# Asian American Community College Presidents:
# Their Leadership Practices, Insights, and Attributes

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**Abstract**

Asian Americans continue to be underrepresented as university and college presidents, despite the significant growth in population as well as in the number of Asian American college students. The purpose of this study was to examine the personal experiences, including leadership practices, insights, and attributes, of five Asian American community college presidents. The intent was to identify potential factors contributing to the underrepresentation problem. Additionally, supplemental data were collected from five trustees to enhance the overall quality of the study. Adaptive leadership theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Narrative inquiry was used as the methodology. Interviews were conducted with all five college presidents and five trustees. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed to determine common themes. The study found significant cultural influences on their respective career paths, including leadership practices. However, the presidents used different aspects of adaptive leadership to successful navigate their respective work environment. The presidents also reported experiencing some racial barriers, including microaggressions and subtle discriminations, during certain points of their careers. Most of the trustees in the study acknowledged that the underrepresentation of Asian American leaders in higher education signifies a systemic problem. They also understood the importance of diversifying in higher education institutions. As part of the study, recommendations were developed to provide advice for aspiring Asian American leaders who may be interested in pursuing college president positions. The recommendations included earning the highest academic credentials, obtaining varied administrative work and teaching experience, overcoming stereotype threat, and getting a mentor.

## Acknowledgements

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" (Lao Tzu). My first step in the journey to pursue a doctoral degree began over a decade ago, in 2006. Unfortunately, that initial journey was cut short because of inadequate planning on my part as well as other obstacles. As such, I am forever grateful to the following individuals, who have made it possible for me to complete my journey, this second time around:

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It would be amiss however not to mention some of the significant events of the last two years. The COVID-19 pandemic that first began in December 2019 had resulted in over 3.1 million deaths worldwide as of April 2021. The pandemic caused global shutdowns and quarantines of hundreds of millions of people in 2020. The year 2020 also saw the struggles and protests against racial injustices through the Black Lives Matter movement. The year unfortunately ended even more tumultuously with the most contested U.S. presidential election in history. As the world welcomed 2021, still in lockdowns, Americans witnessed the horrors of the storming of the U.S. Capitol by supporters of the defeated former President Donald Trump. With the COVID-19 pandemic continued to rage on, Asian Americans found themselves the targets of racial violence. Unprovoked attacks targeting Asian Americans, particularly women and the elderly, led to the highest increases in violent crime rates against Asian Americans in a decade. I am at a loss for words but pray for better days ahead.

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# Chapter 1

## The Research Problem

Diversifying leadership at universities and colleges provides an opportunity to enhance the educational experience of all students in the American higher education system (Gasman, Abiola, & Travers, 2015). As a country, the United States is becoming more diverse, with the population of people who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color reaching approximately 39.2 percent in 2017 (U.S. Census, 2017). The number of students of color attending universities and colleges has also been increasing dramatically. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) estimated that eight million American students of color were enrolled at postsecondary institutions in 2015, representing over 40 percent of the total university and college enrollment. This was an increase from 3.7 million students of color in 2000. The number of university and college presidents in the United States, however, remains predominantly White, at over 87 percent (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017; Carey, 2017). Asian Americans in particular continue to be underrepresented at the senior leadership level in higher education institutions. Asian American enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions was estimated at 1.28 million students in the fall of 2015, representing approximately 6.15 percent of all postsecondary enrollments (NCES, 2017). Nonetheless, less than 1.5 percent of all university and college presidents were of Asian American descent as of the most recent estimate (Gasman et al., 2015; Prinster, 2016). The American Council for Education (2017) estimated that the number of Asian Americans serving as presidents of universities and colleges in the United States to be around 70 persons out of approximately over 4,300 university and college presidents. Almost all Asian American higher education presidents were at community colleges, including several hailing from Hawaii (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Li-Bugg, 2011).

This study sought to gain an understanding of the personal experiences of Asian Americans currently serving as community college presidents. The study explored their leadership practices, insights, and attributes contributing to their respective success. Additionally, the study also tried to identify any challenges and barriers they have attempted to overcome in order to attain and succeed in presidential positions. In particular, this study examined how and whether these presidents see racial identity or being of Asian ancestry as influencing factors shaping their career paths and experiences in the workplace. Lastly, I also intended to obtain valuable advice and recommendations from the study participants for other aspiring Asian American leaders in higher education.

Adaptive leadership theory was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study to examine the leadership experiences of the participants. Evolved from situational, transformational, and contingency leadership theories, Heifetz et al. (2009) refined adaptive leadership theory into a framework to deal with modern-day workplace challenges (Miller, 2016; Cojocar, 2009). Adaptive leadership is a practical leadership framework that helps both individuals and organizations adapt and thrive in challenging environments. It encourages for leaders to embrace change, experimentation, and innovation in order to adapt to an evolving situation (Heifetz et al, 2009). For this study, adaptive leadership framework was used to analyze the process in which each participant effectively navigates his or her workplace environment.

Narrative inquiry was used as the research methodology. Narrative inquiry focuses on the experiences of the participants (Squire et al., 2014; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Yang (2011) discussed of using narrative inquiry to study "the ways human experience the world and how they make meaning out of their experience" (p. 202). As an established research method in its

own right, narrative inquiry has the potential for use across a wide range of disciplines, including education, economics, philosophy, and psychology (Webster & Mertova, 2007). For this study, narrative inquiry as a methodology allowed for the investigation into their life experiences, by capturing and portraying the voices of Asian American college presidents.

As noted above, the study focused on Asian Americans currently serving as presidents of community colleges. The titles of president and chancellor, however, are commonly used interchangeably in American postsecondary institutions to denote the head of the institution. In some multi-campus university or college districts, the president serves as the chief executive officer for the entire institution, and the chancellor serves as the leader of each campus within the district. Meanwhile in other districts, the chancellor is the leader of the entire institution and the president heads a campus within the district. Most single-campus community colleges use the title of president for the chief executive officer (Seraphin, n.d.; Colleges and organizational structure of universities, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, the term president will be used exclusively but will include the equivalency of chancellor positions.

**Problem Statement**

According to the Center for American Progress (2015), the Asian American population was one of the fastest-growing and most diverse demographic groups in the U.S. The 2017 U.S. Census showed the Asian American population grew to over 20.4 million in 2015 from 11.9 million in 2000, representing a 72 percent growth, far exceeding the second-fastest-growing group, the Hispanic or Latinx population, which grew 60 percent in the same period (U.S. Census, 2017; Lopez et al., 2017). Asian Americans, however, are made up of a very diverse population with different and unique histories, cultures, and languages, tracing roots to more than 30 countries in Asia (Lopez et al, 2017). The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, defines Asian as

a person "having origins in any of the original peoples of Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam" (U.S. Census, 2017, n.p.). As such, even though the United States government has used the label Asian as a racial classification for decades to lump together vastly different people from a wide swath of the globe, members of the Asian group may have very little in common. The one notable exception, or in this case, one commonality, may be that very few Asian Americans are in the chief executive positions or presidents of American institutions of higher learning (Gasman et al., 2015; Prinster, 2016).

As the Asian American population has increased, the representation of Asian students on American university and college campuses has also increased. Between 2000 and 2015, Asian American enrollment in higher education increased from approximately 928,200 to 1,228,300 students, representing a 25.6 percent gain (NCES, 2017). In comparison, White student enrollment for the same period increased by 4.5 percent (NCES, 2017). However, it must be pointed out that not all Asian ethnic groups have been equally making gains in college achievement. Cambodian American college students, for example, as a recent refugee group in America, attained a much lower graduation rate of 6.9 percent, compared to the graduation rate of 42.7 percent for aggregated Asian Americans in general (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Ngo, 2006). Asian Americans have also been making gains in the faculty ranks across higher education institutions. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) data showed an increase from 65,469 to 76,265 faculty positions for Asian Americans between 2011 and 2015, representing a gain of 16 percent. In terms of all full-time faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions, Asian Americans made up approximately 7 percent of the tenured faculty (Gasman et al., 2015; Prinster, 2016; American Council on Education, 2012). Asian

Americans are also earning advanced degrees, a critical requirement for senior leadership positions, at increasing rates. Data for 2012, for example, showed that Asian Americans earned 5.3 percent of all master's degrees and 9.4 percent of all doctoral degrees awarded in that year (Gasman et al., 2015; Kim, 2013). The number of Asian Americans serving as university and college presidents, however, remains underrepresented, at less than 1.5 percent of all postsecondary presidencies (Gasman et al., 2015; Prinster, 2016; American Council on Education, 2012).

For the purposes of this study, the term Asian American excludes Pacific Islander Americans, as currently defined by the Census Bureau. The Census Bureau defines a Pacific-Islander American as a person "having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or any other Pacific Islands, including Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia" (U.S. Census, 2017, n.p.). Asians and Pacific Islanders were initially grouped together as one "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders" (AAPI) group on the 1980 Census. However, the Office of Management and Budget, in a 1997 directive, separated Asians and Pacific Islanders into two categories (U.S. Census, 2000; Kim, 2013). My rationale for following the definition of the Census Bureau is only intended to maintain the focus of the study. It is by no means intended to create an exclusion of another marginalized group. In fact, similar studies focused on Pacific Islanders' experiences in higher education are also much needed. During the literature review and the study, when necessary and appropriate, information and data regarding Asian Americans specifically versus Asian Americans as part of the AAPI in general are differentiated.

## Rationale

The purpose of this study was to advance the knowledge about the leadership characteristics of Asian American community college presidents. Just as there are very few

Asian Americans serving as presidents of American postsecondary institutions, very few studies have been conducted with Asian American leaders in higher education (Li-Bugg, 2011). My search for academic literature regarding Asian Americans serving as community college presidents failed to yield much published information. In fact, I found mostly researches from doctoral students on this topic (Torne, 2013; Li-Bugg, 2011; Somer, 2007; Adrian, 2004).

In addition, by examining the personal experiences of the Asian American community college presidents through their stories, the study sought to identify the various factors that contributed to their career successes, including any challenges and barriers they must overcome in their career paths. These factors may help to explain the reasons behind the underrepresentation of Asian Americans as presidents at postsecondary institutions. A study of Asian American community college presidents' experiences may also serve to advance the knowledge for enhancing diversity in higher education institutions. Increasing diversity in higher education helps foster academic and social growth for all students (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

Lastly, this study has both professional and personal significance to me, as the researcher. As a Vietnamese American who has spent over 25 years working for the community college system in Washington State, I have been interested in pursuing a community college presidency in the future. A study of Asian American community college presidents could provide inspiring role models for me as well as for other aspiring Asian American educators. As different studies have found positive influences of role models on specific populations (Drury, Siy, & Cheryan, 2011), similarly for underrepresented Asian Americans scholars and educators, effective Asian American "role models have the power to open up previously unimagined possibilities" (Rockquemore, 2016, p. #).

**Theoretical Framework**

This study primarily utilized the theoretical framework of adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz et al., 2009) to investigate the experiences of the Asian American participants. Adaptive leadership theory emerged from the research of Heifetz and his colleagues at Harvard University as a framework to help leaders successfully navigate rapidly changing work environments (Miller, 2016). As the name suggests, the core principle of adaptive leadership theory is the promotion of adaptability to allow the leader and organization to flourish. Heifetz et al. (2009) defined adaptive leadership as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (p. 14). An adaptive leader, according to Heifetz et al., possesses the core competencies of being able to engage people with organizational changes, to foster diversity, to manage resistance to change, and to understand that lasting changes take time.

Adaptive leadership theory focuses on four core dimensions:

- navigating business environments,
- leading with empathy,
- learning through self-correction and reflection, and
- creating win-win solutions.

The first dimension of navigating business environments encourages adaptive leaders to embrace unpredictable business environments despite uncertainty (Heifetz et al., 2009; Mulder, 2017). Adaptive leaders must be willing to explore new approaches to solving problems. Heifetz et al. (2009) advocated for adaptive leaders to embrace change to find the most creative solutions. Leading with empathy refers to an important characteristic of adaptive leaders. Additional features of an adaptive leader, as per Heifetz et al, 2009 and Mulder, (2017):

1. Must be able to look at the organization and make sound decisions through the employees' perspectives.
2. Respond with empathy to influence others to perform to the best of their abilities.
3. To embrace and learn from changes, adaptive leaders must be able to learn through self-correction and reflection. However, adaptive leadership theory encourages experimentation, recognizing that some experiments will fail. Important lessons for future success can be learned from those failures. As such, adaptive leaders must create opportunities for their employees to reflect on both successes and failures to ensure ongoing learning throughout the organization.
4. Create win-win solutions, where the leader develops a mindset for benefiting everyone involved in an interaction. Adaptive leaders should thus expand and build a network of stakeholders to ensure long-term success for the organization.

Given the complexities and challenges of managing today's higher education institutions, traditional and hierarchical views of leadership may not be as useful for leaders to be successful. Institutional leaders must be willing to adopt new leadership practices to respond to the quick-changing environment. Adaptive leadership theory provides an essential tool for leaders to adapt to the complex needs of the organizations they lead (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). Thompson and Miller (2018) similarly called for university and college leaders to develop and practice new leadership skills to deal with emerging disruptive trends in higher education. The authors contend that such disruptive trends may include funding challenges, technological advancements and limitations, and educational needs of the millennial generation . Adaptive leadership theory, as such, is a valuable framework to study the leadership skills of Asian American community college presidents. Additionally, given the presidents' ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds,

adaptive leadership theory allows for the investigation of how these leaders successfully adapt to the more dominant cultures of their organizations and thrive as presidents of institutions.

**Research Questions**

This study examined the experiences of Asian American community college presidents with a focus on their leadership practices, insights, and attributes. The primary guiding research questions were:

1. How have Asian American community college presidents navigated their career paths in higher education?
2. Do the participants perceive their ethnic and racial backgrounds as influencing factors for their respective career paths?

A related secondary question was:

3. What advice would the participants give to aspiring Asian American leaders who are interested in becoming college presidents?

**Background of the Researcher**

This research topic is personally significant to me. I am an Asian American male of Vietnamese descent. My entire professional career of more than 25 years has been working within the community college system in Washington State. In fact, I found my lifelong career passion in the higher education environment when I first began working as a student worker at Seattle Central College. While intended to be a temporary position until my transfer to a nearby university to finish my bachelor’s degree, I unexpectedly fell in love with my job serving students and ended up working continuously for Seattle Central College and Seattle College District for over 20 years in various positions, from front-line staff to a senior administrator. In 2011, I achieved my highest position upon being appointed as Vice President for Administrative Services at Seattle Central College. After four years, I transferred to a similar position of vice

president for administration at Highline College in 2015. In the summer of 2016, at the encouragement of the then Highline College president, Dr. Jack Bermingham, and other colleagues, I began the pursuit of the Educational Leadership doctoral program at the University of Washington – Tacoma. I was especially attracted to the program for its focus on equity and systemic change.

I am particularly interested in exploring the various factors that may contribute to the underrepresentation of Asian American college presidents, partly due to my own desire of pursuing a career path to becoming a community college president in the future. After spending several years as a senior administrator in the community college system in Washington State, I have noticed a lack of Asian Americans in senior leadership positions within our own system. For a couple of years, I was the only Asian American vice president among the more than 90 vice presidents within the 34 community and technical colleges in Washington. As of the writing of this dissertation in the winter of 2019, I was still the only vice president of Southeast Asian descent within the system. In terms of college presidents, during my entire career, I had known or heard of all but only a handful of Asian Americans to be college presidents in Washington, Oregon, and the surrounding states. As such, I do see the benefit of investigating the factors that may affect Asian Americans from advancing to senior positions in community colleges.

In addition to the disclosure of my lifelong career in higher education, I must add some additional details of my background. I came to the United States as a refugee from Vietnam at a very young age without my parents. Like many other refugees and immigrants starting a new life in this country, I had my share of experiences with economic hardships, microaggressions, and subtle discrimination. Poverty and the lack of guidance from an appropriate role model,

however, were the biggest challenges I faced while growing up. All of these experiences no doubt have influenced my thinking as well as my perspective on life. In fact, the person that I am and have become today is very much shaped by these experiences.

There are two reasons for this narrative disclosure of my background. First, as I embark on telling the stories of Asian American community college presidents, I want to make sure to tell the story of my own background as a researcher. It is of particular importance to me for the readers to understand my personal connection with this research topic. Second, I want to remind myself of potential biases due to my own experiences and perspectives as an Asian American educator with many years of working within the Washington State community college system. Such biases may affect the analysis and interpretation of data, potentially affecting my findings.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduces the problem of underrepresentation of Asian Americans as university and college presidents. The Asian American population has been one of the fastest-growing demographic groups in the United States. The number of Asian American students attending universities and colleges has also increased significantly in the past decade. Very few Asian Americans, however, have been selected to lead universities and colleges as presidents. This qualitative study seeks to gain an understanding of the personal experiences of those few Asian Americans currently serving as community college presidents. Adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz et al, 2009) is used as the theoretical framework for this study. Narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Webster & Mertova, 2007; Clandinin & Hubert, 2010; Squire et al, 2014) through semi-structured interviews is utilized as the method to examine the leadership characteristics, practices, and attributes of the participants. Just as there are very few Asian Americans university and college presidents in the U.S., there have been very few studies

conducted on Asian American educational leaders. It is thus my hope to advance the knowledge about the leadership characteristics of Asian American college presidents through this study.

# Chapter 2

# Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the literature related to the study of Asian American college presidents. The chapter comprises of four sections. The first section describes the experiences of Asian Americans in the general American society, including the challenges of racism and the model-minority myth. The second section examines literature on Asian American leadership, including some previous doctoral studies specifically about Asian American leaders in higher education environment. In addition, adaptive leader theory is reviewed to provide the context for the conceptual framework. The third section includes literature on critical race theory in the context of Asian American experiences to provide additional background to this study. Lastly, the fourth section contains additional reviews for narrative inquiry as a research methodology.

## Asian Americans in the United States

Asian Americans are a rapidly growing population in the United States. As indicated earlier, Asian Americans are made up of a diverse set of peoples tracing ethnic history to over 30 distinctive Asian countries and subgroups. Despite the persistence of common stereotypes of being the model minority group, many Asian Americans face a wide range of challenges and problems within the larger American society. The following section describes the experiences of Asian Americans in the context of institutional racism, including perceptions and misperceptions about Asian Americans.

**Institutional racism against Asian Americans.** Asian Americans have long been subject to institutional racism and discrimination in the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 marked the first major institutional act of racism by the U.S. federal government against Chinese immigrants ("Chinese Exclusion Act," 1882). Despite the fact that Chinese

immigration was encouraged and welcomed only a few years earlier because of the labor shortage in the mining industry and for large projects, like the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted in response to White economic fears of rising unemployment (Norton, 1924). The Exclusion Act not only restricted Chinese immigration but also prohibited Chinese people living in the United States from becoming citizens ("Chinese Exclusion Act," 1882).

The Immigration Act of 1924 represented additional forms of institutional racism sanctioned by the U.S. federal government against Asians. Expanding on the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Immigration Act of 1924 effectively barred Asian immigrants from entering the United States. The Immigration Act of 1924 also reaffirmed other existing national laws at the time excluding people of Asian lineage from becoming U.S. citizens through naturalization ("Immigration Act of 1924," 1924).

The incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II was similarly considered the result of institutional racism rather than any actual security risk posed by Japanese Americans (Miles, 2012). Altogether, over 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry were forcibly relocated from their West Coast homes and incarcerated in camps after the Pearl Harbor attack. Of these, two-thirds were native-born U.S. citizens ("Japanese relocation," 2017). In 1983, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, appointed by the U.S. Congress, concluded that the incarceration of Japanese Americans was based on racial prejudice, not a military necessity ("Justice denied", n.d.).

Beyond the historical context, Asian Americans continue to be victims of structural racism within major U.S. institutions today. For example, very few Asian Americans are represented in senior management positions of corporations ("Bamboo ceiling," 2017) and per-

capita income levels for Asian Americans still lag far behind those of White Americans (Tawa et al., 2012). According to the Pew Research Center (2015), White American men with a bachelor's degree earn $72,599 on average compared to $56,921 for Asian American men with the same degree. In fact, the salary gap between White American men and Asian American men appears to have widened. A few years earlier, Kim and Sakamoto (2010), using the 2003 National Survey of College Graduates to investigate earning differentials, stated there is an eight percent lower earnings for U.S.-born Asian American men compared to White men. The same research also illustrated even more substantial earning disadvantages for Asian Americans with foreign-earned academic credentials. Despite the perception of success among Asian Americans within the technology industry, a 2018 report on leadership diversity at top technology companies found that Asian Americans, as a racial group, are least likely to be promoted into managerial and senior executive positions ("Confronting Asian-American Stereotypes," 2018). Unsurprisingly, this report also found that White men and women are twice as likely as Asians to hold executive leadership ranks. The report specifically pointed out the unbroken glass ceiling for Asian American women. Specifically, while White women have found relative success in breaking through the workplace glass ceilings in recent years, Asian American women continue to remain silently below these glass ceilings.

According to a study conducted by the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health (2017), Asian American participants reported numerous personal experiences of discrimination across many areas of life. Twenty-eight percent of the study respondents said they believed they had fewer employment opportunities because of their race, and 40 percent said they believed they were underpaid compared to White American counterparts for equal work ("Discrimination in America," 2017). Additionally, 12 percent of the respondents said they believed they were

discriminated against when being considered for promotions ("Discrimination in America," 2017). Interestingly, the study found that 11 percent of the Asian American respondents reported being discriminated against when applying for or attending college.

A recent lawsuit filed by the Students for Fair Admissions alleges Harvard University itself has been racially discriminating against Asian American applicants for years ("Discrimination and deceit," 2018). According to the analysis of 160,000 applicants' data by Duke University economist Peter Arcidiacono, Asian Americans have the lowest application admission rates of all ethnic groups to Harvard, despite being the applicants with the highest average SAT scores, highest academic index, and the most extensive extracurricular activities, among all Harvard applicants (Lowry, 2018). Many Asian American applicants' chances of being admitted, however, are dragged down by Harvard's use of a personal rating system of the students' personalities. Harvard has consistently rated Asian American applicants lower on personality traits like positive personality, kindness, courage, and likability (Hartocolis, 2018). Harvard admissions officials have relentlessly ranked Asian Americans well below others in the personality metric without actually meeting most of these Asian American applicants in person ("Discrimination and deceit," 2018). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Harvard's internal investigation of its admissions policies, conducted in 2013, found bias against Asian American applicants, although no actions have been taken to address these findings (Hartocolis, 2018).

**Perceptions of Asian Americans in American society.** Racial stereotypes about Asian Americans may be another cause of the underrepresentation of Asian Americans as leaders in organizations (Johnson & Sy, 2016). As portrayed by the model minority myth, on the one hand, Asian Americans are stereotyped as hardworking, diligent, and technically competent in the workplace. On the other hand, Asian Americans are stereotyped as quiet and lacking social

skills, which makes non-Asians see them as unsuitable for leadership positions ("Confronting Asian-American Stereotypes," 2018). In three different studies (e.g., Johnson & Sy, 2016), participants were asked to rate a White leader and an Asian American leader on different dimensions of leadership. The participants overwhelmingly rated the Asian American leader as dedicated and intelligent but lacking traditionally masculine and authoritarian leadership characteristics such as charisma and tyranny. In contrast, the participants of the same study attributed those same characteristics to a White person and thus rated them as more leader-like.

Ho and Jackson (2001) conducted a study to ask participants to rank Asian Americans based on a list of stereotypes about Asians. The results were very similar to the findings from Johnson and Sy (2016). The participants rated Asian Americans highly on competence but low on social skills (Ho & Jackson, 2001). Participants who perceived Asians as highly competent also felt threatened by Asian Americans. Additionally, they expressed resentment toward Asian Americans (Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005). Meanwhile, participants who perceived Asians as lacking social skills displayed greater fear and hostility toward them. Lin and her colleagues (2005) further found that participants who held stereotypical views of Asians were less likely to interact with Asians personally and professionally.

