4-14-2021

# The meaning in the message: Impact and implications of university presidential statements regarding sexual assault

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# THE MEANING IN THE MESSAGE:
# IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTIAL
# STATEMENTS REGARDING SEXUAL ASSAULT

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education
at
Rowan University
March 25, 2021

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to all those who have sought justice and been ignored, placated, silenced, or undermined in their efforts. I hear you, and you deserve to be heard, loudly, by all. You deserve to be acknowledged, feel safe, and be understood. You deserve justice.

# Acknowledgments

The completion of this thesis is thanks to the support of many people in my life. My success is not mine alone, but shared with the individuals listed here.

First, to my fiancé Devin. You have been so encouraging and supportive of my graduate studies, and I feel so thankful to have a partner like you by my side, believing in me and helping me to follow my dreams every single day. I love you so much!

My parents have both been instrumental in my education. Since I was a little girl, they told me I could achieve anything I put my mind to. Their unwavering support has aided me in reaching this moment in my education, and for them, I am so grateful. In addition to my parents, I'd like to acknowledge all my other family members and friends who have been a part of my journey. They have been by my side through this graduate school journey, and their words of comfort and support have helped me get through the tough times.

A special thank you to my SCCA family. I would not have had the opportunity to pursue graduate studies without my position as a graduate coordinator. I have learned so much in my time with the SCCA, and it has been a true joy to know and work alongside all of you incredible individuals. Thank you for all you do for students and for the Rowan community.

Finally, thank you to three special women. Dr. Haynes, Dr. Wright-Mair, and Dr. Dale. You have all been amazing role models to me and have pushed me to be my most complete self, personally and academically. I hope to make you all proud.

# Abstract

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2020-2021
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This study aims to critically analyze university presidential statements made regarding sexual assault on campus and how those statements might impact campus culture. Through critical content analysis, manifest content and latent content were examined. The results explain that while the statements made are satisfactory and making a statement is better than not doing so, the statements are vague and indistinct. In order for the statements to have more meaning and impact, it is clear that messaging needs to be more specific to each individual institution, and be more critical, using unique language so the campus community can feel seen, understood, and safe. Recommendations for future research on this topic are included. These recommendations for continued research would aid scholars in further understanding how institutions can make more meaningful, impactful statements.

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<center>**Introduction**</center>

**Statement of the Problem**

Academic scholars and university administrators alike have noted that sexual assault on college campuses is an extremely relevant issue that occurs on campuses nationwide (American Association of University Professors, 2012). There are many alarming statistics illustrating the severity of this issue. Statistics about sexual assault demonstrate the magnitude of the issue. For example, it was reported that "student victims were more likely than non-student victims to state that the incident was not important enough to report" and "more than 3 in 4 student victims of rape and sexual assault knew the offender" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, pp.1-7). Statistics regarding assault paint a picture of how prevalent this issue is on college campuses. The statistical data display the frequency and scope of instances, as well as the reporting, policing and legal ramifications that accompany such incidents. These numbers and percentages showcase the elevated risk level of certain populations on campuses, such as female and transgender students, as opposed to the risk level of individuals who are not on a college campus (Office for Victims of Crime, 2014; U.S. Department of Justice, 2014).

The statistical figures presented can aid in the understanding of the scope of this issue. However, what is arguably more important is the impact that those statistics can have on a campus climate (Cantor et al., 2015). The Association of American Universities conducted a campus climate survey to understand the impact of sexual

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assault. This report is extensive and addresses many topics surrounding sexual assault on campuses, with the primary focus of the report to understand the variances of instances across multiple institutions of higher education.

In order to understand campus climate, it is essential to differentiate between other terms that are similar. Campus climate can be defined as "the current attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities and potential" (University of California, 2014). The campus culture is the "persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off the campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6). This means that the climate is current and the culture is how these attitudes and norms are perpetuated over time. Both the climate and culture can impact the campus environment. The campus environment is both the physical place of a campus as well as the community of individuals who make up the campus. The current climate and overall culture can impact how the environment operates and how individuals are situated within this environment, including where they fall within the overall power structure of the university.

The impact of institutional leadership response can display where the priorities of the institution lie. For example, university presidents that are proactive and forthcoming with a statement supporting survivors will create a more positive and supportive university climate than a president that places blame on victims or waits until they are pressured to make a statement about sexual assault incidents on campus. It is the job of

university presidents and their teams to aid them in crafting messages to unite the university community in the face of adversity.

Why then, does this problem continue to perpetuate year after year, impacting a large number of students on college campuses? There is student activism, media attention, and laws in place that should protect those impacted. This study posits that research should start looking towards the administrative side of higher education. Administrators are the source of power behind which most university decisions are made. By examining how administration at institutions of higher education frame this issue in their communication and statements, we can gain a better and deeper understanding of how this messaging can have a positive or negative impact on campus culture. It is important to consider how presidential statements can frame the incident, the alleged perpetrators and survivors, and how this has far reaching impact for how individuals on a campus understand this event. The university president is a leadership role that carries great weight, and the messaging from leaders at this level set the tone for the entire university. When the framing shifts from accusatory and impersonal to be more inclusive and compassionate, the potential of a culture shift at an institution is possible. While a culture shift may take time, the most important part is that it starts somewhere. By starting the conversation, higher education administrators show that they are understanding of the significant magnitude of this issue and that they are willing to dedicate time and effort towards building a culture of compassion and understanding.

**Significance of the Problem**

Sexual assault has been a prevalent issue on college campuses for a long time. Since it has been a longstanding issue, it is hard to grasp that there has not been much traction towards change. In 1972, the Educational Amendments were passed, and included in that was Title IX (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Title IX is an educational amendment that prohibits discrimination in educational programs or activities based on sex (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This means that individuals of all genders should have equal opportunity to the aforementioned educational programs and activities. Since this time, many institutions of higher education have implemented Title IX offices to ensure that equitable practices are being implemented.

While it has been nearly 50 years since Title IX was passed, there are still significant issues regarding sexual assault on campuses. Student activism is an important element to consider when looking at the significance of this problem. The activism by students also garners media attention. Students at campuses across the country are using their voice to speak up towards assault on campus, making their protest of the issue evident through various mediums (Rentschler, 2018). Students feel passionately about their cause as well as their safety and wellbeing on campus, and therefore continue to let their concerns be known. The issue of sexual assault on campuses is clearly still present and prevalent on campuses today, making the need for research and further investigation urgent, particularly in order to support marginalized groups of students who are impacted by this issue.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study will examine the impact and implication that university presidential statements about sexual assault can have on campus climate and culture. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, this study will examine dimensions of rhetoric and communication within a higher education context to investigate the impact of these statements made by presidents regarding sexual assault. Scholarship in the area of university president communication is limited and this study will serve to broaden the field of research on this topic. There has been some research conducted on university presidential statements and communication, but little to none that examine statements on the topic of sexual assault (Cole & Harper, 2017; DeCosmo, 2019).

