

## The Community College Presidency and Why Qualified Candidates are Saying “No, Thanks”

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines senior-level community college administrators' perceptions of the presidency and the factors that may deter qualified candidates from pursuing the role. Although prior scholarship has addressed presidential preparation, qualifications, recruitment pathways, and job-related challenges, limited research has explored why experienced administrators opt not to pursue the presidency despite apparent readiness. This study addresses that gap by investigating how senior administrators interpret the demands of the role and how those perceptions shape their career decision-making.

Historically regarded as the apex of a higher education career, the community college presidency has grown increasingly complex. Internal demands include enrollment management, student retention, faculty relations, accreditation compliance, and technological change, while external pressures involve legislative accountability, fundraising expectations, and declining public trust in higher education. Additionally, concerns related to work-life balance, role strain, and diminished personal privacy complicate the attractiveness of the position. These intersecting pressures may contribute to a shrinking pool of aspiring leaders within the community college sector.

Using a qualitative design, this study draws on data collected through online surveys and semi-structured virtual interviews with twelve senior administrators from two Midwestern states. Findings illuminate key deterrents influencing presidential aspirations and provide insight into the evolving nature of higher education leadership. Implications include informing leadership development initiatives, and strengthening succession planning efforts aimed at cultivating sustainable leadership pipelines within community colleges.

*Keywords:* community college administrators; higher education; succession planning

### Introduction

Leadership in higher education is becoming increasingly less appealing to individuals based on the amount of stress and lack of incentives to become a leader (Morris, 2008; 2017). Specifically, community colleges are experiencing a leadership gap (Morris, 2017). Leaders are leaving institutions at a significant rate (Leist & Travis, 2013). The community college presidency

pipeline has been a source of rich research discourse for decades. One of the ongoing points of discussion is the need to increase the numbers of qualified candidates in the leadership pipeline (Hines, 2023; Moore, 1998; Shults, 2001). Short tenures in office and high rates of retirement create an ongoing shortage of community college presidents in the United States (McNair, 2015). The issues of recruiting qualified community college presidents thus persists.

While much research has been done on the qualifications and competencies needed to be an effective community college president (Cooney & Borland, 2018; Duree, 2007; Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Shults, 2001), there is very limited research which explores the reasons why qualified candidates for the role might ultimately decide against pursuing the college presidency. There is much speculation, but the voices of those qualified candidates who decide against pursuing these opportunities are often unheard. A relatively significant literature base (Fisher & Koch, 1996; Glassner & Schapiro, 2013; Kelderman, 2022; Shults, 2001) also exists regarding the challenges facing community college presidents from the perspectives of individuals serving in those roles.

The role of the community college presidency demands attention and continued research. Recognizing the ongoing nature of the outlined issues, the growing complexity of the role itself and the continued need for qualified candidates in the pipeline, an opportunity to research the connection between the factors facing community college presidents and the reasons why qualified candidates make their decisions about the career path towards the college presidency was evident and important to explore.

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors influencing the decision making of qualified candidates to the community college presidency to effectively shift the current circumstances leading to the current leadership gap. As boards of trustees, executive search firms and other stakeholders are involved in hiring community college presidents they need to understand the problem and, more importantly, how they can respond when qualified, senior-level administrators are continuously making cognizant decisions to not pursue the community college presidency as a viable career option. Additionally, there is an opportunity to inform policy and practice by guiding the development and implementation of preparation programs that adequately support future candidates for the community college presidency. To explore this phenomenon more systematically, this study is guided by theoretical perspectives that help explain how

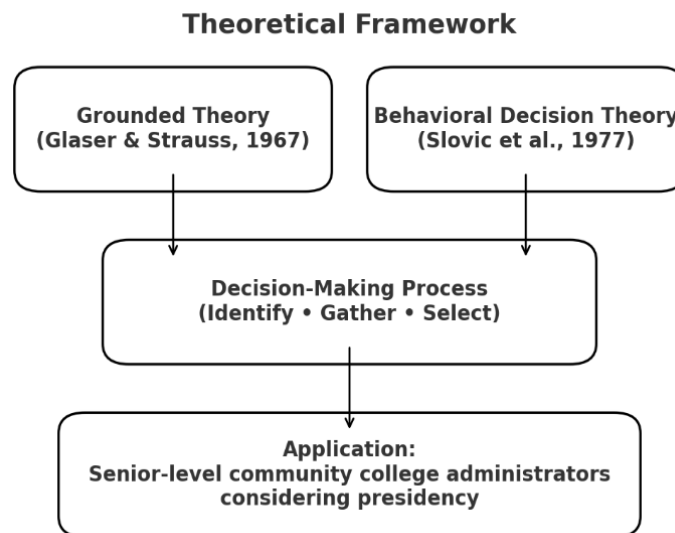
individuals interpret complex leadership roles and make career-related decisions within organizational contexts.

### Theoretical Framework

As shown in figure 1, the theoretical framework encompasses the selected theory or theories which form the foundation by which the researcher understands and plans to investigate the topic of inquiry (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

#### Figure 1

*The Integration of How Grounded Theory and Behavioral Decision Theory Are Used as Guiding Lenses for This Study*



This study is framed around two primary theories. These two are grounded theory and behavioral decision theory. Grounded theory can be defined as the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research (Glaser & Straus, 1967). Grounded theory describes a particular phenomenon, in this study that is the decision-making process of qualified, senior-level community college administrators as it relates to pursuing a community college presidency.

