

# **Navigating Meaning: How College Leadership Manage Influential Stakeholder Assumptions**

**Suzanne Epstein  
New York City College of Technology  
City University of New York**

*The focus of the present study is the description and stories college presidents use about the student population when communicating with certain influential stakeholders. There were three significant findings in this study. The first finding was the tension and duality experienced by the presidents in their role as liaison between the stakeholders and the university. The second finding revealed a diversity paradigm that is different from the historic understanding of diversity in the student body. The last finding demonstrates a shift in the American Dream narrative and discusses the implications of that shift for higher education nationwide.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century student is a complex construction of different narratives, parameters, beliefs and cultures. It is not a simple task for a college president to advance a singular and consistent picture of such a multitude of highly differentiated individuals. It is even more difficult for college presidents to communicate a clear and engaging portrayal of their students to stakeholders who do not have daily access to the contemporary student body. In studying the communication of a college president with certain stakeholders, a broader understanding of the organizational identity comes through as “embedded” within different membership and meanings (Scott & Lane, 2000). The images and descriptions college presidents use in communicating with stakeholders allows us to see what part the students will play in the president’s thinking about the future of the institution. This study’s purpose is to fill in the current gap in the understanding of how college presidents think about, portray and communicate the undergraduate student when developing, presenting and creating followership among stakeholders. These descriptions, when examined through this research, enhance our knowledge about communicating the current undergraduate student to stakeholders.

The findings of this study will enrich the future preparation of college and upper administrative leadership by adding definition and knowledge about the ways in which leadership publically defines the student. The study contributes to current educational leadership by creating a better understanding of the mechanisms behind narration, identity, demographics and trends.

The focus of the present study is the description and stories college presidents use about the student population when communicating with certain influential stakeholders, such as the trustees, alumni and funders. The research examines themes and patterns in the portrayal of students in such communications in order to highlight the process from the presidential viewpoint, as to how and for what purpose they incorporate student descriptions in their discourse and communication.

## Research Questions

The connection between a president's communication, as reflected in speeches, interviews and written documents to various stakeholders, and the role student description plays in this communication is the basis for the following research questions:

*RQ1. How do college presidents portray students in their communication to different stakeholders?*

*RQ2. From these portrayals, what descriptions and themes emerge about students in presidential communication?*

## College Presidents

Until recently, much of the research on college presidents has been in line with traditional leadership studies. However, in the 1990s, studies in higher education began to examine the relationship between leadership and followership. In 2006 the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) stated that faculty, trustees and the president shared the responsibility of governing the university (AAUP, 2006). They concluded that the president's responsibilities are to define and reach institutional goals, take administrative actions and also to "operate the communications system that links the components of the academic community" (AAUP, 2006, p. 138).

In contrast to management leadership, college leadership involves conceptualizing and communicating purpose, vision and meaning (Bolman & Deal, 2008). In much the same way, college presidents need to give speeches, create a vision for the future of the institution and give meaning to the values of the institution. The question of governance is quite different in an educational institution. The decentralized, consensus-driven decision-making, and the autonomous nature of academic institutions, create a complicated environment in which a leader must perform. Governing in these conditions can be a lengthy process and one that has many pitfalls (Neumann & Bensimon, 1990; Milligan, 2010).

Colleges and their trustees will often choose presidents at specific moments in an institution's life, looking for a specific approach to leadership that is particularly desired for that moment in the college's history (Milligan, 2010). In addition to traditional leadership skills, college presidents must also have skills in fundraising, creating followership, knowledge of effective collective bargaining and the ability to establish a strong consensus around his or her vision for the future — and to top it all off, must be a noted scholar in their field. In short, they must navigate political agendas, be able to advance strategic plans and address major issues confronting their institutions (Bicknell, 2008; Bolman & Deal 2008; Milligan, 2010; Kezar, 2008).

Two areas of leadership studies that are pertinent to understanding the way in which college leaders communicate and lead their constituencies are authentic leadership and servant leadership. Much of the literature on authentic leadership reflects recurrent themes of self-construction and self-awareness as a baseline characteristic of the construct. This premise is not typical of more traditional forms of leadership. Traditional leaders are motivated by self-enhancement and self-protection goals whereas more authentic leaders are motivated by self-improvement and self-regulation (Gardner et al., 2005 as cited by Meecham, 2007). Henderson (1998) argued that the educational leader's ability to develop and maintain organizational systems and policies consistent with authentic behavior go beyond defining the leader; they define the organization itself. Servant leadership, i.e. the leader who is called to service on behalf of a particular group, is a form of leadership that is oriented towards the stakeholder within a community or organization. Greenleaf described a servant leader as one who serves first and leads second (Greenleaf, 1977).

### *College Leadership and Framing*

Transformative leadership theory is often linked to the study of academic leadership. This theory is associated with studies on leadership and emotions, relationships, ethics, long-term goals and visionary framing. A study of nine college presidents reported that these leaders framed the meaning of their communication in three different ways: visionary framing, step-by-step framing, and connective framing

(Eddy, 2002). Visionary framing uses forward-leaning messages and metaphors. The step-by-step frame emphasizes the immediate and daily tasks at hand and the connective frame highlights dialogue and collaborative learning (Eddy, 2002). Each one of these frames must have an audience to work with and presuppose a followership relationship exists.

Even though a college president must be a leader for all members of the college environment he or she reports only to the board of trustees (Bicknell, 2008). Yet the college president must serve as a liaison between the board of trustees and the faculty as well as the other members of the college community, and this can be a challenge, as these constituencies are often at odds. Boards of trustees are not involved in the many details of governance in an educational institution, but for the president the board has significant and sometimes final influence over long term planning and policy (Cohen & Brawer, as cited in Bicknell, 2008).