Additionally, the importance of this study will speak volumes to those impacted by sexual assault on campus. Sexual assault on campus is a pervasive issue that affects a multitude of people. University presidents can serve as a guiding light for an institution, and there is power in what they say. By conducting this research study, we can gain a richer understanding of how university presidential communication can have the power to promote a campus culture of inclusion. Furthermore, we can move one step closer in the right direction towards protecting survivors, possibly preventing further assaults, and creating a campus culture of inclusivity and respect for all individuals.

**Setting of Study**

This study will examine various statements released by university presidents discussing issues of sexual assault on their campuses. The selected statements are derived from a wide variety of colleges and universities. In order to be representative, the

statements have been selected from institutions varying in size, location, and public or private status. The statements gathered are all within the public domain and accessible through a basic internet search.

**Assumptions and Limitations**

There are already many standing assumptions surrounding sexual assault, particularly in regards to gender and the gender binary of only thinking about males and females. In actuality, transgender individuals are at higher risk of being sexually assaulted, with the statistic of, "one in two transgender individuals are sexually abused or assaulted at some point in their lives" (Office for Victims of Crime, 2014). Title IX addresses discrimination based on sex and is inclusive of transgender rights (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.). Future research could examine the evolving inclusivity of Title IX, its impact on students from the LGBTQIA+ community and their rights to an equal education and protection under this law.

Additionally, the assumption exists that those who identify as male cannot also be victims of sexual assault. The sad reality is that this is not true, and male individuals can also be sexually assaulted. Research identifies that while males are victims of sexual assault much less frequently than females, this does not mean that males are at less risk or that they are inconsequential to be included in the conversation of protecting victims (Bullock & Beckson, 2011).

With these assumptions considered, there are also some limitations to this study. First, this study is being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this should not have any impact on the data collected and the results of the study, it is important to

note that this research was conducted during a tumultuous time in education, politics, and the world.

Additionally, there is not a large area of scholarly research surrounding university presidential statements. The research on political communication is viable in examining the statements, but does not address the impact that university presidents' statements can have on a campus environment. One suggestion for further research would be to look into the impact of official university communication, particularly messaging that is coming from the university president, as it has the potential to impact the campus climate in a positive or negative way.

**Operational Definitions of Important Terms**

- Campus Climate - "the current attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities and potential" (University of California, 2014)
- Campus Culture - "persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off the campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6)
- Qualitative Content Analysis- a research method that is used to examine a text for meaning through communication and language (Hsieh & Shannon 2005)
- Framing- "refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p.104)

- Institutions of Higher Education- also known by the acronym "IHE," this refers to colleges and universities

- Impact- having a strong effect, positive or negative, on an individual, group or situation

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

The following chapters will help to further build context and examine the topics and themes presented in this chapter. In chapter two, the relevant literature in the field will be examined and contextualized, further clarifying the gap in knowledge and purpose of this study. Chapter three will elaborate on the qualitative methods used in conducting this study and why this research methodology is important to the results that will be produced. The findings will be reported in chapter four. These findings will demonstrate the meanings of the statements and will be analyzed by theme. In chapter five, practical implications of this research will be discussed, as well as how the findings of this study can be applied to improve not only institutional responses to sexual assault, but aid in building a more positive, safe, and inclusive campus climate.

**Chapter II**

**Review of Literature**

There is a multitude of research that focuses on sexual assault on college campuses, university statements and communication, rhetorical framing of texts, and critical content analysis. Reviewing and contextualizing this past research aids in providing background information for this research study and shows where it is situated within scholarly conversations. By making connections between these concepts that span multiple disciplines, a robust understanding of the topics can be gained. This understanding will aid the reader and guide them through reading the remainder of this research study. In this section, the gap in knowledge will be identified, demonstrating the clear need for expanded research on the topic of framing of statements made by presidents to their university communities centering on issues of sexual assault on campus and how this very framing of their statement can have an impact on campus climate.

**Sexual Assault on College Campuses**

Many scholars have investigated sexual assault on college campus through research studies. The research covers a variety of topics, all aiming to understand the issue with hope to find ways to make positive changes and improve this issue for all those who are impacted. Topics such as current data, statistics and reporting, as well as campus climate and culture are all examined in depth.

### Current Data

To contextualize the plethora of existing literature available on sexual assault on college campuses (Breitenbecher, 2000; Garland et al., 2018), Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) conducted a study analyzing past and current data related to sexual harassment in higher education. They used keywords, categories and themes to pull together 5,259 sources that all are centered around this topic. Upon gathering the data, they categorized their results of research being sorted into the following categories; prevalence, consequences, prevention, which includes matters of policy, education and training, case management, support structures, and other organizational factors, as well as future research. This research aids in demonstrating the most common areas of research related to this topic. While the areas of prevalent research are beneficial, this study helps to contextualize the areas of research and scholarship that are missing from the repertoire of data related to sexual harassment and assault in higher education. Understanding what is missing in the academic conversation can guide future areas of research to ensure that research can gain depth of knowledge in more varied areas.

### Statistics, Reporting & Notification

One issue that is prevalent in the research is the validity of statistics and reporting of sexual assaults on campuses (Mancini et al., 2019; Richards, 2019). Yung (2015) examines whether institutions of higher education underreport their cases of sexual assault on campus. Yung's work provides context to the Clery Act, an act that requires crime statistic reporting on college campuses (Yung, 2015). The method used in this study was a review of Clery Act reporting data as well as timelines of Department of

Education university audits. Yung (2015) found that universities report sexual assault more frequently when they are in an audit, as opposed to before the audit begins and after the audit has taken place. One main conclusion to these findings is the financial and reputational incentive to underreport. Perception of prospective students is highly important to admission and enrollment. Crime statistics demonstrating high levels of sexual assault would likely turn away students, therefore decreasing enrollment. Additionally, institutions of higher education are a brand that, in essence, are advertised to students, who are the consumers. The culture of a school is highly impactful of what the university stands for and their brand. If the crime statistics are underreported, it becomes easy for the brand to create a facade that does not represent the truth of the campus culture for illegitimate financial gain. This is a substantially problematic theme in the research, finding that sexual assaults are in fact underreported.

In addition to reporting, underreporting, and statistics related to sexual assault on campuses, another pertinent issue addressed in the literature is notification of sexual assault. There are numerous policies and acts that require prompt notification of when an assault has taken place on campus. Garland, Calfanol, and Wodahl (2018) conducted a study aiming to discover how students on campus feel about notification of sex-based crimes. Using Shippee's (2012) vulnerability perspective, their research study explores the idea that if students are more vulnerable and view situations as threatening, they are more likely to be in favor of notification procedures and preventative measures (Garland et al., 2018). After surveying 1,048 students from a large midwestern university, they found that students from more vulnerable populations thought it was most important to receive notification about those in power, such as faculty or staff, as opposed to other

students. Additionally, the results of the study illustrate that females living on campus were more likely to want to receive notification than male students or students who live off campus (Garland et al., 2018). These results display that notification of sexual assault on campus is important, particularly for populations who are more at-risk. The concern of those in positions of power at institutions should be that of the safety, security, and the right to a comfortable place of learning for all students. Further research can examine the most effective ways to shift the conversation of sexual assault on campuses, educating students, faculty and staff alike on the risk and ways to help prevent, so that vulnerable populations feel safer on college campuses.

