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LEADING UP:
HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS WITH
POLITICALLY APPOINTED GOVERNANCE BOARDS OPTIMIZE THEIR
EFFECTIVENESS WHEN LEADING FROM A SUBORDINATE POSITION

By
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

Community colleges provide access to higher education and workforce development opportunities for a significant portion of the nation’s population. This vital sector is facing unprecedented challenges related to declining public appropriations and enhanced external scrutiny. Relevant outcome measures for the sector have changed, and there is a large chief executive officer retirement bubble on the horizon. These chief executive officers, operating from a subordinate position, are required to provide leadership for a board of trustees, who operate as the chief executive officer’s supervisor. This study expressly recognizes the unique power dynamics that exist between community college chief executive officers and their politically appointed boards of trustees. This study captures perspectives of successful community college chief executive officers and compares and contrasts them with the perspective of an unsuccessful chief executive officer, as it relates to providing effective leadership for a politically appointed board of trustees. The author provides a series of themes and findings regarding optimal leadership styles, strategies, and tactics that while arguably are applicable across a spectrum of sectors, can specifically be deployed by community college chief executive officers. In addition, the author provides recommendations for future studies, for higher education professional development, and formal academic curricula.

Keywords: community colleges, community college chief executive officers, community college trustees, board governance, followership, higher education, influence, leadership, political appointments, power
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my brilliant daughter, Avery Evangeline Fischer.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

This study examines and expands the conversation on how chief executive officers of community colleges, working in a state where their governance boards are appointed by elected officials, can optimize their effectiveness as the individuals responsible for leading politically appointed boards of trustees. While existing studies have discussed leading from a subordinate position (Drucker, 1990), this study is distinct from previous works on the subject. Previous studies (Useem, 2001; Drucker, 1990) have often taken the perspective of informal leadership, are written from the perspective of individual to individual, and are thin or silent with respect to the power and/or political dynamics of the public-official appointment process. The particular population (community college chief executive officers) being observed in this work have a required leadership position for their governance boards that are rooted in formalized regulatory statutes (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014), which codify a system where a professional expert leads a politically sourced board of trustees.

Scarce literature addresses this particular relationship dynamic within this professional setting. Furthermore, that literature is mostly derived from professional societies devoted to trusteeship, not effective chief executive officer leadership (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b). This qualitative ethnographical study draws on conclusions produced from studies focusing on: community colleges, board governance, management, leadership, higher education leadership, followership, leader-follower dynamics, influence and power, and communication genres, as well as personal interviews with successful and unsuccessful community college chief executive
officers. Data obtained from interviews was analyzed to make recommendations for chief executive officers to optimize their leadership of their politically appointed boards of trustees. This study also yielded recommendations for further academic study and provides recommendations for higher education professional development and program curricula.

**Background**

Community colleges serve more than 12 million individuals engaged in undergraduate education in the United States (Bumphus, 2018), or approximately 40% of the undergraduate population of the country (Wong, 2018). Community colleges are, with some variability, oriented toward awarding associate (or two-year) degrees and professional certifications (Bumphus, 2018). Their open-access admissions policies have long been a hallmark of their commitment to broad accessibility (Bumphus, 2018), and the sector is traditionally oriented toward affordability when compared to selective-admissions, bachelor’s degree granting institutions (Baker, 1994). Nevertheless, the sector as a whole in the United States is experiencing unprecedented hardships with respect to enrollment declines (Fain, 2017) and reduced public funding (Morris, 2017).

Despite the sector’s challenges, demand for postsecondary credentialing has increased (Bumphus, 2018). Regardless if workforce development demands manifest as industry-recognized certifications, associate degrees or through other undergraduate programs, the community college sector will maintain a pivotal role in developing the nation’s workforce. Indeed, the sector is engaged in a number of national and regional reforms that modernize services, develop appropriate outcome measures, ensure student accessibility, and promote financial sustainability (Dougherty, Lahr, & Morest, 2017). The challenges and reforms facing the sector require community college leaders to think
differently and creatively, while still being able to provide critical stability for their organizations (Dougherty et al., 2017).

New pressures on the sector have emerged as a result of enhanced scrutiny of public agencies born from the “great recession” (Chen, 2017). Such an atmosphere creates difficult working conditions for professional educators, as well as an environment ripe for criticism of the public actors that are appointed to provide governance for colleges (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). This difficult atmosphere is made even more arduous as the community college sector is likely to face a significant chief executive officer retirement bubble in the near future (Smith, 2016). This significant amount of leadership change represents a major loss of talent and knowledge, yet also presents opportunities for new individuals to obtain and assume leadership positions.

In states where community college governance boards are politically appointed, chief executive officers are required to provide leadership for these political appointees with respect to the vision, mission, and administration of their colleges. They are expected to function as resident experts in the field of community college education, and are required to translate that expertise into actionable recommendations for trustees to consider (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). Nominally, these chief executive officers often operate from the position of peer, holding the rank of an *ex officio* member of the board (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). However, it is arguably misleading to conclude that chief executive officers and trustees alike recognize chief executive officer *ex officio* status as being fully equal in rank and power with those trustees who are politically appointed. In most systems the only action
that boards may take without a specific recommendation from the organization’s chief executive officer, is when they are appointing a chief executive officer; or when dealing with the contract, salary, annual evaluations, or other human resource matters directly related to the chief executive officer (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). This distinction alone suggests that there is an obvious power differential between chief executive offers and trustees, one that favors trustees. Furthermore, it can be argued that by virtue of the political appointment process, trustees possess greater political power and have demonstrated to possess influential political relationships in their state and region (Hollibaugh, 2018).

Boards of trustees are policy making entities, whether they comprise elected or appointed members. Generally, in the United States boards of trustees retain final oversight for higher education policy at public institutions (Polonio & Miller, 2012). With respect to community colleges, which often have discreet geographic boundaries smaller than individual states, policy-making authority extends to that particular geographic region. That is, community college boards serve as formal legislative authorities for expressly defined regions such as counties (Mellow & Heelan, 2008).

The single most consequential action that can be taken by a board of trustees is the hiring (or dismissal) of the organization’s chief executive officer (Polonio & Miller, 2012). This power is typically held exclusively by boards of trustees (Polonio & Miller, 2012). Ubiquitously codified best-practices for the community college sector indicate that trustees should refrain from involving themselves in the day-to-day administration of the college. Administration and daily operations should be delegated to, and should be the responsibility, of the chief executive officer (Association of Community College
Trustees, 2016b). This is not to say trustees should expect to be kept in the dark regarding administrative operations, nor should they be ignorant concerning the administrative execution of the organization’s mission, but it does suggest that they should be primarily engaged in the work of developing policy. To do this they are advised to work hand-in-glove with their chief executive officer, supporting that chief executive officer in efforts to effectively administer the college (Smith, 2000). Fittingly, the need to maintain separate organizational units for policy development and administrative leadership appears throughout various literature bases related to organizational management (Crutchfield & Grant, 2008). Professional development material specifically related to community colleges also speaks to the value of maintaining a distinct operation for each of these facets (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Leadership relationships often are viewed through the prism of those leading from a position of authority, whether that be through a formal rank within an organization, or from a specifically defined role as a peer who has been entrusted with the authority to lead (Peiro & Melia, 2003). Of course, these are not exclusive conditions. For example, a preponderance of literature addresses how subordinates can manage their supervisors (Gabbaro & Kotter, 2005), and how experts, regardless of organizational rank or title are often called upon to lead special projects or long-term tasks (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 1990). Infrequently however, is the circumstance of having to lead from a subordinate role within board governance discreetly observed or analyzed. This study seeks to better understand the how community college chief executive officers, who are subordinate to their boards of trustees, are able to optimize their capacity to lead those boards. This
particular relationship is worthy of academic inquiry to both ensure that individuals serving in such positions have the tools and awareness they need to be effective, and to ensure that under-observed leadership dynamics are given sufficient attention within the broader leadership literature base.

This study, while addressing an area that is sparse in the broader leadership, higher education leadership, and board governance literatures, is also timely as the stability of enrollment, appropriations and other resources for community colleges are increasingly threatened (Long, 2016). This scarcity of resources has motivated an enhanced atmosphere of scrutiny for chief executive officers and their organizations, as political actors responsible for public funds feel growing pressures to ensure the effective and efficient use of public dollars (Nelson, 2014). Thus, those politically appointed to serve on community college governance boards have an enhanced focus on financial efficiency and media scrutiny, over and above their policy-making responsibilities (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014).

Volatile and temporal political conditions are likely to influence political appointees to develop agendas that are incongruent with chief executive officers’ ideas about how to best lead and manage their organizations (Trachtenberg, Kauver, & Bogue, 2013). Despite, that atmosphere, an opportunity exists to hold those potentially competing interests in a “suspended tension” to develop something altogether unique (Martin, 2009, p.7). As financial resources are unlikely to increase through public appropriations, chief executive officers who develop refined skills in rectifying these tensions can develop their boards into cohesive governance units. Thus, they can
maintain a strategic advantage in optimizing their leadership effectiveness, as well as their organizations’ effectiveness in meeting their missions.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this ethnographical dissertation in practice is to gauge what leadership strategies, tactics, and styles successful chief executive officers working in community college systems, where governance boards are politically appointed, have used to optimize their effectiveness in leading their governance board. This study recognizes that chief executive officers provide leadership from a subordinate hierarchical position in the organization to their trustees.

**Research Question**

How can community college chief executive officers, working in the Northeastern United States, optimize their effectiveness when providing leadership for their governance boards?

**Aim of the Study**

Through the analysis of responses collected from an appropriate sample of successful community college chief executive officers, common traits, styles, and patterns for how they effectively lead their boards from a subordinate position was identified and codified. This codification can serve to inform leadership program curricula, empower current and potential chief executive officers with insights that can better prepare them to lead governance boards, and possibly to inform and improve public policy decision makers.

**Overview of Methodology**

In that quantitative data do not yet exist with respect to the research question, and due to the nature of the qualitative data collected in this study it can be argued that the
research question cannot properly be addressed through inferential statistical analysis. Thus, a qualitative methodology for this research is arguably more appropriate (Hatch, 2002). One specific criterion was applied in the study for a candidate to be considered either “successful” or “unsuccessful” in leading their politically appointed boards. Thus, the population was a criterion sample (Creswell, 2014). Utilizing such a criterion sample led to an ethnography study methodology (Creswell, 2014).

Ethnographical qualitative research evolved from research methods typically deployed in anthropology and sociology. As Creswell (2014) indicated, data collection relies on interviews with carefully defined cohorts of individuals, as well as observation of those individuals during the interview process and/or in other appropriate settings. These cohorts of individuals “share patterns of behavior, language, and actions of an intact cultural group” (Creswell, 2014, p.14) over an extended period of time. Researchers encourage participants to share their reflections of activities that have occurred over an extended period of time (Creswell, 2014).

Through the generation of data obtained from interviews and observation, researchers can engage in an analysis that discerns whether common patterns emerge within the intact cultural group. These commonalities, or a lack of commonalities, can be used for the purpose of developing a meaningful analysis that informs a specific body of literature, in seeking solutions to shared problems, and/or in illustrating and informing academically oriented discussions on subjects that have received limited academic attention (Creswell, 2007).

Ethnographic analysis is conducted through the coding of interview responses. In this work, following Creswell’s guidance (2007), data (interview responses) were coded
into themes and subthemes that manifested from participant interviews. These coded themes illustrate observed patterns of responses and relevant observed behaviors.

**Definition of Relevant Terms**

Terms used in this study require specific definition for clarity. The term *successful* is used to indicate individuals in the sample population for this study who are perceived to have executed their responsibility to lead their boards with a degree of sophistication and aplomb. This is not a measure of how well their colleges are doing with respect to accreditation, financial resources, or other commonly used higher education outcome measures (Kvaal & Bridgeland, 2018), but to assess if individuals have effectively navigated the nuances of board governance, and thus have been retained in their position as chief executive officer. Due to myriad variables, individuals, and unique institutional issues, it is essential to ensure that such a definition refrain from being subjective. Thus, a simple objective measure was used to delineate chief executive officers that are considered successful. Most college chief executive officers have within their contracts reappointment and termination clauses (White, 2015). Because of this standard, Trachtenberg, Kauver, and Bogue (2013) contend that chief executive officers at higher education institutions, who have served for at least five years can be perceived as being generally effective. This time frame accounts for common contract renewal time frames that appear throughout much of the sector and account for extenuating circumstances, or lingering effects from previous administrations.

To determine if retired individuals were successful in navigating this environment they had to have retired under their own terms, rather than having been terminated or afforded an opportunity to resign under conditions that were not favorable. Here it is also essential to provide parameters for the term *recently retired*. Perspectives of retired
individuals were deliberately sought as they had potential to be less guarded and/or could provide a more reflective understanding of how they managed to effectively execute their responsibilities. Retired individuals were considered for interviews provided that their immediate successor was still in the position of CEO at that college from which they retired. This ensured that retired individuals interviewed were still familiar with organizational, political, and governance issues that are likely to exist for current chief executive officers in the sector. In addition, because there have been substantial economic, political, and legislative changes since the “great recession” of 2008/09 that have impacted the dynamics of the community college sector (Chen, 2017), no individual who has been retired for more than 10 years was considered for an interview.

While the goal of this study was to determine how successful chief executive officers have optimized their efforts as board leaders, counter examples were deliberately sought to provide perspectives that could further enrich the conclusions drawn from data collected. Three individuals were identified as having met the criterion sample but were deemed unsuccessful. One individual, who had left their position through an unexpected termination, agreed to be interviewed. The inclusion of this perspective was enriching to the final analysis and recommendations produced by this study. Fittingly, the term unsuccessful, when used in this study in reference to chief executive officers, indicates that the chief executive officer failed to be re-contracted. The term does not make any implications with respect to the particular College’s financial, academic, or accreditation health, or any other frequently cited higher education institution outcome measures (Kvaal and Bridgeland, 2018).
The term *power* is used throughout the study. This term has multiple definitions and connotations within the broader leadership literature base (Greenleaf, 2002). For the purposes of this dissertation, Haslam, Reicher, and Platow’s (2011) articulation that those who possess, “material or psychological resources: (1) rewards, (2) coercion, (3) expertise, (4) information, (5) legitimacy, and (6) respect” (p.34), provides a succinct definition to conceptualize the comprehensive political power and formal political authority possessed by politically appointed community college trustees. This power is bestowed on them by virtue of the office they hold, their political appointment, and their relationships with appointing agents such as elected county leaders and elected state governors. Indeed, this delineation of types of power is also helpful in describing the power possessed by community college chief executive officers who logically possess both expertise and informational power (Peiro & Melia, 2003) when standing in contrast with their politically appointed boards of trustees, who possess formal and political power (Hollibaugh, 2018).

The term *community college* is used extensively. This term refers to institutions where academic programs generally lead to an associate degree, have open-access admissions policies, prepare students for transfer into bachelor’s degree programs, and generally serve a specified geographic region (Levin & Kater, 2012). Such institutions also generally have roots developed in Zook’s (1947) report, “Higher education for democracy: A report to the chief executive officer’s commission on higher education,” which outlined a need for the creation of openly accessible, and locally oriented institutions of higher education.
The term *chief executive officer* is used throughout the study. This term references the senior leader of a community college, who reports directly to the board of trustees. This individual has the authority to make recommendations to the board and serves as the highest ranking executive within the organization. While the terms president and chancellor often are used to describe this position in academia, to ensure against any confusion in terminology, and to protect anonymity of study participants, the term chief executive officer or the abbreviated term CEO is used.

The term *Northeast* is used to describe the region from which the sample base of community college CEOs was drawn. The Northeast is defined broadly using the United States’ Census Bureau’s definition of the region. Those states are: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Limiting the region to this specific area accounts for variables that might not exist between the various constituent regions of the United States and acknowledges that states in the Northeast use a political appointment process to staff community college governance boards (Tollefson, 2009). It should be noted, that some states or individual schools permit the direct election of alumni or student trustees who are outside of the traditional political appointment process. However, these trustees often have special conditions, lack formal voting rights, have shorter terms, can be considered ceremonial, and are significantly fewer in numbers (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014).

The terms *political actor* and *professional actor* are used at various points throughout the study to reference whether individuals are operating in the public sector as elected politicians, appointed officials, or as higher education employees. Sources have
defined people working within the public sector as a political actor, regardless of their position or job title, as a means of conveying that politics and public life are comingled, and that the individuals have a stake in the success of a defined public or political organization (McNair, 2017). Thus, for this study elected officials and appointed trustees are referenced as political actors when appropriate, and those operating as higher education professionals are referenced as professional actors when appropriate. An additional term, civic elite, is used in reference individuals that are influential to public life in any given jurisdiction. The term comingles elected and appointed government officials, significant private sector, and nonprofit leaders, as well as other individuals of influence.

The term political skill also is used throughout the study to reference the interactions between chief executive officers and their politically appointed governance boards, and the political actors who appoint trustees to governance boards. This term is referenced frequently in various literature bases (Hahn, 2003). Those who participated in this research, when they used this term, generally described the methods of communication and the nuances of their interactions with individuals who held both political power in governments, as well as those with political leverage on their governance boards, and among their college staffs and volunteers. For the purposes of this research, the term implies a skill set used to effectively engage with individuals who have, or are instrumental to, the preservation and success of a specific public or political entity. The use of political skill in this context also generally implies the use of negotiations, and trade-offs to successfully further one’s agenda or goals (Burke, 2014).
Lastly, the term *governance board* is used to describe a politically appointed board of trustees that serves as the policy-making body for a public community college, and whose members are the formal supervisors of the previously referenced chief executive officer (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014).

**Limitations, Delimitations, Assumptions, and Personal Bias**

This study is limited to a target population of community college chief executive officers operating in a Northeastern state, where community college governance boards are appointed by political officials. While this work may possibly inform board governance where trustees are elected, or in regions outside of the Northeast, a range of variables, such as demographic changes, regional legislation or policies, and funding mechanisms prohibit the broad application of conclusions outside of this particular geographic region or into other systems of higher education, or sectors that feature board governance organizational models. It is also important to note that the definition aforementioned for “success” presents a limitation in that individuals who have yet to meet the threshold of years served, but might have insights worthy of consideration are purposefully not included. Furthermore, individuals who have retained their positions through some alternative political leverage could skew the data mined in the interview process.

An assumption of this work was that successful chief executive officers interviewed sought to obtain their position because it was their professional ambition to execute the mission of an open-access community college. It is also assumed that individuals interviewed professionally groomed themselves to be community college experts and are prepared through a combination of education and experience to execute those responsibilities. This is distinct from individuals who have obtained the position of
chief executive officer through some sort of political patronage system. Successful CEOs interviewed, without fail, described the path to their current position as having been the former, and provided detailed responses indicating that they had systematically cultivated the requisite expertise to successfully compete for such positions regardless of their existing (or nonexistent) political relationships.

Over a period of 10 years the researcher was professionally employed at a community college. This experience provided a broad perspective as an administrative leader. However, the researcher has no prior direct experience as a politically appointed trustee on a community college governance board.

**Role of Leadership in this Study**

Leading from a subordinate position presents a challenging dynamic. This power dynamic and leadership nexus between community college CEOs and trustees is worthy of formal academic exploration, as the phenomena is presently under-observed, and current and potential chief executive officers could benefit from gathered insights. Because community colleges often serve the nation’s most vulnerable student populations (Ma & Baum, 2016), seeking to understand how leadership principles can effectively be applied by community college chief executive officers is essential for empowering the nation’s educational system and workforce development opportunities. This study can arguably influence a shift in existing leadership approaches, which have the potential to generate greater consensus and dialogue between CEOs and trustees, aid in maintaining a focus on the greater good by all parties (Lowney, 2003), and ensure that the all-too-often neglected leadership traits of humility and self-reflection are maintained by chief executive officers (Lowney, 2003).
Significance of the Dissertation in Practice Study

The study addresses a gap in the literature pertaining to community college board governance. Observing the dynamics of leaders working in a subordinate position within their organization’s hierarchy, yet have greater expert authority (Johnson, 2012), who are required to provide leadership for their governance boards, has relevance for those who hold such positions, and for those who aspire to hold such positions. The study is also relevant for politically appointed trustees who seek to educate themselves regarding their responsibilities as stewards of public organizations (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). Indeed, political decision makers, whether they be in executive or legislative (policy development) roles also can benefit from a deeper, richer understanding of the leadership dynamics they influence in their region’s community colleges.

This study has the potential to inform current literature for community college governance, board governance and higher education board governance. By developing a greater understanding of how chief executive officers and trustees on governing boards interact trustees, potential trustees, CEOs, potential CEOs, and other professional staff can better set and manage expectations regarding professional relationships and responsibilities; potential sources of controversy or tension can be identified and or mitigated; and public policy relevant to the professional dynamic can be reviewed, enhanced and informed.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study examines and expands the conversation on how chief executive officers of community colleges in the Northeast can optimize their effectiveness as the individual responsible for leading a politically appointed board of trustees. Studies have discussed leading from a subordinate position (Useem, 2001), however, this particular relationship under observation warrants specific attention, as the literature base is presently thin regarding this discreet professional relationship. What does exist is primarily for the betterment of trustees, and often suggests deference to chief executive officer expertise as a best practice (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). While this material is noble and helpful, it lacks grounding in the realpolitik where political actors expect significant influence on an organization’s direction, (Hollibaugh, 2018) and arguably overlooks the need for CEOs to develop the political skills necessary to optimize their success (Trachtenberg et al., 2013).

The aforementioned lack of specific attention suggested that a broad range of literature genres needed to be consulted in order to form a firm foundation for informing the study. The following genres, while limited in their attention to the specific research question at hand, have yielded conclusions that are arguably relevant to the dynamic under consideration, or are at least in a position to offer relevant perspectives for chief executive officers to successfully lead, (Lowney, 2003), influence (Barbuto, 2005), follow (Kelley, 1988), and manage (Gabarro & Kotter, 2005) their boards while simultaneously providing effective leadership for their subordinates in their organizations (Lowney, 2003).
The genres are classified into the following headings: community colleges, board governance, management, leadership, higher education leadership, followership, leader-follower dynamics, influence and power, and communication. The following presents relevant literature and provides insight into perceived strengths and limitations as they directly relate to this dissertation.