Asian Americans were also perceived and expected to be less domineering than Whites (Berdahl & Min, 2012). While White colleagues exhibiting dominant characteristics were often seen as more leader-like in the workplace, Asian Americans violating this stereotype by acting more dominant were judged negatively. The authors also found that among working professionals, Asian Americans who appeared more assertive in the workplace faced more harassment from their White colleagues. As such, Asian Americans confront double dilemmas.

If they assert themselves in a professional setting, they will likely be disliked, but if they do not, they risk appearing less capable as leaders.

The model minority stereotype is another dominant narrative about Asian Americans that may contribute to the underrepresentation of Asian Americans as leaders (Chou & Feagin, 2015). The model minority myth characterizes Asian Americans as a monolithic hardworking and high-achieving group despite facing historical discrimination and institutional racism (Yi & Museus, 2016). The Asian American model minority myth traced its history to the 19th century with the first wave of Chinese immigrants employed to work on the American railroads. The Chinese railroad workers were often compared to and praised against their Black coworkers. After World War II, the model minority myth was applied to Japanese Americans returning from concentration camps, to question why Black Americans could not just overcome racism and succeed like Japanese Americans (Chou & Feagin, 2015). During the Civil Rights Era, the White majority again used Asian Americans as a racial wedge against Black Americans and other minority groups, by using the essence of the model minority myth to delegitimize challenges of racial oppression and White supremacy (Chow, 2017; Yi & Museus, 2016). The success of Asian Americans was used to undermine the persistent struggles of Black Americans in the face of racism and inequities (Chow, 2017). The model minority myth continues to exist in present-day American society as a pervasive stereotype about Asian Americans. By implying that Asian Americans have already succeeded, the stereotype is also being employed as an instrument of racism to deny equal opportunity and equal protection to Asian Americans (Museus & Kiang, 2009), potentially preventing Asian Americans from advancing into senior leadership positions in various institutions and organizations. Yi and Museus (2016) posited that

the White majority often uses the model minority myth as a tool to justify and maintain the racial order over people of color.

The model minority myth however may not necessarily be perceived to apply consistently to all Asians. According to the 2016 Post-Election National Asian-American Survey (Ramakrishnan et al., 2017), stereotypes of Asians could vary by national origin. Southeast Asian refugees from the Vietnam War, including Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong, for example, were perceived to be less intelligent than East Asians. Ngo and Lee (2007) similarly described contradictory views about Southeast Asian American students by the popular press. On the one hand, Southeast Asian American students are often stereotyped as hardworking and high-achieving model minorities. On the other hand, Southeast Asian American youths are also as often portrayed as low-achieving gang-affiliated high school dropouts. While the realities of academic performance of these students are far more complex than either image suggests, the model minority myth may in fact prevent further research into the needs of Southeast Asian American students (Keo, 2020). For example, Chhhuon and Hudley (2008) in their investigation into the factors influencing Cambodian American students' academic underperformance found little research specific to Cambodian Americans. In his examination of over 151 peer-reviewed academic articles, in six K-12 and higher-education journals, and over a span of 10 years, Keo (2020) found only 4 articles specifically addressed in whole or part Southeast Asian Americans. Based on his findings, he concluded Southeast Asian Americans as not only "silenced" but most disadvantaged among the aggregated data and studies conducted about Asian Americans. The lack of disaggregated data for Southeast Asian Americans as such further instilled the various stereotypes about Asian Americans contributing to the underrepresentation problem.

## Asian American Leadership

As this study sought to examine the leadership characteristics and experiences of Asian American community college presidents, the following section briefly describes a leadership concept based on an Asian cultural perspective. In addition, this literature review section also examines some of the more specific researches on Asian American leadership experiences in higher education.

**Asian American leadership: Cultural-based explanations**. Unlike some of the more prominent leadership models, including democratic leadership, autocratic leadership, bureaucratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and situational leadership, Asian American leadership is not an actual leadership model or style. Rather, it is a concept used to differentiate the perceived leadership characteristics of leaders of Asian ancestry in American society (Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009). However, Chin (2013) argued that the traditional Western definitions of leadership alone are not adequate to describe Asian American leadership. She insisted on adding Asian cultural aspects and beliefs as part of a definition of Asian American leadership. For example, whereas Western leadership perspectives are said to place much emphasis on the ability of the individual leader to influence followers, many Asian cultures, particularly the Chinese, are said to value collectivism and harmony as equally important leadership characteristics (Chin, 2013). Neilson and Suyemoto (2009) similarly recommended using more culturally sensitive frameworks, based on Eastern cultural perspectives, to define Asian American leadership. Given that most university and college leaders are of White European descent (Gasman et al., 2015; Gagliardi et al., 2017), Neilson and Suyemoto (2009) asserted that almost all research on higher education leaders have focused primarily on the experiences of White American leaders. The methods used to study these leaders have also been

primarily based on Western leadership perspectives. For example, there have been several studies to identify effective leaders on the basis of their traits. Such methods, because of their lack of conceptual understanding of Asian cultures, may not be adequate to fully examine the experiences of Asian American leaders.

Asian American experiences, as noted previously, are complex and diverse. Asian Americans, particularly those of Japanese and Chinese ancestry who in many cases have resided in the United States for multiple generations, would likely have very different experiences compared to the more newly-arrived Asian American refugees from Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam. As another example, Southeast Asian refugees, who were forced to flee their native countries due to war and turmoil, would most likely have very different perspectives on leadership compared to newer generations of Indian and Chinese immigrants, who migrated to the United States primarily for economic reasons. A redefining of leadership to include Asian cultural perspectives must also avoid the generalization of an overall Asian culture in explaining their experiences (Chin, 2013).

**Asian American leadership in higher education**. As indicated earlier, there have been very few published studies on Asian American leadership in higher education. Torne (2013), Li-Bugg (2011), Sommer (2007), and Adrian (2004) are a few researchers who have studied Asian American leaders in community colleges. Torne (2013), for example, focused her research on female Asian American community college presidents along the Pacific Coast. She found the participants contributing their successes to having varied experiences, including prior teaching experience, and documenting accomplishments. The participants also spoke highly of and credited their career success to mentors and role models. Li-Bugg's (2011) study, conducted on Asian American leaders in community colleges, found significant influence of ethnicity and

culture on their leadership styles. Her sample reported of feeling *in-betweenness*, defined as being in between Asian and American, as a contributing factor to their career successes. The author attributed institutional racism and biases, by predominantly White college boards, as the root causes contributing to the lack of Asian American presidents in community colleges. Sommer (2007) similarly conducted a narrative study of five Asian American female participants who had pursued either vice-president or president opportunities. Her study found evidence of several barriers facing these participants, including biased search processes. Adrian (2004) used the dynamic constructivist framework to study Asian American leaders in higher education. She concluded, like the previously cited authors, that the Asian American participants, because they had experienced different backgrounds and cultures, used multiple interpretative frames in expressing their leadership styles.

## Adaptive Leadership Theory

As noted above, Asian American leaders may be influenced by their cultural and racial backgrounds, resulting in the feeling of "in-betweenness". Such cultural and racial identities may also influence their leadership characteristics and practices, including how they navigate and adapt to the predominantly White work environments. The use of adaptive leadership theory as a conceptual framework allows for the investigation of their experiences in terms of how they lead. Adaptive leadership theory evolved primarily from two other complex leadership theories of transformation leadership and situational leadership (Cojocar, 2009; Miller, 2016).

**Transformational leadership.** Transformational leadership is about leading changes to transform and improve on an existing structure, process, or product. Transformational leaders seek organizational transformation by inspiring and motivating the employees to innovate. They constantly push their employees to perform above and beyond their current job responsibilities

(Choi et al., 2017). They are highly influential in motivating others to work toward a common goal (Hickman, 2017). Their focus is all about making improvements, which in an existing well-structured environment could create uncertainty and impact morale (Choi et al., 2017).

**Situational leadership.** Situational leadership refers to a model in which the leader adjusts his or her leadership style to fit the employees' work styles. As the needs of the employees change over time, situational leaders must also continually adjust their leadership styles to align with the organization's goals and circumstances. Leadership theorists Kenneth Blanchard and Paul Hersey developed and studied this leadership style in the 1970s. They believed today's leaders could no longer lead based solely on positional power but must be flexible and adaptable ("What is Situational Leadership," 2014). Whitaker et al. (2009) expanded on the concept by defining that "the leader adapts her leadership behavior to followers' maturity, based on their willingness and ability to perform a specific task" (p. 17). Unlike in other leadership models, situational leaders do not believe in any single best leadership style. They may use one leadership style under one set of circumstances and a different leadership style for another set of conditions ("What is Situational Leadership," 2014). This flexibility is a major advantage of situational leadership. In contrast, a major drawback of situational leadership is the potential inconsistency in long-term organizational strategies.

**Adaptive leadership.** Adaptive leadership, as pioneered and researched by Heifetz et al. (2009), is a practical leadership framework that helps leaders adapt to fast-changing environments (Miller, 2016). Heifetz et al. (2009) proposed for leaders to let go of the idea that hierarchical leadership is desirable. The traditional top-down leadership model may actually hinder the flow of information in modern organizations, preventing collaboration and cooperation across departments. Organizational leaders instead should embrace an adaptive

approach to leadership to cultivate a culture of inclusivity and flexibility. By using the four dimensions of navigating business environments, leading with empathy, learning through self-correction and reflection, and creating win-win situations, adaptive leaders have the necessary tools to deal with unpredictable environments. Adaptive leadership is not about one leadership style. Just as different environments require different organizational models, adaptive leadership is about adapting different leadership models to different situations. An organization can transition from one leadership style to another over time. For example, during times of uncertainty and upheaval, the organization could experiment with transformational leadership. When the environment becomes stable, a switch to democratic leadership may be more appropriate. Adaptive leadership is intentionally about real-time evolution (Heifetz et al., 2009; Miller, 2016).

DeRue (2011) also readily challenged the traditional leadership models as too individualistic, hierarchical, and one-directional to be effective in today's complex environments. He believed traditional studies and literature about various leadership models are incomplete, as leadership is more complex and functions more like a social system than currently recognized by various leadership theories. Rather than focusing on the leader–follower characteristics, the author examined the leading–following process of relationships and social structures that enable organizations to adapt to changing environments. Other scholars agreed that most traditional leadership theories failed in understanding the social process involved in leadership (Avolio, 2007; Bedeian & Hunt, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hosking, 2006). That is, scholars generally believed leadership is "a social process of mutual and reciprocal influence in service of accomplishing a collective goal" (DeRue, 2011, p. 126). However, because most traditional leadership theories concentrated on how leaders influence their

subordinates, the process of leadership in terms of relationship between leaders and followers was often ignored (DeRue, 2011; Hunt & Dodge, 2000). DeRue (2011) argued such views on leadership are outdated; he instead made a case for contemporary organizations to conceptualize leadership as an adaptive process of leading and following in which anyone can participate.

Yukl and Masud (2010) also argued for organizations to adopt flexible and adaptive leadership in responding to the increasing pace of change. As the authors note, such changes affecting the organization may include increasing globalization and international commerce, rapid technological advances, changing cultural values, a more diverse workforce, and expanded use of outsourcing. As such, “mobilizing an organization to adapt its behaviors in order to thrive in a new environment is critical” (Heifetz et al., 1997, p. 46). Adaptive leadership requires the organizational leaders to engage employees at all levels and across departmental boundaries to collectively solve problems. Leaders must also be willing to challenge the employees to adapt to take on new roles, new relationships, new values, and new approaches to work (Heifetz et al., 1997). Heifetz’s adaptive leadership model could be applied in almost any organization, academic and nonacademic alike. Randall and Coakley (2007) examined two studies in which the adaptive leadership model served as the primary process for initiating change in academic environments. The findings showed that leadership is a process requiring the engagement of all stakeholders to be successful, and the two case studies also affirmed the greater potential for the use of the adaptive leadership model to guide change initiatives in organizations.

**Critical Race Theory**

While note a central focus of this study, Critical Race Theory provides another useful context within which to reflect upon the unique factors that distinguish the experiences of Asian American college presidents from those of their non-Asian American peers. CRT is a critical

theoretical framework that emerged from the field of legal studies during the 1970s to give a voice to people of color in response to racism in legal institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As its most basic premise, CRT acknowledges that race and racism are defining characteristics of American society (Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Taylor, 2000). In fact, racism is so ingrained in American society, including political, legal, and educational structures, that it has become almost unrecognizable (Delgado, 1995). Therefore, dialogue and conversations around and about race are commonly generated from a legacy and perspective of racial privilege (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The stories told by members of the dominant group, called majoritarian stories, are often aimed to ensure and justify their dominant position in maintaining their privilege (Love, 2004). Despite the claims of neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness, these majoritarian stories frequently distort and silence the experiences of the oppressed members (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In actuality, the majoritarian stories are often used as camouflage to sustain the self-interest of the powerful dominant groups in society (Manglitz et al., 2006). CRT has since been adopted by disciplines beyond the legal field, such as higher education, as a critical tool to analyze dominant systems of racial oppression (Museus & Iftika, 2013).

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) documented some core tenets of CRT as follows:

- *Intersectionality* is the examination of the interconnected nature of race, sex, class national origin, and sexual orientation.
- *White privilege* refers to the societal advantages and benefits that come with being a member of a dominant White people over non-White people.
- *Institutional racism* is a form of racism practiced and expressed by social and political institutions as opposed to individual racism. An example of institutional racism is the different access to goods, services, and opportunities in society because

of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Institutional racism is less perceptible than individual racism because of its more subtle nature.

- *Micro-aggression* refers to the intentional and nonintentional slight acts of racism directed toward any group of people. These include brief and constant verbal and behavioral indignities that communicate hostility, derogatory, and prejudicial insults.
- *Storytelling* refers to the technique of using narrative to illuminate and explore experiences of racial oppressions by naming one's own reality.
- *Counter-storytelling* is a tool employed by CRT scholars to contradict racist characterizations against a category of people. Counter-storytelling serves to reveal how dominant institutions reinforce and support unequal relations in society. It could also be used to expose, analyze, and challenge the dominant stories about racial privilege and other systems of oppression.

**Asian critical race theory**. Some Asian American scholars have been using CRT as a conceptual lens to study the experiences of Asian Americans in the context of racial oppression from the dominant systems (Museus & Iftika, 2013). Nevertheless, some scholars have argued for a new critical theory, or AsianCrit, to specifically examine the perspective and experience of Asian Americans in response to racial oppression (Museus & Iftika, 2013; Liu, 2009; Chang, 1993). Museus and Iftika (2013), for example, proposed a need for a conceptual framework that centers particularly on the experiences of Asian Americans with their racial realities in America. They offered an analytical framework of seven unique but interconnected tenets to examine and understand the ways racism affects Asian Americans. Their tenets of AsianCrit perspective are as follows:

- *Asianization* refers to the lumping of Asian Americans together into a monolithic group and the racialization of all Asian Americans as overachieving model minorities, perpetual foreigners, and threatening yellow perils (Museus & Iftika, 2013; Espiritu, 2008; Yu, 2006; Chon, 1995). Asianization is a "common mechanism through which society racially oppresses Asian Americans" (Museus & Iftika, 2013, p. 21).
- *Transnational contexts* draw attention to the historical and contemporary national and international contexts for Asian Americans. In contrast to Asianization, transnational contexts allow AsianCrit to analyze the individual historical and contemporary events affecting specific groups of Asian Americans. For example, the context for Filipino Americans during and after the United States colonial period regarding culture, economics, politics, and citizenship status would be very different from the context for Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong refugees arriving in United States after the American military intervention in Southeast Asia during the 1970s (Museus & Iftika, 2013; Takiki, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).
- *Reconstructive history* emphasizes the importance of reconstructing historical narrative to include the voices and contributions of Asian Americans in the United States. Reconstructive history also focuses on exposing historical racism and discrimination against Asian Americans.
- *Strategic anti-essentialism* advocates for Asian Americans to engage in actions and activities against racial oppressions. Strategic Anti-Essentialism specifically acknowledges that "race is a socially constructed phenomenon that can be shaped and reshaped by economic, political, and social forces (Museus & Iftika, 2013, p. 25).

- *Intersectionality* refers to the interconnection of racism and other systems, including sexism and heterosexism that mutually shape Asian American experiences. This AsianCrit tenet actually is a reiteration of the original CRT intersectionality tenet. The purposeful application of intersectionality can help facilitate deeper and more complex multilayered analyses of the ways social structures, political processes, and identities intersect to create certain conditions, realities, and experiences than what already exist" (Museus & Iftika, 2013, p. 27).
- The *story, theory, and praxis* tenet underscores the importance of counter-stories, theoretical works, and practices in advocating for Asian Americans in American society. Similar to CRT counter-storytelling, this AsianCrit tenet recognizes the need to provide the voices of Asian Americans as a narrative for the Asian American experience. Additionally, as the name suggests, the story, theory, and praxis tenet calls for Asian American stories and research, by Asian American scholars, to inform theory, which in turn is used to inform practice.
- *Commitment to social justice* is the last of the seven tenets in the AsianCrit, as proposed by Museus and Iftika (2013). AsianCrit as a critical theory is dedicated to advocating for ending all forms of oppression, including the elimination of racism and other systems of subordination (Museus & Iftika, 2013; Matsuda, 1991).

In offering the seven tenets, Museus and Iftika (2013) indicated their intention of "providing a conceptual foundation for scholarly discourse on racism and Asian Americans" (p. 23). The AsianCrit tenets were not intended to replace CRT tenets. Rather, AsianCrit used both CRT tenets and existing knowledge about Asian American experiences to develop the AsianCrit

tenets to further advance critical analysis of racism toward Asian Americans (Museus & Iftika, 2013).

**Chapter Summary**

The literature review in this section provided contextual background to the narrative study of the Asian American college presidents. The review first includes various scholarly articles about the experiences of Asians in the American society. As the study focused on their leadership practices, insights, and attributes, the literature review also examines a leadership concept based on Asian cultural perspective. In addition, some previous doctoral studies of Asian American leaders in higher education are also included. Adaptive leadership theory is discussed to provide context for the conceptual framework. The third section describes critical race theory in more detail, as well as a subsection on the emerging Asian critical race theory. The final section includes additional review on narrative inquiry as the research methodology for this study. The literature review is by no means exhaustive. It is rather an attempt to offer a general understanding of background information needed for me to conduct the study of the Asian American college presidents.

# Chapter 3

# Methodology

## Restatement of the Problem

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Asian Americans, numbering over 20.4 million, made up approximately 5.6 percent of the U.S. population in 2015 (U.S. Census, 2017). In the same year, Asian American enrollment in postsecondary institutions comprised 6.15 percent of total enrollment, with approximately 1.28 million students (NCES, 2017). The number of Asian Americans serving as university and college presidents, however, was estimated to be at less than 1.5 percent of all president positions at postsecondary institutions (Gasman et al., 2015; Prinster, 2016). This underrepresentation posed a major concern for Asian Americans. The underrepresentation of Asian Americans university and college presidents should be a major concern for higher education institutions as well. Research showed various benefits of diversity in the work environment, including increased creativity and innovation (Segal, 2019). Increasing diversity in higher education leadership fosters academic and social growth for students as well as the community (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

The purpose of this study was to examine the personal experiences of a sampling of Asian American community college presidents, with the intent of advancing knowledge about their leadership characteristics. In addition, the study sought to identify barriers and challenges faced by these Asian American leaders as they navigate their career paths in higher education. The findings may lead to an understanding of the contributing factors resulting in the small number of Asians being selected as college presidents. As such, the study also aimed to obtain valuable advice and recommendations from the participants for other aspiring Asian American

leaders who may be interested in pursuing college presidencies. The primary guiding research questions were as follows:

1. How have Asian American community college presidents navigated their career paths in higher education?
2. Do the participants perceive their ethnic and racial backgrounds as influencing factors for their respective career paths?

A related secondary question was as follows:

3. What advice would the participants give to aspiring Asian American leaders who are interested in becoming college presidents?

**Research Design, Framework, and Instrumentation**

This study employed the narrative inquiry as the research method to examine the personal experiences of Asian American community college presidents through semi-structured interviews. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative approach to gathering and collecting data through storytelling (Webster & Mertova, 2013). This method was used to provide a narrative inquiry into the unique experiences of each participant with the intent to "develop patterns and relationships of meaning" (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). With the lack of available scholarly researches on Asian American leaders, narrative inquiry allowed for these college presidents to "amplify [their] voices that may have otherwise remained silent" (Wang & Geale, 2014, p. 195).

Narrative inquiry was first used by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) as a research methodology to describe the personal stories of teachers (Wang & Geale, 2014). Since then, over the last three decades, narrative inquiry has been gaining acceptance as an important qualitative research methodology to investigate the human experience through their stories (Squire et al., 2014). Narrative inquiry has been used across a wide range of research disciplines

from education to philosophy, and from medicine to environmental science. Social science researchers, for example, have been especially adapting narrative inquiry to examine the understanding of particular aspects of life experience (Yang, 2011).

Webster and Mertova (2007) agreed that "narrative inquiry is set in human stories" (p. 3). The use of narrative inquiry "provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world they depicted through their stories" (Webster & Mertova, 2011, p. 2). Unlike traditional empirical research methods with well-defined concept of validity, narrative inquiry does not strive to reach any conclusions of certainty. It instead seeks to produce findings with supportable reality of the human experience (Squire et al, 2014). As this is a study of Asian American leaders, whose experiences are often not told, narrative inquiry also serves to "amplify voices that may have otherwise remained silent" (Wang & Geale, 2014, p. 195).

This study used 13 open-ended interview questions on the participants. The interview questions (see Appendix C) were developed to closely address the guiding research questions. Additionally, some of the questions were specifically crafted to elicit responses relating to the conceptual framework of narrative inquiry. As noted previously, the focus of the interview questionnaire was to collect data on the participants' personal journeys to their positions as college presidents. The questionnaire also included questions seeking advice and recommendations for other Asian Americans who may be interested in pursuing college presidency career paths.

The data were collected through face-to-face interviews with each of the participants. Each interview lasted about 90 minutes. All interviews were intentionally semi-structured. The interview questionnaire was emailed to all participants about two weeks before the interview.

By providing the questionnaire in advance, I intended to build trust with the participants and allow time for them to prepare for their interviews. I used the questionnaire to guide the discussion during the interview, but I encouraged the participants to tell their stories in a manner and format most comfortable to them. Participants were free to take the conversations beyond the provided questions. When necessary, I asked follow-up questions. Time was the major restriction during the interview process, as each session was scheduled for only 90 minutes.

All of the face-to-face interviews were voice-recorded with the participant's permission. Although I kept detailed notes during the interview, the use of a voice recorder allowed for an accurate record of our discussions. After the interview, I used a speech-to-text transcription website to transcribe the recordings. I uploaded each of the interview recordings, in mp3 format, to the Temi website. Within approximately 20 minutes of each upload, the website returned a transcribed Microsoft Word document for download. I reviewed each transcript for accuracy before emailing the transcripts to the participants for their review. Out of the five transcripts, I found that three had an accuracy of above 95 percent. The other two had an accuracy of around 90 percent. The most common mistakes were the proper names of people and locations. The two transcripts with lower accuracy rates were likely due to the perceived foreign accents of the participants, as English was their second language.

As part of the review of the transcripts, I conducted online research of the participants to confirm their narrative stories. I first browsed their college websites for public media releases about the participants. I then looked at their various online presences, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Additionally, I searched for published news articles regarding their appointments and selections to their college president positions. In all cases, I found the stories told by the participants to align with this publicly available information.

Once the transcripts were finalized, I emailed each one as a document attachment to each participant. The intention was to provide the participants with an opportunity to make corrections or changes as they see fit in the transcript. In my email, I asked the participant to review the transcript and respond to me, within a month of receipt, with any corrections, additions, or deletions. Three participants responded with acknowledgments of receiving the transcripts. None of the participants responded with corrections, however. A short sample of a transcript is provided in Appendix E.