### *Campus Climate*

Sexual assault on campuses is a large factor of the campus climate (University of California, 2014). Do all students feel safe, welcomed, and respected on campus? In order to work to develop a culture of respect on campuses, the conversation shifts to prevention of sexual assault. If the culture is changed to an environment where all individuals are respected, prevention of assault would look a lot different than it does in the current environment.

Prevention is a relevant topic across the research on sexual assault on campuses (Exner & Cummings, 2011). One author, Breitenbecher (2000), reframes how we think about preventing sexual assault, and poses the question in her research, "is an ounce of prevention enough?" (p. 23). In her study, she critically examines common themes in the literature, reviewing the effectiveness of sexual assault prevention programs. The results of the study display that prevention programs are moderately effective in the short-term,

changing attitudes about sexual assault (Breitenbecher, 2000). While her research finds

that the answer to her question is no, that prevention is not in fact enough, Breitenbecher

notes that does not mean that institutions should abandon all effort. So long as prevention

programs are being evaluated properly, she notes that these programs can continue to

improve in the prevention of sexual assault on campuses. Future research could examine

long-term solutions towards prevention methods and how these prevention methods can

be modified to address cognitive, emotional and behavioral processes (Breitenbecher,

2000). The theme of prevention overlaps with other concepts of bystander behavior and

education of individuals on campuses to be able to advocate in situations where an assault

might be preventable (Exner & Cummings, 2011; McMahon et al., 1994).

  While prevention of sexual assault should be the first step, we unfortunately know

that sexual assault is still a prevalent issue on college campuses. After an assault happens

on campus, student defendants can feel that they are in a hostile environment (Henrick,

2013). In 2015, the Association of American Universities, or AAU, published a report of

the AAU campus climate survey on sexual assault and sexual misconduct, authored by

Cantor et al. (2015). This report extensively reviews the survey results in depth. The

survey was distributed amongst a wide range of institutions of higher education, therefore

being able to gather statistically representative data (Cantor et al., 2015). In the report,

survey results regarding campus climate around sexual assault were separated into

sections of: response to a report of sexual assault or sexual misconduct, bystander

intervention, opinions about prevalence and personal risk, and knowledge about

university sexual assault policies and procedures (Cantor et al., 2015). All of these

elements combine to contribute to the campus climate surrounding sexual assault. The

results of the survey demonstrate that there is a wide range that institutions of higher education fall under in regards to campus climate related to sexual assault. Of all the institutions surveyed, there was no correlation based upon institutional factors such as size and location (Cantor et al., 2015). A suggestion for further research is why the rates of assault can vary so greatly based upon the institution and institutional characteristics.

The literature surrounding sexual assault on campuses has breadth and depth, both exploring the topic on a macro level as well as understanding the more nuanced issues related to the topic. The different categories examined give context to the scope of the issue and its importance moving forward in this research study. By looking at the literature surrounding current data, campus climate, as well as statistics, reporting and notification, one can understand the scope of why this issue is prevalent to campus communities, and begin to consider how we can work to remedy this problem.

**University Statements and Communication**

As with any incident that occurs on campus, university stakeholders have a right to be informed. Official university communication serves as a reputable source for information during times of crisis. With the prevalence of the issue of sexual assault on college campuses, the university community has a right to be notified of these assaults. In examining university presidential communication and university value statements, it is important to acknowledge how messages from university leadership can have an impact on the rest of the university community.

*University Presidential Statements and Communication*

There is an abundance of scholarship on university mission statements, however, there is little research surrounding university communication, particularly in regards to presidential communication. Cole and Harper (2017) conducted a research study examining the impact of university presidents' statements on racial injustice and campus racial incidents. Cole and Harper (2017) add to the conversation of the importance of presidential rhetoric and campus climate in relation to diversity. Through the use of rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation (1992), Cole and Harper categorized their findings into the three categories of the Rhetorical Situation; exigence, audience and constraints (Cole & Harper, 2017). By acknowledging the Rhetorical Situation, Cole and Harper understand that there are internal and external factors at play that can impact how these statements are made as well as how they are received. They report that, "college presidents are oftentimes willing to address the racist but rarely the racism" (Cole & Harper, 2017, p. 326). This is an important consideration to think about moving forward, meaning that while a situation may be addressed, the underlying issues of systemic racism are often overlooked or omitted.

Even more closely related to this research study, DeCosmo (2019) wrote her dissertation on university presidents' responses to crisis situations on campus. Her research questions the presidential discourse after four distinct types of crisis events; environmental, intentional, accidental, and student protest (DeCosmo, 2019). DeCosmo (2019) utilized content analysis as well as comparative case study to analyze discourse of university presidents during a time of crisis. Her research suggests that through analyzing

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this presidential discourse, future leaders can be more effective in aiding their institutions through the process of recovering from a crisis situation.

### *University Value Statements*

Community values can also have an impact on how statements are received to those on campus. Hight and Cooper (2004) examined the development of community value statements of institutions. They found that of the institutions questioned, each one included the importance of respecting and "valuing the ideas, opinions, contributions, and rights of others" (Hight & Cooper, 2004, p.12). When institutions place emphasis on values that include respect, this has potential to encourage the start of a culture shift on campus. However, this messaging needs to be communicated from leadership in order to instill these values in students, faculty and staff.

It is evident that while there has been some research conducted on university statements and communication, that much more is needed. This type of communication has the potential to impact many campus stakeholders, therefore it is important to be transparent and intentional. By continuing to dig deeper into university communication, there is potential to increase understanding of its importance and how it can impact the campus climate.

### Rhetorical Framing of Text

By understanding university presidential communication, the conversation shifts from what these individuals are saying to how and why they are saying it. An important concept to examine to help understand this is rhetoric and rhetorical framing of texts.

Rhetoric can be defined as, "the strategic use of communication, oral or written, to achieve specifiable goals" (Kuypers, 2010, p. 288). This strategic use can have implications for how messages, or texts, can be framed and viewed by an audience. While a text can be any artifact, this research study will examine presidential statements as the text. How do the words, the phrasing, the flow, all matter in making this message? More importantly, what is left out of the message? Which perspective is shown and which is left out? Where does the power dynamic lie and how can that impact the receiving of the message? These are all important elements that will be examined in the methodology of this research study.

Framing theory suggests that the world around us, as well as differing perspectives and values, can impact how messages are received and influence opinions (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Therefore, most messages are being received with bias just based upon the wording and position of the statement. In their research, Chong and Druckman (2007) use framing theory to discern political communication. While a university president is not a public servant in the way a congressperson is, they certainly can be regarded as a political figure, being the face of an institution of higher education. In their results, Chong and Druckman (2007) advocate for the thought that in order to promote a more democratic society, individuals should form opinions through fact-based logic and steer clear of manipulation and messages framed with malicious intent. The question that remains is how can we achieve this lofty, idealistic goal?