**Community Colleges**

For the purpose of this study, community colleges are defined as open-access centers of higher education. They are publicly supported institutions that are in the mold of what was recommended in the report, “Higher education for democracy: A report of the chief executive officer’s commission on higher education.” This report urged the creation of colleges that were accessible to all, both geographically and financially (Zook, 1947). In addition to national policy and national perspectives, state-wide community college professional publications exist that highlight individual state sectors and their various achievements. These publications while relevant to broad community college awareness and education are often anthological in tone and offer little in terms of the interworking of college governance (O’Lawrence, 2013).

Unlike governance, significant academic attention relating to the mission, operations and student populations of community colleges is broadly available. This material is relevant to this study as it speaks to the sector itself and to its goals. Fong, Davis, Kim, Kim, Marriott, and Kim’s (2016), “Psychological factors and community college students: A meta-analytic investigation,” serves as a fitting example for the depth and breadth placed on the unique needs and concerns of the sector’s student population, yet it only provided passive reference to issues of governance.
Further materials regarding the nature of the current community college system in the United States have been developed by both professional organizations and academics. A particularly effective publication that provided a modern understanding of the role community colleges play in American higher education is Elsner, Boggs and Irwin’s, *Global development of community colleges, technical colleges and further education programs* (2008). This work described the essential elements of how community colleges function, and their common goals. Likewise, Eddy’s *Community college leadership: A multidimensional model for leading* (2010) provided a digest of methods commonly used by effective senior leaders at community colleges. These works are helpful in developing the background and introduction of the broader community college sector.

**Board Governance**

Several professional societies exist that specialize in professional development for effective board governance at public institutions (Association of Governing Boards, 2016) and nonprofit organizations (National Council of Nonprofits, 2016). These organizations routinely produce publications that provide a wealth of insight regarding effective board governance and management. In addition, the Association of Community College Trustees is devoted exclusively to community college board governance and fosters relationships with researchers and academics to produce material that is designed to help trustees meet the demands of their positions (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016a). Such materials were useful in defining the specific role and position of trustees.

Some publications do exist that are specific to community college board governance. Sherman’s (2009), *Essential’s of good board/CEO relations: Engaging
trustees in effective governance, stands alone in the genre in that it spoke directly to the symbiotic roles of chief executive officers and their trustees. Sherman, published his work through the Association of Community College Trustees. While the book provides a solid exploration of the relationship under observation, the specific subordinate position that chief executive officers have to their trustees is underreported in the general thrust of the research, leaving an impression that trustees and chief executive officers recognize each other as peers and can apply arguably generic measures to mitigate sources of friction. Sources of friction are presented as being quasi-predictable throughout the sector without references to plausible distinctions between different regions or state systems. Tollefson, Garrett, and Ingram’s (1999) anthology style publication, Fifty State systems of community colleges: Mission governance, funding and accountability, provided a comprehensive view of how the 50 states organize their approaches to community college education, comparing substantial differences. This publication is short on commentary and advisory arguments regarding optimal styles, is dated with respect to trends in public and educational policy and, by design, did not delve deeply into the nature and management of relationships between CEOs and trustees. Dobbins, Knill, and Vogtle produced a digestible anthology comparing various systems of higher education governance across the United States (2011). The text provided insight to the variety of governance methods for all higher education and illustrates the differences between open-access and selective-admissions institutions, as well as distinctions between public and private colleges. Despite its comprehensive tone, the text nevertheless offers little in terms of CEO perspectives that would be germane to this study’s research question.
Tollefson followed his anthology work with a specific article related to community college governance (2009) that is specifically insightful for board governance issues between members, and provided reference to the trustee/CEO relationship, yet did not conceptualize the subordinate-style relationship between the CEO and trustees with any degree of specificity. Amey, Jessup-Anger and Jessup-Anger (2008) addressed the importance of community college governance, offering compelling arguments for the value for specific methods. This work, while insightful, is dated with respect to certain sector-wide changes that have emerged in the years after the “great recession” (Chen, 2017).

Two other publications provided insights into how community college boards work and provide suggestions on how to be effective. Both of these publications provide comprehensive visions for how boards should be managed and how those boards should appear in terms of diversity and composition (Doyle, 2009; Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). Both referenced publications provided detailed professional analysis of community college board governance protocols and strategies for developing policy. However, both are limited in their discussion of relationship management between trustees and chief executive officers, and they arguably lack necessary recognition of the full power dynamics involved in the political appointing process (Hollibaugh, 2018). This is not to slight either publication, as both are written from, and for, the benefit of trustees,’ not for professional development of chief executive officers.

Smith (2000), like Doyle (2009) and Tollefson (2009), authored a book that discussed best practices for community college trustees. The text made frequent reference to the need for trustees to be deferential to, and supportive of their college’s
CEO. The work provided sound advice and insights but it is dated in terms of the modern political pressures facing the community college sector (Chen, 2017). Polonio and Miller’s (2012) work related to community college board governance, published by the Association of Community College Trustees, was geared toward the trustee, not the CEO, but did illustrate the need for CEOs and trustees to collaborate on their college’s leadership vision. Despite their earnest efforts, Polonio and Miller provide limited and rather diplomatic references to the logical sources of friction that are likely to manifest between CEOs and trustees (Hollibaugh, 2018). Polonio and Miller (2012) respectfully outlined the best practice of delineating the policy-development responsibilities of the board, as compared to the administrative responsibilities of the CEO. They echoed the sentiments of the Association of Community College Trustees (2014 and 2016b) with respect to trustee professional development. This is germane to this study, but it is still somewhat limited by their minimalist attention to the nuances and power dynamics of the political appointment process (Hollibaugh, 2018).

**Management**

Management theory literature is expansive (Freeman, 2010). Management and leadership should not be used as interchangeable terms (Nayar, 2013), the distinction being that leaders are responsible for establishing a vision, whereas managers are responsible for executing an established vision (Cox, Plagens, & Sylla, 2010). Nevertheless, much can be gleamed from studies about management as it relates to community college chief executive officer leadership effectiveness.

A seminal and often cited work about management and one that intuitively appears relevant for this research is by Gabarro and Kotter (2005), originally published in 1970, “Managing your boss,” explored the dynamics between supervisors and
subordinates and explored ethical methods that subordinates can use to influence their supervisors. Arguably, many of these strategies translate for community college chief executive officers seeking to optimize their board-leadership effectiveness. However, the Gabarro and Kotter (2005) study is rooted in management theory not leadership; and the leadership paradigm and prerogative manifest throughout the work in traditionally observed roles where leaders rest on top of the hierarchy, and managers report up to them (Bryson, 2011).

A great deal of literature exists related to management of nonprofit organizations, which have some parallels with publicly funded agencies. Nonprofits are mission-driven operations and feature boards of trustees’ governance models. Crutchfield and Grant’s *Forces for good: The six practices of high-impact nonprofits* (2008) provided a succinct argument for how mission-drive organizations can optimize their effectiveness. They used a series of diverse case studies to speak specifically to the value of shared leadership between professional staff and trustees. However, the relationship discussed here assumes that the sitting CEO can influence who might be admitted to fill vacancies on the board. While it is possible that community college CEOs might be able to develop such influence with appointing authorities, the way in which that is assumed in this text, limits its value for direct application to this study.

Zietlow, Hankin, Seider, and O’Brien (2018) wrote about the value of sound financial management as being a predicate for effectiveness and argued that management of this issue is paramount toward mission-driven success. Their book, *Financial management for non-profit organizations: Policies and practices* also provided recommendations for sound management practices that should be emulated in mission-
driven organizations. This study does not challenge their conclusions or recommendations, but their work’s singular focus on financial management is limiting for the purposes of drawing broad inference. They do present a dynamic of CEO-driven board leadership, but only addresses the nuances of those relationships as they relate to financial concerns.

**Leadership**

Beyond management, the literature in the domain of leadership studies is rich in ideas and conclusions that are relevant for community college CEO leadership effectiveness. Various texts have chronicled leadership styles and methods (Rath & Conchie, 2008; Johnson, 2012) and the challenges and benefits associated with using these understood leadership styles (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). The research here looks to such sources to shape a basic understanding for the leadership expectations placed upon community college chief executive officers (Sherman, 2009). Such texts are useful in establishing general methodologies and styles of leadership that community college chief executive officers might want to understand. This dissertation will not seek to define any additional styles of leadership that presently are not understood in the existing literature base, it does make reference to understood styles as referenced by interview participants.

Broadly speaking, the understanding of leadership styles in these texts (Rath & Conchie, 2008; Johnson, 2012; Haslam et al., 2011) are often presented through the lens of traditionally observed hierarchical structures where chief executive officers possess both a greater hierarchical position and greater formal power than those who they lead (Bryson, 2011). Thus, conclusions drawn by authors working in this vein are indeed relevant, but nevertheless limited by their fundamental prism of observing conditions that
do not account for the inversion of hierarchical position and power under observation in this study. Of particular interest for this study are sources that discuss authenticity and being an authentic leader and the impact on followership (Sidani & Rowe, 2018). Participants in this study frequently cited the value of authentic leadership with respect to optimizing their capacity to lead their boards of trustees. (Participant VII, personal interview, December 15, 2017; Participant XII, personal interview, January 6, 2018).

Lowney (2003) stands out as a particularly useful researcher on the subject of leadership. Lowney’s history of the experiences of the Jesuit order, as being invited teachers and advisers in locations that culturally clashed with Europe has relevance for examining relationships that might be tense, or feature inversions of political power. Lowney’s impressions about the effectiveness of “servant-based leadership” (p. 121) have specific value. The name, when taken literally, certainly resonates with the research topic at hand and the hallmarks of the style are to ensure that a devotion to cause and commitment to others take pre-eminence over selfish ambition (Lowney, 2003). This style of leadership can be effective for CEOs to understand when seeking to educate and influence trustees, who occupy a higher position in the organizational chart over themselves.

An overall limitation of academic leadership studies (Greenleaf, 2002; Haslam et al., 2011; Johnson, 2012; Lowney, 2003; and Rath & Conchie, 2008) relating to the relationship between community college chief executive officers and their boards, is a lack of discussion concerning the chief executive officer’s requirement to both lead their subordinates at the institution, and to lead their supervisors. The inversion of power on display in this study indicates that trustees cannot be directed by the CEO to complete
tasks or be otherwise required to adhere to CEO-desired behaviors. This dynamic, which has been described as politically tense (Fullinwider & Lichtenberg 2004), arguably influences how chief executive officers structure their behavior and leadership style. As such, the tensions and unique circumstances of this relationship are worthy of specific attention.

**Higher Education Leadership**

Similarly to broad leadership studies, there is an entire body of literature devoted to understanding successful leadership in higher education. Smith and Miller (2015), successfully identified the range of competing agendas that motivate community college trustees. They artfully articulated the various positions entrusted to, or assumed by trustees, in various jurisdictions (Smith & Miller, 2015). Smith and Miller (2015) also identified that the impression trustees have about their roles, are often in tension with what college leaders regard as optimal. Smith and Miller (2015) effectively demonstrated the tensions and distance between expectations and reality. However, their study focused on impressions of trustees made by CEOs. While, these impressions are relevant to the research being proposed, the study was not designed to determine effective strategies to mitigate and overcome such tensions (Smith & Miller, 2015).

In addition to Smith and Miller’s (2015) work on community colleges, higher education leadership literature features both broadly (Hayes, Krebs, Buehler, & Phillips, 2012) and narrowly focused subjects within the genre (Kezar, 2014). Again, this literature is rich in contributing to the understanding of the nuances of higher education leadership. Jones, LeFoe, Harvey, and Ryland (2012) completed a study offering a range of suggestions for college leaders. They contended that present circumstances and controversies surrounding higher education have forever altered the sector’s landscape,
and leaders at institutions need to alter their approaches. This work should be commended for incorporating timely trends and variables, and for suggesting major reforms to better leverage leadership opportunities and empower institutions (Jones et al., 2012). However, the study stops short by defining leaders as administrative figures, and scarcely touches on the need to develop or lead boards of trustees.

The overall lack of attention paid to board dynamics in the aforementioned works yields considerable limitations for the purposes of understanding the leadership relationship between community college trustees and chief executive officers. Unlike self-perpetuating nonprofit boards, trustees appointed through government mechanisms are often appointed via political patronage, or are appointed to effect a specific politician’s agenda (Smith and Miller, 2015). Chief executive officers need to carefully manage such board members, shape the direction of the board, and optimize its potential and their effectiveness under the cloak of political and media scrutiny, and potential retribution for failing to meet politically developed expectations (Smith & Miller, 2015).

**Followership**

Beyond leadership studies, followership studies present excellent insights for leaders. Such studies often discuss the needs of followers, such as providing consistent and timely communications, recognition, and the valuing of contributions (Whitlock, 2013). Community college chief executive officers would be wise to ensure that they understand these principles as they relate to educating themselves and their board members, especially if they are attempting to inspire their boards to trust in them, and to follow their lead. It stands to reason that cultivating knowledgeable followers would be advantageous for effective leaders (Currie & Ryan, 2014). An excellent example of how this literature fits into the conversation was introduced by Currie and Ryan (2014).
Currie and Ryan identified the value that followers bring to leaders, fleshing out how follower actions are relevant to the success of a leader’s vision. The limitation of this work, as it relates to community college chief executive officers, is that it was grounded in management, not leadership literature. Thus, the assumptions are that leaders have both formal and position power (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013) over their followers, which is not the case for community college chief executive officers and their politically appointed boards (Peiro & Melia, 2003).

Similarly, Kelley (1988) developed a rich understanding that leadership success and failure also reflects on the success (or lack thereof) of a follower base. He argued that an organization’s success is more of a two-way street, where both leaders and followers have responsibilities to uphold (Kelley, 1988). His argument that analysis of leadership dominates organizational studies at the expense of followership remains sound (Kelley, 1988). His study, however, dealt primarily with private business organizations, not nonprofit or public agencies (Kelley, 1988). The study also assumed that leaders and followers are aware of, and understand their role as either a leader or a follower (Kelley, 1988). As noted by Smith and Miller (2015), such an assumption ought not be made when seeking to understand the leader-follower dynamics of community college boards and chief executive officers, where it is more likely that all parties within this group will perceive that they occupy – and will conduct themselves – as though they occupy a leadership position (Smith et al., 2015).

Baker (2007) critiqued Kelley’s (1988) observations on followership. She noted that followership being considered worthy of inquiry and appreciation began in the social sciences in the mid-20th century (Baker, 2007). Kelley’s original work is thus expanded
upon by Baker, who produces new insights. However, the limitations that are true of Kelley (1988) are also largely true for Baker (2007). Thus, followership literature, while relevant in developing an understanding of the dynamics and tensions between leaders and followers, reaches a limitation for this study, in that there is an absence of discussion concerning unique subordinate and supervisor relationships.

An emerging notion in the followership literature is the concept of active followership, a concept implying that followers are distinctly more involved in the crafting of organizational direction and have a greater degree of influence on the leader and organizational vision than what previously has been understood (Whitlock, 2013). Whitlock (2013) provided a strong argument for the value of active followership, in particular this includes reference to the concept of “upward influencing” as applied to follower groups (p. 20). Whitlock’s (2013) study draws from samples of healthcare professionals, but it made generalized conclusions beyond the scope of healthcare administration. “Upward influencing” (Whitlock, 2013, p. 20), while compatible with this study’s aim, was presented from a management, not leadership, perspective. Furthermore, the piece is written from the position of those following, not leading. Followers identified what they needed to be effective, but a corresponding study of the needs of leaders and their impressions is absent. It would be questionable to conclude from Whitlock (2013) that the self-reported needs of followers, translate into simultaneously being the needs of leaders. Lastly, the amorphous line that exists between community college CEOs and their trustees, as to who possesses the leadership prerogative, is not referenced to the degree that this dissertation observes (Smith & Miller, 2015)
Leader-Follower Dynamic

Bridging the literature between leadership and followership studies as discreet disciplines are works that seek to examine the leader-follower relationship as a whole. Featuring a strong sample size of participants, Agho (2009) confirmed that the perceived needs and goals of leaders and followers are not necessarily parallel. Thus Agho’s (2009) study has extraordinary relevance for the purpose of understanding how to manage competing agendas. However, the article did not seek to understand how to hold those positions in what Martin (2009) calls “suspended tension” (p.7) to creatively problem solve. Indeed, rectifying the tension between the chief executive officers’ vision, with the potentially competing agenda of political actors’ (Fullinwider & Lichtenberg, 2004) is at the very root of this dissertation.

Agho (2009) should be commended for providing a strong argument for the value of followership and rejecting pejorative connotations of the word. It is arguable that shifted thinking on such terms could ease demands on chief executive officers that are placed upon them from difficult trustees. However, because those conditions do not presently exist in the majority of environments (Fullinwider & Lichtenberg, 2004) chief executive officers need to seek strategies to manage conditions as they exist, not as Agho (2009) contended they should be.

Following Agho (2009) is Cox, Plagens, and Sylla (2010), who convincingly argued that modern leadership researchers suffer from a limitation of their predecessors in that they too often conceptualize the discipline through the prism of the “great man” (Cox et al., 2010, p.37). Cox et al. contended that leadership scholars view the discipline through rigid hierarchical designs, where leaders are archetypes, and good followership is merely a byproduct of their greatness (2010). They argued that followers make an active
choice to follow because they are inspired to do so (Cox et al., 2010). They argued that successful followers have the ability to leverage their aggregate power to positively react to those considered “nominal” leaders (Cox et al., 2010, p.37). Indeed, this study perhaps most accurately reflects the existing dynamic between community college chief executive officers and their boards of trustees. The fundamental contention is that organizations do not thrive because of the actions of leaders (chief executive officers), but by the actions of followers (trustees) (Cox et al., 2010). From a raw perspective, this is absolutely true for chief executive officers, as trustee support is essential and formally required in order for chief executive officers to be successful (Doyle, 2009). Nevertheless, while this study is enlightening regarding the professional dynamic between chief executive officers and trustees, the perspective is written from a supervisor to subordinate position. There are not express considerations for the inversion of hierarchical positions and power under observation in this study. Furthermore, trustees are not necessarily making an active choice to follow, but are appointed to a political position and expect to be able to lead (Fullinwider & Lichtenberg, 2004).

Kellerman’s (2008) *Followership: How followers are creating change and changing leaders*, speaks directly to the relationship dynamic between followers and leaders, and like Kelly (1988) and Cox et al. (2010) it does not conceptualize followership as a byproduct of leadership, but as an active choice by those following. This work is included in this section because, unlike Kelly (1988), Kellerman (2008) it is deliberately exploring the relationship between leaders and followers and how each party influences the other. The limitation of the work as it applies to this study is that
Kellerman defines followership by rank within the organization, as understood from a top-down organizational chart.

Finally, Zhu, Riggio, Avolio, and Sosik (2011) provide an excellent analysis regarding the formal and informal dimensions of the leader-follower relationship, its impact on the impression that followers have of themselves regarding the success of the organization, and their own identity as having agency within the organization. This study places equal emphasis on the contributions of leaders and followers, indeed a practical lens from which to view the topic under observation in this dissertation. Nevertheless, the political dynamics and political power dynamics that are underexplored in much of the existing aforementioned literatures remains underexplored in this work. As was the case with Fullinwider and Lichtenberg (2004), this study features a limitation in that trustees are unlikely to uniformly recognize and conceive of their position on the board as that of follower (Hollibaugh, 2018).

**Influence and Power**

The notion of influence, while extensively discussed in followership literature (Whitlock, 2013), is also worthy of specific review for this research. Influence, especially as viewed through the political lens, often has overtones relevant for those looking to shape the opinions of individuals who possess greater power or authority (Ferris, Treadway, Perrewe, Bouer, and Lux, 2007). Ferris et al. (2007) highlighted the value of developing “political skill” (p.290) as an effective tool for leaders to develop. They also demonstrated how political skill can be leveraged for the advancement of organizations (2007). As indicated by Ferris et al. (2007), political skills are essential and an effective tool for leaders to possess. However, Ferris et al. (2007) did not
conceptualize their effort through a leadership perspective, but through the prism of organizational management (Ferris et al., 2007).

The concept of influence and “political skill” (Ferris et al., 2007, p.290) lend themselves to the exploration of influence and the use of power. Where Ferris et al. (2007) discussed political skill in terms of collaboration, Goodstadt and Kipnis (1970) discussed the use of “organizational,” “position,” “coercive” and “expert power” (p. 201-202) and how leaders can successfully deploy them using formal or informal channels. They developed a sense that temporal and resource deviations can impact the quality of leadership, management, and followership within organizations (Goodstadt and Kipnis, 1970). Arguably, chief executive officers at community colleges possess significant power (Eddy, 2010). A case can certainly be made that understanding how to effectively leverage power to influence others and outcomes is relevant to the research at hand. Nevertheless, Goodstadt and Kipnis (1970) use the vernacular of supervisors and subordinates throughout their work (pp.201-207) Thus, their working assumption is that the leader possesses a higher hierarchical position than followers (Goodstadt & Kipnis, 1970).

Luhman authored a relevant book, *Trust and Power* (2012), which argues that these two elements are the fundamental underpinnings of what makes society as a whole operate. Luhman is hostile to the idea that any sort of codified ideologies, whether they be political, or otherwise, can define or explain mass sociological phenomena. The publication, although published nearly 40 years ago, has remained in publication. Luhman argued for a need to be specific and nuanced when observing and analyzing sociological systems, and he asserted that broad applications of theories are implausible
because they cannot recognize the nuances of interpersonal relationships and localized variables. This dissertation, working within that spirit, attempts to provide clarity within a discreet system by offering a specific look, at a unique relationship between CEOs and trustees within community college governance. Luhman, despite the kindred localized perspective, only offers philosophical discussion, he does not feature modern applied examples, and does not address higher education specifically.