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design is the basis of inquiry, with a combination of content analysis and in-depth interviews using a narrative inquiry framework. In order to study a problem or phenomena the qualitative researcher collects the data in the natural setting and does inductive analysis to identify emerging patterns and their significance (Creswell, 2007). Nine college presidents from the City University of New York (CUNY) were interviewed about their views and the choices they make about student imagery and student life as they talk with stakeholders in the college community. The presidents were asked open-ended questions and allowed to elaborate in any way they desire.

### **Background on Participants**

For the remainder of this article the participants will be named as college presidents or participants or cited by their coded name. The backgrounds of the college presidents, though varied, did have several common elements that give an experiential context to the data collected for this study (See Appendix A, Table 1 and Figures 1-3). Their ages ranged from 55 to 68 years ( $m = 63.6$ ). Six participants were male and three were female. Six of the presidents actively pursued the college presidency as a career goal, whereas the other three came to the position without career planning: "A goal was to be in Higher Education Administration after my banking career. But I did not think about a college presidency. I was tapped by headhunters." Three college presidents saw their own student experience as very different from those of the current students. The others, who had come through the public university system, described their student experiences as similar to those of the students in their current institution. One difference between the college presidents' student experience and that of their current student body was the fact that eight out of the nine presidents were in college during the sixties and the "times were different when they were students." Three presidents mentioned the Vietnam War as an important backdrop to their undergraduate experience. Another mentioned segregation and bans on interracial dating as different from current social mores. Six out of the nine presidents explicitly expressed their belief in the CUNY mission, while the three others implied deep commitment to the University as a whole. This belief in the university's mission presented itself in different ways for different presidents.

In almost all of the interviews the presidents' narratives emerged as nonlinear, coming out at spontaneous moments. This non-linear response format allowed for a more direct link to the college presidents' spontaneous and un-predetermined reflection on the students and their stories and descriptions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narratives in each interview were a combination of anecdotal stories and detailed narratives that (a) fit a more traditional narrative structure of a beginning, middle, and end and (b) that employed traditional elements such as character, problem, and resolution.

The participants told stories that highlighted a traditional view of the undergraduate student (e.g., the American Dream stories), along with more traditional academic success stories. They told stories of their own student experience that fit into the traditional mode of learning and growing as a student. However, there was also a contrasting theme of a non-traditional type of story. Presidents told stories of global circumstances that changed how they and the institution should see and understand the current

undergraduate student. These stories described unique situations in which the student and his or her particular achievement did not fit into a particular student grouping. For example,

We had a student, an Indian student this past semester. A brilliant young woman. What I found so amazing is she could pick up the phone and she'd be talking to her parents in her, in Tamil, in her native language; she was completely at ease in two different cultures. If you're still living at home, rather than — Let's say you leave that Indian family and you go to Yale; you're trying very hard to be American, and you're almost trying to pass, get beyond, transcend that culture. [Douglas]

## **COLLEGE PRESIDENT AS LEADER**

The college presidents chose the following adjectives to describe themselves as leaders: Amazed, harried, bewildered, dismay, surprise, student centered, risk taker, stabilizing in rough times, available to community, soft spoken, and shy. Four of the college presidents described themselves as consensus-driven leaders and three as being student-centered. Five of them exhibited elements of authentic and visionary leadership traits in their stories of themselves as students. Appendix A, Table 2 provides an overview of the thematic categories that emerged through responses to this question.

### **Going Against the Grain**

Across the stories CUNY surfaced as a non-traditional university, which in turn lent itself to a theme of non-traditional leaders as - college president. In five of the nine presidents' stories of their own student experience or self-description as a leader, *Going against the grain* was a repeated theme.

They were going to wait until all the legal proceedings, before we would proceed — I knew that would be years. I knew I could never succeed as president if it didn't happen. So I went over a lot of people's heads to get that done. [Douglas]

In another cluster of stories combined with anecdotal statements, the college presidents highlighted their own student experience and reflected upon how that experience influenced their choices or actions in their current positions. Across the different stories, these actions flowed into three leadership acts: (a) leading against common opinion, (b) moving forward, changing the culture and opinion of the college, and (c) developing student and faculty trust. A subtheme of Persistence was often intertwined with the *Going against the grain* theme. The presidents chose stories of their student experience that illustrated a moment in which they learned how not to accept the common opinion around them at the time or to accept defeat. Charles related a defining moment in his childhood:

I was carrying groceries at a supermarket in Harlem and I was asked, taking this man's box of groceries to his home and when I got to the — walked four or five blocks, we go to the third floor, put the groceries on the table — and he gave me a nickel as a tip. Now, [you] normally get 25 cents or 30 cents. And I took the nickel and I could've put it in my pocket, but I — I decided to put it back in his hand and say to him, "You probably need it more than I do." Because if I accepted that nickel, then I would've accepted someone else's interpretation of my value and my worth. [Charles]

### **Momentum**

The college presidents' reflections on their own leadership displayed a sense of momentum and of continually moving forward. The *Momentum* theme was repeated often among the presidents and spanned across several student stories as well as the stories the presidents told of when they were students. This overlap in the stories demonstrated that the college community was moving forward, that the presidents

chose to have a lot happening at once and that it was important to give the campus community and stakeholders a sense that things were moving forward. As Douglas stated:

So it's a very active place. So, those are all the things I just figured we had to do to make this the kind of place that faculty would no longer say, "Well, we're not a real university. But I believe you always have to have a lot of things happening. You've got to feel things are really moving forward. [Douglas]

### **Belief Systems and Presidential Goal**

The third thematic category that emerged from the stories participants told about themselves as leaders was *Belief Systems*. Directly or indirectly, each college president described their belief in the university's mission or that of their institution. They also expressed a belief, either explicitly or implicitly through the stories they told, in this being a complex and international world and claimed that this belief had implications for their leadership. The presidents defined the global world as the environment their students navigated as undergraduates or as protagonists in the college presidents' stories. While describing their students' global experiences, the presidents seemed to be searching for how they themselves would preside over this new and complex world. These themes appeared as the presidents described their goals as being to help students become whole students in a global society or to make their institutions student-centered. As Bonnie stated:

The expectations are still the same for our students as they were for those students that had historically come to college campus, but I see that we have to – as an institution and as a country – accept our global position in the world. [Bonnie]

## **COMMUNICATING STUDENTS TO STAKEHOLDERS**

The presidents were asked how they communicated the stories or lives of their students to stakeholders in the college. This question was very much a thesis question as it specifically targets how presidents use their stories and representations of the current undergraduate student to communicate to the major stakeholders (e.g., trustees, funders and alumni) in their institutions. The stakeholders, as defined by the presidents, fell into three main categories: college fund boards, alumni and different sponsoring groups such as politicians and local leaders. The responses to this particular question were filled with information, consideration and strategy as all participants reflected upon the types of stories they tell, what purpose these stories serve and what challenges are faced when communicating the current student body to stakeholders (see Appendix A, Table 3).

### **Alumni Bias**

Four out of the nine presidents felt that they used story telling more often when communicating with alumni. They also stated that they chose specific student stories to help them counter two major preconceptions that the Alumni had about the current undergraduate student. The Alumni assumed that the current undergraduate students were not up to the institution's academic requirements. The alumni also assumed that they had very little in common with the current urban student body.

I had to spend a lot of time convincing them that the students caliber — [was] equal to them — and that the reputation of the institution would be safe. Now that's a particular alumni argument any urban college president has to deal with. [Clara]

The presidents provided different strategies for demonstrating the talent and intelligence of the students. The college presidents often prioritized student academic achievement levels over financial need or ethnic background.

To address the second apprehension of the alumni regarding the difference in ethnic backgrounds, the presidents chose student stories that had strong emotional content. Eight of the nine presidents endorsed a strategy of demonstrating through student stories the similarity between the alumni and the current student body, despite the ethnic differences. Two presidents commented on how persuasive an argument it was to make to the alumni.

What was really compelling was when the alumni saw these students; although they may be a different religion, they saw themselves. [Clara]  
We bring them here; we say, ‘They’re sitting where you sat — they’re going through their journey just as you did 20 years ago. [Edgar]

The use of story to demonstrate similarity between current undergraduate students and the alumni was a theme found across both the senior colleges and the community colleges. The presidents articulated a gap and by extension, a bias in knowledge between the alumni and the current urban student. Clara stated that this was a primary goal in the choice of student stories she told to alumni groups, especially those that do not live in the urban environment. She stated her end goal as being the following: “Think about the students, they’re just like you. Their faces may be different, but they have the same story as you do.”

### **Trustees**

The presidents defined trustees of their college fund boards and state and local political leaders as the main stakeholders they communicated with about the college mission. Bonnie described politicians as important stakeholders.

And then all the politicians and public figures [laughs] who feel that they own a part of the urban City University of New York system in New York City – and they all do, of course, and are supportive of it. People have different agendas. [Bonnie]

The choice of student stories and descriptions served as an accompaniment to specific program descriptions or to contextualize data. Three out of the nine presidents had only recently begun to develop fund boards and were still refining the way in which they communicated the mission of their respective institutions. This was particularly true for the community college presidents.

Well, we have a Foundation board that we’ve developed over the years. And I guess what I try to tell them about our students are that they are the backbone of New York City, and that they are important, that community colleges need to be supported. And that the students who come here are talented; they may have not been successful in high school, but this gives them a second chance. [Abigail]

Two presidents stated that the trustees needed to be reminded that the mission of the institution was first and foremost the student.

For trustees...Sometimes they need reminding-that students are why we’re here. The trustees like to see the faculty productivity and the big picture data but it is important to put a human face and a student face on that. Just to remind our trustees that we have students who are coming to college every day, going to classes — even though they’re hungry or they’re coming from a shelter...we should always have star students [to talk about]. But we have 15,000 students, and to talk about their success — that’s a quantitative exercise, that’s not a storytelling exercise. [Edgar]  
One president stated that she sought out data and stories that tell the fundamental mission of the college.

And they [students] are the people who are going to be taking care of you, as they are the nurses, they are the hotel people, they are the policemen, they are the firemen. And that you need to support them, because... the future of this city depends on them. [Abigail]

### **What is Success?**

Student and institutional financial issues were never far from the presidents' comments or stories. Almost every story started with a student who had very limited means. Two participants offered stories about homeless students and another commented on how more than a few students came to college without much to eat:

So the university set aside some money for assistance to our students who are struggling in this economy; either they've been evicted or they're in homeless shelters, they don't have enough money to put food on the table, they don't have Metrocards. [Edgar]

Many students are on the edge financially and several presidents commented on how difficult but important it was to recognize and educate these students. However in cross-referencing many of these themes the student stories showed that the "neediness" of CUNY students was one of their unique qualities that drove them to achieve: "Just to remind our trustees that we have students who are coming to college every day, going to their classes — even though they're hungry or they're coming from a shelter." When I asked Anthony to expand on this theme of needy students being driven, he recited the following student poem to me.

They said I couldn't do it because I am black.  
They said I couldn't do it because I am a single parent.  
They said I couldn't do it because I was poor.  
They say I couldn't do it because — but I made it.

Another president described it, as "they are needy, therefore hungry, therefore aspiring." The need level of the students was often seen as a positive paradigm. Only one president stated that the students who are needy are students who might be misinformed and easily swayed by others: "They need to be taught to look holistically and to think. They need to be exposed to other perspectives on the world."