Entman (2007) acknowledges that, "framing works to shape and alter audience members' interpretations and preferences through priming" (Entman, 2007, p. 164). Priming, similar to framing, can impact how a message and the meaning of the message

is perceived by the audience. Entman (2007) incorporates a formulaic approach to ensure framing bias and slant can be reduced in political media communication. He elaborates how framing, priming, and slant towards one issue in the media can be used as an agenda setting method in political communication. This understanding can also be applied to how university presidents' statements can frame and issue and impose a certain position to their statement and beliefs.

In examining the concept of framing, it is important to acknowledge how this can be used as a device to shift the thoughts and opinions of an audience. Through framing, there is a differential between the power dynamic of the source sending the message and the individual receiving the message. Framing can be used as a strategic communication tool that inherently sets and perpetuates the agenda of those yielding this in their communication arsenal. Through understanding the ease in which bias can be introduced in framing, an informed individual can deduce their own interpretation of messages. As Chong & Druckman (2007) concur, this can create a more democratic society. Yet the question remains of how to educate the general public to be armed against this deceptive messaging strategy.

By understanding the implications of framing a text, one can come to realize the importance of how presidential statements frame an issue. How a message gets mediated or framed has the potential to mean just as much as the actual words of the message. This framing can help to highlight the inequality or injustice of an issue, or the diametric opposite, it could be harmful and negligent to frame an issue in a way that can impact many groups that are marginalized.

**Critical Content Analysis**

Keeping in mind what has been discussed about rhetorical framing of a text and university statements and communication, the next concept that will be explored is critical content analysis. This is a qualitative method used in examining texts and finding meaning. Methods known as critical content analysis, qualitative content analysis and critical qualitative inquiry, all aim to achieve similar research goals of identifying common themes in a text, analyzing them from a critical perspective, searching for power differentials and examining how that can be problematic (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kohlbacher, 2006). This methodology is grounded in social justice and critical scholarship as it probes a text to understand the voice of power and how this can have an impact on how messages are coded and received.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) break down three different types of qualitative content analysis; conventional, directed or summative. Through their review of each distinct type, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) note the components that are common between the three, particularly discussing the importance of coding. Coding is also a crucial component when identifying how the three methods differ. The key differences are what basis the study starts based upon, the timing of defining codes or keywords, and the source of codes or keywords (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015). They note that through complying to a clear procedure throughout a qualitative content analysis research methodology, this will increase the validity of the research project.

Critical content analysis is a tool that can be useful in varying types of research. Kohlbacher (2006) examines how this method works in conjunction with case study

methodology. Through examining the utility of case study research and critical content analysis research, Kohlbacher (2006) discusses the utilization of critical content analysis as a way to understand a case study. He advocates for this, noting that it could provide a shared perspective amongst those reviewing the case study.

Common concerns in the literature of critical content analysis are those of validity and reliability of this method (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Kohlbacher, 2006). This concern is understandable, considering if not done properly and systematically, critical content analysis could potentially lack academic rigor and validity. However, when conducted properly, this research method could aid in producing valuable scholarship, information, knowledge and results that will further the academic conversations being held in multiple fields. Applying two paradigmatic approaches; qualitative research with a critical lens, research with this method can continue to gain better understanding of the lived experience while questioning structures of power and oppression.

**Gap In Knowledge**

While the current literature from scholars in various disciplines aids in building context for this issue, there is still a gap in knowledge pertaining to how university presidential responses to instances of sexual assault can impact campus climate. What is lacking is an interdisciplinary approach, examining how meaning is made and how experience is shaped through public discourse of university leadership. By approaching this issue from a higher education and communication perspective, this study will aim to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of how presidential statement framing can have far reaching implications for campus communities.

<center>**Chapter III**</center>

<center>**Methodology**</center>

**Context of the Study**

Based upon the literature examined, it is apparent that through researching university presidential communication, we can be one step closer to understanding how this communication can impact campus climate and the campus environment. This study critically examines university presidents' responses to instances of sexual assault. Throughout the research process, I analyzed statements, coded this data through qualitative content analysis, discovered themes in the data, and interpreted the underlying data, or latent content analysis, present within these statements (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

**Research Question**

What thematic patterns exist in university presidential statements addressing sexual assault on college campuses?

**Research Method**

Hsieh & Shannon (2005) provide three approaches to qualitative content analysis. Summative content analysis is an approach that utilizes coding to determine frequency but also includes interpreting this data (Lune & Berg, 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method ensures that this research study produces the most expansive results, utilizing analysis of both the manifest and latent content analysis. Manifest content analysis examines the "elements that are physically present and countable" (Lune & Berg, 2017). Latent content analysis takes a more critical look at the data through

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interpreting the underlying meaning and symbolism (Lune & Berg, 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). By combining these two elements in summative content analysis, we can understand the full picture of the data that was analyzed and can deeply understand the impact of both the actual and underlying meaning present within these texts.

**Procedure**

In order to decipher what patterns exist in these texts, an open coding scheme was used to begin the data analysis process. According to Lune & Berg (2017), open coding is when the data that is being analyzed guides the way for determining what codes will be used in the analysis. This is beneficial because it allows the researcher to be open to what the data presents, as opposed to having a pre-defined code to make the data fit into. An open coding of the text allowed for themes and patterns to emerge as the data was analyzed (Lune & Berg, 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Elements that were counted in the coding were words and themes, examining how these combine to create key concepts within the data (Graneheim et al., 2017; Lune & Berg, 2017). This coding contributed to the manifest content analysis, meaning that words and themes were counted and categorized, providing frequency of usage within the statements.

Following open coding, the interpretation of the words, themes and concepts were analyzed for latent content analysis. Patterns were examined, including how the themes found within the data frame the message in a particular way to benefit a particular viewpoint. The analysis of the data examines implications to these patterns within the data and how these statements can negatively or positively impact campus climate.

Additionally, the findings examine what implications these patterns can have on a campus environment.

**Population and Sample**

The data of this study are statements that have been made by university presidents addressing issues of sexual assault on campus. Texts were selected that were delivered within the past 8 years. All statements are remarks made by university presidents. Twenty-four individual statements were collected. Statements were collected from universities in the United States. Additionally, statements were collected from universities of all sizes, as well as from both public and private institutions.

**Data Collection**

Data sources were collected through an internet search and taken from websites that are publicly accessible to view. This is important, as published presidential communication can be accessed by current students, faculty and staff, as well as those who are not currently at the institution. This public information can inform public opinion about an institution and its leadership. Twenty-four individual statements released by university presidents that discuss sexual assault on campus were collected and analyzed for this study. All statements range in page length, from very brief to long, detailed plans. All statements that were collected were published between the years 2013 to 2020.

**Data Analysis**

Once the data was collected and synthesized, the data was analyzed for both manifest content and latent content. The manifest content analysis was conducted to

determine the magnitude and prevalence of words, themes and concepts. Following that, the latent content was examined, determining patterns that emerged from the data. Once the patterns were determined, they were analyzed for their potential implication as to the possible impact that they have on campus climate and environments, examining if they have an impact in a positive or negative way.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

As examined in the review of the literature, a common weakness to critical content analysis is that it has the potential to lack credibility and trustworthiness (DeCosmo, 2019; Kohlbacher, 2006; Lune & Berg, 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In order to account for this and to ensure that this was not a concern for this study, the manifest content was analyzed first to aid in the credibility of the results of the study. While latent content can be analyzed through different points of view, by obtaining the manifest content results first provided a guide to the analysis of the latent content present within these texts. Additionally, in order to ensure academic rigor and validity of the results, the number of data sources examined establish that sufficient evidence was examined to be generalizable in the results.