Greenleaf’s efforts in defining servant leadership and the nature of power (2002) are applicable to the study at hand. The concept of servant leadership suggests that leaders should place their followers’ needs before their own (Greenleaf, 2002). This resonates with Lowney’s contentions on servant-based leadership (2003) and is equally valuable to CEOs. Greenleaf is included in this section because his research on servant leadership was developed for modern applications whereas Lowney’s (2003) treatment of the subject of servant leadership reflected a more historical application of the style, prior to when it was formally defined (Greenleaf, 2002). Specifically, Greenleaf (2002) cites the needs for those in trustee positions to have purposeful influence with respect to the leadership vision of an organization. Moreover, Greenleaf’s (2002) discussion about the nature of where power comes from is worthy of specific note for community college CEOs. Greenleaf conceives of broad ranges of power that can be developed through various mechanisms, not simply as an extension of codified authority. This, along with his attention to the symbiotic relationships between trustees and CEOs, is worthy of consideration for this study as, the style of servant leadership conceives of power as an extension of legitimacy (Greenleaf, 2002).
Greenleaf’s (2002) conceptualization is unique in the leadership literature and is insightful for community college CEOs who are seeking to lead their trustees in the absence of having formal power over those trustees. Greenleaf’s limitation for this study is that he is drawing broad conclusions for a range of sectors, and his work is not specific to higher education or community colleges.

Akin to Greenleaf’s unique understanding of power, is Peiro and Melia who discuss power in terms of formal and informal channels (2003). This bifurcation of the term is insightful and applicable to this dissertation; however, the thrust of the research is psychological, not social or organizational. This work is valuable in that it provides testament that groups of people can possess and leverage various forms of power and have the ability to leverage that power to meet their goals. In an opposite vein is Hollibaugh (2018) who approaches the subject of power through the prism of formal power bestowed upon individuals by virtue of their elected, appointed, or otherwise obtained positions. In particular, he discusses the influence that political appointment power has on government agencies. He broadly discusses in clear terms the inter-workings of patronage-style political appointments. This clarity is germane to the study at hand as it presents conditions, as understood by those living it, not from the vantage point of what ought to be. Hollibaugh’s concise and powerful recognitions while relevant do not cite community colleges as agencies and therefore his conclusions are limited with respect to the focus of this dissertation.

A subgenre within the power and influence literature base is related specifically to influence tactics. From a fundamental position, Demirtas (2013) provided a framework for how leaders can ethically deploy influence tactics. Demirtas (2013) produced an
effective study that offers excellent insights concerning how individuals can influence, as opposed to direct, the actions of others.

Barbuto (2000) provided a framework for understanding how followers comply when being influenced by leaders. He highlighted a range of different relationships where influence and effectiveness play major roles in the dynamic (Barbuto, 2000).

Barbuto and Scholl (1999) explored both leader and follower motivations as they relate to certain influence tactics. Both studies produced recommendations and guidance for leaders and for further research (Barbuto, 2000; Barbuto & Scholl, 1999). However, the broad generalities included in the studies (Barbuto, 2000; Barbuto et al., 1999) are too expansive for navigating the rather esoteric waters of community college board governance leadership.

Barbuto (2005) further explored motivation as perceived through the lenses of “transformational,” “charismatic,” and “transactional” leadership styles (p.26). Barbuto’s discussion about motivations under these conditions is worthy of exploration by community college chief executive officers. Nevertheless, when seeking to influence and lead from a subordinate position, limiting leadership styles to those noted by Barbuto, would be unadvisable for both maintaining flexibility (Lowney, 2008), and for leveraging the strengths of followers (Rath & Conchie, 2008). Because the dynamic under review in this research has a limited understanding in higher education literature (Smith & Miller, 2015), limiting deployable leadership styles to those observed by Barbuto (2005), could arguably reduce the quality of analysis and subsequent recommendations.

Kipnis and Schmidt (1988) produced an exceptionally relevant study on what they termed “upward-influence” as it relates to personnel chains within organizations (p. 528).
Kipnis and Schmidt. (1988) placed great emphasis on the nature of organizational relationships, “performance evaluations,” “salary” implications, and “stress” factors (p. 528). This study encapsulated many of the environmental factors (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988) that contribute to the unique environments that community college chief executive officers must navigate (Polonio & Smith, 2012). In terms of influence, conclusions produced by Kipnis and Schmidt (1988) should be heeded by community college chief executive officers.

Kipnis and Schmidt (1988) also classified various styles of tactics that can be used to influence those with higher positions or hierarchical power. Again, such focus is expressly compatible with the phenomenon of leading trustees from a subordinate position. They drew conclusions about how supervisors perceived the effectiveness of various leadership styles, and by extension offered advice on how to avoid negative perceptions (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988). Their study also featured a deliberate focus on perceived gender roles and how such factors may alter both subordinate and supervisor relationships (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988). Thus, their study has lasting relevance for those in positions that require the use of influence. However, their work is void of any meaningful discussion regarding factors unique to the political appointment process (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988).

**Communication**

No literature review for this topic would be complete without looking into literature designed to understand effective communication, as communication skills appear in virtually all of the previously presented literature genres as being necessary for leadership effectiveness (Lowney, 2003). Thus, Hahn (2003) serves as a reliable base for navigating methods for effective communication channels between public and political
actors. Hahn’s work heavily featured political-campaign language and political-campaign strategy (2003); however, it is relevant for community college chief executive officers. Hahn’s recommendations for shaping and defining messages and visions, and persuading individuals suggests commonality with community college CEOs that seek to influence their trustees’ behavior and opinions. It is arguable that understanding communication through this prism would serve community college CEOs well, as their audience of trustees is often more astute and aware of political activity, over the demands and professional measures of higher education (Smith & Miller, 2015).

Summary

Of the multitude of literature that is relevant to the research question itself, the genres that are most useful are: influence and power, and leader-follower dynamic. These genres rely on organizational dynamics (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013) as the bedrock for their refined research questions. Furthermore, like the research herein, they too rely on existing literature concerning effective leadership and management style.

Influence and power as a genre is well suited with respect to the relationship that this research explores. The inverse hierarchical position and political power possessed by community college trustees as compared to community college chief executive officers indicates that chief executive officers must be effective at influencing board members, rather than being able to leverage formal power to compel certain behaviors (Demirtas, 2013).

Because chief executive officers have to influence, not direct, behaviors, and because they are held accountable for shaping their organizations’ and their boards’ leadership position (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014), influence tactics as a subgenre needs to be explored for both its value and limitations. Chief executive
officers at community colleges must develop and refine their influence toolkits, they must of course influence ethically (Svara, 2015), and they must create environments that recognize their board’s capacity, talents, strengths and weaknesses (Smith & Miller, 2015). Thus, the research here made express considerations for the seminal literature in this particular genre.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation in practice is to develop a better understanding of what leadership strategies, tactics, and styles successful community college chief executive officers working in Northeastern states (United States Census Bureau, 2016) have used to optimize their effectiveness in leading their governance board. The dissertation recognizes that CEOs are required to provide this leadership while operating from a subordinate hierarchical position to their boards.

This work is an ethnographical qualitative study. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research enables the discovery of what factors and experiences individuals assign to specific problems. Because the literature base is limited for the specific dynamic under review, a qualitative approach, used to determine existing individual understandings is essential to understanding the problem (Creswell, 2014). Because there is an absence of theoretical frameworks regarding the research question, an ethnography was arguably the most appropriate method for developing a meaningful data set for the purpose of analysis (Creswell, 2014).
**Research Question**

How can community college chief executive officers, working in the Northeastern United States, optimize their effectiveness when providing leadership for their governance boards?

**Research Design**

An ethnographical qualitative study demonstrates and analyzes “shared patterns of behaviors, language, and actions of an intact cultural group, in a natural setting, over a prolonged period of time. Data collection often involves observations and interviews” (Creswell, 2014, p.14). Because there is presently a lack of specific scholarship or analysis devoted to understanding how successful community college CEOs lead their governance boards from a subordinate position, gathering, synthesizing, and analyzing the efforts of successful individuals who are, or recently were, a part of this distinct “cultural group” is essential to developing a broader understanding of the dynamic, as well as address a present gap in existing literature (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). In addition to obtaining the perspectives of successful individuals, the insights of individuals who had been terminated where sought. One individual that had been terminated from a community college CEO position agreed to participate. This individual’s perspective added a rich dimension to the data collected. The final analysis benefited from having incorporated this perspective as a counterpoint to the impressions provided by successful CEOs.

To control for the many variables that could manifest by observing this population, such as: funding mechanisms, trustee appointment process, various demographic considerations, cultural issues, legal and legislative issues, public sector nuances, political concerns, and codified community college CEO expectations and
requirements, it was determined that working with a population from one single state would provide controls for many factors and yield the most consistent data for the purpose of generalized analysis.

In all states in the Northeast, every community college board of trustees is appointed by a combination of politically elected leaders. Thus, trustees, who have a higher hierarchical position over chief executive officers, obtain these positions in congruent ways throughout the Northeast. In all of these states, whether by law or statute, chief executive officers are required to provide leadership for their governance boards, and boards cannot act without the recommendation of the chief executive officer (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). The only exception to that rule is that boards are empowered to act upon the employment conditions and contracts of their chief executive officers (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b). Thus, chief executive officers of community colleges in the Northeast have comparable and consistent working conditions as they relate to board governance and leadership (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). Because these conditions are so structurally similar, observing, interviewing, and analyzing a reflective subset of that population indicates potential for the development of analysis and generalized inferences.

**Participants**

For this study there was a need to identify chief executive officers who have successfully been able to provide leadership for their governance boards. These individuals were deemed successful if they had completed a minimum of five years of service as chief executive officer. Five years was selected as a suitable time frame because newly hired chief executive officers in the higher education sector are commonly offered a two- or three-year contract, subject to subsequent renewal (Trachtenberg,
Thus, individuals who have completed five years of service likely have been successfully retained in their position by their governance boards; and can arguably be deemed as having been successful in providing necessary leadership for their trustees and institution. Furthermore, individual participants are easily able to confirm if they have passed through the contract renewal process. In addition, individuals who served in such positions, but have retired on favorable terms (not terminated or asked to resign) are considered successful. The lone unsuccessful individual that agreed to participate did not meet these standards for success, and had been terminated prior to having ever been recontracted.

To identify these participants, the state under observation’s state-wide community college advocacy organization was engaged. Each state in the Northeast has a statewide group that either has formal public standing via code, or statute; or exists as a formal professional association (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). This state’s network’s leadership was able to help determine which current or recently retired chief executive officers met the definition of successful, which individuals might be available that did not meet the definition of successful, and how to best contact individuals who were appropriate.

A suitable population size to capture sufficient data was deemed to be no fewer than half of all available participants who met the definition of being “successful” as defined in this study (Creswell, 2007). For the particular state that was under observation, there were 19 individuals who were both identifiable and accessible. Fourteen of those 19 individuals agreed to participate and were interviewed as part of the research. In addition, three individuals were identifiable and accessible who did not meet
the definition of having been successful. These individuals had been terminated, or had been asked by their boards to resign, prior to the close of their initial contract. One individual meeting the definition of unsuccessful agreed to participate. This sample suggests that over two-thirds of the available successful population was captured; and that some relevant perceptions from an unsuccessful CEO was able to be incorporated in to the analysis where appropriate. As interviews and subsequent coding indicated, the data captured were sufficient for analysis and inference. A significant majority of available successful CEOs agreed to participate, and readily discernable patterns emerged through aggregated responses, suggesting that saturation had been achieved (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2008) defines this sample of CEOs as a criterion sample as they have all met the standard of having personally experienced the phenomenon under observation.

**Data Collection Tools**

To complete the dissertation, personal face-to-face interviews were conducted. To conduct these interviews an interview protocol was developed (Appendix A). This interview protocol follows guidelines set forth by Creswell (2014) that seek to ensure maximum flexibility, while providing a structured and predictable interview process for participants. Participants were generous with their time and energy and devoted significant time to being interviewed. Data collection in each instance occurred in one interview. Each individual interview spanned several hours.

The interview protocol was shared with participants prior to the interview and ensured that interviewees were comfortable and familiar with the subject matter and line of questioning. This also allowed them to think critically about their experiences and expertise to prepare for the subsequent interview. This approach appeared to create a sense of ease and comfortability between the interviewee and the interviewer (Creswell,
The same approach was used regardless whether an individual was part of the cohort of 14 successful CEOs or the lone unsuccessful participant. Questions in the interview protocol were amended as necessary to reflect individuals’ current professional circumstance. For example, a currently employed CEO was asked to – describe the mission of your organization; whereas the terminated individual was asked to – describe the mission of your previous organization.

Face-to-face interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Additional notes were kept in a field log by the interviewer, which supplemented orally communicated data. The field log captured impressions of body language, relevant environmental elements, and other germane observations, as well as supplemented the memory of the interviewer to ensure that no critical points were missed in the analysis (Creswell, 2014). Recorded, and transcribed data were coded and organized appropriately for the purposes of discerning observable and consistent patterns that emerged from interview responses (Creswell, 2014).

**Data Collection Procedures**

Through the statewide professional agency’s endorsement and encouragement of access and participation, individuals who met the definition of having successfully led their boards of trustees from a subordinate position, and the unsuccessful CEO, were convinced of the value of the project and the value of the potential conclusions and recommendations as they relate to optimally leading from a subordinate position.

To protect anonymity participation invitation letters (Appendix B) were sent to these individuals via U.S. Mail. This process avoided any superfluous electronic records of invitations or subsequent participation. Follow up phone calls to potential subjects were completed by the researcher directly. All community colleges under observation
lacked a formal institutional review board. Thus, all individuals completed a common informed consent form (Appendix C). The researcher obtained the consent form and they remain in his possession.

Interviewees understood that their identities would be kept anonymous. Anonymity (in particular when an individual’s transparency might be used by nonaligned political or professional actors to sew discord or develop forms of retribution) was essential to ensuring that the interviewer could capture accurate and useful information (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Accuracy of information was essential to protecting the reliability and validity of captured data (Creswell, 2014).

An interview protocol (Creswell, 2007; Appendix A) was developed after the researcher secured formal commitments to participate via the informed consent form (Appendix C). Each interviewee was asked the identical set of questions from the protocol that was shared with them ahead of their interviews. The researcher sought to have participants offer narrative responses that were comprehensive and reflected their career experience (Creswell, 2007), and inserted follow up questions when and where appropriate in order to obtain sufficient data (Creswell, 2007).

Interviews were digitally recorded, and transcribed. Responses, along with any observed field notes from interviews or observations, were coded to determine what relevant patterns emerged from the participants’ responses. This data then served as the actionable data from which arguments and inferences were developed.

The ethnographical approach ensured that a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of the individuals interviewed was captured (Creswell, 2008). Despite the strength of the approach, to ensure a deep understanding of individual experience it also
was critical to ensure that recollections were accurate. Recollections can be distorted purposefully or because time has altered the interviewee’s memory (Creswell, 2008). To guard against this the researcher reviewed corresponding institutional documents, such as board of trustee meeting minutes, to triangulate with responses, ensuring that responses had validity. Because final analysis could have political consequences if anonymity were breached, member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of the researcher’s impressions (Creswell, 2014).

**Ethical Considerations**

To protect anonymity, pseudonyms for participants and institutions were essential. Rather than create monikers, the term “Participant” with a sequential numeral, based on the order of their having been interviewed, was used for direct reference to individuals. No institution required a formally changed name to protect anonymity. All colleges were referenced as “college,” “institution,” or “organization” or other nondescript terms.

As part of the interview protocol, interviewees were reminded to refrain from using any terms that would indicate their identities or locations of employment. Nevertheless, careful consideration was used to redact formal names, or other indicators when used by interviewees. If personalized indicators were referenced by participants bracketed terms were substituted by the researcher to indicate what the participant referenced. Bracketed terms or phrases also were used to clarify references made by participants without undermining anonymity. This effort ensured that no specific location or organization, nor the state under observation is discernable (Creswell, 2008). Additional bracketed terms were used to indicated body language or diction of responses. These specific bracketed responses appear in italics. Furthermore, all data collected was
kept confidentially under lock and key in a secure office. Transcripts of individual interviews were disseminated to each of the participants through USPS mail. This ensured both security and continued anonymity, as well as removing the potential for an electronic record being discovered.

As a former community college sector professional, it was critical that the researcher refrain from interjecting any perceived bias regarding effective leadership and board governance into the formal interview protocol, invitations to participate, informed consent form, or in any subsequent conversation or follow up questions that emerged during the invitation and interview process (Creswell, 2007).

This research was approved by Creighton University’s formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to proceeding with data collection. This process specified a specific document set of: the researcher’s Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative certification, invitation letter to participants (Appendix B), and interview protocol (Appendix A) be provided to the IRB to ensure proper research protocols were followed (Creighton University, 2018). This process was completed, and the research was approved in September of 2017 (C. Scheurig, personal communication, September 6, 2017).

Data Analysis Approach

For this dissertation, data was hand coded using written notes and electronic data storage programs to organize and synthesize the material. While this was arguably a more lengthy process in the absence of specialized coding software, the unique and discreet relationship being observed had little literature to draw existing inferences or standards. Thus, considerable attention was devoted to poring over responses so as to create a nuanced understanding of potential patterns. The hand coding process stimulated
a process of visiting, and revisiting transcripts, and recordings to ensure that meaningful patterns were recognized. This process further ensured the researcher’s ability to develop a deep appreciation for participants and their responses within the context of their sector and within the context of their peers. From this manual process, an informed approach, cognizant of interviewee responses, body language and other nonverbal cues, as well as environmental factors and sector-specific vernacular was able to be synthesized appropriately, and accurately to determine discernable patterns (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Category creation coding was the most direct and efficient method to ensure that data were coded accurately (Creswell, 2014). Upon completing the coding process, the data were organized into themes and subthemes that most accurately represent the patterns that emerged from responses (Creswell, 2008).

Trustee Appointment Process

All interview participants provided responses that indicated their boards of trustees were sourced via a political appointment process where a combination of local and state-wide elected officials had board appointment authority. In four instances those interviewed indicated their college’s bylaws authorized the election of either a student or an alumni trustee (Participant II, personal interview, December 4, 2017; Participant III, personal interview, December 5, 2017; Participant V, personal interview, December 11, 2017; and Participant IX, personal interview, December 20, 2017). In these four instances, participants broadly indicated that they engaged and led these student or alumni trustees differently than those that had received formal political appointments. CEOs were asked to direct their responses toward their interactions with those trustees that were politically appointed. Responses firmly indicated that participants were aware of the professional literature base that champions the focusing of trustees toward policy
making, while empowering CEOs with the freedom to lead the organization’s administration (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014).

**Profiles of Participants**

Qualitative interviews were completed with 15 individuals. No deliberate effort was made to ensure that responses came from an ethnically, racially, or gender-based diverse group of individuals. However, within the sample a broad array of ethnicities, races, and genders were represented. The sample included African Americans, Hispanics, and white individuals, as well as an equitable distribution of men and women. In order to protect the anonymity of those who participated the gender pronouns “she” and “her” are used for consistency when describing individuals throughout. This usage should not be taken as an inference that all participants were female.

The assumption that a tenure of at least 5 years would imply a degree of success as it would typically span at least one re-contracting period was validated by all participants during the invitation process. The unsuccessful individual affirmed that she was terminated prior to re-contracting (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017).

**Participant I** currently serves as the CEO of a community college in the specific state that is under observation. She has served in this position for more than 20 years. She obtained this position through having worked in various faculty and administrative positions at her current institution, including the position of chief academic officer.

**Participant II** currently serves as the CEO of a community college in the specific state in the Northeast that is under observation. She has been in the position for seven years. Prior to her time in the position of CEO, she had been a chief academic officer for
a community college in a neighboring state, as well as member of the faculty and in faculty leadership positions at other community colleges.

**Participant III** currently serves as the CEO for a community college in a neighboring state to the one under observation. Prior to her current position, she served as the chief executive officer or as the acting chief executive officer for a significant period of time at four community colleges. Most recently, she had served as the CEO of a community college within the state under observation for eight years. Prior to her positions as CEO, she had been college faculty, a faculty leader and chief academic officer at various other community colleges.

**Participant IV** currently serves as the CEO of a community college in the specific state under observation. She has served in this role for nearly 25 years. Prior to this position, she served on the faculty of a selective admissions university, and as an administrator, and as a college chief executive officer’s special assistant.

**Participant V** is recently retired from the position of CEO of a community college in the specific state under observation. She had been bestowed with the honor of [chief executive officer] emeritus by her board of trustees upon retirement. She had served as the CEO of that college for 11 years. Prior to becoming CEO, she had served as a member of the faculty, a faculty leader, chief academic officer, and as the chief operating officer at satellite locations for that same institution.

**Participant VI** currently serves as the CEO of a community college in the specific state under observation. She has served in that position for 14 years. Prior to holding the position of CEO, she served in various administrative positions as a lead officer in institutional research, grants management, and strategic planning. These
positions were in both community colleges within the same state and selective admissions
institutions in neighboring states.

Participant VII currently is the CEO of a community college in a neighboring
state to the one under observation. Prior to this position, she served as the CEO of a
community college in the state under observation for five years. Before obtaining the
position of CEO, she had served as an acting CEO, and as the chief operations officer.

Participant VIII served as the CEO of a community college in the state under
observation for about one and a half years prior to being terminated. Prior to her position
as CEO, she served as adjunct instructor at the same college and as a member of the
senior leadership of a county government agency in a non-elected capacity. In addition
to her being the lone unsuccessful individual, it should be noted that her career path
lacked the significant higher education experience brought to the position by her
successful colleagues.

Participant IX presently serves as the CEO of a community college in the state
under observation. She has served in this role for six years. Prior to her time as the CEO,
she served as an adjunct instructor at both community and selective admissions
institutions and held a significant leadership role for a large k-12 school system within
the state under observation.

Participant X is recently retired from the position of CEO of a community
college in the state under observation. Prior to her time as CEO, she held government
and politically appointed positions related to higher education. After retiring as CEO, a
building at her college was named in her honor. She subsequently accepted an
appointment to serve in a statewide governmental advisory capacity related to higher education policy.

