning were parallel. The president who had no government or non-profit experience suggested one major difference he experienced was the size of his college versus the size of business organizations he had operated, the latter being smaller. Therefore, he had to adjust his management style to adapt to an organization with significantly more employees than any previous enterprise he had led in the past.

However, the biggest difference, mentioned by all four individuals, was the deliberative decision-making process in higher education and the time it took to affect
change, when compared with the private sector, non-profit sector, and—surprisingly—the public sector. As a result, non-traditional presidents had to adapt to the slower, consensus-building processes that exist in colleges and universities. Several of the presidents remarked there was a “lack of urgency” in academia. And while presidents may have found the slower decision-making process frustrating, they all appeared to recognize, and appreciate, the importance of its nature and that the decisions that were being made would be long-term in nature.

Another difference identified was that while there are aspects of institutions of higher learning that mirror businesses, the presidents recognized colleges and universities cannot be operated like businesses. On more than one occasion, each president reflected on the need to understand and appreciate the “academic side” of the equation. In fact, while there is an increasing trend in higher education to hire non-traditional presidents, to have more non-traditional presidents than traditional presidents would be a mistake, argued two presidents. This may reflect the collective feelings of presidents, CAOs, and trustees that the culture and traditions of higher education are important and need to be preserved.

Three of the four presidents specifically asserted it would be difficult to assume the position and think that it could be “run like a business.” This is surprising given the fact that oft-times education (and government) is criticized for not being operated in the same manner as a business. As one who has spent his entire career in government, the assertion by these presidents is not surprising. There are certain constraints placed upon public (governmental and educational) agencies—such as collective bargaining agreements, complying with Open Meetings acts, and responding to Freedom of
Information Act requests—that are not always placed on private organizations, especially small businesses.

Three presidents mentioned the multiple constituencies an academic president has to deal with are broader and more significant than the constituencies they dealt with in the private and public sectors. One president said he had to learn how to deal with "administrivia," when asked about the differences between his current position as president and previous positions. And some of this "administrivia," he asserted, could not be delegated. This could, however, be said for any leadership position and not necessarily limited to higher education. Having been in local government administration for almost 29 years, I have found on many occasions that there are administrative tasks, sometimes menial, that for one reason or another cannot be delegated.

Just as the presidents found their past experiences valuable as they moved into higher education, it makes sense there were similarities between their past leadership positions and being president of a college or university. But while there are similarities in leadership traits and even though skills were viewed as transferable, there are some marked differences that exist between leading an institution of higher learning and leading other types of institutions. As noted previously, the most significant adjustment that non-traditional presidents had to make dealt with the deliberative decision-making processes that exist in higher education. As a result, they had to make adjustments in their leadership styles in order to be more effective in their roles as college and university presidents.
Research Question Four

The barriers or challenges that non-traditional academic leaders found in their respective backgrounds (education and experience) that had to be overcome to effectively function as president was the emphasis of the fourth research question. No one denies that barriers and challenges exist for non-traditional presidents, the two primary obstacles being faculty and campus resistance to the non-academic (Birnbaum, 1988; Bornstein, 2003; Kauffman, 1980; Kauffman, 1982; Silber, 1988) and tradition (Buxton, Prichard & Buxton, 1976; Dorich, 1991; Kaplan, 2004; Kauffman, 1984; Stoke, 1959). Two other potential obstacles exist: the search committee (Birnbaum, 1988, Munitz, 1995; Wessel & Keim, 1994), and the candidates themselves (McKenna, 1972; Pulley, 2004). Hahn (1995) suggests the success of a college or university president is comprised of a three-legged stool (not all of which are equal): support of the governing board, faculty, and staff.

All three groups interviewed in this study verified what the research has suggested. Faculty and campus resistance does exist, and gaining credibility with those groups was necessary. Faculty and staff approach non-traditional presidents with caution. At the same time, an interesting dichotomy exists: the faculty desires an academic president, and yet when an “academic” moves to an administrative position, s/he is deemed “the enemy” (McCarthy, 2003; Tryon, 2005) or that administrators conspire against the faculty (Olson, 2005). While a CAO observed “one could argue that if you’re a first-rate scholar, you’re not going to become an administrator,” another CAO personally experienced the “us versus them” phenomenon when moving from a faculty position to an administrative one. When asked about reconciling this conflict, the CAO
commented, "what they forget about is a lot of strong academics are terrible managers or terrible organizers. They are the fuzzy-headed professor[s] who never figured out how to tie his shoelaces, that stereotype. There's some truth to that. People who live the life of the mind don't always organize the best."