# Chapter IV

## Findings

The purpose of this study is to examine statements made by university presidents addressing instances of sexual assault in order to understand the thematic patterns that exist within these statements. Using content analysis, the themes within these statements have been analyzed, particularly investigating how these statements have the potential to impact campus culture and community. This chapter will contextualize the profile of the sample and break down the analysis of the data through both manifest and latent content analysis.

### Profile of Sample

In order to accomplish the goal of this study, 24 statements made by university presidents regarding sexual assault were collected. Elements such as university size, public or private status, as well as location within the United States were considered. Table 1 synthesizes the breakdown of institution type and size.

**Table 1**

*Public/Private Status and Institution Size*

|         | Small <5,000 undergraduate students | Medium 5,000-15,000 undergraduate students | Large >15,000 undergraduate students |
|---------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Public  | 1                                   | 3                                          | 12                                   |
| Private | 3                                   | 4                                          | 1                                    |

This table displays the breakdown of institution size compared with public or private status of the institution. This table is proportional to how undergraduate enrollment looks at different institution types, as it is typical that private institutions tend to have lower undergraduate enrollment where public institutions comparatively have larger undergraduate enrollment (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2011). Based upon this table, it is evident that more public school statements were analyzed as compared to that of private schools. One suggestion for the disparity in statement availability between the two is that private institutions have more autonomy, and therefore, what could be presumed as less accountability, particularly when it comes to making a statement that might implicate the institution in a harmful way (Atlbach, 1999). This has the possibility to perpetuate a culture of silencing at private institutions, where instances of sexual assault are kept quiet. This could have a variety of dangerous outcomes. It can be surmised that there is perhaps more pressure on public institutions to take a stance on the issue of sexual assault and address it, due to increased accountability since public institutions are required to have publicly available information (Allen & Bresciani, 2003).

In addition to understanding the institution types that data was gathered from, Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of where in the United States that data was gathered. As displayed by this map, data was collected from 19 states and the District of Columbia. This was done in order to gather a representative sample of institutions across the country.

**Figure 1**

*Map of Data Collection*
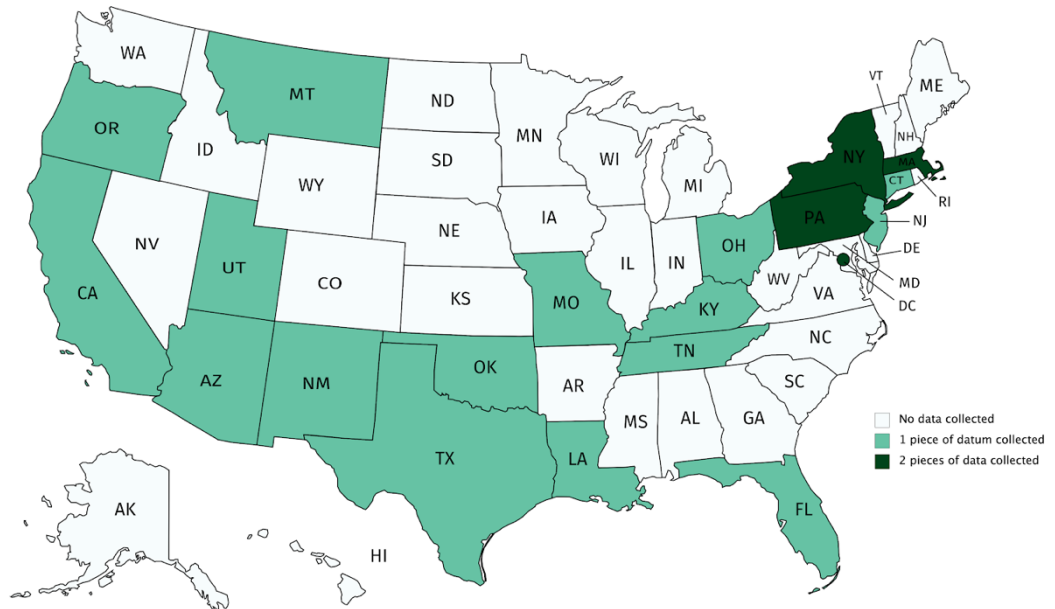


In understanding the context of the data collection, it is also imperative to note that there is a variation in what the impetus is for all of these messages. Some are proactive messages, outlining that sexual assault will not be tolerated on campus. Others are statements that have been sparked by an "event" such as an incident of sexual assault involving students or university stakeholders, survey results or data that have become publicly available, a book release that exposes the issue of sexual assault at a campus, updated Title IX regulations, and others. The inciting event that brought on the statement will be an important point to consider moving forward throughout the findings of this report as the nature of the statement's inception is tied to the positioning of the

statements. For example, an institution that was aware survey data would soon become available is likely more apt to be open or transparent in their statement, since the data is being released to the public. Being perceived as "open" or "transparent" might benefit the institution as this would paint them in a more favorable light than seeming like they were trying to hide survey results by not addressing them.

In regards to transparency of data available, it is significant to address the ways in which this data was organized. Some institutions have pristinely organized websites for the Office of the President which are easily accessible to the public to view archives of information on statements made by the president. However, some institutions had this information available, but under a password protected website that was unable to be accessed by the public and only members of the institution. Accessibility of these statements sends a message to the general public about how the institution operates in regards to transparency. An institution that keeps their records private and password protected has the potential to develop a public perception of covering up or gatekeeping information. Another item of importance in regards to transparency is the availability of hyperlinks within the statement. For example, if a statement addressed a specific policy or resource, some statements included a hyperlink that will take the reader directly to that information. This is beneficial for the reader to find that information and can assist the reader to make their own assumptions about that specific information. Additionally, statements that included analysis of data from surveys or reports typically gave numerical statistics as well as a summary of the data. This can guide the reader to understand the figures and gain a deeper understanding of the data being presented to them within the context of the statement.

**Data Analysis Procedure**

In order to assess all of the data, each statement was saved as a document file as well as printed. To begin the coding process, a first round of open coding was conducted. During this process, general themes and patterns were acknowledged and noted. Next, the frequency of specific words and phrases that stood out in the data were collected for the manifest content analysis by searching for specific words in the electronic copies of the documents. After reviewing the frequency chart and initial themes and patterns from the open code, three main themes emerged in the latent content analysis. Of the three main themes in the latent content analysis, two themes were then broken down into sub-themes to better interpret all of the data that was collected. Subsequently, a second code was done to categorize the data based upon the main themes and subthemes. This second code was used to validate the information collected in the first open code and categorize the information by main theme and sub-theme.