No president directly articulated this duality between the struggling student's level of need and the unique drive that drove him or her to achieve. However, they all seemed to understand this contrast as they always presented to stakeholders the students' drive and level of achievement before speaking of their extreme need. However, during the interviews these two cross-themes of need and unique drive were regularly alternated in the participants' stories and comments.

### **KEY NARRATIVES**

From the many stories told by the college presidents two key narratives emerged: the American Dream and Diversity. The *American dream* overlapped and contrasted with a Global Citizen theme. The presidents' stories were divided in how they positioned the students as either the traditional immigrant, or as a citizen of the new transcontinental world: "They still come with those hopes and aspirations, but hopefully, they come in not blinded by the perception of what American was, but what America is in a global society — and it's changing daily." In several stories the student emigrated from their native country, in other stories the students immigrated to the United States as a second or third immigration, and in still other stories, students came just for a few years to study and then went back to their countries of origin. See Appendix, Figure 4 to refer to both the overlap and contrasting storylines.

The traditional storyline of the *American dream* was the one most often communicated to the stakeholders. The traditional storyline is of an individual working hard, overcoming obstacles and achieving academic success. This is how the student and the university work together: the student works

hard at the university and success is guaranteed (the *American dream* narrative). Yet, the college presidents' non-stakeholder student stories recognized that the experiences and challenges students faced did not always fit the *American dream* narrative. The undergraduate students were more diverse and culturally extremely different from those in the traditional student story.

### **Reflective Definitions of Diversity**

Diversity was one of the biggest themes that underlies almost every story and reflection participants told about the students in their institution. In addition to ethnic diversity, several presidents described the students as being diverse in their age, sexual orientation, and disabilities. Students were also seen as being diverse in their academic preparedness, with several college presidents citing three levels of college readiness. Some students went straight into their courses, and some needed remedial attention in their first years. Yet, these were all part of the diverse CUNY student body (see Appendix, Table 4). The college presidents defined student diversity as one of the biggest challenges in higher education today, as well as the most exciting part of their work. It was almost always presented in a positive light. Some presidents saw it as a new paradigm where students and their families were well prepared for the future in a global world. Yet, they also found it harder to communicate to stakeholders — and the broader public — how diversity can be positive even as it creates a complex learning environment. One president commented on the complexity of the higher education paradigm as seen through the traditional eyes of stakeholders:

It is easy to teach when students start at the same point. With diversity people are afraid of not being able to do the same thing without lowering the standards. That is the wrong paradigm, the wrong model. Diversity can be used. It asks you to reassess yourself and this is part of what it means to be educated. [Douglas]

In many of the stories diversity was a powerful presence that appears everywhere as a phrase, as a description of the students and their lives, and as a part of instructional reality. In examining the stories told, the presidents' comments and the strategies they applied in communicating with the stakeholders suggest that one cannot separate the university from student diversity. Diversity is seen as a real advantage for both the student and for the future world. Diversity was also one of the more challenging aspects of the communication strategy with stakeholders. This concept of the university as diversity and vice versa, creates a unique but complex perspective on what diversity means for the university, leadership and the undergraduate student.

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

There were three significant findings in this study. The first finding was the tension and duality experienced by the presidents and how this influenced their choices in their role as liaison between the stakeholders and the university. The second finding was the diversity paradigm. This study revealed the newer and multifaceted layers of diversity and how this paradigm is different from the historic understanding of diversity in the undergraduate student body. The last finding was the shift in the American Dream narrative and the implications of that shift for CUNY and for higher education nationwide.

### **Duality and Tension**

The presidents interviewed for this study, shared many different stories about their students freely and with great clarity. They were critically aware of the uniqueness of the students attending their institutions and of their multifaceted backgrounds. Yet, when communicating with influential stakeholders the college presidents portrayed the students in a more contextualized and less broadminded way. The stories they told in the presence of the stakeholders were more packaged to fit a particular vision of what I call the “assumed university.” The “assumed university” is one where students study hard and achieve academic success; there is little room for alternative storylines. It is a version in which the stakeholders have an

investment and assume what the university looks like and how it functions. The dominant image of the student as portrayed to the stakeholders is that of a protagonist who is on a journey as part of a larger picture. However, in this version of the university there is little description of the students as individuals with ethnic and religious particulars. Students who have distinct ethnicities or religious backgrounds are not highlighted; therefore the individual variations in the academic journey, student success, and the shifting university are not part of the student portrayal to stakeholders.

When the presidents were speaking with me they told stories that not only touched them personally, but that they found to be significant in representing some aspect of the student in his or her institution. When speaking with me (a non-stakeholder audience), the presidents' stories presented a duality in their portrayal of students; the stories they freely shared were often more intimate and involved the complexity of leading an institution with such a divergent undergraduate student body. The nuances of complex ethnic and global backgrounds were clearly present in the college presidents' descriptions of the students. These more personal stories often revealed tales of students who do not always succeed, who are working through cultural difficulties and extreme poverty.

However, when the college presidents talked about their students to the stakeholders, they told different stories. The presidents' elaboration on student strength, intelligence, hard work, and overcoming odds is linked to the assumed university (i.e. the common concept of what the college should be doing and what college life should be for a student). These stories and portrayals of the students when told to the stakeholders showed an acknowledgement of the investment alumni and sponsors made in the institution. However, these stories revealed that the stakeholders were not necessarily seeing the same students as the college presidents. The stakeholders' adherence to these types of stories reflects their own reference to the academic institution. It is a reference point of their own previous experiences as students in college, which then influences their understanding of the university. These are important social constructs and references for the stakeholders and are fundamental to creating meaning for them in their support of the college (Weick 1995).