**Participant XI** serves as the CEO of a community college in the state under observation. She has served in that position for 15 years. Prior to her time as CEO, she served as the chief academic officer for a community college in a neighboring state and held a number of administrative leadership positions at both community and selective admissions colleges in the state under observation.

**Participant XII** serves as the CEO of a community college in the state under observation. She has held this position for 16 years. Prior to her time as CEO, she had served as the CEO of a community college in a neighboring state, as college faculty, and held positions in institutional research at community and selective admissions colleges.

**Participant XIII** serves as the CEO of a community college in a state in the same geographic region as the state under observation. Prior to this position, she served as the CEO of a community college in the state under observation for five years. Prior to her time as a CEO, she served several institutions as a member of the part-time and full-time faculty and as a chief academic officer.

**Participant XIV** recently retired from her positions as the CEO of a community college in the state under observation. Prior to retirement, she served as CEO for seven years. Prior to serving as CEO, she held several faculty appointments at research universities, served as a training and workforce development officer in the private sector.

**Participant XV** recently retired from the position of CEO of a community college in a different region than the one under observation. She cited family and health concerns as the reason for her abrupt departure and was recently awarded [chief
executive officer] emeritus status by that college. Prior to this position, she served as the CEO of a community college in the state under observation for nine years. Before her time as a CEO, she served as a chief advancement and chief planning officer at the college located within the state under observation.

**Figure 1** Professional characteristics of participating chief executive officers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
<th>Currently a CEO in state under observation</th>
<th>Currently a CEO in a different state</th>
<th>Recently Retired</th>
<th>Terminated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant I</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Participant II</td>
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<td>Participant III</td>
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<td>Participant IV</td>
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<td>Participant V</td>
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<td>Participant VI</td>
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<td>Participant VII</td>
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<td>Participant VIII</td>
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<td>Participant IX</td>
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<td>Participant X</td>
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<td>Participant XI</td>
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<td>Participant XII</td>
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<td>Participant XIII</td>
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<td>Participant XIV</td>
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<td>Participant XV</td>
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</table>

*Figure 1.* This chart displays the criteria used to identify possible community college CEOs (participants) for this study. Boxes marked with an “X” indicate that the individual possesses this characteristic. Participants are numbered in the order in which they were interviewed by the researcher. CEOs presently working in different states from the one under observation, all had served, and had been recontracted at least once as a CEO in the state under observation.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

Interviews with participants yielded distinct patterns of insights for leadership styles, strategies and tactics that community college CEOs have leveraged to optimize their board leadership success. Patterns that emerged from these insights were organized into three themes, one of which was also organized with subthemes, as significant data were reported by participants that warranted further delineation. The themes were presented in their order based on the novelty of the analysis. Subthemes to the third theme were presented as an intuitive pathway from the CEO application process through what can be considered reflections of a mature CEO/board operation.

The first major theme presented, leveraging the classics, indicates that CEOs draw upon traditionally understood tenants of effective leadership styles, strategies, and tactics to create environments where they can optimally lead their boards of trustees. As Lowney suggests, good leaders will typically engage in some common behaviors shared by other good leaders (2003). However, responses from participants in this study indicated that the way in which one deploys such actions when leading upward, is distinct from when one deploys them when leading subordinates (Participant XIV, personal interview, January 11, 2018). While participants generally avoided much discussion of academically defined leadership styles (Haslam et al., 2011), it is under this theme that frequent references to authenticity and authentic leadership were referenced as being optimal (Participant VII, personal interview, December 15, 2017).

The second major theme, developing symbioses, is highly reflective of the literature regarding leader-follower dynamic (Zhu et al., 2011). This theme suggests that
ensuring a respectful environment where CEOs and trustees are able to symbiotically hold each other accountable – and one where each party is able to effectively contribute toward impacting the college’s leadership vision – can be a significant advantage for CEOs attempting to optimize their board leadership capacity. While the degree to which this theme was discussed by participants is less universal than the other two distinct themes presented, there was a strong and compelling pattern of responses that indicated this was worthy as being reported as a distinct theme.

The third major theme, *maintaining focus*, that was discerned through near universal response from those interviewed was that the paramount goal that CEOs need to work toward when leading their boards, is to prevent unnecessary or counterproductive political interference (or intrusion) by political actors from creeping into a college’s administration. Participants conflated whether those referenced political actors were elected officials, elected officials working through their appointed trustees, or trustees acting on their own accord. This suggested that participants had a common shared experience when managing this facet of their jobs. While the goal of preventing this counterproductive intrusion itself is not necessarily a leadership style, strategy or tactic for leading upward, it was presented by respondents in this study as a strategy for ensuring that one’s board members are focused and engaged on their policy-development responsibly. The goal of calibrating trustee focus on appropriate board activities and keeping the board from engaging in potentially counterproductive intrusion into administrative concerns, thus manifests as a CEO-driven strategy for effectively leading their boards from a subordinate position.
Aggregated responses from CEOs suggest that this attention to focusing trustees toward these responsibilities makes the board a more effective unit, one that respects the roles of trustees and CEOs, and one that functions within the best interests of the college. The impressions of successful CEOs working toward this goal are presented as a major theme, and the tactics and strategies used by CEOs to achieve this are communicated as subthemes. The theme was referenced in some form in all interviews and reflects a broad consensus among successful CEOs that suggested its inclusion in this study as a distinct theme was appropriate. Broad consensus on this topic offered by participating CEOs suggested that they were in-tune with this sector-wide best practices (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b) and that the issue of preventing political interference into their administrations is a powerful motivator for CEOs when leading their trustees.

Additional patterns reflected within the theme of preventing unnecessary or counterproductive political interference were classified into five subthemes. These subthemes were reported consistently by a majority of interviewees and were either expressly noted to be part of the process of preventing political intrusion, or because they were made in reference as being tactically related to achieving that strategy. Within these sections participants provided responses that indicated how they have effectively led their boards as a subordinate, but also why and for what purposes they sought to optimize their effectiveness. In essence, CEOs suggested they sought to keep their boards focused on their codified responsibilities as policy makers (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b), so that they and their professional staffs could effectively lead and administer the mission. Responses that were entirely unique to one individual, or
responses that were reflective of particular circumstances at individual colleges, or were related to the detailed workings of a single political actor, were not included as subthemes.

The reporting of themes and subthemes makes frequent use of block quoting. This is used to provide the reader with the opportunity to read the responses of CEOs in their own words and within the broader context of responses. This was specifically done to enrich and strengthen the analysis by presenting certain data points that were broadly indicative of aggregated responses, were germane to the topic, or presented a detailed degree of insight. The use of quotes also ensures that responses analyzed lack any misleading varnish, and that the researcher refrained from interjecting bias.

**Theme 1: Leveraging the Classics**

As each interview unfolded, common suggestions for being an effective leader from a subordinate position were provided. Virtually all interview subjects (including Participant XIII, who had been terminated) cited common tenants found throughout the broader leadership literature base that are known to be essential for leadership success. Notably, being flexible (Lowney, 2003), ensuring full transparency (Bennis, Goleman, O’Toole, & Biederman, 2008) with trustees, engaging people as individuals – not as a monolithic group (Greenleaf, 2002), seeking to meet people on terms familiar to them (Greenleaf, 2002), and needing to engage people through their discreet and esoteric interests (Haslam et al., 2011), manifested throughout the interview process. For most, this advice was stated with an altruistic tone, with a degree of optimism and enthusiasm for what this type of engagement could foster. Participant I indicated that, “While it isn’t exactly the same, in some ways you provide leadership for your trustees the way you would lead any other group, and if you do that well, they will respond positively”
(personal interview, November 29, 2017). The first portion of Participant I’s response should be carefully noted however. The consensus she and her peers expressed is that while one may need to rely on commonly understood hallmarks listed throughout the leadership literature base, the way in which you deploy them must be altered because of the inversion of power on display between community college CEOs and their trustees. Uniformly, responses articulated in interviews suggested awareness and acceptance of the power differential between CEOs and trustees was an essential element for CEO success (Haslam et al., 2011).

One participant provided feedback that suggested a need to minimally provide lip service to such commonly cited effective leadership factors (Participant II, personal interview, December 4, 2017):

Of course, you need to pull out all the old tricks, be engaging, and transparent, and make sure people feel heard. This can frankly be exhausting because you have to do it when you basically already know what needs to be done, but sometimes, you know, what can I say, there is a ring that has to be kissed and making sure you’ve at least made the attempt to be engaging…and documenting that of course…is a necessary step, even if it might not always be a productive one.

While the tone of this response does indicate a degree of skepticism by the interviewee, the advice is nevertheless valuable. Regardless of this CEO’s perception of its value, it can be effective to engage trustees using such tactics to ensure that they feel they are part of shaping the leadership vision. Beyond the insights of Participant II, Participant XV (personal interview, January 24, 2018) noted that engaging in this might feel like a
burden, but that there was value in engaging in exercises that keep CEOs humble. She indicated that, “your staff will try to please you. They will ‘yes’ you to death, your trustees won’t do that. Embrace that challenge.”

Nevertheless, a common trait emerged throughout interviews, regardless of the interviewees tone, that while such leadership strategies are common to deploy in all leader/follower relationships – whether that be a traditional top-down model, peer relationship, or in this unique bottom-up environment – the way in which you deploy them varies drastically when dealing with those who are effectively your supervisors. Surely the way in which such strategies are deployed varies when one must lead those who possess significant political power, as well as the ultimate power over the terms and conditions of one’s employment. Participant XIV (personal interview, January 11, 2018) provided the following insights:

They are your boss. That’s kind of funny to say, they are your boss. It’s a plural to a singular and we often think of our boss as just one person, but in my career as [CEO], I had [exact number of trustees on her board] bosses that functioned [as my boss at any given time]. That’s different. Recognizing that difference cannot be met with same old same old approaches is to your advantage as a [CEO]. Be aware, [trustees] will behave differently, change more sharply, than any boss you’ve had so you need to recognize dealing with them will require a different set of skills than you needed when you only had one individual to report to.

CEOs suggested a range of ideas for how one can accomplish this. Those who were of the persuasion that leveraging classically understood sound leadership principles were largely ceremonial, nevertheless indicated it was required minimally for relationship
management. A summation of such thinking was offered by Participant II, “be a squeaky wheel, don’t be annoying, but be persistent so they quickly get back to you” (personal interview, December 4, 2017). Others indicated that a CEO should ensure to appear deferential and respectful of trustees’ political power (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017), and to prevent trustees from feeling excluded in administrative decisions (Participant IX, personal interview, December 20, 2017).

For the majority, who were less cynical in tone about deploying these tactics and strategies, their advice ranged from: being proactive (Participant I, personal interview, November 29, 2017), leveraging trustees’ experiences and insights (Participant V, personal interview, December 11, 2017), taking advantage of the opportunity to challenge oneself and others (Participant III, personal interview, December 5, 2017), and reminding oneself to stay humble when engaging those with more political power (Participant XV, personal interview, January 24, 2018). Nevertheless, regardless of tone used by CEOs, the insights gathered demonstrated a clear need to develop finely tuned political skills (Ferris et al., 2007) to discern what terms will be most effective for the purposes of optimizing one’s leadership capacity when leading from a subordinate position.

**Theme 2: Developing Symbiosis**

The second major theme unearthed in this research was that those who had been successful at effectively leading from a subordinate position either intuitively understood that they would need to be deferential, or quickly learned that they needed adjust their initial expectations of the position in order to thrive within an environment where they possessed less political power. Indeed, this echoes the importance of being flexible (Lowney, 2003), but several participants spoke in depth regarding this point and their
unique take indicated that their insights went beyond simply structuring a respectful environment (Lowney, 2003).

Participant X, who was prone to speak in metaphors, provided a clear one related to creating a productive, respectful, and symbiotic working environment. She noted that initially she expected that her trustees would largely be deferential to her expertise at running the college. She assumed that deference would extend to her board leadership efforts. She did not suggest she had entered the position without recognition that her trustees possessed political power, but did indicate that she struggled at the start of her tenure regarding level to which trustees would inundate her with questions that she thought reflected “minutiae” and certainly “were not issues of policy” (personal interview, December 26, 2017). As she continued to reflect on her early months as CEO, she indicated that at one point she came to what she described as a “profound realization” (Participant X, personal interview, December 26, 2017):

I have to admit that a part of me was [pause] the vain part I guess I should concede [pause] was agitated by this deep-in-the-weeds interest expressed by a few trustees. It felt like I was being asked to conform to the views or beliefs they had, not lead the place, and answer meddling questions like “what is the cost of postage?” or “do we limit personal phone calls by staff during the day?” Nothing ever boiled over, thankfully, but there was a time when I felt that I was being harangued, or jostled, and it wasn’t what I wanted. [It] wasn’t a job I wanted to do, and I began to question my own judgement. And I can’t tell to this day how I came to the realization, but once I did, I never looked back and keeping it in mind helped me basically every day afterward. I kept in mind that I had obviously been
hired because I was perceived as having been able to do this job, that [trustees]
believed enough in my credentials and experience to entrust the stewardship of
this organization to me as the [CEO], but then I realized this didn’t mean that they
didn’t trust themselves. It meant they found me to be the best candidate to marry
their strengths with. So their digging into the small stuff like postage wasn’t as
much a reflection of their distrust in me as it was an expression of their concerns.
The equation I came up with was if the college was a lake and they all wanted to
go out in a boat, they hired the most qualified captain they could find. One that
knew how to navigate, steer, anchor etcetera, but that didn’t mean they didn’t
know the lake itself. Frankly, they grew up at the lake, they swam in the lake,
you know the time of the tides and where treacherous underwater obstacles were
located, which lake houses were owned by who, and where and when was best to
leave and return to port. Basically, while I knew how best to operate the boat, and
how to get the most out of the features of the boat, they knew better the
environment in which we were sailing. Once I realized that, and realized that I
didn’t need to overcome or end-around this with them, that what I needed to do
was harness [the strengths of trustees], my life became much easier.

Participant VII was similarly insightful. She noted during her career being known as an
expert emboldened her with confidence, yet she was proud she never stopped trying to
learn. She noted, “letting trustees know that you are sincerely trying to learn from them
goes a long way toward building effective relationships” (personal interview, December
15, 2017).
Along with her peers, Participant IV noted that learning from trustees was essential. She understood that she possessed a power, by virtue of being an expert in community college education, that her trustees did not necessarily have, but in addition to the political power possessed by trustees, they were all also “data rich.” She indicated that during her career, because she had been open to the guidance of her trustees, she was able to create an open culture between herself and her trustees. This culture was inclusive of all parties’ strengths, insights, and expertise. She recognized that such a culture could possibly be a source of tension or disagreement, could also be leveraged to, “create powerful shared visions, and strategies” for the college (personal interview, December 7, 2017).

Participant XII (personal interview, January 6, 2018), one of the longer-serving CEOs, expressed the following anecdote that indicated her awareness of creating a respectful and symbiotic relationship:

I recall in my early days, I had made a decision to go with a certain vendor for a very small capital project, we’re talking basically a toolshed. In passing, I mentioned to a trustee, that I saw in a restaurant, that I would be recommending going with this contractor because he met the [requirements for the job], and was the lowest bidder. Well, even though this was small potatoes, the trustee said basically ‘whoa whoa whoa, he’s terrible, he did a bad job on [a local high school building project], everyone thinks he’s bad news and I know [name of specific board member], who was our chair at the time, isn’t going to care for this.’ So my default was almost to sort of defend myself and express that we had made a search by the book. I certainly didn’t want to have to do business based on who
people personally liked and didn’t like, and I didn’t want to be micromanaged, and [the conversation] sort of had the feel like I was being pressured to change my mind for reasons that were immaterial to the success of the project. But, I didn’t defend myself; I said I would look into it. When I went back to the staff, we did a little digging and found that one of the assurances required, I can’t exactly recall it, as part of the proposal that was affirmed by the contractor as having been met, was also at issue on the [high school] job. In fact, it was the basis of a law suit that created a huge media issue, and eventually resulted in the contractor having to pay back [name of a government agency]. We had time to adjust the award, citing this concern, and we were able to select another contractor. At no point, did I hear from [trustees] which contractor I should hire, but what I realized was this trustee just protected me. I could have inadvertently created an issue at a board meeting, or tension with the chair, but luckily I happened to stumble into a meeting where that was sort of accidentally prevented. Sometimes it’s better to be lucky than good – what can I say [laughed]? From thereon out, I proactively sought their feedback on such things to make sure that I was fully informed, or to see if they simply knew things that I didn’t.

In essence, Participant XII came to the conclusion that her trustees were a source of information regarding her community. She realized that she might not understand or have access to information possessed by her trustees, and that proactively mining that information from them could help prevent tension and conflict between herself and trustees.
Other successful CEOs indicated that they benefited from structuring symbiotic environments where all individuals’ expertise and insights were welcomed at the table. Participant XI noted that she had she took her responsibility to educate and inform her trustees seriously. However, she suggested that in addition, had she to do her career over again that she would purposefully and proactively tell trustees at the start of her tenure as CEO that she welcomed their insights, and the opportunity to learn from them (personal interview, December 27, 2017). Similarly, Participant XIII noted that she had proactively – and frequently – thanked her board for the opportunity to learn the “intimate details” of the region from them (personal interview, January 10, 2018). Here Participant XIII echoed Participant V, who cited that trustees were a rich source of information and insight regarding the community served by the college (personal interview, December 11, 2017).

In opposition to the suggestions of successful CEOs was Participant VIII. Regarding this theme, she was alternatively incredulous that her expertise was not more valued by the trustees with whom she thought that she had longstanding, established trusting relationships; and yet conceded that her self-described “pugnacious style” was “obviously not conducive for success,” because it inevitably led to conflict and contributed to her subsequent termination (personal interview, December 18, 2017).

Theme 3: Maintaining Proper Focus

The single most important goal and the seemingly paramount strategy echoed throughout every interview (including Participant VIII’s) for ensuring that CEOs can optimize their success as a board leader, was as Participant I stated, “what you need to do, oddly enough is to keep your Board from inserting themselves into the administrative process or [from] inviting the [political actors that appoint trustees] from inserting
themselves into your operations (personal interview, November 29, 2017).” The participant noted this as being counterintuitive because according to her (Participant I, personal interview, November 29, 2017):

Make no mistake, you’re going to have to play politics to get your job done, and that might suggest that you should invite elected leaders to be in the fold, so to speak. That is not what you want. They over reach, and I say that respectfully. These are people that want to effect change, but you don’t want them doing that at your college around you, or in a way that gums up your works. So even though you need to make sure they are satisfied and happy, you need to lead and shape their involvement.

Participant XII’s quote on the subject was candid (personal interview, January 6, 2018):

I’ve been able to do what I’ve been able to do as a college [CEO] because I knew how to keep unnecessary politics from the halls of [specific college]. And believe you me, anyone who is going to be good at this job will find a balance of making sure trustees and [politicians with appointing authority] are both happy; and [that politicians are] at arm’s length.

These responses indicate a common response from the CEOs that were interviewed, that there is a need for keeping trustees engaged in policy development and kept out of the day-to-day administration of the college. Successful CEOs delved into why this goal was so important for creating an environment where their board leadership capacities could be optimized. Broadly indicating, as Participant IV suggested, that managing this facet successfully is the very root of one’s ability to be an effective board leader (personal interview, December 7, 2017).
Participant VIII, who had been terminated from her position for what she described as, “political reasons” (personal interview, December 18, 2017) also underscored this point by noting:

What did me in, other than the nonsense that was pinned on me, was that I came from [the county government] where we always wanted to have more control over the college’s operations. So when I finally [became CEO] I said come on in [to various political actors]. Now what [elected county officials] ended up doing was realizing [pause] I should say [pause]. They misunderstood that because the college made money [through collecting tuition] that [public] appropriations cuts could be weathered simply by increasing tuition.

The implication of this quote was telling. Unlike those who had successfully navigated their careers as community college CEOs, who sought to prevent unnecessary political interference in their administrations and shape political actor involvement carefully, Participant VIII carelessly invited their involvement and overreach (personal interview, December 18, 2017). As a result, these political actors developed a misinformed view college finance. This misunderstanding then yielded a significant cut to the college’s annual appropriation. Participant VIII (personal interview, December 18, 2017) continued:

They really didn’t understand, and I’ll admit now, that I might not have fully appreciated it then, how college finance works. Without that appropriation as a piece of bedrock, we were really hurt. [Political actors] wrongly assumed that our enrollment would increase. [Politician’s name] even said to me basically just take in more students. I reminded him that we were open-admissions and it wasn’t how
it worked [as compared to selective admissions programs], that we had what we
would have and we couldn’t just charge our students more and more and more.
Well, he took that as me being condescending, which didn’t work out too well.

Consensus from successful CEOs, combined with the inferences that can be
drawn from the unsuccessful CEO, suggested the goal of preventing counterproductive
political interference into one’s administration was essential for CEO board leadership
success. This is not to suggest that all participants provided uniform responses.
However, where patterns emerged throughout interviews, it was clear that participants in
the study, those who were successful and the lone individual who had been terminated
(Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017), understood (or came to
understand) that in order to provide optimal leadership for both their boards of trustees,
and to provide effective leadership for their subordinates, what they needed to
accomplish and sustain was an environment that they could protect from unnecessary
political interference. Successful CEOs strove to keep their trustees from inviting such
interference, and to make sure that they as CEOs were perceived as being capable of
managing and leading the college administration without such interference. By doing so
CEOs established that they could be trusted to both lead the college on a daily basis and
to keep the trustees engaged. Participant V suggested (personal interview, December 11,
2017):

You could make them look good, which frankly all politicians like, and if you can
do that through [trustees who they appointed], well than you can make sure you
can stay focused on meeting the mission and keeping those [trustees] themselves
satisfied. Once you find that balance, well then [the board of trustees] will follow you because they know you can be trusted.