Behavioral decision theory is concerned with the reasoning of a person's choices. Behavioral decision theory has two major models, normative and descriptive (Slovic et al., 1977). The normative model of the theory is focused on the courses of action that align most closely with the decision maker's beliefs and values and therefore, the decisions that they ought to make (Chandler, 2017). The descriptive model of the theory is concerned with characterizing and explaining the choices that people make (Chandler, 2017). This research study will examine the

descriptive model of behavioral decision theory.

According to Mendoza and Gutierrez-Pena (2010), “one of the most common activities of human beings is that of decision making, which is the logical process required to arrive at a decision among several alternatives” (p. 119). The process of making decisions has been represented over time in a variety of ways but often includes the steps of identifying options, gathering relevant information related to each of the options, and selecting an option based on some selection criterion (Saaty, 1990). However, the way people make decisions varies considerably (Dillion, 1960).

Rossi et al. (2012) offered a decision-making process, while designed for farmers, that can be applied across individuals and groups in any context. The process involves four key decision-making elements: what, who, when, and how. Each of the four key decision-making elements leads to a series of additional choices to be contemplated and made.

### **Literature Review**

More than ever, community college presidents are navigating challenges to lead their institutions in today's ever-changing educational, social, and political landscapes. Bourgeois (2016) noted “powerful social, economic, technological, and political forces are driving change at a daring new pace, and as a result, higher education is at a crossroads” (p. 12). These factors influence whether qualified individuals pursue a community college presidency or not.

### **Shifting Demands for Community College Presidents**

The community college presidency is complex. “It is enormously challenging to guide higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The number and complexity of issues is dizzying, if not overwhelming,” wrote Bourgeois (2016, p. 15). Duree and Ebbers (2012) explain:

One of the greatest challenges facing community colleges in the new millennium is filling the leadership pipeline with individuals who possess the necessary skills and traits to be successful and are committed to upholding the community college core values and mission. (p. 41)

The demands on community college presidents are varied. According to Duree and Ebbers (2012):

When asked to identify the most challenging issues confronting their institutions at present time, the five most challenging issues for community college presidents, ranked in order of the importance, were fundraising, student enrollment and retention,

legislative advocacy, economic and workforce development, and faculty relations. (p. 49)

Additionally, public accountability is continually increasing across higher education, but specifically for those using tax funding. Many state legislatures are calling for greater accountability for high tuition costs, increasing student debts and low graduation rates across all higher education which receive public funding (Gillett-Karam, 2013). These factors, among others, are contributing to the changing role of college presidents.

### **Perceived Barriers to Pursuing the Community College Presidency**

The role of a community college president has always been large in scope. However, the challenges facing the role seem to be growing (Johnson & Peifer, 2017; Lavigne & Sa', 2020; Miner, 2020; Suchman, 1995). This dynamic is not only impacting current community college presidents but also on the decision-making related to professional pathways for aspiring community college executives. Some of the most frequently identified challenges facing current and aspiring community college presidents include societal pressures on higher education, student enrollment issues, and financial responsibilities.

### ***Societal Pressures on Higher Education***

The accountabilities placed on today's community college presidents seem immeasurable. These pressures include student success measures (or lack thereof), graduation rates, scrutinized decision-making, institutional image issues, budgetary constraints, the declining value placed on higher education, and numerous others (Lavigne & Sa', 2020). These issues are magnified and compounded in the daily media. Nelson (2008) explained that "this increased scrutiny and public attention make the college presidency much more contentious than in the past" (p. A37).

Public perceptions about higher education have changed over time. Confidence in American education is declining (Miner, 2020). Contributing to this shift are questions around the purpose and function of a college education in today's world in addition to significant changes in the economic landscape which have diminished the value people place on higher education (Miner, 2020). With increasing costs to gain a college education and decreased return for encumbering the debt, many people are not finding value in higher education, including people who have earned a college degree and initially believed in the system (Beaudry et al., 2016; Miner, 2020; Valetta, 2018).

The measure of public confidence reflects the overall image and value placed on higher education (Miner, 2020). When there is doubt in the system, the legitimacy and stability of higher education begin to erode (Johnson & Peifer, 2017; Leveille, 2006; Suchman, 1995). The legitimacy of community colleges cannot be left unattended by their leaders. Community college presidents, and therefore aspiring college leaders, must recognize the societal perception issues facing higher education for their institutions to be relevant, increase student enrollment, and positively impact fundraising efforts. Miner (2020) warned, “diminishing confidence in education has the potential to spill over into other social institutions, such as politics, the economy, and personal relationships, which may further impact American life” (p. 2313). Mounting societal pressures leave community college presidents with much to monitor and manage.

### ***Student Enrollment Issues***

The causes for declining enrollments at community colleges are varied. A few primary factors for the drop in student enrollment are increasing student debt and a narrowing of the financial advantage between a college degree and a high school diploma (Beaudry et al., 2016; Miner, 2020; Valetta, 2018). College students today are facing an unprecedented financial burden (Miner, 2020). The Federal Reserve Board (2019) stated, the real amount of national student debt owed by American households surpassed 1.5 trillion dollars (about \$4,600 per person in the US). Miner (2020) remarked, “after accounting for books, supplies, room and board, and transportation, students today face a price tag nearly fifty four percent higher than in 2000,” (p. 2315).

The financial advantage of a college degree is coming into question in society today. Many people are deciding to go straight into the workforce to begin making money sooner, and avoiding the debt associated with higher education. The increasing costs of a college degree contrast with the stagnant wages witnessed by many working and middle-class families (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). The wage gap between people with a high school diploma and those with a college education has plateaued since the early 2000s (Beaudry et al., 2016; Hulten & Ramey, 2019; Miner, 2020; Valetta, 2018). Though individuals with a college degree still tend to earn more, on average, than those without a college degree, the research indicates they are no longer benefiting from increased wages like in earlier decades (Miner, 2020).

