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# Applying A Fit Perspective: A Portraiture Study Of Short-Tenure Presidents At Historically Black Colleges And Universities

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# Applying A Fit Perspective: A Portraiture Study Of Short-Tenure Presidents At Historically Black Colleges And Universities

## **Abstract**

Recent years have seen an increase in college and university presidential turnover. Alarming, across all 4-year post secondary education institution types, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have experienced the highest rate of presidential turnover. Between 2010 and 2014, HBCU presidents' tenures lasted for an average of 3.3 years (Kimbrough, 2017) while the average tenure of presidents across all 4-year higher education institutions in the same years was 7 years (Gagliardi, 2017). Explanations for the high rate of HBCU president turnover include increases in political conflict, internal pressures, external stakeholder demands, and fiscal stress. Despite these explanations, some scholars believe that "scholarship on presidential turnover is lacking cohesion and is in need of a theoretically grounded conceptual framework..." (McNaughtan, 2016, pp. 3-4). This study uses the portraiture method and builds upon a theoretically grounded conceptual framework that includes person-organization fit theory, person-job fit theory, and organizational culture. This study aims to explore how former presidents' perceived fit with their former HBCU employers contributed to their short tenure presidencies.

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APPLYING A FIT PERSPECTIVE:  
A PORTRAITURE STUDY OF SHORT-TENURE PRESIDENTS AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES  
AND UNIVERSITIES

Amanda Washington Lockett

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Education

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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APPLYING A FIT PERSPECTIVE:

A PORTRAITURE STUDY OF SHORT-TENURE PRESIDENTS AT HISTORICALLY  
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2019

Amanda Washington Lockett

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving husband, Darryl, and our beautiful son Landon.

Best friend socks. Marathon shoes.

Love Always.

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I am first thankful to God for the courage, strength, and ability to pursue and complete this journey. There were moments when the road felt difficult but I am ever grateful for the graceful reminder of God's love, protection, and purpose in Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." This assurance has carried me through even the most challenging days of exhaustion and uncertainty. Thank you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **APPLYING A FIT PERSPECTIVE: A PORTRAITURE STUDY OF SHORT-TENURE PRESIDENTS AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

Amanda Washington Lockett

Marybeth Gasman

Recent years have seen an increase in college and university presidential turnover. Alarming, across all 4-year post secondary education institution types, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have experienced the highest rate of presidential turnover. Between 2010 and 2014, HBCU presidents' tenures lasted for an average of 3.3 years (Kimbrough, 2017) while the average tenure of presidents across all 4-year higher education institutions in the same years was 7 years (Gagliardi, 2017). Explanations for the high rate of HBCU president turnover include increases in political conflict, internal pressures, external stakeholder demands, and fiscal stress. Despite these explanations, some scholars believe that "scholarship on presidential turnover is lacking cohesion and is in need of a theoretically grounded conceptual framework..." (McNaughtan, 2016, pp. 3-4). This study uses the portraiture method and builds upon a theoretically grounded conceptual framework that includes person-organization fit theory, person-job fit theory, and organizational culture. This study aims to explore how former presidents' perceived fit with their former HBCU employers contributed to their short tenure presidencies.

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## CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

Recent years have seen a noticeable increase in presidential turnover at HBCUs. Despite their historical prominence and unwavering commitment to educational equity for African Americans students, many HBCUs are in the crux of inexplicable leadership challenges (Freeman & Gasman, 2014). HBCUs are institutions with a historical legacy of empowering African Americans (Freeman et al., 2016, p. 571). The Higher Education Act of 1965 defined HBCUs as

Any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is the education of Black Americans and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress towards accreditation. (White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, n.d.)

In 2015, HBCUs enrolled 9% of all African American college students (Anderson, 2017) and today, 101 4-year HBCUs across the nation continue to fulfill their historical legacy. HBCUs are primarily responsible for the nation's Black middle class and the production of the majority of the nation's Black science, technology, engineering, and math professionals (Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Perna et al., 2009).

Turnover has steadily risen within all sectors of higher education but the HBCU sector has experienced the highest rate of presidential turnover (Kimbrough, 2017). In 2011, the average tenure of presidents across all 4-year higher education institutions was 7 years (Gagliardi, 2017). Between 2010 and 2014, the average

HBCU presidential tenure was only 3.3 years (Kimbrough, 2017). At that rate, HBCU presidential turnover was over twice that of all postsecondary sectors combined.

Scholars have given specific rationale for presidential turnover. Tekniepe (2014) attributes the steady rise of American college and university presidential turnover to increases in political conflict, internal pressures, external stakeholder demands, and fiscal stress. HBCU scholars posit that, in addition to Tekniepe's rationale, the HBCU sector's presidential turnover is uniquely impacted by presidents' advanced ages upon installation, citing that 53% of HBCU presidents in 2013 were between 60 to 70 years old, which is slightly older than the average of all college and university presidents (Gasman, 2013). HBCU scholars Freeman and Gasman (2014), Fort (2013), Schexnider (2013), and Mbajekwe (2006) also attribute high HBCU presidential turnover to pressure in office due to this sector's specific lack of, and access to, financial resources, shifts to outcomes-based funding models, and frequently turbulent relationships between the HBCU presidents and their boards of trustees.

Additionally, HBCU scholars suggest that fundraising, a job requirement for most college and university presidents, is a critically important skill set for HBCU presidents given many of these institutions' fragile financial status (Freeman & Gasman, 2014). Since the economic downturn of 2007, the country's financial and economic landscapes have not allowed for traditional sources of funding to support university functions with the same ease as years prior (Stewart, 2013). For example,

Julianne Malveaux, president emerita of Bennett College, noted that she faced grave institutional funding cuts and unrealistic expectations to fundraise and find access to large amounts of wealth. In a 2013 interview, she stated that the pressure to juggle ill-communicated expectations surrounding institutional funding, external university challenges, and lofty fundraising goals caused her blood pressure levels to unhealthily soar and ultimately led to her premature resignation.

Explanations for HBCU presidential turnover are often specific and associated with the unique characteristics of presidents. Birnbaum (1992) also notes that,

It is usually not too hard to explain retrospectively why an organization [has] responded to a leader in a certain way and to use the outcomes to frame guidelines for prospective leaders. But outcomes in one setting may not be replicable in others, and an explanation that in hindsight appears obvious may not necessarily be true (p. 3).

Birnbaum's words ring true in many of the cases of HBCU presidential turnover. The variables that are often retrospectively attributed to HBCU presidential turnover — old age, previous leadership experience, and access to financial capital — may not serve as the strongest indicators for presidential failure, success, or tenure longevity. McNaughtan (2016) urges scholars "...[to][study] turnover using both individual and organizational attributes" (p. 56). This is true of HBCU turnover as individuals' characteristics are often cited but seem to be derivative phenomena that stem from a common root. The common root is nearly always related to candidate "fit" within the institution or, as higher education scholar McNaughtan

(2017) defines it, consideration of the intersection of the HBCU's culture and goals and the candidate's culture and goals. More consistently, a president's fit within the institution and within the parameters of the institutions' unique job requirements can indicate the success and longevity of her or his presidential tenure.

McNaughtan (2016) believes that "scholarship on presidential turnover is lacking cohesion and is in need of a theoretically grounded conceptual framework..." (pp. 3-4). This study aims to use "person-environment fit" as a theoretically grounded concept for scholarship on explanations for the current rate of HBCU presidential turnover. This study posits that the lack of adherence to candidates' "fit" within the organization is the root cause for the high frequency of abrupt resignations or firings and, in turn, contributes to the alarming increase of HBCU presidential turnover.

### **The Case for Person-Environment Fit Theory in HBCU Presidential Selection**

In his book, *Higher Calling*, Scott Beardsley (2017) notes that, "...[as] the context of [the higher education] enterprise shifts, the kinds of leaders ... who thrive in it also change" (p. 60). This study acknowledges that as the HBCU higher education landscape shifts, so too must the practices by which these institutions choose their presidents.

HBCU scholars have written extensively on best practices and skill sets specific to HBCU presidential efficacy. These scholars (Esters et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2016; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Nichols, 2004) posit that some of the

featured characteristics for successful HBCU presidents are that they are effective fundraisers, politically savvy, powerful advocates, and efficient communicators. Minor (2008) also notes that HBCU presidents, “must balance HBCU traditions and create a contemporary defining role in higher education for their institutions” (as cited in Freeman et al., 2016, p. 573). Freeman and Gasman (2014) believe that there are “unique challenges that HBCU leaders face [that] necessitate a specific skill set” (p. 573) and urge higher education scholars and practitioners to remember that HBCUs are not monolithic (Freeman et al., 2016). Because of this, each institution requires the leadership skill set of a president who uniquely matches both the job’s requirements as well as the institution’s organizational structure, culture, and values.

Significant higher education expertise and financial resources are expended to place HBCU presidents (Trachtenberg Kauvar, & Bogue, 2013, p. 1). Despite the extreme measures that go into hiring a president that embodies the traits and characteristics most often associated with successful leadership, there are some institutions that continue to rapidly experience presidential turnover. Perhaps this is not due to poor candidate skill set or expertise but instead to a poor candidate fit within the specific HBCU and the roles requisite to the specific HBCU’s president. Trachtenberg and associates (2013) highlight that one of the themes of university and college presidential derailment is difficulty adapting to the collegiate environment (Table 1). Within this theme, they note that,

some leaders can make the cultural and mission transfer among different organizations, and some cannot. Academic presidents and those choosing them, will want to have reasonable belief that an individual has knowledge of the enterprise, professional experience, and individual values closely allied with the culture and expectations of the organization he or she hopes to lead (p. 13).

Table 1

*Enduring Derailment Themes from the Corporate Sector*

Themes	Characteristics
Failure to Meet Business Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor performance</li> <li>• Lack of follow through</li> <li>• Lack of disciplined judgment</li> <li>• Difficulty thinking strategically or making strategic decisions</li> <li>• Betrayal of trust</li> </ul>
Problems with interpersonal relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insensitivity to others; cold; aloof; arrogant</li> <li>• Overly emotional and mercurial temperament</li> <li>• Isolation from the organization, not open or responsive to honest dissent</li> <li>• Extreme ambition</li> <li>• Authoritarianism</li> <li>• Lack of self awareness about leadership strengths and weaknesses</li> </ul>
Inability to lead constituents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to lead a large scale organization</li> <li>• Failure to staff effectively</li> <li>• Failure to delegate responsibilities</li> <li>• Inability to manage subordinates and develop staff</li> <li>• Overreliance on a single mentor or advisor</li> </ul>
Difficulty Adapting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty building and leading a team</li> <li>• Difficulty adapting to a different culture</li> <li>• Limited capacity to develop or grow professionally</li> <li>• An early strength becomes a weakness</li> <li>• A previous deficiency becomes a liability</li> <li>• Conflict with upper management.</li> </ul>

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Source: Trachtenberg et al. (2013), p. 9

Similarly, those who choose HBCU leaders must recruit and select candidates who are able to adapt to the unique organizational culture, mission, values, and norms of the respective HBCU. Birnbaum (1992) writes that successful college presidents “[understand] the history and [respect] the cultures of their colleges. They [are] seen as totally committed to the kind of education represented by their institutions and considered by their constituents as exemplars of core institutional values” (p. 143). This study posits that despite search firms’ and selection committees’ frequent hiring of skilled and veteran higher education professionals, they neglect to recruit and hire candidates whose values and norms closely align with, or “fit” the organizational culture and values of the HBCU. This oversight plays a part in the alarmingly high rate of HBCU presidential turnover.

This study centers the idea that some HBCU presidents, though proven and successful higher education administrators in one context, cannot succeed in all higher education institutions. This study takes the position that misaligned presidential “fit” within the respective HBCU is the root cause for the alarming rate of HBCU presidential turnover. Simply put, just because a recruited president possesses conventional higher-education leadership skills and has a proven record of administrative success, he or she is not automatically an appropriate candidate to lead in every HBCU environment. In addition to assessing for candidates’ conventional leadership skills, a proven record of success, and an appreciation for

the HBCU sector's historical mission, the HBCU presidential search process must also take candidate fit into consideration. More specifically, the selection committee and process must be sure that there is an alignment of the recruited candidate's and the HBCU insofar as the fit of their values, what they believe to be professional best practice, their strategic styles and what they both believe to be acceptable "norms." This study aims to investigate if, and how, self-perceived person-organization fit and person-job fit, two frameworks within the larger theory of "person-environment fit," influenced the tenures of four highly qualified higher education professionals who served short-tenure presidencies at HBCUs.

The "person-environment fit" theory is not unique to the education sector. For years, Beardsley (2017) states that corporate America has cited that, "researchers [are] interested in the potential benefits of selecting employees based on their fit with the culture and goals of an organization" (p. 203). Higher education scholar McNaughtan (2016) believes that person-environment fit also has a critical role in the university's presidential selection process. In the context of higher education, the person-environment fit perspective considers the intersection of the university's culture and goals and the candidate's culture and goals (McNaughtan, 2017). This study applies person-environment fit theory to the HBCU sector. Person-environment fit is most often defined as the compatibility that occurs when individual and work environment characteristics are well matched (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005, p. 3). Livingstone, Nelson, and Barr (1997) refer to

person-environment fit as “the degree of similarity or compatibility between individual and situational characteristics” (as cited in Tull & Medrano, 2008, p.2).

The four frameworks within person-environment fit theory are person-vocation fit, person-group fit, person-organization fit, and person-job fit (McNaughtan, 2016). This study is most interested in person-organization fit (P-O fit) and person-job fit (P-J fit) and how they influenced the four HBCU short-tenure presidents’ recruitments, selections, and tenures.

P-O fit measures “the congruence between the norms and values of organizations and the [norms and] values of persons” (Kristof 1996, p. 339), while P-J fit measures the comparison of skill sets needed to succeed in a job to the candidate’s knowledge, skill sets, and abilities. This study hopes to understand if, how, and to what extent short-tenure presidents perceived considerations of P-O or P-J fit were employed in their recruitments and selections. It also explores whether they believed their tenures as HBCU presidents were influenced by the selection committee’s adherence or lack of adherence to their fit with the HBCU.

From these individuals’ perspectives, did they sense that their recruitment, hire, and tenure considered their fit within the institution’s organizational culture and the presidential job role? If not, why or what was used in their recruitment and selection? At what point, if at all, did they perceive or were they communicated tenets of fit within their respective institutions? How, if at all, did fit inform their presidency? How, if at all, was fit discussed or introduced during and after the

candidates' resignations or firings? How, if at all, have their perspectives of fit been informed since their resignation or firing?

There is a dearth of scholarly literature regarding the influence of fit on HBCU presidents' selection and turnover. Using the portraiture method, this study will narrate four short-tenure presidents' experiences with fit during the stages of their recruitment, selection, presidency, and departure. This is to include their understandings, and perceptions, of the adherence to P-O fit and P-J fit perspectives by their previous HBCU employers. This study will specifically examine and analyze the P-O fit and P-J fit of candidates to their HBCU and to the HBCU's president role. This dissertation also aims to illuminate best practices for HBCU presidential selection and to advance the understanding of if, and how, person-environment fit theory perspectives, specifically P-O fit and P-J fit, influence HBCU presidential turnover.

### **Statement of Problem**

*"If you want to know when a college is heading down a slippery slope, I can tell you that it is when you change presidents every two, three, or four years. That's a sign that the college is going to have difficulties. "*

*- Haywood Strickland, 2009, President, Wiley College (Freeman & Gasman, 2014, p. 2)*

The increasing incidences of HBCU presidential turnover and short-tenure presidents have detrimental and long-lasting effects on HBCUs. Scholars posit that presidents are most efficient in their roles if they remain at an institution for at least ten years (Kerr, 1970; Korschgen et al., 2001; McNaughtan, 2016). Abrupt

presidential turnover results in “the loss of organizational progress, waste of financial and human resources, and damage to the morale and reputation” (Trachtenberg et al., 2013, p. 1) of both the institution and the president. Beyond this, the cost to replace a president is extremely high. As noted by Trachtenberg and associates (2013),

dismissal costs are likely to include legal fees and often severance pay...and the institution must...pay the costs of a new search and hiring a new president...interim presidents...contract negotiation [fees]...[and] communication campaigns to manage the message. New presidents often entail housing renovations, office space adjustments, and new furniture and equipment. (p. 6)

Not only do these costs take away from mission critical activities of academic institutions, but they also create additional challenges for new presidents coming into office. HBCUs, often holding strained operating budgets (Gasman, 2011), are in no position to rapidly spend money on ineffective leadership turnover every few years. To ease the trend of high HBCU presidential turnover and short-tenure HBCU presidents, it is crucial for scholars and stakeholders to understand the role of fit as an increasing number of HBCU presidents and HBCU boards are choosing to prematurely terminate or walk away from presidential contracts.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

With this study, I sought to examine the adherence to the P-O fit and P-J fit tenets during the selections through the abrupt resignations or firings of four short-tenure HBCU presidents. This exploration focused on the phases of presidential

recruitment, selection, tenure, and abrupt resignation or firing from the selected candidate's perspective. I explored the four participants' self-perceptions of fit for the job and fit within the HBCU as they interacted with the institution's board, selection committee, presidential search firms, faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders. Additionally, I asked questions to explore at what point, if at all, the presidents felt that they no longer fit the job or institution.

As a qualitative research study, my dissertation used the portraiture method to explore the narratives of four HBCU presidents who were courted, hired, and then abruptly resigned or were fired after presiding for less than 5 years. This study reflects on emerging themes in which past presidents narrated their understandings of how fit is communicated during the selection and hiring processes and the presidential tenure. The lessons learned from the four past HBCU presidents have implications for 1) aspiring HBCU college presidents; 2) current HBCU presidents; and 3) HBCU leadership stakeholders such as the boards of trustees. It is my hope that this study paves the way for further research on the importance of person-environment fit in HBCU president selection and further illuminates the nuances of HBCU organizational culture and leadership. With the information gathered from this study, I aim to benefit both the selection processes of HBCUs and promote leadership continuity through best practices in executive search.

The following research questions framed this study:

Q1. How does 'candidate fit' contribute to HBCU presidents' high turnover?

Q2. From the short-tenure individuals' perspectives, did they sense that their recruitment, hiring, and tenures considered their fit within the institution or the job? If not, why or what proxy was used in their recruitment and selection?

Q3. At what point, if at all, did they perceive or were they communicated tenets of fit within their respective institutions?

Q4. How, if at all, did fit inform their recruitment to the presidency, their tenure as president and their resignation or firing?

### **Significance of the Study**

The most comprehensive examination of academic presidential tenure was conducted in 1974 in Cohen and March's book *Leadership and Ambiguity, the American College President* (Padilla & Ghosh, 2000). There is currently limited up-to-date research exploring presidential turnover at HBCUs and, in particular, how fit impacts the HBCU presidential tenure. Person-environment fit, specifically the tenets of P-O fit and P-J fit, is a powerful tool to successfully select and hire candidates who will likely be good matches for jobs and organizations (McNaughtan, 2016). McNaughtan (2016) and Trachtenberg and associates (2013) have studied the impact of presidents' adapting to their environments and have noted that attention to "fit" across both higher education and corporate sectors effectively decreased incidences of abrupt presidential turnover (McNaughtan, 2016; Trachtenberg et al., 2013). Scholars have outlined researched traits that affect

presidents' abilities to adapt to change within their college or university (Table 2). Trachtenberg and colleagues (2013) offer that presidents are most successful when they are open-minded, recognize the institution's values, work in participatory change modes, express respect around change, respectfully challenge the board, and exhibit resilience (MacTaggart, 2011). Although these traits are transferable to leaders across HBCU and non-HBCU sectors, I believe that there is a marked need for an HBCU-centric study regarding president and organization fit. This is because HBCUs exhibit the highest rate of presidential turnover in the higher education sector and "fit" research has never been conducted within the specific context and consideration for the HBCU sector.

Table 2

*Traits affecting presidents' ability to adapt to change*

More Functional Traits	Less Functional Traits
Open-mindedness in learning the institution's needs for change and the board's perceptions	Reliance on solutions that have worked elsewhere instead of creative solutions that fit the current situation
Skill in articulating a vision or strategic direction that recognizes the institution's values and inspires participation by the board and other stakeholders	Tendency to focus on isolated problems rather than address problems in the context of a broad vision for change that the board embraces
Ability to work with boards, faculty and staff, and community members in a participatory change mode	Preference for being the sole author on the best ideas when it comes to leading change.
Capacity to express sincere respect for others engaged in the dialogue surrounding change, whether in support of or opposition to it	A strong-minded personality that, while decisive, fails to elicit support or wholehearted participation from board members and others
Strength of character to make decisions, set boundaries, say no to proposals inconsistent with the change plan, and respectfully challenge a board on change issues	Excessive desire to please others and to court the favor of the board or strong-willed members
Personal resiliency and persistence in the face of pushback, criticism, unexpected obstacles, and instances when change does not seem to be progressing as planned	Lack of persistence and difficulty maintaining focus when the pursuit of goals is an uphill struggle

Source: Trachtenberg et al. (2013), p. 14

With my study, I hope to fill the void in scholarship and I also aim to offer aspiring HBCU presidents, presidential search committees, presidential search consultants, boards of trustees, and HBCU presidential search stakeholders further

best practices to incorporate consideration of fit into the HBCU presidential recruitment and selection processes.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The College and University President's Role Then and Now**

Contrary to their frequent portrayal, higher education institutions are not homogenous. Colleges and universities are multifaceted and boast diverse histories, rituals, missions, and organizational structures and cultures. As Brint and colleagues (2006) write, “the organizational field of American higher education is composed of a complex mix of private, for profit, independent, nonprofit, and state-supported institutions with overlapping missions and multiple goals” (p. 230). As such, it is impossible to create a one-size-fits-all profile comprising the skill sets and temperament required to be a successful academic president.

Since its inception, the role of the academic president has endured several iterations. A recent Deloitte University press release summarizes the evolving roles of college and university presidents (Selingo et al., 2017). In the 1800s, presidents were primarily clergy who split their time between teaching and presiding. Between 1900 and 1944, the role expanded to a more managerial profession as boards were formed to search for candidates with business training. The years 1945 to 1975 saw World War II, the passage of the GI Bill, and presidential roles that required individuals with abilities to oversee the construction of edifices that would hold an influx of students while simultaneously managing more federal assistance dollars. Shifting again in the years 1976 to 2008, as the federal government began to offer

more loans than grants, the president was expected to be an effective fundraiser and successful partnership creator.

Today, as American colleges and universities experience monumental changes insofar as student and institution inequality, inflated costs, uncertain revenues, technological upheaval, and fragmented business models (Witt/Kieffer, 2013), college and university presidents are expected to not only fundraise, but to also be multi-disciplinarian. Freeman and Gasman (2014) note that, “boards of trustees will likely look for potential presidential candidates that can solve complex problems and raise substantial dollars for their institutions” (p. 4). They are also expected to “build and navigate academic disciplines, institutions, and outside partnerships” (Selingo et al., 2017, p. 4). The role of higher education presidents has changed drastically since its birth and now calls for a more varied skill set than ever before.