**Population and Sample**

The participants for this study were intentionally selected as samples of Asian American community college presidents. Given the small number of Asian American presidents in postsecondary institutions in general, I intentionally sought out all prospective participants in the community college systems in Washington, Oregon, and California. Using various sources, including online searches, my own professional networks, and referrals from colleagues, I initially identified 11 potential participants. Upon receiving IRB approval, I sent an invitation letter (see Appendix A) to five prospective participants in late October 2018. The invitation letter explained the purpose of the study and included a brief introduction of me as a graduate researcher. The invitations were sent to the participants' work email addresses. I also copied the participants' executive assistants. In addition to the invitation, I sent a consent form (see Appendix B). I asked the prospective participants to return the consent forms to indicate their interest in participating in face-to-face interviews. Within two weeks of my sending the invitations, all five invitees responded with an acceptance to participate. I sent no other invitations to other potential participants after the five persons accepted.

The five participants were purposely selected to ensure a mix of diverse ethnic backgrounds, genders, and locations. The five invitees included a Chinese American, a Vietnamese American, a Filipino American, a Japanese American, and an Indian American. Of the five invitees, three were women and two were men. Three were presidents of colleges in Washington. One was in Oregon, and one was in California. Two of the participants were single-campus presidents who reported directly to their boards of trustees. Two of the participants were presidents of colleges within multi-college districts who reported to the chancellors of their respective districts. One participant held the title of college president with supervisory responsibilities over three campus presidents. For full disclosure, I must also note that I had been acquainted with two of the participants because of past interactions in the community college system in Washington.

**Research Settings**

All five face-to-face interviews were scheduled between November and December 2018. I conducted all five interviews at the participants' workplaces. It was my intention to visit all the colleges where the participants worked to gain a deeper understanding of their workplace environments. None of my visits lasted long enough to fully immerse myself in each participant's environment. However, by spending some time touring the colleges, I was able to gain additional insight into the daily contexts of the participants and their constituents.

My first interview took place at a college in Western Washington. The college was in an urban setting in the middle of the downtown area of a mid-size city. The campus essentially consisted of a massive multilevel red-brick building, a parking garage, and several outlying parking lots. For my second interview, I traveled to a community college in Oregon. The college was the largest campus in this multi-campus district. The campus was situated on a hill

overlooking beautiful landscaping including a city park across from the college's main entrance. I toured several buildings, including the library, bookstore, and performing arts center during my visit. Next, I flew to the Bay Area in California to meet with the third participant. The college was nestled among many tall trees and some steep hills. The walk from the visitor parking lot to the main campus required some physical mobility, as I counted 137 steps uphill. Before my visit, the college was forced to close for two days because of smoke from a wildfire, although the campus itself did not suffer any damage. I returned to Western Washington to complete the last two interviews. The fourth college I visited was in a suburb of Seattle. Despite its location, the campus felt surprisingly rural with a beautiful view of the Puget Sound. I was able to tour the college's newest building. The fifth college was about a 20-minute drive from Seattle. I had visited this college several times before my visit for this study. As such, I did not spend as much time touring this location as I did with the other four locations.

All five interviews took place in the participants' private offices at their home campuses. All five participants appeared to be quite at ease and focused during the interviews as suggested by their body language. All participants seemed to be quite comfortably situated in very relaxed body postures. Ms. Larch for example injected humor in her answers on several occasions. Mr. Maple was genuinely interested in making sure that I had the time to take notes of the conversation. The private settings allowed me to productively conduct the interviews without any interruptions. The only exception was the interview with Ms. Teak. Due to various unscheduled activities, my interview with Ms. Teak started later than originally scheduled. The interview time was also shortened to accommodate her other schedules.

**Data Collection**

Before the beginning of the interviews, I notified all of the participants that their confidentiality, including the names of their current institutions, would be protected in all written accounts through the use of pseudonyms and study codes. All files relating to the interview were housed on a password-protected server. However, I also informed the participants that their identities could still be revealed by inference, given the small number of Asian American community college presidents in the nation. All five participants accepted the risk and agreed to proceed with the interview.

The participants in general were open in their conversations during the interviews. They were flexible in allowing and responding to follow-up and clarification questions. All except one appeared to be eager to tell their stories about their personal experiences. One participant initially seemed to be reserved with his responses. Nonetheless, he became quite engaged in sharing his story in the second half of the interview.

Three of the interviews lasted about 90 minutes each. One interview lasted about 75 minutes. One interview lasted less than an hour because of an unexpected scheduling conflict for the participant. For this interview, the participant was able to answer only the first 10 of the 13 questions before we ran out of time. The participant agreed to a follow-up phone interview at a later date. Nevertheless, because of the difficulty of arranging a mutually available time, I was not able to follow up with a phone interview in a timely matter. Instead, I asked the participant to reply to the remaining questions in writing. The participant emailed the responses to me approximately four weeks after our initial in-person interview.

**Reliability, Validity, and Data Analysis**

The interview questions I initially developed underwent several revisions. I reduced the number of interview questions to 13 from the initial 24. I reworked the interview questions to align with the conceptual framework but, most importantly to closely address the guiding research questions. I tested the interview questions with two Asian American colleagues who were not community college presidents to ensure the questions were clear. I also practiced reading the questions out loud in at least two different settings to test the voice recorder.

Data triangulation was vital to test the study's validity. Creswell (2003) suggested the use of multiple data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. The primary source of data for this study came from the participant interviews. However, I also collected supporting documents both before and after the interviews to collaborate and confirm the participants' narrative stories. These supporting documents included online research of the participant's biographies, press releases, and social media profiles. I also continuously reflected on my own experiences and identity as an Asian American leader as I analyzed the data.

I followed the data analysis procedures for qualitative data as described by Creswell (2003). As noted earlier, after the interviews, I used a speech-to-text transcription website to transcribe the recordings. The transcripts were then emailed to the participants for review and correction. Three participants acknowledged receipt of the email. However, none responded with any corrections or changes. Data analysis involved reading, reviewing, coding, and recoding of interview transcripts and notes. Coding involved highlighting, transcribing, and circling key words and phrases on both hard copy and electronic copy of the transcripts. I made notes of descriptive and memorable quotes for use in the narrative of findings. Once coding was completed, I looked for key themes from the data. One particular challenge was trying to

identify common themes between the primary and secondary data, as the interview questions were significantly different. At times, it felt like the participants' stories appear to be random and disorganized due to the voluminous amount of data. The research questions served as the central framework for identifying all common themes. Throughout the data analysis process, I utilized the adaptive leadership theory as the primary lens to review and interpret the data. Critical race theory, however, was also used heavily as a secondary lens to connect the participants' experiences with the research questions.

## Participant Profiles

In an effort to bring the narrative stories of the participants to life, I compiled a brief profile for each participant, using data collected from the actual interviews as well as supporting documents. To ensure the participants' confidentiality, I changed all their names to pseudonyms or study codes, using the names of trees to symbolize their career growth. The aspen, larch, maple, redwood, and teak trees can all grow to over 100 feet tall. I randomly assigned the tree names to the participants. The five participants, for the rest of this written inquiry, will be known as Mr. Aspen, Ms. Larch, Mr. Maple, Ms. Redwood, and Ms. Teak. Additionally, I selected five colors—red, orange, yellow, green, and blue—to refer to their respective current institutions. These colors are chosen to symbolize the diversity of these five participants, as they traced their ethnic backgrounds to five different Asian countries of India, China, Japan, Philippines, and Vietnam. In the following section, all of the participants' direct quotations are noted in quotation marks.

**Mr. Aspen.** Mr. Aspen was selected by the board of trustees to serve as president of Red Community College in summer 2018. By the time of my interview with him in December 2018, he had barely completed his first six months in the position. Mr. Aspen proudly proclaimed that

being "president of Red Community College is the greatest job that I ever had." Red Community College had an enrollment of over 20,000 students in academic year 2017–2018, including over 1,400 international students from 62 countries. About 40 percent of the students at Red Community College were reportedly students of color, and about 30 percent spoke English as a second language. As of 2017, the college offered over 60 associate degrees in 25 programs of study.

Before being selected as president at Red Community College, Mr. Aspen served as a provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at a community college in the Midwest. He had held positions as dean of instruction and chief of academic affairs at different colleges in the area. With over 20 years of experience in higher education, Mr. Aspen had earlier served as dean of business and computer science at a community college on the East Coast and dean of business and social science at a college in the South. Additionally, he had taught as both adjunct and tenured faculty in various community colleges before transitioning to administration.

Despite his impressive résumé in higher education, Mr. Aspen admitted that he had wanted to be in the corporate business world earlier in his career. He had worked as a senior financial analyst for a corporate governance consulting firm and an investment analyst for a brokerage firm. At one time, Mr. Aspen also took the helm of a startup company as chief executive officer. He expressed no regrets in transitioning to academia however. He recalled being "accidentally" introduced to teaching as a guest speaker in a class and then "absolutely fell in love with teaching." Mr. Aspen went on to become an adjunct instructor and then tenured faculty, teaching economics and finance, his two areas of expertise.

With four graduate degrees, Mr. Aspen's academic credentials were as impressive as his professional achievements. He earned both his doctorate and master's degrees in economics

from an international university. His other two graduate degrees included a master of business administration (MBA) and a master's in finance from two U.S. universities.

Mr. Aspen immigrated to the United States from India almost 31 years ago. He reminisced about following his older brother in searching for a career opportunity in the new country. Several of his family members had since also immigrated to the United States. His family ties and connections, however, remained strong with his native country. He frequently returned to India to check up on other relatives and a family business. Mr. Aspen attributed his passion for learning to his Indian cultural background, which values higher education.

**Ms. Larch.** Ms. Larch served as president of Orange Technical College, a public two-year college offering certificates and associate degrees primarily in professional technical programs, with some associate degrees transferrable to four-year universities. Orange Technical College, with an enrollment of approximately 6,700 students, was ranked among the top 25 two-year technical and trade colleges in the United States by a nationally reputable magazine in 2018. Ms. Larch had been in her current position for approximately eight months as of my interview with her in November 2018. Her academic background included a doctorate in higher education leadership and an MBA.

Ms. Larch, a Chinese American, immigrated to the United States with her husband in the late 1990s. She left behind an established career as a product manager for a large company to be reunited with her in-laws in the United States. Upon her arrival, she enrolled in a community college to learn English. While she had learned some English in China, Ms. Larch disclosed that her English skills were so limited that she could not speak or understand much in the new country. As of our interview, almost 20 years after her arrival in the United States, she still

considered her English skills a weakness. Ms. Larch readily admitted, “it was difficult to learn a new language in your 30s.”

Ms. Larch however never allowed her English limitations to impede her pursuit of education. Upon gaining adequate English skills, Ms. Larch enrolled in a computer network program with the intention of following the footsteps of her husband, a computer programmer. She found a job in an information technology support department at the same college where she had earned her computer networking degree. After two years, Ms. Larch planned to return to the business world but decided first to pursue an MBA, specializing in project management. Upon earning her MBA, Ms. Larch unexpectedly found an opportunity to be a branch campus manager at a college, where she worked closely with students. It was in that position that Ms. Larch discovered her “true calling to stay in higher education.” According to Ms. Larch, she “felt how she could positively impact students’ lives” with her daily work. Ms. Larch, however, was not finished with her own educational pursuits just yet. In 2010, she enrolled in a doctoral program in higher education leadership. During the pursuit of her PhD, her professional career also advanced rapidly, with a promotion to a director and finally to associate dean. In 2013, Ms. Larch landed a new position at Orange Technical College as Dean of Continuing Education. She did not know it at the time, but this new position would serve as a launching pad for her presidency later at Orange Technical College. In three short years, she became Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success. In March 2018, Ms. Larch was named president of Orange Technical College to replace the outgoing president.

Ms. Larch credited her Chinese parents with instilling the values of education in her. She quoted her parents, saying “education can change your life” for the better. She remembered her parents pushing her to pursue education beyond her MBA, saying, “You’re not done with MBA

… there is always something new to learn." For her parents, being a lifelong learner was especially important. Ms. Larch also thanked her husband for his strong support. In fact, she said her husband pushed her harder than her parents in the pursuit of education. She partly attributed her success in becoming a college president to her husband's believing in her. Ms. Larch also credited her work ethics and her ability to solve problems for her success in becoming a college president at Orange Technical College.

**Mr. Maple.** Mr. Maple began his tenure as president of Yellow Community College in August 2016. Unlike the other four participants of this study, who were all in their first president positions, Mr. Maple had previously served as president at another community college. Yellow Community College was one of the largest community colleges on the West Coast, with over 73,000 students. The college offered a comprehensive array of programs and degrees, from professional technical to academic transfer. During my interview with Mr. Maple in late November 2018, he noted an interesting connection between Yellow Community College's location and his family history. From the windows of his office, he pointed to a place beyond the tree line where his mother and grandparents were once held for three months, before being forcibly relocated to a concentration camp during World War II.

Mr. Maple is a *Sansei* or a third-generation Japanese American. His grandparents immigrated to the United States in the late 1800s, becoming the first generation of Japanese in America. Mr. Maple's maternal grandparents settled in Washington State. They started a farm by purchasing a few hundred acres of land and cleared it by hand. A few years later, however, the Washington State Legislature passed a law prohibiting people of Asian ancestry to purchase or lease property or farmland. The law also made it illegal for any White people to sell land to people of Asian descent. This law essentially wiped out his grandparents' farm and their

livelihood. As a result, the grandparents and Mr. Maple's mother became sharecroppers. They followed the crops by season across a very rural part of Washington State at that time. After several years, the family eventually was able to strike a deal with a local Native American tribe to lease some land. As a sovereign nation, the tribe was not bound by the Washington State law preventing the lease of land to Mr. Maple's grandparents.

Because of the Naturalization Act of 1790, Mr. Maple's grandparents were not allowed to become U.S. citizens during their entire lives in America and were prohibited from owning land because of their citizenship status. His parents were *Nisei* or second generation of Japanese Americans who were born in the United States to immigrant parents. The *Nisei* were U.S. citizens by birthright. By leasing the land from a tribe, his grandparents had hoped to pass on the property to Mr. Maples' mother and uncles, once they became of age. The family was making a comeback when World War II broke out. Under Executive Order 9066, issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, some 120,000 Japanese Americans, including Mr. Maple's mother and grandparents, were forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to concentration camps. His mother and grandparents were temporarily relocated to a camp in Oregon for several months, before eventually being interned to the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp in Wyoming for the rest of the war. On Mr. Maple's paternal side, his father, uncles, aunts, and grandparents were also deported from their homes in the Pacific Northwest to the Tule Lake Segregation Center in California. Mr. Maple recalled the family stories of his uncles and aunts protesting "the injustice of their incarceration." His uncles demanded the release of the family from the camp when they were asked to join the military. Mr. Maple's father nevertheless did volunteer to serve in the U.S. Army while the rest of the family remained interned at the Tule Lake Segregation Center for the rest of World War II.

After the war, Mr. Maple's father came to Washington State to attend college on the G.I. Bill. Coincidentally, Mr. Maple's mother also returned to Washington State from Heart Mountain Relocation Camp. She too enrolled in classes at a large research university. It was here that Mr. Maple's parents "met and fell in love". Mr. Maple cited both of his parents' pursuit of higher education as the foundation for his own interest in attending college. He recalled wanting to go to college at a very young age, before he "even knew what college was all about". Based on his parents' story, Mr. Maple just knew college was "a place where your life would change." Mr. Maple credited his parents for instilling the "transformative power of higher education" in him.

Mr. Maple attended a regional public university upon graduating from high school. He earned a degree in physical education and later taught health and fitness at a local community college. After a few years, Mr. Maple moved to a nearby college to be a wellness center manager. He was soon promoted to athletic director and started several athletic programs at the college. Despite his love for physical education, Mr. Maple became more interested in student services administration instead. He soon landed a position as Director of Student Success and Retention Services within the same college. He recalled finding 'the passion for serving students" through this position. He returned to school shortly after to pursue a graduate degree in educational leadership and policy studies at a top-ranked public research university. Upon receiving his master's degree, he found a job as an Assistant Dean for Student Services at another community college, although he did not stay there long. In 2006, he was selected to be Vice President of Student Services at a multi-campus community college district, his fourth job at a community college in Washington State. Mr. Maple became college campus president in July 2010, at a college in the same college district.

Surprisingly, in 2013, Mr. Maple decided to put his career in higher education on hold. He left his position as college president to join the Obama administration as a political appointee to work on various post-secondary initiatives. He credited the experience working for the federal government with giving him national perspectives on education. In August 2016, Mr. Maple returned to higher education when he was selected as college president to lead Yellow Community College.

**Ms. Redwood.** Ms. Redwood was born in South Carolina to Filipino immigrant parents. Her father, serving in the U.S. Navy at the time, was stationed at a naval base in the state. Originally from the Philippines, he had enlisted in the U.S. Navy under a special immigration program. In the 1960s, Filipinos in the Philippines were often recruited by the U.S. military with an offer for a path to an American citizenship. Ms. Redwood's mother also immigrated to the United States on a special program for Filipino health care workers. The U.S. government offered immigration status for Filipino/Filipina doctors and nurses willing to serve in areas, especially rural America, with a shortage of health care workers. Trained as a nurse in the Philippines, Ms. Redwood's mother was brought to the East Coast to work, where she met her future husband, Ms. Redwood's father.

During the mid-1980s, Ms. Redwood's father relocated the family to the Pacific Northwest as part of his navy assignment, when she was about to start middle school. The family then decided to put down roots in Washington State. Ms. Redwood remembered her family quickly integrating with a small community of Filipinos living near the naval station. Unlike her family, however, these Filipinos were migrant workers and farmers who had been settling in the Pacific Northwest since the 1930s. Ms. Redwood recalled being immersed in the Filipino culture, language, and customs growing up in this community. Upon graduating from

high school, Ms. Redwood attended a state university. Her father had wanted her to pursue a law degree, while her mother pressed her to become a nurse. Ms. Redwood, however, chose education as a major. She became a high school teacher after earning her undergraduate degree. Ms. Redwood recalled wanting to positively “impact underrepresented students of color” as the reason for becoming a teacher. In working closely with the college-bound students in high school, Ms. Redwood discovered an interest in working in the community college setting.

In 1998, she joined Purple Community College as a manager in the Upper Bound Department, a high school outreach program. While working with Upper Bound, Ms. Redwood returned to school to earn her master’s in public administration at a research university. She was then promoted to Director of Outreach and Recruitment. She worked on several different grants, including a Title III grant focusing on helping English learners attain English proficiency skills. Ms. Redwood credited her work with the grants in providing her with the budget and supervisory experience needed for career advancement. She was promoted to dean of advising in 2008. In the same year, Ms. Redwood decided to return to a regional public university to pursue a doctoral degree in higher education leadership. She earned her PhD in 2011. Another promotion soon followed, as she became Vice President of Student Services at Purple Community College in 2012. With the unexpected retirement of the president of Purple Community College in early 2018, Ms. Redwood decided to throw her hat in the ring to pursue her first college presidency position. She was selected as president of Purple Community College in July 2018.

Purple Community College was a part of a multi-college district. The college had an enrollment of 8,741 students in the 2017–2018 academic year. Approximately 40 percent of the students reported being students of color. Among the colleges in the district, Purple Community

College had the largest percentage of students enrolled in professional technical programs, at 56 percent of its student enrollment.

**Ms. Teak.** Ms. Teak proudly proclaimed to be a first-generation college graduate in her family. She came to the United States as a refugee from war-torn Vietnam at a very young age. She recalled the story of her family escaping Vietnam on a fishing boat during the final days of the Vietnam War. The family endured 25 days drifting at sea before being rescued by a Japanese cargo ship. The ship took them to a temporary refugee camp in Japan. The family eventually was resettled by the U.S. government in the Midwest, in the autumn of 1975. Within a couple of years, however, Ms. Teak's father relocated the family to the South "in search of warmer weather." The family moved again to California when she was 14. They lived in low-income housing, where Ms. Teak attended a nearby predominantly African American and Latino high school. From this environment, Ms. Teak developed a passion for community leadership and service. She served as a student representative on the local school board. She joined the Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps as a cadet colonel brigade commander. She graduated from high school as the valedictorian. The town mayor even declared Ms. Teak's high school graduation day as her day in recognition of her community service.

Unlike many other community college presidents, Ms. Teak became a community college president through a very untraditional career path. Upon graduating from high school, she went to an Ivy League institution to obtain a bachelor's degree in philosophy. She then earned her law degree from one of the top public law schools in the nation. Ms. Teak pursued a career providing legal assistance to school districts on issues of desegregation, bilingual education, and student discipline. She later worked as a field representative for a state assembly member. Ms. Teak was active and well-known among the Vietnamese American community in California.

She co-authored a book highlighting the contributions of Vietnamese Americans to American society.

Ms. Teak transitioned her career to the community college in 2003 with an appointment as general counsel at a community college district in California. During her tenure as general counsel at the district, she was assigned several other temporary positions, including vice chancellor for human resources and district-wide strategic planning manager. In July 2015, Ms. Teak went on to serve as interim general counsel for the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. Less than a year later, however, Ms. Teak found an opportunity at Blue College that she "can't possibly pass up." With the encouragement of her mentors and acquaintances in the community college system, she applied for the position of president at Blue College. Ms. Teak outperformed several other candidates in the interview process as part of the national search. The board of trustees officially appointed Ms. Teak to be Blue College president effective July 1, 2016.

Blue College was part of a two-college district. As of the fall 2017 semester, the college had an enrollment of 13,633 students. Almost 70 percent of the student population were students of color. The college also had one of the largest Asian and Asian American student populations among community colleges in the nation, with about 32 percent of the students at Blue College reported to be of Asian ethnicity. The college also had a high percentage of nontraditional-age students. According to Blue College's own statistics, almost half of its student population in the fall 2017 semester was over the age of 25. The college also attracted over 1,600 international students from all over the world to the campus.

**Supplemental Interviews**

In most community colleges, the board of trustees, serving as the governing body for the college, is typically responsible for hiring and appointing the college presidents. In an effort to enhance the quality of the study, I solicited additional perspectives from some trustees on the topic of Asian American college presidents. I contacted five current community college trustees for an interview using an email invitation (see Appendix D for a sample of the email). In addition to the email invitation, I forwarded five open-ended interview questions for the trustees to preview (see Appendix D). I was acquainted with three of the trustees through my professional network. The other two trustees were referred by a colleague specifically for this study. It did not appear that four of the trustees had worked directly with any of the presidents interviewed for this study. One of the trustees, however, had served on a search committee in selecting one of the presidential participants. Nonetheless, to ensure confidentiality, I did not disclose the presidents' identities to the trustee participants.

In response to my invitations, two of the trustees agreed to face-to-face interviews. I conducted both interviews during the last week of April 2019. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. In addition to keeping detailed notes of the interview, I voice-recorded the interviews with the trustees' permission. The other three trustees responded with an acceptance for a telephone interview. All three telephone interviews were conducted during the last week of May 2019. Although the phone interviews were not voice-recorded, I kept detailed notes of the conversations. Two of these three trustees also emailed me their written responses to the interview questions after the phone interviews. In general, I followed the same data collection process with the trustees as the presidential participants. The data collected from the trustee interviews will be included separately as part of the Findings in the Supplemental Data section.

The following is a brief profile of each trustee. Their names have been changed to Trustee 1, Trustee 2, Trustee 3, Trustee 4, and Trustee 5 to ensure their confidentiality. The pseudonym of "trustee" is purposely chosen to differentiate the supplemental data from the primary data of the presidential participants. The biographical data for the trustees were collected primarily from researching their institutions' websites. During the interviews, I collected additional demographic data from the trustees by asking follow-up questions.