### ***Fiscal Responsibilities***

Bourgeois (2016) noted “colleges and universities are expected to do more than ever before – and they have fewer resources with which to do it” (p.12). The continual decline in state and

federal resources has forced colleges to find new revenue streams. College presidents are expected to have a primary responsibility for fundraising efforts (Bourgeois, 2016; Setterwhite & Cedaja, 2005). According to the American Council of Education (2012), college presidents spend an average of 60 percent of his or her time engaged in fundraising-related activities. Among the most significant responsibilities of a college president in today's current context are acquiring financial resources, allocating those resources, and formulating the vision for the institution (Kerr, 1993).

### **Recruiting a Community College President**

Presidential searches are more complex than ever before (Lavigne & Sá, 2020). With the growing responsibilities for community college presidents, it has become more difficult to find candidates with the needed expertise to fill vacancies at the presidential level. Negatively impacting the ability to fill presidency roles is the fact that many current college administrators are not interested in the position (Cooney & Borland, 2018; Waggoner, 2016). Duree and Ebbers (2012) indicated that “perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing community colleges in the new millennium is filling the leadership pipeline with individuals who possess the necessary skills and traits to be successful and are committed to upholding the community college core values and mission” (p. 41).

Identifying and understanding the skillsets and qualities needed for the job of community college presidents is of critical concern. Though it has been suggested that American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) *Competencies for College Leaders* may need updating and revising (Duree & Ebbers, 2012), the document serves as a guidance tool. However, despite the benefits of AACC's *Competencies for College Leaders*, Curphy (2011) noted that search committees were not using the competencies or the document as part of their process for hiring community college presidents.

Gillett-Karam (2017) explained “boards of trustees are the hiring body for the college and serve as linchpins for changing the portrait of community college presidencies” (p. 42). This assertion goes beyond the competencies needed for the position but also the diversity in people filling the roles. The questions of how presidents are hired, and how effective presidents lead are prominent issues yet to be resolved (Gillett-Karam, 2017). Boards of trustees and executive search firms, who free themselves of false and outdated assumptions, will find much more success if they embrace the reality that leadership has changed in community colleges (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002). Moore (1998) emphasized that “because the employment of a president is the most

important task of a board of trustees, the search process must minimize the existence of extraneous factors that impede the selection of the best person for the organization” (p. 60).

Search committees for college presidencies are becoming more specific and demanding in what they expect of candidates though there is still a lack of consistency in what those characteristics should be in this era. Some recruiters see a need for a new generation of presidential competencies (McDade et al., 2017). The increasing complexity of the college presidency requires new skills (Selingo, 2015). More institutions are engaging in the services of consultants and executive search firms (Lavigne & Sa’, 2020; Loomes et al., 2019). McDade et al. (2017) claim search firms bring expertise to the process and go on to say, “we bring a consistency, pace, and thoroughness to the search process” (p. 51).

### **Method**

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

**Research Question 1.** What are the perceived challenges facing community college presidents that senior-level administrators evaluate when deciding whether to pursue a career pathway towards becoming a community college president?

**Research Question 2.** What identified perceived challenges facing community college presidents are the most prevalent reasons which prevent senior-level administrators from pursuing presidency roles?

Qualitative research methods were determined appropriate for this study as the purpose of this research was to explore the views and perceptions of senior-level college administrators, specifically those who are qualified for community college presidency roles. A qualitative approach allowed for the potential to more deeply understand and interpret the thoughts and behaviors of participants as it relates to the research topic. The primary tools for this research were an online survey and virtual interview. The online survey included an assortment of question types including static, closed-ended (multiple choice single and multiple responses), open-ended, and a rating scale. The researcher engaged each participant individually with both data collection tools.

For this study, phenomenology was utilized as the method to identify phenomena within the participants’ responses. Using phenomenology as the research method allowed for an understanding of senior-level community college administrators’ thoughts, specifically their perceived challenges related to the community college presidency and the factors influencing their own decision making regarding whether to pursue the role as part of their career path. The

researcher recognized potential limitations, delimitations, assumptions and design controls related to this study. While not necessarily an exhaustive list, these factors were acknowledged by the researcher. The limitations, delimitations, assumptions, and design controls are addressed in this section.

### **Limitations**

- Like all studies, this research faced limitations. The researcher identified the following possible limitations in this study:
- Validity and reliability could be limitations based on participants' ability and/or willingness to share or describe their thoughts
- A strong regional focus based on selection of participants and where they are geographically employed could affect the extendibility and generalizability of the findings
- Research design limitations
- Researcher bias/subjectivity

A limitation often associated with qualitative research is related to validity and reliability (Wiersma, 2000). Full and transparent engagement from participants could be a limitation. Potentially, participants in the study refrained from providing detailed responses to the survey and/or in the interviews. Self-reported data cannot be independently verified. Additionally, it can contain several inherent bias sources, such as selective memory, attribution, and exaggeration.

This study focused on data from participants in two midwestern states (Iowa and Nebraska). As a result, there is a heightened likelihood that the research findings' extendibility and generalizability could be impacted. This limitation could be addressed in future research designs. As noted above, the research design, in and of itself, could pose limitations on this study. Participants from a broader geographical base could offer increased extendibility and generalizability. Additionally, the research design could be improved with more participants, in general, not just from a wider geographical distribution. Furthermore, selection bias is a possible limitation in this study's research design. Community college presidents in the research area (Iowa and Nebraska) were asked to identify senior-level administrators from their institutions who are qualified to pursue a community college presidency role and would be interested in participating in this study. This selection process could lead to bias on the part of those individuals identifying potential research participants.