It is the college president's elaboration of these American Dream-based student portrayals in his or her stories that strives towards developing membership for the different stakeholders in the college's mission. The choice to only share stories that present a student narrative about hard work and overcoming great odds while not telling stories that show a complex student identity is evidence of the duality presidents navigate in their roles as leaders of a college. The questions of globalization and the ever-increasing categories for labeling diverse students are difficult concepts to present. There are often dual or contradicting descriptions as to what is unique about the students, how ethnically and culturally different they are and what the final self-actualization might be. This nuanced approach to who the student is and what their final fulfillment will be was not found in any of the descriptions or portrayals the college presidents communicated to stakeholders.

For the college presidents there is the complication of maintaining the stakeholders' membership in the university by way of portraying the traditional student while perceiving an undergraduate who proposes multiple realities. This complication is what Weick (1995) described as plausibility versus accuracy. If the different stakeholders of an organization make sense for themselves in relation to a given point of reference— in this case a traditional American Dream story—then identifying that common reference will depend more on what is most plausible and not necessarily what is closest to the truth. In the assumed university any ethnic background is plausible if it fits into the American Dream narrative.

This perceptual duality in leadership role creates a duality in the way leadership itself is approached by these college presidents; acting upon one's perception entails the risk of weakening followership. The servant leadership approach was discernible within each president's reflection on his or her belief in the university's mission. However, visionary leadership or authentic leadership—which surfaced so clearly in their stories as students and in their self-reflections on the institutional leader role—was in direct conflict with the choices they were making as they navigated through different stories communicated to stakeholders. Maintaining two different narratives disempowers leadership from not only establishing a long-term vision but also from integrating needed changes for the entire academic community.

### **The Shifting American Dream**

This study demonstrated the essential place of the American Dream narrative at the heart of communicating the undergraduate experience in academia. This study also revealed that this American Dream narrative is shifting in the context of an American student body that is becoming more global and more multi-faceted than the previous generation. There is a more complex reflection taking place as college presidents perceive and tell stories about the increasingly multilayered life journey of today's undergraduate student.

The American Dream with its emphasis on mainstream identities and achievement against the odds was contrary to the student experiences the presidents were seeing on a daily basis. Students were often trilingual, older, parents, navigating religious and cultural differences. They were not trying to fit into the American dream; they were part of a global society that defines success in a less traditional way. Some students achieved self-actualization by succeeding at continuing college against their family's wishes, continuing college while homeless, or while taking care of their own children.

The above scenarios may not follow a traditional storyline for the American Dream. They are, however, an American story, one in which a large number of current undergraduate students fit their lives into the larger goal of achieving a better life. The gap exists in that the traditional story of the American dream coming true has a mainstream identity attached to it; students start at the same point, desire the same goals, and will become like other Americans. This was evident in how presidents shaped the American Dream stories for the stakeholders. However, the students described by these college presidents are not from the mainstream and do not necessarily seek a mainstream identity. This disconnection between the American dream story and the non-mainstream student identity raises several serious questions: What should the definition of success be? And what does that success translate into to as a form of public education knowledge and policy? The American Dream storyline is important in that it enforces a socially constructed academic path — one which is no longer - works for many current undergraduates— and it therefore lessens the ability to truly recognize what the 21<sup>st</sup> century path to higher education may be. This speaks directly to the recognition and acknowledgment of the shift taking place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century academic version of the American Dream.

In looking at the future of higher education in the United States, Trachtenberg (2007) argued that even though change will at times be incremental, it will be dramatic; academic institutions will have to become flexible and accommodate change. This will be difficult because even students can become tradition-bound after they enter an institution (Trachtenberg, 2007). College presidents are dealing with stakeholders who wish to see the university stay the same as it's always been, even though there is an inevitable amount of change that is taking place. The discrepancy between the presidents' portrayal of the current undergraduate student and the final portrayal as presented to stakeholders is evidence of both a current duality and of a shift about to happen. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought the global world into the urban public university. This globalization of the student body creates a conflict that is highlighted by the American Dream narrative. How does a student seek out the American Dream when he or she also exists in a global world that has a given the student a different identity? The student is a member of a world community and not mainstream America, the world of the American Dream.

A future challenge for the urban college president lies in relation to the dual role students inhabit. It concerns whether or not higher education can continue to portray the academic as the driving force behind the American Dream. Today's students are striving for a different identity, a different outcome, and a different narrative that is greatly based upon their global roots or multi-cultural experiences. Yet, it seems that higher education cannot totally divorce itself from the American Dream; it is still the fundamental story that gives life to the mission of the academic institution. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is offering a newer paradigm wherein the traditional narrative is only part of a larger student experience. Still, it would be hard to entirely disregard the American Dream narrative. The difficulty is in how to integrate the 21<sup>st</sup> century paradigm and the traditional narrative. The 21<sup>st</sup> century student experience is almost too multilayered and too diverse to fit easily into a mainstream life.

## **Leadership Vision in a Shifting Environment**

This research has led me to reconsider what leadership means in the current urban academic context, an environment that is shifting. The question of where leadership action truly begins came to me several times over the course of this project. How would the duality reflected in the participant's narratives impact their leadership actions as they move their institutions forward in this shifting academic context? However, in the final analysis the question of leadership action became less important: clearly, the college presidents were already in action — implementing policy, developing curriculum and fundraising. The more provocative question that emerged from this study was where to begin building one's leadership vision and strategy in such a mobile environment. Visionary leadership begins in the ability to build common values and beliefs. Yet, this disconnection between stakeholders who adhere to a certain vision of the institution and the college presidents who perceive a different institution means that the presidents do not have a clear foundation on which to begin building a visionary leadership. They are leading with only half the story.

As state and federal funding decreases even more college presidents are reaching out to various constituencies with the intention of increasing funding and developing a national or global presence. As more college presidents actively enlist these new and current stakeholders they will begin to see the complexity of combining visionary leadership for the stakeholders and the elements of servant leadership for the student body. Stakeholders will continue to look for a common reference point they can understand and believe in. A good student story reflects shared values, thus allowing the various constituencies to adhere to the president's vision for the institution.