### **Pathway to the Presidency**

The traditional pathway to college and university presidencies is from provost roles (Selingo et al., 2017) and traditionally focuses on how individual’s knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) complement the job’s requirements (Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011). As the landscape of higher education changes, “surveys of sitting provosts [find] that many no longer aspire to the [presidency], [or lack] the broad set of skills necessary for the changing demands of the [presidency]” (Selingo et al., 2017). An academic background and a graduate school degree remain

commonly held credentials of most college and university presidents (Freeman & Gasman, 2014). Outside of academic credentials, the way society views the necessary characteristics and responsibilities of college presidents are informed by the way American society defines the goal and purpose of higher education. Contrarily, Derek Bok suggests that American colleges and universities cannot be homogenously defined because they “have not had a single, unifying goal for well over one hundred years” (Bok, 2013, p. 28). Likewise, the training and skill set necessary for the successful presidential tenure is varied (Freeman & Gasman, 2014; McLaughlin, 1996). The mission and challenges of American higher education change often and, as such, institutions face unique challenges and needs that influence the requisite presidential training and skill sets.

Because of the inability to define one unifying current goal of the American higher education institution, the current context, purpose, and requirements of individual institutions’ presidents is diverse and ever-evolving. Although traditional, it is less often that college presidents are bred from the sole pathway of faculty to chair to dean to provost to president (Freeman & Gasman, 2014). The paths to college and university presidency have become quite varied. Popular today, doctorate programs across institutions including Jackson State University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Alabama, and University of Georgia, equip promising leaders outside of academia with the necessary acumen to lead today’s colleges and universities.

Challenges such as growing institutional expenses, reliance on small endowments, enrollment based on tuition driven practices, and federal and state policies that significantly cut financial support have undoubtedly changed the necessity for what HBCU search committees look for in presidents and their pathways to presidency.

### **Organizational Culture Shapes the Type of President Best Fit to Preside**

Organizational culture plays a major role in the life of a college or university. Culture affects most aspects of the institutions, including governance, programming, leadership, decision-making processes, administrative practices, and strategic planning (Manning, 2016; Tierney, 2012). The fit of a president is determined by her or his ability to appreciate and align with the organizational culture of the college or university. Colleges' and universities' consideration of organizational culture will help selection committees to communicate to presidential candidates the type of work environment and leadership skills needed and it will also allow presidential candidates to determine if the organization is the right fit for them. This understanding can help to lower the rate of presidential turnover across higher education.

What is organizational culture? Anthropologist began studying organizational culture in corporations in the 1930s and 1940s (citation). In general, organizational culture theorists believe that the leaders within an organization shape organizational cultures (citation if different than the one added above).

Higher education is nuanced in that organizational theorists believe that universities' and colleges' cultures are shaped not by the leader, but rather by the organization's histories, missions, rituals, demographics, and daily activities (Manning, 2017). Presidential leadership is important in colleges and universities, especially because while new presidents step into an established organization, the culture is still living, breathing, and evolving. Because of this nuance, the "members within the organization take an integral role in shaping [and maintaining] the [organizational culture of colleges and universities]" (Manning, 2017, p. 69). Debate exists among organizational theorist whether organizational culture is especially relevant. Those who deny its relevance claim that there is more credibility in methods that are steeped in more scientific and empirical data (Tierney, 2012). The fit of a leader or the evolution of an organizational culture has no easy, quantifiable data pattern. Instead, organizational culture is felt and made apparent through "the use of rituals, language, architecture, stories, tangible, and intangible outcomes" (Manning, 2017, p. 70) as well as the way that the entire team views the organization and their place within the organization.

"Organizations as cultures are not isolated entities but institutions situated in a context that includes history, past players, and traditions that serve as the fodder for and backdrop to any culture building experience" (Manning, 2017, p. 71). As selection committee members describe what they are looking for in a leader, they must also feel the heartbeat of, and understand, their organizational culture. The

ability to communicate this might help aspiring leaders determine if an organization fits their personality as well as provide insight into how to best provide leadership to embrace and grow with the college or university culture.

As the landscape of higher education rapidly changes, so too does the need to examine the presidential selection process. After synthesizing and analyzing the existing literature, I look forward to further interrogating how business-oriented fit theories, coupled with selection committees' understandings of their unique organizational structure and organizational culture, help to inform successful presidential search processes.

The academic governance model cannot be stripped from the organizational structure model of higher education. Giousmpasoglou (2016) writes that, "shared governance rests on the assumption that faculty should hold a substantive role in decision making alongside the institution's key stakeholders" (p. 7). Academic governance is integral to maintaining the best interests of faculty and administrators within higher education organizations because it ensures collective action and helps faculty, administration, and students to feel that their interests are heard and met. Insofar as planning for an organization's future and the future needs expected from leaders, academic governance "requires [that colleges and universities] address the deeply held institutionalized trajectories based on the past and ... challenge their appropriateness and legitimacy going forward" (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2009, p. 143). To this end, academic governance is an effective way to

continually evaluate that colleges and universities fulfill their mission and purpose while ensuring the equitable treatment of all stakeholders involved.

### **'Candidate Fit' and Presidential Selection**

The high turnover of HBCU presidents presents an opportunity to examine the processes currently guiding and informing their selection. A part of this process involves presidents determining if the job and institution are a good fit for their personal goals, values, and skill sets. Regarding HBCU presidents and the characteristics of good leadership, Freeman and Gasman (year) write that, "A successful presidency is based on institutional needs in conjunction with the knowledge and competency the president brings. Basically, it is a function of good fit" (p. 5). There is little research that determines how candidates go about determining if they are a good fit for an institution. Is it guesswork? Do they determine their "fit level" after speaking with the selection committee? How do candidates know if they are a good fit for an institution's needs and culture? And if they are a good fit, why do such an alarming percentage leave shortly after beginning their tenures? As schools look toward the future of presidential selection in a changing higher education landscape, fit plays an ever-evolving and important role.

More than ever, college and university presidents are selected from backgrounds and sectors outside of academia and the traditional faculty to chair to dean to provost to president mold. The litmus test for qualified applicants is

expanding to include more than an academic background and a doctorate degree. As the candidate pool consists of both leaders within the academy and significantly expands beyond academicians, how, if at all, do colleges and universities employ the tenets of P-O fit and P-J fit?

Fit is a key component and determinant of a person's tenure within an organization. There is currently no research that interrogates short-tenure presidents' understandings of their fit within the college or university organizational culture before, during, and after their tenure. Because "fit" has been deemed a strong metric of success between employers and employees, the study of HBCU presidents' perceived fit before, during, and after firing will better help to understand how to thwart increasing incidences of HBCU presidential turnover.

### **The Search Process**

Historically, the presidential search process generally lasted between nine months to twelve months (Unglaube, 1983). It involved many people from across the higher education sector, and was, at one time, "characterized as 'so haphazard as to be ludicrous,' and it [was] suggested that improvement in the selection process could make an important contribution to increasing the effectiveness of presidential leadership" (Birnbaum, 1989, p. 490).

Today, with the changing landscape of higher education, searching for the president of a college or university has become even more complex. The Association of Governing Boards notes that the presidential search process is one of the most

important responsibilities of a college or university's board of trustees (Callery, 2017). The Association of Governing Boards lists seven staple keys for the board of trustees to follow during the presidential search process. These keys are outlined as

1) appoint[ing] and chartering ... a search committee; 2) [conducting] interviews with search consultants before choosing one; 3) [the selection committee's] creation of a "presidential profile" setting forth the characteristics being sought in the new president; 4) solicitation of a candidate pool; 5) selection of candidates in conducting first-round "airport" interviews; 6) selection of final candidates for on-campus interviews; and 7) [providing a] committee report to the full board for making an offer to the preferred candidate. (para. 3)

### **The Presidency Today and the Need for Fit**

Although the earliest college and university presidents were "seen as little more than an extension of the faculty" (Selingo et al., 2017, p. 4), selection committees and boards have acknowledged over time that the role of the president requires a wide array of skill sets. Despite the role of college and university presidents of the past, MacTaggart (2017) suggests that, "American education must redefine the work of its presidents if it is to meet today's challenges and those fast approaching on the horizon" (p.1). In addition to redefining the work of higher education presidents, American colleges and universities must also examine who is coming into the presidency and how the identities of presidents profoundly impact the working style, vision, and, perhaps even, the values of the presidents. Beardsley (2018) writes that, "Nontraditional leaders ... [defined as] those who have not, at some point in their careers, come through the full-time tenured-faculty track ... now

represent fully a third of the presidential population” (p. 2). Although many presidents traditionally rose through the ranks of academia to become college and university presidents, the current landscape of higher education may require selection committees and boards to increasingly recruit talent from outside of academia.

One of these reasons is simply because of a steady reduction in the number of individuals who follow the traditional academic path to the presidency. Bowen and Tobin (2015) write that,

in 1969, tenured and tenure-track faculty accounted for over three quarters of all faculty (78.3 percent); in 2009, tenured and tenure-track faculty accounted for just over one-third of all faculty (33.5 percent). As many people have noted, the ratio simply flipped. (p. 152)

According to Beardsley (2018), another notable reason for the expansion of the college and university president candidate pool is that, “intense public scrutiny brought on by 24/7 social media, shifting government regulations, and declining state funding for public universities are all placing a premium on better management, so many talented traditional leaders no longer want the job” (pp. 4-5). Beardsley (2018) also noted that, “universities have become much more complex businesses, as well. Many large research institutions, for example, have hospital systems that account for as much as half of their revenue and employment” (p. 5).

According to Kelderman (2017), “there is some evidence that [today] about 70 percent of presidential searches at public colleges use [search firms]” to find

their presidential candidates (para. 5). Whether using historical search practices, or through the use of a search firm, Birnbaum (1988) wrote search guidelines that, for decades, have been deemed the foundation to good search practice. All searches try to incorporate clear communication to candidates regarding what is needed for effective presidential leadership. In general, Birnbaum (1989) noted that the search process begins “under the aegis of the board of trustees with the formation of a single search committee of perhaps a dozen persons including [nominated] trustees, faculty, students, and occasionally representatives from other campus constituencies” (p. 490). Birnbaum outlined the following steps in the process of presidential selection. He wrote that the seven steps to presidential search are to 1) appraise the institutions current and predicted future condition; 2) determine the characteristics of the presidents they seek and create a list of qualifications; 3) publicize the vacancy through public advertisements and private inquiries; 4) collect twenty to thirty ‘plausibles’ for further investigation; 5) select five to fifteen finalists to visit campus and interview with the search committee; 6) search committee recommends to the trustees a select list of one to three persons; and finally, 7) from the one to three selected persons, the board makes a final decision (p. 173)

Trachtenberg and associates (2013) posits that a leading cause of presidential turnover is that hired presidents cannot adapt to the culture of their job and institution. In other words, they are not a good fit. As every college and

university is unique and has differing challenges and strategic directions, Birnbaum's (1988) and the AGB's (2017) search process might be enhanced with intentional inclusion of a fit perspective (McNaughtan, 2016).

Currently, no literature exists on the implementation or the effectiveness of P-J fit and P-O fit on HBCU presidential selection. With this study, I hope to contribute literature to the field while also informing best practices for HBCU presidential search committees.

### **The HBCU Presidency**

HBCUs' historical missions inform the students they serve as well the types of leaders who thrive at their helm. HBCUs were founded to serve African American students that were, prior to 1954, largely denied admittance to predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Lockett, 2017).

HBCUs have long played a pivotal role in the social and economic mobility of African American students and have played a large role in the development of the African American middle class (Gasman, 2009). In 2014, 46 percent of all HBCU students came from families that made less than \$34,000 annually (Lockett, 2017; Ramsey, 2014) and nearly 70 percent of students are currently Pell Grant eligible (Douglas, 2017).

Given their history and current contexts, each HBCU president has many roles — a traditional college or university president, an HBCU president, and the president of his or her specific institution. Freeman and Gasman (2014)

acknowledge that there is little published literature that describes the characteristics of successful HBCU presidents or the nuances of HBCU presidential leadership. In fact, they note that HBCU presidents are often altogether removed from post-secondary research studies and literature pertaining to successful models of college and university leadership (Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Mbagekwe, 2006; Nichols, 2004).

Although the role is unique, the HBCU presidency requires many of the same skill sets of any sectors' academic president. However, HBCU presidents require multidimensional leadership and an intersectional understanding and approach to their role. As a college or university president, the HBCU president serves as “a staple role of leadership in higher education, both practically and symbolically” (Freeman et al., 2016, p. 571). An HBCU president, unlike other institutional sector presidents, must also “face unique situations and require[s] particular expertise to be effective” (Esters et al., 2016, p. 1). Scholars Freeman and Gasman (2014) note that many HBCUs are in a fragile era as they undergo “fiscal mismanagement, [poor] leadership [structure], unethical behavior, and governance issues” (p. 2). While not present across all HBCUs, many of the aforementioned challenges influence the requirements and skill sets needed for many HBCU presidents.

As the leader of an institution, an HBCU president must understand the nuances and intricacies of the specific institution he or she serves. The HBCU president must “be [a] highly experienced, knowledgeable, creative, compassionate,

and visionary [leader] with solid business acumen and a sense of academic mission” (Schexnider, 2013, p. 130). While possessing these traits, an HBCU president must also possess, “a unique blend of executive skills ... [and] be able to deal with problems unique to the particular organizational culture and needs of [the] students they serve” (Schexnider, 2013, p. 130). Each HBCU has a unique culture and the best HBCU leaders understand and fit within those respective cultures.

This fit does not mean that leaders cannot urge change from within the institution. Schexnider (2013) also notes that, “executive leadership will need to be able to change an organizational culture that has evolved over decades and is highly resistant to change” (p. 131). He remarks that this feat is difficult, risky, and presents many challenges. These challenges may include pushback from faculty, staff, students, and stakeholders. This may also mean the president’s dismissal from the college or university. A president that is both strong and, upon hire, fits and understands the existing HBCU culture “is capable of meeting these challenges” (Schexnider, 2013, p. 131).

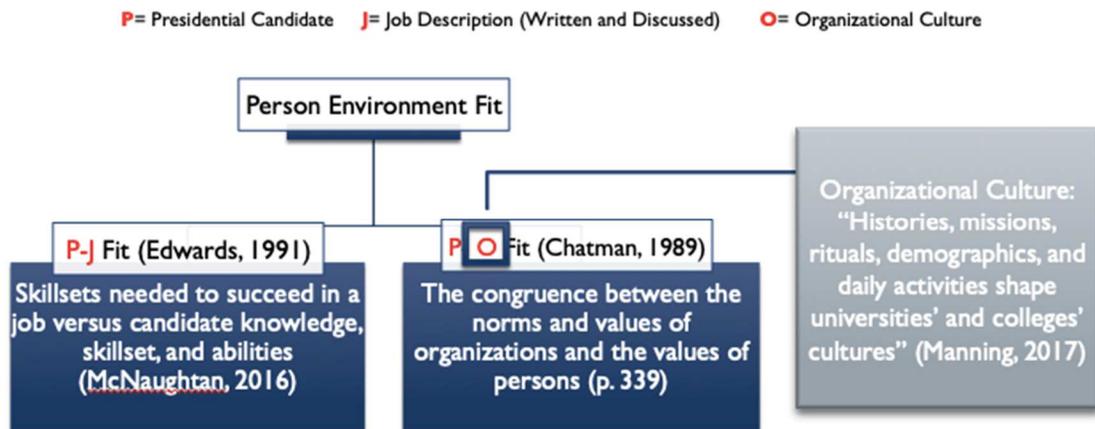
HBCUs are not monolithic and, as such, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to effective HBCU presidential selection. Despite this, it can be reasonably assumed that the specific skill sets required in any HBCU presidency are influenced by institution-centric phenomena such as the history, mission, organizational culture, strategic plan, faculty and staff makeup, town-gown relationships, and student demographics, to name a few.

## Conceptual Framework

McNaughtan (2016) demands that, “too many researchers have not sufficiently grounded their work, which has led to disparate findings and minimal progress.” (p. 136). To theoretically and contextually ground and frame my study (Ravitch & Car, 2016), I employ person-job fit theory (P-J fit theory), person-organization fit theory (P-O fit theory), and the concept of organizational culture, which stems from organizational theory (Figure 1).

Figure 1

### *P-O Fit Theory, P-J Fit Theory, and Organizational Culture*



### **Person-Job Fit Theory (P-J Fit Theory)**

P-J fit theory measures the skill sets needed to succeed in a job compared to a candidate’s skill set, knowledge, and cognitive ability (McNaughtan, 2016). Edwards (1991) is attributed to the conventional understanding of P-J fit theory as both a

...demand-abilities perspective and needs-supplies perspective. According to the demand-abilities perspective [of P-J fit], the fit of demand-abilities could

be achieved when individuals bring sufficient knowledge, skill and abilities (KSAs) to meet the job demand. The needs-supplies fit exists when the supplies offered from jobs are compatible to the needs, preferences and desires of individuals (as cited in Yen & Ok, 2011, p. 2).

McNaughtan (2016) describes a matching abilities-demand P-J fit as when a mathematics instructor has the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to teach that specific math course. My study examines the P-J fit of presidential candidates and their HBCU's through the demand-abilities perspective. In the HBCU presidential candidate context, there is an achieved P-J fit when a presidential candidate's knowledge, skill, and abilities match what a selection committee's desires of a candidate's knowledge, skills, and abilities. For this study's purposes, the P-J fit will only examine the abilities-demand framework.

### **Person-Organization Fit Theory (P-O Fit Theory)**

Kristof (1996) defines P-O fit as "the compatibility between people and organizations" (p.3). Chatman (1989), notes that P-O fit theory relies on "the congruence between the norms and values of organizations and the values of persons" (p.339). McNaughtan (2016) states that, "[P-O fit theory] is concerned with how closely aligned individuals' values, goals, needs, interests, and abilities are to those of the organization" (p. 45). P-O fit significantly influences an individual's compatibility and longevity in the job.

Edwards (1991) attributes P-O fit to employee job satisfaction while Tepeci and Barlett (2002) correlate the number of employee and organization alignments

to increased job satisfaction (Yen & Ok, 2011). Scholars have also linked increased employee-organization alignments to lesser incidences of employee turnover (Chatman, 1989; Edwards & Shipp, 2007; McNaughtan, 2016; Lindholm, 2003; O'Reilly et al., 1991).

As HBCU presidents are high-ranking employees within their organization, it follows that the P-J fit and P-O fit can influence their role as the president. Turpin (2013) suggests that the term "institutional fit," often used in the higher education field, is synonymous to the P-O fit theory. This study interrogated if HBCU short-tenure presidents, prior to hire, believed that their knowledge, skills, abilities, values, norms, vision, and beliefs of best industry practice were aligned with the organization, or the HBCU, and the job, or the role of president. This study examined the participants' P-J and P-O fits with their respective HBCUs.

Presidents often endure significant criticism when they are fired or abruptly resign because there is a perception that they are incompetent or lack requisite leadership skills (citation). Beardsley (2017) posits that this might not be the case. He notes that poor candidate to organization matching and the consideration of fit between candidates and organizations lead to presidents' abbreviated tenures.

Beardsley (2017) also states that "when leaders fail, it isn't often because the leader is incompetent or the college is incorrigible; the problem is the lack of compatibility between the two" (p. 180). In the recruitment of identified candidates, do selection committees transparently explain what they need in the president and

do candidates clearly understand the responsibilities that the position entails? The HBCU president's role varies greatly across institutions depending on, among other things, the organizational needs and culture of the respective HBCU. While recruiting candidates, selection committees' must consider their HBCU's leadership needs and their preferred leadership style in respect to their HBCU's organizational culture. Implementing tenants of the P-J fit and P-O fit theory models can serve to predict candidate satisfaction and adaptability once in the president role. Requisite to this process is that selection committees and boards of trustees introspectively examine their college or university to determine their organizational structure, culture and unique nuances within their strategic needs and directions. Such examination allows the selection committee to better perform the search process as they match the mutual needs, values, norms, vision, beliefs of best industry practice and desires of the HBCU and the presidential candidate.

There are higher education search firms that already implement psychometric components of fit in higher education presidential searches (citation). For example, the executive search firm Korn Ferry uses a *Four-Dimensional Executive Assessment (KF4D)* that measures and compares individuals' and organizations' competencies, experiences, traits, and drivers (Korn Ferry, 2016). Although such tools are occasionally used for presidential searches by search firms, a wider implementation of such assessments across higher education presidential searches most ideally serve to better predict candidate fit and/or predicted

candidate success. Implementations of such assessments might help search firms and selection committees solidify the specific competencies, experiences, traits, and drivers that they believe a necessary candidate will possess.

Organizational culture plays a significant role in the day-to-day activities and contexts of HBCUs. In many HBCUs, the faculty, staff, students, and affiliates demonstrate an “overt commitment to promoting [the] cultural interests of minority students cited in mission statements” (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008, p. 213). Culture is embedded into the HBCU context and mission. As such, there is a necessity for more research that examines the impact that fit within the organization and for the job, or P-O and P-J fit, have in the recruitment, experiences, and longevity of HBCU presidential candidates. This study used these models specifically because of the unique organizational cultures and job responsibilities often required in the HBCU presidential context.

### **Organizational Culture Theory**

Birnbaum (1988) posits that the presidential selection process requires selection committees and boards of trustees to “determine the characteristics of the presidents they seek and create a list of qualifications” (p. 490). To do this, the selection committee must rely on organizational culture and institutional needs. It brings to bear the institution’s organizational structure and culture as it assesses needed traits and skill sets that best fit the institution’s presidential vacancy.

Organizational theory plays a major role in the life of HBCUs. According to March and Cohen (1974), the American college and university is the perfect example of an organized anarchy. The scholars label it as such because “it does not know what it is doing[,] [i]ts goals are either vague or in dispute[,] [i]ts technology is familiar but not understood[,] and [i]ts major participants wander in and out of the organization” (p. 3). They also offer that college and university decision-making processes are often ambiguous and lack clear goals. As such, this study interrogates the ways in which HBCU selection committees communicate, or fail to communicate, the organization’s values and goals to presidential candidates.

Brazer, Kruse, and Conley (2014) note that, “organizational theory guides understanding of the complexities of schools ... and can be a basis for collaborative and effective decision-making” (p. 254). Organizational theory posits that histories, missions, rituals, demographics, and daily activities shape universities’ and colleges’ cultures (Manning, 2017). It provides important theoretical context for this study as organizational theory is often used to “inform candidates about different ways of looking at the roles they hope to take on as they lead educational organizations” (Brazer et al., 2014, p. 256). Additionally, organizational theory informs the selection committee’s and recruited candidates’ perspectives on how to lead as the “organization is an important part of the context in which leadership happens” (Brazer et al., 2014, p. 256). In this theory, the organization itself affects most aspects of the institution, including governance, programming, leadership, decision-

making processes, administrative practices, and strategic planning (Manning, 2016; Tierney, 2012;).