There is always the possibility of bias and subjectivity. The researcher made every attempt to protect against bias and subjectivity. It is noted that having only one person analyzing and coding the research data could result in unintentional bias and subjectivity even when safeguards are implemented.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are factors that can restrict the questions asked by the researcher or the inferences which can be drawn from the research findings. The primary delimitations of this study included research questions and the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of participants in the research. The research questions for this study were framed to examine two topics:

1. The perceived challenges facing community college presidents that senior -level administrators evaluate when deciding whether to pursue a community college presidency
2. The most prevalent reasons from the identified perceived challenges facing community college presidents which prevent qualified, senior-level administrators from pursuing community college presidency roles

The criteria for selecting participants were broadly defined as senior -level community college administrators who are qualified to pursue a community college presidency role. The researcher more clearly defined the criteria for what was meant by the phrase “qualified to pursue a community college presidency role”. The researcher determined that participants in this study must have:

- A minimum of a master’s degree
- At least 10 years of professional work experience
- At least 3 years of professional work experience must be in higher education
- Currently hold a senior-level administrator (cabinet level) role at a community college
- Currently work at a community college in Iowa or Nebraska

### **Assumptions**

There were certain assumptions related to this study. Assumptions included the theoretical foundation of the study, the clearly defined nature of the research topic, the identification and recommendation of participants, the validity and reliability of the instruments, the reliability of participants’ responses, and that the results of the study would be generalizable. These assumptions are further explored. The theoretical framework for this study is assumed to be an accurate reflection of the phenomena being examined. The researcher identified behavioral decision theory

as the appropriate theoretical framework for this research. This decision was based on the focus of research questions to understand the decision-making processes of participants.

The research questions were assumed to be clear and measurable. The researcher narrowed the number of research questions to two. Each research question had a specific, nuanced focus. The researcher made every effort to develop each question with clarity. Another assumption was that the participants who were referred to the researcher by community college presidents across Iowa and Nebraska are viewed as qualified, senior-level administrators who could successfully pursue and obtain a community college presidency role if they applied for such positions. While the researcher used criteria to determine what was meant by *qualified*, it is likely assumed that college presidents would only refer any of their personnel if they had a strong belief in their training, experience and abilities to effectively handle a community college presidency role.

An online survey using open-ended, closed-ended and rating scale question types, as well as an open-ended interview were developed as data collection instruments for this study. It was assumed that these instruments would provide valid and reliable data related to participants' perceptions and experiences. The researcher attempted to develop questions for the survey and interview with care to align them with the study's research questions. The researcher worked to eliminate ambiguity and bias in the study's instruments.

The researcher assumed that the participants would answer survey and interview questions honestly and factually. This assumption was probably true because participants' identities were concealed, and their confidentiality preserved. Assuring participants that their responses were confidential and kept secure made it more likely that they responded honestly. Finally, it was assumed that results from the study would be generalizable beyond the sample being studied. It was further assumed that the research results would be relevant and meaningful to stakeholders beyond the study itself.

### **Design Controls**

This study was structured with specific design controls. The design controls for this study were selected and implemented to establish participant confidentiality while also allowing for specificity in responses to the research questions. The researcher worked to ensure strong design controls. Participants' identities were secured from others. Only the researcher knew who the participants were engaged in the study. The survey tool used for the primary data collection in gathering responses from participants was developed to offer clear and concise responses. Most

survey questions were crafted to allow participants to select from pre-determined answer options. This methodology was intended to reduce ambiguous and disparate responses.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

The data collection methods for this study included a survey and interview. The survey served two primary purposes. First, the survey established, through self-reporting methods, whether participants met the definition of being a qualified, senior-level community college administrator. Secondly, the online survey which consisted of open-ended, closed-ended and ranking scale type questions collected initial data from participants about the community college presidency, including their interests in the role as a career pathway, their perceptions about their own readiness for the role, the perceptions about the scope of responsibility for the role, and their perceptions about any areas of concerns they might have regarding taking on the job role in the future.

After the survey completion, all twelve research participants accepted the invitation to engage in an interview with the researcher. The interviews occurred virtually using Zoom. The interviews were recorded to allow for efficient transcription of the dialogue between the researchers and interview participants. The research interview included eleven open-ended questions. The interview questions allowed for the opportunity to further explore participants' perspectives and perceptions about the community college presidency and their interest, or lack thereof, in pursuing the role as part of their own career trajectory. The interview questions were framed to allow for open-ended responses, which provided greater detail and context than the survey itself.

### **Findings**

The data collected from the twelve research participants provides clear answers to this study's research questions. The data also offers some nuances which are worth understanding.

#### **Research Question 1**

What are the perceived challenges facing community college presidents that senior-level administrators evaluate when deciding whether to pursue a career pathway towards becoming a community college president? Table 1 provides a comparison of the collective analysis of survey and interview responses related to challenges facing current community college presidents.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Survey and Interview Results on the Issue of Perceived Challenges Facing Community College Presidents*

Data Collection Tool	Most Concerning Challenges	N	Percent
Survey	Legislative issues and impacts	10	83%
	Work-life balance	9	75%
	Increasing costs and student debt	8	67%
	Student enrollment	7	58%
	Finances and fundraising	7	58%
Interview	Political climate and public perceptions	11	92%
	Finances and fundraising	9	75%
	Student enrollment	8	67%
	Legislative issues and impacts	4	33%

This table represents a comparison of the top themes shared by respondents to survey question #15 and interview question #1 about the most concerning challenges facing community college presidents. The following challenges are consistent across both data collection methods and rank in the top five as identified by twelve respondents:

- Legislative issues and impacts
- Student enrollment
- Finances and fundraising

It seems plausible that the survey data indicating increasing costs and student debts as a challenge facing community college presidents could be a factor impacting the overall concern of student enrollment. This point about the cost of a college education and the negative impact on student enrollment already resonates in the literature base (Beaudry et al., 2016; Hulten & Ramey, 2019). These two factors seem to be inextricably connected making them difficult to discern individually. This most likely accounts for these challenges reflecting similar response percentages in the research data.