Not having the appropriate academic credentials (i.e., a doctorate) is part of not having followed the traditional route to the presidency and presents limitations to potential candidates (Dowdall, 2000). This was acknowledged by two presidents, but in only one institution was a Ph.D. "required." The one president who holds the Ph.D., along with the CAO and the two trustees from that institution, insisted had he not possessed a doctorate, he would not have been considered for the position. Reflecting on this, one trustee suggested it would have "sent the wrong message" to faculty and staff. It appears to be part of the culture of that particular institution, because in the three other instances, while possessing a doctorate would have been preferred, it was not considered a prerequisite. Several trustees from different institutions mentioned the absence of a doctorate would not preclude other non-traditional candidates from being considered for the position in the future.

As noted previously, the need to become acclimated to the culture of the institution and to higher education can be viewed as a barrier. This, too, was acknowledged by respondents. However, in three instances the non-traditional president was acquainted with the institution through his prior affiliation with it. In those particular cases, such familiarity was found to be invaluable. In the fourth instance, the president had significant interaction with the higher education community, including the institution he was leading. This familiarity, coupled with the confidence that each president had in...
his ability, does not make it unexpected that they were able to adapt to the culture of the organization, although perspectives differed as to how quickly they did adapt. While it was agreed that a learning curve existed, there was a difference in how long the learning curve was, depending on whether the respondent was a president or a CAO. Not surprisingly, the CAOs viewed the learning curves of the presidents as being longer than what the presidents themselves recollected. Generally, the responses of the governing board members mirrored the presidents’ responses.

It was, however, the consensus of all individuals interviewed that the non-traditional presidents were successful in overcoming many of the obstacles faced. This success was, in part, based on the individual’s ability to work with the various constituencies and stakeholders of the institution, the fact that all four presidents embraced the missions of their respective institutions, and the demonstrated tangible successes each person brought to the institution, most notably fundraising and capital improvements. Again, given the fact that the presidents understood the value of relationship-building and were able to cultivate a solid support team, it is not unreasonable to expect most obstacles and barriers were overcome. This is not to suggest that all faculty and staff accepted the non-traditional presidents, but there was certainly a large part of the campus communities that did accept them.

Research Question Five

The fifth research question focused on how prior leadership experiences have been an asset to non-traditional academic leaders and their respective institutions. The concept of leadership has received a tremendous amount of attention during the past half-century, especially the past 10 to 15 years. While elusive, there are characteristics and
traits that the literature has found to be common among successful leaders. For any leader
the capacity to develop and maintain relationships (Blanchard, Carlos, & Randolph,
1999; Burns, 1978; Dowdall, 2000; Eckel, Hill, Green, & Mallon, 1999; Fisher, 1984;
Kouzes & Posner, 1995) is critical. In addition, leaders must define and articulate a
mission and purpose for the organization (Burns, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Heifetz, 1994). A
third aspect of leadership is mobilizing stakeholders (Fullan, 2001). Finally, the ability to
understand change and conflict is a critical characteristic of leaders (Burns, 1978; Bush,
2003; Quinn, 1996). The presidents in this study brought their own unique skill sets and
personal characteristics to their positions and to their institutions, but the four
characteristics noted in the literature were common threads.

Barrax (1985) indicates self-confidence and interpersonal and communication
skills are essential for college and university presidents. Given their backgrounds and
experiences, each president had an ability to work with a variety of individuals and to
develop and maintain relationships that equipped them to serve their positions and
institutions effectively. This was a consistent theme, not only among presidents, but also
reflected in the comments made by CAOs and trustees. As part of their leadership ability,
the presidents recognized their own shortcomings and were able to identify talent and
developed strong teams to compliment their skills and assist them in managing the
institution, especially the academic affairs. That is not to say that they relinquished
authority; the buck ultimately stopped at the president’s office.

All of the respondents asserted the non-traditional presidents either embraced the
missions of their institutions or bought into the missions in a relatively short period of
time. Two presidents who had specific agendas were found to be motivated—in no small
measure—by their strong convictions about leading their institutions back to their core missions. The CAOs and trustees of the respective institutions admired this characteristic and were emphatic about how the presidents were able to articulate the missions and move the institutions, and their stakeholders, with them.

Glover (2005) found bringing a different perspective to the institution, in the forms of “newness and enthusiasm” where characteristics of a non-traditional resident. This was the consensus among all the respondents in this study. A case can be made argued, however, that any new leader—regardless of a traditional or non-traditional background—can bring a different perspective to an organization. What differentiates the non-traditional president from the traditional president, one trustee astutely observed, is that a person from a private, non-profit, or even public background will be able to adapt more quickly to change simply because those organizations have oriented them to do so. The trustee pointed specifically to the vibrant environment from which the president had just moved. Thus, non-traditional presidents are able to adapt to change more quickly than traditional presidents.