Employing organizational theory to the selection process helps selection committees better understand their institution, determine the skill sets and needs that best fit the institution, and inform how to best lead an established, yet ever evolving organization. Selection committees and recruited candidates that understand organizational theory know “how to approach changing the organizations they [are a part of] and lead” (Brazer et al., 2014, p. 256). Organizational theory impacts all aspects of the institution including the presidential selection process’ interpretation and implementation of P-J and P-O fits.

Within organizational theory is organizational culture. Anthropologists began studying organizational culture in corporations in the 1930s and 1940s (Tierney, 2012). In general, organizational culture theorists believe that the leaders within an organization shape organizational cultures. Higher education is nuanced in that organizational theorists believe that universities’ and colleges’ cultures are shaped not by the leader, but rather by the organization’s histories, missions, rituals, demographics, and daily activities (Manning, 2017). Presidential leadership is important in colleges and universities especially because while new presidents step into an established organization, the culture is living, breathing, and evolving. Because of this nuance, the “members within the organization take an integral role

in shaping [and maintaining] the [organizational culture of colleges and universities]" (Manning, 2017, p. 69).

There is debate among organizational theorists whether organizational culture is especially relevant to employer performance (Tierney, 2012). Those who deny its relevance claim that there is more credibility in methods that are steeped in more scientific and empirical data (Tierney, 2012). A leader's fit or the evolution of an organizational culture has no easy, quantifiable data pattern. Instead, organizational culture is felt and made apparent through "the use of rituals, language, architecture, stories, tangible and intangible outcomes" (Manning, 2017, p. 70) as well as the way that they entire team views the organization and their place within the organization.

"Organizations as cultures are not isolated entities but institutions situated in a context that includes history, past players, and traditions that serve as the fodder for and backdrop to any culture building experience" (Manning, 2017, p. 71). As selection committee members describe what they are looking for in a leader, they must also feel the heartbeat of, and understand, their organizational culture. If they do not, the cycle of turnover is likely to persist. This study uses the narratives of past short-tenure presidents to "construct a story for analysis employing theory that allows [selection committees] to gain insight into their school organization and their ability to ... make meaning of issues that face them" (Brazer et al., 2014, p. 264).  
Examining P-O fit and P-J fit through an organizational theory and organizational

culture lens illuminates the impact that organizational culture has on successful hires and presidential tenure longevity. Organizational theory and culture determine P-J and P-O fit.

As the landscape of higher education rapidly changes, so too does the need to examine the presidential selection process. I look forward to examining the short-tenure presidents' perceptions of their P-J fit, P-O fit, and the HBCU's organizational culture during their recruitments, selections, and tenures.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate short-tenure presidents' perceptions of their respective institution's adherence to tenets of P-J fit theory and P-O fit theory during their recruitment, selection, hiring, and tenure. More specifically, this qualitative portraiture gave voice to past short-tenure presidents by openly telling their stories and sharing their recollections of their previous institutions' recruitment, selection, and hiring processes. In this chapter, I provide my rationale for the chosen methods, methodological approach, and procedures by which I collected and analyzed data pertinent to this study.

### **Use of Qualitative Methods**

Creswell (2013) writes that qualitative research "begins with assumptions and the use of frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning [that] individuals or groups ascribe to a ... problem" (p. 44). To study the problem, Creswell writes that qualitative researchers "collect data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study ... and conduct data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes" (p. 44). The final written report of these data and themes must include the voices of the participants while also including the researcher's reflexivity, description, and interpretation of the problem, and the study's significance or anticipated contribution.

Creswell (2013) notes that all researchers bring their philosophical

assumptions, or paradigms, to their research. As I approached the study, I believe I acted through the hybrid paradigms of social constructivism and postpositivism. I operated with a postpositivism paradigm. I approached my research with “multiple levels of data analysis for rigor, employed computer programs to assist in [my] analysis, encouraged the use of validity approaches, and [wrote this study] in the form of a scientific report” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24).

Per Creswell’s (2013) definition and description of qualitative data, my study was executed using qualitative research methods. This study explored if, how, and to what extent past presidents perceived that the selection committees communicated tenets of P-O or P-J fit during their selection or hiring process. From the candidate’s perspective, were the selection committees most interested in their leadership caliber or their fit within the job and HBCU? This study examined short-tenure presidents’ recollections of their selection committees’ communication during the search process and upon hiring. As suggested by Creswell, my study relied on my assumptions, the voices of the participants, and the frameworks of both P-O and P-J fit theories.

In line with qualitative research methods, my study collected the narratives of four past short-tenure presidents by way of one-on-one semi-structured interviews. I interviewed the four participants in person and in an environment that was most comfortable and sensitive to them. From their narratives, I looked for emerging themes through both inductive and deductive analyses and created

individual participant portraits. This study is unprecedented, and I believe it will add significantly to the field of HBCU organizational studies and leadership while also contributing lessons that HBCU selection committees might consider to strengthen their presidential search processes.

### **Methodological Approach: Portraiture**

This qualitative research study employed the use of Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's (n.d) portraiture method. Portraiture is defined as "a method of social science inquiry distinctive in its blending of art and science, capturing the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life." (Lawrence-Lightfoot, n.d.). Portraiture was the most appropriate research method for this study as this method strives to tell a story in which the researched subjects "feel seen ... fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, scrutinized ... to feel both the discovery and the generosity of the process, as well as the penetrating and careful investigation." This process, according to Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot leads to research that results in "documents of inquiry and intervention, hopefully leading toward new understandings and insights, as well as instigating change." This study explored short-tenure presidency not as failure, but as an opportunity to extract learning lessons from the participants' leadership experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The portraiture method is best suited for this study for the distinct reasons that 1) it gives voice to the oft silenced; 2) it has chosen participants that are able to narrate and demonstrate their health and resilience as leaders after

their respective HBCU departures; and 3) it allows the reader to see the universal in the particular.

The goal of portraiture is to “give voice to the [often] voiceless” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, n.d.). Many past presidents who are abruptly fired or resign after a period of tumult are likely isolated. Former board of trustees members and stakeholders who remain loyal to the institution likely overshadow the participants’ experiences and perspectives. After a college or university president is fired or abruptly resigns due to tumult, there is often little recognition given to that past-president’s “side of the story.” This can render these individuals’ voices as weak and, often times, unheard. Amidst unfavorable media attention and institutional stakeholders’ often negative renditions of why the president was fired or resigned, short-tenure college presidents are infrequently asked for their side of the story. As written in Trachtenberg and associates (2013) *Presidencies Derailed*, “a president who is fired or resigns before the end of his or her first contract can impart wisdom and lessons that help to “guide the feet of future college, university, and system leaders” (p. vii). This study sought to listen to the experiences between short-tenure presidents’ recruitment through their departure and, by doing so, aimed to illuminate valuable higher education leadership lessons from a demographic whose experiences are often undervalued. This study aimed to orient its epistemology in the wisdom of the four participants and used their narratives, voices, and lessons to create new knowledge for the HBCU selection process.

The portraiture method also allowed the participants to narrate their stories in a manner that demonstrated their health and resilience as leaders (Lawrence-Lightfoot, n.d., pp. 8-9). This method assumes the good and healthy and “assumes that the two are laced with imperfections” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). Similarly, this study did not assume that the short-tenure presidents were failures. Instead, the research aimed to unearth lessons of resilience for both the past presidents and the institutions they served. This study fully embraced Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’ belief that “relentless scrutiny of failure has many unfortunate and distorting results” (p. 9). They posit that social science too often focuses on pathology and deficit narratives while simultaneously ignoring the complications of human strength and vulnerability. This positionality leaves both scientists and social-science consumers blind to promise and potential, vulnerable to cynicism and inaction, and guilty of blaming the victim. Additionally, Lawrence-Lightfoot’s portraiture method “[creates] a subtle and complex narrative that allows us to see the universal in the particular” (Walsh, 2014, para. 27).

While examining the unique experiences of four short-tenure HBCU presidents, the narrative allowed us to draw parallels to the universal, which in this case is the world of HBCU presidential selection and leadership. Although every institution is different, the lessons learned from one past-president might help to impart wisdom in the larger body of HBCU administrative selection and leadership. There are five essential features of portraiture-context, voice, relationship,

emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole. These elements are important because they serve to capture the very essence of portraiture.

### **Context**

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, context refers to the physical, geographical, temporal, historical, cultural, and aesthetics of the study. The context was used “to place people and action in time and space as a resource for understanding what they say and do” (p. 41).

### **Voice**

In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is ever present in the assumptions, frameworks, questions asked, data collection, and data analysis. Simultaneously, in this study, it was imperative to focus and center the voices of the participants so that my voice “never overshadow[ed] the actors’ voices (though it [may be] sometimes ... heard in duet, in harmony, and in counterpoint)” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85). This element was a compelling reason for my use of portraiture as it aims to focus the participants’ voices. As aforementioned, it is rare that short-tenure presidents’ “side of the story,” voices, and challenges are centered and listened to. In this study, it was my hope that I brought to bear lessons that lead to organizational and process change. As such, it was necessary to advocate for the voices of those who have gone through the search, selection, and premature termination processes.

## **Relationships**

“Portraits are constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships ... it is through relationships between the portraitists and the actors that access is sought and given...” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, n.d., p. 135). In order to gain access to information regarding the past-presidents’ sensitive experiences, it was important for me to develop relationships with the participants. I tried to do this through connecting with past presidents whom I met during my time as a higher education graduate student. I did not know any of the participants intimately, but I was able to use our brief interactions as a launching point for our relationship as I got to know the participants more in depth via email exchange.

## **Emergent Themes**

From the data, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis encourage the portraitist to “construct a coherence of themes that actors might experience as unrelated or incoherent” (p. 185). This was an important step as I drew from the narratives of different past presidents who came from differing personal and professional contexts. Trying to pull the similarities in their experiences was an important step in contributing significant lessons to inform HBCU selection processes. I pulled emerging themes through both inductive and deductive coding.

## **The Aesthetic Whole**

Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) acknowledge that context, voice, relationships, and emergent themes all serve to create a comprehensive and

thoughtful study. Herein is the concept of the aesthetic whole. There are many motivations to using portraiture — to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and to the heart. In order to accomplish these dual motivations, it was imperative to consider the larger picture and the ways in which all four of the aforementioned elements of portraiture played a part in the creation of a sound research study.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

Three of the four participants were interviewed in person at a location of their choosing to allow the interviewee to be the authority of the space (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The fourth participant, of his choosing, was interviewed over the phone due to inclement weather conditions. Conducting interviews at a setting of the participant's choosing also allowed for a more natural and organic qualitative research process (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the portraiture method relied on participants being comfortable and familiar with the space that they were in so as to not alter the participants' natural responses (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 42). This study asked participants to reflect on times that might have been professionally and personally sensitive for them. As such, portraiture's allowance for participants to choose where they are interviewed helps to "reveal their knowledge, their insights, and their wisdom through action, reflection, and interpretation" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 43). These aspects of transparency were especially important to this study.

This study was comprised of four participants who are all past-presidents of HBCUs. To select participants, I used operational construct sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used this purposeful sampling strategy as it allowed me to “find case manifestations of a theoretical construct of interest ... to examine and elaborate the construct and its variations and implications” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 132). I also found this purposeful sampling strategy the most appropriate as Ravitch and Carl note that, “theoretical constructs are based in, are derived from, and contribute to scholarly literature. This involves deepening or verifying theory” (p.132). The construct of interest in this study is candidate fit, specifically as it relates to presidential candidates’ perception of P-O fit and P-J fit with their respective HBCU employers. I contacted each of the participants via email (Appendix A) and explained the context of my dissertation research. Each participant willfully agreed to participate in the research and each participant completed a consent form before being interviewed (Appendix B). The qualifications for their participation were that they each served as president of the respective HBCU for less than five years, were each abruptly fired or resigned after a period of tumult, and have each been away from the institution for at least one year. I chose the one-year period because this time frame ensured that each of the institutions have found another president and that the participants have secured other jobs. The year timeframe is intact so as not to compromise the institution or the former president. In keeping with the goal of participant comfort in the portraiture method, the participants are anonymously

presented in the papers. I used pseudonyms for both their names and their previous institutions in an attempt to maintain their anonymity. To further protect the anonymity of the participants, some of the details of their narratives underwent minor alteration. In instances of detail alteration, the study ensured to reasonably change the details so as to not compromise the account of details nor the participants' truths or voices.

This study enlisted participants that have verbalized their ability to clearly remember the details of their hire or removal. To ensure validity and credibility, the study enlisted participants who have published widely about their experiences while in office or, after having departed from the respective HBCU, and could clearly recall and remember the details of their recruitment and selection experiences and their terminations or resignations.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews are a pillar in the collection of sound qualitative data as "they provide deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized data" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 146). I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews that lasted between 75 to 120 minutes in length. The interviews followed what Ravitch and Carl call *customized replication* and implemented contextualized probes and follow-up questions as were appropriate. Rubin and Rubin (2005) state that this technique is also considered a *responsive interviewing model* and suggest that the interview maintain a basic form while also leaving room to adapt to the interview's unique

context. Ultimately, this method of interview serves the portraiture methodology best in that the interviewer, following the portraiture method, “takes in stimuli and listen[s] carefully” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 187) while trying to establish a genuine understanding for the participant’s experience.

### **Research Questions**

- Q1. How does ‘candidate fit’ contribute to HBCU presidents’ high turnover?
- Q2. From the short-tenure individuals’ perspectives, did they sense that their recruitment, hiring, and tenures considered their fit within the institution or the job? If not, why or what proxy was used in their recruitment and selection?
- Q3. At what point, if at all, did they perceive or were they communicated tenets of fit within their respective institutions?
- Q4. How, if at all, did fit inform their recruitment to the presidency, their tenure as president and their resignation or firing?

### **Data Analysis**

An important first step before I began looking for emergent themes or codes was simply that I read my transcripts (Maxwell, 2012). After I collected all four of the approximately 75 to 120-minute interviews, I listened to each the recordings of the semi-structured interviews and read the original notes, in the form of memos, that I made before sending the interviews to the transcriptionist. I referred to the detailed notes and researcher memos that I took during the entire data collection

process. The memos helped to shape the process of data analysis because I was able to trace my thinking throughout the study in order to move the analytical process forward (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Referring to these notes helped me to speak to the aesthetic whole as I made note of relevant observations outside of the immediate interview questions.

After receiving the transcribed interviews, I uploaded the transcriptions to NVivo, a software used to organize and assemble qualitative data. I coded the data in two waves — first in an inductive approach and then in a deductive approach. According to Schwandt (2014), coding “organizes and breaks [data] down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments” (p. 30; see also Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As I had four 75 to 120-minute interviews, it was important that I was able to break the data down into manageable amounts and create easily recognizable code definitions. I looked for emerging themes across the data (inductive coding) and for themes that could be pulled from P-O and P-J fit theories and applied to the data (deductive coding). I also performed manual open coding on each of the transcripts. This is a process in which I “highlight[ed] sections of text” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 250) and pulled themes from emerging themes that I saw across the study’s four participants.

While I coded the data, I kept in mind that Ravitch and Carl (2016) warn that coding is not the last step of data analysis. I also used connecting strategies to develop the context of the data and look for relationships that connect statements

across the presidents, their perceptions of fit, their institutions, and their leadership practices.

### **Data Management**

The audio recordings were kept in a locked filing cabinet located in an office with a locked door. Only my dissertation chair, Marybeth Gasman, and I had the key to the room. Additionally, presidents' recordings were de-identified and coded. The presidents' names were kept in a separate spreadsheet saved in Penn+Box and on a flash drive locked in the same cabinet as the audio files. Audio Recordings (audiofiles with the naming conventions listed above) were shared with the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institution's (CMSI) longstanding transcription service provider, Absolute Marketing & Research (AMR), through a limited access Penn+Box folder.

### **Positionality and Role of the Researcher**

According to Creswell (1996), credibility is of primary importance in qualitative research. I do recognize that I might have come to this research with a biased perspective. I am an alumna of a Historically Black College, come from a family that is highly affiliated with HBCUs, and I have worked extensively on an HBCU leadership development project with the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions. I came to this research very engaged and also very clear that I believe it necessary to amend components of the executive search process at many HBCUs. With my current research interests and experiences in mind, I took several steps to

methodologically address my issues of bias. The first was that I researched schools that I have not attended and interviewed participants who presided over schools at which I have no known affiliation with the selection committees.

There are many ways in which I believe my positionality enhanced this research. As a student of higher education and specifically of HBCUs, I was eager to learn about the narratives of the former HBCU leader participants. Additionally, as one of the participants is a woman, I looked forward to learning her story. In addition to HBCUs executive search practices, I have also conducted research regarding the narratives of Black women leaders within the HBCU context. As a student of the narratives of HBCU leaders, I approached this research eager to learn and listen from the participants.

I relied heavily on the methodological questions that Davis (1997) presents in portraiture. As I told the participants' stories, I continually asked myself, "how [to what extent] does the disposition of my voice inform (give shape but not distort) the product (the developing product)?" (Davis, 1997, p. 106). By keeping this question in the forefront of my mind, I was able to center the voices of the participants and, hence, guide my epistemologies. In other words, I trusted the information that was presented in the semi-structured interviews because I centered the participants and their perspectives of P-O Fit and P-J fit throughout their recruitments and through their departures.

## **Trustworthiness**

I used additional triangulation measures of validity and trustworthiness to contextualize and validate the participants' narratives. I used electronic document review data as a second source to substantiate interviewees' claims. I implemented an electronic document review of over 130 publically accessible sources in the form of media portrayals of public-facing incidences, publicly accessible board of trustee minutes, campus news stories, community news stories, national news stories, and public interviews. Additionally, I reviewed public artifacts including the institutions' strategic plans, missions, visions, and descriptions on their websites. I also reviewed publicly available media interviews of the institutions' selection committee members and Board members.

I performed the electronic data review to gain a context of the research site (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), as well as to fact-check many of the claims that the participants made about situations and public-facing events that occurred at the higher education institutions. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, I did not cite these electronic resources in my dissertation. I did not cite the electronic data review because including this information displaces the participants' voices and, in addition, many of the electronic data contain identifying information that reveals the participants and the institutions. I used the electronic data review as a validation tool and it is my hope that triangulating data in this way better employs Lawrence-Lightfoot's (n.d.) belief that, by the "layering of data ... [and using]

different lenses frame[s] similar findings.” Providing such information not only aims to layer the data but it also aims to give factual evidence, or “data derived from personnel information” (p. 204) with the use of institutions’ and media accounts of what happened through publicly accessible information.

Lastly, in an attempt to portray the data most credibly, I asked three peers to review my findings to ensure that the portraits do not read as biased or subjective. The three peer reviewers did not know the identity of the presidents, but they were each intimately familiar with the higher education landscape and the landscape of leadership within historically Black colleges and universities.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The most apparent limitation to this study was that it primarily relied on the participants’ accurate and transparent narratives. I asked the participants to share intimate details of, what they may have considered to be, traumatic and/or professionally damaging events of their lives. As such, this study relied on the fact that the participants did not alter the details of their narratives. It also relied on the fact that the participants would be candid and forthcoming about the incidences of their presidential tenures. Some participants were more forthcoming about their lessons learned, perceptions of fit, and mistakes that they believed they made while in the presidency. Ultimately, I believe that participants were happy to share their side of their presidency story. As this is a portraiture study, the research centered the participants’ perspectives and acknowledged that their perceptions might differ

from those of their former constituents at their past HBCUs.

Time is a limitation in this study. The participants' narratives can never be completely captured through a semi-structured interview format. Time simply did not and never will allow it. In the case of each of the participants, higher education is their life's work. They have each devoted thousands of hours as leaders in the higher education industry. Their knowledge, wisdom, and narratives regarding their perception of the experiences at their past HBCUs could easily expand well into hundreds of hours of conversation. In an ideal world, I would have been able to spend unlimited hours listening to, and learning from, the stories of these past presidents. In this vein, time was not on our side.

Weather was a limitation in this study, as well. Due to inclement weather, I was not able to travel to perform a face-to-face interview with one of the participants. Despite this limitation, the participant and I were able to have an in-depth and transparent phone call.

## CHAPTER 4: CHERYL WILLIAMSON'S PORTRAIT

### **Fitting as a Woman President**

Cheryl Williamson's love for historically Black colleges and universities is apparent. Prior to our meeting, and before I reached out to schedule an interview with her, I read news outlets and higher education journals that boasted Williamson's groundbreaking work in higher education. She was well known within, and outside of, HBCU higher education circles. I used our shared interest in HBCUs as a way to connect. Via email, I proudly shared that I am a graduate of Spelman College. She beamed and noted that I had made a good choice and offered to help me as much as she could.

We met at a country club near her home. She chose the establishment as she frequented it for afternoon tea and noted that she appreciated its charm and solitude. She offered that the club's tearoom was a quiet place that often allowed her to hold personal meetings such as ours. As outlined in Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's (n.d.) portraiture method, I agreed to meet at the tearoom because it was where Cheryl felt most comfortable to share her story. After a few back and forth emails, we settled on an early afternoon teatime in the country club's tearoom.

I arrived about twenty-five minutes early for our interview. I sat in the lobby of the country club and took in the grandeur. I scanned the room as couples engaged in dialogue and wondered what power decisions were being made all around me. The room was filled with floor to ceiling pastel wallpaper, oak colored furniture, and

boasted French double doors that opened to a veranda overlooking expansive green, rolling hills. Across from the striped pastel love seat on which I sat, a sign led the way to ballrooms named after wealthy and powerful American men. The space was dripping with prestige.

At our agreed upon time, Cheryl and I met in the foyer that was situated just before the tearoom's entrance. Cheryl had a warm familiarity. She had a friendly smile. I had the immediate feeling that she was the kind of higher education professional that would help any graduate student "so long as she was contributing to their learning experience." Cheryl and I stepped up to the hostess' table and she gave the hostess our names and reservation arrangement. We checked in and proceeded through the doors to the tearoom. Immediately, she noticed that the quiet tearoom was filled with raucous young adults. Indiscriminate chatter and booming laughter reverberated through the tearoom. Cheryl assured me that the tearoom was usually very quiet and suggested that we try to move away from the noise. She went back to the hostess' table and politely asked that we be moved to another table in the tearoom and away from the chatty groups.

In response to her request, a young waiter came forward and demanded, "what's the issue?!" I perceived the waiter's tone to be rude. Despite this however, I found Cheryl to be extremely calm, confident, and poised. Cheryl explained that we needed seats in a quieter area because we were recording an interview. Their exchange was quick, and we were in another seat within minutes. After observing

Cheryl, I asked myself several questions — Was the waiter rude because Cheryl changed her reservation? Was the waiter intimidated because Cheryl looks to be a successful, professional woman? Was the waiter offended because Cheryl is a Black woman? These are all questions with answers that will likely go unanswered. However, this unexpected interaction was one that solidified my understanding of Cheryl's personality. Cheryl's feathers were not easily ruffled — a trait that served her well because, by her account, Cheryl's presidency was riddled with many incidences of disrespect and tumult. Cheryl was a woman who might not have been treated fairly but who — from what I could see — was able to meet tense encounters with ease.