**Manifest Content Analysis**

Through open coding and the emergence of common themes and patterns, there was a prevalence of words or concepts that seemed to appear in most statements. In order to better understand the pattern of these words, a frequency chart was created to give context to the data. This was done by selecting the words that appeared to stand out most in the open code, as well as words related to the concepts and overall message of the statement. To determine the frequency of each word, each data piece was searched for 14 words and their variations to detect the presence of the words within the data. Only words that appeared in the title or the content of the message were counted. Items such as department names, job titles, event names, initiatives, or email addressed were not

counted in the word frequency. This was done in order to get a real understanding of the
number of times the words were used to create meaning within the message.

**Figure 2**

*Frequency Chart*



Frequency Chart
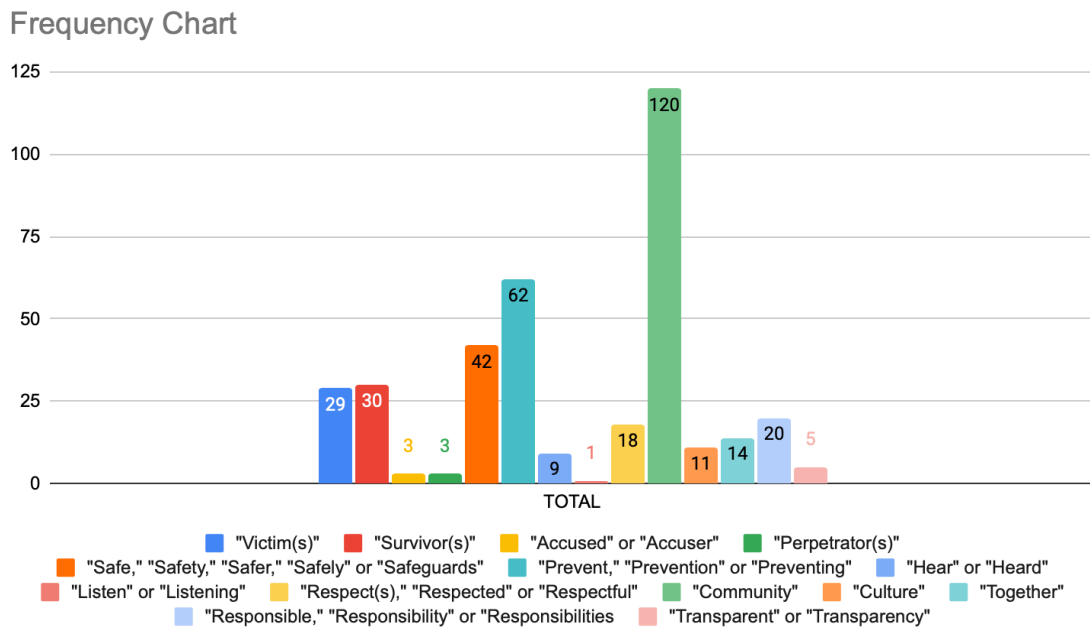
By analyzing the chart, there are a few key items to note. First, and most
evidently, is that the word "community" was used the most across all of the data. This
word would be used many times throughout individual statements, but also overall
throughout the whole data set. The word "community" was most often used in how the
presidents began their statements, addressing the campus community. Conversely, the
words that appeared least frequently were "listen," "accuser," "perpetrator," and
"transparent."

Next, there were 2 pairs of terms that have similar meaning to each other, yet can be understood to be framed differently. They are "victim"/ "survivor" and "accused"/ "perpetrator." It is interesting to observe that these word duos were used almost the exact same number of times ("victim" 29 times, "survivor" 30 times and "accused" 3 times, "perpetrator" 3 times). Most statements utilize just one of the two ways, favoring the use of one term over the other. One statement utilized the term "victim survivors." This is similar to the use of "accused" and "perpetrator" where the statement typically only contains one of these words.

Another commonly used word combination was that of "respect" and "culture." In the data, "culture" is almost paired with "respect," to emphasize that institutions aim to "cultivate a culture of respect." Throughout the data, "respect" is used more frequently than the word "culture" and is not always tied to the concept of creating culture. "Respect" is also frequently used when referring to safety and well-being.

By analyzing the frequency of words used in statements, we are able to better understand important themes and concepts presented in the data. These themes and concepts are crucial to know as the analysis of the data becomes more layered and complex through the examination of the latent content present within the data.

**Latent Content Analysis**

After examining the frequency of words that appeared in the statements, it is more evident as to which words are used to aid in generating impact within statements. Understanding the frequency of words used is beneficial to learning about the common language used across statements. Latent content analysis aims to take a deeper look into the meaning of the statements. By examining the latent content within these statements,

we can get to the root of what the message truly portrays to the audience. Through understanding the themes and patterns that emerge, implications and impact to campus climate and environments can begin to be considered. In the latent content analysis of the data, three main themes emerged; structural pattern of the statements, responsibility, and the positioning of the statements.

### *Structural Pattern of Statements*

One of the themes that emerged through examining the latent content of the data is the structural pattern of the statements. In looking at the data, it was clear that most statements follow a very similar pattern of how the message is set up. This includes 3 basic items; denouncing the behavior and addressing how it has impacted the individual institution's campus community, what the institution has been doing and/or what the institution will do moving forward to prevent sexual assault on campus or improve their efforts, and concluding the statement, once again denouncing the behavior and how the institution will move on from this and prioritize the rights, safety and well-being of all individuals. This pattern is very formulaic and was evident in examining all the data that was collected. The structural pattern informs the content of the statements, and allows for this same type of statement to be generated in a consistent manner across the different institutions.

The largest and most substantive part of the statements is the middle section, where the president addresses what has been done previously to combat the issue of sexual assault on campus as well as explaining what the institution will do moving forward to continue to support survivors and improve the overall issue. These two items, what has been done and what will be done, are interchangeable, meaning some

statements include one, the other, or both. This part of the statement mainly explores the

8 following ideas for improvement; conducting a study or survey, understanding student

opinions and experience, focusing on preventions efforts including education programs to

prevent assault, adding additional support resources for students, Title IX offices process

for investigations and general resources, updating university policies and procedures,

increased staffing in support areas including counseling, and increased public safety

efforts and programs (Table 2). Not all of these ideas for improvement are included in

each statement, however these are the general themes that most statements include. The

ideas for improvement sometimes are placed under what they have done in the past to

improve, and sometimes are the action items of what they will do in the future to

improve.

**Table 2**

*Structural Patterns of Statements*

| 1-Denounce behavior of those who commit sexual assault on campus and address how it has impacted the institution's campus community | 2A-What the institution has been doing to prevent sexual assault on campus | 2B-What the institution will do as a result of an instance of sexual assault to improve | 3-Conclude the statement and again denounce sexual assault, as well as how the institution will move on and prioritize the rights, safety and well-being of all individuals |
|---|---|---|---|
| | I.    Conduct a study or survey | | |
| | II.    Understand student opinions and experience | | |
| | III.    Focus on prevention efforts including education programs to prevent assault | | |

| 1-Denounce behavior of those who commit sexual assault on campus and address how it has impacted the institution's campus community | 2A-What the institution has been doing to prevent sexual assault on campus | 2B-What the institution will do as a result of an instance of sexual assault to improve | 3-Conclude the statement and again denounce sexual assault, as well as how the institution will move on and prioritize the rights, safety and well-being of all individuals |
|---|---|---|---|
| | IV. Add additional support resources for students | | |
| | V. Title IX offices process for investigations and general resources | | |
| | VI. Update university policies and procedures | | |
| | VII. Increase staffing in support areas including counseling | | |
| | VIII. Increase public safety efforts and programs | | |

The importance of this structural pattern does not solely lie in the fact that the statements follow a similar formulaic pattern, but that the content presented is informed by the pattern. Having a pattern to follow gives the university president a formulaic response that they are able to deliver without adding much of their voice to the conversation. They are able to cover the areas of material that are expected to be covered by the audience. While the general audience might feel satisfied with this response, there is a chance that some individuals can feel that this response is cold or insincere by following the structural pattern.