A labyrinth of obstacles mires the landscape of the community college presidency with issues ranging from educational, technological, economic, political and societal (Bourgeois, 2016; Lavigne & Sa', 2020; Miner, 2020). During another interview, a research participant stated, "I'm not like crystal balling but, with the way things have been since 2020, there are going to be more

and more disruptions in higher education including what we know is coming like the enrollment cliff, political upheaval, artificial intelligence to the things that are yet to be seen.” Another research participant noted that, “One thing at the top of mind is the shrinking population in our rural areas which are negatively impacting student enrollment.”

What is important to note is that while challenges related to politics and legislative issues have been referenced in the research literature, the results of this study indicate the heightened prominence and growing intensity to which these challenges are influencing the community college presidency. One of the study’s respondents claimed that “politics and the pandemic coupled together really made people very skeptical about higher education and we are still feeling those effects today.” During another interview, a research participant explained, “As we gear up for another political election, the rhetoric against higher education makes it harder and harder for us (community colleges) to show students our value.” Yet another research participant declared, “In our political climate, people are actively devaluing higher education.” Even still another research participant asserted “we (community colleges) are at risk of losing autonomy in our ability to educate a broad audience of students on a broad range of topics resulting from legislative decisions that come down at the state and federal levels which tie our hands.” During the interview phase, respondents would reference the political climate and legislative actions as challenges or disruptions which negatively impact higher education but also influence their decision making about their career pathways and more times than not these issues dissuade them from pursuing the community college presidency.

Student enrollment is a real concern for community colleges. This statement is echoed by research participants in this study when 58% of responses to Survey Question #15 and 67% of respondents to Interview Question #1 noted student enrollment as one of the most challenging issues facing community colleges and their presidents. Lower birthrates during the Great Recession resulting in the shrinking college-age population is what has been dubbed as the enrollment cliff (Drozdowski, 2023). Since the 2020 pandemic, community college enrollments have plummeted by 16% according to Doug Shapiro, executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Knox, 2023). Fewer people want what colleges have to offer and enrollments that were already declining over the past decade have been gutted during, and since, COVID-19 (Drozdowski, 2023).

One respondent claimed that “The one thing on everybody’s mind right now is the enrollment cliff. Demographics tell us high school enrollments are going to go down. So, every college is going to be scrambling for the same piece of the pie that is known as college-going students. We must worry about what impact that may have on us.” Another respondent stated, “Probably top of mind for me are the shrinking populations in our rural areas.” And another respondent asserted “Our population is dwindling in rural communities. It’s like where are our students going to come from because high schools aren't graduating more and yet we are striving to grow at the community college level.” Another respondent voiced concern that “trying to grow enrollment and get butts in seats is a difficult thing.” This respondent expanded by claiming that “with the number of high school graduates declining and many of them not wanting to go to college, there are just fewer students, in general, to recruit to college.”

Regarding Research Question 2, the researcher endeavored to understand what factors particularly impacted the decision-making process of senior-level administrators when they consider the community college presidency as part of their career path. This inquiry is not addressed in the existing research literature. Research Question #2 is presented below:

**Research Question 2**

What identified perceived challenges facing community college presidents are the most prevalent reasons which prevent senior-level administrators from pursuing presidency roles?

**Table 2**

*Comparison of Survey and Interview Results on the Issue of Factors Dissuading Qualified Senior-Level Administrators from Pursuing the Community College Presidency*

Data Collection Tool	Dissuading Factors	N	Percent
Survey	Work-life balance	8	67%
	Legislative issues and impacts	7	58%
	Lack of personal and family privacy	6	50%
Interview	Work-life balance	7	58%
	Political climate and legislative issues	3	25%
	Overall scope of the role	2	17%

This table compares the top themes of responses to survey question #17 and interview question #8 about factors dissuading them from pursuing a community college presidency.

At the top of this list was the perception of a lack of work-life balance associated with the role of the community college presidency. In this study, nine respondents (75%) indicated that

they had no interest in pursuing the community college presidency at any point in their professional future and only one respondent (8%) answered by stating that they might consider the role in the future. Only two respondents (17%) asserted their affirmative desire to pursue the role in the coming few years. To better understand these responses, it is critical to examine the reasoning behind why they answered as they did. Data connected to Survey Question #17 indicated that eight (67%) of the respondents identified the lack of work-life balance as being a significant factor deterring them from pursuing the position. During the interviews, six (50%) of the twelve respondents identified the significant time commitment and work-life imbalance as the factor which guides them away from wanting to pursue the role of community college president. One respondent noted, “It’s not that I don’t already work more than a forty-hour week, but presidents work all the time. That’s not what I want to do with my weekends. That’s not what I want to do with my evenings. But to know that it would be that way for the rest of my career, there would be no end. I’m not interested.” Another respondent summed up the community college presidency by saying, “It takes somebody who makes the choice that this is what they’re going to do from 7:00 am to 9:00 pm every day.”