I later learned that Cheryl's kind, but confident demeanor came largely from many of the things she had encountered while the president at Edgarville University. After many tumultuous encounters while presiding over her HBCU, she felt "unheard," that her post as president was one in which she had "no private life ... [and] work[ed] all day [with] lack of appreciation for the sacrifice." As we sipped tea, she told me that she is never dishonest about her past experiences with Edgarville University, but she does not believe in rehashing what she deemed to be a negative experience. For this reason, she often opts to "take the higher road" and rarely discloses her side of the story. Lawrence-Lightfoot (n.d.) urges the researcher to allow the interviewee to tell his or her own story for this reason exactly. There are, often, times that stories, those that we can learn from and that should be widely

shared, are suppressed or never told. Our meeting was one in which Cheryl Williamson divulged the whole of her career in higher education and, specifically, her encounters while serving as president of Edgarville University.

Cheryl served as president of Edgarville University for nearly three years. She previously served in senior level administrator roles and loved the business of higher education. She ultimately chose to become an HBCU president because she believed that Edgarville University needed a change. She believed that her years of administrative work and learning about “best practices” in higher education would serve to provide the change that she thought Edgarville University desperately needed.

Upon sitting down for our interview, Cheryl briefly scanned my interview consent form. She signed it, placed her pen and the consent form on the table, folded her arms in her lap, and smiled. She nodded — the cue to press ‘record’ on my freshly opened Dictaphone. I began the interview speaking aloud a reminder to myself that “today is October [date] and I am beginning my doctoral research in [city].” Cheryl gently pulled a tea napkin from between the teacup and saucer. She picked up the pen and began to write a note. As I introduced the date, time, and city of my dissertation’s first interview, she calmly wrote on the napkin. When I finished, very gently — as if to reassure me that she had once been in my shoes and she understood that I might be a little nervous — she unfolded the napkin to reveal her message. The note read, “No biggie but it’s November” I pressed stop. We laughed. I

felt a sudden wave of calm and all my nerves were shaken away. I hit the ‘record’ button and our interview officially began.

### **Cheryl’s Recruitment to Edgarville University**

Cheryl’s journey to the HBCU presidency was not linear. She told me that several search firms and colleges pursued her for college presidency roles earlier in her career, but she initially had no desire to serve as a college president. She explained that she initially believed her best fit was to be a supportive and knowledgeable member of an institution’s leadership team. She previously served many roles, from faculty to senior leadership and enjoyed “helping other people’s visions come to life.” In addition, she appreciated that in a supportive role, she would not “have all the problems associated with the leadership role.” She deemed a college presidency as not providing enough of a private life. Additionally, she believed it would be a life with no balance.

Despite the fact that she had no desire to be a college president, a member of Edgarville University’s board of trustees approached her. To Cheryl’s understanding, the trustee was interested in her because of her participation in a prestigious higher education leadership development program several years earlier. Cheryl enjoyed professional development activities and decided to sit in on the forum to learn about college presidency. As a result of her participation, the board member submitted her name to the university’s presidential leadership search. She felt that her seasoned career had taught her best practices to elevate institutions of

higher education, especially HBCUs, and she decided that she “might have something to contribute.”

When Edgarville University needed a president, she was ready. Her children were grown, she excelled in her career to that point, and she had very few external personal obligations. She met with the board member and told him about her leadership philosophy and her previous experience in higher education. Shortly after that meeting, she was called by the search firm conducting Edgarville University’s presidential search. She agreed to meet with them.

Cheryl is ambitious. This is evident in the fact that she had no intention of competitively interviewing for Edgarville University’s open position. She simply attended the interview to understand the presidential search process in the event that she wanted to participate in a future search. In essence, this interview was a practice interview. As she recounted the details of her unconventional presidential search, she paused as if to reflect on what she had shared. She quickly noted that her mentality was naïve at the time she interviewed with Edgarville University.

Cheryl noted that when the day came for her to meet the university’s search firm, she had not done any research on the institution. After all, she did not want the position and did not believe she would be a competitive or serious candidate. As luck would have it, her plane to the interview was delayed. As she waited, she read the institution’s report. She recalled that she “was so hurt by what [she] was [finally] reading ... [that] she started going through everything [she] could find.” She told me

that she was hurt by the reports because Edgarville University, one of the HBCU sector's most well-known institutions, was in a state of tumult. As she researched the institution and waited for her plane, she became more interested in Edgarville University and decided, "maybe I can help rescue, or at least start to rescue [Edgarville University] from what looked like a downward spiral."

Cheryl knew that she "needed to change everything" in order to be pleased with Edgarville University. As she continued to read report after report, she realized that, "I'm not the ideal candidate for this [institution], because ... in order to fix these things, I have to change everything." Before interviewing for the Edgarville University presidency, Cheryl knew that she wanted to make huge changes and, for that reason, she felt that the board of trustees would not select her.

When she finally did interview, Cheryl told me that she was brutally honest with the selection committee. She recalled:

I wasn't trying to get the job. I was trying to answer the questions they were asking, because I knew they wouldn't want me, because I just told them I was going to change everything. Everything they asked me, I just told them what I thought was wrong with it, based on the data that I had read, and how I would address the issues that I read about.

Cheryl later shared in our conversation that during her interview with the board, the selection committee, and the alumni, she was asked her impression of Edgarville University. Without hesitation she replied, "everything I see, most things I see need to change." They seemingly shared her sentiment as she recalled that the crowd, "complained about this and that happening at the institution." She agreed with the

Edgarville University staff, faculty, students, board, and stakeholders as they unfolded issues related to financial aid, unaccommodating dorm rooms, low graduation rates, and underpaid faculty. She told them that, “you seem to be asking for change, and I know exactly what to do to make [the] problem[s] go away.” She was confident in her ability to help Edgarville University but revealed to me once more that, “I thought I would never be selected, because I told them I was going to change everything.”

Cheryl chuckled as she told me the result of her interview process with Edgarville University. Between smiles and headshakes of disbelief she told me that she was overwhelmingly popular. The vote was ten ‘yes’ to two ‘no.’ Cheryl said,

I left [Edgarville University] ... and ... as I recall [when I got home] ... the news said that they were offering me the job. I’m just saying how are you offering me a job and I haven’t talked to the search firm? So I called the search firm and I said what is going on? We haven’t even had a conversation about any terms or anything like that. They announced it and I hadn’t even agreed to even go to the next step.

At the time, Cheryl was unsure if the unorthodox nature of her interview process was because of the institution type or the search firm. She shook her head and told me,

[I thought] they just didn't follow standard business practices ... the business practices and professionalism that I was used to maybe was so different from what they had, I just chalked it up ... which was a mistake on my part.

## **Cheryl's Selection**

Just as Cheryl's recruitment process was unorthodox, so too, was her selection and installment. Nearly all of Cheryl's requirements for hire were met, in fact, she was offered more money than she asked for. This puzzled Cheryl but she summed it up that they hired her because her requirements for salary were reasonable. The only thing that she did not get was a private jet. She told me that,

the only thing I didn't get was a private plane and they told me I was crazy. I just said well, that's what every place else I've ever been, we had planes, and if we didn't have a plane, we had time on the plane, to go places, so you wouldn't be, you know ... Okay, so I had to adjust. I had to adjust.

Cheryl told me that Edgarville University offered her the presidency but delayed offering her a contract. She recalled that "noise was falling out of the back ... the offer was given and then negotiated, and then picked apart." She even recalls feeling embarrassed at a meeting before her installation when a trustee yelled out to the provost, "does she have a contract yet?" For Cheryl, this was embarrassing because Edgarville University, an HBCU, "operated in the way in which everyone expected." Cheryl recalls a point when a mentor, a colleague who was not affiliated with an HBCU, advised her to back out of the presidency. At that point she had verbally agreed to serve as Edgarville University's president, and she said that "we had already signed off on the thing," yet Edgarville continued to renegotiate. She declined stepping down because she "wanted to prove we were better, or I thought we were better than that, and that it would go away ... once we reached an [official]

agreement ... that [HBCUs] do like you do in any other business.” I interpreted her use of “we” to ultimately mean that HBCUs were better than what most people expected them to be. After all, Cheryl was an HBCU alumna and, though she had significant professional experience at a non-HBCU, she felt strong ties to the HBCU community.

I asked Cheryl if she later found her experience to be like what she had with any other business. Sadly, she said she did not. Upon her selection and official installment, she quickly realized that “this thing is full of politics, and I’m not a politician.” From there on, though she felt an affinity to HBCUs, she did not feel that Edgarville University felt the same affinity to her.

### **Cheryl’s Presidential Tenure**

Cheryl said that she did not experience a “honeymoon” period as president of Edgarville University. In fact, she coins her first two days as president of Edgarville University, “The First 48.” Within 48 hours of becoming president, she was informed that the funding for one of the college’s most prestigious, innovative, and lucrative programs was being cut.<sup>1</sup> This was done without her being consulted nor informed. Cheryl showed a face of disapproval as she demanded to me,

had I known [Edgarville University] was going to [cut this program], I would never have [assumed presidency] because [cutting the program] would have told me that [Edgarville University] was not interested in what I was

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the identity of Cheryl Williamson, some of the intricate details of this account have been altered.

interested in — and that’s building a brand that mattered, and building an institution.

Of all the memories that she shared with me, Cheryl seemed most bothered by her “First 48.” After the “First 48,” she tried to fundraise to reinstall the program. She drafted a multiple-year budget and wrote proposal after proposal; all to no avail. Administrators and government officials mocked her because they believed she asked for too much money. Cheryl knew better. She previously worked in higher education finance PWIs for years. She knew the numbers necessary for a successful academic program. She “needed faculty, [she] needed students, [she] needed scholarship money, and [she] needed money for research.” What is more, she knew that other PWIs “had spent way more than that [for] their program.” She looked me in the eye, lowered her tone and said,

I didn’t just assume that, I talked to [program] deans around the country ... I didn’t talk to HBCU [program] deans because they didn’t have any money either, so they thought [X] dollars was a lot of money ... in [these programs], this is not money.

Cheryl was determined. She would not stand for the removal of Edgarville University’s top program,

So, I just pursued it, to a point where ... the legislature knew, the students started marching, [students from neighboring schools marched with us] and said, ‘why are they doing this?’ The students got together and marched on the governor...this is all playing out in the newspaper ... I said dang, I just got here.

Cheryl told me more details about the way that this scenario played out for her in the first few weeks of her presidency. The most scandalous details of Cheryl’s

experience in her “First 48” left me speechless. Her experience was disheartening. But as Cheryl told me, she is a woman of intuition, tenacity, and character. By the end of her “First 48” ordeal, she shared that, “[the governor] was mad at me ... [and a senior member of the board] was mad with me, so he was going to do me in, no matter what ... so that’s kind of how I got welcomed.”

She continued her presidency at Edgarville University, even after her “First 48,” and even after she realized that she and her leadership team had different goals and visions for Edgarville University. She attempted to reconcile their differences with some third-party consulting. About a month into her term, she hired a consulting company to conduct an environmental scan. The environmental scan yielded nearly 1500 pages of comments and suggestions that the consultant deemed necessary to address in order to achieve institutional growth and progress. The scan allowed Cheryl to gain insight into what the faculty, staff, and students wanted from the institution. She continued to set her goal toward changing the institution, and with the assistance of the consulting firm, she thought she knew what and how to tackle the issues while pleasing the faculty, staff, and students.

In addition to ordering the environmental scan, shortly after her selection, Cheryl met with her board to discuss their expectations for the institution and for her presidency. Edgarville University had just been audited and there were over twenty-five findings that the board wanted her to address. In order to address the concerns adequately, Cheryl recalled that she needed to fire the old professionals

and hire new external professionals. Cheryl told me that, “I needed a new CFO and a whole group of people on the financial side ... and a new provost.” In addition to recruiting for some of the most senior positions on her leadership team, Cheryl needed to hire cabinet members. In the previous president’s administration, all of these positions were interim. Cheryl was required to hire most of these individuals swiftly, so she allowed her faculty to help her recruit. To her dismay, Edgarville University’s faculty did not handle the recruitment and hiring process as she expected. She told me that they had a different professional style than Cheryl had become accustomed to at her previous institution. She explained,

the best candidates in the process — they [the faculty] did what they could to dissuade them from coming ... my [professional] style said, ‘I’m going to choose from the [few] people that you give me, and if you think they’re good enough, no matter if you ran off two [of the people I thought were best] people ... I’m going to take them.’

Although she found the Edgarville University faculty difficult to work with, Cheryl was determined to compromise within reason and vowed to remain professional. Cheryl believed her professional style to be completely different than the Edgarville University faculty.

She would find her professional style to be different than her board of trustees, as well. Unbeknownst to her at the time of accepting the presidency, her board of trustees would be involved in the selection of her legal counsel, her daily operational tasks, and the hiring and firing of faculty and staff. These were just a few

of the daily tasks in which the board involved itself. Cheryl found the board's level of daily involvement unacceptable and unprofessional.

### **Cheryl's Fit at Edgarville University**

Fit is deemed a strong indicator of success between employees and employers (Chatman, 1989; Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Lindholm, 2003; McNaughtan, 2016; O'Reilly et al., 1991). In the marriage of Cheryl Williamson and Edgarville University, there was little to no "fit." In fact, Cheryl said that,

I think it was a terrible fit ... because the mission and the goal and the need of what I brought fit, but everything else did not fit. The fact that I was female didn't fit ... my faith and my expressed faith probably didn't fit with them but that was why I am and that is who I am ... [also] I wasn't sweeping stuff under the rug ... I didn't want to take a picture ... showing you that everything was beautiful on one day, when the other 364 out of the year are terrible ... so I think fit is extremely important.

There were also other ways that Cheryl perceived herself to be an ill fit with Edgarville University. She mentioned that she preferred a bit more independence but her board needed constant connection and access to her; this included access to her whereabouts, access to suggest she change her clothing, access to critique her behavior, and even to tell her what and how to speak. It seems unlikely that the ill fit was for lack of Cheryl Williamson's skill set as a leader. Cheryl noted that it seemed that the board of trustees and those who were politically aligned with Edgarville University were not receiving what they actually wanted in the arrangement. To Cheryl, "anything that [she] did that they couldn't control, how [she] did it and what [she] did ... was a problem." She was especially adamant that "[w]hen it came to the

money, it was an issue because I paid attention.” Cheryl reiterated that she wanted to change the trajectory and the negative narrative associated with Edgarville University. She wanted to focus on improving the quality of the school’s educational offerings and overall institutional improvement. Regarding past whisperings of misappropriation of funds, she said often,

[we’re] going to spend [the money that we have] for what we say we’re going to spend it for, and I’m going to put it on these students and on this education So all you community people, all of you business people that have been taking advantage and getting paid and not providing services, your day has come.

According to Cheryl’s account, the culture of Edgarville University was one that did not fit her leadership style. Additionally, she acknowledges that she was not the right person for the job. She believed that the institution had a culture of board members and politicians commanding the president as if they were puppeteers. She said that she was not going to be intimidated or controlled by anyone. Cheryl cared about the students but did not care for the board’s controlling behavior.

Multiple times, Cheryl mentioned, “my goal and my vision was to have that institution be a best in class ... doctoral university. Not the best HBCU, but for schools that size, and with the kind of programs they had.” To Cheryl, her vision and that of the existing leadership and board were not aligned. Cheryl remembered, “That was ... one of the biggest disconnects for me and for them, they wanted to be the biggest, and I said I need to be the best.” She understood their desire to be the biggest as the school was tuition and enrollment dependent, but she did not agree

with asking students to pay top dollar for a degree that would, in turn, be worthless.

Cheryl led me to believe that Edgarville University's ill-fitting relationship with her might have been due to the expectations that the board gained with the immediate past president. Cheryl understood the previous Edgarville University president to "[understand] the game. He wanted to be the best HBCU and he knew the politics. He knew the culture and he was willing to let the culture run and do the best [he could] with what [he had], without changing anything." Self admittedly, Cheryl realized that she did not fit the culture of the institution and, despite her deep desire to do so she would not be able to change the institution. She stated,

I did not know how to let that culture run, and get the best out of it ... I call it a picture painted in time. For example, you can have a picture of an orange. It looks like it's real, but when you open it up, there's nothing in it ... [Edgarville University] had mastered that art. Everything we peeled ... every layer [of the onion that] we peeled back, we found that the heart of it was rotten, or not what it could have been, or what it should have been.

And to Cheryl, the past Edgarville University presidents, those who encouraged and turned a blind eye to the 'image over substance' culture, continued to define the metric by which Edgarville University measured Cheryl's presidential success. As they had done in the past, "they [the board] immediately tried to control me." Cheryl recounted:

When they realized that I was not the icon and I just wasn't going to stand around and do what they said, that presented a problem, so they immediately struck us ... [T]hey called me and told me to hire this person, hire that person, give this person all that money and all those kinds of things that people always [did], and I just said 'no, I'm not going to do that' ... [and] I said

we're going to check it out, and we're going to make sure that whatever we do is ethical.

### **Challenges During Cheryl's Tenure**

Even in the beginning, the marriage between Cheryl Williamson and Edgarville University presented monumental problems. From Cheryl's perspective, she and Edgarville University had several problems. There was a communication problem, an expectations problem, a financial expenditure problem, and, perhaps most detrimental to her presidency, there was a lying problem. According to Cheryl, the senior leadership of Edgarville University just seemed to dislike her from the beginning of her presidency. One story stood out to me. In her recollection, the faculty were not honest about her outreach to them and their communication with her. Her administrative staff was not on her side. She told me, "[they were] basically just flat out lying to a point where one of [Edgarville University's former senior administrators] came to me and said why don't you document every time you talk to [a faculty member]?" Technology was her only ally. Cheryl had a caller-ID record of every single phone call she made to the faculty. She had years' worth of caller-ID records. In fact, she had even been diligent enough to jot down notes on the calendar and the context of each conversation. Even still, she felt that her record keeping was futile. The issue was not that the faculty believed she was not available to them. To Cheryl, "the translation was 'she's not doing what I say, so therefore she's not talking to me.'" She had no resolve. She felt the faculty, much like the board, of Edgarville

University disliked her because she was not submissive. She boldly stood up for her beliefs and her opinions of best practice. Although she tried her best to open the lines of communication — and to make the faculty like her — she realized that she “had to live with [the lie that] ‘she’s not talking to me,’ [even] when everybody, [including] ... [her] administrative staff ... knew [the truth] because they [were setting] up the meetings.”

Although the problem of the faculty lying about her bothered her, Cheryl Williamson was extremely proactive. To protect herself, she made sure to put meetings on a shared calendar and asked third party participants to take notes in the meetings. At one point, she was even booking calendar invitations for meetings a year in advance of the meetings themselves. As Cheryl relayed these details to me, she seemed to be annoyed by just remembering details of the situation.

We prepared notes at the end of the week, to send them [in order to] tell the faculty what had been going on all week long. Not just the things that they should be concerned about as far as policy or governing issues, just told them [everything]... but [to them], I [still] wasn’t communicating with them. [So] then I would ask them ‘is there anything that you received on the notes?’ ... is there anything you want to talk about? ... [I would] Call them up, no, they didn’t want to talk about anything. They didn’t ever want to talk about anything ... except when [I] changed [hired or fired] somebody or demoted somebody.

Cheryl was convinced that the Edgarville University faculty did not like her and, unfortunately, the board rarely supported her. She narrated an incident in which she decided, contrary to the Board’s demands, not to fire a staff member. She said,

They created a little stir, and wanted [the staff member] to report to them, as well as to me, and I objected to it, but the [staff member] was in a hard place ... [The staff member] told them everything I was doing, which I didn't mind telling them, because the operational decisions were mine.

Cheryl eventually felt obligated to fire the staff member because it became apparent that the person was "torn between what [the Board] [was] telling [them] to do and what I [was] asking [them] to do." She said that the situation was hurtful and difficult for her because, as she recalled, "everybody was mad with me later."

She shared several more memories pointing to Edgarville University's internal dysfunction. Particularly alarming was that Edgarville University's senior staff members "would take what [they] found and tell it to other people and would go to the trustees ... [and then] the newspaper would have it, and they would attack the institution." After one term of these and similar incidences, Cheryl had had enough.

### **Cheryl's Departure from Edgarville University**

By the time she completed her contract, Cheryl was tired. Aside from the mistreatment she endured, she recalled that there were very few people who supported her and were on her side. Cheryl's adversaries, "picked people [who supported Cheryl] ... and focused on [tearing down] that person." According to Cheryl, "they just kept coming, and it [said to her], well, does anybody care about the institution?" She was aware that her detractors were being exceptionally harmful to the people who supported her "because they [couldn't] get to [her] because [she]

didn't care what they [said] because [she was] focused on what it [was] we came here to do."

Cheryl became tired of being picked on, and her few supporters being chosen as targets. She long realized that they were treating her poorly because they simply did not like her. In fact, she was told that "they had never treated a previous president as badly as they treated [her]." Despite her efforts to diligently fundraise, travel, and connect she was continually told that she was not presiding correctly.

At the end of her tenure, she did have one very large body of supporters; the Edgarville University students. Cheryl remembers that, "they were very, very hurt ... They camped out in the board meeting room and when I walked over to the board that morning, when the meeting [that would determine Cheryl's resignation] started, they cleared them out." And Cheryl still talks to the students. She smiled and said, "I've still got about three thousand people on my Twitter ... and I talk to them on email and stuff like that. I support them. They ask me for references, and I still introduce them to job opportunities and scholarships..." As I determined shortly after she accepted my request for an interview, Cheryl is a higher education professional who cares deeply for her students and the learning experience.

### **Lessons Learned During her Tenure at Edgarville University**

I ended the interview asking Cheryl what she believes selection committees can do to better communicate what schools are looking for in presidential candidates. She responded simply that, "they need to say what it is that they want."

She continued that she was very disappointed in the presidential search firm and asked them not to approach her again. Cheryl stated,

[they] knew the rottenness that was in this [school] and [they] didn't share it. If [they] had shared it with me, it would have been different. Maybe I would have made the same decision [or] maybe I would not have made the same decision.

The primary lesson that Cheryl took away was that she was not interested in working with search firms in the future because, despite their knowledge, they did not inform her of what she perceived to be Edgarville University's problematic organizational culture nor several of their other existing problems.

Additionally, she learned that she will demand the humanity and respect that she believes she deserves in all her working conditions. Since serving at Edgarville University, these are very important pillars for her, and she will not work or tolerate conditions that do not exhibit these. She closed our interview by stating that, "expectations are a significant part of fit and thus discrimination has no place in it for me."

## CHAPTER 5: ROBERT RUFFNER'S PORTRAIT

### **Fitting at All Levels**

Robert Ruffner and I met on a quiet weekday at a regional airport. He knew of a great restaurant at the airport and this location would prove to be perfect for a candid conversation. There was little foot traffic in and out of the restaurant during our conversation. Robert arrived at the restaurant first and chose a seat. When I met him, I was greeted with a very friendly smile. Robert is a well-known higher education practitioner and scholar. As such, I was expecting him to be dressed in business or business casual attire — I attribute this to my own disbelief that higher education “giants” such as Robert rarely “turn off.” To my surprise, he was dressed in casual clothing — sporting sneakers and a casual sweater.

