

2015

# The 21st Century University President: Building Blocks for Effective Rural Leadership

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**The 21<sup>st</sup> Century University President:  
Building Blocks for Effective Rural Leadership**

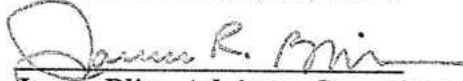
by

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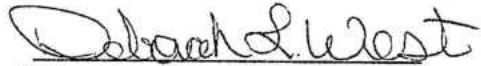
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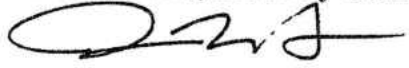
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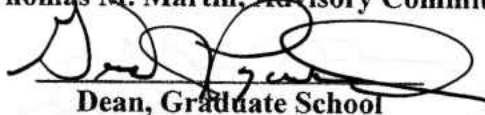
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The 21<sup>st</sup> Century University President:  
Building Blocks for Effective Rural Leadership

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing wife, whose endless support, sacrifice and love made it possible for me to accomplish this significant personal and professional milestone. It is also dedicated to my parents, Howard and Mary McFaddin, who have always loved me unconditionally and whose good examples have taught me to work hard for the things that I aspire to achieve. Finally I would like to dedicate this work to my beautiful, sweet and spunky daughter Isabel and her soon-to-arrive sister Sophia. You are and will always be the best part of me.

To each of you I would say that if the skies were parchment and the seas were ink, I could never express my love for you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my committee members who were more than generous with their expertise, time and unending encouragement. A special thanks to Dr. Charles Hausman, my committee chairman for his countless hours of reflecting, reading, encouraging, and most of all patience throughout the entire process. Thank you Dr. Deborah West, Dr. James Bliss, and Dr. Thomas M. Martin for agreeing to serve on my committee and travel on this journey with me.

I would like to acknowledge and thank those college and university presidents who took precious time out of their demanding schedules to participate in this study. Their willingness to talk openly, honestly and intimately about this topic was of critical importance to properly explore this understudied area of presidential leadership. Of all the things I learned during this process, the most inspiring was just how much these individuals love their institutions, their communities and the people they have the good fortune to serve.

Finally, I would like to give my sincerest thanks to Mr. John Williamson, the greatest teacher, mentor and friend I have known. He truly shaped the trajectory of my life for the better by seeing something in me I never saw in myself. Teachers do make a difference!

## **ABSTRACT**

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century University President: Building Blocks for Effective Rural Leadership**

**David T. McFaddin**

**December 2015**

#### **Abstract**

This paper was written to examine the fundamental areas of influence that can help to shape effective leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century college or university president in a rural setting. In the last few years, centuries of long held traditions, behaviors and expectations inside and outside of the university community have quickly and radically changed. The new and evolving knowledge-based economy of America has created an exceedingly competitive marketplace for higher education that has forever changed the social and financial contract between higher education and the American public. This new world features extremely complex and competitive organizations that must exist and flourish with less public funding, greater public oversight and increased private costs to consumers. An in-depth examination of the literature concerning the most effective methods by which presidents might shape their leadership to cope with this new world reveals the significant impact and influence the core skills, experiences, behaviors and values have on effective leadership in a rural setting. This paper specifically focuses on how the skills, experiences, behaviors and values identified by the presidents themselves can offer a root-cause analysis of how to effectively lead rural colleges and universities in this new era. It also reveals that while every rural college and university president is



striving for leadership and institutional excellence in a highly competitive marketplace, only those who identify and manage their leadership through their skills, experiences, behaviors and values will be able to accomplish that goal.

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup> century, rural, higher education, university president, college president, skills, experiences, behaviors, values and effective leadership

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## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Overview**

Historically, America's public universities offered non-elites access to higher education while developing and disseminating new, practical knowledge (Alperovitz, Dubb, & Howard, 2008). In the late twentieth century, the historic public university mission was eclipsed by other institutional concerns focusing on public policy, market trends and new competitors. However, there is now a national focus to revive that legacy tradition within higher education and make it relevant to the social and economic needs of citizens and communities of the twenty-first century (Alperovitz, 2008).

Likewise, the leadership of the public university has evolved over the past three centuries. More and more the success of a university depends on the president's ability to successfully integrate an effective leadership style that allows him or her to be transformational, charismatic, visionary, a successful fundraiser and always well informed in an increasingly complex and ambiguous environment (Birnbaum, 1989). Upton Sinclair once described college presidents as spending their time running back and forth between mammon and God (Nicholson, 2007). Sinclair may have been accurate in his description of the 19th- and 20th-Century university president, "but 21st-Century presidents appear to be driven by mammon alone" (p. 256). Schrecker (2011) argued in a recent editorial for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that, due to the current financial

environment and the tremendous cutbacks that have occurred in appropriated funding, public colleges and universities are in survival mode and cannot effectively serve as a means to help support and grow a thriving middle class. Needless to say, this new environment calls for a unique leader who can balance the often-competing interests of a higher education institution of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Chandler (2006) stated, “Leading the modern college or university is a complicated affair, requiring the organizational affairs of a field marshal, the fiscal acumen of a CPA, the diplomacy of a politician and the vision of a prophet” (p. 25).

Colleges and universities in the United States and all across the world are facing new opportunities and challenges in the fast-paced knowledge marketplace that is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With ever-changing technology and increased competition from public, private and for-profit institutions, the landscape for higher education has changed in ways that many never expected (Kazeroony, 2012). In the last few years, centuries of long-held traditions, behaviors and expectations inside and outside of the university community have quickly and radically changed. This tidal wave of change being forced upon the academy by outside factors (technology, government, workplace needs versus general knowledge transference, etc...) will either force change in higher education leadership strategy, organizational design and behavior from the inside out or be crushed from the outside in (Duderstadt, 2000). While academia has always been global; there have been scholars all across the world sharing knowledge for century after century, now more so than ever, time and space are less of an obstacle to this knowledge exchange due to technology (Stallings, 2001). As explained by Friedman, (2005) the world is now flat and

higher education is competing in a global marketplace. Additionally, the growth of for-profit educational models, distance learning and the exponential erosion of government support for higher education has dramatically changed the environment in recent years. For example, the new and evolving knowledge-based economy of the U.S. has created an exceedingly competitive marketplace for higher education that has forever changed the social and financial contract between higher education and the American public (Duderstadt, 1999). This idea highlights the question of whether higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be an increasingly public good or a private good. A 2013 report released by Grapevine, comprised from data gathered from the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), revealed that the national total fiscal support for higher education in the United States for FY13 was 10.8% lower than FY08 (Grapevine, 2013). The report went on to highlight that higher education systems in 38 states are now operating with levels of support that are between 2.6% and 36.6% lower than levels reported just five years ago (Grapevine, 2013). Bob King, SHEEO Executive Committee vice chair and president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, emphasized that the increasing share of educational cost being borne by students, now approaching 50% as a national average and much higher than that in many states, is an overwhelming burden for students and institutions alike (SHEEO, 2014). King was quoted saying, “as states have shifted their limited resources to other parts of their budgets, such as corrections, K-12 education, employee pensions and health care, public colleges and universities have been forced to place an increasing share of the cost of education on students and their families. This is not sustainable in an era when more and more students from lower-

income families need to attend and graduate from college. Colleges need to find ways to reduce costs, but states also must find ways to direct more money to support their students” (Bradley, 2014, p. 3). As government support continues to decline and tuition generated funding replaces it, the needle increasingly moves toward higher education being a private good that is only measured by the return on investment it offers to the individual purchasing it.

Change has always characterized the university as it has sought to preserve and propagate the intellectual achievements, the cultures, and the values of our civilization (Duderstadt, 2000). However, the capacity of the university to change, through a process characterized by reflection, reaction, and consensus, simply may not be sufficient to allow the university to control its own destiny in the 21st century. Not only will social and technical change be a challenge to the American university, Duderstadt (2000) suggests, “it will be the watchword for the years ahead.” (p.10).

To complicate this issue even further, many institutions and those who are tasked to lead them are faced with the unique challenges that a rural environment presents. While the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought countless changes to higher education and the world as a whole, the general challenges of rural America have remained unchanged, most notably: limited resources, geographic isolation and a static economy (Morelli, 2002). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, those issues that have historically been endemic to rural areas: “poverty, illiteracy, a graying population, dying small towns, shortage of trained workers, substandard housing, high unemployment, above-average school dropout rates, substance abuse and the lack of adequate healthcare and childcare,” (Reichard, 1995, p.17) have



worsened to a near catastrophic level. While scholarly publications abound regarding the impact higher education can have in enhancing rural and distressed communities and regions, almost no research has specifically addressed the critical attributes needed by the presidents of these higher education institutions.

One can only wonder where do we find the next great leaders of the rural American university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? More specifically, where can we find exemplary presidents that possess those essential skills, experiences, behaviors and values that are aligned with, or complement, the mission, location, culture and constituencies of their institutions? Given all of these factors, there has been a sharp change in where universities are looking. Recent data shows that 20 percent of new college presidents are coming from the corporate boardroom rather than the classroom (Lederman, 2012). Fisher, Tack, and Wheeler (1988) foreshadowed these higher education trends on the horizon and suggested that the college president of old, a former professor who presides at convocations and faculty meetings, raises some money, and creates as few waves as possible is likely the leader of the past and not the future. To effectively lead an institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (1988), a college president should look more like a corporate executive than his or her traditional predecessor. Regardless of where this new generation of leaders come from, with this change will come unprecedented opportunities for those universities, under the proper leadership, with the vision, the wisdom, and the courage to lead in the twenty-first century— “the real question is not whether higher education will be transformed, but rather how . . . and by whom” (Duderstadt, 2000, p. 334). While most all of the research available today looks at university presidents at a

macro level, the basis of this study is to understand effective leadership in a rural setting. Identifying and understanding those critical skills, experiences, behaviors and values, as they specifically apply to leaders of rural universities, form the basis of this study.

### **Problem Statement**

Rural colleges and universities hold great expectations and responsibilities for improving the areas that they serve. It is crucial that today's institutional leaders possess the necessary experiences, skills, values and behaviors needed to meet the challenges of their positions in the communities and regions they serve. Another layer of complexity to this problem is that leaders must not only be effective but reflective of the world around them (Broad, 2012). This issue becomes increasingly important when dealing with institutions that are located in, or serve a rural region.

In this research, I seek to understand more fully the skills, experiences, behaviors and values that are fundamental for a president to be effective in a rural setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This project's purpose is to advance the understanding and expand the cannon of research on higher education leaders in the following ways: a) to provide a systematic and detailed list of those skills, experiences, behaviors and values exhibited by effective presidents, b) to relate those skills, experiences, behaviors and values to the 21<sup>st</sup> century global marketplace for higher education and c) to relate those same areas to leadership in rural America.

Universities are charged with preserving the knowledge of the past and transmitting it to the next generation; educating citizens, professionals, and leaders and

fostering the discovery of new knowledge that may either strengthen or challenge established ideas and norms—all with the aim of deepening human understanding and advancing the human condition (Dew, 2012). Universities also function as engines of economic development, foster technological and scientific innovation, stimulate creativity in the arts and literature, and address urgent global problems such as poverty, disease, ethno-political conflict, and environmental degradation (Chaichankul, 2006). Rural America desperately needs all of these issues to improve so that they may enjoy success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The localized missions and unique characteristics of rural regions, and the institutions of higher education that serve them, may require presidents who possess a distinctive set of skills, experiences, behaviors and values that are different from those needed by their urban or suburban counterparts.

Due to these pressures, institutions are looking to a new breed of leadership that can help navigate the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education environment. Latta (2010) described the current funding environment as a perfect storm: as the need for an educated workforce is increasing in order to be competitive in the new global marketplace, the cost of attending a university is growing, and state funding declines are expected to continue (p. 2). For rural Americans globalism, job scarcity and changing technologies have presented daunting challenges that far exceed their urban counterparts and continue to plague these regions well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hill & Moore, 2000). Declining populations, low average incomes, shortage of jobs, little to no public transportation and poor provision of services and facilities have made rural America a place that does not attract the visionary leadership or private investment needed to bridge these critical

economic and social gaps (Richardson, 2000). Given all of these factors, rural Americans have increasingly looked to their higher education institutions and those who lead them as one of, if not the primary, source of hope for survival and prosperity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In total, universities are faced with the presence of a new normal that includes decreased state funding, increased costs for institutions and students, dramatic technological changes that have revolutionized distance education and made higher education a truly global marketplace, more competition in the form of for-profit institutions, amplified demands for accountability and transparency and all this while striving to preserve the traditions and legacies of the academy.

The rural university president of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must possess a suitable set of skills, experiences, values and behaviors that will enable them to lead their institutions in a way that not only allows it to survive, but to thrive in a highly competitive global marketplace that expects more quantity and quality of education for less cost (Kazeroony, 2012). This new 21<sup>st</sup> century leader must be capable of seeing clearly, thinking broadly, feeling deeply and effectively striking a delicate balance between increasing access, affordability and graduation rates in higher education, all while uplifting and empowering the faculty, staff, students and their local communities through a shared set of values, goals and rewards (Lowman, 2010).

The vast array of opportunities and challenges facing higher education institutions and the individuals that lead them reveal a significant opportunity to increase the

understanding about what key factors are critical for a university president to be effective in this dynamic environment.

Much like the community college system, there is an absence of an institutional classification system that recognizes and categorizes the differences between rural, urban and suburban institutions across the United States (Katsinas, 2003). This lack of regional modeling may have allowed a universal or standardized methodology that assumes there are no unique characteristics needed to differentiate an effective rural higher education institutional leader from his or her urban or suburban peers. Further analysis of this notion could suggest that, regardless of institutional type, all effective 21<sup>st</sup> century university presidents require the same set of skills, experiences, behaviors and values. Given that there has been no formal research heretofore to address this assumption, this study will analyze what skills, experiences, behaviors and values are most critical for a rural university president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Research Question(s)**

- 1. What unique skills, experiences, behaviors and values are believed to be essential for a rural university president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

### **Conceptual Framework**

Due to the intimate and individualized nature of this study, a grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) methodology centered on the use of a Life History Case Study (LCHS) (Campbell, 1999) was utilized.

A grounded theory approach enables the researcher to use a ‘funnel’ tactic when gathering data. Glasser and Strauss first introduced grounded theory in 1967 (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The research revealed that theories could be generated from a systematic collection of data to help explain the complexities within the social sciences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Further, grounded theory “ seeks out not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also to determine how the actors respond to challenging conditions and to the consequences of their actions” (p. 5). Glasser and Strauss (1967) suggested that the data collection process and data analysis should occur simultaneously, making the interpretation and gathering of data more complete and systematic. Essentially, the grounded theory method endorses data gathering and analysis as a continuous process. Grounded theory permitted for the opportunity to actively explore various facets in each president’s life without adhering to a rigid guideline. Also, grounded theory allowed for the construct of questions for future interviews by reading previous transcripts.

When the unit of analysis is an individual, an important concept to consider is life history. Bromley (1991) states, "The case study emphasizes the proximal causes of the behavior and circumstances, whereas life history emphasizes the remote origins, and the continuities and discontinuities in the behavior over a relatively long period of time" (p. 86). According to Stake (1995) the case study researcher may be somewhat of a biographer focused on a phase or segment of the life of an individual. Various reports in psychology (Bromley, 1986), sociology (Creswell, 1997; Yin, 1984, 1994), and education (Stake, 1978, 1995) have studied the individual as the unit of analysis, and have used the case study method to develop rich and comprehensive understandings about people.

The primary data source of this study was in-depth, one-on-one and face-to-face interviews with six rural university or college presidents. The interviews were conducted on their respective campuses in their offices or another logistically convenient location. The guided interviews, which lasted approximately an hour, were conducted with each president and they guided through an interview by the researcher that asked strategic questions about their individual skills, experiences, behaviors and values. This process provided rich data, which assisted the researcher in interpreting the responses and developing the information into a meaningful narrative about effective rural university leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model for Life History Case Study (LHCS) used in this research study**

## **Significance of the Study**

This study will contribute to the literature on higher education leadership by providing an acute insight into the skills, experiences, behaviors and values held by a sample of rural university presidents who have worked in higher education during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While there are comprehensive reports and studies conducted by groups like the American Council on Education (ACE) that profile key demographic data about those presidents serving today, there is very little additional insight into the other key areas that shape the effective leadership of these individuals.

In-depth interviews with currently-serving rural university and college presidents provide key insights into those most critical skills, experiences, behaviors and values that are essential for effective leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century rural setting. The results from this qualitative study help multiple different constituencies have a greater understanding about this previously understudied topic.

These new and explorative revelations can help other presidents to be more effective in their respective roles, allow presidential search committees to make more informed decisions about their next institutional leaders and generally help create positive social change through a greater understanding of what is needed to be effective in rural higher education leadership during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## **Definitions**

*American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)*- A Washington, DC-based public college and university advocacy group composed of 420 member institutions

*American Council on Education (ACE)*- A Washington, DC-based advocacy group composed of 1600 public and private colleges and universities

*American College President Study (ACPS)*- A periodic public and private college and university presidential survey and comprehensive study performed by the American Council on Education (ACE). It is considered the most comprehensive research study of university presidents.

*Case study*- a preferred research strategy where “how” and “why” questions are posed, when an investigator has little control over certain events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 1984). A case study is bound by time and activity and depends on a variety of data collection methods (Stake, 1995).

*Effective Leadership*- Those leaders who intentionally influence followers toward change through shared purpose and personal responsibility.

*Higher education and postsecondary education*- Both terms indicate education at a post-high school level at a college or university.

*Life History Case Study (LHCS)*- A qualitative methodology specifically designed to assist researchers in understanding the in-depth and comprehensive meanings in

people's lives and helps them to gather background information about the study participant (Campbell, 1999).

*Long-serving president-* For the purpose of this study, a university president or chancellor that has served in the position for 10 or more years

*President and Chancellor-* The chief executive officer at a college or university; the person responsible for leading a postsecondary education institution with degree-granting authority (Fisher et al., 1988).

*Rural America-* those areas and populations not classified as urban by the United States Census Bureau; rural areas outside incorporated and census-designated places; rural portions of extended cities (Richardson, 2000).

*The Chronicle of Higher Education-* It is the primary news and information resource for colleges and universities, available daily online and in weekly print form.

*Urban area-* Defined by the U. S. Census Bureau as an area with 50,000 or more inhabitants (What is Rural, 2003).