Another three respondents (25%) noted the political aspects of the community college presidency, along with the current political culture (local, state and national), being strong factors discouraging them from having interest in the role. One respondent stated “I continue to contemplate the changes in the national political climate and what that means with being a public education entity. We are at the mercy of state and federal government.” Another respondent declared that “the American dream is an unfulfilled promise despite it being a societal promise for over a hundred years with folks historically being able to go to college to improve their economic standing by moving into the middle class, but that’s not the case anymore, and I think colleges are getting the blame for that.” The same respondent continued by stating, “There is this underlying anger and people feeling like they have been left out. A lot of politicians are exploiting that anger and directing some of it towards higher education.”

The community college presidency is complex. The issues impacting the role are intense. As a result, the ability to recruit current, qualified senior-level community college administrators into the role is far from easy and nearly impossible in many instances. These individuals are the most logical next step in the candidate pipeline. However, it is clear in this study that they are, for the most part, not interested in serving as community college presidents. Participants in this study

recognize in themselves the inability to accomplish all things as expected of community college presidents. This appears to be negatively influencing their decisions about the community college presidency and whether the job role is a part of their future career trajectory.

### **Discussion**

This research study explored a few long-standing conundrums perplexing community colleges. The current literature base clearly indicates community college presidents are encumbered in their roles by a broad set of challenges (Fisher & Koch, 1996; Glassner & Schapiro, 2013; Kelderman, 2022) and the candidate pipeline for the community college presidency is not as robust as needed to match the job market demand (Hines, 2023; McNair, 2015; Moore, 1998; Shults, 2001). The researcher ventured to examine these issues further since they remain pertinent in the current context. The researcher believed there was a different perspective to explore which has not received attention in research literature. This perspective is from the vantage point of senior-level community colleges administrators versus presidents themselves.

In developing this study, the researcher pondered not just what challenges were facing community college presidents, but how have those challenges grown or changed in recent years. Additionally, the researcher pondered how currently serving senior-level community college administrators see themselves fitting into the candidate pipeline leading to the community college presidency. More specifically, the researcher wanted to understand how senior-level community college administrators who were identified as being qualified candidates for a community college presidency thought about themselves serving in the top role of president. The researcher speculated that barring current or past community college presidents this group of individuals in the community college presidency pipeline are arguably the most qualified candidates to serve in the role.

The researcher concluded that the role of the community college presidency demands attention and continued research. Recognizing the ongoing nature of the outlined issues, the growing complexity of the role itself and the continued candidate pipeline shortages for the role, an opportunity to research the connection between the factors facing community college presidents and the reasons why qualified candidates make decisions about the career trajectory towards the college presidency were the driving factors for this research study.

Understanding both the perceived challenges encountered by community college presidents and the reasons dissuading potential, qualified candidates from pursuing the role was

critically important to the researcher in relation to addressing the growing leadership gap apparent in the context of filling future community college presidency vacancies.

Based on the researchers' interpretation, this study has uncovered some important answers to the two research questions. Additionally, significant themes became evident which could offer insights and have implications on the topic of the community college presidency. Furthermore, there exist new research opportunities related to this topic as a result of new questions emerging.

### **Findings Discussion**

The data collected from the twelve research participants provides clear answers to this study's research questions. The data also offers some nuances which are worth understanding. Each research question and the corresponding findings are discussed below. Research Question 1: What are the perceived challenges facing community college presidents that senior-level administrators evaluate when deciding whether to pursue a career pathway towards becoming a community college president?

Recognizing that the survey was designed with multiple choice response options and occurred in a static context and the interview was open-ended questions in an interactive, dynamic setting, the data comparisons indicate strong similarities but do fluctuate based on response percentages. The researcher speculates that the live interactions of the interview, where the respondents are engaged in a conversation, likely led to more synergistic responses than perhaps what was possible in the survey. Even with the percentage differences for responses within the survey data compared to the interview data, there are distinct challenges identified. The following challenges are consistent across both data collection methods and rank in the top five as identified by twelve respondents:

- Legislative issues and impacts
- Student enrollment
- Finances and fundraising

It seems plausible that the survey data indicating increasing costs and student debts as a challenge facing community college presidents could be a factor impacting the overall concern of student enrollment. This point about the cost of a college education and the negative impact on student enrollment already resonates in the literature base (Beaudry et al., 2016; Miner, 2020; Valetta, 2018). These two factors, or challenges, seem to be inextricably connected, making them difficult

to discern individually. This most likely accounts for these challenges reflecting similar response percentages in research data.

The researcher believes the data from this study strongly reinforces the existing literature on the topic of predominate challenges encountered by community college presidents. A labyrinth of obstacles mires the landscape of the community college presidency with issues ranging from educational, technological, economic, political and societal (Bourgeois, 2016; Fallis, 2007; Lavigne & Sa', 2020; Miner, 2020; Mount et al., 2001). During another interview, a research participant stated, "I'm not like crystal balling but, with the way things have been since 2020, there are going to be more and more disruptions in higher education including what we know is coming like the enrollment cliff, political upheaval, artificial intelligence to the things that are yet to be seen." Another research participant noted that, "One thing at the top of mind is the shrinking population in our rural areas which are negatively impacting student enrollment."