Although I was surprised, Robert’s demeanor in person was much like what I experienced through our email interaction. As an example, our initial meeting date had been postponed on my account due to a family matter with my son. In response to my request to postpone, Robert wrote, “No problem. Family must come first.” This struck me as incredibly kind and understanding. Just as his response to my email, upon our meeting, I found him to be very ‘down to earth,’ kind, and matter of fact. He pointedly answered each of my questions, and also being a scholar of the subject, suggested higher education governance literature that he believed would add to my data.

In addition to providing me with the details of his presidential tenure, he also shared his viewpoint on the state of HBCU presidential leadership. He has worked for several decades in the higher education space and, as such, has worked with several institutions and organizations.

### **Robert's Recruitment to Waterville University**

Robert Ruffner is an HBCU graduate and has followed Black colleges for several decades. Throughout his career, he has served in myriad senior administrative positions at several institutions — both PWIs and HBCUs.

As Robert discussed how he initially came to academic administration at HBCUs, he shared that he,

just determined that we [HBCUs] can do better ... so [that] motivated my career to a very large extent. And so, I wanted to have an opportunity to show that historically Black institutions could be as strong and competitive as anyone could imagine, and [my family] had gone to [an HBCU] ... so I felt an obligation to give back.

I was struck by Robert's words that HBCUs can do better. By the time I interviewed him, I had heard this mantra repeated by several past college presidents. In fact, it seemed as if this sentiment — the “wanting HBCUs to do and prove better” — was a prerequisite to an HBCU presidency. Robert shared,

I really admire people like Lee Iacocca who tried to apply what he had learned as an executive before, at Chrysler. He basically saved Chrysler and turned it around. So, I thought that hey, I spent all of this time in [predominantly white institutions], and maybe I can do something for a historically Black institution. And so, that's my story.

Although a search firm was involved in Robert's recruitment to Waterville University, he said that they were not particularly involved in the details of the search. More integral to the details of the search was "a board of trustees which [was] not a governing body. It [was] more an advisory body that has responsibility for identifying and recommending three people for consideration." The board of trustees screened and interviewed Robert and two additional candidates. After they screened and interviewed the three candidates, they submitted the names to the president of the state's university system. Reflecting on his experience with the Waterville University selection process, Robert said that, "there was, perhaps, more thought given to fit by the president of the system than by the board that identified me ... [and] I think fit requires ... some thought, not just on the part of the candidate but also on the board."

Robert came to be a candidate for Waterville University by coincidence. He told me that he applied for a position at a PWI and, while at the interview, met a man who represented the board of trustees who would later lead the Waterville University search. He saw the job ad in a higher education news article and, because of his interaction with the board member, Robert immediately remembered the name of the university. When he applied for the Waterville University presidency, one of the board of trustee members remembered that Robert had applied for the PWI position years earlier. The representative was surprised that Robert chose to apply for an HBCU presidency and questioned his decision to apply with a joke that,

“You’re not a part of this Black college president network.” Robert was taken aback by the board member’s comment because “he didn’t think he had to be [a part of the Black college president network]” in order to succeed in the position. He believed in the institution’s potential and believed that he could elevate Waterville University’s recognition and brand. To this end, Robert told me,

When I saw the ad [for the presidency] in the *Chronicle of Higher Ed* ... [I thought] ... yeah, it looks like it could be interesting ... I had never been on the campus, but I had a lot of respect for the [school]. My goal was to ... I was really naïve ... I was really thinking that I could transform the institution into [being] a [part of the] public eye. I planned to be there like ten years, and I said I can [put] this [college in the] public eye.

Robert’s ultimate desire was to innovatively brand Waterville University as a leading health science HBCU. During his recruitment, he was most impressed with Waterville University because it housed many health science programs and, as he had experienced. “you don’t normally find that in historically Black institutions.” Even the PWIs in the same town did not have the health science programs that Waterville University offered. For this reason, Robert saw potential in the academic offerings of Waterville University.

Throughout his recruitment and selection, Robert was most looking forward to innovatively positioning Waterville University’s health science program. He had done similarly at his previous institution and, with a background in medicine, he felt qualified and professionally experienced. Despite his recruitment and eventual selection, he came to find that neither he nor his vision for Waterville University

were well received by the Waterville local board, faculty, staff, or students. He would later attribute the challenges that he faced to the fact that he was not a member of the Black college president network. He relayed,

There is such a thing as the Black college president network ... They promote each other, and it's no wonder that a lot of the schools are in the fix that they're in ... It's terrible. And so, [the board member that initially recruited me] ... was rather doubtful that I would...that it was going to work out...

### **Robert's Selection**

Throughout his screenings and interviews, Robert Ruffner communicated that he was adamant to change the norm at Waterville University. He drew professional inspiration from the business world. The business sector's trends of change models interested him and, when speaking to the local board and university system president, he often likened such models of change to Waterville University. He told me that he never pointedly expressed his desire to update the health science programs with the local board. He believed however, that with his vision the university's health science program might be a catalyst for university innovation and progression.

He broadly told the college's board of trustees: "I see opportunities to make changes and I'd like very much to do that." He did not mince words and he perceived change to be what the institution needed to thrive and grow. From his perspective, as president he would need to "crack a few eggs" to get things done. I perceived this to mean that he was prepared to take immediate action upon his installment. I asked

Robert what he expected the presidency would entail before he was selected to the Waterville University helm. He said,

I like to think of myself as someone who's intentional and purposeful ... I'm not a bench warmer. I mean, if I take on a responsibility, I'm expecting to deliver results. And so, that was my expectation ... I saw an opportunity to reposition the institution, to make it stronger, to have a clearer sense of its role and identity and to make changes.

Upon his selection to Waterville University's presidency, he wanted to be respectful of the institution's history but also wanted to balance his role's responsibility to instill what he believed were necessary innovations. Robert looked at me and shook his head. He said, "I hate to say it, but these folks, they didn't really have a clue, and they didn't want to, because they had a vested interest in keeping things the way that that were. So, I went in seeing myself as a change agent."

It was not long after his presidential installation that Robert realized he would not be able to instill the innovative change that he had envisioned for Waterville University. During his recruitment and selection period, he never had a conversation with local boards about what his role would entail as the president of the institution. Before his installation as president, Robert believed that he would go in as a change agent and help put the school in the public eye. While president, he believed that the local boards felt differently about what they wanted him to do while in his role. Ultimately, the president of the university system hired him because they shared a belief in Waterville University's potential and in the innovative change with which Robert wanted to preside. Other than the president of

the system, Robert had no allies or, at the very least, had no colleagues willing to work hard to create the change needed to make Waterville University what he perceived to be a quality institution,

As his institution is a public university, he told me that upon his selection, he answered to the president of the system and the Board of Governors or, as he called it the “super board.” Additionally, each institution within the state’s system had its existing individual local boards. Regarding the Waterville University governance structure, Robert said,

When [the university system was created], [the state] already had ... boards for each institution. So, what [the state] did was create this super board that would have the real governing authority, in the code of [the state]. They left these other [local] boards intact. They were advisory, but the fact that they existed left lots of room for interpretation and mischief.

As he found out, he shared differing values, visions, and beliefs of best practice with both the Waterville University board of trustees and with the board of governors.

According to Robert, he and the president of the system were the only administrators who cared about elevating and positively transforming Waterville University. He shared,

My sense is that prior to the guy who hired me, there really wasn't much [productive] ... going on at the [Waterville University]. As long as they didn't embarrass anybody, create any waves, didn't do anything that was stupid, it was okay. The guy who hired me didn't have that kind of mindset. He really saw the need and saw an opportunity to make a difference. And so, he basically gave me carte blanche to do whatever I thought needed to be done, which was good, until he decided he was going to leave. So that's when things began to change.

I asked Robert why he believes he was offered the position. He replied that he thinks the president of the system was impressed with him and his honesty. To the best of Robert's knowledge, the board did not want him because it was vying for the selection of a candidate who was an exiting Waterville University senior administrator. When they found out that Robert had been hired, they were not happy with it. Robert shook his head and noted that, "I still thought that I would try to work the best I could, but it's a lot of work, when somebody really wants someone else."

### **Robert's Presidential Tenure**

Robert Ruffner served as the president of Waterville University for four years. In response to his overall enjoyment of his presidential tenure at Waterville University, he looked at me and said, "to be very blunt about it, it was not a good fit." It was not a good fit for several reasons. One reason was that, in Robert's opinion, the university was very 'behind the times,' the board "had a way of getting involved in the day to day operations of the institution," and his work style was very different than his staff's, and the university culture was one with very little drive. In fact, he remembered that many of the faculty and staff would not come to work if they felt that they could still get paid without physically being on campus. After describing the reasons that he believed he was an ill fit for Waterville University, he looked at me and said,

[it was a] deep culture shock. It was just a different organizational culture [than the school that I came from] ... At [my previous institution] we had our challenges, but at least if you pressed a button you got something. When I went to [Waterville University] and pushed the button, I got zero.

He noted,

I had pockets of support for what I was trying to do, but there was a lot of what I would call the silent majority, people who knew that I was trying to do the right thing, but they couldn't bring themselves to speak up.

He knew it, the faculty knew it, the board knew it, and even the students knew it. He recalled that one student even came to him and said, "you're too ivy league for us." It was then that he really knew that his days at Waterville University were numbered.

Robert also found that he and many of the Waterville University faculty and staff approached development and growth differently. He told me about his attempt to start a joint STEM program with a neighboring PWI. He remembered that,

my vision of creating a strategic partnership with [a neighboring PWI] could never get off the ground. They wanted it. Foundations supported it. We could have gotten more money from the federal government because they supported these synergies ... but I had faculty that [said], 'I recall when we couldn't walk on that campus.' Sure. That was then; this is now. So you're going to deny yourself an opportunity, deny the institution an opportunity because something happened. So, it's very, very hard for some of us to be open-minded.

Robert previously shared with me that he was a product of an HBCU and that his family had been heavily involved in HBCUs. Even given his HBCU background, the faculty, staff, and students did not embrace him. He said that he was not well liked, which was in large part because he did not receive his education at Waterville University, had no affiliation with Waterville University, and was not from

Waterville town. By all accounts, Robert was an outsider and Waterville University was located in “a ... town that’s very suspicious of outsiders.”

To Robert, one of those old ways was the a lack of accountability. Robert explained his frustrations with the way the university operated. He again mentioned that the board meddled in the daily operations of the university, and noted that it was not unusual for board of trustee family members to be hired despite lacking requisite skills for jobs. He gave me one example.

When I first got to [Waterville University], I spent all of my career on the academic side of the house ... I always felt that admissions is a very mission-critical function, and it needed to be on the academic side, because it’s what faculty do. It’s why people teach, when they do research. So, when I got to [Waterville University], the admissions office was in student affairs. And I said well, why is it there, because it was clear to me that they weren’t getting the support that they needed and it had been in academic affairs before ... I was told that the folks in the academic affairs didn’t want admissions because it was too big a drain on their budget. Now, how dumb is that? I mean, it’s your life-blood. It’s the source of everything. So, if you don’t have students, and if you’re not paying attention to students and their ACT scores and SAT scores, a drain on your budget? You don’t understand what this is all about.

Robert told me that this scenario was sobering. It was one more situation in which he realized that he and his colleagues at Waterville University did not view their responsibility to students in the same manner. Despite all the signs that he was not a good fit for the organizational culture of Waterville University, Robert is a self-defined optimist and wanted to make his presidency a success. He smiled and said, “all the signs of opposition were there. I was just ignoring them.”

## **Robert's Fit at Waterville University**

During our interview, Robert told me,

I believe there's a fit for every president ... [and] ... it's important to determine what that fit is, not just with the institution, but also with the board, and one's values and one's vision ... [Fit] is very, very important.

Today, Robert believes that he was only a fit with the university system president, the person in charge of hiring him. The university system president had very little to do with the daily workings of Waterville University. The faculty, staff, and board were most integral to Robert's professional life and tenure while he was president of Waterville University. Unfortunately, he did not believe that his vision and values fit those of the faculty and staff.

He remarked, "I think fit requires some thought, not just on the part of the candidate but also the board." As he told me, the board ultimately had no part in his hire because, in his institution, the board was "more an advisory body ... They don't actually make the decision to hire, but they do screen the finalists and send them to the system president who hired me." From his statements, I assumed Robert believed the board should have had more selection power during Waterville University's presidential selection and hire.

Before presiding over Waterville University, he spent most of his professional career in "large research, meaning white institutions" and this experience had a profound impact on the professional culture he had come to expect. He noted that before his time at Waterville University, he, "never worked so

hard. It [was] a different organizational culture.” And it was a culture to which he was not accepted and one to which he was not professionally accustomed. As he told me, “they [the Waterville University faculty, staff, and stakeholders] had a vested interest in keeping things the way that they were. So I went in seeing myself as a change agent.” His desire to be a change agent did not fare him well because “[Waterville University] liked doing things the old way.”

Although he was an HBCU graduate, a notable higher education professional, and deeply cared about the successful trajectory of Waterville University, he simply did not fit the organizational culture of the institution. Robert’s ill fit with the culture influenced his ability to fit into the role that the faculty, staff, and students wanted in their president. Robert recalled that his experience at Waterville University was “a real culture shock for me, and I don’t think I was ever really popular among the students or the faculty.”

Robert spoke specifically of fit by stating that, “organizations, as I came to understand, need a certain type of leader, at a certain stage of their development.” He noted, “so many Black schools are just busy dealing with the potholes and silly rivalries that they can’t think ahead to be prepared for an opportunity.” He felt that he was prepared to lead and innovate while president of Waterville University and became frustrated by the inability of his board to do the same. He and the Waterville board had many differences in approach and opinion when it came to leading the university. For this reason, he did not believe that he was the leader that Waterville

University needed when he came into the presidency. Additionally, he believed his presidency would need a different set of requisite skills than the position actually required. He said,

When I got interested in being a college president ... the job was primarily that of an academic leader. So, somebody who was an accomplished scholar, also a good leader, respected leader, high on the list of priorities. Today, the average college president spends a half or more of his or her time raising funds. And equally important, friend raising ... And so, I came to realize that in so far as fit is concerned, you need a certain type of person to lead, given what the needs of the institution are.

In summary, Robert became aware that he was not a good fit for the culture of Waterville University. He believed that he was a good leader for what he thought the institution needed but, as he told me, it seemed that he was never accepted or comfortable enough to make the pivotal administrative changes that he believed the institution needed to be “[perceived in the] public eye [as a quality] institution.”

### **Challenges during Robert’s Tenure**

Robert’s presidency was fine until he began to make changes. He told the “super board” that he wanted to make some changes but he believed that, “they heard [him], but they didn’t really hear [him].” In Robert’s account, this is because he was not on the “super board’s” radar and they did not take him seriously.

Although the position presented myriad challenges and culture shock from the beginning, it was not until the early spring of his second year that the board shifted from ignoring Robert to attacking him. This was also the year that the President of the System, directly in charge of Robert’s hire, announced that he was

retiring. Robert told me that when the president of the system retired, “people [who did not like Robert] started coming out of the woodwork.” A few months after the president of the system retired, Robert’s tenure at Waterville University became horrible and that is when he knew that “this was not going to work.” He recalls that he was embarrassed for himself and the institution because he was being attacked by the board and by his detractors. He said,

I was so ashamed and ashamed for my family, because I couldn’t protect them ... so I knew then, and I decided, at the end of my second year, that I would complete the strategic plan [that I had started earlier that year] and start implementation as much as I could.

He created a personal goal to lead the college through that year’s Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACs) reaffirmation and accreditation and then he would step down as Waterville University’s president.

The process to step down took nearly two years and, by Robert’s account, “the last two years [of presidency] were not fun at all.” Although he stayed in the presidency for four years altogether, he knew at the end of his second year that he was not a good fit. He likened his tenure to, “a kid who drops out of high school. They may make the decision really maybe [in the] sixth or seventh grade. They just kind of go through the motions...but they decided [to leave] in those ... first ... weeks.”

## **Robert's Departure from Waterville University**

When Robert stepped down from the Waterville University presidency, he defined the university as “dysfunctional.” He recalled that many of Waterville University’s faculty, staff, and affiliates had the “tendency to be preoccupied with the potholes.” Because of this preoccupation, they could not be innovative and could not make substantive progress at the institution. Robert believed it was as if they were “constantly looking in the rearview mirror” and making decisions and creating situations, “where [Waterville University] could not focus on what was really important.” Robert described an example of dysfunction within the university’s daily building operation. There was one time that the university’s staff had not made a payment for Waterville University’s water bill and so the entire campus had no water. He looked at me and asked,

Can you imagine that, a public institution? I mean, it’s just stupid. How can you not pay your bills on time? I mean, these are realities of it. These things happen. And that might be an extreme example, but there are others...

He told me that he stepped down from the Waterville University presidency because he was drained. He was disgusted and put-off by the dysfunction of the institution and the culture of mediocrity and complacency. As he notes, despite his efforts to lead and “do the right thing,” he was met with challenges at every turn.

### **A Lesson Learned: Communicate Before Accepting the Job**

Robert did not discuss the expectations of the Waterville College president in-depth with anyone other than the system president. At the time of his

recruitment, he found it unnecessary. He would later learn from this self-admitted mistake. Although past presidents and the local board did not have governing authority over Robert or his presidency, they did play advisory roles in Robert's presidency. The advisory roles were symbolic and the local board members held influence in the school community. Robert shared that initial communication with the local board might have illuminated some of the challenges that he would come to face throughout his tenure.

For example, Robert told me that well into his presidency, the immediate past president told him, "these [institutions] pretty much run themselves." Robert told me the statement was pretty telling of the preceding president's leadership and perhaps the culture of the institution, as well. In his opinion, the school did not run itself. On the contrary, he found the responsibilities of the Waterville University president to be all consuming. Not only did the job require Robert to spend a lot of time fundraising, but he also dedicated a significant portion of his time cultivating friendships and courting donors. He did not expect the position to entail all that he found it did. He believes that if he communicated his vision and expectations with the local board earlier, he would have been saved the hassle of finding out the culture and the significant work that would be required.

## CHAPTER 6: ANDREW SPERRY'S PORTRAIT

### **Fitting with a Legacy**

Andrew Sperry's love for higher education, and specifically for HBCUs, was born from his own educational experience. I was most struck by Andrew's ability to see himself in his students at Lakewood College. Throughout the interview, he mentioned that he had great relationships with his students and that his work was driven by the ability to help his students succeed and reach great academic heights.

Andrew is a first-generation college student and appreciates the profound and positive impact that his HBCU experience afforded him. During our conversation, Andrew acknowledged that his first-generation background contributes to his "very high expectations and high desires about what a university campus should be like." He likened the college and university setting to "...almost a refuge." Andrew is a seasoned higher education professional who believes in following what he believes are best business and innovative practices in higher education. Simultaneously, he says that he came to this work to serve students and to "help minority students [and] first-generation students that were akin to [his] own background." For these reasons, he pursued the presidency of Lakewood College.

Andrew is a seasoned higher education professional and, before assuming the position, he was ready to take on tough challenges as the president of Lakewood College. He was not prepared for the way in which his tenure at Lakewood College

would test his desire to help students within an HBCU context. Very transparently, Andrew shared that his tenure at Lakewood College “certainly did impact [his perception of fit and the HBCU presidency].” He continued, “[I entered my Lakewood College presidency] ... want[ing] to serve [my] community in an HBCU environment ... [and then it made me realize that] ... perhaps helping them in a different organizational context was best for me.” For Andrew, candidate fit had an exceptional impact on his ability to fulfill what he believed to be his calling to his community.

### **Andrew’s Recruitment to Lakewood College**

Andrew was recruited for the Lakewood College presidency after serving as a leadership fellow for a prestigious higher education organization. He was a popular leader in the higher education field and, prior to being selected by Lakewood College, was a finalist in several HBCU presidential searches. There were two reasons that Andrew believed the institution was a good fit for his leadership skills. Primarily, the Lakewood College board of trustee chair was extremely supportive of him. Secondarily, Andrew appreciated the historical prestige of Lakewood College, as a history scholar, and felt that he would seamlessly fit the culture of the institution. Andrew recalls that he “submitted [his] materials, essentially, and with a referral, each time, kept coming out at the top.” To the best that Andrew could determine, he and the Lakewood College board of trustee chair shared similar political, financial, and ethical views. Andrew believed that he performed so well in

Lakewood's president recruitment primarily because he was the board chair's favorite candidate.

In regard to his recruitment to Lakewood College, Andrew transparently informed me that his relationship with the board of trustee chair helped him immensely. He told me that most of the HBCU searches that are operated with the search firm that recruited him are done with the assistance of the former president. He made the delineation that this is not typical of many, if any, other college and university searches. Regarding the search firm's practice of using former presidents in the search, Andrew stated,

I think that's where ... the beginning of slippage ... occurs with the way in which [the search firm] normally addresses things ... with the HBCU searches. I think there's much more of a deference to the former president, and in [the] case, [when a] former president ... serves as the consultant, much more deference to the current [board of trustee] chair...

Andrew continued to tell me that, in his case, "there wasn't any conversation of fit." He attributes this to the fact that he was a good fit with the Lakewood College board of trustee chair. In his experience, the board of trustee chair served as the general manager of the Lakewood College presidential search. Although Andrew was a fit with the chair of the board, he noted that, "for several reasons ... [his fit with the chair of the board] proved to be still obviously not sufficient because there are just too many other factors that were in play that did not come into the process."

Andrew believed that the board wanted him to preside at Lakewood College and be a change agent. He shared that, "my sense from the board what ... we need

for you to come in and baseline and tell us, from a higher education perspective, what our institution needs. That was the message that was communicated to me.”

### **Andrew’s Selection**

Upon Andrew’s selection, he was required to give some vision points about what he would do to confront the institution’s major issues. He told me that the major issues were not disclosed to him. Instead, he was asked to determine his vision points, “based on what [he] presumed and actually later discovered to be accurate about what the major issues were.” He fashioned his vision points around combatting the institution’s challenges insofar as human resources and personnel, technology, fundraising, and enrollment. Aside from these few issues, Andrew also wanted to “properly baseline” Lakewood College. To do this, shortly after his selection he told the college that they would participate in a study that is basically “...a reaffirmation of accreditation report [to give him] ... knowledge about what the institution need[ed].” His decision to order this study allowed him to do much more than merely baseline the college.

Andrew is adamant that prior to his selection, he was unaware of many of the institution’s challenges. Indeed, it was not until he was installed that he was told that the college had several debt propositions. As he recounted the narrative of his recruitment and selection process, he said that he views his, and many search firms like the one that recruited him, as “criminally negligent” for not transparently sharing the institution’s challenges with recruits. The study allowed him to uncover

many of the issues that the college faced, but he also found out about others in haphazard manners.