Table 1

*Trustee Demographical Data*

| **Participant** | **Ethnicity** | **Years as Trustee** | **Number of President Searches** | **Professional Experience** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trustee 1 | Filipino | 9 | 1 | Practicing Attorney |
| Trustee 2 | Pacific Islander | 8 | 1 | Non-profit Community Activist |
| Trustee 3 | White | 10 | 2 | Financial Advisor |
| Trustee 4 | Black | 9 | 1 | Business Consultant |
| Trustee 5 | Korean | 10 | 2 | Educational Consultant |

Trustee 1, a Filipino descent, was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. He had been a practicing attorney for over three decades. He earned his law degree from one of the most prestigious law schools in the United States. As of our interview, Trustee 1 was in his ninth year as a community college trustee. He had participated in one community college presidential search during his tenure as a trustee.

Trustee 2's heritage is Pacific Islander. Proud of her community activism, she worked in various leadership roles for several nonprofit and community-based agencies for over 20 years. She had earned a bachelor's degree in social work from a large research university. Trustee 2

was in her eighth year as a community college trustee as of the date of our interview. She had served on one college presidential selection committee during her time as a trustee.

Trustee 3, who is White and a Washington native, was in his 10th year as a community college trustee. His professional career included over 27 years of working as a financial advisor. Trustee 3 had served in the U.S. Army and later earned his bachelor's degree in political science from a regional public university in the Midwest. During his tenure as a trustee, he took part in selecting two college presidents.

Trustee 4 was an African American writer and business consultant. She had served as a community college trustee since 2010. Trustee 4 graduated from a highly selective private university on the West Coast, majoring in business and marketing. Her most recent involvement with a college presidential search was in 2018.

Trustee 5, of Korean descent, was in her 12th year as a community college trustee. In addition to serving as a trustee for her community college, Trustee 5 had been actively involved with the national trustee association. Her professional work experience included investment banking and community development. Trustee 5 earned her bachelor's degree in international studies and political science from a large research university. She had participated in two college presidential searches during her time as a trustee.

**Chapter Summary**

This study employed the method narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Wang & Geale, 2014; Squire et al, 2014) to examine the personal experiences of five Asian American community college presidents through semi-structured interviews. I selected and invited these five participants to participate in the study with the intention of ensuring a diverse sample. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, I have changed their actual names to study

codes using the names of various trees. Five trustees were also invited to participate in the study as supplemental participants. The supplemental data collected from the trustees help to enhance the overall quality of the study. As had been my intention from the beginning of this paper, the emphasis of my writing is on the telling and re-telling of personal stories. The biographical profiles of the presidents and the trustees are provided as crucial background information for exploring their own narratives about leadership practices, insights, and attributes in the next chapter.

# Chapter 4

## Findings

The data collected represent the participants' own narratives. During the interviews, all participants appeared to be eager to tell their stories. As a researcher, I have attempted my best to capture their voices in the manner I believe they wanted their stories to be told. The findings are presented through the research questions. All direct quotations from the participants are shown in quotation marks.

The five participants came from very diverse backgrounds with very different career paths. The table below provides an overview of the participants' demographics as a brief recap of the profiles presented in the last chapter. The demographics data were provided by the participants themselves on the consent form.

Table 2

*Participant Demographical Data*

| Participant | Ethnicity | Highest Degree | Position | Years in Position | Report to |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mr. Aspen | Indian | PhD Economics | President | < 1 Year | Board |
| Ms. Larch | Chinese | PhD Education | President | < 1 Year | Board |
| Mr. Maple | Japanese | Master of Education | President | 2 Years | Board |
| Ms. Redwood | Filipino | PhD Education | President | < 1 Year | Chancellor |
| Ms. Teak | Vietnamese | Juris Doctor | President | 2 Years | Chancellor |

### First Research Question

The first research question was "How have Asian American community college presidents navigated their career paths in higher education?" This question sought to explore the professional experiences of the participants through their own voices and their own stories. I

wanted to hear how they have managed major challenges, competing priorities, and supporting employees. In addition, for those presidents reporting to a board, I wanted to obtain some perspectives from their experience in working with their respective boards. Furthermore, I also wanted to know how they sought for support for themselves. Lastly, I was interested in identifying their leadership characteristics through their stories.

**Managing major challenges.** As college presidents or chief executive officers of their institutions, all five participants must manage numerous challenges. Their stories of managing institutional challenges, especially financial challenges, are not unique to being Asian American leaders of their respective institutions. As part of the narrative inquiry framework, however, their stories are presented to demonstrate that they have the leadership abilities and skills to effectively manage work challenges compared to their non-Asian counterparts.

Mr. Aspen, with an extensive background in business and economics, noted the "college budget is always front and center … in my mind." Fortunately, he said the current financial situation at Red Community College is relatively stable. So, as a new president with less than six months at the college, his priorities had been "getting to know the college and the community." He had been visiting and learning about the college's departments and programs. He wanted to build connections with the faculty and staff. Mr. Aspen's focus, however, had not only been internal but also external to the college. He wanted "a stronger partnership with the community, the chambers of commerce … and the local district legislators." Mr. Aspen added, "We are in the people business, and this place is all about the connecting part."

Ms. Larch agreed that her biggest challenge as college president has been managing the budget at Orange Technical College. As part of the community college system in the state, Orange Technical College had been funded within the state allocation model, which is largely

based on enrollment. Due to the declining enrollment in the past few years, Orange Technical College's finances had been greatly affected. Ms. Larch said she spent significant time managing the financial shortfalls. Internally, at the college, she worked closely with her executive cabinet to control expenditures. Unfortunately, she "had to make some budget cuts affecting people and programs." Externally, she had been "working with the other presidents in the system to find ways to revise the current allocation model." She pointed to the resource-intensive cost of operating a primarily technical college, in terms of equipment and labor, compared to a comprehensive community college. According to Ms. Larch, on average, it costs at least 50 percent more to educate a student in professional technical programs than to educate a transfer student. Because of industry and other requirements, the typical faculty-to-student ratio tends to be significantly lower than for academic transfer programs. Additionally, professional technical programs, like manufacturing and machinery maintenance, generally require considerable investments in equipment. Ms. Larch had recently restructured her college foundation to "look into the possibility of building more partnerships" to help reduce the strains on the budget. For example, she contacted industry partners to seek "funding support for certain expensive equipment replacement for my health care programs." Ms. Larch acknowledged, however, that her college's "financial outlook … continues to be bleak in the near future."

Mr. Maple unhesitatingly cited addressing budget issues as his foremost challenge upon becoming president at Yellow College two years ago. Yellow College relied heavily on levies for funding of the college's operations. A tax initiative to fund a significant portion of the personnel retirement system, however, failed in November 2016, "which would have been a revenue solution for the college to pursue the reforming of its retirement system." Almost immediately upon being appointed as Yellow College president, Mr. Maple had to work with his

budget team to find alternative options. Some of those options were still being explored as of the time of our interview. The country's political environment also unexpectedly presented another major challenge for Mr. Maple early in his tenure as president at Yellow College. Upon the election of Donald Trump, many students and other stakeholders at the college were advocating for sanctuary college status. Mr. Maple had to carefully consider and weigh the various consequences of proclaiming sanctuary status. He ultimately decided to support the idea by submitting a proposal to the board of trustees. With the board's adoption of the proposal, Yellow College became a sanctuary college in early 2017. Mr. Maple said he "was in complete alignment with where the college needed and wanted to go at that particular time." Mr. Maple acknowledged that addressing these two challenges had earned him the trust of the college community as a new president. He believed "whenever there is a transition in leadership, it takes a while for people to trust you." By tackling those two immediate issues facing Yellow College, Mr. Maple intentionally created an opportunity to build trust with the college constituents.

Not surprisingly, Ms. Redwood also mentioned budget as the top of her priority list. Purple College, similar to Orange Technical College, had been facing declining enrollment for several years before her appointment as college president. However, she also quickly pointed out that her priorities were always with "issues of equity and diversity, because those are in line with my personal values." In addition, she would prioritize student success issues and needs "because those are within the institution's values." Ms. Redwood asserted that she would not compromise those values even in a budget-challenged environment. She readily admitted as a new college president it appeared that "everything coming to me is a high priority." She equated it to a "firehose" of high-pressure water coming nonstop for the past five months of her tenure as college president. It was not always from the internal college employees and students. The local

community and elected leaders also had made demands on her priority list. Ms. Redwood cited an example of a recently passed local levy to fund community college for regional students. Because of the potential benefits provided to the college, the levy became an overnight priority for Ms. Redwood, although she had not yet "worked out all the details to move forward." She acknowledged with a sense of satisfaction in her voice that "people have wanted change for a long time and see me as the person who can do that."

Ms. Teak readily agreed with the other participants that budget woes and declining enrollment topped the list of her challenges as president of Blue College. In fact, on the same morning of my interview with her, she had met with her executive cabinet to strategize about the various budget reduction options for the institution. Ms. Teak maintained the need to be strategic about reducing the budget. She emphasized, "you don't just cut, but you have to also think about where to invest." She believed in "opportunities for budget reorganization so that you are better positioned for increased funding in the future through increasing enrollment." Equity, however, was one area she would not compromise on. Ms. Teak proudly claimed to have a "protectionist attitude about equity work and initiatives on campus." At her institution, she believed equity work provides the necessary morale for employees to navigate the difficult and tumultuous times in dealing with budget issues. Ms. Teak specifically mentioned her vision of creating "a college with borders or walls." She wanted her college "to be a bridge to the local and global communities."

**Managing competing priorities.** In addition to managing the institutional financial resources, the participants must devote significant time and effort to managing the work environment. This includes dealing with competing work priorities as well as conflicts among the staff. While their styles may be different, all participants were surprisingly similar in their

approaches to managing priorities and conflicts through teamwork. None of the participants believed in autocratic decision making.

Mr. Aspen believed that any team or organization could use a "healthy dose of conflict." According to him, "If you don't have any conflict … that means people are not being honest, not forthcoming," and that is not good for the organization. He encouraged his direct reports to disagree with him when necessary; otherwise they "are not doing their job." As a new president to the institution and someone new to the area, Mr. Aspen expected to hear honest opinions from the people working with him and for him. He cautioned, however, that when conflict "becomes too much, then [it] become[s] destructive … the key is to find the right balance." In terms of managing competing priorities, Mr. Aspen encouraged his team to bring different points of view to the table. He wanted to keep those different perspectives "on the table until the end … without dismissing any ideas" until everyone had an opportunity to provide input. He recalled instances when some discarded ideas for one situation became excellent inspirations for another project.

Ms. Larch's secret to managing competing priorities was to keep a list of all priorities. Using her project management background, she devised a set of lists for different staff members and for the board. Periodically, except when facing an emergency, she would go over the lists with the staff and the board. She would make note of the conversation, and when necessary, formulate action items from the conversation. By the next meeting, she would "refer back to her list and notes to check up on the status." Ms. Larch said she would "evaluate my priority list on a daily basis." In terms of conflict management among her staff, Ms. Larch preferred to ask questions to get the facts first. She would then encourage people to evaluate the facts or the situation based on their own perspectives to determine mutual agreements and differences. As

necessary on rare occasions, she would facilitate a discussion to resolve complicated issues. In most cases, however, Ms. Larch fully expected for her senior executive members to be able to settle the differences on their own, as she believed they are all proven professionals. She wanted them to know that "they can solve the problem together."

Mr. Maple described his philosophy on managing competing priorities as creating win-win situations by "understanding what is it that people meant to say as opposed to what they actually say." For example, when people resist an initiative, he would try to understand their concerns and then offer solutions to address those concerns. According to Mr. Maple, while having the opportunity for input is important, it was more crucial to "understand the anxieties underlying the input." Mr. Maple had also been very strategic about implementing changes by "identifying change processes [that] when successful will positively impact all other processes." He was interested in leveraging opportunities or creating multipliers, where "if you change one thing can produce ripple and cascading effects on other changes." He wanted to reap as much synergy as possible among priorities and initiatives. Mr. Maple constantly asked himself and his staff to assess and evaluate different initiatives using the following questions: "Are there complementary priorities that influence each other? How do you identify and align those priorities? How do you foster communication between the leaders of those different initiatives?" Because of the size of Yellow College, with four different campuses and multiple centers, Mr. Maple maintained an executive cabinet of 14 senior staff members, including all the campus presidents and vice presidents. Managing and resolving conflicts among such a large executive cabinet required some conscious planning in Mr. Maple's decision-making process. He described using formal voting for his cabinet decision-making process but said "it is not a Robert's rule but a Bob's rule." Depending on the decision, his executive cabinet would do a

simple majority vote, a two-thirds vote, or a consultative nod. The key was that the decision would always be "documented and recorded." Mr. Maple was all about keeping the decision-making process transparent at Yellow College. His office maintained a website documenting all decisions made by his executive cabinet, as well as official meeting minutes. Mr. Maple added "effective and efficient time management" as another strategy for managing competing priorities. He routinely required his executive cabinet to focus on one or two action items in each meeting.

Ms. Redwood's approach to managing conflict was similar to that of Ms. Larch. She would try to hear from both sides first to get a sense of the severity of certain issues. However, she was adamant that she was "not going to arbitrate issues among my executive team members." Ms. Redwood believed in the professionalism and experiences of her executive cabinet members in solving problems. In her opinion, people at the senior leadership level "must have the professional maturity and skills to work together to solve problems." Her task was to build trust among her executive staff members in order for them to work well together. She preferred "not to be the final judge involving my staff … as that could lead to future discord among the team members." In terms of using a strategy to manage work priorities, Ms. Redwood would rotate her regular executive cabinet meetings every other Tuesday with the executive cabinet working sessions. In the regular executive cabinet meetings, formal meeting minutes and decisions were kept and distributed to the campus to ensure transparency with the college community. However, for working sessions, her executive cabinet members "would deep-dive into a particular topic, like budget and accreditation, for up to three intensive hours." Team members could speak freely off the record in any of these working sessions. Ms. Redwood found that these working sessions have greatly improved the dynamics of her executive team.

She said, “It’s in a space where people can trust one another, and whenever a decision is made, it’s something that everyone knows that we are going to stand behind.”

Ms. Teak believed in “forming, storming, and norming” in managing staff conflicts. She encouraged her executive cabinet, consisting of 12 senior administrators, to “air out their differences when necessary.” On a few occasions, some discussions actually led to hurt feelings requiring some apologies among her executive cabinet staff. Ms. Teak believed it is all a critical part of being a high-performing team, as she would say, “Lessons learned…let’s move on.” In fact, she would “actually be worried when a team is not storming.” When she became president at Blue College, she brought in a trainer to train the college management team on managing the stages of change. She expanded her executive cabinet team from seven to 12 people to “get more diversity in perspectives” among the most senior leaders of the college. Ms. Teak also acknowledged the many competing priorities facing her and Blue College. Her number-one concern was with the lack of time. She believed, with the help of her executive team, competing priorities could be successfully managed through “strategic intellectual exercises … except time.”

**Supporting employees.** All five participants were very conscious about supporting professional development opportunities for their employees. At the same time, all participants recognized the challenges of providing opportunities with limited resources. As a result, the participants had to manage professional development programs very differently. One common concern for all participants was to ensure equity in professional development opportunities for all employees.

Mr. Aspen categorized lifelong learning as one of his top three goals for his institution’s employees. He believed everyone has “to keep learning no matter what you do or what your

position." He tried to set an example himself by learning something new every week. Whenever Mr. Aspen came across a relevant article or book, he would forward it to members of his team. In fact, he proudly shared that he gave a book about leadership as a holiday gift to all of his team members. In addition, depending on the person's interests, Mr. Aspen encouraged the staff to attend conferences and workshops to further develop professionally. Nevertheless, "in an effort to be strategic about providing learning opportunities" to as many staff as possible, he employed a leadership academy in-house at Red Community College. All deans, directors, and managers in the institution had been asked to attend a three-month course as part of this in-house leadership academy. Mr. Aspen wanted to ensure that "everyone is exposed to those different training opportunities based on [his or her] current jobs … but also future goals." He appeared to correct himself about sending people to conferences and workshops. Mr. Aspen added that he prefers for people to not "randomly go to a conference but to determine what you are trying to learn and how to fit it to your long-term goal."

Ms. Larch similarly encouraged her staff to attend professional development opportunities whenever possible. She mentioned, however, that "professional development opportunities are getting smaller and smaller for my college" because of budget cuts. Nonetheless, professional development "is very important to me" to ensure learning continues for all employees. In an effort to have the best bang for the buck, she encouraged bringing speakers to the college for service days, where "instead of one person getting professional development, 300 people now get the same opportunity. … That is really cost-effective." Ms. Larch specifically mentioned the need to be equitable with training opportunities for all employees. As a person of color, she had been particularly interested in professionally

developing faculty and staff of color. Nevertheless, she needed to make sure such opportunities do not create misperceptions of preferential treatment among other faculty and staff.

Mr. Maple emphasized the importance of incorporating a social justice lens in professional development at Yellow College. For example, the college offered in-house training programs in equity, critical race theory, and social justice for all faculty and staff. He stressed, “it is really social justice incorporating critical race theory.” According to Mr. Maple, Yellow College had been very innovative with “social justice one-on-one and two-on-two training.” In the last year, he led the college in developing and implementing training on “culturally responsive teaching” for faculty. Mr. Maple also focused on providing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff of color. He noted a new program called “faculty diversity initiative” to help with on-boarding and retaining faculty of color. The strictly voluntary program “paired newly hired faculty of color with a mentor during the first couple quarters of teaching” to help them “build a résumé so they can apply for tenure-track positions.”

Ms. Redwood claimed of being a strong supporter of professional development for her employees. However, as president for less than six months as of our interview, she had not yet had an opportunity to develop new training programs. Nonetheless, she pointed to various professional development initiatives she implemented during her tenure as vice president for student services, also at Purple College. For example, she instituted a quarterly professional development day for all of her student services staff. All departments, programs, and offices within student services would be closed for the day for all employees to participate in professional development activities designed specifically for student services personnel. Ms. Redwood was also resolute about ensuring equity in professional development training for all of her staff. Additionally, Ms. Redwood made efforts to support her employees in pursuing formal

degrees to advance their professional careers. She “pushed hard” for the staff to complete degrees. Ms. Redwood admitted to be especially “pushing for a lot of employees of color to complete master’s degrees so they could be in line for leadership positions.” According to her, “that in itself is also an equity initiative.”

Ms. Teak maintained particularly the importance of employee professional development to her from the perspective of an equity lens. She encouraged her staff to learn about racial equity as a professional development initiative. Ms. Teak admitted to providing fewer opportunities to employees at Blue College in the last year due to budget constraints. To stretch the limited resources on professional development, she implemented a system in which employees who go to training “must come back and present to a wider group about what they learned.” Ms. Teak created a campus-wide “sharing Thursdays” program specifically for this purpose. During the lunch hour of every Thursday, Blue College hosted an in-house professional development session for employees who had received new training to share with the rest of the college. In addition to sharing Thursdays, Ms. Teak created space and opportunity for her Asian Pacific Islander employee group to share life stories with one another. Ms. Teak believed in the power of storytelling to educate employees at Blue College on social justice and equity issues.

**Managing a board.** In nearly all community colleges, the board of trustees or an equivalent supervising board serves as the institution’s highest governing body. The board typically hires the college president and, in some cases, other senior executive positions as well. Nevertheless, not all community college presidents report directly to a board. Whereas single-campus presidents do indeed report to the board, presidents in a multi-campus district usually report to a chancellor, who in turn reports to the board. Of the five participants in this study, only three answered directly to the board. Ms. Redwood and Ms. Teak reported to a chancellor,

respectively. According to the three participants reporting directly to a board, maintaining regular communication with the board is considered crucial to their success. The following are some recommendations from Mr. Aspen, Ms. Larch, and Mr. Maple for managing a board.

Mr. Aspen recommended building a strategic partnership with the board as soon as one was selected for the president position. According to him, "The board serves as an important resource" for a new president to bounce ideas off of and share crucial information. He stressed the board members are "not someone you want to avoid or not to keep in your confidence." The board must trust the president and vice versa. Mr. Aspen believed "the more you share and the more questions you ask, the stronger the partnership will become over time." He did note the importance of the board in maintaining its proper role as the governance body at the college's policy level. The board however should not get involved at the operational level.

Ms. Larch fully agreed with keeping the board informed of her major decisions. She believed communication is key to maintaining a good working relationship with the board. She recommended getting to know each board member individually. This allowed her to tailor the communication to each member differently, as "they may not have the same interest or same attention span in every topic or decision." She further explained that "you don't have to like them all … with five bosses and everything." However, a president must be able to work with all of the board members. Ms. Larch stressed the need for ongoing communication as important in building trust with the board.

Mr. Maple similarly believed maintaining regular communication with the board is crucial to a successful college presidency. According to him, "It's better to over-communicate than under-communicate." He also recommended getting "to know the board members and to know their vision of governance." With an elected board, Mr. Maple believed in the importance

of aligning the strategic direction of the college with the board's vision of governance. Mr. Maple specifically suggested using elected board members in external public relations, "like a press conference or media interview, to bring more visibility to the college". He circled back to the importance of maintaining frequent communication with the board. Mr. Maple concluded, "When in doubt … sit down with the board to clarify their priorities."

**Supportive networks.** As part of the interview questionnaire, I asked all participants the following question: "Who do you rely on for support at work and outside of work?" This question was purposely designed to further investigate how the Asian American community college presidents navigate their work environments. All five participants reported relying much more on people outside of their respective work environment for support. As presidents and chief executive officers of their institutions, all of the participants felt the need to network outside of the workplace to ensure confidentiality.

Mr. Aspen mentioned using his extensive network of other college presidents and professional colleagues from previous jobs for support. He believed in the importance of having "professional connections outside of the college … at your level." According to Mr. Aspen, "There are just times I need to reach out to friends outside of the college for advice about the issues at the college." Interestingly, he also frequently counted on his family as a source of support for work.

Ms. Larch similarly maintained that she relies "on quite a few retired college presidents for support in my current position." She also mentioned a mentor, currently a long-term community college president from another state, as her go-to person for advice. She admitted contacting him to discuss challenges or when she was "just wanting to vent." She acknowledged the frustrations of not being able to share specific information about work with her colleagues

and staff at times. Accordingly, Ms. Larch believed in the importance of having a good professional network outside of her workplace, as “they have a lot of good advice, especially sharing experiences on similar challenges, [which] can really help with potential pitfalls.” She counted her husband as her biggest source of support outside of work. Ms. Larch credited her “husband as the chief supporter of my career but also the most conscientious adviser for both personal and professional concerns.”

Mr. Maple acknowledged that he too relies more on people outside of work for support. He mentioned that because “our state is small where everybody knows everybody, if I need to talk to somebody about a difficult situation, then I usually call somebody on the other side of the country.” On matters involving the community college system in his state, Mr. Maple often turned to the other college presidents for answers and advice. However, when it comes to confidential or private matters, he relied “on mentors and others outside of the state college system altogether.” Mr. Maple also said he frequently discussed and asked for advice from his wife for work issues.

Ms. Redwood readily admitted to the challenges of not always being able to discuss sensitive matters with her college colleagues and staff. Nevertheless, she counted on one particular faculty member whom she “could trust to bounce many ideas off.” Ms. Redwood claimed that the faculty member had been her “supporter and champion … for quite a long time.” She said, “It’s important to have a person [with institutional knowledge] that will always tell it to me straight.” Among the five participants, Ms. Redwood was the only participant who reported relying on an internal employee for advice and support. Similar to other presidents, however, Ms. Redwood also reached out to former colleagues, especially retirees from the student services discipline, quite often for support and advice. One unexpected source of support

was the new class of presidents in her immediate community college system. Since July 2018, of the 34 community colleges in Washington State, five recently-hired college presidents were people of color. Ms. Redwood asserted of this "new freshman class of presidents connected early on and served as an important support group for me." She frequently called on the new president group "every now and then just to say I am struggling with this. … What would you do?"