In the participants' reflections and stories the traditional versus non-traditional model comes forward as a framework for thinking about where to begin to develop leadership vision. Each college president in this study demonstrated a combination of traditional and non-traditional behaviors in their leadership choices. The themes of going against the grain and of persevering were common in some form or another among all nine college presidents. At the same time, the interviews revealed that the presidents were actively searching for new ways in which to lead. They make visible the difficult juggling act they are required to perform: how to lead their institutions with (a) deep commitment to the mission of the university, (b) recognition of a student body that is expanding into newer and more complex demographics and (c) acknowledgment of the institutional need to perform in a more global world.

The question of leadership in academia is a complicated one and does not fit easily into traditional theories of organizational leadership. A college president is the symbolic leader of their institution (Balderston, 1995); as such, they must lead a diverse community of stakeholders, communicating a vision and strategy but embodying a belief and a mission as well. The college presidents in this study are steeped in situational leadership in that relationships with the many different members of the college are extremely important — relationships that are influenced by the transactions between the community members and the president.

The difficulty revealed by the participants in this study is that these presidents feel the conflict between the stakeholders' vision and their own perception of the university. It is imperative to bring these two visions closer — but this would entail a certain risk on the part of the presidents. The impact of globalization as both an institutional goal and a new student reality brings to light the risk-taking and non-traditional leadership approach college presidents must embrace, as they navigate the creation and maintenance of a current and vibrant institutional mission through the next 25 years.

## **Limitations of the Present Study**

The participation for this study was nine urban college presidents. The findings resulting for their participation are limited to the urban undergraduate schools and specifically to the City University of New York. The findings must be understood first and foremost under these limitations and within this context. However, the results point to themes and patterns representative of much of the American undergraduate student body. Therefore more research could determine whether these results correspond to other urban university or state university systems.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This study is contextualized by current national trends in higher education in the United States. The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century showed an increase in diversity among students enrolling in community and four year colleges. Since 2000, general student enrollment has increased by 15%; enrollment in public institutions increased by 11% (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The most significant increase is reflected in the diversity of the student body: Hispanics 42%; Native Americans, 30%; Asians, 27%, African Americans, 27% (White enrollment, 6%).

While the experiences and the stories shared by participants are varied, the findings of this study indicate that (a) there is a shift in the undergraduate student identity, and (b) there is an inherent difficulty in communicating that shift to stakeholders. The presidents' own experience as students, as expressed through their personal stories, shaped their knowledge and perceptions of the current undergraduate student by helping them to contextualize their observations of the current student body. It is within the presidents' choice of stories that a social reality can be seen and where it begins to take form.

There is a dual perception of who the students are and what their definitions of success will be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are new categories of diversity, which demonstrate varied and newer conceptions of diversity than previously conceived by both college leadership and stakeholders. The presidents are extremely perceptive in their stories of who these students are and the unique difficulties they face. The college presidents also play in a dual role; they integrate their own student experience with that of the current students in their institutions and at the same time, communicate a recognizable but qualitatively different storyline to the stakeholders.

### Implications for Practice and Future Research

In a higher education environment that is rapidly changing college presidents can recognize (a) the ways in which they shape discourse in relation to stakeholders as an audience and (b) the influence this shaping has on understanding the organizational culture of their institution and the undergraduate student's experience. Through their choice of stories, words and narrative framework used in the portrayal of students to others, the presidents actively contribute to the construction of how the undergraduate student is understood within their institutions.

The college presidents' self-reflection allowed for an in-depth examination of their own perceptions and beliefs about the current undergraduate student. Their stories and depictions of the students not only help to identify the changing demographics and life experiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century undergraduate student, but also to understand what types of action must be undertaken by college presidents as well as in the higher education field.

This study revealed new categories and variations in student diversity and student success. During the interviews two presidents pointed out that student success needs to be redefined. For example, Anthony stated,

We don't produce Rhodes scholars but we produce young people and older people who will be model citizens, rearing great families, they will pay taxes, they will produce others that will pay taxes and make us proud.

Although this was not a theme that dominated among the participants, it is an important theme that needs further investigation. Students with disabilities and students who are parents are perhaps not on the traditional academic path. These students raise the question of how to achieve success in a college education. It also asks the question of what that success will look like. In addition to getting a good job or continuing in their education these students, as Anthony described, define success in more relative terms. College has long been associated with a positive influence on students beyond academic achievement, in self-esteem, self-understanding and control over events in their lives (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The question for further research and for college leadership in urban centers to consider is whether this definition of success is now a permanent part of the urban college

paradigm. The next step in this research agenda is to expand the present study to a national level and examine the questions and narratives expressed by presidents in state schools and then in private colleges.

### **Navigating Meaning**

Caruthers, et al. (2004) argued that the story that is told and listened to allows an individual to communicate meaning and membership in a community, including core values of that community. The participants' selection of traditional American Dream stories in order to portray students to stakeholders reflects a commitment to a historical and traditional value that is kept alive through such stories. This is in contrast to the other stories that portray a different university, where the student is a more complex person with a less complete set of traditional standards. The duality that CUNY college presidents navigate is about constructing meaning and a sense of followership for their stakeholders, while at the same time presiding over a student body that is different than it used to be.

The duality reflected in the participants' stories and the reality they construct affects students and stakeholders, as well as the presidents (see Appendix F, Table 12). The students are navigating between their own multilayered identities and lives and their struggle to fit into the mainstream story. They are attempting to live the American Dream story, even as their college presidents' stories illuminate realities that make it almost impossible to fit into an American Dream-oriented identity. The stories the presidents shared with me, a non-stakeholder, during the interviews revealed the students' reality, the stories the presidents chose to tell the stakeholders revealed how the students are packaged to fit an assumed reality.