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions guided this study:

1. Participants completely and accurately answered all questions supporting this study.
2. The methodology used in this study offered an appropriate and thorough method to identify and better understand the skills, experiences, behaviors and values that are needed to be an effective rural university president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

According to Cresswell (2003), it is incumbent that a researcher fully identifies any limitations or potential weaknesses that may be present or applicable in a formal research study. The following limitations applied to this study:

1. There are limits to the generalizability of the results of this study. The limited sample size and the use of university or college presidents whose institutions are in or serve rural areas from only the state of Kentucky could disallow the application of the results to populations that are not considered similar in nature. However, it provides a new foundation upon which to engage in discussion, analysis and further research of effective higher education leadership principles in a rural setting during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
2. Key threats to trustworthiness in this study include respondent biases to their unique set of skills, experiences, behaviors and values; a desire to tell the researcher what should be rather than what is; and finally a preexisting professional relationship with the researcher that could shield or shape how respondents answer questions.
3. To identify rural institutions, this study relied on a single definition of rural and the geographical location of the institutions campuses and service region.
4. Due to fiscal, geographic and the general time constraints that each participant could grant to the researcher, only one in-depth interview was conducted with each participant. It is important to note that a limited amount of engagement between researchers and participants can create an obstacle in

developing trust and eliciting valuable and relevant information (Morris, 2003).

5. Some data reduction may have served as a source of error if codes were incorrectly captured or applied, or if inappropriate codes were used when evaluating the data collected during the study (Morris, 2003).

### **Organization of the Study**

This qualitative study is organized as follows: Chapter One includes the introduction, statement of the problem, research question(s), conceptual framework, significance of the study, definitions, assumptions and limitations of the study. Chapter Two reviews the literature on the role of a university or college president, the challenges facing presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the challenges facing presidents who lead institutions that are located in or serve rural regions and a synthesized review of the skills, experiences, behaviors and value systems that are essential for a president to be effective. Chapter Three explains the research methodology used, including data collection, for this exploratory qualitative study. Chapter Four describes the findings and provides a systematic analysis of the data collected. Chapter Five summarizes the major findings of this study and makes recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **The Role of the President**

The American college presidency can be traced back to its inception with the election of Henry Dunster as chief officer of Harvard College in 1640. He was bestowed the title of president, which has continued at Harvard and has become the accepted title for the chief executive of American institutions of higher education (Prator, 1963). From the creation of the office of president, the chief executive or top tier administrator has retained this title and assumed responsibility for leading the institution of higher learning. Schmidt (1957) identified the president as “the most important individual in the early college” (p.103). If the president is not the most important leader in colleges and universities today, he or she must fulfill a significant role in the success and effectiveness of the institution.

In today’s society, the role of the President has changed. Descriptions tend to be similar to that held by Robert Hahn (1995), President of Johnson State College in Vermont: “Presidents are like baseball managers—they turn over often, are blamed for what they can’t control, and are eagerly accepted by other organizations after they’ve been given a ticket out of town by their last one” (p.14). “Ironically, among those presidents who stay briefly and move frequently are many regarded as our most successful leaders” (Hahn, 1995, p.17). Bart Giamatti, former President of Yale, quipped

that, “being president of a university is no way for an adult to make a living. It is to hold a mid-nineteenth century ecclesiastical position on top of a late-nineteenth century corporation” (Padilla & Ghosh, 2000, pp. 34–35).

Is it too much to ask that the presidents of the 21<sup>st</sup> century be throwbacks to previous generations, a time when they led from the bully pulpit of the corner office and were intimately weaved into the cultural fabric of their institutions? While many presidents complain that their faculty members are out of touch and still hiding away in the ivory tower of academia while the world around them has unequivocally changed, they too seem to be out of touch with what the general public assess’ the value of higher education in America is worth (Selingo, 2013). Selingo (2013) also argues that the president should focus more of his or her energy on what’s happening on their own campuses during the time they have at the helm, so they might be better equipped to tell the narrative of that institution and possibly of higher education as a whole. He also postulates that this approach might very well help them to become more comfortable in the place that they call home, and not be in effect a visitor on their own campuses (Selingo, 2013).

The president of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be dynamic and multi-dimensional—everything to everyone at all times and a genuinely authentic individual (Bowles, 2013). To do all of this, they must be strong physically, emotionally and mentally. While presidents of days gone by would often be found in the classroom pursuing academic scholarship, research and writing, nearly all presidents of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be focused on the business of running the institution and the never-ending quest for

resources (Palolitto, 2001). Specifically, university presidents are increasingly focused on fundraising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Upton Sinclair once remarked that the college president spends his time running back and forth between Mammon and God (Sinclair, 1923). Sinclair may have accurately described the nineteenth- and twentieth-century president, but twenty-first-century university and college presidents appear to be driven by mammon alone. Cook (1994) suggests that the role as fundraiser has become the most important one for university and college presidents.

### **Challenges Facing Presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The world has changed, and higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century faces new challenges and opportunities never seen before. Declining state and federal support, increased expectations for excellence and a “business model” that requires a balanced approach to knowledge creation and dissemination that must ensure adequate revenues to keep the organization alive is a relatively new environment for many who have worked in academia for more than a decade (Lowman, 2010).

As Friedman stresses in his provocative book, *The World is Flat*, information and telecommunications technologies have created a platform “where intellectual work and intellectual capital can be delivered from anywhere—disaggregated, delivered, distributed, produced, and put back together again” (2005 p.7). Or in layman’s terms, we can now reach the world, and they can reach us from our smart phones; it gives an entirely new freedom to the way we do work, especially work of an intellectual nature. This new reality, as described by Friedman, is one that makes who we are, where we are and how

we access information far less important than how far the next generation of leadership is willing and able to help us reach across this new flattened world.

In the United States, our institutions of higher education face serious additional challenges in this new and changing world through: an increasing socioeconomic stratification of access to (and success in) quality higher education; questionable achievement of acceptable student learning outcomes (including critical thinking ability, civic participation, communication skills, and quantitative literacy); cost containment and productivity; and the ability of institutions to adapt to changes demanded by the emerging knowledge services economy, globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, an increasingly diverse and aging population, and an evolving marketplace characterized by new needs (e.g., lifelong learning), new providers (e.g., for-profit, cyber, and global universities), and new paradigms (e.g., competency-based educational paradigms, distance learning, open educational resources) (Duderstadt, 2007).

While there is no shortage of challenges, all is not lost for the American higher education system. These challenges present the opportunity to capitalize on the unique strengths of the U.S. system. Wooldridge (2005) says, “The strength of the American higher education system is that it has no system” (p. 6). The system benefits from a remarkable balance among funding sources, with roughly 25% from the federal government, 20% from the states, and 55% from private sources (tuition, philanthropy). “It is all too easy to mock American academia. But it is easy to lose sight of the real story: that America has the best system of higher education in the world” (Wooldridge, 2005 p. 3).



## **Challenges Facing Presidents in a Rural Setting**

Rural colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to shape the regions that they serve. Although confronted with federal and state public policy issues similar to their urban and suburban counterparts, rural university presidents have faced additional localized challenges and a unique set of social, economic and political concerns. Gillet-Karam (1995) offered a melancholy depiction of rural America by invoking three adjectives—low, slow, and high— to describe these areas: “low population density, low total populations, low per-capita income, low levels of educational attainment, slow job growth, high poverty, high unemployment, and high rates of illiteracy” (p. 43).

While there has been little to no research on rural university or college presidents, there have been several studies that have looked at effective rural leadership at community colleges. Though the scope of these institutions is different, the rural nature of the region and the unique leadership attributes needed to be effective could be applicable. Cavan (1995) offered several leadership qualities deemed necessary for an effective rural community college presidency: the ability to understand and articulate the importance of institutional charisma and personality, the articulation of a vision, the pursuit of strategic planning, and the ability to collaborate with other agencies by building coalitions. He also indicated that, as the political educator of the institution, the president must “bring together, in a nonthreatening way, all the power of the political community to support the mission of the community college for the betterment of the total community” (p. 13). In a study conducted by the Rural Community College Initiative, researchers found that institutions that had marked success in enhancing their

communities had presidents who were “committed to improving economic opportunity in the region and a vision for community change . . . a level of financial and organizational stability that allowed the president and others to devote attention to nonacademic concerns” (p. 19).

The movement from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrial society was completed long ago. Today, there is the additional burden of surviving in the newly emerging market system, a system that has catapulted society into a global arena not only for corporate entities, but also for the general population and educational institutions as well. The combination of these forces has served to further isolate rural communities from the benefits that may be afforded to them if they had greater access to what the current economic trends have to offer. As the national economy continues to move increasingly toward a knowledge-based structure, the influence of quality higher education opportunities can directly impact the future of Rural America. Chesson and Rubin (2003) highlight how the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy has largely bypassed so many rural communities. Regions dependent on industries involving historically low-tech manufacturing and natural resources have continued to lose jobs rapidly because, “in an era where prosperity increasingly depends on a highly skilled workforce, rural communities are held back by low levels of educational attainment” (p. 1).

It can be argued that the macro and micro political and economic forces, many of which the everyday American has little or no control over, can be blamed for the erosion of the local family-owned and hometown economic model in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hill & Moore, 2000). Effectively these global forces, which often originate on Wall Street, have

the biggest impact on the Main Streets of rural America. About 46.2 million people, or 15 percent of the U.S. population, reside in rural communities, which spread across approximately 72 percent of the nation's land area. From 2011 to 2012, those rural areas lost more than 40,000 people, the first such statistically significant drop in rural populations as a whole, in history (Cromartie, 2013). Likening it to a threadbare fabric, Richardson (2000) characterized rural America as a place with:

...fewer people, low or declining populations, relatively low average incomes (linked primarily with agricultural and extractive industry sector jobs), a shortage of alternative jobs, little or no public transportation, stores closing on Main Street, and poorer provisions of services and facilities. (p. 1)

The age-old idea that life in rural America is simple and serene has long since been replaced by a sense of urgency, consternation and potential pending demise. In the absence of a comprehensive national or state strategy to address these systematic issues, many rural communities and regions have come to depend less on others and more on themselves (Richardson, 2000). This necessitated inward focused approach has resulted in a more determined look toward the higher education leaders in rural communities for guidance, strategies and leadership that can help to address these very complex and persistent challenges. Rural higher education leaders must challenge themselves to build new and innovative roles and partnerships, establish value systems that engage and encourage broad participation with all constituencies, and embrace risk-taking and economic development responsibilities all while being good stewards of the local cultures, traditions and legacies (Eller, Martinez, Pace, Pavel and Barrett, 1999).

## **Skills of an Effective President**

The duties of a 21<sup>st</sup> century university president require them to wear many hats and serve many constituencies. According to the annual American Council on Education (ACE) presidential survey, the areas in which presidents spend the most time have remained largely unchanged (Cook, 2012). Presidents cited fundraising, budgets, community relations, and strategic planning as the areas that occupy most of their time. Fortunately (with the exception of budgeting), these are also areas presidents reported enjoying the most. Ironically, fundraising was the area presidents stated they were least prepared to address when they began their presidency (Cook, 2012).

While each institution of higher education will have its unique set of opportunities and challenges based on its mission, location and circumstances, there are certain skills that should transcend that to apply to all 21<sup>st</sup> century institutions and their leaders. A review of these critical skills reveals that strategic resource management [1. more strategic about finances and budgeting and 2. more engagement in the internal business dynamics of the institution], attention to detail, accountability, the ability to collaborate with others, effective change management skills, a global perspective and effective board relationship skills are essential for the 21<sup>st</sup> century president (Skinner, 2010). The application of these skills can be seen in a president who has honed the ability to give guidance to regents and trustees to help them translate their thoughts, ideas and priorities into sound institutional programs and policies that can coexist with the campus culture (Legon, Lombardi & Rhoades, G., 2013). Lombardi (2013) also discusses the skills needed to earn the trust of other constituencies including faculty, staff, students, and

alumni. Those key areas include developing budgets and decision-making processes based on verifiable performance data and properly vetting hard or big decisions through comprehensive analysis of the information and deliberative consultation of subject matter experts.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has also brought with it new challenges in the form of social media, mobile devices and a 24-hour news cycle that require new and unique skills for the next generation of university leaders. Americans live in a society that is deeply divided on social issues; one that punishes those that fail to speak out but also punishes those that do. Sherman (2013) pleads for an increased presence of today's university presidents in the arena of public commentary by hearkening back to well-known presidents of the past and their use of the bully pulpit to help shape society for the better. He argues that in worrying about making social missteps in the public arena, university presidents have lost their voice on matters of higher education (Sherman, 2013). Conversely, recently retired Ohio State President Gordon Gee's missteps with bad jokes, awkward and sometimes offensive Twitter posts and some less than flattering comments about Roman Catholics and other universities, ended his tenure at Ohio State and sent a strong message to other presidents about what, where and how they say things (Stripling, 2013). In the face of such discord, university presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century could be well served to find and support those issues that are related to their expertise. They must also seek to spread factual and relevant knowledge that has not yet been understood or disseminated to those who need to have a greater understanding of the value of higher education.

Finally, in the way of skills, it is the same today as it was in years past that universities are teaching and learning organizations where there is still the exchange of knowledge that takes place between instructors and students whether in a classroom, across the Internet or through new and innovative mediums (Duderstadt, 2009). Despite the growing complexity of leading a contemporary higher education institution, many presidents remain active in their academic disciplines. Since 2006, growing shares of presidents have taught at least one course during the academic year and similarly had written for scholarly publications (Cook 2012).

### **Experiences of an Effective President**

Demographic trends indicate that there is about to be a great shift in who occupies the presidential suite on campuses across the United States. The average age of a college president today is 61, and nearly 60% of presidents are 61 or older (Selingo, 2013). Similarly, the most common career path to the presidency has largely remained unchanged in the past two decades with the chief academic officer's job continuing to be the most frequently cited immediate prior position for college presidents (Lederman, 2012). Another constant is that most presidents have spent their entire careers in higher education; interestingly, while more than half of college presidents have never worked outside higher education, the share of presidents whose immediate prior position was outside higher education has increased since 2006 from 13 percent to 20 percent (Cook, 2012).

In preparation for the role of president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the first steps down that pathway should begin early in one's career with institution/organization-wide responsibilities; dedication to personal development that focuses on fundraising, governing board relations, budget and financial management, risk management and legal issues; and developing a strong personal/professional mentoring strategy that will help individuals learn from others successes and failures (Ekman, 2010).

While the academe finds itself in a period of profound change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a crucial trait for presidents is that they have experience as a change-agent who has led substantial change either inside higher education or outside (Selingo, 2013). To quote George Mason University associate professor of history, T. Mills Kelly,

We're always so focused on getting someone with the right kinds of experiences, but if they haven't had to deal with massive change in their career, then all we are doing is hiring someone to ideally position us for 1995. (p. 3)

The 21<sup>st</sup> century role of a university president has increasingly become a 24/7/365 undertaking in which successful presidents begin early in their careers the process of always being *on* (Wilkins, 2012). That is to say that it is nearly impossible for a university president to freely move about his or her community without everyone taking notice of who, what, when, where, why and how a president spends their time, money and energy. After leaving the University of Southern Mississippi, President Martha Saunders commented that, "what I miss least is not having control over my own life, college presidents are on the job 24-7, especially in a small town" (Zaiger, 2013 p. 1).

While few studies have specifically examined the must-have experiences of a 21<sup>st</sup> century university president, there is no doubt that the roles and duties of a college or

university president have become far more complex since the inception of higher education (Sanchez, 2009). Many key stakeholder groups have defined their own measuring sticks of what could make for an effective new leader. Trustees want integrity, competence, results, good external relationships, effective consultation with the board, and adaptability and tranquility on campus; faculty want acceptance of their procedures, support of their values, good salaries and avoidance of academic reform; alumni are looking for someone willing to engage them in a discussion and seek their input for holding on to the traditions, while making a plan for the future; students want a friendly, available and student-centric campus that provides a supportive learning environment; and finally the public and local community want a leader that can ensure their institution and personal actions will be in line with the local cultural norms and not create incidents that run against middle-class morality and that could attract negative perceptions or media attention (Scott, 2011).

A comprehensive review of the literature concerning the experiences needed to be an effective university president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century highlight that there are possibly more questions than answers. However, a synthesis of the literature does indicate that in order to become an effective president today an individual must aspire to acquire those necessary professional, personal and academic experiences that can help them navigate the uncharted waters of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## **Behaviors of an Effective President**

Studies that focus on leader behaviors attempt to determine what kinds of things successful leaders do rather than examine the perceptions that others hold of leaders (Halpin & Winer, 1957; Hemphill & Coons, 1957). These researchers focus on identifying the behaviors exhibited by leaders that increase the effectiveness of their organizations and institutions. The primary concept driving behavioral leadership studies is the idea that leadership is not necessarily an inborn trait, but rather effective leadership methods can be taught to individuals (Saal & Knight, 1988).

Early studies have asserted that key transformational leadership behaviors are predictive of job satisfaction, motivation toward extra effort and perceived leadership effectiveness (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Bommer, 1996). A more recent study indicated that charisma, individual consideration and contingent rewards were statistically significant factors that contributed to the most desired leadership behaviors that cause variances in job satisfaction, motivation toward extra effort and perceived effectiveness of presidential leadership (Webb, 2003).

While an individual leader's behaviors are crucial to an organization's success, the modeled discretionary behaviors, or "extra-role" behaviors", are one of the most critical areas of focus for an effective university president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Normore & Duyer, 2012). Normore and Duyer's (2012) study on the *extra-role* behaviors exhibited by effective institutional leaders revealed that it is necessary to provide a modeling of the behaviors for others in the organization in contrast to those who only perform their "prescribed duties." Such behaviors have long been recognized as essential to

organizational effectiveness, and historically, numerous organizational leaders characterized the willingness of individual employees to contribute cooperative efforts to an organization as indispensable. Other key takeaways from the literature concerning effective leadership behavior included the importance of creating an environment with shared vision, empowerment, institutional commitment, collaboration and an institutional culture that are all bonded by a singular focus on students. At the foundation for encouraging discretionary behavior is the idea of trust in colleagues and leadership. For the leader of a higher education institution to be exceptional and succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they must recruit, reward and retain those who exhibit behaviors that extend well beyond merely being organizationally compliant. The 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education leader will only be as good as the individual members that comprise the whole.

The extensive challenges to shaping one's behavior, in order to become an effective university president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to meet the expectations of the competitive global marketplace for higher education, are extraordinary. A fundamental understanding of the most important individual and organizational behaviors can lead to a better understanding of how to shape those most desired behaviors. The multitude of factors that can impact behaviors are innumerable, but the research reveals that people want to work in environments where they do not have to check their values, goals and strengths at the institutional door (Marques, Dhiman, & King, 2009). Every college and university president across the globe is striving for individual and organizational effectiveness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; they must identify and manage their behaviors through their values, goals and strengths in order to accomplish that mission.

## **Values Systems of an Effective President**

Values can be defined as enduring beliefs that influence the choices we make among available means or ends (Kernaghan, 2003). Within an organization, a strong value system is said to exist when the members share key values related to acceptable behavior within the organization and its strategic course (Weiner, 1988). In order to shape organizational behavior in the modern university, a president must be able to meet the complex demands of external accreditors, governments, the competitive marketplace, faculty, staff, students and others, with a willingness to reassess their values in order to shape the values of the institution (Lowman, 2010). At the heart of this complex problem is the courage and humility, both individually and organizationally, to engage in a process melding the values of the president with that of the institution itself. The desire to change must be greater than the desire to stay the same, for both.