While most participants would conflate the political actors who appointed their trustees and trustees themselves as all being political actors capable of engaging in undue politically oriented interference, two participants, II and IV, carefully separated their trustees from those who had trustee-appointing authority into two groups that might seek to overstep their authority or to assert their influence on a college’s administration. Both participants were aligned with the broader consensus that preventing political interference was paramount, but their unique and deliberate categorization of these groups was thoughtful and is worthy of specific attention.

Participant IV (personal interview, December 7, 2017) noted, “keeping your board, and those that appoint your board, from creeping into your administration is the name of the game.” She continued:

You are presumably confident that you will be able to identify the needs of your organization and that you are the best possible person to do this job. With all due respect, you know that your trustees do not have the expertise that you do, but they will have their say. If you resist that, and if you make them feel that they are out of control, or they are superfluous or ceremonial, if they feel they are out of influence, than you will ensure that you get interference from anyone in the county that has ever been anything [a reference to those that achieved a degree of political success]. They will turn on you.

Participant II made the following statement (personal interview, December 4, 2017):
You must keep the politics out [of one’s administration] and you have to be careful about how you do that. It might mean you need to show off with your skills, but you need to be measured, and you need to do it with purpose. Your trustees will fairly challenge you until they get what they need. Now that doesn’t mean you have to beat them or show you are better, but they need to know you’re serious and capable. Establishing that takes time and effort, but it can be done, and if you do it right it doesn’t matter that they have more power, they will follow you because they know it is in their interests, but also in the interests of the college (personal interview, 2017).

Participant II’s perspective was salient as she captured the essence of what has been termed political interference (personal interview, December 4, 2017). Her explanation reverberated throughout subsequent responses from other individuals. Essentially those interviewed defined any actions taken around them by trustees or other political actors to be “political interference” (Participant II, personal interview, December 4, 2017; and Participant IV, personal interview, December 7, 2017). Actions might include trustees meeting with faculty, staff and students without the CEO’s knowledge or under circumstances where CEOs felt pressure to conform to the wishes of powerful political actors. Another often-cited form of political interference was if trustees insisted on involving themselves in the day-to-day operations of the college, in other words, when trustees went beyond their codified role as a policymaker. (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b).
With that strong sentiment in mind, the remainder of the themes presented can be understood as subthemes to the paramount goal of preventing unnecessary political interference. However, before their specific introduction, it is necessary to offer the perspectives of participants as to specifically why preventing political interference from trustees and political actors is necessary for the establishment of a successful and productive CEO-trustee environment.

Several of those interviewed noted the sheer amount of time that addressing political interference, and/or cleaning up intrusions by trustees into the administrative operations takes to mitigate (Participant VI, personal interview, December 13, 2017; Participant VII, personal interview, December 15, 2017; and Participant XI, personal interview, December 27, 2017). Having to deal with such intrusion is logically distracting for the CEO, and is arguably distracting for all of the college’s various constituency groups. Participant XI (personal interview, December 27, 2017) noted:

If you have your politics [a broad reference to interference from political actors] all wrong everyone will be able to tell. It won’t be subtly felt. I mean it will be pretty obvious. For faculty and staff, they’ll wonder why this trustee is doing this or that, where is the [CEO]? For students, they might feel compelled to engage [trustees and political actors] that they know have some kind of high rank. Even the community could end up being distracted if something were to blow up in the press or something like that, so you really want to be careful.

Participant V (personal interview, December 11, 2017) noted ominously that if it is obvious that the CEO is:
…incapable of maintaining [preventing political intrusion] than at a certain point the faculty and staff will regard you as weak. They could extend a vote of no confidence – which surely won’t help you keep the board from wanting to dig in deeper. The board, even though they are basically doing whatever they want, will likely find you lack the requisite strength [to run the college], and that’s too fine a line [for her personal comfort level]. But I’ve seen it in [the state under observation], and just like anywhere else, once the word is out you’re weak [pause], I mean, perception is reality.

Here Participant V suggested that the perception of weakness is incapacitating and will irreparably harm a CEO’s professional reputation to the degree that they will no longer be able to effectively lead upward for trustees, or effectively lead their subordinates.

Participant III (personal interview, December 5, 2017) stated the following:

If you spend all of your time trying to chase down your trustees run amok at your college, you will have essentially abdicated any ability you had to make change. You won’t be able to lead your staff because they will quickly lose confidence in you, and you really don’t want your staff to lose confidence in you. I mean, how can you inspire them if they see you as spineless? I guess to the specific topic you’re looking at, if your trustees realize that they can walk all over you, or that you are essentially weak-willed or lack any degree of integrity [pause] perhaps a better word is constitution, they’ll sniff that out or conclude that you are weak and you won’t be respected by them.
Subthemes

As previously noted, the following tactics were listed by participants as being valuable for the purposes of optimizing one’s ability to lead a politically appointed board of trustees from a subordinate position.

The following are regarded as subthemes to the overarching theme of preventing unnecessary political intrusion by trustees or other political actors, which manifested in all interviews, including that of Participant VIII (unsuccessful CEO). These subthemes have express, or inferred connections to the macro theme of preventing political intrusion, therefore regarding the prevention of political intrusion is cited as consensus strategy, and these subthemes are cited as tactics toward the execution of that strategy.

Subtheme 1: Selecting where to apply. It stands to reason that individuals who are ambitious and seek to obtain the position of a community college chief executive officer would cast as wide a net as possible to obtain such a position. However, what was virtually unanimously received from interviews with participants was that those who are seeking to do this type of work will have very few opportunities. While it is expected that a rash of retirements is likely (Smith, 2016), the fact remains that there are only approximately 1,200 community colleges in the country (Levin & Kater, 2012). Thus, at any given time only a fraction of those colleges will plausibly be seeking to hire a CEO. Critically, even fewer will be a good fit for individual candidates. A discernable pattern emerged from responses that suggested carefully vetting potential opportunities as a candidate for a CEO position was essential for eventually being able to prevent counterproductive political interference.
Participant IV, provided a thoughtful and careful response to the specific question, “What advice would you give to those who are new to their positions or are seeking to obtain positions such as yours, as it relates to providing leadership for their boards?” Prior to delivering her response she took a long pause, and responded with the following (personal interview, December 7, 2017):

I can tell you that the advice I would give myself, looking back some 20 odd years and for me it actually worked out but only via coincidence and while I am grateful for that having worked out, it could’ve gone the other way. Anyway, I say that because I’m saying this in a way where I’m sort of aggregating the experiences and insights I’ve seen in this state over the course of my career that you better really vet where you apply. I know when you have reached a certain part of your career and you feel like you can handle the job of CEO, you’re prepared to do the job, you want to do the job so on and so forth, so what ends up happening is you put your resume out there to headhunters and search consultants, you half expect that you might need to relocate. You roll all that into one and, from what I’ve seen, a powerful delusion can set into one’s thinking – that wherever you can obtain a CEO offer you should take it, because you believe you are so capable of doing the job that you will be able to overcome whatever challenges are there and that you will be able to manage any environment. I can assure you, sure as I sit here, that that’s far from being true. It’s hard to blame people for thinking that way. You’ve worked hard and you know you are prepared, but just because you are qualified and prepared, it doesn’t mean you are the right fit for the job at that particular school, in that particular
place. Easy as it sounds to see, I’ve had the benefit of working at [name of college] as [CEO] for near 25 years, and while I didn’t make the consideration when I applied, the advice I would give would be – you’re going to be a public figure so if your personal politics are against the grain [in the region where you are applying] don’t apply there. Personally speaking, I am as [color associated with a particular political ideology] as the day is long and so too is [jurisdiction where her college is located], and I know that if I had to do this job in [a jurisdiction in the same state that was suggested to have political leadership of an opposing viewpoint] there would be no way. I mean, I see what happens over there, and while I have the utmost respect for their programs and [name of CEO at the community college that serves the referenced jurisdiction], as well as trustees from there that I’ve met, if I had to work with them to meet an open-access community college mission, I would’ve pulled my hair out. Likewise, I bet [repeated name of CEO] would say the same about having to do that here. I’m not making a case about the merits of my politics over another’s here, but that knowing your environment and your own limits and personal lines in the sand are critical [pause] critical.

Her point was emphatic and fully represented the tone of a number of responses that suggested that interviewees would advise those looking for CEO positions to avoid applying for positions in jurisdictions where irreconcilable political conflict with political actors was likely.

Participant VI (personal interview, December 13, 2017) provided a similarly thoughtful response, which echoed the heavy partisan political tones of Participant IV’s
response. She indicated that she had cast a wide net when seeking a CEO position, and while she fortunately was able to secure a position in a region that reflected her own basic political beliefs, she noted:

I’ve seen far too many instances where the person who got the job didn’t know what they were walking into, didn’t know themselves, and banked on assumptions that they would be able to manage regardless. And they sure couldn’t. So I would certainly say know yourself and do your due diligence when applying, because just because there is an opening and you want to be a [CEO], and you might be a good one somewhere, you might not be a good fit everywhere.”

While participants IV and VI offered overtly partisan political perspectives, other responses indicated that it would be to a CEOs eventual advantage to carefully and deliberately choose where to apply versus pursuing any opportunity where one meets the minimum qualifications. Such areas include making sure one fully understand the population demographics (Participant I, personal interview, November 29, 2017), the economic conditions and local major industries (Participant IV, personal interview, December 7, 2017; Participant VII, personal interview, December 15, 2017; Participant IX, December 20, 2017; and Participant XIV, personal interview, January 11, 2018), ensuring one is fully aware of enrollment trends and public appropriations (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017), that you can see yourself leading within the particular collective bargaining atmosphere (Participant VI, personal interview, December 13, 2017), that one is aware of major positive and negative media stories (Participant V, personal interview, December 11, 2017; and Participant XV, personal
interview, January 24, 18), that you will be happy living in that region, state, and climate (Participant IV, personal interview, December 7, 2017), and that one is comfortable working in a place that might be far from family and friends (Participant VII, personal interview, December 15, 2017). These responses were offered as specific examples regarding the vast array of considerations that one might make when thinking about applying for a position as a community college CEO. While they are broad, they all suggest the specific insight that having a full grasp of the political, economic, and institution-specific conditions before seeking the position is valuable advice for potential community college CEOs.

Consensus among those interviewed was that working in an environment that is enjoyable and compatible with one’s sensibilities enables one to better engage in her board governance responsibilities, and can help to ensure the growth of productive and positive relationships between board members, and CEOs. This optimal engagement is arguably essential to optimizing a CEO’s ability to effectively lead and focus their boards of trustees, and effectively administer the college. Lastly, while it is certainly not a new discovery, Participant VI noted (personal interview, December 13, 2017):

Famously, it’s been said that it’s lonely at the top. You will come into a place where you might not be known, you might not have many relationships, and frankly any relationship you have will either grow or change based on the fact that you are the only [CEO] at the college. So that means whether you [worked at a particular location for most of one’s career prior to becoming CEO] or if you came from parts unknown, all relationships you have or make are going to be power relationships for everyone else. Their relationship to you…and I don’t
mean to sound cynical with this, because I’m not saying that everyone that works at a community college is Machiavellian or that they are all engaged in cloak-and-dagger spy games [pause] but you cannot mistake that there is a power dynamic between you and everyone else, so you have to protect yourself and keep appropriate distance. Having done this now long enough and all I can say is, if you do that part [maintain appropriate distance], then you will be lonely. You will feel lonely, even isolated at times, and that isn’t always easy. What helps that is liking where you work, liking where you live, and being comfortable with the unique factors that define your job. [Being CEO of a community college] is a great job, but you really have to make sure that you want to do it…and do it somewhere you like to be.

Beyond developing an understanding and comfortability with the specific institution where one submits an application, participants offered additional insights one can take during the interview process.

In addition to fully understanding if one is a proper fit for the college, and the regional environment, there was broad consensus from participants that transparently defining oneself during the interview process is equally as important, and reflects Haslam et al.’s discussions on the value of leading authentically (2011). Participant XII’s response (personal interview, January 6, 2018) on this subject was short but emphatic, “When you interview, make sure they can tell exactly who you are. If they are misled by you, and you turn out to be something other than what they expect, there will be a price to pay. Trustees do not like surprises, and they particularly won’t like to feel misled.”
Along this thread, interviewees provided consistent feedback that suggested as, Participant VII declared (personal interview, December 15, 2017):

You almost have to reject the instinct to sort of go out of your way to impress. Of course, put your best foot forward, but do not betray who you are. That is, what you want to make sure you do is show who you are in a way that is fully transparent. While you of course want to do well, you want to get the job; you do not want to get the job only to have your future bosses think that they have been manipulated to believing you’re something that you’re not, or that you weren’t honest about who you were, or even worse that you have been a bait-and-switch. In the interview, you are free to advertise all of your convictions, your ideas, to be your true self. No job is worth betraying that anyway, but you will find in a job like this, to start on that foot is do so at your peril. You will not be able to sustain the charade you’re projecting. So my advice would be to let them see you, the real you, and let them make their decision to make you an offer or not based on that. It’s been my experience that this will save everyone involved a lot of grief.

Participant VII’s thoughtful summation provided a succinct codification of the near ubiquitous responses from participants who suggested one should be authentic and transparent about who she is in the interview process. Indeed, these responses echoed the findings of Bennis et al. (2008), who concluded that full personal transparency is essential for establishing trusting functional relationships, and Sipe and Frick (2015), who concluded that by projecting one’s authentic self you can empower followers with trust in you, and empower yourself by being free of contrived behaviors that run counter to one’s natural and learned skill-sets, sensibilities, ethics, and disposition.
The third facet of this subtheme was to ensure that when one is interviewing, to view that time as a two-way street. In effect, participants provided consistent feedback that during the interview process there is an opportunity to effectively cross-examine those that are interviewing you. Participant X provided the following response, which serves as an effective example of responses received from several participants (personal interview, December 26, 2017):

Be mindful that [the interview process] is your chance to size up the people you’ll be working with, and working for. It’s likely that some trustees are going to be involved, as well as faculty and staff. Keep notes, see what you think. Do you think you can get along with them? Do you think that they share your goals or that you can come to common goals together?

Her responses coalesced around a surprising piece of advice that was reflected by most interviewees, including Participant VIII (personal interview, December 18, 2017), who was terminated from her position, that as a candidate for the position, one needs to be prepared to say no to the offer. To be clear, this advice was not to be confused with being prepared to say no to an offer because the offer did not provide adequate or expected compensation, but because one is not a good fit for the position.

Participant XIII (personal interview, January 10, 2018) did indicate that one should not undervalue herself in terms of compensation, but moreover, participants suggested in the aggregate that it was important to take in all that you have been able to discern about the location, the college, and the people to make an informed decision if one thinks they are a good fit for the job. Specifically, it was suggested to not be seduced by the title and the flattering nature of being offered a prestigious position. As
Participant XIV noted (personal interview, January 11, 2018), “The first sign of being a good leader is knowing when you are, or are not the right person for the job.”

The multifaceted feedback obtained from participants was consistent in tone and style. Based on the thoughtfulness and consistency of replies from successful CEOs and the lone CEO who was terminated from her position, it is clear that first ensuring that skills, disposition, personal values, goals, and leadership style are an appropriate match for the college where one has applied is an essential and fundamental building block for future success as a leader of trustees. Surely, trustees have an obligation to conduct a search that yields an appropriate candidate, but applicants have an obligation to the college, trustees, and themselves to project oneself transparently and authentically. By doing so, one can ensure that appropriate expectations are set by both trustees and the CEO, as well as faculty and staff involved in the interview process.

It is reasonable to conclude that if the CEO interview process is engaged and executed successfully, all parties will be apprised of the details needed to optimize the relationship between CEOs and trustees. This becomes fundamental to establishing the CEO as the expert leader for the board of trustees and developing the requisite trust between parties. This clear starting point is essential for empowering the CEO in preventing counterproductive political intrusion from trustees themselves, or from their politically powerful appointing authorities.

**Subtheme 2: Understanding the trustee world.** The fundamental responsibility for any effective community college board of trustees is to recruit and hire a competent and appropriate chief executive officer for their institution (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). In virtually all states or systems this responsibility is formally
codified (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014). Trustees often have vastly diverse backgrounds, and have been appointed by elected leaders for equally diverse reasons (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b). This diversity of experience was cited by those interviewed as being valuable and enriching for their colleges (Participant II, personal interview, December 4, 2017; Participant VII, personal interview, December 15, 2017; and Participant X, personal interview, December 26, 2017). Nevertheless, it still stands to reason that trustees who have illustrated strong political acumen, may not have a fully informed view of higher education, or in particular what is distinctive about community colleges from other institutions of higher education (Eddy, 2010). As Participant XI noted, “Even your most dedicated and sincere trustee, if they have not been exposed to higher ed., you will spend a lot of time bringing them up to speed (personal interview, December 27, 2017).” It is in that spirit that the majority of those interviewed provided insight suggesting that in order to develop productive relationships with their trustees, they as CEOs had to first illustrate that they understood, as Participant V noted, the “world of the trustees” (personal interview, December 11, 2017).

To be clear, this phrase, and the particular advice was not suggestive that CEOs need to be experts in the daily professional and personal lives of each individual trustee who served on their college’s board, but was indicative that trustees appreciate when CEOs make a deliberate attempt to understand the comprehensive pressures of public life in the region that trustees are subjected to as political actors (Hollibaugh, 2018). Trustees expect that their CEO understands how to properly run a college. As Participant II indicated (personal interview, December 4, 2017), “You were hired for a reason, and
that’s because you convinced [the search committee and the trustees on it] you were an expert [at running a college.” Participant IX suggested (personal interview, December 20, 2017), “for better or worse they expect that you understand the [day-to-day operations], and the strategic planning for your college” (personal interview, 2017). She continued by noting, “What appears to be helpful to me for the purposes of relationship building is when they know that you understand what it is they are facing from the [elected leaders that have appointing power] and from others that [pause] that are a part of the [pause, accompanied by physical gestures suggesting she was looking for a term] network of influence.”

It stands to reason that educating oneself regarding the pressures faced by colleagues can be a fruitful exercise for any leader (Lowney, 2003). It promotes comprehensive understanding, and it promotes diverse thinking and the inclusion of various perspectives (Lowney, 2013). These reasons echoed through interviews; however, more practical motivations for developing an understanding of the broader public environment where your trustees operate were articulated.

The first was that CEOs need to understand the public channels for issues related to governance and operations. CEOs unanimously cited the need to be well versed in the conditions that will influence your annual public appropriations. The state under observation features a mechanism where public appropriations are awarded by the authorities who also simultaneously have trustee appointing authority (Participant I, personal interview, November 29, 2017). The basic concern of understanding funding mechanisms was noted seemingly almost in pretext to the conclusion that understanding
this enables a CEO to advocate appropriately for appropriations, or to argue against appropriation cuts. As Participant II noted (personal interview, December 4, 2017):

Your trustees are better at speaking to the [trustee appointing authority] and the [second appointing authority]. [Appointing authorities] know [trustees] better than they know you. By demonstrating that you understand the comings and goings of what is happening [in public life] you appear informed, but you will be regarded as [air quotes] ‘getting it.’ If you can talk the trustees’ language, they will be vastly more inclined to place trust in you. They will see you as a member of their club. Frankly, you will benefit from this education yourself. You will better understand the terrain and landscape of why you can’t get more funding, or you might find opportunities to find more dollars, or to insert your programs into a broader public conversation. I can’t say this enough, if they think that you [air quotes] ‘get them’, then they become easier to work with.

Beyond Participant II’s insight, Participant VII offered (personal interview, December 15, 2017):

Trustees are political people, all with ambitions to do other things, or this position is a capstone to their careers, or even if they sought such a position because they are advocates for your mission, knowing them and their colleagues and relationships helps you to better understand what your college can expect [from them]

Participant X, along the same channels suggested (personal interview, December 26, 2017):
By [becoming integrated as a member of the regional civic elite] you can learn a lot about the people on your board. You see them [network]. You see what relationships they have beyond the ones you can learn from your college. You develop a more complete picture of the world that has yielded your individual trustees. Seeing each other outside of the college can foster conversations that are less directly related to the college, but ones that could prove useful. As you observe them, they too, can observe you making relationships in the community, networking with other decision-makers, and [political actors]. If they were appointed by [name of a prominent political actor], and you are seen getting along well with [name of prominent political actor] then that sends your trustee a message that you can be trusted, or at least that you can stand on your own and don’t need to be either propped up or overly scrutinized. I think college [CEOs], who only ever spend their time thinking about the college make the mistake of thinking everyone wakes up with the college on their mind like they do. Truth is, your trustees don’t do that. You’re the only one who does that, and by learning how your trustees spend their time and how they involved themselves in the community, then you can grow a deeper bond on multiple levels not solely based on the one thing you know you have in common [the college].

The consensus on this particular issue was clear. A tactic that yields an environment where trustees can build trust in a CEO is for that CEO to illustrate a willingness and an aptitude for engaging in the broader public life of the region where the college is located. Those interviewed indicated with a strong degree of consensus that developing this understanding is a productive exercise for the mission of the college and for the purposes
of relationship building. This fosters an organic atmosphere that is conducive to the
development of a sincere trust between CEOs and trustees that can then be leveraged by
the CEO for effective board leadership. However, Participant I offered one extra element
(personal interview, November 29, 2017) that engaging in public life, and in what
Participant V would later call the “world of the trustees” (personal interview, December
11, 2017) should not be confused with being heavy-handed in party politics:

Look, like anyone else you and your trustees may have firm political convictions
and you might be tempted or feel compelled to take a public stand against
positions or candidates. My sincere advice is to avoid this. Of course, everyone
has to decide on their own, but to this public servant, I say unless it has a direct
impact on your mission, on your college’s well-being, just don’t [laughed]. I
mean, you’re only going to buy yourself heartache. To me the worst possible
thing is having a politician with an ax to grind, he’ll sic [trustees or other political
actors with influence] on you.

She continued that she was not an advocate of staying totally silent or neutral on every
issue, but affirmed again her belief that purposefully avoiding political controversies
when you can would be in both the best interest of the college and for the CEO’s
relationship building and leadership capacities (Participant I, personal interview,
November 29, 2017).