Ms. Teak likewise mentioned relying on her mentors—former presidents and chancellors from her previous employments—for advice and support. She still fondly recalled one of her mentors, who had guided her through the earlier years of pursuing the college presidency. The mentor, also a former college president, "never dismissed me because of my law background." Rather, she genuinely provided feedback and guidance that had helped Ms. Teak to become a community college president herself. Additionally, Ms. Teak mentioned of relying on the professional network of Asian Pacific Americans in higher education for support.

**Leadership styles.** As this study examines the leadership characteristics of the Asian American college presidents, I wanted to investigate the leadership styles of the participants. All five participants acknowledged the importance of navigating the dominant White culture and environment in their respective career paths. As people of color in leadership positions, they understood the need to adapt and adjust to their environments in order to be successful. However, the participants revealed very different leadership styles, based on how they described themselves.

Mr. Aspen described his leadership style as "hands-on but not micromanaging." Based on his own research, he claimed his leadership style as the right balance between the hands-off and the micromanaging styles. He recounted prior experiences in the corporate world where

many hands-off leaders failed as a result of disengagement. At the same time, Mr. Aspen acknowledged working with micromanagers where the team's morale suffered tremendously. He quoted his philosophy that leaders "have to work with people and take care of their problems and so forth, but without micromanaging what they do and how they do it." Nevertheless, Mr. Aspen emphasized that he wanted to be involved with projects at the design and implementation phases to let the employees know that "you are there with them following up and following through." Mr. Aspen noted, "Connecting with the employees before leading is [an] important" leadership characteristic. He added that a leader "could be demanding but at the same time you could be compassionate about how you lead."

Ms. Larch was definitely eager to tell her story when asked about her leadership style. She believed in "open communication" as her effective leadership style. According to her, "If you do not communicate, it does not matter what intentions you will have, it does not matter how much you want to support your people; they may not understand you." Ms. Larch underscored the importance of supporting her employees' work. She always wanted to be an advocate for the people working for and working with her because "if they have the tools, they will be successful, and … then they don't have to bother you." Nevertheless, she held high expectations for her employees to perform. She believed in "setting the bar high to motivate her employees to be their own better leaders." She asserted, "Running a college is like running a business; you have to be efficient." As such, Ms. Larch claimed to have very little patience for underperforming employees.

Mr. Maple described his leadership style as more consultative. As a leader of the institution, he wanted to know how his employees feel about the organization and what motivates his employees at work. About six months into his position as president at Yellow

Community College, Mr. Maple set about to develop a two-year work plan. He was intentional about honoring the accomplishments of the previous administration. At the same time, he identified various initiatives, including certain changes, needed to move the institution forward. He prioritized and incorporated these initiatives into a coherent and cohesive plan, complete with implementing strategies. He then communicated the plan to the board of trustees, the employees, the students, and the community. Mr. Maple explained a motto that he had learned from practicing judo since he was a child: "Plan thoroughly to execute boldly." In an effort to minimize the resistance to change from certain segments of the institution, he was very intentional about listening to all stakeholders. He wanted to let people know "here is your chance to provide input." By actively listening and "trying to hear what people are saying, and not just the words but the meaning," he wanted to see the institution through the perspectives of others. Mr. Maple pointed to a sign on his office wall that said, "If you want to go fast, go alone … but if you want to go far, go together." He summed up his leadership style as "providing the chance for people to be heard and actively listening to your constituents."

Ms. Redwood readily admitted to following a situational leadership style. She recalled "doing a lot of code-switching" to navigate the work environment. As a new community college president, she worked hard "to understand the environment and navigate it." One of her goals was to normalize conversations about race. She remembered of "censoring herself to not talk about race" in the past, because she feared of making her mostly White staff uncomfortable. Ms. Redwood mentioned that "it is because of not only our [people of color] own discomfort, but also we think somebody else [is] going to be uncomfortable hearing about race; as such, we censored ourselves." She decided to intentionally stop censoring herself and just normalize conversations about race. She said it "had led to some really healthy dynamics around being

able to talk about issues of race and with humor, not belittling it, or minimizing." In addition to the topic of race in the workplace, Ms. Redwood acknowledged the challenges of navigating around issues of sexism and gendered expectations. Most of her cabinet members were White men. She corrected herself by saying "tall White men … as they are all over six feet tall." She used the term *mansplaining* in a joking fashion to call out her colleagues whenever they tried to explain or re-explain her statements. She felt it was an effective way to disarm someone's defensiveness against being called a sexist. It enabled her "to point out where there is some dominance, either in gender dominance or racial dominance, at play in the interaction" among her cabinet members. Accordingly, Ms. Redwood proclaimed of utilizing situational leadership to engage people in less confrontational ways as the best leadership approach. At the end of the day, she maintained, "[I] still needs to work with all of these people on a daily basis."

Ms. Teak claimed to be a transformational leader in her current position as a college president as well as in her former jobs. With a background and training in the legal field instead of education, she brought a very different perspective to the institution regarding leading organizational changes. She was a strong believer in leading her employees and institution with empathy. She called it "critical" for leaders to be able to lead with empathy. She proudly claimed, "it is part of my mantra" here at Blue College. As a first-generation college graduate in her family, Ms. Teak emphasized student success as her top priority. She wanted the students to have a sense of empathy from her and her staff to inspire them to give back to their own community through service leadership. She wanted to "walk the walk" and "practice my own leadership and management skills … to prepare our students to lead their own lives in their own communities to have that level of empathy." In the past two years in her position as president at Blue College, Ms. Teak had been focused on rebranding her institution under the theme of

service leadership. She wanted to "build on the college's identification of an institutional learning outcome of empathy … along with a host of other outcomes." To achieve such goal, she encouraged her staff to acknowledge that "if you are serving people, you really have to understand their needs." She said that one has to adapt and adopt to "maneuver your own approach to serve the community, the students, the faculty, and the staff." Interestingly, Ms. Teak also brought up the topic of code switching in her work environment. As a trained lawyer, she found it necessary to code switch often when speaking to different audiences. Some of her employees compared her public speaking style to a preacher, while some students thought she sounded more like Judge Judy, from the television show of the same name. Others saw her more like a corporate chief executive officer. Ms. Teak claimed that she was all of that. By her own account, she comprised of "a mixture of a lot of things."

**Analysis of Research Question 1**

Based on their narrative stories, several major themes emerged from the data. As president and chief executive officer of their respective institution, all five participants faced similar organizational challenges of running complex organizations in a community and technical college system. All participants reported dealing with institutional budgetary issues as their primary concern. This was expected as state and public funding for community colleges had been on the decline for the past several years. In addition to budgetary challenges, the participants must also manage competing priorities of their respective institutions as well. The presidents mentioned the ability to successfully manage conflicts among their staff as crucial. Their similar approaches to solving conflicts and managing competing priorities focused on teamwork. It was unclear however if cultural influences play a major role in their emphasis on teamwork.

In terms of leadership styles, all participants acknowledged that they have adapted their leadership styles based on their specific work environments. There was no one common or consistent leadership style practiced by all the participants. Mr. Maple, for example, favored a "consultative leadership style," compared with Ms. Redwood's "situational leadership style." As they all faced different work environments, the participants acknowledged the need to be adaptive in their positions. Both Ms. Redwood and Ms. Teak claimed to "code switch" often when dealing with different groups of stakeholders. Mr. Aspen believed in a hands-on approach to leadership. He wanted to be involved with projects at the design and implementation phases to let the employees know that "you are there with them following up and following through." As people of color leading institutions still dominated by the majority, the presidents must be mindful of racial and cultural dynamics (Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Taylor, 2000). Consequently, they adapted their leadership styles to be successful in complex environments while serving many different stakeholders (Heifetz et al., 2009; Miller, 2016). This finding about their leadership styles failed to support the cultural leadership concept as described by Neilson and Suyemoto (2009) and by Chin (2013). Only Mr. Maple specifically emphasized his leadership style to align with the collectivism of the institution (Chin, 2013). In addition, most of the participants did not explicitly acknowledge the influence of ethnicity and cultural background on their leadership styles. The finding was also in contrast with Li-Bugg's (2011) findings where she found significant influences of ethnicity and cultural background on her participants' leadership styles. Perhaps, due to their experiences with different backgrounds and cultures, the Asian American college presidents, in this study, may be using multiple interpretative frames in expressing their leadership styles (Adrian, 2004).

Despite their different approaches to managing the work environment, all participants strongly agreed on the need to support professional development for their employees. In fact, the participants were very intentional about supporting professional development for their employees. Mr. Aspen noted professional development for employees as one of his top three goals as college president. Similarly, Ms. Larch maintained the importance of ensuring learning for her employees. All participants, except for Mr. Aspen, indicated clear support for creating professional development opportunities for faculty and staff of color. Mr. Maple, for instance, described his support for a mentorship program to assist faculty of color at his institution. Given limited funding availability, however, all participants mentioned the need to be equitable with professional development opportunities for all employees. Their strong support for professional development reflected their own experiences with the training needed to advance their careers. As noted in the findings, the theme of "mentorship" was important to all participants. The presidents were genuinely interested in creating opportunities to enhance their employees' professional skills. Based on their personal experiences, most of the presidents were particularly interested in mentoring faculty and staff of color to create opportunities for future leaders of color. This finding showed some of the participants' commitment to equity and social justice tenet of AsianCrit (Museus & Iftika, 2013). As Asian Americans college presidents, the participants were also very conscious of the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in leadership positions (Torne, 2013; Li-Bugg, 2011; Sommer, 2007; Adrian, 2004). At the same time, the presidents were mindful of the equity perception from the rest of the campus community. The presidents did not want to appear to particularly favor faculty and staff of color over White employees. As noted in CRT, the participants acknowledged the political reality of working within the dominant institutions as leaders of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

All participants reported relying on people outside of the institution for support. Given their position as presidents of colleges, the participants felt the need to ensure confidentiality with their decisions. As such, all participants consulted with external mentors and colleagues when facing difficult decisions. Ms. Larch counted on the support of "quite a few retired college presidents" when she became a college president. Mr. Maple contacted colleagues far away because "our state is small, where everybody knows everybody. If I need to talk to somebody about a difficult situation, then I usually call somebody on the other side of the country." While the rationale provided by the participants understandable, it must be questioned whether the participants felt the need to rely on external support because of who they are, as Asian Americans but also as college presidents. The AsianCrit tenet of intersectionality may help to explain the participants' managing of intersecting identities and social structures (Museus & Iftika, 2013). Additionally, with the exception of Ms. Teak, all participants mentioned relying on family members as well for support with work-related decisions. Mr. Aspen specifically depended on his brothers and sisters for work advice. Mr. Larch, Mr. Maple, and Ms. Redwood frequently discussed work issues with their spouses. In fact, Ms. Larch credited her "husband as the chief supporter of my career but also the most conscientious adviser for both personal and professional concerns." This finding was in accordance with Torne's (2013) study where she found considerable emphasis of dependence on family among her subjects. As Asian cultures are said to place a high value on family, the participants turned to family members for work support and advice, supporting the cultural explanation theory (Torne, 2013; Kane, 1998).

The narratives of the five Asian American college presidents in this study allowed for the readers to understand their real-life experiences (Wang & Geale, 2014; Creswell, 2005). The study of how they have navigated their career paths in higher education further added to the

scholarly understanding of Asian American leaders. As noted by other researchers, very few studies have been published about Asian American leaders and leadership in higher education (Torne, 2013; Li-Bugg, 2011; Sommer, 2007; Adrian, 2004). This narrative inquiry approach to understanding their experiences served to "amplify [their] voices that may have otherwise remained silent" (Wang & Geale, 2014, p. 195). The five participants represented a diverse group of Asian Americans, coming from five different cultural backgrounds as Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Vietnamese. Their narrative experiences dispelled the stereotypical view of the monolithic Asian American experience (Lopez et al, 2017). They took different paths to reach a college presidency. This finding aligned with findings by other researchers of the non-linear career trajectories of Asian American leaders in higher education (Torne, 2013; Sommer, 2007).

## Second Research Question

The second research question of this study was "Do the participants perceive their ethnic and racial backgrounds as influencing factors for their respective career paths?" This question sought to understand the participants' perceptions about their own ethnicity as having an influence on their respective career paths. While narrative inquiry served as the primary conceptual framework for this question, the interview questions also integrated the perspective of CRT storytelling.

**Influence of culture and identity on career path.** All five participants stated being proud of being Asian American professionals and leaders. Based on their respective positions as a community college president, they all have achieved notable successes in their professional field. The participants credited the positive influences of their respective cultural backgrounds on their career paths. Some common themes that emerged from their stories included attribution to the values of family, community, and being part of a collective.

Mr. Aspen, for example, attributed his success to being raised in an Indian family. He remembered his parents kept pushing hard for him to succeed in his professional career. Mr. Aspen recalled talking to his parents about wanting to be a college president when he had just become a dean. From that day on, his mother would constantly ask him, “So, when are you going to be a college president?” It was not just his mother, however. Other relatives, including distant cousins in India, often encouraged him to continue advancing his career path. According to Mr. Aspen, his family, including extended family members, saw his career success as their own success. He added with a chuckle, “It’s an Indian thing!” He attributed of being focused on his career path due to such reminders. Mr. Aspen made an interesting observation about the cultural influence of being an immigrant. According to him, another reason for his tireless drive to achieve and succeed was that “you have nothing to fall back on if you don’t succeed.” He believed immigrants must strive hard to succeed because “we feel so insecure.” Surprisingly, however, Mr. Aspen did not think much of his Indian cultural influence on his leadership or communication style. After living in the United States for over 30 years, he believed he came “mostly into my own” in terms of leadership and communication styles. He admitted such cultural influences may have been there when he was new to America but perhaps diminished over time.

Ms. Larch readily agreed on the significant influence of the Chinese culture on her career path, especially the expectations of working hard. She believed as an Asian American woman, she must “work much harder than my White colleagues to succeed in [her] career.” By working hard to succeed in all of her jobs, she was recognized by faculty and staff as a diligent leader. That, in turn, gained her “a lot of support from faculty and staff because they really like me and my work ethics.” Ms. Larch also acknowledged “the Asian cultural expectations of being part of

a collective." In her case, however, she claimed of evolving "to be more individualistic" over time as a leader. At various times in her career, she felt the need to intentionally trying to "being less Chinese and more like my White counterparts." She added with a laugh, "Some of my Chinese friends think of me as not Chinese enough, whereas some of my American friends think of me as not American enough." Nevertheless, Ms. Larch admitted to the significant influence of her Chinese cultural background on her communication and leadership styles. She jokingly blamed such extensive cultural influence for her struggles with mastering the English skills. She acknowledged of her shortcomings in verbal English communication as one of her weaknesses, by admitting "[my] English pronunciation could use some improvement."

Mr. Maple asserted the Japanese cultural value of "being in a collective and being in a community has been really helpful." He believed the cultural influence of expecting to be collaborative fits well with the higher education institutions he had worked in. Mr. Maple preferred using the pronoun "we" when talking about his accomplishments, "because nobody really does it by themselves." He mentioned however the downside of being the quiet Asian, whereas "leaders are always expected to have something to say." For example, while preferring to actively listen when other people talk, he was judged "sometimes [perceived] as being too passive." At other times, when he tried to be respectful of others, he was "perceived by the dominant culture as lacking an opinion." Mr. Maple acknowledged the influence his Japanese background has on his leadership and communication styles. Such influences cultivated his consultative leadership style and made him "really care for others as part of the collective."

Ms. Redwood similarly embraced "the sense of community," or being part of the collective, as the most significant influence her Asian American, or specifically Filipino heritage, had on her career path. She remembered, "almost everyone was an uncle or an auntie growing

up." It was that kind of support that she believed helped her succeed in her career path. While she had a lot of respect for the American individualism of "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps," for Ms. Redwood, "it is the sense of community that would really help many of our community college students." As a leader, she tried to communicate to all of her employees that "we are all in this together." She considered "being part of a community a fundamental value for me."

Ms. Teak definitely concurred with the positive influences that the Vietnamese cultural background had on her career path. She credited the support she received from her immediate and extended family for her professional successes. Ms. Teak also mentioned the support she received from being "in a collective of other like-minded professionals" as important for her career trajectory. She recalled being instilled with the value of humility at young age. She believed such values had kept her "grounded" and "approachable." At times, however, she felt the need to "stop being so humble" to fully show her strengths as a leader. In terms of her leadership and communication styles, however, Ms. Teak did not see much of a cultural background influence. She pointed to the fact that she actually "grew up in America" immersing in the dominant culture, as a possible reason for such lack of influence.

**Influence of cultural values on education.** All five participants took very different paths to get to their college president positions. One thing they all strongly agreed upon was the value of education. More specifically, all five participants believed that their Asian cultural backgrounds have significant influence on their educational attainment. They stressed obtaining the highest academic credentials as necessary to become a community college president. Three of the participants, Mr. Aspen, Ms. Larch, and Ms. Redwood, hold their doctoral degrees. Mr. Maple had completed all coursework for his doctoral program except the dissertation. Somewhat

rare for a community college president, Ms. Teak came from a law and legal studies background with a Juris Doctor degree.

Mr. Aspen cited expectations from not only his parents but also from the "village" for him to earn an education. His Indian mother had always wanted him "to work harder than everyone else" to obtain an education. Ms. Larch recalled her Chinese parents continually pushing her to pursue advanced degrees. They often reminded her that "education can change your life" for the better. As soon as she had just completed her master's degree, her parents immediately pressed hard for her to go back and earn her doctorate. Ms. Larch added, laughingly, "I don't think they actually know the difference between a master's and a doctoral degree," however. Mr. Maple maintained that his parents had always expected for him to attend college and earn an advanced degree. As a second-generation of Japanese Americans who had to overcome discrimination and detainment during World War II, both of his parents successfully graduated with bachelor's degrees from a large research university. According to Mr. Maple, his parents believed "there is no reason [for me] to not earn a college degree" with all that he had. Ms. Redwood recalled of similar expectations from her parents. After graduating from high school, she had planned to take a year off "just relax and find myself." Her father, however, became extremely irate with her for even thinking about not attending college immediately after high school. She quickly recanted and enrolled in college to attain her bachelor's degree. Ms. Redwood attributed her many career achievements to her father's insistence of her obtaining a college education. Ms. Teak also credited her parents for providing the motivation for her pursuit of a college education. Coming from a poor immigrant family background, neither of her parents had ever attended college. They insisted however for Mr. Teak to earn a college

education to "have a better life in the new country." With a bit of emotion in her voice, Ms. Teak recalled some of the sacrifices her parents made to ensure that she remained in school.

**Barriers in career paths.** As Asian Americans, all five participants were conscious of the many challenges and structural barriers facing people of color in the workplace, as well as in a larger societal context. I engaged the participants with one multi-part interview question to specifically investigate their personal experiences with racial barriers. All participants, except Mr. Aspen, reported experiencing some forms of microaggressions, discrimination, and racism in their careers. Mr. Aspen was also the only participant to report being unfamiliar with critical race theory.

Ms. Larch recalled a specific instance when she believed she was denied a promotion because of her gender and race. At the time, she had been working as a dean, managing for a branch campus for a few years. One day, out of the blue, her college president informed her of his decision to promote "a recently hired White male colleague as the new executive dean" of her branch campus or essentially her new boss. The decision caught Ms. Larch by complete surprise as she did not even know of a plan for an executive dean position. The president had not only failed to mention the hiring of a new executive dean but also never bothered to ask about her interest in the position. Additionally, the president had only recently hired this particular White male colleague for an entirely different position altogether at the college. Feeling extremely offended, she confronted her president to seek an understanding of the rationale behind his decision, especially when "he had consistently applauded [her] for an excellent job at running the branch campus". Ms. Larch pointed out her more relevant experience and qualifications compared to the White colleague. During the heated conversation, she bluntly asked the president whether he based his decision on the fact of her colleague "being a White male." The

president "didn't say it [was] because of race or whatever, but he couldn't give me [a] good reason as to why." Ms. Larch nonetheless suspected the White male–dominated culture of the institution as the primary reason. The branch campus predominantly offered professional technical programs like automotive technology and carpentry. The president may have "believed a White guy can do a better job out there … because of the environment." Ms. Larch concluded "since he could not give me a good reason as to why, that just made me feel or believe it was because I am an Asian woman." After the conversation with Ms. Larch, the president changed his mind about appointing her White-male colleague as the new executive dean for the branch campus. He also eliminated the executive dean position altogether. Ms. Larch remained in her same [dean] position at the branch campus for several more years.

Mr. Maple recollected his experiences with discrimination as much more subtle, unlike the overt discrimination faced by his grandparents and parents. For example, he cited a wanted ad in the *Seattle Times* during the 1950s with "Whites only need apply" when his father was a young professional looking for jobs. Discrimination and racism were distinctively open and clear. "Nowadays, discrimination is masked," Mr. Maple continued. "It is not about your race anymore, but it is always something else." He recounted applying for his first management position and being told, "You're not ready … and you're too young." Meanwhile, his White male colleagues of roughly the same age appeared to have no problems progressing into higher positions. Mr. Maple also recalled being denied access to professional development opportunities early in his career. Similarly, his other colleagues, mainly White males, appeared to be afforded various opportunities to advance their own careers. He admitted however that he did not know for sure "how much of that was actual racial discrimination or just implicit bias." Mr. Maple acknowledged "no one was going to say … we don't promote or hire your kind."

Ms. Redwood recalled being subject to frequent microaggressions earlier in her career in higher education. Despite serving as a director of a department, she remembered being "expected to take notes in meetings" for sharing and distributing to colleagues and employees. Her colleagues often commented on her "excellent command of the English language … without a trace of an Asian accent." On various occasions, Ms. Redwood felt compelled to remind them that she was born and raised in the United States. She also recalled two recent experiences where she believed "some racism was at play". When the former president announced his retirement, Ms. Redwood submitted her name in a bid for the interim president position at the college. As the most senior vice president, with extensive relevant working experience, among the three vice presidents at the time, she felt very confident of her application. The interview committee, however, selected one of the other vice presidents, a White male, for the interim president position instead. Through the interview process, Ms. Redwood "had the sense that [she] didn't fulfill the image of what a community college president should be." The interview committee appeared to be looking for a White male leader, disregarding her experience and academic credentials. Ms. Redwood holds a doctorate in education, whereas the selected White male colleague held a master's degree in mathematics. Somewhat discouraged by the process at her college, Ms. Redwood decided to pursue a different opportunity as a vice chancellor for student success at a different institution. Once again, however, she lost out to another White male candidate. Ms. Redwood firmly believed the selection process discriminated against her as an Asian American woman. In comparing herself to the selected White male candidate, she reported to have more in-depth relevant experience in student services, including several of years working as vice president of student services. The selected candidate, on the other hand, came from a business and finance background with almost no formal experience in student support.

After this second experience, Ms. Redwood "really questioned the fairness of the system" and "almost quit my job."

Ms. Teak remembered being taunted with racial name-calling by other children while growing up in an impoverished neighborhood in California. In her professional career, however, she recalled facing more subtle microaggressions from colleagues. For example, earlier in her legal career, some of her colleagues would comment on her ability to communicate in English, saying, "You can really write in English very well." On a few occasions, Ms. Teak recounted telling her colleagues, "I am an attorney … it's my freaking job!" She also recounted of being treated unfairly due to her being an Asian American woman at different times. She admitted, however, "It would be difficult to prove" a case of racial discrimination due to the subtlety of such acts. Ms. Teak acknowledged to have not experienced an overt act of racism or discrimination in her professional career. Nevertheless, she added with a nod, "That does not mean it will never happen in the future, though."