There is a great unease on campuses across America that institutional core values are losing value in the eye of key stakeholders. Throughout society, there appears to be an erosion of support on important university commitments such as academic freedom, tenure, broad access and racial diversity (Duderstadt, 1999). In the dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century landscape for higher education, students, policymakers and the general public at large are constantly questioning and evaluating the private and public value of a college degree. If the value system of the president and their institution do not lend themselves to creating value for these constituencies, a self-correction or imposed correction may be necessary (Dew, 2012). Identifying and understanding values is a necessary first step in shaping individual and organizational behaviors. These shared and communicated values will

help to solidify the institution's most basic, yet complex, influencers on behaviors. Given the potential importance that values have on influencing an individual's and subsequent organizational behaviors, which in turn impact individual and organizational effectiveness, it is necessary to move away from the remedial questions of what and why to search more acutely to discover the process by which a president might consciously seek to develop shared values through an integration of those values across the institution (Kernaghan, 2003).

At a time when our society desperately needs inspired, committed and ready-to-work university leaders who firmly ground their actions in integrity and center them with their values, far too many respond to the call as apathetic bureaucrats (Corrigan, 2001). While there may be a poetic expectation that university presidents should value teaching excellence, student successes, regional stewardship and other lofty goals, the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has put increased, if not exclusive, value on the amount of money raised by a capital campaign, buildings erected and victories on the football field.

Knoepfel (2010) states that, "the path to effective leadership requires reflection" (p. 24). In order to do this, a leader must be self-aware enough to "know when to be introspective" (Sousa, p. 11). Effective leadership in higher education requires one to assess the outcomes of the shared vision and see whether it successfully met student, faculty, staff and community needs or if challenges remain. Amey (2006) explains, "postsecondary leaders need to guide their institutions into the future" by "critical reflection ... and deep understanding of organizational culture and values" (p. 58). Proper and timely reflection gives a leader the ability to look at the accomplished goal,

assess the needs of the people, consider university needs or mission values, and professionally deconstruct what may be needed in order to shape or create a more efficient vision for the future. Furthermore, this contributes to sustaining positive leadership abilities; exemplary practices require “periods set aside for reflection, renewal, and relaxation” (Davis, 2006, p. 101). This allows for a reflective awareness of what worked or did not work well in the process, as well as how to better improve results for those challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Myatt (2012) emphasizes this explaining that, “real leaders are always looking beyond what is, thinking about the possibilities of what if, and acting to ensure what is next.” (p.1)

Clearly, what values should be valued by the 21<sup>st</sup> century university president, is a question that needs clarity and insight from those who are effectively leading today. Understanding the delicate relationship between individual and organizational values within an institution of higher education is a critical building block for shaping an effective university president for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Lawrence, 2006). Charles Vest, departing president of MIT, reflected that:

...the death knell in a good university is for a president to try to operate by cult of personality. That goes back to my view that most of the institutional vision has to come up from within and be collective. You can't run a group of first-rate people based on ego. If presidents attempt to do that, almost by definition their tenure will be short. (p. 399)

## **Summary**

This chapter examined a sampling of relevant literature that helped to frame a general understanding of rural America and the role of a university or college president in both a historical and current setting, while examining those unique skills, experiences, behaviors and values that can assist a president in being an effective leader. The literature review has revealed that, while experts agree that certain characteristics and traits are crucial for a president to be effective, no studies have actually endeavored to identify the specific skills, experiences, behaviors and values that would help a rural university or college president be an effective leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adding to the body of research concerning higher education leaders in rural America during the 21<sup>st</sup> century will help to close this gap in the literature and is definitely warranted. Chapter Three, Methodology, will analytically detail the use of the Life History Case Study technique administered through an in-depth, one-on-one interview process to explore the essential skills, experiences, behaviors and values of effective rural university and college presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

To fulfill the purpose of this qualitative study, an exploratory methodology was utilized in the design to most accurately provide insights into the essential skills, experiences, values and behaviors that are most critical for effective rural leadership in the 21st century at an American university or college. The primary data source of this study relied on in-depth, one-on-one and open-ended interviews with six rural university or college presidents. The guided interviews were conducted with each president and each participant was asked key questions about the essential skills, experiences, behaviors and values that help create effective presidential leadership for a rural setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This process provided rich data, which assisted in the interpreting of responses and developing the information into a meaningful narrative. The six presidents interviewed for this study represented a diverse sample of university presidents from rural regions in Kentucky, representing both public and private institutions, as to provide greater insight and understanding into those skills, experiences, values and behaviors that can distinguish effective rural university or college presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Rural colleges and universities hold great expectations and responsibilities for improving the areas that they serve. It is crucial that today's institutional leaders possess the necessary experiences, skills, values and behaviors needed to meet the challenges of

their positions in the communities and regions they serve. Another layer of complexity to this problem is that leaders must not only be effective but reflective of the world around them (Broad, 2012). This issue becomes increasingly important when dealing with institutions that are located in, or serve, a rural region.

In this research, I seek to understand more fully the skills, experiences, behaviors and values that are fundamental for a president to be effective in a rural setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This project's purpose is to advance the understanding and expand the cannon of research on higher education leaders in the following ways: a) to provide a systematic and detailed list of those skills, experiences, behaviors and values exhibited by effective presidents, b) to relate those skills, experiences, behaviors and values to the 21<sup>st</sup> century global marketplace for higher education and c) to relate those same areas to leadership in rural America.

Universities are charged with preserving the knowledge of the past and transmitting it to the next generation; educating citizens, professionals, and leaders; and fostering the discovery of new knowledge that may either strengthen or challenge established ideas and norms—all with the aim of deepening human understanding and advancing the human condition (Dew, 2012). Universities also function as engines of economic development, foster technological and scientific innovation, stimulate creativity in the arts and literature, and address urgent global problems such as poverty, disease, ethno-political conflict, and environmental degradation (Chaichankul, 2006). Rural America desperately needs all of these issues to improve so that they may enjoy success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The localized missions and unique characteristics of rural



regions, and the institutions of higher education that serve them, may require presidents who possess a distinctive set of skills, experiences, behaviors and values that are different from those needed by their urban or suburban counterparts.

Due to these pressures, higher education institutions are looking to a new breed of leadership that can help navigate the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education environment. Latta (2010) described the current funding environment as a perfect storm: as the need for an educated workforce is increasing in order to be competitive in the new global marketplace, the cost of attending a university is growing and state funding declines are expected to continue (p. 2). For rural Americans globalism, job scarcity and changing technologies have presented daunting challenges that far exceed their urban counterparts and continue to plague these regions well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hill & Moore, 2000). Declining populations, low average incomes, shortage of jobs, little to no public transportation and poor provisions of services and facilities have made rural America a place that does not attract the visionary leadership or private investment needed to bridge these critical economic and social gaps (Richardson, 2000). Given all of these factors, rural Americans have increasingly looked to their higher education institutions and those who lead them as one of, if not the primary, sources of hope for survival and prosperity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In total, universities are faced with the presence of a new normal that includes decreased state funding, increased costs for institutions and students, dramatic technological changes that have revolutionized distance education and made higher education a truly global marketplace, more competition in the form of for-profit

institutions, amplified demands for accountability and transparency and all this while striving to preserve the traditions and legacies of the academy.

The rural university president of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must possess a suitable set of skills, experiences, values and behaviors that will enable them to lead their institutions in a way that not only allows it to survive, but to thrive in a highly competitive global marketplace that expects more quantity and quality of education for less cost (Kazeroony, 2012). This new 21<sup>st</sup> century leader must be capable of seeing clearly, thinking broadly, feeling deeply, and effectively striking a delicate balance between increasing access, affordability and graduation rates in higher education while uplifting and empowering the faculty, staff, students and their local communities through a shared set of values, goals and rewards (Lowman, 2010). The vast array of opportunities and challenges facing higher education institutions and the individuals that lead them, reveal a significant opportunity to increase the understanding about what key factors are critical for a university president to be effective in this dynamic environment.

Much like the community college system, there is an absence of an institutional classification system that recognizes and categorizes the differences between rural, urban and suburban institution across the United States (Katsinas, 2003). This lack of regional modeling may have allowed a universal or standardized methodology that assumes there are no unique characteristics needed to differentiate an effective rural higher education institutional leader from his or her urban or suburban peers. Further analysis of this notion could suggest that, regardless of institutional type, all effective 21<sup>st</sup> century university presidents require the same set of skills, experiences, behaviors and values.

Given that there has been no formal research heretofore to address this assumption, this study will analyze what skills, experiences, behaviors and values are most critical for a rural university president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Central Research Question**

In order to accomplish the purpose of this study, the following central research question (CRQ) was used to guide the process:

1. *What individual skills, experiences, behaviors and values are believed to be essential for a rural university president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

A broad based interview guide strategy was employed during the interview process to provide some structure, while keeping the experience highly flexible and conversational for both the researcher and the participant (See Apendix A).

### **Guiding Interview Questions**

To shape the broad based interview guide a set of guiding questions were developed:

The Guiding Questions for this research were as follows:

1. What if any key challenges have you faced or observed during your tenure as president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education marketplace?
2. What if any unique challenges have you faced or observed during your tenure as president serving a rural region?

3. What skills do you personally possess or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
4. What experiences have you personally had or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
5. What behaviors do you personally exhibit or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
6. What values do you personally hold or have observed in others to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
7. What do university or college presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to learn or know to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### **Research Design**

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design. Research design is a critical component that must be thoroughly studied, planned and executed in order to adequately complete the formal research process and subsequently add valid academic research to the issue being studied. Yin (1984) referred to a research design as “an action plan for getting from here to there, where ‘here’ may be defined as the set of questions to be answered, and ‘there’ is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions” (p. 28).

While there have been countless research documents published on the who, what, when, where and how of using qualitative research design, Taylor and Bogdan (1998) summed it up very concisely when they endorsed this methodology to “empathize and

identify with ... people ... in order to understand how those people see things ... develop concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns in the data rather than collecting data to assess preconceived models, hypotheses, or theories” (p. 7). These same authors praised qualitative research for its ability to bring meaning to “people in the context of their pasts and the situations in which they find themselves ... how people think and act in their everyday lives” (p. 8).

Given that this study has the added component of examining a very defined social setting, rural America, and the human subjects that live and work in those settings it is important to underscore that a research design that utilizes a qualitative methodology is uniquely qualified to best address this type of research (Berg, 2001). An extensively published author on the design, use and suitability of the qualitative approach to research, Cresswell (2003), endorsed qualitative research methodology when the researcher seeks to view a phenomena in a holistic matter.

A *qualitative* approach is one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e., the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) or advocacy/participatory perspectives (i.e., political, issue-oriented, collaborative, or change oriented) or both. It also uses strategies of inquiry such as narratives, phenomenologies, ethnographies, grounded theory studies, or case studies. The researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data. (Cresswell, 2003 p. 18)

### **Life History Case Study Design**

The in-depth, individual, one-to-two hour recorded interview with the six selected participants incorporated into a Life History Case Study (LHCS) narrative. LHCS is a qualitative methodology specifically designed to assist researchers in understanding in-depth and comprehensive meanings in people's lives (Campbell, 1999). Over the last couple of decades, life history approaches have come to be increasingly used in the social sciences and in educational research in particular (Stanley, 1992). Some writers have claimed that the endeavor to understand social life has taken a narrative, autobiographical turn and that this turn has fundamental implications for all aspects of the research process and for how we make sense of the world. This methodology can be beneficial in gathering background information about the study participants. In addition, this method will allow for a greater exploration and understanding of the participants perceptions of their skills, experiences, values and behaviors that have prepared them for effective university leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The guided interviews for this study will be conducted with participants, who described their individual skills, experiences, values and behaviors or those that they have observed that could help a president in effectively leading an institution of higher education in rural America. This process is designed to provide rich data, which can clarify historical findings and assist in interpreting the participant responses into clear, concise and meaningful narratives about effective rural presidential leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yin (1984) referred to case studies as “the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 13). A case study related methodology allows a researcher to focus on a specific area of interest, one offering the chance for insight, discovery, and interpretation. Unlike other strategies involving hypothesis testing, a case study can provide the opportunity to uncover “the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon . . . a design particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variables from their context” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29).

### **Sampling**

Qualitative research such as this study, which stressed in-depth investigation with a small number of expert participants, utilized purposeful sampling that helped to emphasize the quality rather than the quantity of the data collected. Padgett (1998) stressed that the objective of qualitative research is not to maximize the number, but to become “saturated” with information on the topic (p. 21). There are no hard and fast rules about the number of participants or samples used in qualitative research. While there are no closely defined rules for sample size (Baum 2002; Patton 1990), sampling in qualitative research usually relies on small numbers with the aim of studying in-depth and detail (Miles & Huberman 1994; Patton 1990). Seeking a richness of data about a particular phenomenon, the sample is derived purposefully rather than randomly (Reed et al. 1996; Mays & Pope 1995; Ezzy 2002). Additionally the sample size was small

because qualitative studies tend to be small. The aim of qualitative research is not to generalize; it is not necessary to find a sample size that is statistically significant (Richie, et al., 2003). Additionally, an incident only needs to appear once to be analyzed, so including more people does not necessarily add to the evidence. Merriam (1998) suggests finding a sufficient number to obtain reasonable coverage (p.64) based on the purpose of the research. I specified the criteria used to select participants for the study, which included manageability in terms of the number of interviews that could realistically be conducted in a very defined set of time, accessibility to the participants and the willingness of respondents to meet with and speak openly and freely with the researcher.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data source of this study relied on in-depth, one-on-one and open-ended interviews with six rural university or college presidents. Before collecting data, the researcher obtained university approval to conduct the study as presented here. The Eastern Kentucky University Institutional Review Board (IRB), for the purpose of this study, granted this approval. The interviews were conducted with each president with the use of a researcher-designed interview guide and each participant was asked fundamental questions about the essential skills, experiences, behaviors and values that help create effective presidential leadership for a rural setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (See Appendix A).

An interview guide is a qualitative measurement instrument that lists, in outline form, the topics and issues that the interviewer should cover in the interview (Patton, 1990). The creation and utilization of the guide ensures that different interviewers will



cover the same material and keep focused on the same identified topics and issues, while at the same time remaining conversational and flexible to investigate relevant themes of discussion. The guide also assists those who want to duplicate or further research the study to assess the quality of the interviewing methods and the instruments used. The use of an interview guide helps create some structure for the interview and assists the researcher in drawing out detailed and critical information, even though the experience for the research participants were treated as a conversation (Rubin & Babbie, 2001). Finally, for the researcher, this additional structure eases the process of organizing and analyzing the interview data.

### **Coding and Data Analysis**

Multiple data sources were used to confirm the study's results (Yin, 2003). The analysis of data from the interview transcripts and field notes was based on an inductive approach geared toward identifying patterns in the data by the means of thematic codes. "Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (Patton, 1980, p. 306).

The grounded theory method was also employed in the study. "A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23).

The data collected was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) a model that employs a strategy where line, sentence, and paragraph segments of the transcribed interviews and field notes were systematically reviewed to decide what codes fit the concepts suggested by the data. The interview data was given more weight in the final analysis than the literature reviews. Each code was constantly compared to all other codes to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns.

After concluding the interviews with presidential participants, a follow-up email communication was conducted for the purposes of member checking and data validation. Member checking is a term used to describe a process by which the study participant helps to determine the trustworthiness of the data analysis (Wolfe, 2010). This process allowed presidents the opportunity to review the information from the interview to ensure it accurately reflected their feelings and responses to the questions asked (Cresswell, 1998).

In sum, data were reduced and analyzed by means of thematic codes and concepts in a systematic process. Key themes progressively emerged as a result of the combined process of becoming increasingly familiar with the data, making logical associations with the interview questions, and considering what was learned during the initial review of the literature. At successive stages themes moved from an abstract nature to become major, overarching themes rooted in the evidence provided by the data.

### **Limitations-Concerns for Validity, Reliability and Generalizability of Results**

According to Cresswell (2003), it is incumbent that a researcher fully identifies any limitations or potential weaknesses that may be present or applicable in a formal research study. The following limitations applied to this study:

1. There are limits to the generalizability of the results of this study. The limited sample size and the use of university or college presidents whose institutions are in or serve rural areas from only the state of Kentucky could disallow the application of the results to populations that are not considered similar in nature. However, it provides a new foundation upon which to engage in discussion, analysis and further research of effective higher education leadership principles in a rural setting during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
2. Key threats to trustworthiness in this study include respondent biases to their unique set of skills, experiences, behaviors and values; a desire to tell the researcher what should be rather than what is; and finally a preexisting professional relationship with the researcher that could shield or shape how respondents answer questions.
3. To identify rural institutions, this study relied on a single definition of rural and the geographical location of the institution's campuses and service region.
4. Due to fiscal, geographic and general time constraints that each participant could grant to the researcher, only one in-depth interview was conducted with each participant. It is important to note that a limited amount of

engagement between researchers and participants can create an obstacle in developing trust and eliciting valuable and relevant information (Morris, 2003).

5. Some data reduction may have served as a source of error if codes were incorrectly captured or applied, or if inappropriate codes were used when evaluating the data collected during the study (Morris, 2003).

### **Personal Disclosure**

As an educator and senior-level administrator currently serving in a rural university, I believe this exploratory research is important for university administrators and, specifically, for presidential hopefuls. It is important that hiring boards and all those concerned with the pending leadership crisis that is facing colleges and universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are armed with tools to assist them in finding presidents that have the unique set of attributes needed to be effective for their specific institutions.

All administrators are not leaders, nor does every vice president have the desire, personal attributes, skills or abilities to become a president simply because of their length of experience in the academy. The leadership needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century necessitates that those potential leaders, who not only desire the presidency but who bring the appropriate personal skills, experiences, behaviors and values, are discovered and prepared in order to emerge as the next generation of great rural college and university presidents.

### **Ethical Considerations: Protection of Human Subjects**

The participants in this study were ensured they would be unidentified as each are currently serving or has served as a president at a rural college or university during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A consent form (see Appendix C) was approved by the university's Research Review Board and was signed by each participant prior to his or her interview. Preceding the interview, the participants were given a list of guiding questions that related to the nature of the research. Participation in this study was voluntary and allowed the participant to withdraw from the interview, as stated in the consent form.

Using identifiers protected the identity of the participants. This discretion allowed the audio recording to be transcribed without disclosing individual or institutional names. The researcher assured the participants that audio recordings and transcriptions would not be used outside of this research and the materials would be stored in an undisclosed secure location.

### **Summary**

Chapter three addressed the methodology used in this study. A qualitative design was selected for this research, a life history case study was conducted, and the interview was the primary data-gathering tool. This chapter discussed the research procedures; the guiding questions, the scope of the project, research design, case selection process, the selected research participants, data collection, trustworthiness and credibility role of the researcher in the validity and reliability of the data, the data analysis procedures, a personal disclosure, and a chapter summary. Chapter four will present the background

and context of the study, the guiding questions, the information regarding the participants, and the findings related to each guiding question (emergent themes).