Here there was a clear break with Participant VIII (personal interview, December
18, 2017), who had been terminated from her position. Prior to her time as a community
college CEO, she was member of what Participant IX called the “network of influence,”
(personal interview, December 20, 2017) and she had initially relished in her ability to
invite public officials into the operations of the college (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017). Her approach on developing this sort of relationship stood in contrast to her more successful colleagues indicating that her approach reduced her ability to be a successful leader of her trustees. She indicated that she sought to mitigate the consequences of having purposefully invited political interference. She noted that eventually she felt compelled to purposefully withdraw from public life, refusing invitations to events and fundraisers from her associates in the civic elite and her trustees, as a means of avoiding their spreading counterproductive influence at her college. She indicated that at a certain point she believed it was her responsibility to keep herself and the college free from appearing to take sides on issues and to keep discussions with trustees from wondering too far from the business of the college, as it could “compromise my ability to meet the mission” (personal interview, 2017). However, her eventual termination suggested she was not able to effectively mitigate the damage caused by her initial missteps, nor establish a foothold for effective board leadership.

The difference of opinion expressed by Participant VIII stands in contrast with what her more successful colleagues had shared. Her subsequent revelations about participating in public life reflected the wisdom of Participant I’s advice to try to avoid being in the middle of political disputes (personal interview, November 29, 2017), and the advice of her colleagues that suggested engaging in public life needs to be done carefully and deliberately (Participant X, personal interview, December 26, 2017). It can be stated fairly that all participating CEOs viewed engaging in public life to be consequential for their success or lack thereof. It can also be stated that participants, regardless of ultimate success as a board leader, recognized or eventually recognized the
need to engage in public life carefully, strategically and proactively as a way of creating an organic trust with trustees that could serve as a foundation for productive working relationships. Those interviewed expressed a clear position that once trustees feel CEOs understand them, and the world in which they operate, trustees will instill a trust in the CEO that is difficult to obtain through college-based interactions alone. Once this trust is obtained, trustees will be arguably more comfortable deferring to the CEO when appropriate. Trustees will be more inclined to let the CEO take the lead for the organization, and give the CEO a stronger voice in setting the course of action for the college.

**Subtheme 3: Obtaining and giving trust.** Trust is a term that manifests throughout a great deal of leadership (Lowney, 2003), management (Crutchfield & Grant, 2008), and power (Luhman, 2012) literature. However, the subject of trust, as discussed by participants in this study, featured a unique perspective that is worth sharing as a specific subtheme. Uniformly, all participants, those who are defined as successful CEOs and the lone individual who was terminated from her position, offered at various points throughout their interviews, the need to ensure that as a CEO one must take careful measures to ensure to trustees that they can be trusted (Participant III, personal interview, December 5, 2017). This piece of advice is fairly well-established as a best practice within leadership studies (Luhman, 2012) and was referenced in the previous section as it related to trustees trusting in the CEO. For this study, what was unique was that a distinct pattern of responses emerged around the concept of ensuring that as the CEO one needs to be cautious and careful about placing trust in trustees.
The perspectives of this sample group suggest that CEOs must take careful steps to determine to what degree individual trustees can be trusted, and that it is a potentially “blindsiding error” (Participant XIII, personal interview, January 10, 2018) to assume that one can inherently trust these individuals. Understanding to what degree trustees can be trusted is beneficial to keeping one’s board of trustees a cohesive, functioning, policymaking entity that avoids engaging in counterproductive political interference into the college’s operations.

This topic is listed after Subtheme 2 for a deliberate purpose. Most responses indicated that what is essential to determining if one can trust trustees on an individual level, is to first acclimate to the world in which they live. In this respect it is logical to list these two subthemes in sequential order.

Participant III (personal interview, December 5, 2017) noted that in her experience she made the mistake of believing that her trustees could be trusted to have the best interests of the college at heart. She noted that she did not expect that she would receive unchallenged consensus on every proposal that she made to her trustees. However, she admitted that having come from a place where she had previously been CEO, she made the mistake of assuming that her trustees were operating harmoniously as they had in her last position. She assumed there was an “inherent trust” between people serving as the College’s trustees and professional staff, including herself as the CEO. She would frequently recall advice such as, “remember, you can’t take trust for granted”, “again, you want to make sure that you can really trust these people”, and “it all comes down to how much you think you can trust [trustees].” The frequent recall suggested that she had made the mistake of assuming that she could trust her trustees without engaging
in the legwork of developing relationships, and the consequences of having done so were arduous enough to keep this advice at the forefront of her responses. Even though Participant III’s enthusiasm and frequent mention of this advice was more animated than her colleagues, it does broadly align with the general consensus provided by other participant responses.

Terminated CEO, Participant VIII, offered a succinct, “I was under the impression that I could trust my trustees, that what they said was what they meant, that they were committed to [the college], and had my back. Simply put, they didn’t (personal interview, December 18, 2017).” She provided an anecdote that indicated she had previously worked with many of the individuals on her board of trustees; that she had known many of them for decades; that she felt misled when taking the position; and that relationships she thought she could count on, in terms of her ability to be trusting, were radically changed once she became a college CEO. A portion of that anecdote is as follows (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017):

So you have to know that I was generally misled about this job. I won’t get into it all around with the he said-she said type of back and forth, but looking back, I’m comfortable in saying that I was misled by people who I thought I could trust. I’d known several of the trustees, worked with them in [various public and political capacities]. I mean I knew these people, was a guest at their homes, went to dinner, considered some of them and [county appointing authority members] friends. I assumed, as anyone would, that I would be able to trust my friends, that I would be able to count on those relationships to help me be successful, and that I
would be able to be candid and enjoy a productive working relationship as we had always done. But [pause] I was wrong.

At a later point in the interview she picked this theme up again:

I [was made into a] scapegoat by people who I had known and admired for such a longtime, I mean, it hurts – having lost my job and having my record raked over the coals [pause] adjudicated in the media, incorrectly mind you. There is a truth, nothing but the truth, and the whole truth and I’ll leave it at, the whole truth was seemingly not important [pause] but anyway, what I will say is this. If you are going to do [the job of CEO of a community college], you have to be prepared for a viper pit of politics and palace intrigue. Now you might find [working with your trustees] smooth sailing, you might even like the politics, like the palace intrigue and the gossip and all that. Many people, no matter what, will flatter you, and I guess I have to admit I liked being the [CEO], I liked being recognized for being the [CEO]. It was hard to avoid that. But I’d bet my last dollar anyone who thought, like me, that it would be smooth sailing is in for a wakeup call sooner or later. For me, advice I would give is that whatever you were, and whoever you were [before you were CEO], it doesn’t matter to [trustees] anymore. You need to throw those old feelings out. Now I remain proud of the way I did my job, and I would like to think I wouldn’t do a single thing differently knowing what I know now, but I might have had more smooth sailing if I put a little more time into [pause] if I had thought that I should reestablish my existing relationships with [political actors and trustees].
What seemed clear from this response was that she failed to recognize the advice of Participants IV (personal interview, December 7, 2017) and VI (personal interview, December 13, 2017), who offered perspectives that as CEO of a college, existing relationships will be affected, it will be difficult to establish personal relationships, that it might be “necessary” for the CEO to be “lonely,” in order to protect and serve the college’s mission. That it is important to avoid overly capitulating in existing relationships that you have or want to protect to ensure that you are able to remain effective while protecting the college (Participant VI, personal interview, December 13, 2017).

To be fair, Participants IV (personal interview, December 7, 2017) and VI (personal interview, 2017) were offering this shared sentiment with respect to a broad array of relationships, not exclusively to the relationship between trustees, political actors and CEOs. However, it is worth noting that both Participants IV and VI are two of the longer serving CEOs that participated in this study. Their insights about being mindful of the changing nature of relationships one has and or being mindful that relationships that develop are colored rightfully or wrongly because of the nature of one’s professional position stand in stark contrast with Participant VIII’s experience and assumptions that she would be able to rely on existing relationships she perceived she could trust. As indicated, Participant III (personal interview, December 5, 2017), likewise seemed to have ran afoul by being too willing to trust in her trustees, or because she failed to fully appreciate the political motivations or ambitions of trustees and their political patrons. Though Participant III seemed to be able to recover from this initial misstep, as she has successfully retained her position as CEO.
A particularly insightful dialogue on this point came from Participant X, who had recently retired after a lengthy career as a community college CEO. It appeared that having recently retired she was taking an opportunity to be reflective about what she expected to miss about the job, and indeed to reflect on things she was happy to leave behind (personal interview, December 26, 2017):

Developing trust is an ever-changing process in [geographic region that her college serves]. That is probably true for any [jurisdiction], but I know [geographic region that her college serves] best, and I can say that the politics are a blood-sport. I would generally keep tabs on the ambitions of my trustees outside of their role at the college because in politics things change on a dime. One day, this crowd is in power, the next, poof, it’s someone else. So I won’t at all miss having to look over my shoulder [pause] no I shouldn’t say it that way [pause]. I won’t miss having to keep constant tabs on the political machinations of the [current set of political actors, both trustees and appointing authorities]. I might not have realized it over my time as [CEO], but it was exhausting being the only person at the college who could do this work. You can’t delegate the fostering of trust, and the amount of time and effort, and the necessity of it really can be exhausting, not to mention that the consequences of messing it up are grave. Your career can hang in the balance and the lives of students and your staff can be adversely affected.

Participant I mirrored her responses, offering insights that suggested CEOs need to be careful where they place their trust, because being too trusting can lead to trustees manipulating CEOs. Whereas not being trusting enough can be regressive for
establishing productive relationships, and what is essential for CEOs is to (personal interview, November 29, 2017):

Trust in yourself that you will seek to do the right thing. I mean that sounds rather obvious, but it is worth stating aloud. You have to be able to trust in yourself that you can do the job, and that you will make decisions based on the right reasons in service of the students. I mean, if you can’t you’re probably in the wrong line of work and no matter what advice I give, you won’t really do well. But you also have to be very careful about who you trust and who you trust with what. I think it’s wise to recognize that people change, and their desires for themselves change, and that means you have to be careful about where you place your trust. Believe me, [trustees] won’t just give you their trust, you will have to earn it and rightfully so, but to the degree you can respectfully do it, you need to make sure that they have earned yours as well. If you can’t somehow manage to do this respectfully, and right, I think you’ll find you will have a rough time. I’m not saying trust your gut. It sounds like I’m getting to that. What I am saying is, trust your gut when it comes to yourself, but when it comes to trusting others, including and especially your trustees, use caution.

It was interesting that she indicated as a CEO she had to be careful and respectful when discerning if she could trust her trustees. What appeared to be influencing her particular choice of words was the recognition that CEOs are subordinate to trustees. Thus, the way in which trustees develop trust in the CEO is distinct from the way in which CEOs develop trust in trustees. Through her responses, it appeared that her perception had its
roots in the inverse power possessed by trustees as compared to the CEO (Participant I, personal interview, November 29, 2017).

The trust dynamic that manifested in interview responses was expressly or indirectly related to the CEOs’ ability to prevent counterproductive political meddling into the administration of their colleges. Several CEOs suggested that once they ingrained themselves as a member of the broader public body of political actors they better understood the motivations and the driving forces behind decisions made by trustees. Participant I (personal interview, November 29, 2017), again, provided keen insight:

*I mean until your trustees trust you, they are your adversary. Lots of politicians in [state being observed] want to act that way. They think it makes them look attractive to voters I guess, but until they have total trust that they can trust you to keep them from being embarrassed and can creatively solve problems, they will approach you antagonistically. When they can trust you, and when you are comfortable trusting them, then you can develop them into a powerful advocacy voice. Honestly, this is what [trustees] want. They want for you and them to do a good job. Anyway, [when they do place their trust in you] is when the rubber really meets the road, when you feel your trustees will have your back.*

Participant VIII, the terminated trustee, reflected that without a two-way trust, trustees would start to second guess virtually all CEO decisions, that trustees themselves would begin to be intrusive into the operations of the college, and she admitted that she mistakenly encouraged this interference and could not stop it once it was invited (personal interview, December 18, 2017). Participant V (personal interview, December
11, 2017) indicated the same, and added that in addition to trustees themselves interfering with the operations of the college inappropriately, trustees will call upon their political allies in elected and nonelected public leadership, or in media to be intrusive and burdensome. She stated, as perhaps only a retired public servant could, that, “Politicians will have their say. They will be heard – right, wrong or misguided as they might be – and you can either understand that and work within it, or resist it and feel their wrath. I chose to try to work within and found it vastly more productive than the alternative” (personal interview, 2017).

The advice from Participants V and VIII was clear: CEOs’ expert power with respect to running a college will not alone be able to overcome the goals, and the political power of trustees and their patrons. Expert power alone will not suffice toward the development of trust, and cannot prevent political intrusion into one’s operations. This was echoed by Participant II, who indicated that trustees and other political actors will as a general rule look to involve themselves in a college’s operations if they feel it serves their broader political goals; or if they feel unsupported, lack communication with, or are excluded by the CEO in decision making (personal interview, December 4, 2017). She indicated that in order to successfully leverage expert power, CEOs need to effectively develop trusting relationships that will best position the CEO to develop their boards into trusted advocates (Participant II, personal interview, December 4, 2017). Once this is established, trustees will feel appreciated, valued, heard, and influential. If this atmosphere can be established, successful CEOs can mitigate potential counterproductive political interference into the operations of the college and effectively provide leadership for their boards.
Subtheme 4: Making peace with having less power. The codified organizational structure of the public community college system under observation requires chief executive officers to provide leadership for their politically appointed boards of trustees (Eddy, 2010). While the organization of board officers is a power possessed by boards, and while there are individual bylaws for each college that further codify that process, both state laws and individual college bylaws require chief executive officers to provide expert-oriented leadership for their trustees so that they operate as an informed policy-development and policy-setting entity (Polonio & Miller, 2012). As previously discussed, the nature of this relationship builds in a power imbalance between chief executive officers and trustees, where CEOs are required to lead from what is an expressly subordinate position. This is not to suggest that CEOs are without power. Indeed, they possess significant power both by their expertise, via their authority to administer the college (Eddy, 2010), and their sole authority to make formal recommendations for board action. However, the power to set the terms and conditions of employment, and/or to end a CEO’s employment is retained by trustees (Polonio & Miller, 2012).

Several interview participants suggested that they were or quickly became aware of this imbalance. Participants I (personal interview, November 29, 2017), IV (personal interview, December 7, 2017), V (personal interview, December 11, 2017), VI (personal interview, December 13, 2017), VIII (personal interview, December 18, 2017), XII (personal interview, January 6, 2018), XIV (personal interview, January 11, 2018), and XV (personal interview, January 24, 2018) all noted that they expected and understood that their board of trustees was their official supervisor, and that the board was the entity
to which they were accountable. However, other than Participant I, each of them also stated affirmatively that they expected to be the leading expert in the room when it came to advising on college policies and college administration, and candidly suggested that they expected more deference than they received from their boards at the beginning of their tenures. Through their narratives, these cited CEOs all essentially suggested that in order to better develop the relationships that fostered success with their trustees they had to become comfortable with the concept that even though they were, as Participant V stated, “in charge” (personal interview, December 11, 2017), they were not the most powerful people in the College’s operation.

Participant VIII (personal interview, December 18, 2017) provided testimony to this thinking as she reflected upon her time as an unsuccessful CEO:

I made the mistake of conflating authority, power, management and leadership. While the functions of all of those things all overlap, and some skills overlap, I should have realized – and I guess looking back I’m surprised I didn’t – that just because I was looked to as the leader and manager of the college, and just because I had certain [authorities] vested in me, it did not mean that I had all of the power. Well I guess I didn’t think I had all of the power, the college has a system of shared governance and you always want to bring as many voices as you can to the table, so I don’t mean to say I went into it thinking that my will will be done because I was the [CEO]. But, I assumed, I supposed that as the [CEO] I would have the power I needed to [set the agenda for the organization].

Her sentiment was echoed by Participant V who noted (personal interview, December 11, 2017)
My first board meeting as [CEO], I sent an agenda to the board for the [regular board] meeting, and I expected them to say thanks – basically, for getting the administrative process completed, getting it to them on time, and generally getting things together in an orderly, and what I thought was a predictable fashion for them. What I got was an earful from several trustees asking me who approved the agenda before I sent it to them. Now, I was lucky that my trustees then, after whacking me on the nose, were more gentle in letting me know their future expectations. Here I had been [reference to her academic training] that in order for them to act I had to make a recommendation, and to do that I developed what I thought to be an appropriate agenda. Well, they wanted more from me than what I thought. They wanted to know what to expect. They wanted influence on that agenda. They did not want to have to take votes or make public statements on anything that they maybe didn’t fully understand. Initially, this took me aback, thinking well, why hire me if you think I can’t do this job without your handholding, and why the [expletive] do you need me to hold your hand to do yours, right? I mean, I thought, read the material, if you have a question call me. I did realize though, I was setting myself for a fight and understood fighting over process probably wasn’t worth it in the end. As it played out, I realized that they had no real reason to trust me implicitly, nor was it my responsibility to make their life easier by spoon feeding them [their agenda]. But, what I would have to do, would be develop an agenda that would meet the mission, but one that they would own as well.
She continued that the incident helped to stimulate her thinking with respect to trustee and board professional development and to develop a board governance model that was lacking when she arrived, “They had no committee structure, or organization in place to share the workload or to sift through information” (personal interview, December 5, 2017). Thus, the feedback that she was given by her trustees motivated her to work with her board to develop a board-committee system, where an agenda for board meetings would emerge through an iterative process. This she found to be a formal method for obtaining a jointly owned agenda; one that trustees felt was under their influence.

Participant I had an alternative experience to Participant V, stating (personal interview, November 29, 2017):

When I was hired as [CEO], I was known to my board for the most part having been at [name of college] for a while beforehand. They were basically on autopilot. Didn’t get involved in much, and would basically approve whatever I put in front of them. For a good year I was basically getting everything rubberstamped and I thought, well this is easy. Well, it was easy until it wasn’t. I’ll explain [pause]. We ran into a public relations issue, not unlike many of the [reference to media narrative regarding sexual assault in the workplace] issues you are seeing today, which in those days they were less common [pause, accompanied with gestures indicating she was thinking carefully about her choice of words], or if not less common, they received less attention than they do now. This issue involved a long-tenured member of the faculty who was generally highly regarded. It was a he-said, she-said, as noted by both the police and the college’s lawyer. The lawyer advised me to influence the resignation of the
faculty member. This was to get him out of the college as quickly, and cheaply as possible. The lawyer and I agreed, along with the dean of students that without hard evidence, and no relief from the police this was the best we would be able to do. I go into [session of the board meeting not open to the public] with this recommendation and I was ripped by them. Now at this point I’m annoyed. I’d been left on my own for a year with barely a peep, and now they are on me because I made this reasonable decision to get this guy out of here, and they are all over me. They didn’t want to accept any resignation, they wanted to fire the guy and let it spill out in the public that they took this action to back up the student. Now, I see they were way ahead of their time, but then, I was taken aback. Long story short, what stuck with me was, in the end, they took my recommendation for the sake of moving the chains and to not derail what had been put in place, but a member of the board called with a message the next day that said basically we get the rationale, we believe you were acting in a way that was trying to protect the college, but never ever make that recommendation again. If you don’t have the stomach to fight these fights, we’ll find someone who does. Now, it’s been a while and I’m truncating. He was nicer in fact, but it was clear then. No matter how in control I thought I was, no matter how checked out I thought they were, they had power, and that power was both over me as their [CEO], and within the community. They wanted to be shown as public advocates for their students. They did sincerely believe firing him was the right thing, but I got it, they missed a political opportunity with this just going away. They wanted
to show their power as advocates to the community, and I denied them that and honestly I think they were right.

Participant I (personal interview, November 29, 2017) would conclude that she has remained ever mindful of that power and while she has retained a board that has been mostly deferential during most of her tenure, she has been more proactive at developing a shared consensus with her board on all matters as to avoid the possibility of tense conflict.

Much less illustratively than Participant I, was the feedback from Participant XIV (personal interview, January 11, 2018). She provided a short narrative that suggested she had given previous thought to this particular subtheme, as she was both concise and emphatic. Indeed, she appeared animated and excited to share this advice:

Be mindful that while you are basically the lynchpin for developing the [course of action for the college], you will know what needs to be done to move the college forward, it’s [the trustees’] to bless. You need their holy water or else you won’t get much done, and you’ll likely be setting yourself up to fail. In my years in doing this, seeing colleagues do this, my advice would be to make sure you have tolerance for bridging the gap of what you know needs to be addressed with what your trustees want, and expect to be addressed. You have to be the one to figure that all out, how to make it come together in a way that meets everyone’s needs, and you may reach a moment when you feel the need to fall on your sword or take a stand. Always keep in mind, sometimes you might need to leave if you simply can’t tolerate the conditions placed on you. But, I think if you can stay humble and be receptive to a give and take, you might not get everything you want, but
you can usually get more than you give. [Trustees] want [CEOs] to be successful, too. So my advice is to use [trustees’ desire to CEOs be successful], and be comfortable with having to share power, compromise, and, of course, with sharing credit.

What these successful CEOs indicated is, regardless of the tone the board initially sets for the CEO, whether they are immediately immersive in the process, as Participant V found, or are aloof as Participant I found, it is to the CEO’s advantage to keep the board engaged in the vision and agenda-setting process, to be mindful of the power imbalance that exists between CEOs and trustees, and validate that power imbalance to prevent counterproductive tension from developing. As Participant VIII stated (personal interview, December 18, 2017), “[CEOs] have to be comfortable with having the role of manager, leader, having virtually all of the authority, but less power. I obviously didn’t strike that balance [laughed], but if you can I would bet it is a recipe for success.”