Andrew recalled that the day before he was to be introduced as Lakewood College's president, he received a phone call to inform him that a "rift" was planned for his installation day. He reached out to the board chair to gain more insight. The board chair had no idea that the rift was planned to take place. He also recalled that on his first Monday as the president of Lakewood College, he was greeted with appalling news,

I see on my desk ... a letter [from the Southern Association of Colleges] ... noting 15 noncompliant items, a letter from the Department of Education requesting a letter of credit request, a list of legal cases, totaling about 45 legal cases that were pending. And that was just on my desk — the first day — that I had no clue about.

These revelations would be the first of several unwelcomed surprises while he served as Lakewood College's president. Andrew went on to tell me that it was only after his installation that he discovered the institution historically operated in deficits and that it was common for Lakewood College to use lines of credit to financially survive the summer. Not only was it common, but also according to Andrew, "the trustee members were perfectly fine with this happening." Based on his tone and the many stories he shared, I assumed that such unwelcomed surprises became commonplace throughout his tenure. He said that the search firm did not make him aware of many of these issues upon his recruitment and, if they had, he would have declined the recruitment offer.

As Andrew explained the internal problems that existed at Lakewood

College, he told me,

That's where the challenge came for me ... to address [the problems that Lakewood faced] puts you at odds with board members who have long accepted [the issues] and just felt like well, here, you don't have to worry about [the issues].

Andrew told me that the search firm's negligence to disclose Lakewood College's challenges further frustrated him because he pulled out of several previous searches because he did not like the way the institution ran or the heavy-handed nature of the board of trustees. He shared that he felt, in a way, tricked by Lakewood College and the search firm that recruited him. Despite what he knew about the dysfunction of some HBCUs, he felt the board chair, because of their good relationship at the time of his recruitment, was transparent with him. Andrew reflected that the board acknowledged their policies were archaic and that there was a need for a more innovation. Regarding this, Andrew said, "he [the board chair] was transparent about what the challenges would be, but he gave the impression that the board understood it and that they would be willing to do what was necessary to turn it around."

He recounted information about other senior administrative searches in which he participated in. Those searches, many of which were not for HBCUs, inform candidates of the state of the institution prior to even making it to the final round of interview. As the candidates ascend the interview rounds, the colleges and

universities give “full disclosure of the audits ... on where [the institution is] currently, full disclosure of what the board owned ... etcetera.” He went on to share that he believes search firms are hesitant to share this information when recruiting executive talent for HBCUs out of fear that they will be labeled racist or prejudicial. Because of this, Andrew believes that he was not given all of the information to make an informed decision about his leadership at Lakewood College and, alternatively, he believes that Lakewood College was negligent and dishonest throughout his recruitment and selection processes.

Moreover, Lakewood College also made it difficult for Andrew to find out about internal issues from past presidents, as well. He recalled that after he was selected as the president of Lakewood College, there was little to no communication between any of the past presidents and him. Andrew thought that he would be able to talk to former Lakewood College presidents to gain insight into the internal working of the college — ways to build on the past and progress the college into the future. Instead, he told me, “you typically hear about transition opportunities, opportunities to talk with your predecessors.” Not so for Andrew. He was “urged to follow the suggestions and recommendation of the board, in terms of whether or not [he] should reach out to [his] predecessor.” He did not explicitly say that the board told him not to reach out. He said that the current president has not reached out to him and while he was Lakewood’s president, he never reached out to past Lakewood presidents.

## **Andrew's Presidential Tenure**

Unfortunately, Andrew knew on the first day of his presidential tenure that he was not a good fit. He shared that

I kind of knew, the first day, and frankly, my whole goal was to just last three years. I felt compelled to not leave or to be removed in less than three years ... I knew from day one, that the institution ... very much resembled [the challenges that face many] HBCUs.”

He told me that his day-to-day work revolved around trying to get out of the “fiscal hole and working on the accreditation reports, so that we [could] get off the warning.”

Andrew reiterated several times that he deeply admired the history of Lakewood College, but he also knew that the institution needed to be catapulted into the present. He shared with me that,

[in] the summer that followed my first year, we brought in [the American Council on Education], the Department of Education, [The Southern Association of Colleges], [The Council of Independent Colleges], our lawyers, our creditors ... [and the] *IU Lilly Family School of Philanthropy*. [And they] said ‘hey guys, this is what you need, and this is what should be happening at an institution of higher education.’

He told me that Lakewood College’s response to the consultations and the reports helped him realize that, “they [the faculty, staff, and affiliates of Lakewood College] were not at all interested in what one might normally expect an institution of higher education to meet.” Andrew shared that it was difficult for him to accept that staff and administrators did not seem to want to learn what he perceived to be the best practices in higher education. He shared, “when you look at [the college’s] metrics

and discover them to be what I would describe as [in] the red zone I don't think any higher education professional would look at any of that and say that that's acceptable." He knew that the institution needed a bit of a facelift, but he had always placed Lakewood College, and the staff and administration therein, on a pedestal as he believed it to be a prestigious, progressive higher education institution.

Andrew was not the only Lakewood College affiliate that was baffled by institution's state of disarray. He remembered that much of his role as the Lakewood College president included conversations with the faculty and staff in which he was transparent about the Lakewood's metrics and areas for improvement. The responses to his style of transparent leadership were varied. From his recollection, many of the faculty and staff were in "disbelief, because no one from the administration ever really talked with them about the condition of the institution." He told me that others were offended because they viewed Andrew as an outsider who they assumed was, "making this stuff up about [their] great institution." Andrew felt that he was often made to defend himself and his decisions as president. In his words,

I spent a whole lot of time trying to break down what the annual ... revenue was versus our expenses and how there should be some sort of equitable way that I make a decision, not just the way it might have been done before.

He continued that he was often expected to explain why he did not emulate the former, long-serving president's leadership style.

The Lakewood College presidency entailed considerably different responsibilities than those Andrew initially thought his job would entail. He wanted to provide a baseline for the health of the institution while also implementing innovative change-leadership. He found the implementation of his vision to be difficult because the university prided itself on its traditional, older systems. The older systems proved to slow the college's progress as Lakewood struggled to keep pace with industry best practices. Even still, many of the faculty, staff, board members, alumni, and other college affiliates had no desire for change. In fact, Andrew noted that upon being selected, he was very excited to use what he believed to be best practices in his role as president. When he was installed, he learned that the expectations of his presidency did not follow what he believed to be conventional best practice. He told me,

Talking about things that [the] higher ed [industry] talks about was not a concern [at Lakewood College]. It's more of 'we need you to come speak at this funeral [and] like that's what you're expected to do, not that they don't forget about working through the [Southern Association of Colleges report] ... [presiding over Lakewood College was] like you just forget everything you've ever learned or thought about higher education and just come in there and be, I don't know, just be a person that connects and just talks.

### **Andrew's Fit at Lakewood College**

Andrew is an HBCU alumnus and, before assuming Lakewood College's presidency, he was a finalist for many HBCU presidencies. From his experience as a finalist and an HBCU president, he believes, "boards make the selections [for the

college president] ... in many cases, without regard to the constituency and the community and whatever their [the institution's] pressing issues may be." He noted that many times candidates "go with whatever process has been established, with the understanding and with the expectation and the hope that the board has good reasons for doing whatever they're doing." I interpreted from this statement that he, in good faith, went with the selection process that the Lakewood College board had put into place.

Andrew found his good faith to be futile. He believes that he did not have a good experience with the board because his values and vision for the institution did not align with the entirety of the board. Instead, he was heavily recruited and selected by one very influential board member. From Andrew's experience, he learned that presidential candidates should more often "examine the attitudes of [all of the] board members who, in most cases, in HBCUs, don't really have to adhere to the constituency, because most of the constituency are not in power ... to be able to truly influence board decision[s]."

In the past, Andrew has also been a finalist for senior level administrative roles at PWIs. He told me that his experience with "fit" was very different between the HBCUs and the non-HBCUs. Regarding this, he said,

I've been in searches and have been a finalist ... at predominantly white schools, where it's much more rigorous, much more sort of [conversation about] fit ... 'we think you'll fit,' 'maybe not a fit,' 'here are the issues,' 'this is where we think you'll fit in,' 'this is where we don't'.

He continued, "I think in [Lakewood College's] case, there wasn't any conversation about fit, because it was really more of a fit between the chair [of the board] ... [and me]." Ultimately, he said that, "there wasn't any conversation about fit" and he believed there to primarily be consideration of fit between the search firm consultant, the board member in charge of the search, and him. He did not believe that this type of fit was sufficient for his successful presidency.

### **Challenges During Andrew's Presidential Tenure**

There were many problems with the marriage between Andrew Sperry and Lakewood College. Many of the problems that would prove most destructive in his career, he learned while on the job. One of the most pressing concerns for Andrew was that he was not able to put much of his higher education knowledge and training into practice while serving as Lakewood College's president. He told me that the school and trustees ideally would have preferred his role to entail "just be a political face or just smile and talk about [Lakewood College] all day." He could not just do those things. He would often respond with, "that's counter to any kind of training of any kind of senior administrator situated at any other kind of university." He wanted Lakewood College to soar. He did not want to just be a smiling face in the midst of a sinking ship. He often thought, "whoa, we got legal cases here. We should probably put in policies to prevent that. We're operating in a deficit ... do we know how much long-term debt this is?" For him, his presidency and the continued legacy

of Lakewood College would be ill served if he resorted to smiling amidst Lakewood's many challenges. He could not just smile, talk about Lakewood, and turn away.

Even after learning about the many challenges of Lakewood, Andrew resolved to stay through his term as a commitment to the chair most loyal to his campaign. Andrew shared that he believed the chair wanted him to stay for several more years, to implement his higher education experience and knowledge, and to help with Lakewood College's turnaround. Regarding the chair, Andrew said, "He's committed to doing it right. He's not going to shortcut it. He's going to be right there, with me, when I'm dealing frankly with the issues that we're confronted with." He believed the chair to not only be a strong supporter, but also a teammate in the institution's turnaround process.

What Andrew found was not negligence or unwillingness on the chair's part.

While reflecting on the missteps taken, he said,

Unfortunately, I think he misread his board and misread their willingness to support such a deep sort of deep incisions in grappling with the current realities of [Lakewood College] ... what tends to happen at [Lakewood] is just continue[d] celebrat[ion] of the past, without any sort of coming to terms with truly where they are in the present from deferred maintenance to debt to a host of other issues.

Andrew thought that the chair and the board would support his efforts to change and, in his mind, progress Lakewood College. He acknowledged that,

You can face anything, if you've got the chair and the board behind you, as we see in several cases where change is happening and empowered ... the problem becomes if your board is not with you and those board members are

also a part of groups that are trying to up-seat you, that's when, obviously, you can't really do much of anything.

Andrew wanted to implement a strategic plan that would transform the institution. He told me that in addition to the problems he faced internally with the institution, Andrew did not feel that he fit neither the Lakewood College culture nor the culture of the surrounding community. Of his relationship with the surrounding community he said, "my day-to-day struggle was, frankly, engaging and interacting with people who [had] roles that they would likely not otherwise have, were it not for them being a part of the community." It was difficult for him to engage with the community primarily because many of the community members were also affiliates of the institution. To Andrew, being a member of the community was not license to be a part of the institution — he believed that allowing this drove down the prestige and the quality of the instruction. Of many of his professors he said, "[t]hey're a professor, and even if they're not tenured, their longevity there [at Lakewood] and relationships there essentially equates to tenure." He further said,

I was just struck by that ... the faculty staff ... what their credentials might have been and the role they occupied, struck by what was the knowledge base that they would articulate, from their perspective ... in terms of what they might have known ... and what the industry would suggest.

As Andrew would tell me, this seemed to be the culture of Lakewood College and it seemed that everyone was okay with this except for Andrew.

## **Andrew's Departure from Lakewood College**

Andrew mentioned that the winds truly changed when Lakewood College experienced board leadership turnover. He recalled that the board chair, the man who was the biggest supporter of his hire, stepped down nearly halfway into Andrew's tenure. Andrew narrated his stepping down as, "one of the most traumatic experiences I had [while at Lakewood College]." Andrew told me that as soon as the board chair stepped down, he knew that his days as Lakewood College's president were numbered. A mentored advised him to try to stay in his position for the entirety of his contract. He heeded this advice and shared, "I just felt compelled to not leave or to be removed in less than [my contract's allotted] years.

On the day before his contract was to be renewed, Andrew said that "[Lakewood] picked up the phone and called me, [and said] 'Okay, we decided not to renew your contract.'" After the phone call, he was gone within days. He has since cut ties with the institution, the board of trustees, and has not been in communication with any of the presidents the institution has installed since his resignation.

## **Lessons Learned During Andrew's Presidential Tenure**

Andrew noted that there were many lessons pertaining to "candidate fit" and his fit within Lakewood's institutional context that he learned during his presidential tenure. According to Andrew, many of the lessons he learned while at Lakewood College have made him very cautious about continuing to lead in the

HBCU space. The primary lesson that he learned from Lakewood College is to be cautious of boards that seem to look after their own best interest and not that of the constituency and the community. He truly believes that the issue at Lakewood College, and many HBCUs, is not with the leaders but is rooted in the boards. In regard to the board, he noted that “[the rogue trustee] is an exceptional case, but I’m saying that’s standard and constant and consistent, across most of the HBCU experience.” He learned a lesson that, at Lakewood College, the board “[made] most of the decisions, and they [threw rocks] and [hid] their hands.”

He told me that unfortunately, he also learned that many of the HBCU presidents withstand ill treatment from their boards and unprofessional working conditions for fear that alternative leadership opportunities are scarce for African American higher education senior administrators. Andrew stated, “I think there is complicity ... also because that’s where most African American senior administrators are going to get an opportunity to administrate or lead is in the HBCU space.” For this reason, he believes that many HBCU presidents work in concert with the board but against the interests of the institution, the stakeholders, and the students. Andrew mentioned that for the HBCU presidents that do not work in concert with corrupt boards,

to know behind the scenes what they’ve gone through and what they’ve endured ... it’s just radically different ... I just would not know how to sort of recommend people, with the knowledge I have about it, but again, that may just be also why I’m not a good fit for [the HBCU sector].

The gravity of his statement was not lost on me.

In regard to his work as a president, Andrew learned that he was not comfortable presiding in what he believed to be complicity. He said that he learned that, “if you just want to keep a job as [an HBCU] president, you mainly just have relationships with them [the board] and relationships with key alumni members and make people, again, just feel good about their institution.” This was not the type of president or leader he wanted to be. He continued, “so in that sense, the fit for leadership, it was definitely not a fit for leadership, because there’s no, at least from my experience, discernible desire to actually change what one would consider to be key metrics.” As stated, Andrew perceived his role of president to be to progress and positively change the institution. When he was installed into the role, he realized Lakewood College wanted to largely remain as it had been before. According to Andrew, the college was not interested in change or innovation. This was a lesson learned because he believed before starting his presidency that metrics mattered.

Upon his tenure, Andrew said that metrics mattered much more than they seemed to matter to stakeholders at Lakewood College. For him, metrics, and what he perceives to be ‘best practice,’ are the lifeblood of institutional progression and advancement. His experiences at Lakewood College have impacted much of his belief about the HBCU sector and he stated that another lesson learned for his professional trajectory is that,

being in an environment [prior to Lakewood College] where metrics mattered a bit more and where credentials are, observed or appeal to objective data points in higher ED ... would all be better suited [for me] ... than in a much more relational and social environment like [HBCUs] ... [the social and relational] has impacted [HBCUs] to the point where I pretty much know that I'm just not a good fit for working in a predominantly HBCU environment.

## CHAPTER 7: TYLER MILLS' PORTRAIT

### **Fit for the Future**

I met Tyler Mills several years ago. I was a master's student at Columbia Teachers College and, at the time, was conducting research at an institution in which Tyler was a senior administrator. Upon our first meeting, I remember Tyler Mills as an impressive higher education administrator. He spoke highly of HBCUs and the work that I aimed to do. Although I was not one of his students, he was very encouraging of my work and my goals in higher education. While he did not know me, he was very engaging upon learning about my graduate work in higher education. I believe that he was likely a supportive mentor and higher education administrator. Undoubtedly, he was fiercely supportive of the students at his institution. I viewed him as the type of administrator to work relentlessly in the best interest of his institution and the students who he served. Several years later, I was admittedly shocked to learn that he did not complete multiple terms as Parker College's president.

Several years after meeting Tyler, I emailed him a request to be an interviewee for my dissertation research. Tyler immediately accepted my invitation and suggested we meet in the conference room of his current office building. After several emails, we settled a date and time.

Along with accepting my request for an interview, he recounted the details of our meeting several years prior. His recall of my work and interest in my current

success reminded me of what I had known about him upon our first meeting. His love for student success is evident and is important as it illuminated what I believed to be Tyler Mills' good character.

On the agreed upon date and time, I met Tyler Mills. Upon meeting him, he greeted me with a smile and, once again, struck me as a familiar and supportive individual. As our conversation commenced, I found his responses to be transparent but strategic. His words were measured. I believe his responses were carefully verbalized because he wanted to be sure that he answered my questions as transparently as possible while also not divulging too much information about the institution. He would later tell me that he had a deep respect for the institution and did not want to shed a negative light on it.

Despite his measured responses, he shared the most pertinent information that he deemed "the HBCU community needs to know" in order to combat the phenomena of such a high leadership turnover. Like many of the past presidents that I previously spoke to, Tyler did this because he wanted to help and elevate HBCUs. As he told me toward the end of our interview, his answers were intentionally protective of Parker College because of his respect for the Parker College students, staff, and faculty.

### **Tyler's Recruitment to Parker College**

Tyler Mills is a prestigious higher education scholar and practitioner. As he remembered, "the initial call [for his recruitment to Parker College] came from the

school and then the search firm handled the process to keep it anonymous.” Before Tyler’s recruitment to Parker College’s presidency, he believed that he had a clear perception of a college president’s roles and responsibilities. This was in part because he attended an HBCU and was also a seasoned higher education professional. Tyler told me that in the consideration stage of his presidency to Parker College, he believed the requirements of the presidency were that “you have to have a vision, you have to be a visionary leader, you have to be a leader.” He later expounded upon this by stating that, “this is not a management job. It’s a leadership job ... you have to be effective at getting people’s attention and getting them through information and inspiration, to follow your lead on ... a certain vision.” In addition to visionary leadership, he also highlighted the need for the Parker College president to understand how to fundraise. As Tyler spoke about the key ingredients of leadership necessary for Parker College’s success, it was evident that he believed that Parker College needed a leader who could conceptualize and implement innovative ideas.

In his past professional experience, Tyler worked on a college’s administration team and, in the role, was able to see all of what the job entailed for that institution’s president. According to Tyler, “I understood what presidents do and [my previous college] is not a bad place to learn it.” He shared his frustration with the “resource gap, and it’s an enormous resource gap, between Black higher education and some of the elite institutions.” Because of this, he noted that as an

HBCU presidential candidate, he knew that, “you’ve got to know how to raise money, you’ve got to know what you’re doing ... you’ve got to know management ... you have to know academic life, [and] you have to know the higher ed industry.” As he outlined the things he believed the president of Parker College, or any college president, needed to know, he listed the professional experiences and accomplishments he believed made him a highly qualified candidate for the Parker presidency.

Tyler also noted that his primary higher education professional experience was mainly held in positions outside of HBCUs — both within and outside of colleges and universities. He smiled and shared that the institutions and organizations in which he gained his professional training were “a bit different from Black higher education.” Despite this, Tyler was no stranger to HBCUs. As a student and very engaged higher education professional, he continued to follow the happenings of HBCUs and particularly the happenings of Parker College. He explained that he often grew tired of seeing the progression and innovation at the non-HBCU institution in which he was employed while witnessing stagnation at HBCUs around the country. To this frustration, he proclaimed that, “I insist that what was going on at [my previous PWI employer] and places like it was exactly what HBCUs needed to be doing.” With Tyler’s professional knowledge and skill set, he looked forward to elevating Parker College by implementing what he believed to be best practices in higher education.

His excitement about the visionary and knowledgeable leadership that he could bring to Parker College did not come without trepidation. Upon his recruitment to Parker College, Tyler was “well aware of the disjuncture” as it related to the institution’s financial portfolio. He told me, “in my interview, I had asked them to send me some of the audit financials ... I knew how to read Moody’s reports [and] all this stuff. I noticed that there’s a ... measure of institutional health called the CFI, it’s called the composite financial index.” He explained to me that upon his review, the CFI of Parker College was much lower than what he deemed to be a healthy score. He asked Parker’s board about the state of their CFI. They responded, “what’s a CFI?” Tyler looked at me, paused, and shook his head in disbelief. He was baffled that the board was not familiar with the composite financial index.

### **Tyler’s Selection**

Upon his selection for the presidency of Parker College, Tyler felt “very well prepared for the job” although he had an idea that he and the college’s definitions of successful leadership were different. After presiding for just a short while, he found that the situation was worse than what he anticipated. Tyler and the Parker board of trustees’ definition of presidential leadership and responsibilities were not slightly different but, in his words, were “very different.”

As Tyler reflected on his leadership role and his approach to the Parker College presidency, he shared his vision for the institution and the ways in which he articulated this vision to faculty, staff, and students upon his arrival to the

institution. Ultimately, he wanted to lead in a way that simultaneously engrained character and economic development into the institution's organizational culture. As he was not aware of one HBCU that had successfully done so, character development and economic development became the pillars of his presidential agenda while at Parker College.

Tyler defined good character as the culture students live and breathe on Parker College's campus and determined that Parker College, with its historical prestige, had long been a leader in shaping students with good character. He listed several alumni of the institution who are conventionally considered stewards of good character and whose life works have transcended the HBCU and African American community. In his opinion, Parker College boasted good character and, as Tyler explained, "this place [Parker College] was set up to get you to do something significant in the world and the place was wired that way." He believed that this notion was nearly baked into the formula of Parker College — the students lived and breathed what he believed to be tenets of good character. He believed that the other half of his vision — the institution's economic sustainability — was not as organic to the Parker College organizational culture. While president, he wanted to build on the college's ability to garner capital and for the students to be exposed to tenets of healthy economic growth and sustainability.

He believes that financial sustainability is more organic to institutions with "the big endowment, the well-paid faculty, the students without concern[s] for

financial aid, [and] the great physical structure...” As president, Tyler was intent on fostering a culture that boasted investment in students’ character while also building a culture that equally appreciated financial and economic stability. He noted that he did not want to change the culture, but rather to expand upon what he was bound to inherit as president. In his words,

Well, why not have [an appreciation for good character] and [economic sustainability] in the same place, at the same time, to a high degree? And that’s the pathway I’ve been on my whole career ... I insisted when I started the presidency at [Parker College] that it’s easier to have ... [good character] and go in search of [financial sustainability] than it is to have [financial sustainability] and try to figure out what your character is, and I believe that.