Among the five participants, Mr. Aspen was the only one to claim of not personally experiencing microaggressions or any act of racism in his professional career in the United States. He acknowledged, however, being quite aware of race issues in this country. When he moved from the East Coast to the South, his friends and colleagues had warned him about the prevalence of racism in the South. Mr. Aspen recalled people telling him "don't go there … you will stand out with your accent." On the contrary, he declared to have "one of the greatest times" in his long career working in Georgia. He felt the community there truly embraced him because he worked hard "to help everyone." In addition to his full-time job at the college, Mr. Aspen joined the local utility board as a commissioner, as well as serving as an adviser to the mayor of the town. He proudly recounted that he "was a star in their community" as many people there

"were very impressed with [his] work. Mr. Aspen added with a chuckle, "I was quoted many times in the local newspapers…as I was quite influential in the town."

**Analysis of Research Question 2**

The participants were asked to reflect on the influences of their cultures, ethnicities, and other identities on their respective career paths. Additionally, the participants were asked to identify barriers they had experienced in their careers. Three major themes emerged from the narrative data provided by the participants. First, the participants identified what they saw as significant influences of Asian cultural values on their career paths. Second, the participants recognized the significant influences of their cultural values and upbringings on their views of education. Third, the participants reported experiencing some form of discrimination, racism, or microaggressions in their careers.

All five participants reported being significantly influenced by their respective cultural values. The values of family, community, and being a part of a collective clearly emerged from all of their stories. Mr. Aspen attributed his success to being raised in an Indian family. Ms. Teak similarly credited her career success to the support received from her Vietnamese family. Being a part of a community was especially important for all of the participants. Mr. Maple preferred using the pronoun "we" in talking about his accomplishments, "because nobody really does it by themselves." In the same way, Ms. Redwood proudly pointed to "the sense of community" or being part of the collective as the most significant influence that being an Asian American, or specifically, Filipino, had on her career path. Ms. Larch acknowledged "the Asian cultural expectations of being part of a collective" as a significant influence to the point that she needed to be more "individualistic" to fit an American image of a leader. In general, all five participants claimed to have been positively influenced by their Asian cultures. The finding

reinforced the earlier finding in Research Question 1 of the emphasis of relying on family support. In addition, the finding also aligned with Torne's (2013) findings of family support her subjects received as they navigated career pathways in higher education.

Interestingly, however, three of the participants claimed to be less influenced by their respective cultures in terms of leadership and communication styles. Mr. Aspen said that after living for 31 years in the United States, he had come into his own on leadership and communication styles. Ms. Larch also asserted to be "less Chinese" as president of Orange Technical College. Along the same lines, Ms. Teak pointed to the fact that she essentially grew up in America as the reason for not being too influenced by her Vietnamese culture in leadership and communication styles. Such insights appeared to be somewhat contradictory to their acknowledgment of being heavily influenced by the cultural value of community. According to Chin (2013) and Neilson and Suyemoto (2009), such cultural influences served to define Asian American leadership. It is thus probable that the three participants were conflicted between the two definitions of leadership; one of a more commonly accepted individualistic Western-style leadership versus one of a more collectivistic Asian-style leadership. Similar to the finding earlier in Research Question 1, the CRT tenets of intersectionality and counter-storytelling may help to explain these conflicting responses (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The participants were Asian Americans and college presidents in White-dominated systems. On the one hand, they contributed cultural influences to their successes. On the other hand, they appeared to adapt their communication and leadership styles based on the dominant culture's expectations.

All five participants strongly agreed on the values of education with respect to their achievements as community college presidents. The participants credited their respective cultures as important influences on their educational attainment. All participants except one had

earned doctorates. Mr. Maple had completed all doctoral program coursework except for his dissertation. Mr. Aspen cited the expectations from not only his family but his "village" for him to obtain an education. Ms. Larch's parents continually pushed her to obtain advanced degrees because of their belief that "education can change your life" for the better. Coming from a poor immigrant background, neither of Ms. Teak's parents attended college. They insisted that she obtain a college education to "have a better life in the new country" than they did. All participants acknowledged what they viewed as the positive influences of their respective Asian cultures on their educational attainments. All participants considered having advanced degrees as crucial academic credentials for becoming college presidents. The finding here however required further analysis to determine whether CRT intersectionality affected the participants' responses (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). According to popular media of recent years, certain evidences existed on the high value placed on education in Asian cultures and mindsets (Boylan, 2016; Tucker, 2016). Torne (2013) also found similar cultural influences on education reported among her Asian American president subjects.

Four of the participants reported experiencing some form of racism, discrimination, or microaggressions during their careers. Ms. Larch specifically recalled an occurrence when she was denied a promotion, which she attributed to the fact that she is an Asian American woman. While she was serving as a branch campus dean, the president promoted who she described as a less-qualified White male colleague to replace her as executive dean of the very same branch campus. Upon her protest, the president reversed his decision. Mr. Maple recounted being told that "you're not ready … and you're too young" when trying to pursue his first management position. He also recalled being denied access to professional development opportunities that were afforded to his mainly White colleagues. Ms. Redwood remembered being subject to

frequent microaggressions from White colleagues earlier in her career. The colleagues, for example, often commented on her "excellent command of the English language … without a trace of an Asian accent." On many occasions, she had to remind them that she was born in South Carolina. Similarly, Ms. Teak admitted to being annoyed by colleagues repeatedly complimenting her excellent command of the written English language. She had to remind the colleagues that "I am an attorney … it's my freaking job!" Although none of the participants could recall specific instances of overt racism, all participants stated that their personal experiences with subtle racial barriers had some negative impacts on their careers. In fact, during the interviews, most of the participants still recalled their personal experiences with what I saw as anger and resentment. While such personal experiences did not prevent the participants from attaining their college president positions, the participants believed such racial barriers may contribute to the underrepresentation of Asian Americans as college presidents. The recalled experiences of the participants were similar to the experiences of other Asian Americans faced in the workplace in terms of subtle acts of racism and microaggression (Johnson & Sy, 2016; Ho & Jackson, 2001; Lin et al., 2005). Li-Bugg (2011) reported a similar finding among her five Asian American leaders in higher education in that most experienced some subtle acts of racism and prejudice, including name-calling and negative comments about their ethnicity. Interestingly, just as Mr. Aspen claimed to have not experienced an act of microaggression or racism, two of Li-Bugg's Asian American subjects, similarly stated to have not experienced such acts, also readily recounted incidents recognized as subtle racism (Li-Bugg, 2011). Since admitting to a lack of understanding of critical race theory, Mr. Aspen may view subtle acts of racism and microaggression in different terms.

The findings for the second research question exemplified the appropriate use of narrative inquiry for this study. Unlike traditional empirical research methods striving to reach conclusions of certainty, Squire et al. (2014) believed narrative inquiry only seeks to produce findings with supportable reality of the human experience. The participants' responses were conflicted to a certain extent. However, they reflected the reality of their own human experience as Asian Americans and as college presidents of still dominant (White) American institutions. While not explicit in their answers, the participants appeared to struggle in navigating between their respective Asian culture and the Western European-American culture. Both Torne (2013) and Li-Bugg (2011) also reported finding the theme of "in-betweenness" among their Asian American study subjects as they struggled to navigate their career paths. Coupled with the experiences with subtle microaggressions and racism, these likely represented the challenges and barriers leading to the underrepresentation of Asian Americans as college presidents in the U.S.

**Third Research Question**

The third research question of this study was "What advice would the participants give to aspiring Asian American leaders who are interested in becoming college presidents?" I had intended for this third question to be a secondary focus of this study. The purpose was to provide valuable recommendations for other aspiring Asian American educational leaders who may be interested in pursuing positions as college presidents. All participants acknowledged the need for more representation of Asian Americans as college presidents. Their recommendations included earning and obtaining advanced degrees. Mr. Aspen, Ms. Larch, and Ms. Redwood, for example, all hold doctoral degrees. Mr. Maple had completed all of his doctoral coursework except for the dissertation. As a former attorney, Ms. Teak with her law and legal background came into her position with a Juris Doctor degree. Additionally, the participants considered

having diverse experiences in higher education as valuable for advancing their careers. Ms. Larch held several administrative leadership positions, including dean of continuing education and vice president of institutional effectiveness and student success, before being named college president. Similarly, prior to being selected for his first college president position, Mr. Maple worked in various other positions within academia, including athletic director, assistant dean, and vice president for student services. All participants believed having teaching experience greatly enhanced their résumés, especially in terms of gaining the respect of faculty. All five participants, in fact, reported having prior teaching experience in their various former positions. The following section describes additional recommendations from the participants for aspiring Asian American educators, including suggestions for the interview process.

**Recommendations for aspiring Asian American educators**. Mr. Aspen admitted to closely follow the statistics of Indian American college presidents and educators in the United States prior to becoming a college president himself. He noted the low number of Indian American presidents compared to the much larger number of Indian American faculty and "those with PhDs." While he agreed "there may be an invisible wall" preventing more Asian Americans from becoming a college president, Mr. Aspen believed a potential lack of interest to pursue such senior positions from Asian American educators may be to blame. For those who may be interested, however, he proudly proclaimed that being a college president "is a great job … there is nothing like it." To further stress his point, Mr. Aspen asserted, "I am telling the truth … there is no other job like … a college presidency." He quickly added, "You have to want to be a college president and … you need to have a plan." He recommended an aspiring leader to "build a career-path résumé." He listed several suggestions as part of building a career-path résumé, including obtaining advanced degrees, writing and publishing articles, and attending

professional training and workshop sessions. Mr. Aspen also advised aspiring leaders to "work hard, learn new things, and always do more than what we're being asked." Ultimately, he claimed, "One must work hard to earn such a position… as there is no shortcut" to becoming a college president.

Ms. Larch recommended aspiring Asian American educational leaders to be more "assertive in leadership roles." She believed many Asian American educators are "just too quiet" to inspire confidence as leaders. She recalled from her own experience that Asian Americans "have to learn to speak up … you have got to let people know what you think." Naming some of the stereotypes against Asian Americans, including being timid and unsociable, Ms. Larch pointed to the need for aspiring Asian American leaders to overcome such "damaging perspectives." She believed too often, people, particularly White Americans, view an aspiring Asian American colleague as a "nice Asian person" but not necessarily as a leader. She claimed to have "worked twice as hard as her colleagues" to demonstrate to people of her competence as a college president. Interestingly, Ms. Larch brought up the need for Asian Americans to network beyond just "the Asian groups." She saw too often that Asian American employees "tend to hang out with just each other". Citing some observation of her own Asian American employees, she noted many just typically socialize within in their familiar circle with other Asian Americans. "Very rarely they [her Asian American employees] reached out to socialize with employees of different racial backgrounds," Ms. Larch claimed. A college leader, she argued, must be able to connect with all faculty, staff, students, and community stakeholders of the institution, regardless of ethnic background.

Mr. Maple similarly advocated for more Asian Americans as community college presidents. Pointing statistics showing increasing numbers of Asian American students in

community colleges, he argued for the need of having more Asian American role models. While recognizing the stereotypes faced by Asian Americans as barriers, Mr. Maple believed "the lack of professional development opportunities to develop mid-level Asian American leaders" as the bigger problem. He recalled his own experience of not being able to access leadership development opportunities early in his career. He also mentioned the perceived "lack of interest" in becoming college presidents from Asian American educators as another reason for the underrepresentation. For example, he noted some of his own Asian American faculty showing a lack of interest in pursuing administrative leadership positions in the institution, despite his encouragement. For those who expressed a readiness to pursue a college presidency, Mr. Maple recommended taking the time to research the institution to ensure a right fit. He encouraged potential candidates to "go for quality instead of quantity … as there are currently a lot of openings for community college president positions." Mr. Maple also advocated for Asian American candidates "to proudly proclaim individual accomplishments during the interview process." He believed too many aspiring Asian American leaders "overemphasize the collective accomplishments but shy away from discussing their own individual achievements." Mr. Maple argued for Asian American candidates to confidently articulate their individual successes to demonstrate leadership skills during the interview process.

Ms. Redwood proudly asserted that "they need us badly." She emphasized that she was referring to Asian American college students wanting to see more educational leaders like themselves. Based on her own personal experience, she claimed to have met "many excited students" looking up to her as a role model in "being a college president." Ms. Redwood insisted "if you are considering it [becoming a community college president], then keep considering it, and then just do it at some point in your career." She pointed to one problem, however, in that

"many Asian American colleagues are not considering it." According to her, many Asian American educators tended to shy away from "leadership roles for one reason or another". She explained, "They just want to teach their students… and do good work" but generally not very interested in "engaging on the administrative side of things." As such, Ms. Redwood recommended for aspiring Asian American educators to be more "visible" in the workplace. She added, "People need to know who you are first." Additionally, she believed aspiring Asian American leaders in higher education "need to be equity leaders first." Considering the long history of discrimination against Asian Americans in this country, Ms. Redwood recommended for all Asian American leaders "to be ready to challenge institutional biases."

Ms. Teak could not have agreed more with the recommendation that Asian Americans be "more assertive" as leaders. She too believed aspiring "Asian Americans leaders must learn to speak up … and to speak up loudly and clearly." She pointed to the stereotypes of Asian Americans who just quietly follow the rules at work. Unfortunately, she admitted to have met many of these "stereotyped" Asians in her career. These Asian Americans, according to her, came across more as followers than leaders in the organization. Ms. Teak suggested aspiring Asian American leaders must learn to overcome these perceived, and in some instances, real barriers in order to become successful leaders in American institutions that tend to be dominated by White Americans. For example, she dismissed the cultural value of "being humble with the whole humility thing … it is just not working." She urged aspiring Asian American educators to "be trailblazers in higher education institutions." She added, "We need to go out there and volunteer to let the world know about you."

**Recommendations for the job-interview process.** As part of the effort to obtain valuable advice for aspiring Asian American leaders, I asked the participants to provide specific

recommendations about the interviewing process based on their own personal experiences. Since the interview itself represents a critical component in the recruitment and selection process, a candidate must perform well in order to be considered for the position. The one common recommendation from the participants was for the aspiring candidates to extensively research the institution prior to the interview process.

Mr. Aspen recommended for a candidate to prepare for the interview by doing research on the hiring institution, the community, and the local government politics. With a background in economics, he cited his personal example of researching the population of the surrounding area, the average resident income, and the community perception of the college. As a candidate coming from another state for an interview for his current position, Mr. Aspen noted that he even looked into various data at the state level. According to him, such research "does impress people in demonstrating that I was very sincere about this job." By having the appropriate knowledge about the college and the community, Mr. Aspen felt being able to connect with the board, staff, faculty, and students through the interview process. He suggested for a candidate to "do your homework and just be yourself" during the interview.

Ms. Larch had the advantage of already serving as interim college president before being appointed to her current position. While not required to go through a formal application process, she did, however, go through a formal interview with the board before being named Orange Technical College president. Ms. Larch came into the interview fully prepared to discuss all matters concerning the college and the surrounding community, despite already working with the board for several months in her interim capacity. She suggested for a candidate "to learn as much about the institution as possible … both the good and the bad." During the interview, she recommended a candidate to demonstrate his or her knowledge about the interviewing institution

"like you are already working there." Ms. Larch insisted, "They are looking for a leader to lead in solving their problems."

Mr. Maple specifically advocated for an Asian American candidate to freely discuss his or her individual accomplishments. According to him, most Asian American candidates tended to be uncomfortable talking about their own achievements. He claimed, "They would rather give the credit to the collective than themselves." Such deference to the collective, however, may give an impression that the Asian candidate lacks the necessary leadership skills to be considered for the job. Mr. Maple insisted, "It's a license to talk about your own accomplishments" during the interview process. When necessary, he acknowledged for the candidate to say that "our team did this or the team collaborated on that." The candidate nevertheless must also be able to point out his or her own individual contributions to the team. He added again, "While it is uncomfortable to brag, especially for us, Asians, that is sort of your job in an interview." In terms of preparation for the interview, Mr. Maple recommended for the candidate to extensively research the institution by looking at various documents, including accreditation reports, board meeting minutes, and media releases. He believed these documents "could very well reveal the fears of the institution." Accordingly, a candidate could "capitalize" on such fears by proposing and discussing relevant solutions during the interview process.

Ms. Redwood also recommended a candidate to "do an immense amount of research on the institution" before the interview process. She insisted on researching the institution, even when a candidate had already worked at the same college. Ms. Redwood particularly mentioned attending the Aspen Institute as an excellent way to prepare for such a rigorous interview process. According to her own personal experience, the Aspen Institute provided her with the knowledge to build a leadership profile for a college president based on a number of essential

elements, including institutional effectiveness and equity. Along with her knowledge of the institution and prior working experience, Ms. Redwood felt “really well prepared” for her interview process after attending the Aspen Institute.

Ms. Teak, unlike the other participants, came into her interview process with a very different perspective as an attorney. Although she had worked for a number of years in higher education as legal counsel, she spent several months with her mentor, a former college president, to learn about the role of a president, in order to prepare for the interview process. Her principal suggestion for an aspiring candidate was to be “extremely confident going into the process.” She maintained that a candidate must be able to exude his or her leadership confidence during the interview. According to her, “If you are not confident of yourself … the institution is unlikely to be confident of your leadership ability.” Ms. Teak also added, “Just remember to speak up … and speak loudly and clearly.”

**Analysis for Research Question 3**

The presidents offered several recommendations for aspiring Asian American leaders interested in pursuing a community college president position. First, aspiring leaders should attain the proper academic credentials. Second, aspiring candidates should earn different work experiences in different functional areas of the college, including teaching experience if possible. Third, aspiring candidates should look for mentors. Fourth, aspiring Asian American leaders must be able to navigate racial stereotypes to succeed.

With the exception of the last recommendation, the first three recommendations would be useful to all aspiring candidates regardless of ethnic and cultural background. As discussed earlier in the findings for research questions one and two, the participants’ recommendation of obtaining the highest degree aligned with the recommendations of most other college and

university presidents (Madsen, 2008). In a separate study, Leatherwood and Williams (2008), with their sample of all female college presidents, found overwhelming belief in the importance for college presidents to attain a doctorate degree. All participants stressed the importance of obtaining an advanced degree as a prerequisite to attaining a college president position. Except for Mr. Maple, all of the presidents hold doctorates or equivalent degrees. Mr. Maple had completed all required doctorate requirements except the dissertation. The importance of having the highest advanced degree is fairly apparent in higher learning institutions. The president of a college, as the most senior leader of the organization, is commonly expected by the faculty, the staff, the students, and the public to hold a doctorate. Aspiring Asian American candidates need to obtain similar academic credentials to be competitive for college presidential positions.

In addition to having a doctorate degree, the primary participants considered having diverse experience in higher education as valuable for attaining a college presidency. All participants of this study held various administrative leadership positions in higher education settings before obtaining their president positions. The participants also believed in the importance of having teaching experience in gaining the faculty's respect. As the chief executive officer of the institution, the college president is responsible for running a large multimillion-dollar organization. As such, the president is expected to have knowledge and experience across different functional areas of the institution to be successful. Someone with varied experience in an educational setting would come across as an extremely strong and competent candidate for the job of a college presidency.

None of the study participants started their careers with the goal of becoming a college president. As they progressed in their careers, however, they looked to mentors and network support to navigate their advancement. Ms. Larch mentioned relying on a long-time mentor,

another Asian American community college president in another state, as her go-to person for advice. She spoke of "reaching out to him whenever I have some challenges or [am] just wanting to vent." Ms. Teak credited several former chancellors and presidents in the California community college system as her mentors. With a background in legal studies instead of education, she fondly recalled one of her mentors who guided her through the early years of pursuing the college presidency. The mentor, who was a former college president, "never dismissed me because of my law background." Based on their experiences, having a mentor provided immense benefits for aspiring leaders in pursuing a college presidential position.

All of the participants, except for Mr. Maple, at the time of the study, had only been in their first-time college presidency for two years or less. All five participants however had worked in higher education environment for several years in various different positions and roles. Torne's (2013) finding reported her Asian American college president sample also strongly convinced of their varied work experiences in higher education contributed to their success. According to *On the Pathway to the Presidency Study* (2008), a report produced by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), all community college presidents had served in different administrative positions within higher education prior to being selected as college presidents. Additionally, almost 70 percent of the college presidents had also served as faculty members at some point during their careers.

All of the participants were mindful of racial stereotypes against Asian Americans. As several studies have shown, Asian Americans are widely perceived by other racial groups to be passive, quiet, and lacking social and leadership skills (Johnson & Sy, 2016; Lin et al., 2005; Ho & Jackson, 2001). The participants of this study recommended aspiring Asian American leaders

to overcome those stereotypes as important steps in attaining college president positions. Ms. Larch, for example, said Asian Americans "have to learn to speak up … you have got to let people know what you think." She was concerned about the perception that Asian Americans appear "just too quiet" and "just too nice" to inspire confidence as leaders. Ms. Teak similarly advocated that "Asian American leaders must learn to speak up … and to speak up loudly and clearly." Moreover, she encouraged aspiring Asian American leaders to overcome what she identified as certain Asian cultural values that could encourage negative leadership perceptions. For instance, she said, "Being humble with the whole humility thing … it is just not working." Mr. Maple agreed that Asian American candidates for president positions need "to proudly proclaim individual accomplishments during the interview process." He believed too many aspiring Asian American leaders "overemphasize the collective accomplishments but shy away from discussing their own individual achievements." Collective-based approaches may hurt their chances of being selected as a president of a higher education institution. Thus, the presidents appeared to make a practical but potentially problematic recommendation for Asian Americans to overcome the very racial stereotype about Asian Americans to be successful at attaining a presidential position.

This fourth recommendation from the participants in this study interestingly stood in contrast with the various tenets of CRT. For example, CRT allowed for Asian Americans to challenge the dominant paradigm by providing alternative voices to the normative frameworks in looking at racial inequities in educational leadership (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Parker & Villalpando, 2007). However, by recommending for the aspiring Asian American educators to "speak up… and speak loudly", Ms. Larch and Ms. Teak may have essentially suggested for Asian Americans to act more like their White

counterparts. By recommending for Asian Americans to "proudly proclaim individual accomplishments" and deemphasize collective achievements in the interview process, Mr. Maple also contradicted the counter-storytelling tenet of CRT, a tool for challenging racist characterization of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). However, this advice could also be seen as empowering by informing Asian Americans who are outspoken to speak out. The participants' recommendation for Asian Americans to overcome some of these racial stereotypes may in fact reinforce the very resentment toward Asians exhibiting dominant characteristics of their White counterparts (Johnson & Sy, 2016; Berdahl & Min, 2012; Lin et al, 2005).

The narrative recommendations provided by the five Asian American college presidents again revealed their struggles with balancing the "in-betweenness" (Li-Bugg, 2011). Their recommendations to some extent reflected the experiences of many Asian Americans feeling like they are torn between cultures. In order to be successful in attaining a college presidency, Asian Americans somehow must "suppress" and "restrain" from some of the very cultural characteristics the participants, themselves as college presidents, defined as part of their own success stories. The irony is aligned with Yang's (2011) definition of narrative inquiry as the study of "the ways humans experience the world and how they make meaning out of their experience" (p. 202). The participants' recommendations resulted from their experience of challenging work environments and their best attempts in making meaning out of their experience within these contexts. Aspiring Asian American educators must be mindful of the struggles with "in-betweenness" (Li-Bugg, 2011) as they navigate their career paths to college presidencies.

## Supplemental Data Collection

As noted earlier, the boards of trustees, serving as governance bodies of the institutions, are typically responsible for hiring college presidents. In an effort to obtain additional data to enhance the quality of this study, I interviewed five trustees for their perspectives on Asian American community college presidents. I used the same set of four questions, as shown in Appendix E, for all of the interviews with the trustees. The questions focused on the following three key themes of (1) underrepresentation of Asian American college presidents, (2) perceptions on barriers, and (3) recommendations for aspiring Asian American educators.

**Underrepresentation of Asian American college presidents.** In one question, I cited data on Asian American population, the number of Asian American undergraduate students, and the number of Asian American faculty, compared to the relatively low number of Asian American college presidents. The trustees were asked to provide their thoughts on the underrepresentation of Asian Americans serving in college president positions. Three of the trustees perceived "racism" to play a role in the problem of underrepresentation.