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine those unique skills, experiences, behaviors and values that are essential for a rural university president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first three chapters of this dissertation offered an introduction to the problems surrounding leadership capacity and development in a rural area in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a review of the literature surrounding presidential leadership as it relates to skills, experiences, behaviors and values, and the methodological design utilized for this study. This chapter will present the findings that emerged from the data collected and analyzed using the conceptual framework that was constructed for the purpose of this study.

To maintain anonymity, demographic information was not obtained and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to ensure that all participants' identities were kept private. The six presidents, who will be known as President's 001, 002, 003, 004, 005 and 006 represent both public and private institutions that serve a primarily rural region and were active or recently retired institutional leaders. Although they were from different institutions, they provided great insights into presidential leadership from a variety of perspectives.

## **Themes**

In-depth interviews with the presidents and analysis of their comments revealed underlying themes, which resonated throughout the discussions and offered personal insight into their experiences. The findings presented below are based on these themes, rather than by individual stories, in an effort to synthesize the connections between the participants and explore common connections to address the following research question:

- 1. What individual skills, experiences, behaviors and values are believed to be essential for a rural university president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

## **The Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

When asked to discuss what, if any, key challenges exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that requires innovative and strategic decision making for presidents today, there were several key themes that emerged. From the rise of for-profit colleges, to the explosion of online course offerings, to the reduction in state and federal resources and the increased expectation of accountability from regulators and policy makers the 21<sup>st</sup> century has presented some unique and difficult challenges for the leaders of these institutions. The following themes outline a summary of these unique challenges:

1. The Marketplace
2. Resources and Accountability
3. A New Social Contract



## *The Marketplace*

The world has changed dramatically over the past 15 years and has had a profound impact on the marketplace of higher education globally. A plethora of challenges and frustrations await college presidents in the new millennium. Colleges and universities operate in an environment that is constantly being reshaped by advancing technology, globalization of education, state and federal mandates and changing student demographics. For the first time, higher education is truly a globalized commodity and can be delivered to you on your smart phone. Several of the presidents alluded to the fact that leaders today must understand the inherent risks and challenges of being a president in the environment of the global marketplace and must be prepared to handle the unexpected. Unforeseen situations and events can challenge and possibly even topple the most prepared and committed presidency if not dealt with effectively and efficiently.

President 003 noted that the pace of information exchange and the unquenchable need to have instant awareness, instant decision making and instant results makes being a college president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a literal 24/7/365 job. He noted,

You don't get many chances to think about something overnight these days. The technology has forever changed that. It is as such that it happens instantly and you better be prepared for that. So, the changing technology, social media, online learning, all those dynamics combined with a much higher premium placed on the internationalization of the universities experience has fundamentally changed how we do business.

When asked about time management and setting priorities in this new 24/7/365 environment, President 003 said,

There is just not enough time in a day and you have to try and find a balance between taking care of the big things and hoping the small things will take care of themselves, which isn't true. Or take care of the little

things and the big things take care of themselves, that's certainly not true either. Rather you have to have an understanding of how important it is to stay focused on the transformational things, but not letting the little things pile up and bog you down. Keeping something small from becoming a major controversy by recognizing it and dealing with it. Those are the things that are frustrating. I mean, I spend my time thinking about things I never thought about ten or fifteen years ago in terms of use of social media and all the dynamics that brings. I also didn't anticipate having you know, five hundred and fifty Saudi Arabian students here ten or fifteen years ago, which we now have. New cultural norms have arisen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century about how students want to be engaged on campus; the whole impact of the sexual assault issue has become very challenging, the new and more stringent federal compliance standards for many areas has presented new challenges and the scrutiny on the failure to act is about as critical as acting in an incorrect or insensitive way. Failing to act holds the institution at risk just about as much and so you know, those are things we didn't think about and deal with fifteen or twenty years ago.

President 004 expressed how this new marketplace has changed the power dynamics of leadership on a campus and he addressed the increasingly overwhelming feeling associated with the personal intrusion technology has made into his everyday leadership and life in general. He stated,

On a leadership front it has created a significant democratization of leadership--the communication with students, with faculty, with staff, with committee members is so much more prevalent with new technology as a communication vehicle. Not a moment goes by in which I'm walking in public, that I'm not fearful and self-aware that someone is snapping my picture. I've got to make sure everything is perfect and that's just the way it is right now, it's just, there is no hidden moment and everything is out there and you have be able to respond to it immediately. It has really taken a job that was 24/7 and now exacerbated that even more, it is really 24/7 in a global sense.

It was not just the presidents who were trying to adapt and change themselves for this new environment; they were also faced with trying to reshape the internal practices, cultures and norms of their institutions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The challenge to be a change-agent in a fast-moving marketplace was one that President 001 described as follows:

We were having our lunch eaten if you will, by some other institutions in our service region, primarily by some privates, who were much quicker on taking graduate level courses online than we were, so that was something we had to overcome. I think this institution's online presence now is very significant, pretty high, well fifteen, sixteen percent of the total credit hour production. But if you look at enrollment growth over the last several years, a good part of it has been an increase in the online enrollment. And that creates some dynamics or tensions too. This institution, which is not unlike many others, is both a significant residential institution in terms of residential experience, but it has a lot of distance learning going on too. So the folks that are sitting on the main campus, right in the heart of this residential, traditional residential experience sometimes feel threatened by what we do online. If we weren't doing it there they'd be here is the argument they give. But they really feel threatened by the growth online. Personally, I'm convinced a robust online program that makes money is essential in this new environment. In this economy, finding new revenue streams is critical and for many, online is just that. So the online benefits the residential programs because it brings additional resources into it. And the last time I reviewed the finances associated with that it was not an insignificant amount of money.

President 004 felt that his institution was reacting to this dynamic marketplace to the best of their ability, but he also believes that this change has forever altered how we think about education at a fundamental level. He noted,

The competition is significantly increased. The barriers to entry of higher education from a competitive standpoint are next to nil and so there is a lot more dynamics against those lines, the influence of technology, the influence of communication, the tremendous expansion of knowledge, the accessibility to that knowledge, going across borders, geographic borders and those type of things have significantly altered the way we think about education.

### ***Resources and Accountability***

For all six presidents, the need to generate new and more resource streams, and the ever-increasing accountability to nearly every stakeholder group, was an immense pressure. President 001 described that upon taking office he immediately faced the first of

seven budget cuts in a six-year period. He felt that one of the main challenges in this era of diminishing resources was the ability to keep morale high and keep everyone motivated toward maintaining excellence. He proudly stated,

One of the things that really pleased me the most was over this time was the several years there where we were voted one of the best colleges to work for. And that is based on faculty and staff surveys. We continued to be recognized on higher education honor rolls, in fact we scored higher in most areas than we ever had before and in more areas than any other institution we are compared with.

Funding shortfalls, stagnate campus enrollments, outdated facilities and technology, accreditation concerns and a need for a new strategic direction created issues as well. A couple of campuses were seeing increasing percentages of adjunct faculty in comparison to full-time faculty, which was impacting campus cohesiveness and creating communication and consistency problems. Several of the presidents also talked specifically about challenges in trying to motivate faculty and staff toward change.

President 002 summarized the impacts on his campus since the turn of the century as follows:

Let me discuss overall what's happened to us since the early 2000's time period with the financial recession, the worst since the Great Depression. In my time at this institution we've had a budget cut every single year from the proposed budget to the enacted budget. Every single year has been a cut and if you overlay changing expectations, changing understanding of higher education with serious financial constraints and what happens is you create a lot of tension in the academy at the local level. This is primarily because you're not able to give pay raises like you'd like to and you're not able to hire at salaries that you'd like to. People feel like they're under pressure, under fire because everything is changing around them and when you suggest changes that we ought to do to keep up it's like--oh my God, what's going to happen to us if we do that? So there have been a variety of tensions that really make doing the job more difficult today than I think ever before.

President 003 offered some unique insights about the role of shared governance in this new era of accountability and discussed how it has impacted his strategic decision-making and boundary setting:

Support the faculty, but stay the heck out of their way. Let them govern the rightful domain of the faculty: tenure and curriculum and matters related to the academic enterprise. It's my job to handle the financial dynamics, the campus dynamics, the facility dynamics, the lobbying, the fundraising, the revenue, the budget, and all those things that put faculty in a position to be successful, and if I do my job well and they do their job well then we're going to do well as an institution. Trust them, empower them, stay the heck out of their way, but be there when they need you.

Some key world-changing events have also reshaped the landscape for higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There have been things that have happened that have forever altered the course of the nation and the world: things like 9/11, a recession the likes of which have not been seen before for generations and a fundamental change in the priority of education and its role as a public good. President 005 highlighted these changes when he said,

There was an enormous sea of change that descended upon the entire world at the turn of the century. While we underwent a technological revolution that certainly impacted the way that we do business, I think higher education was forever changed by the fact that state agencies, particularly ones focusing on public safety, were now bumped to the top of the queue. The impact of the tragedy of 9/11 totally changed the focus of our budgeting priorities. Also, as baby boomers got older and as Medicaid and Medicare and other encumbrances on state budgets continued to grow exponentially, higher education has continued to get pushed down. I really think it's time that we reverse that trend. And that's one of the causes that I've really tried to adopt is to make a compelling case that higher education is a public good and it's not just for private consumption. We all benefit from an educated populace so I think the challenge to the 21<sup>st</sup> century public institution is to make that case. A case that we all, as citizens of our states, when investment in higher education

is at the top of the priority list, we all benefit. That message has a hard time resonating over all of the other needs.

Increased accountability to stakeholders was a major theme that resonated from each president as well. President 002 had a particularly insightful and troubling view of how accountability has changed today. He stated,

We've seen the great intrusion of the federal government in higher education. In ways that we've never seen before; you know college rating systems, targeted financial aid, and interest in things like title nine and sexual assault on campuses. Not that this hasn't been present in the past, but, I mean really significant intrusion. And an underlying feeling, I think on the part of many in the electorate, that higher ed. can't really be trusted unless we regulate them. That theme emerges in so many ways today, that wasn't there in decades before.

President 001 found it to be interesting that there seems to be an inverse relationship to the level of support given to higher education and the desired level of oversight and accountability expected by policy makers and agencies. He rightly pointed out,

Some of the other challenges we face are the growing levels of accountability. It seems that the smaller state support gets, the larger state expectations become. Over the past two to three decades state support has went from funding 75 percent of higher education costs to funding less than 20 percent of our operations. This is a dramatic change that has happened over a fairly short period of time. Yet in that same time period the amount of oversight, expectations and general accountability has grown exponentially.

All of the presidents made note of the heavy responsibilities associated with the presidential leadership role today. They spoke of the need to supplement the growing needs of their institutions in a highly competitive funding environment present in both the private and public sector and of the demands placed upon them in their role as president to lead their colleges through these turbulent times.

President 006 previewed how both government and society are wanting something very different today, than they did in decades past from the college experience:

I think the biggest change has to do with how higher education is perceived in government and in society and I think those perceptions at the government level are traceable largely to changes in the social awareness of higher education. The biggest changes probably have to do with the fact that people have moved away from the idea that higher education is something that makes you a better person and a person better equipped to really get the most out of your life and instead it has shifted toward what career and what starting salary will this career provide me.

### *A New Social Contract*

Since the turn of the century, colleges and universities have begun to function more as profit-driven corporations than as non-profit educational institutions. This has largely been stimulated and fostered by the changing value-statement about higher education held by policy makers, the individual student and a general shift of the cultural expectations for the academy as it pertains to economic growth, job creation and innovation.

President 002 specifically addressed the motivations and expectations of students today and how that may be in contrast to those in the academy. He recalled,

When I went to college, college was a public good; people went to college because we knew, society, we knew we'd be good for society. Today it's an entitlement to so many young people. It's just something they have to do because their parents want them to go or someone is telling them it's important to do, but they may not necessarily be doing it for what I would say, the right reasons, so there's been lots of shifts in what it is. Well, for us on campus that creates all kinds of tensions because those of us that have been educated to teach at the university, we have some lofty ideals of our own. We're here because we love the academy, we love to learn, we believe that students are coming here because they want to learn, and it's

been challenging.

President 006 gave a strong support of this notion of value proposition change when he stated,

Higher education has become a commodity where the commodity is a certain starting point in your career and that's partly because higher education is serving a broader clientele, a clientele that does have to think about the economic circumstances they will be moving into in a more essential way than the market that we formerly served. That market being upper middle class who already had the sense that they could move into lives that could continue that level of prestige and affluence and could therefore think of education in broader terms. I think that has gone away and we find ourselves therefore meeting a different spectrum of needs and what people desire to get from their experience in higher education. To me, that's by far the biggest change from when I started as a college student in 1971 and the questions that press on institutions now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

President 005 has personally taken up the charge to reshape the message and help to renegotiate the social contract for higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He has recently been working to publish a book concerning the public good of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and dispel the myth that higher education only has intrinsic private value in this new world economy. He said:

This is one of the causes that I've really tried to adopt is to make a compelling case that higher education is a public good and it's not just for private consumption. We all benefit from an educated populace so I think the challenge to the 21<sup>st</sup> century public institution is to make that case that we all, as citizens of our states, when investments in higher education are at the top of the priority list, we all benefit. And that message, we have a hard time making that resonate. When a quarter of our population has a bachelor's degree or some training beyond a post graduating credential or certificate, there are a lot of people out there who just don't see the value of it. They may say that college is for rich kids or kids that want to get out of their current circumstances, and as you know particularly in some parts of Kentucky, there may be resentment against people that want to get that. Really, the 21<sup>st</sup> century public and higher education cause has got to be



made in a broader and more appealing way. As presidents, it really kind of falls to us to make that case.

Several of the presidents argued that education is the foundation by which we uphold the nation's social contract. It is only through an accessible and affordable education system that we can provide the opportunity for knowledgeable people to build a nation of equality that enjoys economic independence. Our colleges and universities should play a major role in helping the nation recommit to this social contract. President 005 argued that not only can our colleges impact how we educate our nation, they must also utilize their bully pulpit and continue to be the leaders in informing the nation of the importance of educating every citizen for the betterment of our country.

### **The Challenges of Rural**

The span between the stereotypes that have been perpetuated by the media and Hollywood and the rural reality has created a lot of misunderstandings and prejudices against rural America. However, there are some things that we know for sure about rural America: in rural America, where per capita income lags behind state and national averages and the percentage of those living below poverty levels continues to rise, rural students and their families are finding it more and more daunting to support the educational needs and aspirations of the next generation. Matters of culture, economy, first-generation student status, family support and a general devaluing of higher education have been identified as barriers to the enrollment and persistence of rural students in college today. Previous research has indicated that rural students are less likely than their

urban and suburban counterparts to enroll in postsecondary institutions with intentions of obtaining a baccalaureate degree. For those who do enroll, achieving a degree and staying in their rural region to live and work, effectively stemming the “brain-drain” that has crippled rural regions in the past, is a forbidding proposition.

Key themes that emerged during the interviews with the presidents included the following:

1. A Moving (DEMOGRAPHIC) Target
2. Cultural Attitudes, Values, Norms and Expectations
3. Institutional Legacies and Traditions

### *A Moving (DEMOGRAPHIC) Target*

Rural America, which includes nearly three-quarters of the nations landmass, has seen a steady decline in population since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Census, 2010). These declines have unique impacts on the local economies of these communities in the form of declining tax bases, exodus of critical private and public services and a disproportionate expectation to fill the gaps by those that are left. This presents a set of new challenges for colleges and universities that have historically tied their missions, enrollments and identities to rural regions.

President 006 gave his best description of what has happened to rural America over the past several decades and shared his personal perspectives on what that has meant to his institution:

I’m not a scholar of American demographics by any means so what you are getting is an impression of a person observing a situation as opposed to

scholarly analysis, but I think there is a way in which some parts of the rural life are no longer sustainable or robust. The small family farm that existed up until 50 years ago, and that existed in this part of the country much longer than it did in the upper Midwest, is disappearing. You find very few men and women who come out of that context anymore, of a robust single-family unit that lives on the land either forested or agricultural land. Likewise, it used to be that small towns were vibrant places to live and work. I lived in one of those towns in my grade school years. I lived in a town in northwest Iowa so I know what a town of 3,000 souls that is thriving in its immediate context looks like, I know what that's all about.

After some further reflection President 006 continued,

Small towns have had a much harder time today and that means that there are fewer and fewer men and women who come out of a successful small town environment that are ready for college. In fact, many small towns are wondering if they'll be here 20 years from now. They are already half the size they were or half the economy they were. That means that the population of students actually coming from Small-Town America find themselves lacking the confidence that they came out of a robust lifestyle and might be going back to that, I think that's the most important real change that's occurred and I think it all really comes down to economic developments in the country. The growth that has occurred economically has been in very concentrated places, where there is the knowledge industry going like Silicon Valley or the Boston corridor, places that specialize in industries that are still growing.

President 002 shared his unique and insightful perspectives on how his historically natural resource extraction based economy is being impacted by a precipitous decline in the demand for those natural resources and what impact that is having on his institution today and in the future:

More than sixty percent of our enrollment currently comes from our rural service region. With the changing demographics in the region, we have fewer and fewer students graduating from high school, and we're seeing more and more out-migration now with the demise of the coal industry right now. We've lost more than eight thousand mining jobs in the last two years. I know personally that there have been many, many families, hundreds of families that have had to leave the region and that's impacting

us and it will impact us in the future because those jobs are not gonna come back, not in the form and fashion they were before.

Although he didn't give much thought to his institution being rural, urban or suburban when he took the job, President 003 discussed how his institution has taken on the role of being the driving force behind their economy. He shared that his institution is shaping the region and changing the demographics for the better so that students and local communities might better compete in an increasingly global and knowledge based economy:

I've never really thought of the campus as having a rural agenda because we're trying to drive the economy of this region and attract business and industry. We want to bring the economic development capacity here that speaks to a community much larger than we really are. But you know, having said that, I didn't really come into the job thinking rural or non-rural, I came in driving for excellence. My challenge from our board was I don't ever want to see that word regional in our vocabulary, period. To take this university from something of regional importance to a position of national prominence is what we want to do. What we strive for is to be nationally competitive, nationally known, nationally focused and since that time of course grown into an international context. So, the only way we're going to do that is to begin putting markers out there that can validate the achievements of a bold vision.

While President 003 serves an institution that has its main campus physically located in a community that pushes the limits of being considered rural, his institution serves nearly 30 other very rural communities. This contrast between the community where the institution is located and the traditional communities that it has historically served makes for a very diverse and divergent mixing of student demographics. However, President 003 clearly states that no matter where you come from and no matter where you want to go, a high-quality education is the key to unlocking professional and personal success:

We're going to attract students from all over this region, all over Kentucky, out of state and internationally. That is going to allow us to achieve that vision and achieving that vision is what's going to give value to students from rural counties to come here and understand the importance of a global context and grow and see and experience things that they maybe didn't see, understand, or experience in the rural community from which they came. That's the value of an education here. It's bringing them beyond something rural or small in nature and putting them in a position to be a leader in here, in this community or anywhere else in the world. That's what education can do.