### **Tyler’s Presidential Tenure**

Tyler was a presidential recruit who was originally very well-liked by the board, selection committee, faculty, and students. Tyler believed that he “was a great fit with what ... a healthy future for [Parker College] required.” During his tenure, Tyler believed the problem was that the board “was looking for someone who was a great fit with them.” He and the board did not share the same beliefs of best practice as Tyler defined his role as establishing what was needed for healthy students and a healthy financial future. Tyler believed the board defined the president’s main responsibility to be fitting into the existing governance dynamic that allowed the board to run the day-to-day tasks of the college without pushback. Tyler refused to uphold what he believed to be the existing governance norms and traditions of the institution as he found them to be ineffective and to simply preserve the status quo.

In his summation, Tyler presented a well thought visionary plan for the college and was eager to implement the best practices that he learned while at other institutions to bolster the reputation, quality, and sustainability of Parker College. Unfortunately, he believed that his plans to better the college went awry because he and the board did not see eye-to-eye. They did not hold the same values or vision for Parker College's future. Tyler repeatedly stated that, "the boards definition to success was a person who was obedient to them." Tyler could not lead while being blindly obedient to the board because his past leadership experiences taught him that such a style of leadership was not best practice and was "not the nature of the [presidents] job."

### **Tyler's Fit at Parker College**

Interestingly, Tyler notes that he was aware of the dysfunction at Parker College prior to accepting the presidency. He had heard, "stories of dysfunction ... treatment of predecessors, in particular." He also told me that, "stories of board dysfunction were coming out all the time. I mean, just outrageous stuff." He believed that a component of the dysfunctional nature of the Parker College board was that it was heavily comprised of alumni and long-tenured board members. Despite this, Tyler believed that, "if [he] converged the right team and they perform[ed]..." he could prove his worth and fit as president. He said that he believed that he could show the board, through his good "performance" that he was able to conduct the role as he wanted and was well trained to do the job. Tyler continued, explaining

that he approached the presidency with the mindset that, "...if you put me in coach and I get on the court and score, I do nothing but score, you're not going to take me out." In essence, he wanted to "perform [his] way out of [the dysfunctional]" manner in which the Parker College board operated. In the beginning of his presidency, it did seem that he assembled the right team and would fare better than his predecessors whose outrageous stories he had heard. Ultimately, this was not the case.

Despite the board's discontent, Tyler told me that while he was in office, he heard praises from faculty and staff that his presidency was "the first time we've ever had ... a real provost, a CIO, [and that] we were overhauling so many fundamental areas, so we were closing the best practice gap." He told me that in his opinion and in the opinion of his faculty and staff, he was fitting in with the culture, he was opening new doors for the college, and he was leading the school to new heights.

### **Challenges during Tyler's Tenure**

Tyler was adamant that he still has "a love" and "a gratefulness" for Parker College, despite he and the boards differing views of successful presidential leadership. He loved the school but believed the problem was two-fold. In his summation, the first issue in his installment as president was that, "the board that was interviewing [him] was looking for someone who is a great fit with them, and what they required." He noted that this is not unique to Parker College, and this is,

perhaps, the downfall of many HBCUs. He and the board's ideas of the roles and responsibilities of the president were different. In addition to believing that the board wanted a president who was obedient to them, Tyler also said,

...they [the board] were running the school, and their perception of themselves was running the school, so the president ... reports to the board and in particular board chair as if that president is a day to day employee ... I never saw that at [any of the previous schools at which I was employed] and I never could or would imagine that it could ever work.

Looking back on his recruitment and selection, he disagreed with the board's inability to be forward thinking and future-oriented. He said,

you don't pass the puck to where the person is, you pass the puck to where the person's going to be ... you choose a leader according to where you want the institution, by the end of their tenure of leadership, you don't choose a leader based on where you are now.

Tyler finished the thought and told me that, before becoming president, he was an active member in the HBCU community, and he paid close attention to Parker College. Although he had no idea of the extent, he sensed the Parker College board of trustees would try to micro-manage his role as president.

By Tyler's account, he did a phenomenal job as the president of Parker College. Tyler felt proud of himself and his team for that work and he was convinced that, "We had metrics. We had measures of success, and I thought ... it will command the attention [of the board] and that's what I was banking on." Despite his best efforts, he was not able to win over the ability for his team to work independent of the board of trustees' overbearing oversight.

## **Tyler's Departure from Parker College**

Ultimately, Tyler said that he “treated [his presidency] like he understood the presidency to be and made some adjustments just to buy time, [he] did not compromise [his] integrity ... but knew there was not a good fit between [his] intentions and the board’s desires.” He narrated the final weeks of his presidency as follows:

I knew there was a good fit between the vision that I outlined and what the campus aspired to, faculty, staff, and students, and that’s all I wanted ... I mean, that’s all I needed. I figured that the president, faculty, staff, and students ... that’s four votes to the board’s one ... so I figured that once you have them, then you’re going to be all right. But that did not compel the board. So in the face of protests by students, in the face of a vote of no confidence by the faculty and other activity by the staff, they defied it all and said, no, basically, we control this and you have to go. So that’s where we are.

Tyler later told me that there was no clear, ugly event that led him to leave. He and the board never had a bad, negative encounter. In his recollection, “it was just a clear recognition, that grew clearer and clearer ... that the way I was executing this presidency was different from what the board leadership wanted, in particular the chairman.” He did not provide the details of his interactions with the board, but he did say that, “I knew my days were numbered when ... the faculty voted no confidence in the board ... and I had nothing to do with it.” He did not explain this incident in detail. He also noted that he knew his presidential tenure was coming to an end because there were many magazine articles and publications written about

the turmoil at Parker College. As the negative publicity drew unwanted attention to Parker College, he was keenly aware that he would not be president much longer.

### **Lessons Learned during Tyler's Tenure**

I wondered why the Parker College board, the entity that oversaw the college's presidential selection, hired Tyler despite their "very different" beliefs of the presidential roles and responsibilities. Tyler believed Parker College was in a "tight spot" due to the pressure for HBCUs to present well-qualified presidents. He said he believed the board was trying to change their view of what the presidential profile required. Tyler noted, "so here I am with the profile, I had a lot of fund-raising which was a weakness ... a perceived weakness ... of my predecessor, and I had [a lot of higher education experience] coming from [many prestigious higher education institutions and organizations]."

Because the board had a clear profile of the types of presidents that they selected in the past, Tyler was well aware he was not a strong fit with Parker College. From the beginning, he knew he and the board shared different beliefs of best practice. To this he acknowledged that,

To me, that experience was about where [Parker College] needs to be. So I don't think I was a good fit with what was. I was a good fit with what had to be if [Parker College] was going to stay competitive and stay [in existence]. The [Parker Board] ... let's just say they had an allergic reaction to [my vision] because they were running the place, and I was expected to be an instrument for their objectives and I didn't treat the presidency that way.

Despite his tension with the board, he told me that he “had solid relationships with the students, with the staff, and with the faculty.” He recounted numerous times that the students, staff, and faculty supported him. In the moments of support, he included the previously mentioned time when they gave a vote of no confidence in the board chair. He added that such a vote was something that had never happened in the history of Parker College because the faculty were historically afraid of the board’s unrelenting control.

In his experience, Tyler believed the board of trustees to be his biggest barrier to a successful and continued presidential tenure at Parker College. I asked Tyler what he thinks search firms can do to better communicate institutional needs with presidential candidates. His answer specifically focused on the board and president-board relationships. He expressed his belief that many HBCU board of trustees are ill enlightened. He continued,

Many HBCU Board of Trustees don’t have the future of the institution in mind as much as they should, and therefore do not end up selecting leadership with the future of the institution in mind, but select leadership with either the past in mind, or the current day to day challenges, which they should only have a mild grasp of anyway, but many of the boards are in the day to day, and when you’re deep into the day to day and when you’re beholden to some paths because you’re an alum, what gets sacrificed is a vision for the future.

Tyler’s presidential tenure at Parker College was ultimately shaped by what he believed to be a visionary, strategic plan that was cut short because of a controlling board. In the entirety of our interview, he spoke highly of the institution, the institution’s historical performance and mission, the faculty, the staff, and the

students. His frustration was primarily with the board and he reiterated several times that an important lesson is for HBCU selection committees to choose a president who will guide the HBCU toward what is in the best interest of its future and not solely to the day-to-day interests of the board and active alumni.

Tyler also noted his belief that, after this Parker College experience, he urges HBCU boards to remain current to conventional trends in higher education industry.

Of HBCU higher education professionals, he stated,

I think [we] have to redefine what it means to be a professional. Being a professional is not remaining beholden to, to practices that are you know, generations out of date. I mean, that's hurting the institution. I believe that the problem [at HBCUs] is with the definition of what it means to be a professional ... to be a professional as I [understand it] is remaining current ... [for example], if you have a Kool-Aid stand and you watch a refrigerated Coco-Cola truck go by, you either tell your assistant to go get some more ice, or it occurs to you that you're in the beverage industry and, something just changed, so there's a gap between my Kool-Aid stand and a refrigerator. It's a mistake when HBCUs say 'go get some more ice because I don't want to be bothered with the implications of the other option, which is [that] we [have to] hit reset.

## CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

### **The Portraiture Method**

According to Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (n.d.), “the development of emergent themes reflects the portraitist’s first efforts to bring interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order to the collection of data ... the themes emerge from the data and they give the data shape and form” (p. 185). The four interviews, and subsequent portraits drawn, are an attempt to illuminate the perceptions of P-O fit and P-J fit through the narratives of short-tenure past presidents.

HBCU scholars often cite derivative phenomena as the rationale for HBCU presidents’ high turnover. Rarely have these reasons considered improper person-environment fit as the cause for presidents’ resignations or firings. It is important to pay attention to the commonalities with respect to “fit” within many short-tenure presidents’ recruitments, selections, and presidential tenure journeys. It is within the commonality that researchers and stakeholders will begin to understand the “why,” and perhaps the root, for the high incidences of HBCU presidential turnover.

As Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (n.d.) encourages, I approached this research with an intellectual framework and a set of guiding questions. As the portraiture method encourages, I “hope to generate theory, not prove prior theoretical propositions” (p. 186). No current research or theory exists that proposes a root cause as an explanation for HBCU presidents’ high rate of abrupt firing and

resignation. Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture method presents an opportunity to generate theory to explain this phenomenon.

As aforementioned, this study used the person-environment fit theory as a theoretically grounded concept for scholarship on HBCU presidential turnover. This study proposes that selection boards' lack of adherence or understanding of "person-environment fit," especially as it relates to the candidates' alignment to the organization and the job, is the root cause for the high frequency of HBCU presidential resignations or firings. HBCU selection committees' adherence to theoretical tenants of "person-environment fit" theory might help to lessen this phenomenon.

### **The Interviewees' Fit within their HBCUs**

P-O fit is defined as "the congruence between the norms and values of organizations and the values of persons" (Kristof, 1996, p. 339). In many instances, histories, missions, rituals, demographics, and daily activities shape the norms and values of organizations (Manning, 2017). This is better known as the organizational culture. The organizational cultures of the four HBCUs were shaped by norms and values the short-tenure past presidents did not embody. Across the four participants' stories, their institutions boasted unique histories, missions, rituals, demographics, and daily activities and it was from these that their norms and values were birthed. Findings indicated that the norms and values of the participants were birthed from their professional experiences outside of the HBCUs at which they

were recruited to preside. Findings overwhelmingly indicated that the presidents and the HBCUs did not share values or norms.

McNaughtan (2016) suggests a need for a theoretically grounded conceptual framework to study high president turnover. I applied the theoretically grounded conceptual frameworks of P-O fit and P-J fit, which are both extracted from the person-environment fit theory. For the analysis and findings, I approached P-O fit and P-J fit as two concepts. As such, I first examined my data through the lens of P-O fit and then examined my data through the lens of P-J fit.

### **Presidential Candidates and HBCUs through the lens of P-O and P-J Fit**

This study found multiple incongruences between the values and norms of the past presidents, the schools over which they presided, and the roles and responsibilities they were expected to fulfill while serving as HBCU presidents. I defined “values” as the participants and the institutions’ moral compass and what they deemed to be appropriate. I defined “norms” as the typical or standard practices that the participants and the institutions deemed critical to the successful operation of the institution.

To find emerging themes across the P-O and P-J fit concepts, I honed in on what person-environment fit defines as “congruence” and coded for this language. I coded both manually and with the Nvivo software. While coding manually, I highlighted similar phrases and experiences between participants across interviews. While coding with Nvivo, I specifically coded for the words “fit,”

“aligned,” “congruent,” “agreed,” “same,” “similar,” “alike,” “compatible,” “harmony,” “together,” “togetherness,” “board,” “trustees,” and words or phrases that conveyed similar meanings. When applicable, I also coded for antonyms of these words to find emerging themes across the four past presidents’ interviews.

### **Emerging Themes: “Fit” Matters**

HBCU scholars attribute the high turnover of HBCU presidents to phenomena such as presidents’ advanced age upon installation, financial resource pressure, shifts to outcomes-based funding models and frequently turbulent relationships between HBCU presidents and their board of trustees (Fort, 2013; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Mbajeke, 2006; Schexnider, 2013). While the participants mentioned many of these issues, they did not attribute their firing or resignation to any one of these problems. There was no one specific event that caused any of the participants to resign or to be fired. In fact, there were several factors that equally shared the root of misaligned person-environment fit. The study found the most prevalent framework was misaligned P-O fit. In short, the presidents were fired or resigned prematurely because they did not fit within the organizational culture of the HBCU. This fit embodied misaligned values and norms related to governance structure and beliefs of what constituted industry best practice.

In all of the interviews, the participants described incongruent norms and values with members of their respective HBCU’s faculty, staff, board, stakeholders, or a combination of all of these entities. This section outlines five thematic findings

in which the participants spoke of misaligned P-O or P-J fit between themselves and their HBCU.

**Improper P-O fit: The presidents were thrivalists, the HBCUs were survivalists.** Findings indicate that a common trait among the interviewees was the desire to lead as a “thrivalist.” Nathan Irvin (2004) defines thrivalists as “critical thinkers, technically adept, worldly, sophisticated, entrepreneurial driven, highly competitive [and] able to see the world through a global lens unfiltered by their own nationality, ethnicity, or culture” (p. 16). One glaring example of this is in Robert’s desire to partner with a neighboring PWI. As I wrote in his portrait, he said there was significant private and federal financial support to implement his vision of a shared science department with a neighboring PWI. As a thrivalist, he believed the partnership to be an innovative opportunity to raise the university’s academic quality and put the university more in the public eye. Ultimately, many of the Waterville University faculty and staff did not share Robert’s thrivalist spirit. Many of the faculty and staff were not “able to see the world through a global lens unfiltered by their own nationality, ethnicity, or culture” (Irvin, 2004, p. 16). In fact, they did not want to partner with the neighboring PWI because they remembered and continued to feel trauma centered on race and segregated educational systems.

Like Robert, all of the participants primarily focused on their HBCU’s quality of education and academic offerings; their values and norms prioritized academic experiences and strategic operations. As they recalled, their desires to expand or

“modernize” the institution using what their professional training taught them were “best-practices” were often thwarted by institutional affiliates’ and stakeholders’ prioritization of history, rituals, and cultural phenomena. Three of the four participants acknowledged they desired to expand ethnic diversity. Regarding racial diversity, one participant stated that, “in an environment where you’re trying to recruit students, good students, [racial] diversity makes a lot of sense.”

The presidents and the institutional affiliates and stakeholders possessed differing values and norms. This is unsurprising as Freeman and Gasman (2014) urged that training and necessary skill sets are different across institutions. The participants each found that what their previous institutions revered as “best practice,” their HBCU did not revere as “best practice.” In fact, they often found the board, faculty, staff, and other institutional stakeholders countered many of the ideas of “best practice” that they had brought from their previous institutions.

Many of the values and norms the schools’ affiliates and stakeholders seemed to revere, the past-presidents, who were thivalist in nature, perceived as mere survivalist strategies. Cheryl said, “I wanted to be best in class, and they [the board] wanted to exist.” Tyler said, “...I was a good fit with what had to be if [the school] was going to stay competitive and [remain in existence].” Andrew shared, “[After my experience], I’m just deeply cynical about the future of HBCUs ... and I think it's the beginning of the end.” The presidents’ visions are different from their institutions’

values. In other words, at the very core, the presidents' visions did not value the same things that the institutions seemed to value.

Without a doubt, the presidents are thivalists and vision oriented. In their interviews, they were knowledgeable about "best practices" and visionary insight. However, like Robert, the participants shared myriad accounts of incongruence of norms and values with their HBCU. Tyler noted he wanted to be an innovator from the beginning while the institution wanted him to be a manager. Cheryl valued the quality of the institution, while the institution valued its size and number of students. Andrew wanted to step away from the historical glorification of the institution's past, but the institution thrived and took great pride in its historical prominence. Upon joining the institution, Robert wanted to integrate a program with a neighboring PWI, but the institution had not healed from its historically induced trauma. In all cases, the values and norms of the presidents and the institutions over which they presided were ill aligned.

To be sure, well-maintained strategic operations and quality academic offerings are cornerstones of successful higher education institutions. At the same time however, it is imperative for college presidents to do as Schexnider (2013) advises in his book *Saving Black Colleges*. He notes for college presidents to, "be certain that you can work with the governing board and that your vision of the institution is compatible with theirs" (p. 43). HBCUs are unique institutions of higher education and carry storied histories, traditions, rituals, and beliefs. It is

deeply important for the presidents of such institutions to lead these institutions to thrive and it is equally important that the Presidents and Boards share an aligned vision. HBCU scholars have noted HBCUs are in a critically important era as they must prepare students who are both academically prepared and globally competitive (Gasman et al., 2010). For HBCUs to accomplish this goal, while also continuing to attract and retain effective leaders, there must be a mutual understanding and respect for the importance of innovation in higher education while also maintaining the historical values and norms upon which HBCUs have been built.

**Improper P-O fit: A reverence for the PWI experience and training while presiding over an HBCU.** Each participant began his or her higher education professional training at a PWI. Interestingly, in each conversation about the HBCU professional experience, they each compared the practices of their PWI employer to those of their HBCU employer. In nearly every comparison, they made note that the PWI employer followed “best practice” in the field and pointed out significant operational and organizational deficiencies at the HBCU over which they presided. Regarding professionalism and professionals within the HBCU context, Tyler noted that he believes HBCU professionals to be beholden to out of date practices. His description statement communicated that the participant values the strategic operations of institutions outside of the HBCU context. This statement seems to be

dangerous in that it stereotypes the institutional and strategic operations of the HBCU and seems to elevate the practices of a few, elite PWIs.

The aforementioned statement was the one that most stereotyped HBCUs however, all of the participants felt that their HBCU was out of date and out of touch with “best practices” in higher education. Although they did not say so verbatim, each participant spoke with a tenor that seemed to elevate their previous PWI training and exposure to the PWIs “best practice.” Many of the participants believed that their experience and ways they solved problems at their previous institutions provided them adequate training and answers to the unique challenges of their HBCU. Unsurprising, because each institution was unique, each president presented different ideas about what their institution could alter to closer follow “best practices” within the higher education industry. Across the interviews, the participants wanted to expand diversity, merge programs with neighboring PWIs, and update what they perceived to be dated, ritualistic practices. For example, Tyler stated,

you have the employees of 20 or 30 years who have not kept pace with the changes in the industry. You have little miss so and so with all her students’ records on index cards when we moved to microfiche to now everything’s digitized, but she’s so precious and she’s so iconic on the campus ... and the culture was okay with them not keeping pace with best practice in the industry. Now some people think that’s precious, but they failed to calculate the risk for the institution itself.

As if agreeing with Tyler’s sentiments, Robert stated,

...adopting best practices and maintaining your identity as a historically Black institution are not mutually exclusive ... there are some institutions whose alumni, Black institutions, whose alumni feel that diversity is okay at Penn, but it's not okay at Cheyney. I mean, something's wrong with that. I mean, if diversity is good, it's good.

He continued, "you always want to pursue, in my judgment, the best practice, and the best practice isn't confined to being an AKA or a Delta or an Alpha or a Kappa."

Robert was the only participant that who specifically to expanding the diversity of the HBCU.

When Cheryl spoke of "best practice" with the funding and operations of her HBCU in mind. She stated,

...they [the HBCU] want the distinction of saying we don't do things the way that everybody else does them, because we are special, and we want special treatment, and my contention was I don't need special treatment, I need equitable treatment ... You can learn how to manage your resources, they just choose not to, and I don't, I will never understand the rejection of a best practice over this is how we do it, when how you do it is inefficient and more costly.

Andrew spoke of his desire to expand best practice insofar as the governance of his institution. He described his interaction with faculty and staff,

[I would ask] What's the process for that? [The faculty and staff would respond], there has never been a process. [Lakewood's past president] would just pick and choose, and I knew that that wasn't in keeping with best practices of certain governance. So, I say that to say that they very much desired and preferred ... a president that's going to be pastor like...

A common finding is that the past-presidents all wanted to change the institution to match what they perceived to be "best practice" for the institution. To them, best practice fell under the purview of the schools' strategic operations, the student

diversity, financial management, and the governance structure. To be clear, my purpose is not to provide judgment regarding the values and norms of the schools and the past-presidents. Simply put, my purpose is to show that there are, in fact, differences in the presidents' values and norms in higher education practice and those of the HBCUs at which they presided.

This finding indicates that many of the practices the presidents were trying to combat were intrinsic to the schools' organizational culture and makeup. As Tierney (2012) and Manning (2016) write, the culture of institutions impacts the governance, programming, leadership, decision-making processes, administrative practices, and strategic planning within a college or university. The schools' cultures are intrinsic to the organization even before the presidents' tenures began. Herein is another example of the misaligned fit between the presidents' norms and values and the institutions' norms and values.

**Improper P-J fit: The presidents were innovators but the presidential job at their HBCU needed problem solvers.** A common finding is that each of the participants were highly innovative in their previous higher education roles. In their previous roles, they created capital campaigns and introduced new, cutting edge, programs to the higher education community. Each came into office with the desire to continue growing as innovative higher education professionals. Unfortunately, when they got into the office, they realized that, more than innovative leadership, the institutions needed practical problem solvers. Edwards (1991) writes that, "the

fit of demand-abilities could be achieved when individuals bring sufficient knowledge, skill, and abilities (KSAs) to meet the job demand (as cited by Yan & Ok, 2011, p.2). Freeman and Gasman (2014) wrote that, “boards of trustees will likely look for potential presidential candidates that can solve complex problems and raise substantial dollars for their institutions” (p. 4). Each of the presidents described monumental problems within their institution; problems that were critical and urgent. They came to the job with the ability to innovate and serve as change agents, but were confronted with a different job demand than they expected.

Upon their hire, the participants realized that they were, in fact, selected to solve many of their respective HBCU’s complex problems. In the participants’ experiences, these problems spanned financial, accreditation, enrollment, and legal crises. In each case, unbeknownst to the president, they were brought to their HBCU as a problem solver, but they were under the initial impression that they were hired to be innovators and change agents. This signifies an ill P-J fit as Edwards (1991) writes that, “the needs-supplies [or P-J] fit exists when the supplies offered from jobs are compatible to the needs, preferences and desires of individuals (as cited in Yen & Ok, 2011, p.2). In each of the participants’ interviews, they mentioned that they desired to be change agents for the institution — not survivalist problem solvers.