**Subtheme 5: Avoiding pitfalls.** Three areas of administrative functions were cited by participants as requiring more attention than they initially expected, for the express purpose of effectively keeping trustees and their political patrons from interfering in the administration of the college; and keeping trustees focused on policymaking responsibilities. These were the effective management of: human resources, financial issues, and legal matters. All but two participants specifically cited at least one these areas as being critical for success in some fashion or another (Participant IV, personal interview, December 7, 2017; and Participant X, personal interview, December 26, 2018). Of the remainder only Participant V (personal interview, December 11, 2017) was silent on discussing financial issues, only Participant XV (personal interview, January 24,
Participants strongly indicated that these areas were some of the more difficult and complex to manage as the chief executive officer. However, participants broadly indicated that among all issues any CEO might face, these issues were most likely to create headlines in the media and therefore are perceived as being of greater consequence for trustees directly. Participant XV stated (personal interview, January 24, 2018):

You might very well have the best-run degree program in whatever subjects, a strong and supportive [charitable foundation volunteers], expert faculty, great access numbers, spectacular number of applications, strong financial aid offerings, effective transfer agreements, and the best graduation rate of any college in the country. None of that is as interesting to your local newspaper as a good old fashioned scandal. It’s sad to say but that’s just how the media works at every level [made a lengthy list of various national and local media outlets]. The more scandalous the story the more likely it is to get attention, and nothing generates more pressure for a [CEO] from their trustees than a bad headline. Participant XI’s responses were akin to this advice, stating that negative press stories cause embarrassment for public officials (such as community college trustees), and by extension are embarrassing to elected officials who appointed them to their positions. She suggested that in her experience trustees received their appointments to ensure that whatever problems or issues exist at the college are managed in a way so that they do not make headlines that can hurt political institutions and actors. Failing to effectively manage these issues would be an open invitation for trustees and their appointing authorities to question a CEO’s general competency in the position, and invite meddling
leading up into one’s administration. She offered that once trustees believe that a CEO cannot protect them or the college from embarrassment, that it would be difficult to regain trustee confidence and trust (personal interview, December 27, 2017).

**Human resources.** Participants were asked to describe their greatest successes and to describe episodes where their efforts were less successful, and what they learned from those experiences that might be beneficial to others who are new to their positions or are looking to obtain the position of CEO at a community college. Participant XIII (personal interview, January 10, 2018) offered the following that serves as a fitting summarization of the aggregate sentiment provided by the majority of responses as it pertained to human resource management:

One of my greatest weaknesses, and in some ways I can’t say that I am even ashamed because it’s human, is that I have at various points in time allowed issues with personnel to linger longer than they should, or I have failed to take action in as timely of a fashion as I should have. Sometimes people, and I mean good people, decent people, people who are literally trying their hardest to do the job, just can’t do it. You want to work with them, get them up to speed, or help them grow, but at a certain point you’re going to have to make the tough call, whether that is through termination or asking someone for their resignation.

She continued her advice by citing various stances where she allowed problems to go unchecked or where she did not provide appropriate attention:

Eventually things will end up in the rumor mill, and that’ll make its way to your trustees. How it gets to them, any number of ways, but chances are as [CEO] you are [going to be] the last to hear things, and you better bet that if you’ve heard a
rumor, some of your trustees have probably heard it too. Trustees will be sensitive to out-of-control personnel issues [pause] well they will be sensitive, especially to personnel issues, if they think they could be out-of-control. If you are not seen as doing something about them, they will first start to hover on your actions, ask lots of questions, and be generally demanding. I’ve been there, and while it’s always difficult when having to make tough decisions that will affect someone’s livelihood, you have to move forward. Keep the mission in mind and make those tough calls. It will prove better for your administration, but it will also demonstrate to your trustees that you have the stomach to do the hard work that needs to be done. And you know, I’ve found that this gives them a sense of calm, that you are able to protect the school from harm.

As stated, the sentiments shared by Participant XIII echoed the general sentiments of the vast majority of participants that affirmed when human resource issues lack appropriate attention by the CEO, trustees will seek to mitigate embarrassment. As suggested, this will cause trustees to engage in behaviors described as counterproductive, and in ways that professional societies suggest are incongruent with best practices relating to both board leadership and administrative leadership (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b).

On the human resources management issue, Participant VIII, was in line with her former successful colleagues. However, unlike her former colleagues, she extended a piece of human resources advice that was absent from the responses of her colleagues deemed to be successful chief executive officers. She noted, in addition to making sure proper attention was placed on managing subordinates, any incoming chief executive
officer should determine, and be comfortable with the method of evaluation that they will be subjected to. She indicated that when she was hired, her contract included a requirement that she receive an annual performance evaluation that would be used for determining compensation and recontracting. She said this was expected and received little attention from her when she first reviewed the document. Looking back, she cited this as having been a mistake she would rectify in the future, by ensuring that she was better informed as to the process of evaluation (personal interview, December 18, 2017).

As Participant VIII continued to discuss this issue, her face twisted and she became animated when speaking, using aggressive hand gestures, and she shook her head in the negative. She offered the following advice, “Make sure your performance evaluation is objective and quantifiable. If you can, work with trustees to design a format that you are comfortable with. If they [do not want the CEO involved in the design of performance evaluation mechanisms] find a way to make sure that you can tell your story on your terms” (personal interview, December 18, 2017). She described the process by which she was evaluated. She suggested that the process, which amounted to the college’s general counsel collecting feedback from trustees, as having been subjective, based on opinion, and, “lacked any form or consistency” (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017). When asked if she had any materials that she would be willing to share, she declined, citing that she did not know where they were located.

Participant VIII continued that her negative evaluation, which she contended was unfair, and inaccurate. She contended that this allegedly poorly constructed process yielded a, “cooked up” document that was used to justify her termination (personal interview, December 18, 2017). Regardless of the accuracy of her claims, the advice that
chief executive officers should both understand, and be comfortable with the method of their performance evaluation struck a similar chord to the advice from her former successful colleagues related to human resources management. In her instance, her lack of attention to this human resources issue proved to be a pitfall. While it might not be possible to influence the mechanism by which one is assessed, as the terms and conditions of a chief executive officer remains under the purview of the various boards of trustees (Association of Community College Trustees, 2014), it is logical to accept the advice that one should have a level of comfort or minimally a full understanding of the mechanism by which her performance will be judged.

**Financial matters.** Participants offered various examples of what they meant by management of financial matters. Participants broadly referenced: public appropriations, tuition and fees, operations budgets (Participant XIV, personal interview, January 11, 2018), salaries and benefits (Participant XII, personal interview, January 6, 2018), fundraising activities, grants management (Participant III, personal interview, December 5, 2017), travel reimbursements, strategic planning regarding budgets, annual audits, purchasing and procurement issues (Participant XI, personal interview, December 27, 2017), and endowment management (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017). While these issues relate to both the revenue and expense side of public budgets, and while all of these issues suggest a wide array of potential pitfalls, the general consensus on the issue was clear – take time to effectively manage your organization’s financial resources.

That piece of advice is often stated in management literature (Zietlow, Hankin, Seider, & O’Brien, 2018). Frankly, it stands to reason that chief executive officers would
devote a significant portion of time to ensuring the proper use of financial resources at their organizations. However, what this specific advice suggests is that unlike other issues trustees will face during their time on the board, trustees will perceive greater consequences for themselves and the organization when the issues are related to finance resources. Participant XII stated (personal interview, January 6, 2018):

All budgets are austere now. There is no wiggle room anymore, and we’re lucky if our appropriations remain [the same amount in dollars year after year]. I haven’t received an increase in appropriations from [source of appropriations] in 10 years now. After a while, with inflation and increased fixed costs, that amounts to a de facto cut. You can’t just keep increasing tuition or you’ll price yourself out of business. The press knows this, your trustees know this, the [county legislators] know this, and the public does as well. So you have all of these eyes on your college, looking over your shoulder to make sure that every dollar is spent wisely and carefully and the second there is a whiff of something improper you will see and feel the spotlights [of trustees, political actors, and the media] shining on you.

In her analysis, she was quick to state that when such problems arise the CEO should be prepared to lead on the issue and to make decisions that are in the best interest of the organization. Indeed, she was not suggesting that the scrutiny was unfair or inappropriate, merely that it should be anticipated. She suggested that trustees’ interest in this issue will likely outpace their interest in other matters because the perceived consequences of financial mismanagement for the organization, have lasting impact for
the organization’s reputation, and the political reputations of trustees and those who
appointed trustees.

Participant I (personal interview, November 29, 2017) recounted a media story
where the salaries of chief executive officers of all public colleges, including community
colleges, within the state under observation, were made public as part of an ongoing
series of stories focusing on public spending. In addition to salaries, travel expenditures
during the course of the previous two-years were included. She described all of the
reporting as, “fairly accurate in that the numbers themselves were likely right,” but that
the numbers alone, while appearing large, were out of context. Nevertheless, as a result,
she and her colleagues spent a great deal of time explaining what these numbers meant to
trustees and media sources, and now had to justify their reports in ways that were
previously unexpected (Chen, 2017). She noted:

It was 2010 or 11, so we had not yet really come out of the recession, and [name
of media source] was scouring all agencies for their spending habits and they
must’ve gotten wind that college [CEO]s make a good living and to look at their
contracts and expense accounts. [She noted several examples from her and her
colleagues’ reports], there were some pretty big numbers on the page and a few of
my colleagues had some expensive travel listed on their reports that were on the
surface hard to explain. It opened up a criminal investigation at [name of a public
college in the state], [Participant I indicated that it was an inappropriate
investigation], but because of that [media narrative], trustees across the state
actively reduced [salary offers] for [CEOs] moving forward. Why? It wasn’t just
because the numbers looked big to a layperson. Those numbers could be
explained, and even justified, it was all about the appearance. To anyone who
read those numbers, from the general public to the state legislature, they were
either angry or embarrassed. And that isn’t where you want to be if you’re in
politics. I wouldn’t want to be in that spot, you wouldn’t, I don’t think anyone
would, and while this [was] a big story, I think it illustrates how the years of our
sector ignoring these numbers was able to bite us in the end [pause]. Because
after the story was published, there was no going back. No matter how
misleading we contended the reporting to be, it didn’t matter, because the public
expected [political actors] to act. Pressure was placed from the governor’s office
on down to show that officials were being responsible with the public’s money.
That was that, you couldn’t spend [referenced reimbursable expenses] a dime over
the next five years without [being subjected to intense scrutiny from trustees].

Her conclusion suggested she and her colleagues had not been attentive to the possibility
that public college CEO’s compensation packages (reported to be generous) could be
seen as a potential vulnerability. Regardless of the accuracy of the reporting, the issue of
suggested financial mismanagement, or a lack of perceived oversight of the issue
motivated trustees to take actions that they otherwise might not have taken for the
purpose of demonstrating how responsible they were as political actors. She suggested
that the way in which trustees involved themselves in the absolution of this issue was
counterproductive to and inefficient for operations at her college (Participant I, personal
interview, November 29, 2017).

Legal issues. Participants also cited legal matters as being worthy of specific
focus with respect to effectively “leading up.” Participant VI made a clear distinction between the mundane processes for how business in the public sector is conducted versus what she called, “unusual legal matters,” such as crimes occurring on campus, or violations of either the law, or code of ethics by faculty, staff or students (personal interview, December 13, 2017). Generally, most participants seemed to maintain this distinction when referencing legal issues even though no other participant made the distinction as expressly as Participant VI.

Participants were fairly muted with respect to lengthy descriptions of legal matters. There is no discernable pattern as to why they were less verbose with respect to offering examples on this subject, and it was not expressly asked by the researcher why such descriptions were avoided. It can be argued that when speaking on legal matters the requirements for privacy that are imposed by decisions or agreements might be of some influence. Nevertheless, as Participant V (personal interview, December 11, 2017) suggested:

Your college will be represented by a general counsel. Listen to him. They’re there to provide you with cogent legal advice, but it’s their goal to keep [the college] out of hot water. I’ve worked with some good ones and some bad ones, but in all sincerity, even the ones that weren’t so good understood that it was in the best interest of the organization for [legal issues] to be dealt with as expeditiously as possible, and in a way that wouldn’t harm the reputation of the college. I can also tell you, your trustees will appreciate a competent lawyer that not only effectively does his job, but understands the art of keeping legal matters
out of the headlines. Not to hide things, but you won’t be able to [legally or strategically provide public comment on legal issues] regardless. By this it appeared clear that Participant V was attempting to illustrate the value of working with the college’s general counsel to ensure that legal matters are properly handled, but when possible that they are handled in a way that does not invite additional scrutiny that could cause trustees to grow concerned about reputational issues and how the CEO is managing them. Concern over mismanagement of these issues might motivate trustees to act in ways that are counterproductive to the administrative goals the chief executive officer has for the college, as well as distract trustees from focusing on their responsibility of policy development out of a sense that they feel they need to in order to mitigate public relations concerns (Participant V, personal interview, December 11, 2017).

A range of other pitfalls were suggested as being worthy of the chief executive officer’s direct attention. However, other than those listed here, which were all directly linked to reputation and media attention in their essence, other suggestions could arguably be attributed to unique conditions at each college, and or are of specific interest to specific individuals. No discreet additional patterns emerged in aggregated responses. What was clearly discernable, was that to those who have been successful, and in retrospect for the individual who was unsuccessful, issues related to human resources, financial concerns, and legal matters appear to have the highest potential for causing reputational damage to the college, to trustees, and by extension trustee-appointing authorities. Because these issues were mentioned with such a great degree of frequency, it can be concluded that devoting specific attention to these issues, as well as effectively
communicating with trustees regarding these issues, will serve chief executive officers well in their efforts to keep trustees from involving themselves counterproductively in administrative concerns.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Included in this final chapter is an analysis of research findings, and conclusions. Recommendations are made for incumbent CEOs and for those that aspire to be community college CEOs. The limitations of the study’s implications are highlighted and additional recommendations are made for further research, for higher education curricula, and higher education professional development.

Summary of Research Conducted

This ethnographical qualitative study was designed to capture an understanding of how community college chief executive officers are able to optimize their ability to successfully engage in their required responsibility of providing leadership for their politically appointed boards of trustees, when operating from a subordinate position. Because the answer to the research question of how successful CEOs operate could be not be answered sufficiently in a quantitative sense, a qualitative analysis was necessary in order to define and understand the problem.

To obtain data, interviews with a criterion sample of participants, ones who met a specifically defined standard for having been successful were completed by the researcher. For perspective, the impressions of a terminated, unsuccessful community college CEO were obtained in a similar approach, and was included in the data set. Responses from interviews were subsequently coded and organized to complete the
aforementioned analysis. The ethnographical approach evolved from anthropologic and sociologic methods to better understand intact cultural groups. Because all interviewed CEOs worked in the same position, in the same state, they could be considered an intact cultural group, aware of and operating under similar conditions (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, the ethnographical approach was taken because the particular subject at hand lacked a firm grounding within various literature bases upon which to draw assumptions and inferences, and the ethnographical approach encourages interview subjects to provide lengthy responses drawn from their experiences (Creswell, 2014). This approach afforded the researcher the ability to obtain sufficient data for the purposes of generalized analysis.

Individual responses provided by participants were subsequently aggregated with similar responses from their colleagues and were organized into codified themes and subthemes for the purpose of discussion and analysis.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

In this section, discussion and conclusions culled from data obtained from interview participants was organized, and presented in narrative descriptions, which serves as a standard reporting format for ethnographic qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

**Conclusion 1: CEOs need to lead their trustees differently than they lead their subordinates.** CEOs who have successfully been able to optimize their effectiveness for leading their trustees from a subordinate position are aware of, and are able to leverage, commonly understood effective leadership strategies, tactics and styles. This study suggested that those who have been successful in their efforts, have invested
time and energy in developing their own personal leadership skill sets, which required
deliberate attention and specific focus on understanding the discipline of leadership itself.
This common trait among successful CEOs is particularly insightful, as many who have
emerged as higher education leaders have done so through mastering academic roles
(Bartlett, Bartlett, Dolfi, Jaeger & Chapman, 2018), and have not necessarily refined their
expertise in the discipline of leadership.

What manifested as unique within this finding was that knowing, and deploying
these elements of leadership best practices, while demonstrably effective for traditional
top-down human resource flow charts (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013), needed to be amended
by CEOs when seeking to lead upward for their boards of trustees. Traditional top-down
models often assume the leader possesses power and authority over those who they lead,
and those who they lead understand and accept their role as that of follower (Kellerman,
2008). Because the relationship between CEOs of community colleges and their
politically appointed trustees features an inversion of power, where CEOs must provide
leadership for their more politically powerful trustees, who occupy a higher
organizational position, CEOs shifted the method by which they deployed leadership
strategies or tactics.

Successful CEOs were able to make peace with having less power and were
creative at establishing working paradigms where they and their trustees work
collaboratively, sharing power, and maintain appropriate responsibilities and roles. This
enabled boards to operate cohesively and enabled the college to meet the demands of its
mission. Importantly, these CEOs were able to leverage their leadership insights so that
they could inspire, not require, trustees to follow their lead on important issues facing their institutions.

Cited tactics for CEOs successfully engaging trustees were: maintaining flexibility in dealing with trustees (Participant XI, personal interview, December 27, 2017), being fully transparent (Participant VII, personal interview, December 15, 2017), dealing with trustees as individuals not solely as a group (Participant I, personal interview, November 29, 2017), meeting people on terms familiar to them, being proactive in engaging trustees (Participant XIV, personal interview, January 11, 2018), and to ensure that as a CEO one remains humble (Participant XV, personal interview, January 24, 2018). These tactics, when aggregated, suggested that community college CEOs (or those who aspire to hold the position of CEO) would be well served to develop refined political skills (Hahn, 2003) that enable them to effectively engage political actors in their regions, and engage the political actors who are appointed college trustees.

**Conclusion 2: Authenticity.** Successful CEOs repeatedly referenced the need to be authentic (Participant VII, personal interview, December 15, 2017). This reference manifested in various responses, which were related to the academically codified definition of authentic leadership (Haslam et al., 2011), as well as other references that implied CEOs and trustees need to understand each other through unvarnished lenses, whereby they engage each other candidly and authentically. Of course, CEOs cannot require that trustees behave accordingly; however, operating authentically and being transparent was inspiring to trustees, in that it established a fair and open working environment and fostered the two-way giving and receiving of trust between the CEOs and trustees. It was suggested by the CEOs that authenticity minimized the potential for
unfortunate surprises occurring between CEOs and trustees. Minimizing surprises and proactively preventing tension are frequently cited as best practices for developing productive CEO/trustee relationships (Polonio & Miller, 2012).

Participant VII provided specific insight related to this conclusion in her assertion that trustees uniformly appreciate “sincerity” from their CEO. She was noted that it can be assumed that trustees have been successful in public life. This in turn, suggests that trustees have cultivated a political skill set and would more than likely be able to identify sincere and authentic actions, from insincere and contrived overtures (personal interview, December 15, 2017). Sincerity, while not able to prevent conflict within the board altogether, can set a tone for respectful dialogue, candor, and respectful disagreements.

**Conclusion 3: Sharing power.** Successful CEOs were able to recognize that in order to optimize their effectiveness as board leaders they needed to ensure adequate deference to their board members and develop an appreciation for their trustees’ unique insights and leadership capacities. In essence, successful trustees were able to effectively operate comfortably as leaders while possessing less power (Participant XIV, personal interview, January 11, 2018). Participant VI (personal interview, December 13, 2017) indicated at the start of her tenure she felt compelled to impress trustees with how capable she was, so that they would trust that she was worthy of being followed. This she later realized was a misguided goal, and that her goal ought to have been to cultivate and mine her trustees’ expertise to ensure that their goals of being a consequential leader for the organization were validated and appreciated.

In this respect it was made clear that many who entered the position of CEO lacked full awareness of the vast array of political overtones present within their
positions. This ignorance was often met by CEOs with a desire to demonstrate or broadcast their capabilities as a leader so as to gain the trust and cooperation of their board. In other words, CEOs initially expressed optimism that after getting to professionally know each other, trustees would defer toward the CEO’s expert authority and subsequent recommendations (Participant VI, personal interview, December 13, 2017).

Successful CEOs quickly recognized it was a more effective approach to develop a symbiotic relationship with their trustees (Participant V, personal interview, December 11, 2017). Rather than trying to impress trustees as an attempt to generate deference from them, successful CEOs worked in good faith with their trustees to leverage trustee strengths. In doing so, CEOs realized they were able to lead the development of shared visions. By perpetually cultivating trustee strengths and routinely incorporating trustee perspectives, CEOs found that they were able to provide better leadership for their boards, better leadership for their subordinates at their colleges, and were able to develop policy and practices that were jointly owned by the college’s major stakeholders (Participant V, personal interview, December 11, 2017).

**Conclusion 4: Preventing counterproductive political interference.** It was abundantly clear that CEOs were aware of and embraced recommendations and standards set forth by professional organizations. These best-practices indicate that trustees should use the development of policy as “their voice” and, hence, defer to the expertise of the CEO for matters of administration (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b). This was so abundantly clear that the participating CEOs all referenced the establishing and maintaining of these roles as being essential in their efforts to be productive board
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leaders; as well as being effective leaders for their subordinates. Working toward a specific goal, while not inherently a leadership style, strategy or tactic in and of itself, was reported as a finding in this study because it was ubiquitously referenced by successful CEOs, and because once achieved by CEOs they reported a dramatic improvement in their board leadership capacities. In essence, if this dynamic cannot be effectively established and maintained, not only does the CEO run the risk of failing as an administrative leader for her subordinates but will, too, fail as a leader for her Board.

Consensus from participants in this study suggested that CEOs who are unable or unwilling to accept their position as maintainer for this bifurcation of responsibility, will soon find themselves incapacitated as a leader of the board, and as the administrative leader of the organization. Conversely, while this time-consuming role can be demanding, it enables the fostering of a critical and transparent two-way trust between CEOs and trustees. This trust affords trustees the opportunity to observe the CEO’s capacity in leading the College’s various stakeholders in productive, relevant, and engaging ways. If effective, trustees will develop trust in a CEO’s ability to protect the college from negative media narratives and embarrassment (Participant XI, personal interview, 2017); and enables the CEO to effectively discern to what degree they can trust individual members of the board of trustees (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017).