*Responsibility*

　　The next theme that emerges quite clearly from analyzing the data is the theme of responsibility. The data frames sexual assault as an issue that some individual or group need to be responsible to help prevent. The two main responsible parties that the data depict are the university president and the entirety of the campus community. Responsibility does not necessarily refer just to the party who is to blame for the incidents occurring, but the party of responsibility to improve and strive to do better. In addition to considering general responsibility for sexual assault on campus, the presidents' statements pose questions of who is responsible to continuously improve and work on shifting the campus culture after the incident.

　　**President's Personal Responsibility.** In some statements, university presidents take personal responsibility, using "I" or "my." This is impactful because they are making a personal connection and taking responsibility for what happens on their campus. One president mentions that they will be hosting a town hall to discuss the issue of sexual assault on their campus and says, "I want to hear everything you have to say about the problem and any possible solutions." This aids in displaying their commitment to their university community.

　　When presidents take personal responsibility, they are acknowledging that they are also a part of the university community. This personal responsibility however is different from who is at fault. While presidents are doing their part to take responsibility, it is clear that they are not the ones at fault for this issue. By taking responsibility, it is clear that they are putting their own vested interest in the continuous improvement of

policies and procedures, education, and how sexual assault gets addressed on their campuses.

**Community Responsibility.** On the contrary to presidential responsibility, there is a huge prevalence of community responsibility in the data. As noted earlier, this responsibility refers to which group can put in the work for improvement. The data contains many words and concepts related to community responsibility. The use of "we," "our," and "together" display that the presidents view themselves as part of the community, and therefore take shared ownership. Another observation is that even in statements where presidents take responsibility, they acknowledge that they cannot do this on their own and that it needs to be the responsibility of everyone in the community to begin to make change. Note the following quotes from the data, exhibiting the need for community involvement in order to being to shift the culture on campuses. The following are just a few examples that were present within the data. Most of these quotes are placed at the end of the statement, so as to conclude the statement with a call-to-action for community support. The words that have been bolded are to exemplify the concept of community responsibility.

- "**We** must all strive to build a culture of respect in which **every member** of the Sun Devil family feels free from the treat of sexual violence" (Arizona State University)
- "**Together we** will end this horrible behavior through a strong, consistent and effective educational approach." (Binghamton University)

- "**We all bear the responsibility** for building and sustaining a culture in which **everyone** can learn, work and live in an environment free from the threat and effects of sexual harassment and sexual violence." (Carnegie Mellon University)

- "With **all of us working together**, I believe **we** can be successful in **our** pursuit of a safer campus." (University of New Mexico)

Some phrases and concepts that were common in the data were "it is all of our problem," "we must work together," and "one is too many." All of these demonstrate a community responsibility, displaying that we all have a stake in this issue and that even if just one person in the community is impacted, that is too much and we all need to put in the work to do better. In framing this as a community responsibility, the audience should all want to do their own individual part to make a difference in the community. The presidents never put the responsibility solely on those who have committed the crime of sexual assault, meaning those individuals are never addressed directly in helping to institute positive change. By not addressing the individuals who are responsible for the crimes, there seems to be a lack of accountability. The responsibility ends up falling on all the other active member of the community, those who want for it to be a safe and welcoming place. While this might be impactful, to call those out who committed the crime, there needs to be an active obligation by all those in the university community to do their part. The presidents demonstrate that a community effort means action by everyone, not just those who create the problem.

**Continuous Improvement.** Mentioned throughout this report is the concept of continuous improvement. In the data, this is a prevalent theme. All statements examined display a need for continuous improvement at their institutions. As analyzed in the

structural pattern of statements, continuous improvement includes items such as what steps will be taken to improve as well as who is responsible for this improvement. As is clear from earlier findings, it is up to the effort of all individual stakeholders to aid in the improvement. Key phrases in the data associated with continuous improvement are expressions such as "strive to improve," "actions always speak louder than words," and "there is much work that remains to be done." The following examples illustrate the concept of continuous improvement and how it can occur. The words that have been bolded are to display the concept of continuous improvement within the statements.

- "We will continue to conduct this survey every other year so that we may continue this conversation, **evaluate the effectiveness** of our programs, and **ensure improvement is occurring**." (New York University)

- "Having said that, unfortunately these incidents will happen on a college campus, but when they do, I want the confidence that we did **everything within our power to appropriately deal with the situation**, and that we provided the necessary support for all involved, hence our desire for an independent commission to take a thorough look at our approach." (University of Tennessee)

As is evident through the examples, most of these remarks include the concept of action. Particularly when addressing continuous improvement, the actions seem to focus on what will now be done as a result of the incident, signifying that while they may have taken steps in the past, their focus is now how to be better in the future. The action items typically involve surveys, improved policies and procedures, and external reviews.

*Positioning of the Statements*

The third and final theme present in the data was the positioning of the statements. As the review of literature concluded, it is apparent that positioning of statements, or favoring one point of view, could create a skewed audience understanding of the content presented. The theme of positioning of the statements encompasses concepts such as statements being reactionary and how framing is further understood and observed the data, learning of key implications of how the statement framing can cause implications.

**Reactionary Statements and Tone.** As part of the positioning of the statement and the speaker favoring one side, a common trend in the data was that most statements were reactionary. In understanding if a statement is proactive or reactive, it is essential to think about the reason or inciting incident that occurred in order for the president to even make a statement at all, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Whatever the reason or event that triggers the university to put out an official statement can inform much of what the content will be geared towards, therefore impacting the positioning of said statement. The tone or positioning of a statement will be greatly influenced by the event in which generated the need for a statement to be made. There is variation within the tone for most statements, ranging from apologetic to defensive. For instance, two statements within the data can demonstrate the variation of tone. The first statement reports that their institution has mishandled alleged cases of sexual assault. This statement utilizes a somber, apologetic tone, as is evident from this section of the statement.

"On behalf of the university, we offer our profound regret and sincere apologies to each person who endured Strauss' abuse. Our institution's fundamental failure

at the time to prevent this abuse was unacceptable – as were the inadequate efforts

to thoroughly investigate complaints raised by students and staff members." (The

Ohio State University)

The second statement announces there have been social media posts alleging

instances of sexual assault have happened to current and former students takes a more

disengaged tone, focusing on the immediate actions, solutions, and updates to processes

that need to be addressed, as this section from the statement displays.