Research Question Six

Study participants were asked to identify the advantages and disadvantages that exist by not having taken the traditional path to the position of college or university president. Some of the advantages of non-traditional presidents articulated by the three groups who participated in this study were specific to the individual. For instance, all of the respondents associated with a private institution where fundraising was important repeatedly mentioned that particular president having developed critically important relationships with the donor community or, in one instance, having repaired a damaged
relationship from a significant community philanthropist. In two other instances, the
president's political sophistication was mentioned as a key advantage to the institution.
The two presidents with law degrees mentioned the advantage of having that background,
but again, it was specific to their experiences. And several trustees mentioned the
integrity and solid personal and professional reputation of the person coming to the
institution. Having a good reputation brings credibility not only to the president, but also
to the institution. In all instances, the financial expertise in public, private and non-profit
sector was viewed as an indispensable skill set that each individual brought to the table.
The characteristics, however, do not translate from having a non-traditional background.

The most significant advantage, according to the majority of the respondents, was
the ability of the non-traditional president to bring a more global perspective to the
institution and to not be encumbered by past practices and traditions and therefore
question "the way things were done." By asking questions, the non-traditional president
encouraged the institutional players to think more deeply about why they were acting the
way they did. It was not uncommon to hear terms like "fresh views," "thinking outside
the box," "global perspective," as being descriptive of the non-traditional president. As
such, the problem-solving abilities of the individuals were viewed as improving the
problem-solving abilities of the institutions. This ability was universally described by
those interviewed as the single biggest advantage for both the individual and the
institution.

Similarly, the disadvantages mentioned were directed more at the individual and
the institution rather than the person being a non-traditional president. Knowing who to
talk to and trust within the institution was mentioned by several respondents from the
same institution. One trustee felt that the bottom-line approach in business, where cutting costs and increasing revenues might be perceived as outweighing the organization's mission, could be a disadvantage for the individual and the institution, but the trustee was speaking generally and not specific to the institution represented. Once again, however, one disadvantage to being a non-traditional president was repeatedly mentioned: the non-traditional president was not an academic and, as a result, had to work to gain credibility and acceptance by the academic community. This disadvantage was viewed as both real and significant, in that the ability of the individual to overcome faculty resistance and gain credibility could directly affect the success and effectiveness of that individual.

This primary disadvantage was not unexpected because it has been revealed throughout the literature. The findings of this study regarding both advantages and disadvantages are consistent with the research recently completed by Glover (2005), which is one of the few qualitative studies that provides a glimpse into the motivations and backgrounds of both traditional and non-traditional presidents. Glover found non-traditional presidents brought three advantages to the position: leadership ability, a different perspective, and business/external experience. Similarly, not being an academic was found to be the most significant disadvantage of being a non-traditional president.

Practical Applications

In addition to providing information regarding the phenomenon of being a non-traditional president, from a variety of perspectives, participants were also asked to reflect on the advice that could be given to someone from the non-academic setting who might consider moving into the academic arena. This was done in order to provide some
guidance to individuals considering academic leadership, which is not necessarily limited to the non-academic audience.

The last research question was asked to elicit advice from the study participants that can be given to someone who is considering making the transition from a non-academic setting to a leadership position in higher education. Birnbaum and Umbach (2002), Barrax (1985), Dowdall (2000), and Rottweiler (2005) have asserted that college and university presidents are at a significant disadvantage if they do not possess a terminal degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.). Birnbaum and Umbach, and Wessel and Keim (1994) believe academic experience in the form of teaching is desirable.

Three of the four presidents agreed with these two assertions. Not surprisingly, all four CAOs believe that had the presidents’ backgrounds included some academic experience, there would have been less of a learning curve and more acceptance on the part of the academic community. As stated earlier, in one instance, had the president not possessed a Ph.D., he would not have been considered for the position, according to all four respondents from that institution.

In addition to gaining experience in academia, several presidents suggested it was important to develop an understanding for what higher education represents in society. As part of this, presidents felt it was critical to “buy into” the mission of the institution. All four CAOs and a number of the trustees were no less emphatic about these two suggestions, noting that negative consequences for both the person and the institution could result from a lack of one or both elements. One CAO and several trustees mentioned the need for a passion or a love for education and one trustee went further to suggest the need for presidents to have a passion for being a leader.
One president insisted on taking time to get to know the stakeholders within the institution. Several trustees agreed. Another president, noting the fast pace of being in charge of an institution of higher learning, cautioned that “Being a new president is like drinking from the fire hose—the water tastes good but the volume and rate of flow are just a little more than you’re used to.” A CAO from a different institution expressed a similar view, suggesting that a person interested in higher education should be ready to accept a lot of pressure and a great diversity of issues and topics, citing the “full realm of human knowledge” represented at a college or university. These comments are consistent with the observations of McLaughlin (1996b), where she suggests that presidents must run “as fast as they can, and then pick up the pace” (p. 15).