Trustee 1 attributed the underrepresentation to the "small number of Asian Americans pursuing a career in higher education." He saw more Asian Americans wanting "to be doctors, engineers, scientists, and business owners … but few in education." He believed in the need "to encourage more Asian Americans to look at education as a career choice." According to him, the underrepresentation could be mitigated by having "a larger potential pool of interested Asian candidates."

Trustee 2, on the other hand, believed institutional racism plays a role in preventing Asian Americans from becoming college presidents. She maintained that "a long historical system of oppression against people of color contributed to the small number of Asians being

hired as college leaders." Trustee 2 pointed to the double standard of the model-minority myth, in which:

> Asians must work harder but opportunities to advance are rare. … It is a system of White privilege at the leadership level. It is difficult for the [White] people at the top to give up power, even in institutions with a history of valuing diversity.

Trustee 3 professed that he was unaware of the underrepresentation of Asian Americans as college presidents. Acknowledging his own privilege as a White male, he admitted of being "ignorant" about the topic. Trustee 3 responded with the following thoughts:

> I am dumbfounded, literally at a loss for words. Until being presented with this data [about the Asian American college presidents], I was wholly unaware of the underrepresentation of Asian Americans at the presidential level. Clearly, this is a little-known fact/problem that needs to have some light shed upon.

Trustee 4 readily claimed that the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in college president positions "is systemic discrimination against people of color in this country." Although she too was unaware of the exact statistics, Trustee 4 believed Asian Americans as well as other people of color "still have a long way to go before we could be well represented in leadership positions." She insisted institutions of higher learning be at forefront of equity and inclusion, especially given the changing demographics of the student population. She noted, "As our colleges are becoming more diverse, it is of importance to ensure diversity in leadership as well." She added, "The boards have key roles in addressing many of these systemic issues."

Trustee 5 agreed with Trustees 2 and 4 in framing the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in senior leadership positions as "a civil right issue … needing to put a spotlight on it." She contended of people feeling uncomfortable discussing racial issues due to the potential

for divisiveness within the institution, especially during a college presidential search. As such, boards of trustees, mostly made up of White males, according to Trustee 5, are more inclined to stick with "safer" choices of selecting another White male as college president. Trustee 5 asserted:

> Even people of color are pushing back from talking about the lack of Asian Americans as college presidents. They are not willing to shine a spotlight on the issue. In some way, Asian Americans just don't want to rock the boat.

**Perceptions on barriers preventing Asian Americans from becoming college presidents.** A second question asked the trustees to identify potential barriers preventing more Asian Americans from becoming college presidents. The trustees called out two particular barriers as potentially affecting the number of Asian American college presidents. First, the cultural values of humility and collectivism were named as likely to be perceived negatively by Whites as ineffective leadership characteristics. Second, the boards of trustees, largely made up of White males, were to blame as barriers themselves.

As an Asian American himself, Trustee 1 reflected that "Asians tend to be reticent." He believed Asian cultural influences may present barriers, themselves, in preventing Asian Americans from becoming college presidents. He asserted, "We don't like to self promote… and our nature is to be humble." In order to become a college president or a head of a large organization, Trustee 1 reasoned a candidate must be able "to boast" about his or her own individual achievements to come across as a confident leader. He speculated such barriers may be more internally rather than externally created. Trustee 1 concluded, "Our personalities become our own barriers preventing us from advancing our careers."

Trustee 2, a Pacific Islander, on the contrary, blamed the institutions and the mostly White male trustees, making up most of the boards, as primarily responsible for creating barriers against Asian Americans. She claimed colleges would rather "recycle White male presidents than hire unfamiliar Asian Americans as leaders." She reasoned that "people don't like change … and institutions also don't like change." Consequently, their attitudes toward change become barriers for aspiring Asian American leaders.

Trustee 3 failed to identify any barriers facing Asian American educational leaders. Again, as a White male, he acknowledged his lack of understanding of the challenges faced by Asian Americans. He exclaimed, "Hard question! I can only look through the lens of my tenure as a trustee, and I would have said no significant barriers or challenges exist, but clearly the data shows this is not to be the case." Trustee 3 did venture to make some guesses about "the collectivistic cultural trait as a challenge for some Asian American candidates in becoming a president." He believed that getting the job requires "a huge amount of self-promotion to differentiate oneself from all other candidates using independence and assertiveness." He concluded, "These traits are decidedly not those of a collectivist culture that values putting the community needs ahead of individual needs and working as a group to support others."

Looking through the lens of an African American, Trustee 4 believed, "Asian Americans faced some of the very similar racial barriers as Black people in this country." She pointed to the lack of advancement opportunities for people of color in the workplace as a barrier in preventing "more people like us from leadership positions." Specifically, Trustee 4 believed that cultural biases may be presenting a barrier for aspiring Asian American leaders:

> There could be perceived cultural biases, pigeonholing (he/she is "good with numbers"), or stereotypes at play unconsciously, perceived disadvantages or a perception of being

> weaker in certain areas, i.e., difficulty understanding speech with accent or dialect (concerns about ability to communicate in groups or public speaker); question of can they relate to all students and understand the experience of all students, especially brown and black students; may be perceived as being more reserved where being more outgoing could be perceived as more of an asset and more people-oriented; a more reserved personality could be interpreted (incorrectly) as less knowledgeable, less of a team-player oriented, more risk-averse, or overly cautious.

Trustee 5, similarly to Trustee 2, also claimed “the current governance structure” of the institution itself as the biggest barrier in preventing more Asian Americans from attaining college president positions. She blamed the makeup of the trustees and presidents, dominated by White males, as the primary reason for the hindrance. “The boards (of trustees) are not comfortable being pushed outside of their comfort zones. They don’t want to deal with the race issue.” She also acknowledged the “lack of advancement opportunities for Asian Americans in itself is [a] barrier.” Trustee 5 said, “You have to have a pool of qualified Asian American candidates … but there is nobody in the pipeline.”

**Recommendations for aspiring Asian American leaders.** Similar to the interview questions for the primary participants, I asked the trustees to provide recommendations and advice for aspiring Asian Americans interested in becoming a college president. The trustees offered widely different, including some potentially conflicting, advice. There were two common suggestions. First, some trustees recommended for Asian American candidates to confidently discussing his or her individual accomplishments and achievements during the interviewing process for presidential positions. Second, the trustees suggested for interested candidates to meet with a trustee of the institution prior to applying for the position.

In terms of a preferred presidential profile, Trustee 1 maintained that "it is all about the leadership characteristics of expressing confidence and the ability to inspire." He stressed a potential college president "must know how to face the campus." His advice for aspiring Asian American candidates included:

> You have to self-promote and express self-confidence that you belong there. I don't know why it is so difficult for some Asians to accept thanks and praises. You need not to be way out there, but you must be willing to display some individualistic bragging about your accomplishments. It is important to demonstrate a perception of success during the job interview.

Trustee 2, with her background in community activism, insisted on a presidential candidate "who can promote equity and inclusion." Given the changing demographics of students, she wanted to find "a candidate with some understanding of racial dynamics and able to connect with others across cultures." It is important for Trustee 2 that the preferred candidate "must know what it meant to serve with humility." In terms of specific advice for an aspiring Asian American candidate searching for a college president position, she recommended approaching and meeting with the trustees before even applying for the job. She reasoned that one "needs to get an understanding of the trustees first … to get a sense if you can work with the board." During the interview process, she wanted to see a candidate able to express what values he or she stands for. Her belief was "you've got to stand for something even when others didn't … you need to make a statement so people know who you are." Lastly, she advised, "It is not the end of the world even if you didn't get the job … learn from the process and look for another opportunity." Trustee 2 concluded her advice with "look for a mentor … regardless of ethnic background, to help you [in] preparing for the search process."

Trustee 3 listed several qualities that he would look for in a presidential candidate. He needed to see proven leadership experience "in increasing roles of responsibility … at the campus level but also in the context of larger academic associations such as American Association of Community Colleges." Trustee 3 also insisted on the preferred candidate having the highest academic credentials to prove that "a candidate will lead an institution that puts a value on continued learning and self-development." He was very clear that "I want a college president with a doctorate without regard [to] discipline … [as proof] to me the candidate also values education." Unsurprisingly, with his business and finance background, Trustee 3 mentioned business and resource development as important:

> The role of a college president is multifaceted, but ultimately they will run a large institution with a multimillion-dollar budget and untold amounts of human capital. The candidate must have experience in budgeting/finance, human resources, labor relations, etc. Increasingly, the college president must also be a key fundraiser for the institution. Developing relationships with business, community leaders, and other centers of influence is critical to the success of most colleges.

In addition, Trustee 3 recommended aspiring presidential candidates make their intentions "known near and far that you're on the path to presidency and that you are doing all you can to prepare yourself for such a position." He believed "too often it's not the best candidate that gets hired, but rather the best-known candidate who gets the job." As such, he encouraged aspiring candidates to look for opportunities to network with trustee members at various conferences, for example. He advised, "Gaining a college presidency is a campaign; sometimes small battles must be lost, as interviewing for many jobs, before victory is achieved."

Trustee 4 described several similar qualities of a preferred college candidate as Trustee 3. Her list included the following:

> A strategic and comprehensive understanding of all major areas of a college, including finance, academic affairs, student services and institutional advancement, along with the skills, and conducive personality and leadership style. In some colleges, human resources might also be structured as a major area. An understanding of labor-management issues as such is essential.

Furthermore, Trustee 4 also wanted to look for a presidential candidate with "a proven track record in higher education with demonstrated true leadership, not just management." She wanted to see a "proven track record of being able to relate to and understand the students, and relate to the faculty and staff." As a person of color, Trustee 4 was interested in a candidate with a "demonstrated understanding of what diversity and inclusion look like in application and practice on a college campus." Trustee 4 offered the following practical advice for someone interested in a college president position:

> First, have a relevant mentor and also be able to identify sponsors who can advocate for, make critical introductions for, and/or help usher you or your name into appropriate spaces. Second, be involved in institutes, or preparatory pathways to president for aspiring presidents. Third, be aware of where presidential opportunities are promoted. Fourth, be familiar with the workings of presidential search firms and have search firms be familiar with them.

Trustee 5 recommended for an aspiring Asian American candidate be "selective and search for an institution that fits with your values, including cultural values." For example, she suggested, "If you want to push for narrowing the equity gap then look for a community that

supports social equity and inclusion." During the search process, she warned that "people will have biases about your looks and your accent … regardless of your impressive résumé." While overcoming these biases may be difficult, she advised for Asian American candidates to mitigate such biases by "proudly discussing your accomplishments and achievements … but when necessary call out that elephant in the room." Trustee 5 stressed the need for Asian Americans "to be fully confident of our individual accomplishments as leaders … as we tend to second-guess the values we brought to the table." She urged for Asian American candidates "to provide evidence and back up with data" when talking about leadership achievements. Finally, echoing some of the other trustees, she too recommended for potential candidates to meet with the trustees before applying for a presidential position.

**Analysis of Supplemental Data**

Supplemental data were collected to enhance the overall quality of the study. They were not intended to respond to the first two primary research questions of the Asian American community college presidents. Data were collected to provide additional recommendations for aspiring Asian Americans interested in pursuing a college presidency, including potential barriers and challenges from the perspectives of the trustees. It must be noted the trustees selected for this supplemental study were most likely not reflective of the nationwide representation of college trustees in terms of ethnicity and race. With four out of five trustee participants were people of color, their unique perspectives may impact the overall findings.

All four trustees of color believed racial barriers played a role in the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in educational leadership positions. Trustee 2, for example, noted that "a long historical system of oppression against people of color contributed to the small number of Asians being hired as college leaders." Similarly, Trustee 4 pointed to the systemic

discrimination against people of color as a cause for such underrepresentation. It was not clear as to their understanding of CRT, however, their responses actually aligned with CRT's basic premises of race and racism as defining characteristics of the American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Taylor, 2000). Trustee 2 and Trustee 5 also blamed the governance structure of the institutions, typically dominated by White males, as the biggest barrier for Asian Americans to succeed in being hired for a college presidency. Their responses were very much supported by the CRT tenet of institutional racism, defined as the denial of access by society based on race, gender, or sexual orientation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Museus & Iftika, 2013).

Trustee 3 was the only White male participant in the supplemental sample. He admitted to being "ignorant" of the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in college presidencies. Additionally, he also failed to identify any of the racial barriers facing Asian Americans, by exclaiming "no significant barriers or challenges exist." His response however clearly typified the CRT tenet of White privilege of a White male living in the U.S. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) described White privilege as societal advantages and benefits that come with being a member of a dominant White people over non-White people. While unintentional, Trustee 3, at least until the study, was not concerned about the plight of Asian Americans struggling to attain leadership positions in higher education. Trustee 3 also asserted that what he identified as the Asian cultural trait of collectivism may pose as a potential barrier for [some] Asian Americans to be selected for a presidential position. He believed that getting the job requires "a huge amount of self-promotion to differentiate oneself from all other candidates using independence and assertiveness." His responses reinforced the very stereotypes about Asian Americans as described by scholars such as Johnson and Sy (2016) and Ho and Jackson (2001).

Interestingly, Trustee 1, as an Asian American, also blamed what he described as Asian cultural influences as "self-inflicted" barriers. For example, he believed many Asian applicants are just too "reticent" and "humble" to come across as confident and viable college presidential candidates. According to him, these "self-inflicted" barriers may be more challenging to overcome than societal barriers. Trustee 1's responses again reinforced deeply-held Asian stereotypes, suggesting how many Asian Americans themselves may internalize these negative views of themselves. Johnson and Sy (2016) in their different studies found these very same stereotypes when asking their samples to rank Asian Americans based on a list of leadership qualities.

In terms of recommendations for aspiring Asian American educators interested in pursuing a college presidency, the trustee participants offered widely different advices. Very few common themes emerged from their responses. Trustee 1 and Trustee 5, for example, recommended for Asian American candidates to overcome Asian stereotypes by exhibiting characteristics typically displayed by their White counterparts. Trustee 1 suggested for the Asian American candidates to "be willing to display some individualistic bragging about your accomplishments." Trustee 5 also wanted for Asian American applicants "to be proudly discussing [individual] achievements… and fully confident of our individual accomplishments as leaders." Their recommendations however may contradict with the findings where assertive Asian American professionals faced backlashes from White colleagues. Berdahl and Min (2012) reported in their study that while dominant and authoritative characteristics were seen as favorable leadership traits in White leaders, Asian Americans exhibiting similar characteristics often face more harassment and retaliation in the workplace. Trustee 2 and Trustee 5 briefly mentioned the need for Asian American candidates to promote "equity and inclusion" while

participating in the interviewing process. As Asian Americans themselves, these two trustees appeared to support the AsianCrit tenet of commitment to social justice. This AsianCrit tenet, as proposed by Museus and Iftika (2013), advocates for ending all forms of oppression, including the elimination of racism and other systems of subordination. Trustee 3 was the only participant to mention the need for the academic credentials of a doctorate degree for college presidential candidates. His response aligned with the finding of the primary participants, as well as those from the other studies (Torne, 2013; Madsen, 2008; Leatherwood & Williams, 2008), where the samples overwhelmingly believed in the importance of earning a doctorate degree for the college presidential candidates. All four trustee participants of color, however, did not mention academic credentials in describing their preferred presidential profiles. This raises an interesting question as to whether doctorate degrees were already expected of the presidential candidates or if such academic credential not seen as important as other qualities from their perspectives as trustees of color. Two trustees also recommended for aspiring Asian American candidates to look for mentors, aligning their responses with the findings from the primary participants. Three trustees specifically encouraged for interested candidates to meet with a trustee member of the institution prior to applying for the college presidential position. It is unknown as to the results of any studies conducted to evaluate the benefits of this particular recommendation.

As supplemental sample, my investigation of the trustee participants was fairly brief compared to the primary sample. Only four open-ended interview questions were asked of the trustee participants. However, narrative inquiry revealed some valuable data to enhance the overall quality of the study. The five trustees, coming from very different backgrounds, provided their own perspective on the topic of Asian American college presidents. As Yang (2011) had defined narrative inquiry as the study of "the ways humans experience the world and

how they make meaning out of their experience” (p. 202), the trustee participants consequently responded based on their own respective human experience and knowledge about the issue.

**Chapter Summary**

The data collected from the presidents, as primary participants of this study, are presented in this chapter. The presidents were very open with their life stories and workplace experiences. They appeared interested in having their experiences captured and told. The primary data and findings in this chapter are organized in three major sections corresponding to the three research questions. Followed each of the three sections is a “data analysis” subsection specific to the findings for each of the three research questions. As chief executive officers of their institutions, Asian American presidents must manage work challenges and competing priorities as any other college presidents, regardless of race. The presidents also reported to adapt their leadership styles and practices based on their work environments. While all five participants identified being influenced as leaders by their respective Asian backgrounds and cultures, the findings did not support a clearly connection of cultural influence on their leadership styles and practices. The presidents showed varying levels of commitment to social equity by supporting professional development for faculty and staff of color. However, they also admitted to being mindful of the perception of providing preferential treatment to faculty and staff of color among White employees, which led them to sometimes hesitate in terms of how they may have publicly supported certain equity and racial justice initiatives. All five presidents believed in the importance of mentorships for career progression. The presidents reported relying on external sources, including family members, and professional networks for support. The presidents positively contributed their career successes to their respective cultural values of community and the emphasis on formal education. All presidents except one also reported experiencing subtle acts of microaggression and racism in their careers. The presidents made several

recommendations for other aspiring Asian American leaders, including the importance of attaining a doctorate degree and overcoming stereotype threat.

Supplemental data collected from the trustee participants are also presented in this chapter, following the primary findings. The trustees, as secondary participants, provided their own perspectives about Asian American college presidents. Some of the trustees blamed institutional racism as the root cause of the underrepresentation of Asian Americans as college presidents. Other trustees appeared to blame Asian cultural traits and characteristics as the likely causes of the problem. The trustees had very different perceptions of the various racial barriers facing Asian American educational leaders. In terms of recommendations for aspiring Asian Americans interested in a college presidency, the trustees also advised for the Asian American candidates to overcome stereotype threat, by exhibiting more dominant characteristics, to be competitive in college presidential searches.

# Chapter 5

## Discussion, Limitations, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the personal experiences, including leadership practices, insights, and attributes, of five Asian American community college presidents. The study aimed to get a better understanding of how these Asian American college presidents navigate their career paths in higher education and their own perceptions of the influence of their identities and upbringings on their respective career paths. In addition, the study also sought to identify potential factors contributing to the underrepresentation problem of Asian Americans serving as college presidents. Supplemental data were collected from five trustees to enhance the overall quality of the study.

### Discussion

The United States has been and will continue to become a more diverse country in the future. As the number of students of color continued to increase in American universities and colleges, the need for diverse leadership in higher education also becomes more apparent. Gasman et al. (2015) argued for diversifying higher education leadership to provide an excellent opportunity to enhance the educational experience for all students. However, as statistics reveal, Asian Americans in particular continue to be underrepresented in university and college presidencies compared to other racial groups (Gasman et al., 2015; Prinster, 2016; Li-Bugg, 2011). The reasons or root causes of such underrepresentation nevertheless appear to be quite complex. Racial barriers, including stereotype threat, are identified from the key findings of this study as the most significant challenge for Asian Americans. Although not specific to the higher education environment, a 2018 report on leadership diversity at top technology companies found that Asian Americans are least likely to be promoted into senior leadership positions

("Confronting Asian-American Stereotypes," 2018). Lin et al. (2005) likewise found explicit resentment toward highly competent Asian American leaders from non-Asian colleagues in the workplace.

In the same way, my study and others document how institutional racism remains the principal obstacle for Asian Americans to attain a college presidential position. In the supplemental findings, three of the trustee participants identified institutional racism as the root cause of the problem. The trustees believed that racial barriers played a role in the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in educational leadership positions. In most university and college structures, the board of trustees is typically responsible for recruiting and hiring the institution presidents. Among their reasons, the trustees blamed the boards, mostly made up of White male trustees, in creating institutional racial barriers against Asian American candidates. Li-Bugg (2011) in her doctoral research also concluded that biases by predominantly White college boards contribute to the lack of Asian American presidents in community colleges. The findings here unfortunately are supported by several tenets of critical race theory (CRT). At its core principle, CRT acknowledges that race and racism as defining characteristics of American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Taylor, 2000). The denial of Asian American promotional opportunities based on their racial background represents institutional racism at its worse (Delgado & Stefancic; 2012).

Asian American candidates for college presidencies, as such, must be able to acknowledge and face the dominant systems of racial oppression in order to be successful with their career progression. As hiring authorities, the boards of trustees must also be willing to look beyond the racial characteristics of Asian American candidates to at least give them a chance at the interviewing process. The trustees will need to be informed and educated about the potential

benefits of diversity, inclusion, and equity for their institutions. Unfortunately, in some cases, such tasks may fall on the Asian American candidates themselves to meet and speak with these trustees. The supplemental findings from the trustee participants of this study suggested for Asian American candidates to meet with trustees of the institution prior to applying for the presidential position. Three of the trustee participants also recommended for Asian American candidates to focus and promote equity issues during the recruitment and interview process. Commitment to social justice is one of the core tenets of AsianCrit (Museus & Iftika, 2013). Asian American candidates may help themselves in the process by meeting with some of the trustees of the recruiting institution before the actual interview process. Such a meeting would allow the candidates to identify and address any potential biases from the trustees. Additionally, the meeting may also provide an opportunity for the Asian American candidates to express themselves on the issues of social justice and equity. It must be noted, due to the limitations of this study, aside from Li-Bugg's (2011) doctoral study, no other literature review had been conducted on the hiring practices of boards of trustees. Additional future studies are recommended to determine the extent of racial biases exhibited by the boards in college presidential search processes.

Returning to the topic of equity in higher education, there were differences between the primary and secondary findings. None of the participants specifically mentioned any involvements with equity work or social-justice initiatives during their interview for this study. Correspondingly, none of the participants recommended equity initiatives as a focus for aspiring candidates to the path of college presidency. At the same time, all of the participants demonstrated their commitment to social justice and equity causes through their support of professional development for employees of color. Three out of five trustee participants, on the

other hand, explicitly advised aspiring Asian American leaders to take the lead on equity issues. The different perspectives on equity focus, between the presidents and the trustees, potentially highlight a conundrum for aspiring Asian American leaders. Asian American candidates and presidents may be uncomfortable confronting the equity and racial issues during the application process, fearing rejection from the trustees, faculty, and staff of the institutions, most of whom are predominantly White. The trustees, or more specifically the trustees of color, however, were interested in candidates explicitly demonstrating a commitment to equity and social justice causes. Future research is recommended on the experiences of Asian American candidates undergoing a college presidency search process.

Both the primary and secondary findings identified racial stereotype threat as another major barrier to Asian American candidates. Several studies have shown the negative impacts of stereotypes on the career progression of Asian Americans (Johnson & Sy, 2016; Lin et al., 2005; Ho & Jackson, 2001). Ho and Jackson (2001), for example, found that Asian Americans are stereotyped as technically competent, passive, and quiet, but lacking the necessary social skills to be effective leaders. Similarly, in three separate other studies, the samples overwhelmingly rated Asian American professionals as dedicated and intelligent, but lacking leadership characteristics of masculinity, authoritative, and decisiveness (Johnson & Sy, 2016). The presidents and the trustees of this study recommended for Asian American candidates to overcome these racial stereotypes as an important step in attaining a college presidential position. Such approaches, however, may hurt their chances of being selected as presidents of institutions.

The trustees also recommended for Asian American candidates to overcome racial stereotypes to be more successful in attaining a college presidential position. Trustee 1 suggested for Asian American candidates to express self-confidence in order to self-promote in

the interview process. Trustee 5 offered similar advices for Asian American candidates to discuss individual accomplishments to demonstrate their leadership skills. Perhaps unintentionally, Trustee 3, a White male, and Trustee 4, a Black woman, re-affirmed the very racial stereotypes about Asian Americans in their recommendations. Trustee 3, for example, mentioned the cultural trait of collectivism as a potential drawback for Asian American candidates to overcome during the hiring process. He also implied Asian Americans often lacked the ability to independently self-promote and assertively differentiate themselves.