### *Cultural Attitudes, Values, Norms and Expectations*

Interviews with the six presidents left no doubt that culture is the most important thing to consider when framing the required and desired professional qualities for the position of rural university or college president. Cultural attitudes, values, norms and expectations, as it relates to serving a rural region, was a topic that every president discussed in some context at length. They intimately highlighted how students from rural regions share a comparatively core set of cultural relativisms and how that impacts the way they lead their institutions. These mindsets and values reflect a special belief system that is unique and strongly tied to small-town America. This system is laden with traditions and expectations that, when compared to those in an urban or suburban setting, can seem outdated, meddling, and intolerant.

President 002 has spent nearly his entire career, which has spanned more than forty years, working in and serving rural regions. His insights on rural culture and how it shapes decision-making provided some key understandings. When considering what is unique about being rural he said,

Well, I think first and foremost its culture: cultural attitudes and expectations. When I came to this job I think one of the assets I brought to it was I'd spent seventeen years at another rural institution as a senior administrator. And so I said to the folks when I was coming here, who wondered how I was going to fit in this community I said, you know for me it's like you know, going across the state line to meet my cousins in a community across the mountain. Because really, the differences between Eastern and Southern Kentucky and East Tennessee is very, very little. Same kind of folks you know, rural, many isolated through history, self-reliant in many respects, and then some of the same problems and challenges that are happening everywhere.

With limited exposure to outside influences and a general void of diversity in most rural communities, the impact of this limited cultural competency can present numerous challenges for an institution of higher education, a place that has historically been celebrated for its openness to diverse and divergent ideas, beliefs, behaviors, religions and perspectives. President 001 recalled that he specifically addressed this issue with his faculty and staff on an annual basis:

I used to tell our faculty at convocations: students that come to us from our primary service region, for many of them when they come here it's their first contact with somebody of color, heck for some it's their first contact with someone who is not a primitive Baptist, and you can stretch that on out to numerous other areas. Now, at the state's urban institutions, the students that come to them from their service region are more cosmopolitan, they are students who have an entirely different set of life experiences. So part of the thing I used to go over with the faculty is that their background, that's fairly parochial. That puts a special obligation on us to expose those students to people with different ethnic backgrounds, to people from different countries and cultures.

President 003 further discussed the cultural challenges associated with trying to position his institution for success in the global marketplace for higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century while trying to battle the cultural notion that being involved in something outside of your town, your region or your state is something to fear:

I think it's a little bit of a challenge because you're educating moms and dads and community leaders as much as you are students in that regard. When we first rolled out the internationalization strategy, when those words with *international reach* were written into a seven-word vision statement, and we started to put a plan together for internationalization there was some push back from parents and from some small town community leaders...I don't think I want my son studying over there, or going over there, or daughter going over there. They've never been out of the state before and I don't know if I want them to go down and be a part of all this international stuff.

President 001, a first-generation college student himself, shared some insights about how a rural institution has to have a focus on nurturing students as a family due to the lack of support many rural students get from back home:

Inevitably the community where a college or university is physically located is bigger than the town most rural students grew up in. So that gives us some particular socialization issues. The other thing, and I guess this gets to the rural issue, we've always been concerned here about the proper nurturing if you will for the students that come to us. For not all, but a significant portion of the students that come to us from our service region, many of them are first time students, but many of them are not the first person in their family to go to college. They've had brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles that have gone away to college and failed at it. So they may be the first generation, no one has ever graduated, but everybody from in their family that has gone away to college has come back unsuccessful. So they come here with some doubts, many come with no family support; their family doesn't necessarily want them to succeed. They want them to come back home every weekend and because their greatest fear is they're going to go off and not come back.

President 002 continued the theme of family perceptions and fears of the unknown and how that shapes cultural norms and expectations:

For rural students, isolation, cultural norms and expectations, availability of family income and support are all things that weigh into student success. And another one, it's less tangible than the others, is the whole notion of getting above your raising. You know, if you get too much

education you might leave home and we hear that interpreted in many ways today with the movement to add more public education in central Appalachia, eastern, and southern Kentucky. The notion is if we educate them at home they'll stay at home. Well, that might be true if there were jobs for those people at home, but the challenge of course is there aren't jobs. Would a higher education institution right in the community help add jobs? It will help some, you will create work at the place, but it won't necessarily add jobs for the wider region. So you know, getting above your raising is still an issue we have to deal with at the university. We have to deal with it in subtle ways, because you know when people talk about that it is something of great importance to them and shapes their identity from the youngest age. But from a cultural standpoint it's an important thing to consider and must be managed even in this day and time.

Institutional ownership was a cultural topic that President 004 stressed as a major differentiating point between rural institutions and their urban counterparts. He stated:

From a cultural standpoint a rural university, a regional university such as this one and also the one that I was at previously, it's owned by the community and there's a lot more personal ownership by our alumni, by our citizens in the local area about the institution. I've worked at metro-based institutions and universities in larger metropolitan areas and there's a little bit of a buffer. Here, where the university starts and stops geographically as well as emotionally, is very blurred whereas in some of the larger metropolitan campuses the geography may be blurred, but who owns it is very much, you know much more solidified. New York University, for example you can't tell it from the campus or not, but the New Yorkers don't feel like they own it. Here, our definition of where the campus starts and ends geographically is pretty pronounced, but the ownership is not. And I think that's one of the real interesting things is managing the town and gown relationship and realizing that when you talk about a vision and changing a culture and everything else, it extends well beyond the campus boundaries. It goes into the community and how do you make sure the community is in touch and ingrained and in support of those changes and or the direction that you're heading and it's not just the people on campus.



Many rural people hold a negative view of higher education institutions and are opposed to breaking cultural norms in an effort to pay for something they cannot reconcile a tangible benefit for as discussed by President 002:

We still have many young people that are averse to borrowing money for college because their parents are averse to borrowing money. Also in many rural communities there is a general distrust in government and you know, whether public or private we're perceived by many as government.

A final concept offered by President 004 concerning the cultural impacts of leading in a rural environment revolved around the notion that while considering the long and profound history of things that have divided our county including gender, race, religion and any number of other things, the one thing that divides us more today than ever before is the ever-growing battle of urban versus rural. He succinctly offered,

Politically speaking, there is an interesting and at times contentious battle being fought by rural policy makers and their urban counterparts over a finite amount of resources available to distribute. Urban versus rural is alive and well, and in a small rural state like this one, the thing that divides us first and foremost is which one we represent.

### ***Institutional Legacies and Traditions***

In order to meet the expectations placed on rural presidents coupled with the new reality of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, interviewees described how long-held legacies and traditions at their institutions create firm foundations for building on, but they also create some challenges that must be overcome.

The presidents clearly recognized the value brought to their administrations by those who had a longstanding relationship with the institution. President 005 spoke with great pride about those who have served his institution faithfully through the generations:

When you spend time in a rural community working for a rural university, you really get a sense of how much the institution means to each community and the faculty and staff there. Because often times we are the largest employer and people have a generational attachment to the place. You may have employees on your campus whose great-great grandfather worked at the institution and who has been around for a long time and they have an affinity for it or they supported it, and you just don't have that other places.

The navigation of the benefits of being rural versus the challenges of being rural was a delicate discussion for each participant, but as President 004 passionately discussed, you must find a balance that allows you to hold on to the past and boldly move forward into the future.

We don't have alumni, community stakeholders and amazing faculty and staff, we have amazing and raving advocate fans and when I think about my other institution where I was a president as well, which was also in a rural area again, they become raving advocates and fans and not just alumni, stakeholders and employees. You know, there's a much tighter bond for the wholeness of the institution than I think you get at some of the more urban institutions... the good side of that is you get raving advocates, the challenge sometimes is you have these raving advocates and they're so tied to what they knew, fifteen years ago--this university was this or thirty years ago--this university was that, and they want to maintain that and we talked about the twenty-first century and technology and expectations and everything all started changing so how do you make sure you stay true to your traditions, your culture and your roots, but also make sure that it's adaptable to the current time and sometimes that's a little challenging.

President 002 highlighted that at many of the rural institutions he has worked at throughout his career, the staff are largely local and have long histories with the

institution and the community. This can create some challenges for organizational change as he discussed,

We have a lot of folks on staff in particular that grew up around here. Some joke that, that you know that part of the challenge we face here is that it's something we refer to as the *X INSTITUTE* way. You probably have that at your institutions because it's the people that live here, have worked here, some went to school here this is what they know. They haven't had the benefit necessarily of going somewhere else to see how it's done. So you have some of that going on, so there is a pretty healthy component of us that is right from this region. We're bright people, I mean we are as smart here as they are anywhere, you know I'd put our people up against people at any public college or university for that matter, but the challenge is many of them are from here.

Colleges and universities that serve rural regions are unique in their missions, leadership and challenges. They must all do more with less, are intrinsically tied to their local communities, operate in unique and culturally responsive manners and engage with the community in an intimate and holistic way. While trying to do all of these things, this study exposed three critical themes that must be acknowledged and addressed in order to effectively lead a rural institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Those three themes involve managing dramatic shifts in rural populations, understanding the unique cultural implications of the rural lifestyle and the change resistant nature of rural institutions based on long-standing legacies and traditions.

### **Skills**

Beyond the terminal degree, there is limited consensus regarding the skills needed for a rural college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While there are large amounts of research focused on the role of the college president, there is little to no research available concerning rural presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Given that today's presidents may be faced with such diverse tasks as the development of effective working relationships with various internal and external stakeholders, the need to maintain a global view of the organization, the responsibility for fundraising initiatives, and the demand to be media savvy and to address effectively the complicated issues that may arise, the presidents' skill set must be diverse and wide-ranging.

The guiding question concerning essential skills prompted an assortment of responses from the presidents. While the participants in this study provided insights into the specific skills they believed served them well in the role of the president, the five principal among these include the following:

1. Ability to build and maintain high performing teams
2. Balance multiple and at times competing needs and agendas
3. Aptitude to know your role and defer to others expertise when appropriate
4. Politically adept
5. Willing and able to lead change.

### ***Building and Maintaining High Performing Teams***

Building and maintaining high performing teams surfaced as a critical skill for rural presidents according to the participants. Specific to this skill was the process of selecting staff, delegation of duties, team management and empowerment.

President 004 summed up the critical nature of hiring great talent when he said,

You have to have the ability to go out and attract individuals who will support the vision, support the mission and darn near all of them got to be smarter than you.

He continued:

Hiring strong, strong people to me that is one of the most important parts of a presidency is surrounding yourself with phenomenal leaders and in doing so hiring individuals who you know will not think like you, that you know will challenge you, that you know will be respectful and loyal and everything else, but they're not gonna tell you what you wanna hear, but are gonna tell you what you need to hear.

President 005 shared that getting the right team assembled is one of the most critical skills a president can try to master, but you will not get it right every time:

I think I'm a pretty good reader of individuals and I'm fairly adroit at skill sets that are needed in a particular time and particular circumstances. That's not to say that I've hit 100% or a 1,000% on every hire, because that hasn't happened, but getting the right people in the right spots at the right times is a skill you must have.

President 006 openly subscribes to Collins (2001) *Good to Great* mantra that you have to get the right people on the team in the right roles:

I would say some of the key aspects of presidential leadership, especially as institutions are being asked to take on greater and greater challenges, is to make your primary focus the old idea of getting the right people on the bus in the right seats.

President 006 also embraces a team building strategy that helps him fill his blind spots and extend the capacity of his team with a diverse set of leaders:

I would say some of the key aspects of presidential leadership, especially as institutions are being asked to take on greater and greater challenges, is to make your primary focus the old idea of getting the right people on the bus. Never try to make your team out of people who are carbon copies of each other but to learn how to appreciate the differences and learn to make them work together.

### ***Balancing Wants, Needs and Agendas***

The ability for a president discern what are needs versus what are wants and

clearly understand the agenda of those stakeholders who want their time, input or support is a critical skill as described by the presidents interviewed.

President 003 discussed how serving a rural region can require you to travel great distances to conduct the presidential business of the institution and that you must be a good steward of your time, energy and influence:

It is critical that you understand how important it is to stay focused on the transformational things, but not let the little things pile up and bog you down. Keeping something small from becoming a major controversy by recognizing it and dealing with it is a must have skill. The big thing is measuring where I need to be and with whom, what I need to spend my time and energy on and make sure to focus on those things that matter most to moving the institution forward.

President 006 described the process of juggling his typical day as something that requires fitness, finesse and flexibility of physical and mental engagement:

It's an onslaught of meetings ranging from meetings with other leaders to meetings with outsiders and students and in between the meetings trying to keep up with emails and then discovering that there is something that is turning into an emergency and so sometimes you are dealing with that with part of your brain while you are still continuing on with the schedule. And then trying your best to find time for the bigger objectives you have going on. What I tell people is you'll be surprised if you get to be a president how your attention gets divided. People talk about multi tasking but it's multi thinking when you are a president, because even as I'm talking to you I've got three other issues running through my head. That's the day and it doesn't end until your head hits the pillow, and even then it may not be over!

President 002 stressed that an individual must be disciplined in managing their energy and keep the most mission critical activities in the front of the line. He noted that if the president can do this campus would follow that lead and stay focused on a strategic agenda. He said,

Well, you know, we've done a good job here where my theme has been plan the work and work the plan. We have used that right from the start so

we've got a good quality strategic plan, we've got a really good quality campus master plan, an IT plan, a housing master plan. We've done a lot of infrastructure work in my time here, so we're on that agenda, but these other things that I mentioned are distractions and so you wind up having to spend some of your time talking before legislative groups, or individual legislators, faculty senators or congressional staffers about issues that are important, but they don't rise to the same level of energy necessary to move the campus agenda. So if you're not careful what happens is each one of those becomes kind of an energy suck. You know, you're peeling off part of your energy to deal with all of these issues that groups may have, all legitimate, but they still pull you away from the central agenda and I think we're seeing more and more of that in higher education.

President 001 summed up this topic by reviewing how fringe issues can consume you if you are not judicious with your personal presidential resources:

You see all these, what I would call fringe issues that presidents have to deal with take a lot of time and not just that they take emotional involvement. You know, people are today, more labeling folks, more name calling with folks so that takes an emotional toll on people after a while. So part of the day to day is dealing with some of that stuff, almost every day so that you, if you're not careful you'll lose focus on what the objective is for the day, for the week, for the year.

### ***Know Your Role***

While the president must take on a multitude of challenges with a diverse and competent skillset, they must also know when to stay in their lane and not venture into the expert areas of other on the team.

President 002 succinctly stated,

You've got to get the right team around the table; you've got to make sure that everybody understands their role and purpose and that includes the president.

President 001 went on to elaborate on the idea that while the president is ultimately responsible for everything that happens on and off campus concerning the

university; they cannot and should not do everything:

The president is only one person and the president can't do all of the things that need to be done, but he or she can make sure that somebody on the team is competent and capable of covering these bases and carrying a consistent message. I think the other thing that is critical, a pitfall to avoid, is not to take the position that you know the solutions to all the problems, or even that you know what all the problems are. You must be willing to let the experts be the experts.

When discussing how he engages strategic and critical issues President 005 highlighted that in now his third presidential appointment he has honed the skills necessary to put the right people on the job:

I've been through enough circumstances that I know how to respond; I know who to get involved, I know which cognizant vice president or champion needs to help out and how to mobilize our team.

President 006 continued his analogy about team building and role assignment by highlighting that no one person can be everything to everyone in everyway that they may want it. Presidents are real people who cannot and should not try to do everything on their own, and a willingness to let go of some of those things can inspire and empower your team:

If the president is supposed to come up with the ideas that guide the vice president for student life and the vice president who manages IT and the vice president who manages the endowment and the Provost, only a superman could actually know enough to provide all the right ideas. If every person who has a leadership role feels like they are either educating the rest of the team or leading in the special areas they have an expertise, combined with a good level of communication with the CEO then everybody is driving the bus. The idea is that everybody should feel a real stake and empowerment within the institutional context. And that goes all the way to students.



President 004 summarized that much of the success he has enjoyed during his tenure has been the result of knowing when to reach out and rely on the expertise of others:

I think that's part of the reason I've been successful here is because I know enough about most things to know what my capabilities are and then I know enough when to go to somebody else and say, "Hey, I need you to help me with this." I know a lot about budgets, but I'm not a budget expert, I mean I can read balance sheets and I know what questions to ask, but if I want to know the nuts and bolts of the budget I'm going to ask our chief financial officer or the executive director that deals with that every single day and they give you the answers.

### *Politically Adept*

Higher education institutions today are faced with increasingly difficult political challenges. Dwindling state and federal support has shifted exponential costs back to the institutions that have been passed on to students in the form of tuition increases and fees. In this time of diminishing government resources the scrutiny on higher education from government entities has never been higher. A president's political engagement is sometimes misunderstood due to the negative connotations attached to the idea of politics. However, skills and the ability to be politically adept were described as must haves for higher education leaders, especially in rural areas.

President 001 discussed how politics are a driving force of influence in presidential decision-making in a rural region:

Politics are a way of life in rural communities. So many people in rural areas depend on government services that political involvement becomes almost second nature to them. For a president to be effective in leading a rural institution you have to understand the role of politics and be willing to play the game.

President 003 highlighted that while managing the external political environment can be challenging, presidents need not forget that there are also strong internal political forces that have to be managed:

You better have strong political instincts, both internally and externally, and campuses are very political in nature. You gotta know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. You need to know when to choose your battles carefully. You can't fight every fight and you gotta know when to fight, when to give up the fight and when the fight begins to overshadow the victory. And when it becomes clear that the victory is not worth the cost, then you gotta know when to pull it.

President 004 shared the notion that the traditional town and gown relationship is one that requires a very skilled political touch when dealing with rural campuses and communities. Since campuses in most rural areas are central points of activity, commerce and traditions, every decision must be considered carefully:

I think that one of the real interesting things is managing that clinical town and gown relationship and realizing that when you talk about a vision and changing a culture and everything else, it extends well beyond the campus boundaries. It goes into the community and how do you make sure the community is in touch and ingrained and in support of those changes and or the direction that you're heading and it's not just the people on campus. This can be a politically challenging situation and you have to walk a very tight rope to manage what's good for the campus versus what's good or expected by the community.

President 004 also stressed the fact that you need to have fairly thick skin when making decisions that may be politically charged for internal or external stakeholders:

You gotta understand the politics. I am talking to a certain degree about the politics of the elected officials and everything else, but just understanding the ebb and flow of the university. Understanding the role of the faculty and shared governance. You know, I've seen individuals come up and become a vice president for example, even though they've come up through the university ranks or someone coming from the outside or a president coming from the outside and they're so accustomed-- you

throw an idea out and people immediately want to help you improve with this that and the other. In the university setting the faculty are going to criticize it, and that's their job. We want our faculty to look at a situation or proposal and argue why it wouldn't work and that's their job. I mean, that's what faculty members are taught to do and sometimes I think people from the outside, or who haven't been experienced to the university in whole, take a real strong offense to that. I think it's something that you have to really embrace and say that this is something that faculty do and this is what we expect them to do and by them doing that, yeah you're gonna change or alter or whatever your proposal decision is, but nine out of ten times you're gonna make it better. So again, I think that understanding that political ebb and flow of a university is so very important.