What is important to note is that while challenges related to politics and legislative issues have been referenced in the research literature, the results of this study indicate the heightened prominence and growing intensity to which these challenges are influencing the community college presidency. One of the study's respondents claimed that "politics and the pandemic coupled together really made people very skeptical about higher education and we are still feeling those effects today." During another interview, a research participant explained, "As we gear up for another political election, the rhetoric against higher education makes it harder and harder for us (community colleges) to show students our value." Yet another research participant declared, "In our political climate, people are actively devaluing higher 101 education." Even still another research participant asserted "we (community colleges) are at risk of losing autonomy in our ability to educate a broad audience of students on a broad range of topics resulting from legislative decisions that come down at the state and federal levels which tie our hands." The researcher asserts that the legislative impacts and overall political climate of approximately the past five years were immensely evident across this study's data in both the survey and interview responses. However, the same degree of presence on this topic and its impact on the community college presidency is not as thoroughly reflected in the current research literature base. Countless times in the interview phase, respondents would reference the political climate and legislative actions as challenges or disruptions which negatively impact higher education but also influence their

decision making related to their career pathways and more times than not these issues dissuade them from wanting to pursue the community college presidency.

Student enrollment is a real concern for community colleges. This statement is echoed by research participants in this study when 58% of responses to Survey Question #15 and 67% of respondents to Interview Question #1 noted student enrollment as one of the most challenging issues facing community colleges and their presidents. The topic of declining student enrollments is not new in the press either. Lower birthrates during the Great Recession resulting in the shrinking college-age population is what has been dubbed as the enrollment cliff (Drozdowski, 2023). Since the 2020 pandemic, community college enrollments have plummeted by 16% according to Doug Shapiro, executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Knox, 2023). Fewer people want what colleges have to offer and enrollments that were already declining over the past decade have been gutted 102 during, and since, COVID-19 (Drozdowski, 2023). One respondent claimed that “The one thing on everybody’s mind right now is the enrollment cliff. Demographics tell us high school enrollments are going to go down. So, every college is going to be scrambling for the same piece of the pie that is known as college-going students. We must worry about what impact that may have on us.” Another respondent stated, “Probably top of mind for me are the shrinking populations in our rural areas.” And yet another respondent asserted “Our population is dwindling in rural communities. It’s like where are our students going to come from because high schools aren’t graduating more and yet we are striving to grow at the community college level.” A different respondent voiced concern that “trying to grow enrollment and get butts in seats is a difficult thing.” This same respondent expanded by claiming that “with the number of high school graduates declining and many of them not wanting to go to college, there are just fewer students, in general, to recruit to college.”

Regarding Research Question #2, the researcher endeavored to understand what factors particularly impacted the decision-making process of senior-level administrators when they thought about the community college presidency as part of their own career trajectory. This specific question is not addressed in the existing research literature. Research Question #2 is presented below: Research Question 2. What identified perceived challenges facing community college presidents are the most prevalent reasons which prevent senior-level administrators from pursuing presidency roles?

At the top of this list was the perception of a lack of work-life balance associated with the role of the community college presidency. In this study, nine respondents (75%) indicated that they had no interest in pursuing the community college presidency at any point in their professional future and only one respondent (8%) answered by stating that they might consider the role in the future. Only two respondents (17%) asserted their affirmative desire to pursue the role in the coming few years. To better understand these responses, it is critical to examine the reasoning behind why they answered as they did. Data connected to Survey Question #17 indicated that eight (67%) of the respondents identified the lack of work-life balance as being a significant factor deterring them from pursuing the position. When asked during the subsequent interviews, six (50%) of the twelve respondents identified the significant time 104 commitment and work-life imbalance as the factor which guides them away from wanting to pursue the role of community college president. One respondent noted in the interview, “It’s not that I don’t already work more than a forty-hour week, but presidents work all the time. That’s not what I want to do with my weekends. That’s not what I want to do with all of my evenings. But to know that it would be that way for the rest of my career, there would be no end. I’m not interested.” Another respondent summed up the community college presidency by saying, “It takes somebody who makes the choice that this is what they’re going to do from 7:00 am to 9:00 pm every day.”

Another three respondents (25%) noted the political aspects of the community college presidency, along with the current political culture (local, state and national), being strong factors discouraging them from having interest in the role for themselves. One respondent stated “I continue to contemplate the changes in the national political climate and what that means with being a public education entity. We (community colleges) are at the mercy of state and federal government.” Another respondent declared that “the American dream is an unfulfilled promise despite it being a societal promise for over a hundred years with folks historically being able to go to college to improve their economic standing by moving into the middle class, but that’s not the case anymore, and I think colleges are getting the blame for that.” The same respondent continued by stating, “There is this underlying anger and people feeling like they have been left out. A lot of politicians are exploiting that anger and directing some of it towards higher education.”

The community college presidency is complex. The issues impacting the role are intense. As a result, the ability to recruit current, qualified senior-level community college administrators into the role is far from easy and nearly impossible in many instances. These individuals are the

most logical next step in the candidate pipeline. However, it is clear in this study that they are, for the most part, not interested in serving as community college presidents. Participants in this study recognize in themselves the inability to accomplish all things as expected of community college presidents. This appears to be negatively influencing their decisions about the community college presidency and whether the job role is a part of their future career trajectory.

### **Implications**

Based on the results of this study, the researcher believes there is reason for concern when considering the community college presidency and vacancies that are and will continue to arise. Regarding the scope of responsibilities for the community college president, nearly 25% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that it was manageable with another 25% uncertain (neither agreeing nor disagreeing). Inferring from participants' responses in both the online survey and interview indications hint that the role is exorbitantly large based on its scope of responsibilities. This is a concern for the longevity of currently seated presidents as well as the ability to entice new presidents to the role. The role of community college president is akin to that of a superhero. Unfortunately, most current presidents and those qualified individuals in the candidate pipeline lack superpowers. The overall scope of the community college presidency and how these roles are structured begs the question of can the current state of the position continue as is or does the job need to be re-evaluated?