One president stated the importance of picking a couple of themes and take measures during the course of the presidency to develop and implement them. Echoing this philosophy, another president referenced a series of guiding principles that he developed and used to assist the governing board and the institution’s administrative team in making decisions.

Unlike the counsel of Fisher (1984), it was noted repeatedly by several trustees and one CAO the importance of finding at least one person within the institution who would speak candidly to the president, whose advice and perspective could be trusted, and who could serve as a sounding board to the president. While none of the presidents articulated this concern, others believed being able to “vent” with someone was a critical element to the success of the president.

Another CAO suggested it would be wise to talk with other college presidents, traditional and non-traditional, as well as CAOs, about the nature and intricacies of
higher education. The CAO also advised attending one or two higher education conferences to become acquainted with the field might be something a person should do if he or she is considering a move into higher education. And one trustee indicated a person should not discount or underrate the experiences they have had that have not been in higher education, especially if those experiences have involved fundraising. Another trustee agreed, stating it was important to look at past experiences, talents, and skill sets to determine if a match existed.

The institutions in this study represented a range of the 1994 Carnegie-classified institutions. While it would be expected that a doctoral/research university would be interested in finding a president with strong academic skills and a high record of scholarship, in only one instance did a trustee acknowledge that the reputation of an individual was important and how it entered into that person's thought process when it came to making a decision. Even in that case, the desired reputation did not necessarily mean an academic reputation. It was surprising that only one trustee made an admission that it was important for the president to bring a national presence to the institution, since it is generally a major consideration when decisions on presidents are made (Greenwood & Ross, 1996). Other trustees acknowledged the reputation one brings to a position is important, but they mentioned it in terms of the need for an individual to bring a high degree of ethics and integrity to the position, not necessarily an academic reputation.

Opportunities for Future Research

While there is a significant amount of study that has taken place on the academic presidency, there remain a number of opportunities for future research. In no particular order, the following suggestions offer several potential areas of research.
First, this study involved interviews with three different groups: non-traditional presidents, chief academic officers, and governing board members. Three other groups were not included in the study: presidents who have followed the traditional path, faculty members from institutions with presidents who have not taken the traditional path, and consultants from executive search firms retained to recruit college and university presidents. Conducting a similar study to obtain views from these groups would provide additional information and might help quantify the results of this study. The study could examine the views of traditional presidents and faculty regarding non-traditional presidents. It could also provide insight into whether executive search firms would consider recommending a non-traditional candidate to their clients, or whether there are situations that the college or university faces where the appointment of a non-traditional president might be beneficial.

Second, there little in the way of qualitative research related to understanding why presidents with traditional academic backgrounds aspire to become presidents. Birnbaum (1988), Cohen and March (1974), Moore, et. al. (1983), and others assert that it is more accident than planning that college and university presidents emerge. A qualitative study could be conducted with traditional presidents to determine their motivations and how they perceived their education and experience benefited them. Because the sample size is not as limited as that of the non-traditional president, there are opportunities to make broader generalizations about motivations in general.

Third, it might be interesting to compare and contrast the careers of traditional and non-traditional presidents and the average tenures and successes of each. As mentioned previously, two of the four presidents had or have tenures extending beyond a
decade. This does not imply that traditional presidents are less successful, because there are plenty of examples of presidents bred in academia who have been successful and have enjoyed long careers at one institution. However, with the tenure of all college and university presidents hovering around just under six years (Corrigan, 2002) and with a decrease in qualified individuals seeking the position (Fain, 2004; Kelly, 2002), there is increasing concern about the toll that is taken, and such a study could provide additional insight into the demands of the position and whether a background outside of academia can better prepare a person to handle those demands. It might also make for an interesting study to know how the performance of non-traditional presidents differs from those individuals who come from a traditional background.

Fourth, one of the presidents in this study asserted that non-traditional presidents are more inclined to take risks because they are less concerned about their next job being in academia. To some extent this was demonstrated by the two non-traditional presidents who would not have considered the positions had they not been alumni of their respective institutions. Looking at the careers of non-traditional presidents following their academic service could further validate this assertion and would provide additional information about the motivations of non-traditional presidents.

Finally, leadership styles differ from person to person. Performing a qualitative study that compares and contrasts the leadership styles of two presidents in the same institution could make for a valuable learning experience, regardless of whether they came from the traditional or non-traditional path.
Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions that one can draw based upon the research that was conducted. First, it is apparent the individuals who took the non-traditional path to the college or university presidency are leaders who enjoy challenging themselves personally and professionally. They have confidence in their past experiences and abilities and are not afraid to undertake the responsibilities of leading a complex organization. All were experienced managers and leaders prior to becoming a president. This finding is consistent with that of Wessel and Keim (1994), who found some institutions of higher learning bypass academic experience if a candidate has demonstrated considerable and successful administrative experience.