### *Change Agent*

As presidents serving at rural colleges and universities face the changing landscape of higher education, they are forced to lead meaningful and positive changes in both institutional policies and practices. When changes take place, it is the president's job to communicate the change across campus and to the community at large. Creating this systematic change and successfully implementing it was a skill that several respondents highlighted as essential for success.

President 004 offered a balanced approach to leading change in his institution:

When approaching change you have to consider: how do you make sure you stay true to your traditions, your culture and your roots, but also make sure that it's adaptable to the current time? And sometimes that's a little challenge.

President 002 argued that change and change management is the most challenging part of his job. With long held traditions and legacies in place in many rural institutions, trying to lead change can be a daunting task. He said:

I think the most challenging part of the job is change and change management. Gone are the days, the years, when we could just sorta keep it going on autopilot. And I think when I first came into the business as a

faculty member in 1977, I think we were kind of on auto pilot. It was a good institution. It started as a teachers college and then when I was there it had twenty thousand students, a well-oiled machine you know, things were rocking along just really well. But we didn't have all these external pressures like we do today. I think presidents in the twenty first century need to understand the need for change, be sensitive to that and then be schooled in how to manage change because we've had fits and starts of that here, but everybody does. You want to move the agenda and you do some things and maybe you haven't thought it all the way through, maybe you haven't consulted with the right groups, maybe whatever it is and you find yourself having to back up, recalibrate and go forward again. I think change management going forward is going to be critical with more of the stuff going online, with massive online courses. With all of the ways people are learning today, a traditional university has to become more non-traditional in so many ways.

President 002 went on to add that if there was one area he could use some additional skills training with it would be change management:

If I could do anything in my life that would help me I would love to take two or three courses taught by the country's leading expert in change management. I think that would really help. Now, I've read a lot about it, part of my doctoral research had to do with change and change strategies, but having said that it's a, it's a work in progress.

President 006 offered some insightful and philosophical ideas concerning change and the president's role in leading that change. He articulated that the change presidents are tasked to accomplish is helping the institution reach its identity through progressive operational changes, not changing the identity to meet the operational realities:

I fundamentally believe that different institutions have different identities because they actually are related to things in the history and traditions of the college. Most institutions are not looking for somebody to change their identity, but they are looking for somebody to help them achieve that identity and it's realization a little more effectively. A president who is mirroring the institution back to itself and allowing the institution to grow better is one who is leading effective change.

## **Experiences**

In reviewing the data, it was clear there were some experiences that were cited more frequently and with greater emphasis, as essential for being an effective rural college or university president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The three emergent themes that developed from this analysis included:

1. Presidential Pathways: Progressing, diverse and challenging job assignments
2. Working for inspiring mentors
3. Learning from mistakes.

### ***Pathways to the Presidency***

Although each president had a unique and varied pathway, a common core of experiences and opportunities influenced their continued moves toward attaining the office of the president. Some of the presidents I interviewed knew they were drawn to leadership roles of some sort, but none openly suggested that they had begun their careers in higher education with the intention of eventually seeking a presidency.

University presidents come from a variety of academic backgrounds. It is important to note that there is no degree that places a person on a linear track to the presidency. What is generally recognized is that graduate education plays a vital role in developing academic leaders. Graduate degrees signal that the individual understands the values of academia.

President 003 described his pathway as one that followed a slightly different track than most traditional academic candidates who hold the position:

I came up through a little bit different track than most who hold these positions. I didn't come through the academic track, but I feel like coming through as a provost is great preparation to become a president, but it's not the only way to prepare yourself. And in fact, I find my business experience and fundraising experience to have been a bigger factor for my success in this job than if I had come through an academic track to the job. I often find that presidents who come up through the academic track, not all the time by any means, but sometimes, lack the business acumen and external skills that are necessary in the presidency. So I felt like my career track served me well; but a president's got to know his or her limitations too. I wasn't going to fake anybody out by being an academician and a scholar with years of expertise and a given discipline.

Interestingly only two of the six presidents interviewed came from a fundamentally academic background. To be an effective college president today requires a strong emphasis on external relations and leading internally, while at the same time one must be a leader in their community. These factors, among others, could be contributing to the college presidency being less attractive as a career choice for traditional academic candidates. Entering into an administrative area that demands long hours, is high stress and offers limited rewards is not a bright prospect for future leaders. President 004 joked that he was the new traditional, yet non-traditional president.

I'm considered a non-traditional president, in that my entire career has been in higher education but it has been purely on the administrative side up through alumni relations, development, government relations; a real external focus. As we all know, the world of the president nowadays is more externally focused than internally focused and those direct experiences with the external world definitely shape my role as president. Interestingly, my father was an academician going up through the rungs of the professor, department chair, dean, provost, and then actually serving two years as an interim president at a university. Having that experience, of my father being a very traditional president and a very strong provost, has shaped my thoughts, ideas, and everything else of how to manage the internal operations of the university through a very strong provost. Growing up in higher education, my career path and leadership has been very much influenced by those experiences.

President 001 affectionately discussed how he had finished his career and was ready to start a whole new chapter of his life when the opportunity to serve as president presented itself as a matter of service to his community and alma mater:

I came out of retirement to serve as president. I had moved on from thinking about my career and I was totally focused on other things. I think this was a big benefit for me during my tenure. In contrast to some of my predecessors, whose objective from the first day they set foot on this campus was to be somewhere else, I was not looking to go anywhere. So I think people knew that I did not aspire to use this institution as a stepping-stone for me; that this job, in this place, was the destination. I think that worked to my benefit. I alluded to this earlier because of eight years in institutional advancement, twenty-two years as an executive assistant to three different presidents and then several more years as vice president for administration. I had a unique knowledge of the history, the programs, services, beauty marks and warts of this institution and that was a great benefit to me.

When President 002 graduated from high school and enlisted in the army he had no idea that after serving over a year and half in active combat in Vietnam that he would come home and someday be a college president. While his start on the pathway to becoming a president was not traditional, once he made a decision to pursue a career in higher education he served in almost every necessary role along the way. As he reflected on the beginning of his journey to the presidency he went on to say,

After I came home, I knew that I had to do something with my life other than what I'd done so far. So I went to college and prepared to become a teacher and was licensed to teach. My senior year in college my advisor had just finished his doctoral work and suggested that I needed to go on to graduate school. That set me on a course, as sometimes these things do, and so I went to graduate school, finished my masters and my doctorate and pursued a career in higher education. My first job was on the faculty in the department of industrial engineering technology for ten years. I went from an entry-level faculty member to a tenured professor in that time. I left there to become a department chair in engineering technologies

and served in that role six years and then I was fortunate I was nominated by my dean to co-chair our SACS review process for the institution and that exposed me to the much broader university. My understanding of the whole campus grew significantly after those two years. After that I was nominated by the provost to be a member of the ACE Fellowship program where I spent a whole year in immersive leadership training. From there I served as an executive assistant to the president, vice president for student affairs, vice president for administration, athletic director and had responsibility for several other areas along the way. So I say all that to highlight that I was really positioned to become the president. Not that that was my aspiration, I just had a lot of experience in nearly every area of the university setting. So when it came right down to it, when the opportunity arose to become a president my preparation was very solid.

A number of the presidents indicated that their willingness to assume and pursue additional responsibilities when asked and when the opportunity presented itself was instrumental in supporting their continued progress toward the presidency. President 002 was asked to work on a variety of projects and problems during many of his support roles throughout the years and he highlighted the fact that he never turned down an opportunity or challenge that was laid before him.

I never refused an assignment. I think that's part of the reason I've been successful here is because I know enough about most things to know what my capabilities are and then I know enough when to go to somebody else and say, I need you to help me with this. I know a lot about budgets, but I'm not a budget expert. I mean, I can read balance sheets and I know what questions to ask, but if I want to know the nuts and bolts of the budget I'm going to ask our chief financial officer or the executive director that deals with that every single day and they give you the answers. So part of it is learned by being thrown into the arena and being willing to dig in. I think sometimes people are afraid to fail and they won't take on the difficult assignments. I've failed a lot along the way, but what I learned has been invaluable to my career and my ability to lead this institution.

In one specific case, President 002 was assigned a very challenging and not very successful project. When dealing with that project he had to eventually go to the



president and admit, “I’m really sorry to report this, but this thing is in the tank, it’s no good.” This was a very hard thing for him to do, but there was no getting around the failure. The president’s response was something that he said has stuck with him throughout his career:

He thought about it for a minute, he looked up at me and he said, “Well, did you do that on purpose?” I said, well of course not. And he said, “Then don’t worry about it, we all make mistakes. Now what are you gonna do to fix this thing?” That’s the right attitude because you know, he could’ve thrown me under the bus and said well, I’ll go find somebody who can do it, but he didn’t say that at all. Rather he said, I know you didn’t do that on purpose, it didn’t work out that’s all. Now how are we going to regroup and make it happen?

President 006 discussed that his passion for higher education was sparked when he first stepped onto the campus of his alma mater as a freshman. That desire to learn has guided him through a career that has spanned three decades and afforded him increasing responsibility, which eventually led him to administrative positions that launched his rise to the presidency:

I have been in academia since 1971 when I went to college myself and I think I’ve been a student, always learning, all the way through. I was more or less a traditional student and then a traditional PhD seeking graduate student and then post doc I decided that I would like to stay in academia and then had a 22yr career as a professor of physics in a quality liberal arts institution. And then in the last few years, of those 22 years, is when I was invited into a more administrative position and subsequently I became a dean of the faculty and provost, and after serving in that role for a total of 8 years there were opportunities to seek a presidency.

All of the presidents interviewed described their pathways to the presidency as a journey that helped shaped their perspectives and train their decision-making and leadership styles for the responsibilities of being the president. All of the participants

were very deliberate in their commitment to a career in higher education, whether they purposefully entered this field intending to be a president or not. Given the industry standard, with few exceptions, of holding a doctoral degree before being qualified to serve as president of an institution, all of these individuals had made a purposeful and committed decision to pursue a career in higher education.

At some point in their careers, every president realized a presidency was the next step and that they had the potential to achieve this goal. Some of the presidents were very determined in their decision to poise themselves to seek a presidency. President 005, for example, discussed being at a point early in his career when he had to make a decision about whether to make the move now to a two-year junior college or wait for a more traditional four-year opportunity:

I was 36 years old. And when I look back now, I'm in my fourteenth almost fifteenth year as a president, so there's not a lot I haven't seen...a lot of folks work their entire life or career and go through a more traditional route of assistant, associate, chair, dean, associate VP, provost, etc. It just so happens that my opportunity came sooner. I think it has really taught me that you can't ever take yourself too seriously. I mean, people, by virtue of the office, show a lot of deference to me and I often have to remind myself that it's not to me but it's to the office. So I've always had this philosophy that you don't ever let it go to your head and you don't take it too seriously. And my kids have a tendency to keep me grounded. It's been quite a ride, I wouldn't trade my career path for anything and I intend to do this for another 20-25 years.

Despite some negative aspects surrounding the challenges involved with being a college president, most every participant indicated they would have chosen the same career path despite the hardships professionally and personally. President 005 contended that being a college president is the most exhilarating experience one can have. The general consensus

among the presidents interviewed indicated the number one factor in why they have remained rural college presidents is the feeling that they could truly make a difference in people's lives and for the communities they serve.

All of the presidents interviewed identified key benchmarks throughout their career that marked progress, diversity and effective leadership growth throughout their careers. While some participants spent multiple decades in countless positions preparing for the role of the presidency, one of the participants entered the role after a relatively short period of time with limited diversity of positions. Regardless of the time of entry or number of progressing positions held until assuming the role of president, each president noted some key steps along the way that helped prepare them for the challenges of the job.

President 002 specifically attributed his long and diverse record of success in multiple areas of the institution as the foundation for his effective leadership as a rural university president. He plainly stated:

After nearly two decades serving in various senior administrative roles, I was really positioned to become the president. Not that that was my aspiration, I just had a lot of experience. So I had been responsible for intercollegiate athletics, business functions, human resource functions and of course I had a lot of experience in academic affairs. So when it came right down to it when the opportunity arose to become the president my preparation was very solid. For me, I think the most important things that I bring to the table that I would like to see every president have is really solid experience in preparation in the matters of the academy.

President 001 reflected on the fact that his career spanned over 40 years and touched nearly every part the intuition:

From student worker to institutional advancement to more than 20 years as an executive assistant to three presidents and then nearly a decade as vice president of the administration, I had an intimate knowledge of the history of the programs, services, beauty marks and warts of this institution and that was a great benefit to me.

For President 003 it was a very specific set of experiences that he attributes to his presidential leadership success.

I find my business experience and fundraising experience to have been a bigger factor for my success in this job than had I come through an academic track to the job or any other experiences I might have had.

President 005 argued that it is not necessarily the length or quantity of experiences that matter as much as having the right experiences needed for the job of the president. Key roles in external affairs, donor relations and board management were some areas that he deemed necessary for success:

I think it was having the right set of experiences that helped underscore that this is what I wanted to do and I believed that I could do it. And to my president's credit, he wasn't that one to say I want to keep you here, he was the one that said, look, if you believe you can do this and you believe you have the toolkit to be successful then I'm going to help push you in anyway I can into that opportunity. And that's what happened when I was 36 years old. And when I look back now, I'm in my fourteenth almost fifteenth year as a president, so there's not a lot I haven't seen.

He also specifically highlighted the fact that he feels he has had many opportunities in his career and in life in general because he was willing to do whatever it took to get the job done.

President 002 encourages aspiring presidents to stay hungry for opportunities that present new and challenging experiences. Even the ones that seem like they are no benefit to:

Look at every opportunity that comes your way and be willing to embrace them, even the crummy ones. And believe me I've had some really crummy assignments at times. I would go home and say to my wife, I don't know why I'm doing this. And she would say, well did you ask the president? And I said well not really, he asked me to do it so I'm gonna do it. I never refused an assignment.

President 002 went on to sum up this theme with a cautionary tale of making sure you are ready for the demands of this job by being tested in other areas of your career:

You can study things in books, we all do, you can learn vicariously, I don't have to make the same mistakes as you, I can learn from your mistakes, I know all that, but for example so many college president's don't know anything about some part of the university, athletics, human resources or something. I was blessed in my career to have the opportunity to learn about all of those in very detailed ways. That set me up for success, that helped me avoid failure when I came here because I knew enough about the issues to know what was really important and what to avoid. So you know, experience is hard to beat, you can look at some folks and leaders in our region in the last few years that have had difficulty, and I think part of that was they rose too fast and didn't have enough experience, you know they made some mistakes. So, experience matters!

### *Inspiring Mentors*

To a person, each president discussed the important role that mentors have played in helping them gain the necessary experiences, insights and personal and professional reassurances that are needed to become an effective president. Mentors encouraged many to seek additional degrees, apply for new and challenging positions with increased responsibilities and opportunities for experience, modeled professional and leadership behaviors that shaped their own and created leadership opportunities in their organizations for them.

President 002 was very pointed about the role of mentors in shaping his career and helping him deal with decision making to this very day:

Part of the success I've enjoyed as a rural college president is to keep in touch with people that have done this type of job in other places. And so I don't have any problem picking up the telephone and calling somebody that I know. If I ask them a question they're going to help me, not because they gain anything from the conversation but because they like to see me be successful. That's what a mentor does. And so that's a very important idea: everybody needs to have mentors, people who you know and trust, and sometimes it takes a while to develop that relationship. But the people that you can count on, you can call them up whether it's a personal matter or professional matter and say I need some help. Or I would like some advice, if you were in this situation what would you do? Or, what would you suggest I don't do? You know it can be cut both ways, but that vicarious learning is also very important and it can help and sometimes it can be the difference in really being successful or being marginally successful, or not being successful at all.

President 001 recalled that one of his mentors really helped him shape a strategy for being successful when working in a rural region:

One of my mentors that helped me become a pretty good writer used to say, the best way to learn to write is to write. I would say that applies to being a president as well. The best way to excel or master some of those things that help you be effective is to do them. It also helps if you've got a good role model. One of my best role models was a guy who I worked with that had a long career as an agriculture extension agent. He had spent the majority of his career primarily serving out in rural areas. I just marveled at him; he had the most highly developed people skills that I've ever seen. And of course, one of the best and most used techniques was to start out by listening, let these folks tell you about themselves. That was some of the best advice I ever got: just listen.

Many of the participants discussed how it is important to have a diverse set of mentors. A group of individuals that look at the world from different perspectives and can offer insights based on their unique experiences, dispositions and values. In fact you

might not see eye-to-eye on many subjects, but that, in and of itself, can help a president to overcome flaws and fill their blind spots.

Giving credit to a couple of diverse mentors, President 002 stated,

I worked for two presidents, both of whom were mentors, both very different people. The first guy was a very successful university guy who would become chancellor of the entire system, in fact, he was the founding chancellor and wrote all of the policies and procedures and he was in that job for a long time. He was one of the youngest budget people in the state when he was in his thirties; he was a director of budgets in the state and a brilliant guy, no nonsense guy. I learned a lot from him about preparation, and being exact and doing things right. And then the other guy I worked for, the fella that was there when I left, was a vascular surgeon; very very different guy, but also a very seasoned kind of a mentor. He had a great bedside manner, the ability to connect and empathize with others in a genuine and heartfelt way. You know, those two guys gave me opportunities and sometimes the opportunities were wrapped up in problems you know, but I learned from both of them and am better for having them as mentors.

President 004 discussed how it was one of his mentors who taught him the value of surrounding yourself with diverse leaders and knowing your role with the institutional cast.

I think that sometimes leaders, you know, hire people who are too much like them; who look like them, who act and think like them and then you get into a group thinking. To me that's the worst part, the worst place to be in; so having that courage to make the right decision and having the courage to have others who can make the decisions and back them up is critical. One of my key mentors had a mantra that guides me to this day: You never make the decision of a vice president because if you make the decision of a vice president why do you have that vice president, and why are you president? I've always thought about that because if you're always making decisions for your vice president you're not being president and you're allowing someone not to reach their full potential.

President 006 attributed his academic nature of observation and analysis as a key tool that he has used to learn from others who he has had the opportunity to work with.

Specifically, he highlighted how it is important to learn from others mistakes:

I was a critical but careful watcher of presidents and provosts. I watched every president I worked with for things not to do and a few attitudes to bring to the table so I think that fits with being a physicist, when we are working on a problem we are observant to the point of being at one with it, just, if you were this particular thing you are studying how would you behave?