Three of the four presidents stated that, had they known of the deep problems that their institutions faced, they would not have accepted the presidency.

Within this, it seemed the presidents were unclear that they would have to use their abilities to problem solve. Instead, they wanted to progress the institution and all four of the participants saw themselves as change agents; they were unclear of the purpose for their hire. Three of the four participants stated that they were unclear about the role they would have to play as president of the institution. This was primarily because before their installations, the participants were left unaware of situations that would greatly impact their job descriptions. For example, Cheryl was not privy of a major departmental program that was to be stripped from the college. Andrew was unaware of several audits and legal cases against the institution. And, although Robert saw himself as a change agent for the institution, he was unaware that the culture of the institution was one in which the majority of the faculty and staff were “vested in keeping things the way that they were.”

**Improper P-O fit: The presidents saw the HBCUs as problem-ridden and wanted to “fix” them.** During the study, the participants provided examples of ways in which they came to the presidencies with “savior” complexes. They quickly realized however, that their respective HBCUs did not think they had a problem and pushed back on the participants’ desire to act as a change agent. Even in instances in which the participants were specifically hired to promote institutional change, they noted as soon as they began their presidential tenures, they quickly lost board, faculty, and staff support.

Within each of the HBCUs, there was a specific organizational culture. The faculty and staff were woven into the culture and they often perceived the participants as outsiders. Manning (2017) notes that, “organizations as cultures are not isolated entities but institutions situated in a context that includes history, past players, and traditions that serve as the fodder for and backdrop to any culture building experience” (p. 71). Cheryl, Robert, and Andrew all gave accounts of how they wanted to serve as “change agents” and, ironically, each of the three individuals also used the word “naïve” to describe that mentality. In their hastes to change the institutions, they admittedly were not attuned to the organizational culture. Robert said, “I saw an opportunity to reposition the institution, to make it stronger, to have a clearer sense of its role and identity, and to make changes.” Later, he said, “And I had never been on the campus ... my goal was to, I was really naïve. I was really thinking that I could transform the institution.” Andrew noted that his HBCU was steeped in history and often glorified its past accomplishments. Despite this, he shared, “[I believed the people who hired me thought I was] someone who could turn it around and be there for a lengthy period ... and that might seem a bit naïve.” Finally, as she spoke about being asked to apply for the presidency, Cheryl recalled, “so I thought well ... this is an opportunity and an idea [to change the institution] ... this was naïve on my part.” In each of the participants’ cases, they were intent on changing the organizations and ran into “members within the organization [who took] an integral role in shaping [and maintaining] the [organizational culture of

colleges and universities]” (Manning, 2017, p.71). The participants faced backlash from faculty, staff, and stakeholders as they upheld the culture and histories of the institution in the face of the new presidents’ desires to single-handedly change the institution.

**Improper P-O fit: The presidents were disliked by the majority of their board.** Andrew noted that the board,

is kind of this nameless figure that can just say we’re not going to acknowledge anything good that’s happened during [the presidents’] time or nothing, and we’ll control the narrative, and that’s part of the conspiracy of it ... [the past president] is isolated because they are not wealthy, and they do not have platforms beyond what they were given [while president].

The board’s impact was undeniably prevalent for all four of the participants. In fact, across all of the interviews, the word “board” was the second most frequently used word. It was used 185 times throughout the course of the four interviews. This word represents one percent of the entire conversation.

This is not a surprising emerging theme. In many instances, the institution’s board of trustees seems to be just as important as the president. The Association of Governing Boards (2017) writes that,

the engaged board is now a fact of presidential life. Presidents must work in concert with trustees, including those with egos to match their accomplishments and secure their support. Successful [higher education presidents] view their board members ... as sources of advice and allies in change leadership. (para. 1)

The board is a powerful force in the life of an HBCU president. In nearly every case, the board played a major part in the hire and fire of presidents. Additionally, in

every case, the findings indicate that the presidents felt ethical dilemmas with the boards and, upon stating them or acting against the board because of ethical dilemma, their tenure became more difficult. Andrew mentioned that he believes many presidents at HBCUs face boards who “run and tell the president what to do, and if [they don’t], they’re threatened, daily, with [the board’s] vote to kick [them] out.” Unfortunately, Andrew was not incorrect. In some capacity, each participant spoke about their board inappropriately controlling the daily tasks of the president and telling the presidents what to do. In Cheryl’s experience, she said that one of the board of trustee members knew that, “anything that I did that they couldn’t control, how I did it and what I did was going to be ... a problem.” Tyler found out, “[the Parker College board’s] definition of success was someone who would be obedient to them.” In Robert’s presidency, he noticed “boards come to meetings, and they get dined and fed well, and everything’s hunky-dory, and there’s a nice dog and pony show ... and they haven’t done their due diligence.” He continued, that “leadership on a board is as important as the leadership of the president. It’s pretty hard to get good people.” Across the four participants, they each verbalized they experienced boards they described as ineffective, stifling, corrupt, and self-serving.

Additionally, in nearly each case, the participant said that he or she began recruitment having a close professional relationship with a board member. The interviewee revealed that their interactions with the board members significantly impacted their tenures. Robert noted that, “it’s important to determine what that fit

is, not just with the institution, but also with the board, with [the board's and president's] values and one's vision." This study's findings determined Robert's statement to be true for every participant. In each case, values and visions determined the tenor of the participant's relationships with board members. With misaligned values and visions, the participants' and boards' relationships grew cold. In one case, the most supportive and aligned board member to the president stepped down, an action that eventually led to disaster because the president did not share values or vision with any of the remaining board members.

For Cheryl, before her recruitment and selection, "one of the board of trustees [of Edgarville University] asked to meet with [her], so [she] went and [she] met with them over tea or coffee or something, and they asked [her] what [she] thought about presidential leadership." This board member would prove to be one of the most supportive of Cheryl during her recruitment and selection to Edgarville. By the end of her tenure, she recalled an instance in which she said, "I said I'm just tired, with the chancellor and the chair and the board of governors." Cheryl's relationship with the board and, specifically, the supportive board member was initially amicable. Her relationship with the board and, specifically, the board member quickly turned sour because as she remembered, "...they [the board] immediately ... turned to try to control me, and so when they realized that I was not the icon and I just wasn't going to stand around and do what they said, that presented a problem."

Tyler's experience was very similar to Cheryl's and Andrew's as they were each heavily recruited by board members and later learned they were only hired to do only what the board members asked them, even if they did not professionally or ethically agree with the demands. Tyler even noted that, in his experience, "the president report[ed] to the board and, in particular, the board chair as if that president is a day-to-day employee."

Andrew and Robert had similar experiences in that their most supportive allies left their positions in the middle of their presidencies. Without an ally, Andrew recalled that, "it was basically a cabal ... [when the board member] just stepped away from the board, completely ... that's when I knew the winds were changing." Robert said the same in his recollection of his treatment after the president of the system stepped down.

Similarly, Robert's greatest supporter was the president of the state's higher education system. He recalled "he [the president of the state system] was very impressed with me and hired me and said 'do what you can' ... he understood what I could bring to the role. He saw the institution as one that could benefit from what I could bring to it." Even though his institution often pushed back, Robert felt that he was at least supported from the state while working under the state's higher education system. Unfortunately for Robert, the state's higher education president retired while he was in office. Robert remembered that he was in the middle of

laying out an innovative and radically different strategic plan for his institution. He said,

we were setting goals and establishing metrics and all this sort of stuff. It [was] all about change. [The college] wasn't ready for it. And so, after the [state's higher education president] made his announcement, people started coming out of the woodwork.

Upon the retirement announcement, Robert recalled his colleagues telling him that, "when [the state higher education president] is gone, you're next."

### **Further Emerging Themes Across All Participant Stories**

The data unearthed the commonality that each of the participants is reluctant to publicly share their "side of the story" and that they are each hesitant to serve as HBCU presidents in the future. In all of the portraits, this reluctance is rooted in their fear that they will be isolated and attacked if they speak out against HBCUs. At some point in each of the interviews, the past presidents shared that they are happy this work is being done because they feel that lessons learned from short-tenure presidents are often ignored or unwelcome. Despite their beliefs that they have endured experiences that might benefit HBCU scholarship and organizational practices, all of the past presidents shared a hesitation, and perhaps even a fear, to publicly share what happened to them.

The participants also expressed reluctance to publicly share their story because they did not want to contribute to the popularized narrative that all HBCUs

are failing and dysfunctional. Most encapsulating of all the participants' sentiments around this topic, Andrew stated,

...presidents don't have perpetual wealth. You've got to move on in your career. So, that's part of the silencing, too ... and then also the backlash from your community ... they're not going to go and have the opportunity to sit down with you, like this, and to hear all of [the details]. And ... if you start talking about their alma mater ... the backlash that may occur there [is], like, 'oh, I know you're not talking about [my school].' So [short-tenure] presidents are silenced in that way, and the board sort of knows that.

The participants' reluctance or hesitance to fully portray the day-to-day happenings of their presidential tenures for fear of their professional careers and for fear that they must save Black colleges seems a heavy burden. It is a burden that continues to follow them, even after their short-tenured HBCU presidency. Andrew mentioned, "It's like, even on the market, I didn't want to share as much about it, because I didn't want the detriment of [Lakewood College] or the HBCUs..." After my interview with Cheryl, she mentioned that she had written everything that happened to her in a journal and decided not to publish or share the journal for fear that it would perpetuate the negative stereotype of HBCUs.

According to the findings, each of the past presidents admitted to being hesitant to ever work in an HBCU context again. Andrew lamented,

I've only had this [HBCU] experience. So, if you had the experience that I had at [Lakewood College], the thing you're reminded [of is] ... wait a minute, I spent [time] at [a PWI] where I had none of these issues ... frankly [after the Lakewood experience] ... I had to see ... if I wanted to help minority students or first generation students ... in a different organizational context.

Cheryl, Robert, and Tyler share this sentiment, as well. Their experiences at the college from which they resigned or were fired significantly shaped their perception of working and presiding at an HBCU. Each past-president, after dealing with the tumult of their HBCU, has either obtained a job at a non-HBCU or has directly stated that they are not interested in serving as an HBCU president in the future.

After their duties to the institutions at which they served, the past presidents found themselves burnt out. They all cited that they will never go back to a post as an HBCU president. They felt that their search firms and selection committees lied to them and they did not end up with the responsibilities that they believed their HBCU presidency would entail. Each of the leaders exhibited innovation, vision, future orientation, change leadership, and resource development — five attributes that AGB acknowledges as most important for higher education presidents (Callery, 2017). They are apt and talented leaders but may have been placed in an institution that, for the culture or the expectations of the job, did not fit them nor their value or norms.

## CHAPTER 9: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

It is my hope that this study paves the way for further research and practice regarding the importance of organizational fit and HBCU president selection. I believe that this study provides implications for aspiring HBCU college presidents, current HBCU presidents, and HBCU leadership stakeholders.

### **Are HBCU Boards wrong or are they unclear about their roles?**

Trachtenberg and associates (2013) write that “Board dysfunction may be rooted in group dynamics, individual board member behavior, lack of clarity around the board’s role, and lack of unity around the institution’s priorities” (116). Higher education across all sectors is at a place of great change. With great change, there comes the need to reset and reevaluate. Perhaps it is time for many boards across the HBCU sector to reset, reevaluate, and re-educate themselves on their purpose and their goals.

All of the past presidents with whom I spoke have proven themselves to be phenomenal leaders. Throughout their careers, they have completed capital campaigns, overseen large institutional changes and projects, and handled their faculty and staff with care and integrity; all while presiding at institutions other than the HBCUs from which they were fired or resigned. If the root problem, in fact, is one of “person-environment fit,” perhaps it is because the board is misunderstanding its role. I do not advocate board corruption or the board’s abuse of power. To be clear, it seems that the board is misinformed about what its role is

within the power structure of the organization. Yes, the president works at the pleasure of the board but that does not mean that the board should meddle in the day-to-day activities of the presidents.

A reoccurring theme was incongruent presidential fit due to incongruent board-president fit. If the board members of the past presidents were taking over the tasks of the presidents, there can be no solution until there is an understanding among the boards. The role of a board is never to be a puppeteer, controlling the president. Perhaps, until boards clearly understand their role, they will cause misalignment of fit for the president and the supportive leadership within the institution. Board members “are obliged, as a body and as individuals, to become familiar with good governance and the principles of academic freedom and free inquiry, as well as the particular culture of their institution, its history, mission, and aspirations” (Trachtenberg et al., 2013, p. 115). If boards do not know their role, they cannot optimally perform their board duties. If boards are unfamiliar with the college or university’s organizational culture, history, mission, and aspirations, they cannot work in tandem with the president to identify their common values or norms. Without a clear understanding of their professional responsibilities, it is impossible to find a proper fit between the board of trustees and the president.

One of the participants stated that their board was composed of a majority of alumni and that,

One of the things that's taking place is that boards are selecting leaders who do not fit with the board and the way the board does things and so they can't be better than the board because, if they are better than the board, they won't last long ... boards make the mistake of choosing presidents who fit with them and not with the future of the institution. Until the board understands its role, which is that of an advisor and counsel to the president, there will continue to be tension between presidents and board members.

### **Finding Balance**

While it is important for HBCUs to remember their histories, it is not wise for them to ignore trends in higher education. As is true of all sectors, HBCUs must find a healthy balance between maintaining their unique and proud organizational cultures while also adapting to the latest trends and innovations in the field of higher education.

All of the study's participants had professional experience in higher education sectors outside of HBCUs. Every participant cited significant pushback from their respective HBCU's board, faculty, and staff when they attempted to introduce new, evidenced-based practices that were found to be effective in the non-HBCU landscape. The participants believed that the pushback gravely impacted their HBCUs' abilities to fundraise, keep pace with neighboring institutions' student enrollment, and provide modern academic opportunities for their students.

Culture affects most aspects of the institutions, including governance, programming, leadership, decision-making processes, administrative practices, and

strategic planning (Manning, 2016; Tierney, 2012). Histories, missions, rituals, demographics, and daily activities shape HBCUs organizational cultures (Manning, 2017). President and institution fit generally assumes congruence between the president's and the institution's values, norms, and beliefs of best practice. For selection committees to simultaneously accomplish the goal of hiring experienced, effective leaders from outside of the university's culture or tradition, they have to be flexible in their understanding that candidates may not hold the same reverence for some of the institution's rituals and traditions.

While making sure to preserve the substance of their organizational culture, these institutions must remain cognizant of the possibility of alienating promising presidential candidates for the sake of maintaining rituals and traditions. The responsibility to reassess and reevaluate traditions and rituals cannot fall on newly elected presidents because they are often not steeped in the traditions of the institution and have not built requisite relationships. Instead, board members and selection committees, because of their deeper roots and demonstrated investment to the institution, must stay attune to the mainstream higher education sectors' best practices.

### **Understanding the Concepts of “Saving” or “Fixing” versus “Advancing”**

Mutual respect is necessary for any relationship to be successful. The relationship between an HBCU president and their HBCU is no different. The organizational cultures of higher education institutions are complex and varied. It is

not fair to weigh validity of one over the other. One is not better than the other.

Across the interviews, the participants communicated that they ascended to higher education leadership at non-HBCU institutions. For many of them, it was at PWIs that they learned about capital campaigns, strategic planning, budgeting, and acquired skills that made them highly desirable as senior administrators. Although many of the participants were HBCU alum or had close affiliation with HBCUs, they seemed to regard the customs, practices, and cultural nuances of their non-HBCU institutions with more reverence than those of the HBCUs that employed them.

Many of the participants later realized they were naïve to believe that their presidency could single-handedly change an HBCU's organizational culture. In the interviews, nearly each participant admitted that he or she wanted to preside over the institution to "change" or "save" it. It is imperative to remember that HBCUs are institutions that have their own living, breathing culture and, often times, this culture is not one that needs "saving." Could the participants' expertise and visionary leadership progress the institutions? Of course. But this is arguably the role of all leaders within organizations. The participants were both external to their institutions and came from non-HBCU professional contexts before assuming the helm. They often prioritized and lauded the prestige of their previous professional experiences. They aimed to utilize their presidency to "save" their HBCU. All of this communicated that they believed challenges were pathological to their school and,

though their HBCU proved to need presidential direction, they did not show an understanding or exhibit respect for what was in place before their tenure.

**Selection Committees Must Clearly Identify and Communicate the Skills, Vision, and Goals Desired in their Presidential Candidate**

Each of the four participants mentioned being unaware of the direst problems at their HBCUs upon recruitment and selection. Many of the candidates entered and left their presidencies unaware of what their boards and selection committees wanted them to accomplish during their presidential tenure. The selection committees lacked clear communication.

In each interview, participants described that they learned about many of the most critical problems such as legal cases, audits, and their schools' financial deficits only upon or after their presidential installations. I asked participants "how can selection committees better communicate what they are looking for during the presidential search process?" Every participant answered that selection committees need to serve with the best interest of the institution in mind and to communicate clearly and honestly. To Tyler, this type of service meant that the selection committees must be clear about what they want in a leader and communicate what they want in a leader in order to benefit the future of the institution. Cheryl believed that selection committees can best serve the institution by "saying what it is they actually want" and not hiring a search firm to say it for them. To this point, another participant also said that the schools should not put leadership search in the hands

of a search firm because “...search firms ... are lazy, a lot of the time.” Andrew suggested selection committees provide reserves of audit and accreditation materials that allow presidential candidates to inquire about the state of the HBCU before committing to serving as president. Robert believed that the board is critical to the selection of effective presidents and can better communicate if they “[have] a clear understanding of what it needs, [and] what it’s looking for in a president.” The participants’ responses provide implications for future research and practice in that they urge selection committees and boards to be more honest, intentional, and clear in their communication with presidential candidates.

### **Presidential Candidates Must Look After their Interests**

#### **Due Diligence**

Several of the participants admitted that they did not thoroughly investigate their respective colleges before assuming their presidential posts. It is in the candidate’s and the school’s best interest for presidential aspirants to perform due diligence before assuming leadership of the institution. In many cases, institutions are not completely forthcoming about the direst problems they are facing.

Additionally, selection committees are not always clear and honest about what they are looking for in a president.

My study illuminates a need to remind presidents that they are interviewing and selecting a place of employment that fits their professional desires, as well. During the recruitment period, presidents must interview potential employers,

particularly the school board and the selection committees, as intently and intentionally as they are being interviewed. When both parties interview one another, it is more likely that both the president and the institution will find a well aligned “fit.” While it is appropriate to trust the selection committee, the board of trustees, and the search firm, it is also important to verify the information that each entity presents regarding the institution’s health and day-to-day operations.

### **Work/Life Balance**

The work of college and university presidents is not easy. Among other requirements, a president’s role is filled with a heavy workload that demands decision-making, extensive travel, long hours, and significant interpersonal interaction. On several occasions, the interview participants mentioned that they faced significant stress, trauma, and one even said that he often felt ill while assuming the helm of his institution. Participants of this study often mentioned that they did not believe their work was about them but about the institution and the students. While this is true, presidents must also be sure to prioritize a work/life balance to ensure that they can continue to preside efficiently and effectively.

## CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to use “person-environment fit” as a theoretically grounded concept to explain the current rate of HBCU presidential turnover. I posited that the lack of adherence to candidates’ “fit” within the organization is the root cause for the high frequency of their abrupt resignations or firings — which, in turn, contributes to the alarming increase of HBCU presidential turnover.

This study centers the narratives of four short-tenure presidents’ experiences with fit. Through a deep and transparent understanding of these individuals’ stories while at the helm, I was able to understand the impact candidate fit has on the recruitment, selection, and tenure of a select group of HBCU presidents. I deeply appreciate the transparency, wisdom, and lessons learned from the interviews with the four past presidents. Through their stories and their unique narratives, readers are able to apply their specific lessons of candidate fit and reasonably apply the lessons and implications to a larger context of presidential recruitment and selection across the HBCU sector.

Fit matters. There are constant phenomena that occur while presidents are in their posts, but it is not the phenomena that determine if presidents will remain in their leadership posts. It is fit that ultimately determines the tenor of an HBCU president’s tenure. Embodied in this is the extent to which their values, visions, and

norms align with those of the selection committee and the board at their HBCU. The four narratives provided evidence of this finding.

HBCUs are institutions that boast bold organizational cultures and require leaders who both understand and fit within the contexts of these organizations. It is my hope that this study will push the needle on future research regarding candidate fit and the HBCU presidency.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix A: Research Questions and Interview Questions

This study aims to answer the following overarching research questions:

- Q1. How does 'candidate fit' contribute to HBCU presidents' high turnover?
- Q2. From the short-tenure individuals' perspectives, did they sense that their recruitment, hiring, and tenures considered their fit within the institution or the job? If not, why or what proxy was used in their recruitment and selection?
- Q3. At what point, if at all, did they perceive or were they communicated tenets of fit within their respective institutions?
- Q4. How, if at all, did fit inform their recruitment to the presidency, their tenure as president and their resignation or firing??

Eleven questions guide the framework for the study's semi-structured interviews:

- 1. How did you come to be a presidential candidate?
- 2. What was your perception of the responsibilities of the college's or university's immediate past president (before you)?
- 3. While a candidate, how did you (the interviewee) define successful leadership? How did your institution define successful presidential tenure? How did your institution define or measure of success?

4. While a candidate, how did your institution define successful leadership?  
How did they define successful presidential tenure? How did they measure success?
5. Before starting, what did you think the position entailed?
6. During presidency, what did you think the position entailed? How did this change from your search/selection period understanding?
7. After leaving, what was your understanding of what the position demanded?  
How did this change from your search/selection and presidential tenure?
8. When you began, how well did you believe you fit the organization? The culture? The job?
9. What event or person led you to believe that you did not fit into the organization? The culture? The job?
10. How can selection committees better communicate what they are looking for during the presidential search process?
11. Do you currently believe you had the requisite skills for the job at the time of your selection?

Appendix B: Email communication reaching out to presidents

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

I hope this message finds you very well.

I am a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Marybeth Gasman is my advisor. I am in the final stage of my doctoral studies and my dissertation is a study of the experiences of past HBCU presidents' selection processes. I believe your perspective and experience will contribute greatly to my dissertation and the field's understanding of HBCU leadership selection practices.

Are you available for an interview anytime in the month of \_\_\_\_\_? If you accept, your name and identifying details of your tenure, as well as your institution, will be made anonymous. As I would prefer the interview be in person, I can travel to a location most convenient for you.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Kindly,  
Amanda Washington Lockett

## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

### **Consent to take part in Amanda Washington Lockett's Dissertation Research**

- I \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an interview in which Amanda Washington Lockett will ask me questions about my experience as an HBCU president and the position's recruitment and selection process. I also understand that my name and identifying details of my tenure, as well as my institution, will be made anonymous.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in Amanda Washington Lockett's dissertation, conference presentations, and/or published papers.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a locked filing cabinet located in an office with a locked door. Only Washington Lockett and Gasman have the key to the room until May 2019.

- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained until May 2019.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalization I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

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Research participant signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

Researcher Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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