The recommendations, provided by both the presidents and the trustees, to overcome stereotype threat are practical and useful for Asian American candidates. As noted by CRT, race and racism are still very much defining characteristics of the American society (Delgado & Stefancic; 2012). In order to succeed in a dominant institution, Asian American candidates may need to adapt to being more individualistic and assertive like their White counterparts. As previously discussed in my data analysis subsection in Chapter 4, these recommendations however reveal somewhat of the internal struggles of the Asian American college presidents. It is ironic that Asian Americans must suppress and restrain from some of the very cultural traits that presidents defined as significant cultural influences of their own success stories. The recommendations reflect the experiences of many Asian Americans living in America of being torn between cultures. Li-Bugg (2011) described such Asian experiences as “in-betweenness.” While on one hand, crediting their respective Asian cultures for their current successes, the presidents on the other hand also recognized the need to embrace certain aspects of the Western-influenced American cultural characteristics to succeed in the workplace. The contradictory findings may be explained by the CRT tenet of intersectionality where the participants tried to balance between being Asians and being presidents at dominant institutions. It is conceivable,

perhaps unconsciously, the presidents acknowledged as Asians they would never be fully embraced as (White) Americans due to the color of their skin or the ways they speak, despite achieving success in their career paths. Li-Bugg (2011) cited a story by noted Asian American historican Ronald Takaki (1998) from his book, *Strangers from a Different Shore*. As part of a multi-generational Japanese American family living in the U.S. since the 1880s, he was frequently asked "how long have you been in this country?" As such, the presidents of this study and Asian Americans in general will likely continue to struggle with "in-betweenness" and racial stereotypes, including the stereotype of being a perpetual foreigner. Aspiring Asian American leaders must be mindful of this internal struggle in order to successfully balance the conflicting characteristics of being Asian American leaders in predominantly White institutions. A future study on this Asian American experience of "in-betweenness" may be of significant value to further understanding the diverse experiences of Asian American leaders living in America.

The last topic for discussion is the professional development of Asian American leaders in higher education. The findings include a couple of emerging themes. All of the participants strongly supported professional development of faculty and staff of color. While not explicitly stated, their commitments to providing training for employees of color, or more specifically Asian American faculty and staff, may indicate a necessity to enhance to professional skills and knowledge to prepare them for future promotional opportunities. Ms. Redwood, for instance, believed that Asian American faculty, staff, and students wanting to see more leaders "like them." Trustee 5 also remarked of the need for more qualified Asian American candidates. At the same time, however, the presidents' commitment to supporting professional development of Asian American faculty and staff may also indicate a lack of interest from Asian Americans in pursuing leadership positions in higher education. Trustee 1 saw the issue from an external

perspective that more Asian Americans would rather pursue different careers than education. He believed in the need to encourage and recruit more Asian Americans to the field. The aforementioned ACE (2008) study, while somewhat outdated, highlighted a particular problem with the lack of qualified Asian Americans in the pipeline pool for potential college presidencies. While Asian Americans made up between 6 to 7 percent of faculty, they represented only two percent of chief academic officers and other senior administrators. The ACE (2008) data also found a significantly larger number of White women in senior academic and administrative roles who could rise to the college presidency compared to a much smaller number of Asian American men and women in equivalent roles (Torne, 2013; ACE, 2008). The findings here represent a two-fold problem. The first is to provide appropriate professional development opportunities for Asian American faculty and staff in order to prepare them for future career advancement. The second is for institutional leaders and trustees to provide encouragement for qualified Asian American faculty and staff to be interested in pursuing a college presidency. Neither proves to be easy to address. As noted by the Asian American college presidents of this study, they already struggled with how to best provide training opportunities for Asian American employees in the midst of potential institutional-wide misperception of equity and limited resources. Encouraging Asian American faculty and staff to pursue leadership roles may require significant investments in time, effort, and more resources. It is recommended for a future study of Asian American faculty and staff to determine their perceptions and attitudes about leadership roles in higher education.

## Implications

Several implications can be drawn from the findings and the conclusions of this study. First, there is clearly a need for more Asian Americans to attain college presidencies to diversify

educational leadership to serve an increasingly diverse faculty, staff, and student population. Institutions should recognize and address various racial barriers, including stereotype threat, to encourage more Asian American candidates to pursue a college presidential position. The lack of professional development opportunities and career advancements may prevent the building of a pipeline of qualified Asian American leaders. Institutions and current leaders should be more intentional in creating and developing leadership programs that offer equal opportunities for aspiring Asian American leaders to gain the necessary credentials and experience to become future college presidents.

Second, it is critical for college administrations and boards of trustees to recognize the cultural assets and values that Asian American candidates bring to a college and system. Institutions should create and promote equity and inclusion programs to educate the campus community on the values of diversifying leadership through respecting and appreciating different leadership styles. As hiring authorities for president positions, the boards of trustees should be conscious of their own biases and take the necessary steps to ensure a fair and equitable selection process. The boards must be willing to acknowledge and declare that the goal of diversifying leadership is to enhance the educational experience for all students of the institution.

Third, to create a network of support for aspiring Asian American leaders, current leaders, especially Asian American college presidents and trustees, must be willing to step up and serve as mentors. Given the small number of college presidents and trustees of Asian descent, these leaders must be proactive in recruiting and reaching out to potential mentees to offer guidance and encouragement. The institutions can also play a role in offering support by providing opportunities for mid-level Asian American staff and faculty to develop their own

networks through various organizations like Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education and Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics.

Lastly, aspiring Asian American candidates must recognize the challenges of navigating individual and institutional cultures. The candidates must learn to adapt their leadership skills and practices to their respective work environments to be successful (Heifetz et al., 2009). Asian American candidates need to embrace the best of both cultures. It is, as such, of extreme importance for family members of these candidates to continue providing the cultural support needed for them to manage the "in-betweenness."

## Limitations

This study has its limitations. The primary sample size of five Asian American community college presidential participants was relatively small. Additionally, due to the small overall size of the population, where I was able to conduct the face-to-face interviews, the sample may not be an accurate representation of Asian American college presidents nationwide. The addition of a secondary sample after much of my research had begun created added challenges to the data collection schedule. The majority of my secondary participants were trustees of color, which most likely was not reflective of the trustee population nationwide. Finally, I was not able to interview other stakeholders directly and indirectly connected to the participants to gather more in-depth insights about how Asian American community college presidents lead outside or within an equity framework, such as through their mentors, or their home institutions' faculty, staff, and students.

## Recommendations for Future Research

This study revealed many new questions and future areas for scholarly inquiry. The underrepresentation of Asian Americans in college presidential positions could further be

explored to contribute to a more robust scholarly conversation about Asian American leadership in higher education. I recommend the following additional studies to enhance the field's overall knowledge of diversifying leadership in higher education:

- Given the limitations of a small sample size of just five participants, this study of Asian American community college presidents could possibly be replicated to include a larger sample size. This study was intended to capture the unique experiences of five Asian American community college presidents in Washington, Oregon, and California. A larger sample of participants, including those from a wider geographical area of the United States, would most likely yield more significant experience in the findings.
- Given the limitations of a mixed-gender sample, it is recommended for a future study to focus on college presidents of a specific gender. It is possible for the findings to show significant differences in leadership approaches between male and female participants, as well as those who identify as neither. In addition, there may also be differences in how Asian American men address racial barriers compared to Asian American women. It should be noted this particular recommendation presents its own challenges. As there are very few Asian American college presidents, identifying an appropriate gender-stratified sample for this study may not be feasible.
- Given the governance structure at colleges and universities, in terms of recruiting and hiring the president, it is recommended for a future study of trustees to determine how and whether biases significantly impact the selection processes. The findings would be useful in developing anti-bias programs to assist the trustees in the presidential search process.

- Given the emphasis on equity and inclusion, it is recommended for a future study of Asian American educators' experience and involvement with social justice issues. The findings would be useful in the development of training programs for other Asian Americans in higher education.
- Given the struggles of the primary participants with negotiating between two cultures, both individual and work-related, it is recommended for a future study of Asian American leaders' experiences with navigating the Western-influenced institutions. The findings would provide valuable knowledge for enhancing the understanding of Asian Americans living and working in the U.S.
- Given the mentioning of the lack of interest from Asian American staff and faculty in pursuing senior leadership positions, it is recommended for a future study to survey their perspectives of leadership. The findings from such a study could determine whether Asian American staff and faculty truly lack interest in senior leadership positions, whether they have experienced institutional and structural barriers, or perhaps both. Additionally, the findings could assist in developing programs designed to encourage more Asian Americans from entering the educational leadership field.
- Given the potential negative impact of racial stereotypes on Asian American candidates for presidential positions, it is recommended a future study survey the perceptions of faculty and staff in general toward Asian American leaders and other leaders from various racial backgrounds. The findings could be useful for aspiring Asian American leaders in mitigating those perceptions.

## Conclusion

The Asian American community college presidents who participated in this study demonstrated that they can be successful in navigating their complex work environments where multiple challenges abound. They all adapted their leadership styles depending on the situation and appeared to be flourishing in their respective positions. It must be noted, however, that most of the participants were still in the acclimating phase of being community college presidents. With the exception of Mr. Maple, who was on his second college presidency, all participants were first-time college presidents. Three of the presidents were barely six months into their positions as of the interviews. The presidents nevertheless acknowledged being able to rely on network support as well as mentors as crucial to their sustained success.

## The End of the Inquiry

This study brought together the personal narrative stories of five Asian American community college presidents. Additionally, five trustees consisting of three Asian Americans, one African American, and one White American, provided insights and thoughts on the topic of the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in college presidencies. In the writing of these final thoughts on this inquiry, I am grateful to all of the participants for sharing their personal stories and life experiences. I hope that this inquiry will further add to the small but growing scholarly research on Asian American leadership experiences. This is the end of my journey in writing this dissertation. I am ready for and look forward to new opportunities, perhaps with a path of my own to a community college presidency someday.

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Appendix A

Invitation to Participate in Study

Date:

Dear:

My name is Michael V. Pham and I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Washington. I am interested in researching the experiences of Asian American community college presidents/chancellors. I hope to learn new insights and perspectives on leadership through your stories. As such, I am writing to request your participation in the study. Please see below for additional information about the research process.

This research will include a face-to-face interview with you in person. The interview can either be at your workplace or a location of your choosing. The interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Prior to the interview, I will forward a set of interview questions for you to review prior to the actual interview. The interview will be taped and transcribed. Once I have examined the transcripts, a copy will be sent to you to re-check for accuracy, if you so choose to do so. I am looking to complete the research phase of this project no later than January 31, 2019.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to read this invitation to participate in my research. If you have any question regarding this research project, please feel free to contact me at 206-476-1104 or michael.pham@hotmail.com.

If you agree to participate, please complete the attached demographic sheet and consent form. I am extremely excited to begin this research project and look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,

Michael Pham

Appendix A-2

Researcher's Information (Attached to Invitation to Participate)

**ABOUT THE RESEARCHER – Michael V. Pham**

I am currently serving as Vice President for Administration and Finance at Highline College in Des Moines, Washington. My areas of responsibility include Business, Finance, Facility Operations, Capital Projects, Public Safety, Auxiliary Services, Contract Administration, Risks Management, and most recently, International Student Programs. Prior to my current position, I had spent approximately 23 years working at Seattle Central College and Seattle College District in various positions including Director of Auxiliary Services, Executive Director of Financial Services, and finally as Vice President for Administrative Services.

I am in the process of pursuing my doctorate degree in Educational Leadership at the University of Washington – Tacoma. My research topic will focus on studying the experiences of Asian American community college presidents and chancellors. I am planning to utilize adaptive leadership theory and critical race theory (CRT) as the theoretical frameworks for my research. The adaptive leadership theory is used to analyze the process in which the Asian American college leaders navigate his/her respective environment. The CRT tenet of "counter-storytelling" is used to capture and portray the voices of these Asian American community college presidents/chancellors.

Appendix B

Demographics and Consent Form

| Title of Study: | **A Qualitative Study of Asian American Community College Presidents** |
| --- | --- |
| Researcher: | **Michael V. Pham** |
| Purpose of Study: | The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding of the personal experiences of Asian American community college presidents and chancellors. The study explores the leadership practices, insights, and attributes contributing to the success of these college leaders. In addition, this study examines the challenges, including any racial barriers, these leaders must overcome to attain and succeed in their respective position. |

**DEMOGRAPHIC DATA SHEET**

The data collected on this Demographic Data Sheet will be used for my research purposes only. All responses will remain confidential. Your name will not be used in the study. The name of your institution will not be used in the study. All participants and institutions will be assigned study codes.

| | |
| --- | --- |
| Name (will not be used in study): | |
| Ethnic background: | |
| Current position: | |
| Years in current position: | |
| Immediate past position: | |
| Terminal degree earned: | |
| Field of study (major): | |

**CONSENT FORM**

Your signature below indicates that you are agreeing to participate in this study.

| | |
| --- | --- |
| Name: | |
| Signature: | |
| Date Signed: | |

Please return this form to mvp2020@uw.edu

Please contact Michael Pham at 206-476-1104 if you have any questions.

Appendix C

Interview Questionnaire

**QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Michael V. Pham**

1. Please tell me about your background, including family and educational history?
2. Please describe your career path and how it led you to your current position?
3. Please describe your leadership style. What are your thoughts on "leading with empathy" theory?
4. What are the major challenges of your current position? How have you dealt with those challenges?
5. How do you manage competing priorities?
6. How do you foster professional development and learning among your employees? Please provide specific examples?
7. Who do you rely on for support at work and outside of work? Why?
8. What advice would you give to an aspiring Asian American leader interested in pursuing a community college president position?
9. What influences of being an Asian or Asian American have on your career path, if any?
10. What barriers, if any, have you faced in your career path, that you believe were due to your ethnicity and/or cultural background? How have you dealt with those barriers?
11. Given your achievement, how do you think your ethnicity and cultural background contribute to your success?
12. What are your thoughts on the underrepresentation of Asian Americans as university and college presidents in the U.S.?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience as an Asian American community college president?

Appendix D

Sample Email to Request Supplemental Interview

Dear Trustee XYZ,

I am in the process of completing my doctoral dissertation on Asian American community college presidents. This is a qualitative study where I had interviewed five Asian American college presidents in Washington, Oregon, and California.

In effort to enhance the quality of the study, my doctoral supervisory committee has asked for supplemental data from the trustee's perspectives. As such, I would like to request an interview with you to hear about your thoughts and opinions on the topic of Asian American leadership in higher education. The interview should take no more than 30 minutes. I could meet you at a place of your choosing (your office, nearby coffee shop, etc.). Alternately, I could also schedule a telephone interview if that is more convenient for you. Due to the timeline of my program, I would appreciate your response for an interview no later than May 31, 2019.

Please find below a list of four questions for the interview.

1. From a trustee's perspective, what are you looking for in a college presidential candidate?
2. From a trustee's perspective, what would be some of your advice for an aspiring Asian American interested in a college presidential position?
3. [Given Asian Americans made up ~6 percent of the U.S. population, 12+ percent of college undergraduates, 7+ percent of tenured faculty, etc. but less than 1.5 percent as college presidents] What are your thoughts on the under-representation of Asian Americans as college presidents?
4. What do you think are some of the barriers/challenges to having more Asian Americans as college presidents?
5. Do you have any other thoughts or comments on this topic?

Please note to ensure your confidentiality, neither your name nor any personal identifiable information will be disclosed in this study.

Thank you very much for your assistance.

Michael V. Pham
mvp2020@uw.edu

# Appendix E

## Sample of Interview Transcript

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Speaker 1: | 00:15:30 | Uh, can you, uh, question number three, please describe your leadership style and I'm not sure if you had a chance to read my background letter. When I sent you, um, my, my real brief of what I was trying to do. So my two conceptual frameworks are, first of all, the, uh, the critical race theory, which is a storytelling, which thank you very much. I mean your, your, uh, background is just very, very amazing. So thank you for sharing that story. And then the second, a conceptual framework that I'm looking at is adaptive leadership theory. I wanted to find out, you'll see if, you know, as Asian Americans, obviously we are in a way a dominant culture environment and I'm just wondering how like how did you or did you have to adapt your leadership style or not? |
| Speaker 2: | 00:16:19 | Yeah, I think that there's always a part of negotiating the dominant culture. And I did. I always have to do that. I have to do that when I go to the Safeway. I mean, great. It's a part of our team leads and no matter what realm it is a, there's always this, at least here on the mainland, right, there's the. If I were to go to Hawaii, be a different, different story or parts of southern California or some parts of Seattle, right? But for the most part, I'm in Oregon is still a predominantly white state and so there is a matter, uh, there is a need to, for me to adjust. However, part of that adjustment is really not an adjustment in that it's a value, a cultural value and that's around what you've listed as leading with empathy, which to me means also means very active listening and trying to really hear what people are saying and not just the words but the meaning, what do people mean when they are telling me what they're telling me. |
| Speaker 2: | 00:17:43 | And so I think that was helpful and being able to get a sense of the, of the institution and what motivates people to work here. And I'm also to listen to the community outside of the college. And what are the challenges facing the |

community, what are the values of the community? So I would say I did hit the ground listening and after about three to six months, um, developed a work plan for my life my first year and then followed up with a work plan for the next two. And so there, there was the balance of trying to honor what had been done, recognizing changes that needed to be made, triaging and prioritizing those changes and then putting them into a coherent and cohesive plan and then implementing that plan. And I think all those, um, were a culturally based. When I was growing up, um, we moved from Beacon Hill to a place outside of Renton.

Speaker 2: 00:19:06 We integrated in the neighborhood. Neighborhood was actually great. We had really good neighbors and then I went to school and then ran into kids who were racist and I got pounded a lot and my parents got me into judo so I would learn how to defend myself because the school didn't know what to do. Um, you know, anyway, one of the maxims and judo is to plan thoroughly execute boldly. And so when I am trying to do is to listen, synthesize, plan, but then at the right moment inform everybody, okay, I'm flipping a switch, let's execute, execute, execute. And that is a little different for the institution. And so a part of this is around really focusing on equitable student success, putting a plan together. And then implementing that plan. So, um, I think because I did some listening upfront that helps on the execution side and I do let people know, here's your chance, here's your chance to provide input and then when that is done, we're moving, we're moving, we're moving. So that's the only sign I have in my office. So for the, for the recorder, I'm pointing to a sign it says if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together and been my model

Speaker 1: 00:20:48 and I actually had a chance to go on their website and read a little bit of your, of your work plans and you are very transparent about what you want it to do that. Thank you for that. Um, you may touch a little bit on, on, on, on question number four already, but which you are, could you tell me what are the major challenges of your current

position right now and how have you dealt with some of those challenges?

Speaker 2: 00:21:14 I would say rebuilding trust. And I did that through communication. Um, so, uh, anytime there's a transition of leadership, it takes awhile for people to trust you and I'm not saying I'm there yet and just that I've worked at it and tried to be transparent and to communicate more. Um, the budget we talked, I talked about. Um, and that requires a lot of communication. I've made plenty of mistakes in terms of I'm not communicating to all the parties that I need to and finding the best way to communicate out is an ongoing pursuit. Um, because this is a very large desk, you know, we have 73,000 students twice the size of Seattle. Yeah, four campuses, eight centers around a five county area, predominantly served three counties. So it's a matter of finding the right way to communicate out to folks. So I would say that's probably the first strategy is around communication and another, uh, has to do with, uh, being strategic about where to focus. And there are certain key focal areas that if we focus on those other things will fall into place. And budget is one of my focal areas because it's related to almost everything.

Speaker 2: 00:23:00 So that's a leverage issue and by making some progress there I think we'll be able to really impact that the district as a whole, I, you know, culturally the pronouns or are all we have always been important. So a mix of I the Pronoun I and, and we, I, when it comes to personal responsibility as a leader to make some decisions and then to stand by those decisions, be accountable. We when it comes to sharing the credit and I'm talking about the collective work that we have to do. So it's how I apply the I and the we that is, I think an important of the change leadership. Um, so communication is a big part of that. Being strategic and strategizing around priorities. I'm listing and getting a sense of the spirit of the institution and then building strategic partnerships in order to address the major issues.

Speaker 1: 00:24:10 So, uh, it appears to be budget is a, a, a big focus of the last two years that you've been here. But if I, just, aside from

the budget, what would, what do you think that you would need to be more successful, more effective in your, in your current position, aside from the budget?

Speaker 2: 00:24:33 Well, I think does the cultural change within the institution, so identifying and defining what the culture currently is and then how to move the culture in the direction that fosters more equitable student success and opportunity. So those are the two areas that culturally I'm interested in focusing on is the mission of creating greater opportunity for our students, particularly low income, underserved, underrepresented students, uh, students of color, first generation students, um, and also eliminating disparities in outcomes between students of color and the average completion rates and between first generation students and a low income students who, students who face greater barriers, um, we want success rates to rise and to eliminate disparities between student populations as they rise rather than exacerbating preexisting disparities and outcomes.

Speaker 1: 00:25:54 So just to clarify, you think that by learning immersing in the culture here, you would be more effective and you're current and you're working with that being your third year

Speaker 2: 00:26:05 at the college, right? Yeah. See, so it's a mixture of cultural work using data as, so identifying opinion leaders working through resistance to change, um, by identifying the opinion leaders and those that have an influence on opinions. I'm listening to those who are really resistant to, uh, to the change that could result in higher and more equitable success rates. And there's usually a reason that's logical to the person that's resisting the change. So I think it's helpful to understand what the logic is, even if it's illogical to me, it's logical to somebody else and I need to understand where they're coming from. And so that's more, that's interpersonal relations but also looking at our procedures, looking at our policies, looking at our practices and questioning them. But also, you know, there's such a, there's such a thing as initiative fatigue and so I think it's really important to prioritize those initiatives that have the greatest impact on the students.

Speaker 2: 00:27:30 And then to stick with them, I think in any change initiative, there's always this point where things get really hard and it looks like it might be best to cut your losses and walk away and I don't want to do that. I, it's my sense that, that has been done before here and I want to change that, that we're not going to walk away from an important strategic change initiative. We're going to tackle the problems, we'll work together as a team to address those and not everybody's going to be onboard and not everybody has to be onboard to create the strategic change. And in fact we can't wait for everybody. So we're gonna move the needle, but it may know we may not have everybody there.

Appendix F

IRB Approval

**DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS**

October 22, 2018

Dear Michael Pham:

On 10/22/2018, the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (HSD) reviewed the following application:

| | |
|---|---|
| Type of Review: | Initial Study |
| Title of Study: | A Qualitative Study of Asian American Community College Presidents |
| Investigator: | Michael Pham |
| IRB ID: | STUDY00005954 |
| Funding: | None |

**Exempt Status**

**HSD determined that your proposed activity is human subjects research that qualifies for exempt status (Category 2).**

- This determination is valid for the duration of your research.
- This means that your research is exempt from the federal human subjects regulations, including the requirement for IRB approval and continuing review.
- **Depending on the nature of your study, you may need to obtain other approvals or permissions to conduct your research. For example, you might need to apply for access to data (e.g., to obtain UW student data). Or, you might need to obtain permission from facilities managers to approach possible subjects or conduct research procedures in the facilities (e.g., Seattle School District; the Harborview Emergency Department).**

If you consider changes to the activities in the future and know that the changes will require IRB review (or you are not certain), you may request a review or new determination by submitting a Modification to this application. For information about what changes require a Modification, refer to the GUIDANCE: Exempt Research.

Thank you for your commitment to ethical and responsible research. We wish you great success!

Sincerely,

Dana Gold, MA
IRB Administrator, Committee D
Email: deg4@uw.edu Phone: 206.543.5602

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