It is my hope that this study highlights the complexity in communicating current and changing undergraduate student experience to stakeholders. The awareness of the how the student's daily reality differs from the stakeholders understanding of a more historic and traditional student is an important factor that affects the college president's ability to create common adherence and meaning for stakeholders, alumni and sponsors. This difference in student vs. stakeholder experience is also an important factor in recognizing and supporting the real life experience of the current undergraduate student. In the future, reflection and training may promote the congruence of the narrative between undergraduate students and stakeholder, which in turn will help college presidents to better lead and support their undergraduate students in this new 21<sup>st</sup> century. This reflection and training will also help the college presidents to guide the stakeholders towards a better understanding of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student and an appreciation of what kinds of support the students most truly need. Finally, this study revealed that when college leadership is given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences — with students, as students themselves and with other stakeholders — those reflections can influence their understanding of undergraduate learning and success.

### **REFERENCES**

- AAUP (2006). Statement on government of colleges and universities. *Policy documents and reports* (10th ed.). Washington, DC: Association of American University Professors.
- Balderston, F.E. (1995). *Managing today's university: Strategies for viability, change, and excellence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bicknell, B. W. (2008). *Community colleges frame the purpose of higher education*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses Database (UMI No. 3313762).
- Bolman, L. G. & Deal, T.E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Caruthers, L. Thompson, S., Eubanks, E. (2004). Using storytelling to discuss the “undiscussables” in urban schools. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 6(3), 36-41.
- Clandinin, D. J. & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Lincoln, NE: Sage.

- Eddy, P. L. (2002). *Sensemaking on campus: The role of the two-year college president and framing organizational change*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (UMI No. 3053737).
- Greenleaf, R.K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Kezar, A. (2008). Understanding leadership strategies for addressing the politics of diversity. *Journal of Higher Education*, 79(4), 406-441.
- Lavin, D.E. and Hyllegard, D. (1996). *Changing the odds: Open admissions and the life changes of the disadvantaged*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Meacham, M.A. (2007). *Life stories of authentic leaders in higher education administration*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses Database (UMI No. 3285944).
- Milligan, M. L. (2010). *Access granted: First female presidents, leadership style, and institutional culture*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 2084387881)
- Neumann, A., & Bensimon, E.M. (1990). Constructing the presidency: College presidents' images of their leadership roles, a comparative study. *Journal of Higher Education*, 61(6), 678-701.
- Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P.T. (1991). *How college affects students*. San Francisco: Jos -Bass.
- Scott, S.G., & Lane, V.R. (2000). A stakeholder approach to organizational identity. *The Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 43-62.
- Trachtenberg, S. J. (2007). The presidency of the future university, In M. Landan Darden, (Ed.), *Beyond 2020* (pp 13-24). UK: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Projections of Education Statistics to 2012*, (NCES 2002-030), by Debra E. Gerald and William J. Hussar. Washington, DC: 2002.
- Weick, K. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. London: Sage.

## APPENDIX

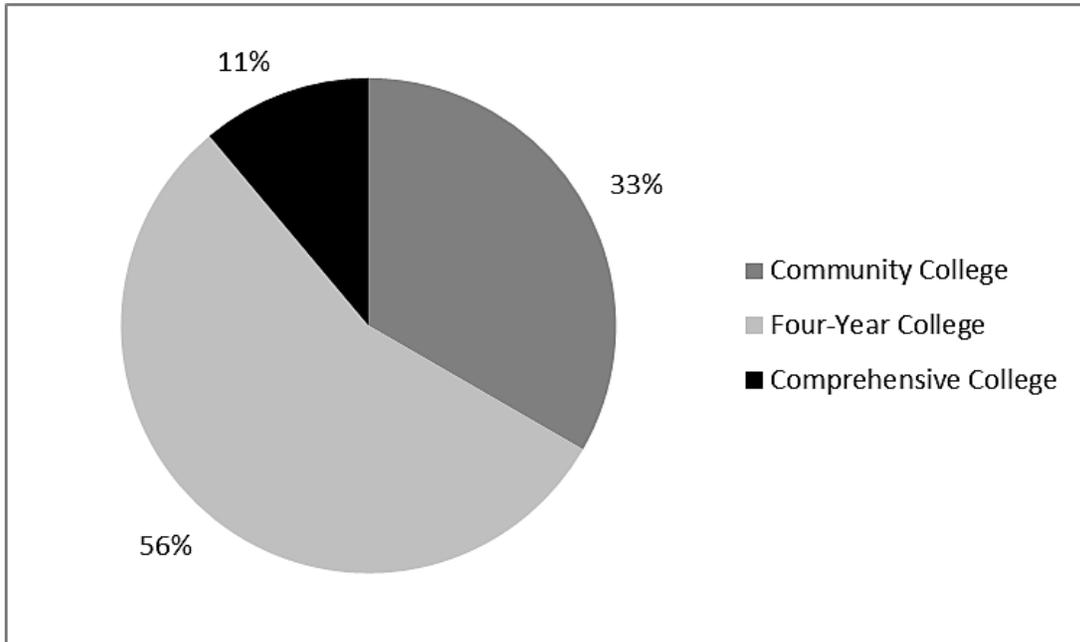
**TABLE 1**  
**STUDY PARTICIPANTS: DESCRIPTIVE DEMOGRAPHICS (N=9)**

Participants	Age	Gender	Years as CP <sup>a</sup>
Anthony	66	Male	2
Abigail	65	Female	8
Bonnie	64	Female	2
Bruce	62	Male	1
Charles	64	Male	17
Clara	63	Female	5
Douglas	68	Male	9
Edgar	63	Male	7
Francis	58	Male	5

Note: All participants are identified through pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