The individuals in this study had a variety of experiences and took different career paths to the position. All three major sectors—private, public, and non-profit—were represented in the backgrounds of the four presidents. There were aspects of each sector that the individuals found valuable. While the premise of a study by Glover (2005) was different than the questions posed in this research, non-traditional presidents and their backgrounds did comprise a small portion of his analysis. The results of this study are consistent with Glover’s findings in that the prior experiences of these individuals were very beneficial as they embarked on leading institutions of higher education.

However, there is no question the most valuable skill that non-traditional presidents brought to their institutions was financial acumen, especially given the significant challenge of coping with decreasing resources and increasing demand for accountability. Each of the four individuals had significant experience in fiscal management, and each found that background to be essential in their roles. As part of this
skill set, it is also apparent that proficiency in fundraising is becoming more critical and demands more time from the president’s office. This is true primarily for presidents of private colleges and universities, but it is also becoming more critical for public institutions as public funding becomes increasingly scarce.

A second critical skill is the cultivation of relationships, with faculty and staff, student, governing board, alumni, donor community, and any other institutional stakeholder. The presidents in this study demonstrate an ability to work with a variety of constituencies and have an innate ability to develop and maintain relationships. They have developed strong teams to support them, and are not afraid of acknowledging that their staff as a key ingredient in the success of the institution.

Hiring a leader is the most critical function of any governing board, whether private, public, or nonprofit. While the skills and abilities brought to any institution by its leader, regardless of his or her background, are important, perhaps the biggest factor that leads to successful leadership tenure is the “fit” between the institution and the chief executive. Cole (1976), McKenna (1972), and many others acknowledge this, as do the respondents in this study. Fit can be demonstrated in any number of ways, from strong fundraising skills to a fundamental and genuine belief in the core mission of the institution.

Much of what has been revealed as a result of this research confirms the findings and assertions of past studies, but given the lack of research regarding non-traditional college and university presidents, there have been new discoveries. The most significant findings of this study are:
1. There is a relationship between prior affiliation with the institution and the non-traditional president leading the institution.

2. The past experiences of the non-traditional president are no less valuable, and in many respects are more valuable, than that of the traditional president, especially in the area of budgeting and finance.

3. In addition to a different point of view, non-traditional presidents bring a “sense of urgency” and “measurables” to the campus community.

4. Leadership skills from the public, private, and non-profit sectors are transferable to higher education.

5. There are more similarities than differences between public/non-profit administration and higher education administration.

6. Traditional institutions of higher education cannot be operated entirely like a private business, and individuals with non-traditional backgrounds who are considering a move into higher education believing that such institutions can be run like private businesses, will in all likelihood fail. That is to say, it is important to recognize the “bottom line” must be viewed within the context of the institution’s mission. In addition, the deliberative and inclusive decision-making processes that exist in higher education need to be respected and accommodated by their leaders.

7. While barriers and obstacles do exist for non-traditional presidents, they can be successfully overcome.
8. Non-traditional presidents surround themselves with strong leadership teams.

9. It is critically important that the person and the institution are a "fit" for one another, with the person embracing the mission, culture, and tradition of the institution.

Table 4 in Appendix E provides a comparison of prior research on previous research about presidents of institutions of higher learning with the findings and conclusions of this study.

Overall, college and university presidents who come from a non-traditional background have demonstrated an ability to become an integral part of the academic community. They have done so because of their leadership skills, the intrinsic motivation they have in testing their capabilities, and because they have a belief in the core missions of their respective institutions. They thrive on being challenged. They understand the nature of leadership and have adapted their leadership skills to acclimate themselves to the nuances of higher education, without sacrificing their fundamental leadership ethos. Their talents were acknowledged by those who work most closely with them: the chief academic officers and governing board members of the institutions. This acknowledgement further affirmed both their inherent and cultivated gifts and skills.

Presidents play a crucially important role in the growth and development of colleges and universities. Given the significant demands being placed on institutional leaders and the increasingly complex organizations that colleges and universities have become, it is likely to see more talent from outside of academia being tapped to lead institutions of higher education in the future.
REFERENCES


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*Journal of College Student Development, 32, 406-415.*
APPENDIX A

Consent to Participate in Study
You are invited to participate in a study about "Non-traditional Paths to Presidencies of Institutions of Higher Learning in Michigan." The study is being conducted by Daryl J. Delabbio, a doctoral student in the higher education leadership doctoral program at Western Michigan University, under the direction of Dr. Van E. Cooley, his dissertation chair.