President 001 affectionately recalled one of his mentors who always seemed to be able to see further down the path than others and how that helped him grow in his leadership capacity:

Presidents really need to be able to see around the corner and mentors can really help you that. I had one mentor who could not only see around the corner, but he could see around the whole damn block and it was fascinating to me the opportunities that I had working closely with him. To hear him talking about the political landscape in Frankfort and rightly predicting what's gonna happen, who is gonna take this position instead of this and this is going to be his reaction and this is going to be her reaction and he was always spot on. And I wondered, I sometimes wondered, has this already happened and he's just playing us? But, but mentors, mentors can help you with that by sharing their experience.

Progress and major milestones came for each president along their career path, but every one of them seemed to go back to the very beginnings of their career and referenced a key figure that served as a guiding light and who empowered their career ambitions. President 005 spoke of his first mentor with great respect and thankfulness:

My first real mentor in higher education really empowered me. His advice to me when I first got started was, "I want you committing sins of commission rather than omission. So be aggressive, take risks, know that



I've got your back, but also don't make the same mistake twice." Which was really good advice. He was really a kind of hands off boss and he really let me cut my own swath and I've tried to do that with my employees too. That experience was really key to putting me on my professional path.

The role of mentors was very significant among all of the participants. From family members, to previous supervisors, to community members to even current and past subordinates, the group of rural presidents that participated in this study identified numerous individuals that have helped them along their career path and who continue to provide invaluable counsel and support to them.

### *Learning from Mistakes*

As stated earlier, there is little to no research on rural college and university presidents. What literature that is available concerning the college and university presidency focuses on the core roles, responsibilities and tasks associated with the job. Another area we know very little about is the mistakes they make and the difficulties they face when trying to fulfill the obligations of the position. This theme emerged as a critical component for the rural presidents I interviewed for this study.

President 001 argues that if you aren't making some mistakes then you probably are not doing anything truly transformational. However, he also cautions not to make the same mistake too many times:

We learn from all our experiences both the successes and failures, sometimes I think we learn more from the failures than we do from the successes if we, if we really dig in and see what caused it to go, to go south and you don't want to make the same mistake repeatedly.

President 005 believes that you must make all decision from a position of strength and be courageous enough to own the mistakes and take the proper action to address it:

You can't be cowed by the fact that you have to make a hard decision. If you make a bad decision then you can make another one to rectify it. There are going to be times when you make mistakes but you have to own up to them and you have to take responsibility.

President 002 discussed how mistakes he made earlier in his career have shaped how he leads and how he handles the mistakes he makes today:

So, you know part of this whole deal to be a successful president I think you have to be flexible, humble and human. I think you have to have enough ego so that you feel good about yourself, but not so much ego that you think you're not above reproach or cannot be wrong. We all make mistakes and if we learn from them, we are better for it.

President 005 admitted that it was the leadership of first college president he worked for that has shaped his leadership philosophy when it comes to learning from our mistakes.

His advice to me when I first got started was, I want you committing sins of commission rather than omission. So be aggressive, take risks, know that I've got your back, but also don't make the same mistake twice. Which was really good advice. He was really a kind of hands off boss and he really let me cut my own swath and I've tried to do that with my employees too.

### **Behaviors**

The leadership behaviors and practices of rural college or university presidents is a critical area to review for the purpose of this study. Looking at those unique and consistent behaviors and practices used by presidents to assist them in influencing the overall success of their institutions can provide some clarity for best practices. The

behaviors and practices of the college or university president directly shapes and influences all aspects of the institution and the following themes developed out of the research conducted in this study:

1. Trust but verify, always get the whole story
2. Be visible and accessible
3. Share credit and check your ego

***Trust but verify, always get the whole story***

The very nature of the role of the president necessitates that many mission critical projects, decision points and fundamental processes get assigned to key leaders with the institution. While each president has done their level best to recruit and empower a competent, committed and trusted staff, the president still must inspect what they expect.

President 002 was the pointed and passionate about this critical leadership behavior:

Trust and verify. See you organize a team, you delegate assignments, you get folks doing things, trust and verify. Even your most trusted advisors at times get distracted, not because they want to it's just because that's the nature of the business and you just need to have little ways to check in with people. Ask them how you doing on this assignment? Are you making progress on that? Trust and verify will help you stay in the middle of the road and not end up in the ditch.

President 006 spoke intimately about experiences that he has had and decisions he has made assuming he had all of the facts. He stressed that these have been some of the biggest mistakes he has made and it has shaped his leadership behaviors to check and double check to make sure he has all of the facts before considering it actionable information:

I'd say don't think you know best because quite often you haven't been told everything yet. My worst experiences have happened because I thought I understood a situation but then as I took off in the wrong direction other facts came to light. I have almost never regretted stopping and thinking again as to whether I know everything before I proceed. I learned this from the first person that brought me into an administration, she said never think that you've been told the whole story yet, and she was right because I've had that happen to me a number of times.

***Be visible and accessible***

The role of the president in a rural setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is one that is public facing. It is not a position that would suit an introvert or someone who has any social anxieties or awkwardness.

President 002 likens his commitment to being visible and accessible to an Australian Walkabout. He stressed that the only way you are going to get to see things, know people and have an intimate and personal understanding on the people and places is to get out there:

I walk around a lot, I have dinner with students, oh I don't know, at least once a week I walk down to the main cafeteria, I just pick a group of students, I never eat with faculty or staff, no I pick a group of students and I say "How ya doin'?" Some don't know who I am, I always introduce myself. You know, "What's you're major? Where you from?" Just get to know them.

President 004 discussed how he subscribes to a very Jeffersonian set of leadership behaviors when it comes to be visible and accessible:

I'm very much a Jeffersonian leader, in that you've gotta be accessible to all and treating each individual with equal value to the institution. This is a very important part of that process as well. If we walk across campus right now I guarantee that a student, if not two or three students will come up and want to do a selfie with me, that we'll cross paths with a custodian that will stop and have a chat, that if I see a yellow bag walk across

campus I'll make a beeline for them because yellow bags represent potential students.

President 001 stressed that being visible is priority number one for a rural college president.

I think it was important first and foremost to be visible. On campus, in the region and with key stakeholders I've always prided myself, and I've gotten a lot of positive feedback over the fact that I can relate well with a lot of people and people from different walks of life and background. The president must be the chief ambassador for the institution and to do that you have to meet people where they are.

President 001 highlighted the fact that the president can be a soft target for misinformation and manipulation. The public nature of the office and open access that is encouraged and expected by stakeholders can make getting all of the information needed to make a quick and accurately informed decision challenging:

We've all seen manipulators who will give person A one version of a story and person B another version of it and person C another version of it. An experienced and effective president will quickly learn some skills and tactics to avoid being trapped into making decisions without all of the information that is needed.

### ***Share credit and check your ego***

A college or university president can have numerous barriers, enemies and trials in their day-to-day work. One of the biggest enemies for rural president could be the one that comes from within. Presidential ego is something that just does not play well in rural communities. In any organization, everyone plays a role in the success of the operation. However, not everyone gets the same amount of credit, not everyone is rewarded equally and not everyone expects preferential treatment based on their positional power. In rural

communities presidents often rank as top community officials, treated as dignitaries worthy of special treatment.

President 001 readily admitted that the best policy for a president is one where there are no mirrors:

It's not about the president, it's about the institution. It's about the institution's mission and it's about the people, all those that the institution serves. A lot of presidents get so wrapped up in the ego trip that it's all about them. So you know, my advice is no mirrors. You don't need anything to let you bask in your reflected glory.

President 004 encouraged his fellow presidents to cherish the opportunity they have been given to lead an institution of higher education and treat the office and job as one of a servant leader:

I've seen too many leaders fail because they become bigger than the institution. To me, they need a sense of humility rather than a sense of accomplishment. That is not due to the president, the sense of accomplishment is due to many individuals in the institution going out and doing amazing things. I think presidents need to learn humility, and realize they're not infallible and they are people. I think sometimes we get too caught up in the stoic nature of it all and that feeling of, "We're always right," and I think we've gotta be real careful about that attitude.

President 005 stressed that presidents must not take themselves too seriously, but they absolutely must take the obligations of the position seriously:

I think it has really taught me that you can't ever take yourself too seriously. I mean people, by virtue of the office, show a lot of deference to me and I often have to remind myself that it's not to me but it's to the office. So I've always had this philosophy that you don't ever let it go to your head and you don't take it too seriously. I'm just a normal person like anybody else but I've been put in a position of responsibility and I take that seriously and I try and do my best.

President 002 embraces the idea that a president must have a healthy ego, otherwise they would never be able to face the pressures and decisions that have to be made on a daily basis:

You know for me, relationships are the most valuable thing. I'm quick to say, and I hope it's true and others could validate this but to me, it's never mattered who gets the credit cause I am not looking for it. I do have a healthy ego for sure, but I didn't come into this business, nor am I motivated by plaques on the walls, slaps on the back and all that kinds of stuff. I am much more motivated by what we accomplish and I'm perfectly happy at the end of the day to say to somebody, man that was really a great job, you really helped do something here that moved our institution. That's very motivational to me, but it's also very motivational for the person to whom you say that and I think recognizing that is of central importance to quality leadership. You have to spread the success around so people know you appreciate them. It's hard to do sometimes if you don't get out and walk around, I mean if you're just sitting around this table with six cabinet members you know, you can spread it around, but it's a pretty thin spread.

President 006 addressed the topic of keeping your presidential ego in check with an honest and transparent revelation:

The thing you fight is that everyone has an ego and so you have to fight yourself to make sure that you are ok when the credit is going all over the place.

### **Values**

At the very core of who we are as people are those core set of values that shape our leadership and our daily actions. To be truly effective college and university presidents must know what they value. In the context of rural leadership they must also recognize and subscribe to a value system that is reflective of the people they serve. They also acknowledge the importance of ethical behavior. The best leaders exhibit both

their values and their ethics in their leadership orientations and actions. Leadership ethics and values should be visible because you live them in your actions every single day. The truly effective leaders are grounded in integrity and centered by a value system that helps them balance the challenging roles and responsibilities they have. While there were several values discussed by the participants those most important and deeply explored themes were based on:

1. Honesty, integrity and trust
2. Valuing others values
3. The transformational experience

### ***Honesty, integrity and trust***

Every president interviewed discussed the monumental importance of honesty, integrity and trust when it comes to their value system. Compromising any one of these things would cripple their ability to lead their institutions in an effective way.

President 002 emphatically stated that without honesty, integrity and trust that there is no basis for any leadership capacity:

Honesty, integrity, and trust are three values I guess you could roll them up together, but if you don't have that you don't have very much because all of us know you can see or hear or identify a phony person pretty easily, you know we can all get a pass for a short period of time, but people do evaluate our behavior to see if it lines up with what we're talking about or what we write about. So I think you know, fundamentally a leader has to have those three things honesty, integrity and trust.

President 003 shared that people must know that you are all in with your leadership being connected to your values:



Integrity is paramount, people aren't going to respect and trust you unless you earn that trust and respect and I think I have earned that. Again, that doesn't mean people agree with you, but people don't question your character, your values, your honesty. They got to know you're all in before you can expect them to be all in. And that doesn't matter whether that's students, faculty, staff, alumni, whatever the case may be. So, this jobs all about leadership, leadership matters and understanding what inspires people to achieve great things, that's what a what a president has to be about at their core.

President 004 argued that in order to put the institution first your values must be above reproach:

Amazing honesty, integrity, and the ability to build relationships with a wide range of individuals from a wide range of backgrounds...the honesty and integrity is imperative and you've got to be true to yourself and true to your word, and going into a presidency knowing that there's going to be times when that's significantly challenged, but knowing that you're going to do the right thing for the right reason regardless of the personal stakes that are involved and in doing so you're always putting the institution first.

President 006 articulated a fairly spiritual revelation about how the president must embody the core values of the institution and through leadership based on trust, mutual respect and honesty the impossible can become possible:

I think at the end of the day institutions seek leaders who will shape them at the most fundamental level. Leaders with integrity and trust that is earned helping them achieve their institutional identity and it's realization a little more effectively

### *Valuing others values*

Acknowledging and respecting others values was a fundamental theme that grew out of my interviews. Rural regions are often characterized as being culturally and demographically homogenous (Nachtigal, 1982). This also leads to the assumption that these communities and their citizens are often unwilling to accept or embrace diversity of

thought, religion or values. Several of the presidents reflected on how their rural institutions offered an opportunity to help expose students to the values of others and show them how those values have value.

President 006 stated that one of the fundamental goals of his institution was to create an environment where all perspectives and value systems had value:

There is value to academic leadership at any level in being able to take on questions from other perspectives and other people's values. That is a principle that we try to teach here. Learning to value others value systems is of critical importance

President 001 argued that if a student did not leave his institution with a greater respect for and understanding of others values then they had not done their job properly:

We have a very special opportunity and obligation here to expose our students to people with different backgrounds, different value systems and cultures. If we do not take this opportunity to encourage and empower them with the knowledge and experience that the world is a very big place, made up of people with divergent values then we have not fulfilled one of the most critical goals of higher education.

President 004 discussed that in a rural setting, it can be challenging to provide a safe and accepting environment for individuals and groups to express and celebrate a diverse set of values:

We must insure that the university is the bastion of free speech, the bastion of expressive ideas, that you create an environment that everyone feels safe and comfortable to come as they are and present their thoughts and ideas as they are. In rural areas that can present unique pressures for certain students based upon their race, their religion, their gender, their gender preferences and sexual orientation. If you're in New York City, having a Muslim stand up and preach the Koran is not an aberration, it's an everyday occurrence. In a rural area, a Muslim standing up and preaching the Koran, not so much and it's equally important to have those opportunities for all of our students. So how do you protect that and

how do you make sure their voice is heard, how do you make sure that not only is it heard, but that they feel safe in having that?

### *The transformational experience*

Several of the presidents discussed how the missions of their institutions were intrinsically tied to providing a transformational experience to their students. A personal transformation created by a dynamic relationship between students, faculty, staff and the community that promotes learning, personal growth and a celebration of student success.

President 005 discussed how there is real value in being a part, even a small part of the transformational experience:

When I hear back from a student and they've achieved their goal, whatever it may be, regardless of their area of study and I've played some small part in helping them reach their goal. I didn't do the work for them, I didn't take the test for them, I didn't pay their bills but I somehow influenced them in a positive way and it somehow influenced them to get to where they wanted to be. That has real value for our institution and me personally.

He went on to say,

Improving people's lives is what we do here. You do that one student at a time and you do that in way that you hope, in time and in the aggregate, buoys up your campus and people say, man good things are happening there. Because there is an affinity to the belief that if you change one individual student for the better, it starts to change the profile of your whole institution for the better.

President 004 distilled down all of the values of his institution and his personal values system to the simple idea that the thing that should be valued most is student success. He articulated that a personal mantra that could be likened to an educational Hippocratic Oath:

Do no harm. You have to understand that the institution is a heck of a lot bigger than any one individual and all of our functions, all of our thought, all of the things that we need to be doing is how do we help the students succeed? And it's not about the glory of x, y or z achieving a certain goal, it really comes down to how do you add value to the experience of the students that have entrusted their lives to you and the institution. To me this is the most critical component, because they really put their faith in our values. They selected us, the family selected us, the students have selected the institution with a deep desire to be able to learn, to grow, to mature, to develop skills, talents and ideas that they're going to take back to their families to make things better. That is what I value the most of all

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings of the research and served to shed light on the leadership perceptions of sitting and immediate past presidents from rural regions. The findings were presented in accordance with themes that arose from the participant's direct conversation with the researcher.

The researcher sought to discover the perceptions of current and immediate past college and university presidents who serve in a rural region regarding their exhibited and observed most essential leadership characteristics in this specific environment. Participants were selected purposefully from various areas of the state and from differing college sizes and classifications as representative of the rural presidency. Each of the participants took part in a personal interview with the researcher and the resulting audio files were transcribed and analyzed. The findings were presented above in the rich thick detail of the participants' own words.

The participants and their colleges or university were described with a broad brush to provide context for the interviews, while still protecting the anonymity of the subjects. Key themes were identified concerning the 21<sup>st</sup> century rural environment and

those most necessary skills, experiences, behaviors and values needed to be effective. Perceptions of the presidents were expressed in their own words to provide rich, thick detail. The next chapter will offer discussions, implications and recommendations that surfaced from the findings.

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore those most essential skills, experiences, behaviors and values needed by current or future rural college or university presidents, as perceived by presidents. Rural colleges and universities hold great expectations and responsibilities for improving the areas that they serve. It is crucial that today's institutional leaders possess the necessary skills, experiences, behaviors and values needed to meet the challenges of their positions in the in the communities and regions they serve. Another layer of complexity to this problem is that leaders must not only be effective but reflective of the world around them (Broad, 2012). Six interviews were conducted following a multiple life-history case study design using a grounded theory approach. The intent of this study was to investigate these key areas and to better understand how a rural college or university president might be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This chapter presents the discussion, conclusions, implications and recommendations related to the findings of this research.

This multiple life-history case study explored the perceptions of six current or past presidents of rural colleges and universities regarding the skills, experiences, behaviors, and values that are essential to be an effective rural presidents in the new marketplace for higher education. Potentially, the study could help rural college and

university administrators and boards of trustees identify what to look for in candidates as they seek to fill pending vacancies caused by the growing number of retirements in the next decade. This study may be found valuable for those seeking to improve their leadership or who are aspiring to become new rural college presidents by identifying the essential skills, experiences, behaviors and values needed to lead into the future.

1. The Guiding Questions for this research were as follows:
2. What if any key challenges have you faced or observed during your tenure as president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education marketplace?
3. What if any unique challenges have you faced or observed during your tenure as president serving a rural region?
4. What skills do you personally possess or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
5. What experiences have you personally had or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
6. What behaviors do you personally exhibit or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
7. What values do you personally hold or have observed in others to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### **Discussion & Conclusions**

Leadership is a fundamental and universal reality to everyone, everywhere in every situation. However, leadership is also never simple or easy. This is especially true

in intricate and politically charged environments like universities. The great complexity of the institution imposes limitations of power on the leaders and demands superior skills, experiences, behaviors and values to be effective. This is especially true in a rural setting where resources are more limited, which increases the risks associated with decision-making.

The overlap of leadership skills, experiences, behaviors and values shared between the rural presidents who participated in the study indicates that having certain leadership attributes can determine or predict, at least in part, effective versus less effective leaders (Hershey & Blanchard, 1982).

From the data collected and analyzed for this study, the following conclusions may be drawn based on the central research question.

*What individual skills, experiences, behaviors and values are believed to be essential for a rural university president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

1. The marketplace for higher education has dramatically and irrevocably changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Technology, a new competitive landscape, retreating resources, increased accountability and a failing public value of higher education have all combined to make the 21<sup>st</sup> century the most challenging for presidential leadership.
2. Colleges and universities serving rural regions are seeing a mass exodus of existing and potential students due to shifting economies and demographics. Cultural attitudes and expectations in rural areas create unique challenges that



require adept leaders to understand and manage them. Rural institutions of higher education have an authentic and deep-rooted set of legacies and traditions that typically resist change and require distinctive and effective presidential leadership.