Participants offered several pieces of salient advice to new CEOs, or for those aspiring to the position, for accomplishing this task. Indeed, the first points have been introduced in previous conclusions: a need to be authentic and sincere when engaging members of the board, which speaks to the need to clearly communicate with members of
the board. CEOs ought to strive for clarity and frequency in communications so that they are able to guide the discussion on terms that are favorable for the organization, to avoid misunderstandings, and to ensure that working assumptions are accurate among all stakeholders (Participant II, personal interview, 2017; Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017).

Prior to holding the position of CEO, successful CEOs recommend that candidates seeking to obtain CEO positions affirm their desire to do the job of CEO, not simply have the job and the title (Participant X, personal interview, December 26, 2017). This also was advised by the lone unsuccessful participant (Participant VIII, personal interview, December 18, 2017). Similarly, CEOs were mindful to state that those seeking this position, or those new to it, ought to be mindful that authority and power can be mutually exclusive. CEOs will have codified authorities, but it will be necessary for them to share power with trustees, as trustees will seek to ensure that they too have influence on the leadership vision of the organization. Advice from participating CEOs was clear that conflating a desire for power, with a desire to lead; and confusing a desire to have the job, with a desire to do the job, will prohibit one from successfully leading her board of trustees.

Participants also indicated that during interviews for CEO positions, potential CEOs should project themselves candidly, authentically, and use the opportunity to, as Participant X noted, “counter-interview” those trustees involved in the interview process (personal interview, December 26, 2017). This will enable candidates and trustees to begin the process of understanding one another as professionals, illustrates a desire for candor, and helps candidates discern if the position is right for them. Once the CEO
position has been obtained, trustees will respond positively to efforts that illustrate CEOs’ desire to better learn and understand the community in which they serve, and the political factors that motivate local and state elected leaders, particularly those that have trustee appointing authority and influence public appropriations. A willingness to be included in the broader public life of the community, while carefully avoiding the possibility of being ensnared in major political controversies, is a skill that CEOs needed to develop and hone to be successful leaders of their boards.

Finally, it was demonstrable that in order to prevent counterproductive political interference in the administration and keep the board’s focus maintained on its policymaking responsibilities, CEOs must be attentive and engaged with trustees over the following issues: financial matters, human resources, and legal matters. Again, this list does not represent an exclusive list of items for trustees to exclusively communicate to their trustees. CEOs, as noted, should proactively seek to communicate with trustees, incorporate their input, and be inclusive in decision making and vision development. However, these three areas were commonly cited by participants and are illustrative of the major concerns trustees have with respect to their oversight role of the CEO and college and were noted by CEOs to be particularly relevant with respect to their potential to create negative media narratives for organizations. Negative narratives logically invite, rather than prevent, counterproductive political interference by trustees into the operations of the organization and will quickly erode trustee confidence and trust in the CEO.

**Addressing the Research Question**

This ethnographic qualitative study provided an answer to the research question: How can community college chief executive officers, working in the Northeastern United
States, optimize their effectiveness when providing leadership for their governance boards? This study produced a series of common findings from interviews with CEOs who have been successful in providing said leadership. These findings were juxtaposed with the perspective of an unsuccessful former CEO that agreed to participate. Findings emerged as patterns of common responses from this criterion sample of 14 individuals, plus the additional perspective of the unsuccessful CEO. All participants had common experiences working in one state, located in the Northeast. Those deemed to be successful had cleared through at least one round of recontracting by their boards of trustees, the unsuccessful individual was deemed to be unsuccessful because she failed to be recontracted after her initial appointment as CEO.

Findings from the study indicated that successful CEOs could lead their boards upward effectively if they were able leverage commonly understood tenants of effective leadership but deployed them in a way that recognized they possessed less political power than trustees. This extended to the next finding where successful CEOs understand that their expertise needs to be coupled with the expertise of trustees, and that as CEO they must be comfortable with sharing power. Finally, CEOs that were successful in providing leadership for their boards of trustees owned the responsibility of maintaining their position as administrative leader while keeping trustees focused on their policymaking responsibilities. These findings led to the following conclusions: CEOs need to use leadership strategies, styles, and tactics in a way that recognizes they are not leading individuals who expect to follow; trustees expect to be able to lead. That in order to successfully impart and obtain trust between CEOs and trustees, CEOs should strive to be authentic not impressive; and that successful CEOs will understand that they are in a
position of perpetually sharing power, incorporating their trustees into the development of vision, and leveraging those trustees’ unique expertise and insights.

**Limitations**

While findings and conclusions may be broadly applicable for a range of CEO/Board relationships, the relationship under observation – CEOs and politically appointed trustees of community colleges from a state in the Northeastern United States – has unique demographic, political, and other factors that might not be applicable in states from different regions, or where community college trustees are appointed or elected through alternative methods. Furthermore, broad application of findings and conclusions beyond the scope of public higher education is limited because other sectors such as nonprofit leadership, healthcare leadership, or private sector/corporate leadership feature alternative methods for board appointments that may be of relevance or influence to this study’s findings and conclusions. Thus, while findings and conclusions might prove to be insightful, additional research and analysis would be warranted to draw firm applications. Drawing broad inferences from this study for all of higher education, spanning private and public schools, selective and open-admissions institutions, is also limited as the range of missions and board selection and appointment processes vary widely (Dobbins, Knill, & Vogtle, 2011).

Because this study used a criterion sample for the purposes of data collection, no express considerations regarding gender, race, or ethnicity were able to be made. Nevertheless, the sample featured a diverse and equitable distribution of genders, ethnicities and races. This study was only able to incorporate one individual that was not deemed to have been a successful CEO. While this perspective provided an important perspective and counterbalance to the impressions of successful CEOs, it would be unfair
to conclude that the data presented from the unsuccessful CEO represents a saturated data set. Lastly, this study was concerned with the perspectives of CEOs, not with the perspectives of trustees. Thus, findings should be understood to be from that perspective, as they were not corroborated by or challenged in this study via inclusion of trustee perspectives.

**Recommendations**

The need for a strong community college system, and strong community college leadership remains a pressing concern for the health of the nation’s economy, and workforce. The sector provides access to higher education and credentialing for more than 40% of those seeking such opportunities, and its open-access mission, coupled with attention to affordability considerations, often make community colleges the preferred option for disadvantaged populations (Fong et al., 2016). This reality is coupled with an atmosphere of enhanced and intense scrutiny of public organizations that has evolved from the great recession (Chen, 2017). Despite these factors, scarce research exists regarding the relationship and leadership dynamics between this sector’s chief executive officers and their efforts to lead their boards of trustees. Fittingly, this study sought to better understand that dynamic, provide specific attention to the unique circumstance where CEOs are required to lead their supervisors (trustees) (Polonio & Miller, 2012) and thus influence the capacity of CEOs and potential CEOs in their ability to provide leadership for their boards of trustees. This can arguably aid in the strengthening of the sector’s leadership and the well-being of the sector.

The results of this study suggest the following recommendations for those looking to obtain CEO positions:
Successful CEOs reported that the degree to which they needed to be apprised of broader public life outside of their institutions, and the degree to which they had to be aware of and manage political concerns were greater than what they expected prior to entering the position. Successful CEOs were able to adjust quickly to ensure that they capably managed this facet of their positions. Successful CEOs advise those seeking to obtain CEO positions that they would be well served to manage this expectation with a greater degree of concern than what was commonly reported by incumbent CEOs.

Successful CEOs recommended that individuals should determine for themselves if they are sincere in their desire to do the work of a CEO, or if they are seeking to possess the position and the title. Successful CEOs were consistent in their feedback that the position is demanding, that it can be isolating, and that CEOs will find themselves in a position of having to share both power and authority with individuals that you might perceive to be motivated by political concerns, or may lack the same degree of expertise that CEO’s possess.

Potential CEOs should be sure to carefully vet application opportunities. Considerations should be made toward the overall political climate of the region being served, demographic factors of the institution and service region, service region population size, history of budget and appropriations, and a review of the institutions’ recent outcome measures. While this list is not to be considered comprehensive, these specific items were cited by participants in this study and illustrate a broad array of possible concerns potential CEOs might seek to familiarize themselves with prior to making applications. Furthermore, they
illustrate the tone of participants who suggested careful consideration of applications, rather than casting a wide net to obtain any such position, is more conducive for establishing one’s eventual ability to lead trustees. Current successful CEOs were consistent in their feedback that individuals should seek a position that will be a good fit for their own unique style, sensibilities, and aptitudes.

- Strive to be authentic in the interview process. It is inadvisable to project oneself in terms that are not transparent, only to have this exposed once one has obtained a CEO position. Being authentic in one’s first introduction will foster the development of trust and appropriately set both CEO and trustee expectations. Conversely, to betray one’s own authentic self during this process is arguably an effective way to create personal and professional frustration for CEOs and trustees, and can foster an erosion of trust between those parties.

The following recommendations are offered for current CEOs seeking to strengthen their ability to lead their boards of trustees:

- Recognize they have been selected to serve as CEO because they were deemed to be the most qualified expert to lead that organization. Nevertheless, recognize that trustees possess a wealth of information regarding the motivations and pressures of elected leaders, regarding the challenges and opportunities in the community that one serves, and that their insights should rightfully be incorporated into the CEO’s efforts to lead them, and for leading the organization.

- Recognize that the CEO is the only individual that has the authority and ability to draw and maintain the distinction between the development of institutional policy
from the administration of the organization. CEOs are ultimately responsible to maintain this bifurcation of responsibility, and CEOs are well served to adhere to the cited best practice of leading your trustees toward the development of intuitional policy, while the CEO maintains administrative leadership of the organization.

The following recommendations are made regarding higher education leadership professional development:

- Higher education leadership professional development programs and curriculums should better recognize the unique relationship dynamics between CEOs and their boards of trustees. Emphasis should be placed on the CEO requirement to provide board leadership, while having to do so from a position with less political power than trustees, as well as from a position where the CEO is literally a subordinate to the board of trustees.

- Higher education leadership development programs should arguably place greater emphasis on the need for CEOs to develop well-tuned political skills, and foster a greater understanding that CEOs, their boards, and their organizations will be influenced by political factors that are not expressly related to principles of sound academic or college leadership.

- Professional development societies would be well advised to introduce CEOs and potential CEOs to conditions that they are more than likely to face. A preponderance of professional literature suggests trustees should defer to CEO expertise (Association of Community College Trustees, 2016b), yet CEOs commonly find that trustees expect a greater degree of influence on the direction
of the college (Participant I, personal interview, November 29, 2017). In order to effectively lead trustees, CEOs need to find harmony between the actual conditions they will face, and what is considered optimal by professional societies.

- Curricula should expose potential CEOs to the inherent differences between leading boards at public colleges versus private settings, as the methods in which trustees are selected vary. For community colleges in the Northeast, potential CEOs should be broadly exposed to the political appointment process that exists.

The following recommendations are made for further academic study on the subject of effective CEO board of trustee leadership:

- This study obtained perspective from CEOs who were successful in their efforts to effectively lead their boards. While some relevant perspective from a single unsuccessful individual was incorporated, it would be compelling to conduct this study using a more saturated sample of unsuccessful CEOs. Comparing the findings of that study, in particular, if a population of unsuccessful CEOs could be found in the Northeast, would be a potentially interesting contrast with this dissertation. That comparison and analysis could greatly enhance the conversation about what strategies, styles and tactics are effective, as well as identify common patterns for those that prove less effective.

- This study focused on a sample population of successful community college CEOs in the Northeastern United States. In this region, boards of trustees are politically appointed through a combination of local political leaders and statewide elected leaders (Polonio & Smith, 2012). A compelling study would be
to determine perspectives of CEOs working in locations where boards are directly elected by the population. It is arguable that direct election of trustees versus political appointments of trustees could influence trustee expectations and behaviors and thus the expectations of leadership placed on the CEO.

- This study’s focus on the Northeast limits its application to other states, outside of that region, that also have politically appointed boards for their community colleges. It would be of interest to conduct this study with a group of CEOs from outside the region to compare and contrast responses of CEOs.

- This study focused on the perspectives of CEOs as they related to their required responsibility to lead their boards from a subordinate position. It did not seek to obtain the perspectives of trustees. A compelling follow up would be to determine the perspective of trustees as it relates to their expectations from CEOs for the purposes of board leadership.

Summary

Community colleges and those that lead them as chief executive officers, and as members of their boards of trustees have faced increasingly challenging changes related to public appropriations, media scrutiny, and changing outcome measures within the sector. These institutions maintain a critical position for providing access to higher education and workforce development credentials. While the sector remains a critical element of the nation’s educational infrastructure, the power dynamic between politically appointed trustees, and college CEOs is underexplored by both academic and professional sources. Chief executive officers are required to lead these trustees, yet trustees occupy a position of greater organizational power (as the CEO’s supervisor) and
possess significant political power and leverage over the actions of the chief executive officer. This unique dynamic was worthy of specific exploration so that current CEOs can be better informed on effective leadership methods, and so that future CEOs enter the job with appropriate expectations.

This study illustrated that despite the political power differential between trustees and CEOs, successful CEOs have been able to harness the strengths of their trustees to develop visions and agendas for their organizations that are jointly shared by the CEO and trustees alike. Their perspectives indicate that through careful interactions, CEOs are able to leverage their expert power to create a symbiotic environment between themselves and their trustees that reduces the possibility of tension, fosters the giving and receiving of trust between parties, effectively address issues facing their organizations, and ensures that trustees and CEOs are able to effectively focus on their defined organizational responsibilities.

The findings and recommendations of this study arguably provide a meaningful contribution to the literature bases in community colleges, leadership, board governance, higher education, political appointments, and the use of power and influence. Through the recognition that as a community college chief executive officer, one will have to grow comfortable with sharing power and authority, and a recognition that boards of trustees are largely comprised of ambitious political actors, current and aspiring CEOs can better meet the demands of their profession, and better serve the missions of their colleges. Furthermore, individual trustees can benefit from growing their understanding of the dynamic in which they have been appointed to serve. In locations where trustees are appointed by elected officials, they have accepted a formal appointment to serve as a
steward for a public organization in their state, to be a policymaker for a specified region’s community college programs (Polonio & Miller, 2012), to serve as part of a sector that provides access to higher education for more than 40% of those seeking access to advanced credentials, and one that serves the lion’s share of underrepresented populations in the nation (Bumphus, 2017). That is noble work, and the trust instilled in them is powerful. Through this effort, trustees and CEOs might better understand each other’s perspectives, might better understand pressures and opportunities, and together might make better our nation’s community college system.

**Reflections of the Researcher**

As I reflect on the dissertation process, and as my time as a student in Creighton University’s Doctor of Education in Interdisciplinary Leadership program comes to a close, I feel both a sense of peace and gratitude, as well as a great deal of optimism toward the future. Through the program of study, and throughout the research process, I gained tremendous insight as a leader, and have deeply appreciated the opportunity to contribute something that I believe to be meaningful, and something that I am proud of, to the broader body of literature for the leadership discipline.

I can state without reservation that my understanding of what it means to be a leader and, especially, what it means to be a successful leader, have grown in ways that were unexpected. When I entered the program, my understanding of leadership was limited to concepts of authority, power, and organizational title. I had some unrefined ideas about the intangible qualities of leaders, and an ethical responsibility toward working with others, but I was not necessarily seeking to reform the leadership ethos that I had brought in with me. Now, at the conclusion of the process, I know that my outlook
and disposition have changed, I feel better prepared to lead in an organization, but more importantly I am prepared to lead with purpose.

Indeed, I attribute this to the program’s insistence on routine self-reflection, and the sincere incorporation of Jesuit Charisms, in particular the values of *cura personalis*, or the promotion of human dignity; *men and women for and with others*, or a dedication to the well-being of entire communities; and *magis*, or an ever present devotion to the greater good. These values, provided a road map for developing skills and competencies that professionally empowered me, but perhaps more importantly provided me with a foundation to better understand the responsibilities that are implicit for those who seek to lead others. I now better understand that successful leadership is not reflected in the works or deeds of any one person, but in how one takes the measure of an organization, listens to their followers, and fosters the inspiration others need to accomplish goals that individuals working alone simply cannot accomplish.

In this program, and through this original research, I was challenged personally and professionally. Challenged to overcome the obstacles of completing original research, and to maintain the motivation necessary to see the program through. I doubted myself and, at times, wondered if I was up to the task. What kept me moving forward, along with the unyielding support of my family and friends, was the support of my fellow students in the program, the expert support of my faculty advisers and dissertation committee members, and without question, the inspiration provided to me as a student in this particular Doctor of Education program.

What I developed as a result of my time in this program, was both the confidence to believe that I could be an effective leader, but also the understanding of the
responsibilities to others that comes with being a leader. The uncertainty, and self-doubt that colored my thoughts, was met with an overwhelming belief that I had been transformed as a person, one that could make a lasting contribution in the world. That was a profound realization for me. My belief in my capacity as a sincere, and effective leader now feels tangible, real, and genuine to who I am as a person. It is in this spirit that I thank this department and program for an opportunity to better prepare myself for professional opportunities, and for this opportunity to grow as person.
References


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer: Sean Fischer
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:

Instructions for interview:
- Describe the project
- Thank interviewee for agreeing to be interviewed and for their time
- Provide assurance that their comments will remain confidential
- Have interviewee sign consent form (if not already in possession)
- Request they avoid using any terms or descriptors that would compromise anonymity
- Remind them that they may take a break at anytime
- If individual is recently retired or terminated, statements will be altered to reflect past tense

Questions (For interviews each question appeared on its own page for the purposes of gathering sufficient notes for a field log)

1. Please describe your current professional position.
2. Please describe the mission of your organization.
3. Please describe how the members of your governance board are appointed.
4. Please describe how your career developed bringing you to this current position.
5. Please describe what being a leader means to you? Do you have any preference for specific leadership styles, strategies, or tactics?
6. Are their leaders that you admire or draw inspiration?
7. Please describe the expected professional relationship that you have with your board of trustees. What is officially required of you? What are your understood professional expectations?
8. Routinely speaking would you say that your board of trustees operates with a high amount of tension, or cohesiveness? Please describe.
9. Where these conditions obvious at the start of your tenure or have conditions changed since your administration began?
10. As the chief executive officer of this organization you are required to provide expert-oriented leadership to your governance board. Because you must provide this leadership to a group that is your supervisor the methods that you have used to successfully lead your board is of great interest. Can you please explain your basic philosophy on leadership in this context and highlight what if anything is different when leading your superiors versus your subordinates?
11. What advice would you give those who are new to their positions or are seeking to obtain positions such as yours as it relates to providing leadership for their boards?
12. Can you describe a major leadership success, what did you learn from the experience?
13. Can you describe an instance where your efforts were less successful, what did you learn and what would you differently?
14. Do you perceive any formal barriers that if changed would assist your efforts to be successful?
15. Do you perceive any informal barriers (political or otherwise) that if changed would assist in your efforts to be successful?
16. Do you have recommendations for specific formal or informal changes that would enhance your ability to be an effective board leader?
Appendix B

Invitation to Participate Letter

Date
Name, Title
Organization
Address
Address

Dear Dr. [Name]

I am currently a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education in Leadership at Creighton University. I have structured my doctoral studies to gain a deeper understanding into the application of leadership at institutions of higher education and have extensive career experience at both open and selective admissions institutions. I am presently engaged in conducting research for a qualitative, ethnographical dissertation to discern how leaders operating from a subordinate position can maximize their effectiveness when leading their governance boards.

By law in the state, as the chief executive officer of an open-access community college you are hired by the College’s politically appointed Board of Trustees, you are subordinate to the board of trustees, the board can only act upon your recommendation with the exception of actions related to the terms and conditions of your employment, the law also requires you to provide expert-oriented leadership to this group of political appointees with respect to operationalizing the college’s mission. By virtue of this requirement you serve as an ex officio member of the board. While this represents an arguably peer oriented position, I am looking to develop a broader understanding of how you and similarly employed professionals at community colleges effectively optimize their ability to provide leadership to their trustees from what is effectively a subordinate position, or how to effectively “lead up.”

While management and peer leadership are much discussed, the specific dynamic of being required to lead from a subordinate position is presently underrepresented in broader literature bases. Thus, capturing lived experiences of those that have been successfully engaged in this dynamic has the potential to improve the literature base, and to enhance the likelihood of success for current and potential leaders who have or aspire to hold the position of community college chief executive officer.

I am hopeful that you will agree to an interview process that is both convenient for you and respectful of your time that can be subsequently coded and analyzed to determine what if any conclusions can be drawn about how one can optimize their capacity to effectively lead their superiors. Your identity, your organization, and the state in which we are working will all be kept anonymous. No qualifying information will be used that could trace your responses back to you. All information, transcripts and recordings will kept under lock and key in a secure office.

Included in this letter is a copy of the expected interview protocol that will be used to shape interviews as well the informed consent form granting permission. I am available for any questions that you might have about this project. You may also contact Dr. William Raynovich, Associate Professor, Creighton University, with questions or concerns about this study. (telephone: [number redacted]; email: [email redacted]). Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sean Fischer
Candidate for Doctor of Education in Leadership
Creighton University
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

**Researcher:** Sean M. Fischer, candidate for the degree Doctor of Education, Leadership

**Sponsoring Institution:** Creighton University

**Purpose of Study:** Dissertation research

**Benefits for participating:** Data will be used to gain a better understanding for leaders can optimize their effectiveness when they are required to lead their superiors. This dynamic is presently understudied, yet the dynamic is often present between chief executive officers and politically appointed or elected governance boards. By contributing to the research one can contribute to the enrichment of the literature base and the professional development of peers and future leaders.

**Type of participation:** Anonymously reported face-to-face interviews

**Notation of Risk:** Participants will be asked to provide their impressions and insights. Transcripts of interviews will be provided to participants before data analysis.

**Guarantee of confidentiality:** Interviews and information that would otherwise qualify the identities of individuals or institutions will not be used. All participants will be kept strictly anonymous. Materials, consent forms, transcripts, records, recordings, notes, field notes and memos will be secured under lock and key within a secured office. The researcher will never reveal, or confirm the identities of participants. Researcher will provide a hard copy of the dissertation to all participants upon completion.

Participation in this research is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time from further participation.

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**Name:**

**Title:**

**Organization:**

**Date:**