The following information is being provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in this study as well as to inform you that you are free to decide not to participate in it, or to withdraw at any time, without affecting your relationship with the researchers or Western Michigan University.

The purpose of the study is to understand the motivations and attributes or characteristics of individuals who have been appointed presidents of institutions of higher education (community college, college, university) in Michigan who do not have the traditional academic background or career path (professor, department chair, dean, vice president or provost, president). If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed for between 60 and 120 minutes. Audio recording equipment will be used to ensure accuracy of the information received and written transcripts of all interviews will be produced. You may request the interviewer to turn off the audio recorder at any time during the interview.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time that you are participating. I will be happy to share our findings with you after the research is completed. With a limited number of participants that will be included in the study, contextual information may identify you as a participant. Keeping data confidential is the norm, but if you would like, you can provide written permission for the researcher to use your name in the study. If you do provide such permission, it is acknowledged that your comments may be made public, due to the nature of the dissertation dissemination process. However, should any participant request confidentiality, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and your identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher. This will be done by either identifying you by the use of a pseudonym or in generic terms (i.e., “According to one President . . .,” “Three of the Chief Academic Officers acknowledged that . . .,” etc.).
The written transcripts will be maintained in a locked file cabinet in the residence of the researcher for a period of one year following the completion of the interviews. The written transcripts will be stored on the campus of Western Michigan University for a period of at least three years. The audio recordings will be destroyed once written transcripts have been completed and once you are confident that the written summaries accurately represent your comments. There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study.

The expected benefits associated with your participation are: 1) the information and knowledge to be gained about the experiences in being appointed to a presidency of an institution of higher learning; 2) the ability to share such information with students and practitioners of leadership, especially in the area of higher education leadership; and 3) the opportunity for the researchers to participate in a qualitative study. There are no other foreseen benefits to the researcher.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact the student investigator, Daryl J. Delabbio, at (616) 336-3516 (office), (616) 866-0479 (home), or by email at ddelabbio@aol.com or daryl.delabbio@kentcounty.org. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269-387-8293) or the Vice President for Research (269-387-8298) if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep for your own records.

Participant Date

Consent obtained by: Interviewer/Student Investigator Date
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocols
Interview Protocol - Presidents

Project: Non-traditional Paths to Presidencies of Institutions of Higher Learning in Michigan

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:

Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. I would like to record this interview so that the study can be as accurate as possible, and I would like to remind you that during any point during the course of the interview, you may request that the tape recorder be turned off.

Questions that the subjects will be asked include:

1. What motivated you to consider accepting the position of president of ____________?

2. How have your past professional experiences prepared you for this position?

3. How similar and different are the demands of this position in comparison to your previous positions in a non-academic setting?

4. What barriers or challenges have you found in your background (education and experience) that you have had to overcome to succeed in your current position?

5. How have your prior leadership experiences been an asset to you and your institution?

6. What advantages and/or disadvantages, if any, exist by not having taken the traditional path to the position?

7. What advice would you give someone who is considering making the transition from a non-academic setting to a leadership position in higher education?

Thank you for participating in this interview. May I contact you for follow up interviews or to clarify some of your responses?
Interview Protocol – Chief Academic Officers (Academic Vice President/Provost)

Project: Non-Traditional Paths to Presidencies of Institutions of Higher Learning in Michigan

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:

Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. I would like to record this interview so that the study can be as accurate as possible, and I would like to remind you that during any point during the course of the interview, you may request that the tape recorder be turned off.

Questions that the subjects will be asked include:

1. From the perspective of an Academic Vice President or Provost, what barriers, obstacles, or challenges did President ____________ face as a non-traditional candidate?

2. From the perspective of an Academic Vice President or Provost, how have the prior leadership experiences of President ____________ been of value to the individual and the institution?

3. From the perspective of an Academic Vice President or Provost, what advantages and disadvantages, if any, exist by this person not having taken the traditional path to the position?

4. What advice can be given to someone who is considering making the transition from a non-academic setting to a leadership position in higher education?

Thank you for participating in this interview. May I contact you for follow up interviews or to clarify some of your responses?
Interview Protocol – Governing Board Member

Project: Non-Traditional Paths to Presidencies of Institutions of Higher Learning in Michigan

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:

Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. I would like to record this interview so that the study can be as accurate as possible, and I would like to remind you that during any point during the course of the interview, you may request that the tape recorder be turned off.

This information will be disseminated in a dissertation.

Questions that the subjects will be asked include:

1. As a member of the governing board of ____________________, what factors led you to consider appointing ____________________ as president, given the fact that s/he was not an individual with a traditional academic background?