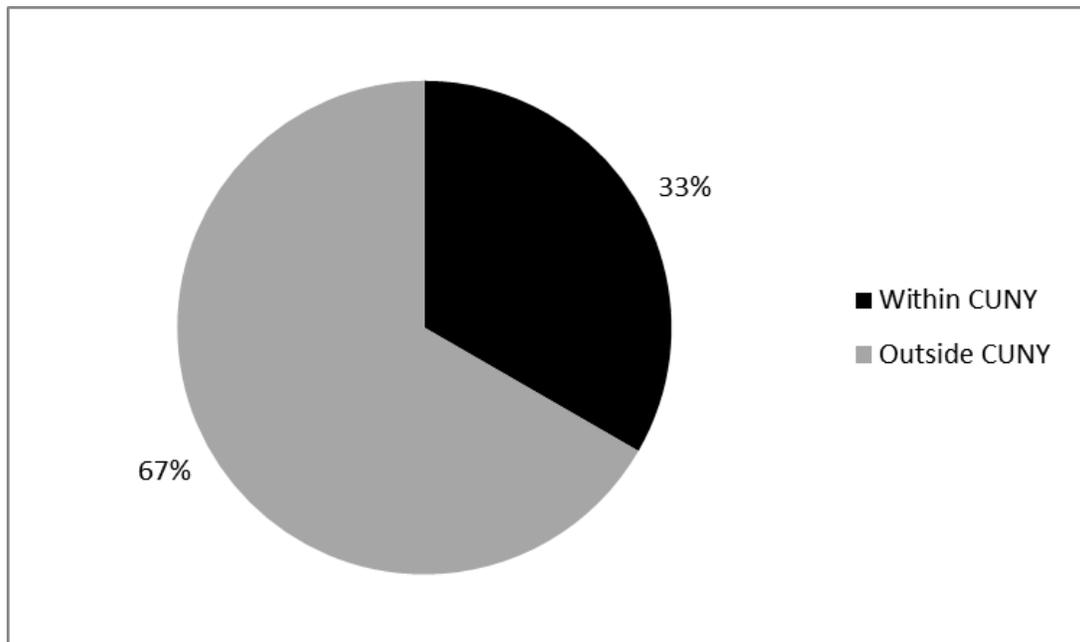
<sup>a</sup>Years as CP = Years of services as College President in current Institution.

**FIGURE 1  
BREAKDOWN OF PARTICIPANTS' INSTITUTIONAL  
LEVEL OF SERVICE, BY PERCENTAGE**



Note: Institutional levels of service include community college, four-year college and comprehensive college levels (n =9).

**FIGURE 2  
COMPARISON OF PARTICIPANTS HIRED AS COLLEGE PRESIDENTS FROM  
WITHIN CUNY TO THOSE HIRED FROM OUTSIDE CUNY, BY PERCENTAGE (N=9)**



Note: Within CUNY = College Presidents hired from within the CUNY system. Outside CUNY = College Presidents hired from outside the CUNY system.

**TABLE 2**  
**THEMATIC CATEGORIES EMERGING FROM PROTOCOL QUESTION:**  
**COLLEGE PRESIDENT AS LEADER**

Thematic Categories	Exemplars
Going Against the Grain	“And the first thing I was told when I came here by everybody was, ‘Whatever you do – since your predecessor tried to do a dorm, don’t do it.’ I did it.”
Persistence	“So we created it. It took me four years but we created – we opened, we cut the ribbon this past Fall on a very nice space in the library; it’s called the Faculty Center for Professional Development.
Momentum	“But I believe you always have to have a lot of things happening. You’ve got to feel things are really moving forward.”
Belief Systems and presidential goals	“I’m a big believer in the CUNY mission. That’s why I came back.”

**TABLE 3**  
**THEMATIC CATEGORIES EMERGING FROM PROTOCOL QUESTION:**  
**COMMUNICATING STUDENTS TO STAKEHOLDERS**

Thematic Categories	Exemplars
Choosing stories for stakeholders	“I would be academically establishing these students first; then I would go on to their financial predicament.”
<i>Mission</i>	“The great CUNY promise is that the university will be open to the whole people.”
<i>Different but Similar</i>	“You know, the students today, they are students just like you were when you were here in the ‘40s or ‘50s or ‘60s.”
Challenges	“And there was great pressure on the part of alum to make sure that the students were... <u>top</u> s. And they got over-fixated on SAT scores, which I never liked but I knew how important it was for lots of reasons.”
<i>Worthy Students</i>	“And that the students who come here are talented; they may have not been successful in high school, but this gives them a second chance.”

<i>Trustees</i>	“And there’s a lot of interest in that part of our productivity.”
<i>Alumni Bias</i>	“You know, we are single-mindedly pursuing the idea that this board needs to look more like the college.”
<i>What is Success?</i>	“We don’t produce Rhodes scholars but we produce young people and older people who will be model citizens.”

---

Note: Regular type indicates major thematic category; *italic* type indicates subcategory

**TABLE 4**  
**PARTICIPANTS’ KEY DESCRIPTIVE TERMS AND CATEGORIES FOR STUDENT DIVERSITY**

Descriptives	Examples
Key Terms	traditional; unique; global; the future; immigrant; African diaspora; parents; employees first/ students second; ethnicity; needy; smart; savvy; hard workers; hungry; extraordinary
Standard Categories <sup>a</sup>	Race; religion; age; gender
Emergent Categories <sup>b</sup>	African diaspora; mixed race/ethnicities; college readiness; sexual orientation; older students, students with disabilities; ESL; students as parents

---

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Standard Categories = Standard categories found in national reports

<sup>b</sup>Emergent Categories = New categories that emerged through participant interviews.

**FIGURE 4**  
**THEMATIC CATEGORY, DETAIL: THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE GLOBAL WORLD,**  
**OVERLAPPING THEMES**