3. The most critical skills needed for a rural president today include the ability to build and maintain high performing teams, a talent for balancing competing needs, an aptitude for knowing where the boundaries of your expertise are, being politically adept and a willingness and ability to lead change.
4. A core set of experiences that were cited more frequently and with greater emphasis as being essential for being an effective rural college or university president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century were a progressing, diverse and challenging portfolio of job assignments, the opportunity to work for and learn from inspiring mentors and self-awareness to learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others.
5. The behaviors and practices of rural college and university presidents are a critical component that directly shapes and influences all aspects of the institution. Specific to this study those most critical behaviors include a willingness to trust but verify information, being visible and accessible to all stakeholders and a willingness to share credit and check the ego.
6. At the very core of all leadership and every person are those fundamental set of values that center us and shape our actions. For rural presidents those most essential values included absolute honesty, trust and integrity, a purposeful and genuine desire to value others values and an unwavering commitment to the

transformational experience of what education can do to positively shape someone's life.

### **Implications & Recommendations**

Studies on the critical skills, experiences, behaviors and values for effective rural college and university presidents are important because of the role presidents' play in leading rural colleges and universities. The unique skills, experiences, behaviors and values of the president have a profound impact on the organization, strategy, priorities and services to the students, faculty, staff and the communities they serve.

This study is important in framing those critical attributes needed to help a rural president be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through a review of the relevant literature combined with conclusions gleaned from the interviews conducted, the following implications of this study are presented:

1. Current and soon-to-be presidents of rural colleges and universities should be interested in this study because the evidence presented provides insight into the leadership attributes with which presidents self-identify and acknowledge as effective in others in a rural setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
2. Search committees and governing boards of rural colleges and universities should be interested in this study because the evidence presented provides insight into the leadership attributes with which presidents self-identify and acknowledge as effective in others in a rural setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

3. Given the unique nature of rural leadership discovered and discussed in this study, there should be some interest in the formation of a rural presidential leadership development program for existing and potential presidential candidates.

### **Presidents**

For those individuals currently serving as rural college and university presidents this study can serve as a guide to help them evaluate their core strengths and identify possible areas of improvement as it relates to skills, experiences, behaviors and values. For those considering a career trajectory that leads to a rural presidency, this study can help them plan a path that allows them to hone their personal skills, experiences, behaviors and values to best prepare them. Future presidents can look for guidance from mentors to aid them in making a proper assessment on any areas of weakness in their personal presidential resume.

### **Search Committees and Governing Boards**

Search committees, typically comprised of key stakeholder groups, designed by the board of trustees are tasked with the daunting challenge of hiring the best possible institutional leader. The committee is tasked with designing and identifying the desired qualifications of a candidate to be placed on the position announcements unique to the institution. The committees could utilize the findings from this research as a guiding tool for the discussions pertaining to the skills, experiences, behaviors and values of presidential applicants. While working with a current administration, the search committee could also use these findings in identifying and developing those individuals with presidential potential that are already employed at the institution.

### **Dissemination of the Findings**

The findings of this research can be disseminated in research reports, academic journals, professional journals, and the findings could be presented at conferences, workshops and training seminars. In research reports the findings could serve as a single reference point for all aspects germane to the topic presented. The research could have a wider impact, and serve as a source of knowledge by being printed in academic and professional journals. The findings could also be presented at rural college and university leadership conferences, workshops and seminars.

### **Future Research**

A significant amount of research supports the importance of higher education leaders possessing a unique set of leadership characteristics to cope with challenges, but relatively few studies model how the dimensions of skills, experiences, behaviors and values meld together to help a president effectively navigate the complex higher education marketplace. More specifically there is little to no research available that discusses these critical areas in relation to serving a rural region. Additionally results of this study point towards the need for additional research in a few areas, namely: (a) the perspectives of other rural college and university presidents in other states, regarding the personal skills, experiences, behaviors and values deemed vital for current and future presidents; (b) best practices for identifying and nurturing educational administrators to help them gain the necessary skills, experiences, behaviors and values to become effective future rural presidents; (c) the value of creating a national training model or fellowship program that helps high-potential candidates who want to seek the presidency

at a rural college or university prepare themselves for the challenges that are unique to that environment;

Specific recommendations for future research include the following:

1. Presidents from other states or geographical locations may have different perspectives about how rural is defined in their specific setting and those most critical skills, experiences, behaviors and values needed by current or soon-to-be presidents to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; replication of this study in other states would allow for comparisons of the findings to further the research on this important topic.
2. Future research could look at rural colleges and universities who have implemented programs to identify and train high-potential candidates within their institutions to take on the role of the presidency. This could lead to a greater understanding and possible replication of this practice.
3. Future study could explore whether the essential skills, experiences, behaviors and values are intrinsic to domestic or foreign regionalism (i.e., are certain skills, experiences, behaviors and values unique to, or transferrable from a domestic rural setting to an international rural setting).
4. Future research could evaluate the potential, design and creation of a national rural presidential training program. This program could focus on those key challenges and attributes needed to be an effective rural college president.
5. Given that only one of the six presidents interviewed had served in expansive academic instruction and academic administrative roles, including being the chief

academic officer or provost, it would be interesting to compare the career paths of all rural institution presidents to their urban counterparts to understand if this is a phenomenon unique to rural areas.

### **Conclusion**

This study was a journey to collect the unique perspectives of rural college and university presidents. The participants in this study provided insights into the specific skills, experiences, behaviors and values they have observed or possess that are essential for being effective. While I knew access to the presidents for a study such as this would be challenging, I was committed to conducting a meaningful study that shed light on an area of presidential leadership that had not properly been explored. I wanted my study to capture the unique nature of being a president in a rural region and doing it effectively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Sitting across the table with each president in their office gave richness to the experience that could not have been attained through phone interview, survey or different method. It was humbling in many ways to see, hear and feel the passion many of the presidents had for the rural regions they serve. To a person, each president was wholly committed to the regional mission of the institution and proudly walked among the people of the region.

There were several themes that emerged from the study. Chief among these were a varied professional background, a balanced set of behaviors, grounded in integrity and centered by unwavering values. All combined with the capability to apply past experiences and learned skills wherever and whenever needed.

Given that today's presidents may be faced with such diverse tasks as the development of effective working relationships with varied internal and external stakeholder groups, the need to maintain a global view of the organization and the marketplace, the responsibility for fundraising initiatives, and the demand to be both a leader and a follower, I hope this study provides some insight to those who may be, or choose to be a rural college or university president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Table 1**

*Summary of the Findings*

<b>Guiding Questions</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Question One: The 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	The marketplace for higher education has dramatically and irrevocably changed in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century. Technology, a new competitive landscape, diminishing resources, increased accountability and a failing public value of higher education have all combined to make the 21 <sup>st</sup> century the most challenging for presidential leadership.
Question Two: Challenges of Rural	Colleges and universities serving rural regions are seeing a mass exodus of existing and potential students due to shifting economies and demographics. Cultural attitudes and expectations in rural areas create unique challenges that require capable leaders to understand and manage them. Rural institutions of higher education have an authentic and deep-rooted set of legacies and traditions that typically resist change and require distinctive and effective presidential leadership.
Question Three: Essential Skills	The most critical skills needed for a rural president today include the ability to build and maintain high performing teams, a talent for balancing competing needs, an aptitude for knowing where the boundaries of your expertise are, being politically adept and a willingness and ability to lead change.
Question Four: Essential Experiences	Experiences that were cited more frequently and with greater emphasis as being essential for being an effective rural college or university president in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century were a progressing, diverse and challenging portfolio of job assignments, the opportunity to work for and learn from inspiring mentors and self-awareness to learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others.
Question Five: Essential Behaviors	The behaviors and practices of rural college and university presidents are a critical component that directly shapes and influences all aspects of the institution. Specific to this study those most critical behaviors include a willingness to trust but verify information, being visible and accessible to all stakeholders and a willingness to share credit and check the ego.



**Table 1 (continued)**

**Guiding Questions**

**Findings**

Question Six: Essential Values	At the very core of all leadership and every person are those fundamental set of values that center us and shape our actions. For rural presidents those most essential values included absolute honesty, trust and integrity, a purposeful and genuine desire to value others values and an unwavering commitment to the transformational experience of what education can do to positively shape someone's life.
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The analysis of the participants insights regarding the essential skills, experiences, behaviors and values needed by rural presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will help provide a clearer understanding of what makes for effective leadership in this environment.

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**Appendix A:**  
**IRB Approval**



EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

*Serving Kentuckians Since 1906*

**NOTICE OF IRB APPROVAL**

**Protocol Number: 16-004**

Institutional Review Board IRB00002836, DHHS FWA00003332

Review Type:  Full  Expedited

Approval Type:  New  Extension of Time  Revision  Continuing Review

Principal Investigator: **David T. McFaddin** Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Charles Hausman**

Project Title: **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century University President: Building Blocks for Effective Rural Leadership**

Approval Date: **7/16/15** Expiration Date: **7/12/16**

Approved by: **Dr. Rachel Williams, IRB Member**

This document confirms that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved the above referenced research project as outlined in the application submitted for IRB review with an immediate effective date.

**Principal Investigator Responsibilities:** It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to ensure that all investigators and staff associated with this study meet the training requirements for conducting research involving human subjects, follow the approved protocol, use only the approved forms, keep appropriate research records, and comply with applicable University policies and state and federal regulations.

**Consent Forms:** All subjects must receive a copy of the consent form as approved with the ECU IRB approval stamp. Copies of the signed consent forms must be kept on file unless a waiver has been granted by the IRB.

**Adverse Events:** Any adverse or unexpected events that occur in conjunction with this study must be reported to the IRB within ten calendar days of the occurrence.

**Research Records:** Accurate and detailed research records must be maintained for a minimum of three years following the completion of the research and are subject to audit.

**Changes to Approved Research Protocol:** If changes to the approved research protocol become necessary, a description of those changes must be submitted for IRB review and approval prior to implementation. Some changes may be approved by expedited review while others may require full IRB review. Changes include, but are not limited to, those involving study personnel, consent forms, subjects, and procedures.

**Annual IRB Continuing Review:** This approval is valid through the expiration date noted above and is subject to continuing IRB review on an annual basis for as long as the study is active. It is the



responsibility of the principal investigator to submit the annual continuing review request and receive approval prior to the anniversary date of the approval. Continuing reviews may be used to continue a project for up to three years from the original approval date, after which time a new application must be filed for IRB review and approval.

**Final Report:** Within 30 days from the expiration of the project, a final report must be filed with the IRB. A copy of the research results or an abstract from a resulting publication or presentation must be attached. If copies of significant new findings are provided to the research subjects, a copy must be also be provided to the IRB with the final report.

**Other Provisions of Approval, if applicable:** NONE

Please contact Sponsored Programs at 859-622-3636 or send email to [tiffany.hamblin@eku.edu](mailto:tiffany.hamblin@eku.edu) or [lisa.royalty@eku.edu](mailto:lisa.royalty@eku.edu) with questions about this approval or reporting requirements.

**Appendix B:**  
**Recruitment Email to Participants**



Eastern Kentucky University  
521 Lancaster Ave  
Coates 101, CPO 41A  
Richmond, KY, 40475  
P (859) 622-6220  
F (859) 622-2290

## Department of Leadership and Policy Studies

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Dear **PARTICIPANT**,

I am engaged in a doctoral research project involving a select number of current and past university presidents relating to effective leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a rural setting. Your participation in this research project will help to explore an area of postsecondary leadership that is underrepresented in the current literature.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do a maximum two-hour interview with the researcher discussing those skills, experiences, behaviors, values and knowledge that you possess or have observed to be most critical to being effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in your respective rural regions.

Participation is completely voluntary. Interview data will be coded to maintain confidentiality; thus, no data will be personally identified with you. Your name will not appear in any presentation or publication coming from this research. If you agree to participate, you may choose not to answer any given questions, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time. There are no known risks beyond the inconvenience of time.

The overall results will be used in a doctoral research project and related dissertation, which is titled, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century University President: Building Blocks for Effective Rural Leadership*.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this project. Attached you will find the approved *Implied Consent Document* associated with this research project for your review. If you would kindly respond to this communication with your interest to participate I will work with you or your scheduler to arrange the interview location and time.

If at any time you have questions about this study you may contact:

David T. McFaddin  
101 Coates Building  
521 Lancaster Ave.  
Richmond, KY 40475

Dr. Charles Hausman  
Eastern Kentucky University  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
415 Bert Combs Building

david.mcfaddin@eku.edu

521 Lancaster Avenue  
Richmond, KY 40475  
859-622-8250  
charles.hausman@eku.edu

If you have questions or concerns about the treatment of participants in this study, you may call or write:

Dr. Jerry Pogatshnik, Associate Vice President for Research  
Eastern Kentucky University  
Whitlock 310  
Richmond, KY 40475  
859-622-1744  
[jerry.pogatshnik@eku.edu](mailto:jerry.pogatshnik@eku.edu)

I will be happy to share the results of this research in a few months. Again, I sincerely appreciate your help and support.

Thank you for your consideration of participating in this study,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David T. McFaddin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D" and "M".

David T. McFaddin

**Appendix C:**  
**Informed Consent Letter**

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**The 21<sup>st</sup> Century University President: Building Blocks for Effective Rural Leadership**

**Methodology:** Qualitative Exploratory Study

**Investigator:** David T. McFaddin, Doctoral Candidates  
[david.mcfaddin@eku.edu](mailto:david.mcfaddin@eku.edu)  
859-358-2480

**Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Eastern Kentucky University:**  
Dr. Charles Hausman, Committee Chair  
[charles.hausman@eku.edu](mailto:charles.hausman@eku.edu)  
859-622-8250

**Why am I being asked to participate in this research?**

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the experiences, skills, values, behaviors and knowledge needed for a college or university president to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> in a rural environment. If you take part in this study, you will be one of seven current or past presidents to do so.

**Who is doing the study?**

The person in charge of this study is David T. McFaddin at Eastern Kentucky University. He is being guided in this study by Dr. Charles Hausman (Committee Chair). There may be other faculty on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

There is very little research available concerning rural postsecondary leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By doing this study, we hope to bring greater understanding to the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education marketplace in a rural setting and explore the most critical skills, experiences, behaviors, values and knowledge needed to be effective as a university president.

**Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?**

The interviews will be conducted at a private location convenient to the participant for those who are selected to participate in the study. Each of those interviews will take about 1 hour to 2 hours.

**What will I be asked to do?**

The interviews will require flexibility with ordering of questions and the ability to examine experiences unique to each individual; the basic information solicited, however, will remain the same. The researcher will conduct interviews using open-ended questions based on the review of the literature.

**Are there reasons why I should not take part in this study?**

There are no particular reasons to not participate in the study.

**Will I benefit from taking part in this study?**

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

**Do I have to take part in this study?**

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

**If I don't take part in this study, are there other choices?**

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except to not take part in the study.

**What will it cost me to participate?**

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

**Will I receive any payment or rewards for taking part in the study?**

You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study.

**Who will see the information I give?**

The methods of data collection for this study will be individual interviews. The sessions will be audio recorded, and the audio recordings transcribed, to ensure accurate reporting of the information that you provide. All responses are confidential and overall results will be used in a doctoral research project and related dissertation.

Transcribers will sign a form stating that they will not discuss any item on the tape with anyone other than the researchers. No one's name will be asked or revealed during the interviews. However, should your name be revealed during the interview, the transcriber will be instructed to remove all names from the transcription. The audio-recordings will be stored in locked files before and after being transcribed. Recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed three years after the completion of this project.

However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court. Also, we may be required to show information that identifies you to people who

need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as Eastern Kentucky University.

All findings used in any written reports or publications which result from this evaluation project will be reported in aggregate form with no identifying information. It is, however useful to use direct quotes to more clearly capture the meanings in reporting the findings from this form of evaluation. You will be asked at the end of the interview or if there is anything you said which you do not want included as a quote, and we will ensure that they are not used.

**Can my taking part in the study end early?**

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to participate. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to end your participation in the study. They may do this if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

**What happens if I get hurt or sick during the study?**

If you believe you have become ill or are unable to complete the study, you should contact David T. McFaddin at (859) 358-2480 as soon as possible. It is important for you to understand that Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. That cost will be your responsibility. Also, Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study.

**What if I have questions?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, David T. McFaddin at 859-358-2480. If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the Division of Sponsored Programs at Eastern Kentucky University at 859-622-3636. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

**What else do I need to know?**

The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, procedures to be used and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him/her any questions you have to help you understand the project.



You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your condition or influence your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

*I have thoroughly read this document, understand its contents, have been given an opportunity to have my questions answered, and agree to participate in this research project.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person taking part in the study

David T. McFaddin  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person providing information to subject

**Appendix D:**  
**Interview Guide**

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

**A number preceding designates primary questions.**

**A letter preceding designates a secondary and non-mandatory question. Secondary questions are designed to help the research get more thorough answers if needed.**

8. Can you begin by talking to me about your educational and career experiences before your current position?
9. What if any key challenges have you faced or observed during your tenure as president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education marketplace?
  - a. What are your specific challenges as a leader in this institution? What gets in your way of what you are trying to do?
10. What if any unique challenges have you faced or observed during your tenure as president serving a rural region?
  - a. Can you describe the demographics of this institution? For example, student and faculty population, diversity, turnover, formal affiliations...
11. What skills do you personally possess or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
12. What experiences have you personally had or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
  - a. What is it like to be the President at the institution in 2015? For example, what is a typical day or week like for you? Just talk about anything that comes to mind about your work.
13. What behaviors do you personally exhibit or have observed to be essential for a rural university or college president to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?



## VITA

David Thomas McFaddin was born in Pikeville, Kentucky on September 3, 1977. He graduated from Johnson Central High School, Paintsville, Kentucky, in June of 1996. The following August he entered Eastern Kentucky University and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations in December 1999. In 2006 he earned a Master of Business Administration degree from the distinguished Gatton College of Business and Economics at the University of Kentucky.

David currently serves as the Executive Director of Engagement and Regional Stewardship at Eastern Kentucky University. He is also a part-time faculty member in the Department of Communication at ECU where he has served since 2011. Prior to joining ECU, David held regional and statewide leadership posts with AT&T, a Fortune 10 company and the largest telecommunications provider in the U.S., for nearly 15 years. His tenure there included major legislative, regulatory and strategic initiatives that paved the way for billions of dollars of capital investments in Kentucky.

David has served as the President for the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, Chair of the ECU Department of Communication Advisory Board, selection Chairman and board member for Leadership Kentucky, ECU Chapter Advisor for the Lambda Sigma Honor Society and elected board member for the ECU International Alumni Association. In 2012 David was awarded the prestigious U.S. Presidential Service Award for his community volunteerism leadership efforts and in 2013 he received the ECU Distinguished Alumni Service Award.