2. From the perspective of a governing board member, what barriers, obstacles, or challenges did President __________ face as a non-traditional candidate?

3. From the perspective of a governing board member, how have the prior leadership experiences of President __________ been of value to the individual and the institution?

4. From the perspective of a governing board member, what advantages and disadvantages, if any, exist by this person not having taken the traditional path to the position?

5. What advice can be given to someone who is considering making the transition from a non-academic setting to a leadership position in higher education?

Thank you for participating in this interview. May I contact you for follow up interviews or to clarify some of your responses?
APPENDIX C

Email Correspondence/Telephone Script to Potential Participants
Dear __________:

My name is Daryl Delabbio and I am inviting you to participate in a study on non-traditional paths to presidencies of institutions of higher learning in Michigan. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership through Western Michigan University. I am the student investigator in this study (616-336-3516, daryl.delabbio@kentcounty.org or ddelabbio@aol.com). The supervising professor is Dr. Van E. Cooley (231-387-3891, van.cooley@wmich.edu).

You are being invited to volunteer as a participant because you are the president or former president of a college/university that does not have a traditional academic background, current/former chief academic officer (vice-president/provost), or current/former member of the governing body at your institution, based upon information received from the website of (name of institution). If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 60-to 120-minute interview session at your institution or an off-campus site of your preference where you will be asked questions regarding your observations about the non-traditional (i.e., non-academic) path taken by the president and the benefits and or challenges associated with not having an academic background. You may also be asked to participate in follow-up conversations, if clarification of your initial interview is necessary. Email may also be used to contact you throughout the study, however clarification of information will be done by telephone, unless you have a private email account that you are willing to use for this purpose.

This study will be restricted to universities in Michigan. Keeping data confidential is the norm, but if you would like, you can provide written permission for the researcher to use your name in the study. However, if you or any participant objects to his/her name being used, your interview responses will be strictly confidential. This means that your name will not appear on any papers on which information is recorded. Respondents will be identified using either pseudonyms or in generic terms (e.g., “As one President explained . . .”), and other identifying information will be masked.

I will be contacting you within the next week to discuss your possible voluntary participation in this study. If you decide you are interested in learning more about the study, please feel free to respond to this email. I will follow up this email with a telephone call to schedule a meeting with you to discuss in more detail this study and to provide you with a written consent form for your review. If, after our meeting, you consent to participate in this study, I will ask for your signature on the consent form. A follow-up meeting can be scheduled for the interview. You will also receive the interview questions in advance so you can be prepared to respond to them, should you decide to participate.

If you have any questions, you may contact either me or Dr. Cooley, as indicated above. Thank you for considering possible participation in this study. The results of this study may be of interest to administrators in higher education as well as governing board members and may be beneficial in assisting others in understanding the recruitment and selection process for college and university presidents.

Daryl J. Delabbio
APPENDIX D

Themes by Group and Distribution of Themes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds previously enjoyed leadership positions in other professions and enjoy being challenged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds held an affiliation with, and have an affinity for, the schools they led or are leading or have “bought into” the mission and culture of the institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds found that their past experiences, regardless of whether they came from the private, public, or non-profit sectors, prepared them for the challenges of leading an institution of higher learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds have had to become acclimated to the more deliberative decision-making processes that exist in higher education and do not allow real or potential opposition to initiatives and change affect their decision-making or policy recommendations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Presidents with non-traditional backgrounds have an ability to establish and maintain relationships with a variety of individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>The obstacles faced by non-traditional presidents are not insurmountable and may be more perceived than real.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1a

**Distribution of Themes – Presidents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<td><strong>Theme 1: Strong Prior Leadership/Enjoy Challenge</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An intriguing or unique idea</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2: Prior Connection with Institution</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior affiliation</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Embraced mission</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Theme 3: Previous Experiences Valuable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 4: Decision-Making Process Different</strong></td>
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<td>Different perspective</td>
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<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of urgency</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had an agenda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not concerned about next position</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 5: Relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with board</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with faculty/ staff</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for shared governance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 6: No Insurmountable Obstacles</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being an academic</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More perceived than real</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial faculty resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstacles overcome</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>It is important to recognize and respect that organizational culture and the tradition of higher education exist and matter.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Obstacles exist and can be overcome, but non-traditional presidents must “prove” themselves in order to successfully do so.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>The previous backgrounds and experiences were valuable to non-traditional presidents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>It is critical for non-traditional presidents to delegate the “academic stuff.” It is important for them to listen and learn.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2a