The fact that so many qualified, senior-level administrators are not interested in the role of community college president is troubling. People, especially Boards of Trustees and search firms, need to contemplate where the next generation of community college presidents will come from if not from the cabinet level. When qualified, senior-level college administrators are the most obvious choice in the candidate pipeline for community college president, how will hiring entities respond when fewer and less qualified candidates are the majority of those seeking the job?

Another implication stemming from this study is the need to better equip qualified, senior-level college administrators to handle the differences between their roles and that of the community college president. Several respondents noted that cabinet-level positions at community colleges are typically internal-facing roles while the president's role is primarily an externally engaged role. One participant summed this up rather astutely by stating, "You know there are people in the pipeline who have spent their life figuring out the academic side or the student services side or the business side of community colleges and now, when they think they are ready for the presidency,

they're supposed to be at the Country Club shaking hands." There is a disconnect between the functions of many cabinet-level positions and the presidency at community colleges. How can this be addressed to support a smoother transition for those who have envisioned moving from senior-level administrator to president?

### **Future Research**

While this study provided some answers, it would be valuable to expand this research to include a larger sample size. Initially, it would be useful to expand the research in the same geographical area to determine the impact on these results. There are fifteen community 107 colleges in Iowa and six in Nebraska. This study only involved three community colleges, 20%, from Iowa and only two community colleges, 33%, from Iowa. Future research could reflect a great number of participants from these twenty-one institutions.

A research study with a national scope would offer additional insights and possibly more data to inform potential solutions to the challenges facing community college presidents, as well as the impending struggles perplexing the candidate pipeline to produce not only qualified individuals, but candidates who ultimately want to pursue the community college presidency. This study suggests that while the candidate pipeline has qualified individuals in it, they are not interested. This is a problem worthy of additional research. A national research study, or at least regional studies, may offer new perspectives and certainly the ability to identify broader themes and trends.

Another area for future research is the comparison of survey and interview data from respondents at rural versus urban community colleges. Though there were participants in this study from rural and urban areas, the majority were from rural community colleges. This study did not examine the difference between participants from rural and urban areas. A larger sample size would be needed to appropriately investigate this idea.

Though the topic of hiring community college presidents from outside of higher education was not specifically investigated in this study, it did come up in several interviews. There was a strong sense from participants that community college presidents need to have some background in higher education. Responses did not indicate a clear pathway for candidates to advance to the presidency, but it was evident that most respondents believe a successful community college president needed to have experience in the higher education context. So, future research would be

beneficial in understanding the success of community 108 college presidents from different professional backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

The community college presidency has long been an esteemed role marking the pinnacle of many people's careers. However, in recent years, the job is one that is viewed as overencumbered by an onslaught of challenges growing in volume and intensity. To characterize the community college presidency as merely complicated and perplexing would significantly understate its complexity.

Today, community college presidents are inundated with a plethora of challenges. These consist of issues presented from internal and external sources. To name just a few, internal factors demanding the time of community college presidents range from student enrollment and retention, faculty issues, campus infrastructure, accreditation, technology advancements to Boards of Trustees. Some of the most pressing external factors consuming the time of community college presidents include legislative issues, fundraising, and an increasing lack of public confidence in higher education as well as overall societal perceptions on education.

Yes, it would be fair to state that being a community college president is hard and can be overwhelming. Compounding this stance is the seeming impossibility of maintaining any semblance of a work-life balance. Adding insult to injury from a job role perspective, community college presidents often forego much of their personal and family privacy, especially in rural areas. As if the pressures from internal and external challenges facing community college presidents were not enough, the real and perceived concessions to one's quality of life are difficult to imagine, let alone embrace and navigate.

All this sets an onerous context in which to draw new community college presidents. The allure of this once prominent occupation has begun to lose its luster. Today's qualified, senior-level college administrators are saying, No, thanks! to the idea of serving as a community college president. The rewards of the role no longer outweigh the disadvantages for many would-be candidates.

Those individuals who are most qualified to serve as the next generation of community college presidents reside in cabinet-level positions in higher education. They have served for numerous years, often decades, and offer a wealth of experience. However, after years of tenure in senior-level positions, the standard motivators of salary, benefits, power and prestige bestowed

upon community college presidents do not hold the same magnetism that they once did. More senior-level college administrators are unwilling to give up even more time for work. They want greater balance in their lives than can be provided by the community college presidency. Furthermore, these same individuals view the presidency as a risk to their personal and family privacy.

From a work perspective, the increasing political divisiveness along with the accompanying legislative issues impacting community colleges is not an appealing aspect of the presidency drawing qualified, senior-level college administrators to the job. Similarly, decreasing state governmental aid to higher education, and plummeting tax bases in rural areas, coupled with declining student enrollment make the task of fiscal management at a community college a logistical nightmare which necessitates more fundraising. Many senior-level college administrators do not feel prepared for, or want, the responsibility of such fiscal leadership under the current dire circumstances.

The community college presidency deserves attention. Renewed focus is needed to analyze the role and its scope of responsibility. By doing so, there is a greater likelihood that challenges currently dissuading qualified, senior-level college administrators from the presidency can be addressed. Moreover, there are obstacles impacting the candidate pipeline. Qualified candidates are opting out of the community college president pipeline themselves, and this calamity seems to be going unnoticed by hiring entities. There is much work to do to resurrect the community college presidency to be more palatable to qualified candidates. Until this issue is sufficiently addressed, it is likely that an increasing number of qualified, senior-level college administrators will say, *No, thanks!* to the community college presidency.

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