**Distribution of Themes – Chief Academic Officers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chief Academic Officer</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Culture/Traditions Exist and Matter</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/tradition important</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for academics</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for shared governance</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2: Non-Academics Must Prove Themselves</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No academic experience</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Resistance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining credibility</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Became comfortable in role</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning curve</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty acceptance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 3: Previous Experience Valuable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politically savvy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarities of past positions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to establish relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different perspective</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 4: Delegating, Listening, Learning are Critical</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have strong team</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to delegate</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>The non-traditional candidate elected as president exhibited a concern, passion, and vision for higher education in general and the institution specifically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Being a non-traditional president was a barrier, but it was not insoluble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>The previous background and experiences were valuable to non-traditional presidents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Non-traditional presidents recognize their shortcomings and compensate by developing a strong team, especially the chief academic officer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Two common traits of non-traditional presidents: different perspective and impatience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3a

*Distribution of Themes – Governing Board Members*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trustee</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Theme 1: Concern, Passion, and Vision**
- Institutional mission  | X |
- Taking institution to next level  | X |
- “Fit”  | X |

**Theme 2: Ability to Overcome being a Non-Academic**
- Not an academic  | X |
- Gain credibility/respect  | X |
- Accepted/overcame obstacles  | X |

**Theme 3: Previous Experiences Valuable**
- Past experience helpful  | X |
- Fundraising  | X |
- Ability to establish relationships  | X |
- Politically astute  | X |
- Bright, intelligent, quick learn  | X |

**Theme 4: Development of a Strong Team**
- Have strong team  | X |
- Willingness to learn  | X |

**Theme 5: Different Perspective and Impatience**
- Different perspective  | X |
- Global perspective  | X |
- Impatience with processes  | X |

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Table 3a

*Distribution of Themes – Governing Board Members (continued)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trustee</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Concern, Passion, and Vision</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional mission</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking institution to next level</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fit”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2: Ability to Overcome Being a Non-Academic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not an academic</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain credibility/respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted/overcame obstacles</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 3: Previous Experiences Valuable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past experience helpful</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to establish relationships</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politically astute</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright, intelligent, quick learn</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 4: Development of a Strong Team</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have strong team</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to learn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 5: Different Perspective and Impatience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different perspective</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global perspective</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impatience with processes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

Comparison of Delabbio Research with Literature and Previous Research
Table 4

Comparison of Delabbio Research with Literature and Previous Research (e.g., Arman, 1986; Davies, 2005; Glover, 2005; Plotts, 1988; Rottweiler, 2005; Salimbene, 1982; Wessel & Keim, 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous Research on Presidents</th>
<th>Delabbio Research (2006) on Non-Traditional Presidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate necessary</td>
<td>Doctorate preferred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic experience necessary</td>
<td>Academic experience preferred; experience outside academia is just as valuable, if not more so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-traditional presidents offer a more global perspective to the institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-traditional presidents bring a “sense of urgency” and “measurables” to an academic community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for someone from a different institution (external candidate)</td>
<td>By definition, a non-traditional president is not an internal candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most presidents know little about the role prior to appointment; difficult to prepare for position</td>
<td>Cannot be prepared for position, but can prepare for it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance from the academic community is a barrier</td>
<td>Resistance from academic community is a barrier, but it can be successfully overcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditions and culture are important and are embraced by academic leaders</td>
<td>Traditions and culture can be embraced by non-traditional leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-traditional presidents have a concern/vision for higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-traditional presidents have prior affiliation with the institutions and have an intrinsic motivation and vision to return the institutions they serve to their academic roots</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 4 (continued)

Comparison of Delabbio Research with Literature and Previous Research (e.g., Arman, 1986; Davies, 2005; Glover, 2005; Plotts, 1988; Rottweiler, 2005; Salimbene, 1982; Wessel & Keim, 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous Research on Presidents</th>
<th>Delabbio Research (2006) on Non-Traditional Presidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similarities exist between public/non-profit administration and academic administration</td>
<td>There are more similarities than than differences between public/non-profit administration and academia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic institutions are big businesses and should be operated like businesses</td>
<td>Some aspects of traditional academic institutions should be operated like a business, but they are “different”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong leaders surround themselves with strong leadership teams</td>
<td>Strong leaders surround themselves with strong leadership teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships are critical to a leader’s success</td>
<td>Relationships are critical to an academic leader’s success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-traditional presidents have achieved success in prior positions and enjoy being leaders</td>
<td>Non-traditional presidents are willing to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-traditional presidents must find individuals who they can trust and who are willing to “speak to power”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial acumen and the ability to raise funds are becoming increasingly important for college/university presidents</td>
<td>Without financial and fundraising skills, it will be difficult for someone seeking a position as college or university president</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F

Approval of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB)
This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “Non-traditional Paths to Presidencies of Institutions of Higher Learning in Michigan” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: September 8, 2006