"In light of the information recently shared on social media, I believe it's

important for us to reexamine our processes and outreach initiatives to ensure that

we are responding effectively to allegations of sexual violence." (University of

South Florida)

This is a slight nuance, as both of these statements are reactionary and contain

similar content and the same structural pattern. However, it exhibits the importance of the

inciting event as to how the statement is positioned and framed to the audience. In the

first statement, the president takes care to apologize for any harm that has been done.

Since the incident that prompted the statement is so egregious, this tone is needed to

provide an adequate response. In the second statement, the inciting incident may not be

considered as extreme, but that does not mean that it should be taken any less seriously. It

is clear that the tone used is more focused on moving forward as opposed to recognizing

the experiences of the survivors, validating it, and taking ownership for the wrongdoing.

**Strong Language to Display Disdain.** One key element to statements is the

denouncing of sexual assault. As part of how the pattern of the statements are structured,

statements typically begin and end with some type of sentiment denouncing sexual

assault, elaborating that it is not only not permitted, but that it is repulsive or repugnant behavior that will not be tolerated. By using such strong language to rebuke the behavior, this creates a frame of reference in which the audience of the message understands the scope of the behavior and primes them to agree that this is an issue that should be taken seriously and addressed through action.

As university presidents are the figurehead of their institutions, this active denouncing of sexual assault can display to the university community the values that president holds, therefore informing the norms of the campus community. As role models, this language has the potential to impact the culture of the institution. By setting a precedent of what is expected of those in the community, as well as what will not be tolerated by the community, presidents have a substantial ability to aid in impacting change through the language they use and statements they make, particularly when it comes to setting the standard of what is unacceptable.

In the data, presidents use their own verbiage to denounce sexual assault. As is prevalent among the findings of this report, there are common themes and elements within all of the data. For example, the most widely used term presidents use in their statements is "deeply" followed by another word; "deeply disturbing," "deeply troubling," and "deeply concerned" to name a few. The use of the word "deeply" further exemplifies the impact that sexual assault has on the institution and those in the campus community. Note the difference in tone of something being "disturbing" to "deeply disturbing." When it is "deeply disturbing," this strikes a chord that there is something so wrong that it has a much stronger and personal impact. While utilizing the word "deeply" to contextualize how egregious sexual assault is, this trope gets used throughout much of

the data. With its overuse across statements, the frequency of this term seems to lose much of its impact as it becomes a trite and standard platitude. For example, note the following sentences from the data and the use of "deeply," bolded for clarity, to signify a strong reproach for what has occurred at the institutions.

- "The results of the survey are **deeply troubling**. I take no comfort in the fact that our numbers are similar to recently reported data on sexual misconduct from other universities." (Brandeis University)
- "Words can't express how **deeply troubling** it is to face the prospect that LSU may have mishandled alleged cases of abuse or sexual assault." (Louisiana State University)
- "We are **deeply concerned** about the victims and are committed to being as transparent as possible to keep the Stockton community informed of these serious matters." (Stockton University)
- "We **deeply regret** any burdens that students have borne unnecessarily during any phase of the Title IX reporting and adjudication process." (Swarthmore)
- "I am **deeply troubled** by these serious allegations and have personally confirmed that these cases are under review by the university offices that are best positioned and trained to respond." (University of South Florida)
- "I am **deeply disturbed** by the revelations of misconduct elsewhere — and I know it also happens at MIT." (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

The similarities within the above passages further display how this overuse of the word can lead to its dilution. Instead of conveying a very strong feeling, the pattern of

"deeply" followed by another word becomes a common way to explain sexual assault that does not feel as significant as it might seem at first glance.

Another common term used when denouncing sexual assault is that it is "unacceptable" for this to occur on their campus. The university presidents are taking ownership of their space and staking claim of what behavior is and is not tolerated. Within the context of sexual assault being "unacceptable," presidents are acknowledging that there is need for improvement and usually continue the statement to address what improvements will be made. The following examples of "unacceptable," bolded for clarity, display the frequency and ways in which presidents utilize this terminology.

- "This is **unacceptable** and we are acting immediately to work to change the culture at our campus through education and training for students, faculty and staff." (Binghamton University)

- "Clearly, the picture drawn by these numbers is **unacceptable.**" (Brandeis University)

- "Even one incident of sexual misconduct is too many and is simply **unacceptable**." (Carnegie Mellon University)

By using scornful language and denouncing behavior in a terse and matter-of-fact manner, presidents are working to actively shift the culture to an inclusive and safe place for all students to actively engage and participate in their education. This bold language sets a standard of acceptable and unacceptable behavior and informs the values in which those associated with the institution should uphold.

**Framing.** As examined in the literature, framing has much to do with the perception of the audience, understanding how they will receive, process and understand

the statement. With these messages being publicly available, institutions want to ensure that they are putting out the information required in order to garner the most optimal results for their public perception. How institutions decide to tell their story is entirely up to those in power at the institutions. The manner in which issues of sexual assault are addressed in the statements from the data display that although there is variation in tone of the statements, most messages utilize the same themes, structural patterns and framing devices. Often, this leaves the audience with banal statements that lack sincere tone. Statements that are framed in a passive way continue to feel devoid of any impact or meaning, since they include overused sentiments and are not specific to their institution.

While most of the data followed the same structural patterns and content themes, there was one statement that was a clear outlier in both structure, content and framing. This particular statement is the only one that addresses the power dynamic present when discussing issues of sexual assault on university campuses. This excerpt from the statement stands in bold comparison to most of the other statements within the data.

> "On this question, our community is not an oasis of safety. When it comes to sexual harassment, assault and related misconduct, a community like ours presents a particular set of risks: a 24/7 environment that brings together people across a broad range of ages, incomes and backgrounds, many of whom have power over others — power to make being at MIT miserable, power enough to make or break a career." (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

In addition to addressing the power dynamic that is present and looming on their campus, this statement emphasizes the important role that men on campus have as it relates to the prevention of sexual assault and actively changing the culture.

> "Let me now state the obvious. Most harassers are men. As a result, the men in our community must play a particularly important role in leading and driving the necessary change in culture." (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

This statement employs a clear, bold, and honest tone that was striking, therefore making it stand out in the data analysis process. It connects directly to its campus community and uses creative language that gets the message across, making it different than the rest.

This chapter addresses the latent content in the data, which looks deeper into what the statements say and what that means for the audience perception. To generalize how the data is framed, the statements acknowledge that sexual assault on campuses is a "deeply concerning" or "unacceptable" issue for which action can, and should, be taken. They frame the issue as a community problem for which all participants in the campus community should take a shared responsibility in continually improving. This has been made evident through the frequency of words used, the structure of statements, the responsibility and the positioning of the statements found in the data.

# Chapter V

## Summary, Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

### Summary of Study

Through the method of content analysis, I have analyzed the ways in which statements made by university presidents about sexual assault can have meaningful impact on the campus community. After carefully examining the content within these statements, I was able to identify the manifest content present within these statements, as well as investigate the three main themes that emerged through the analysis of the latent content. The findings of this study have the potential to impact a change of tone by university presidents when addressing their campus community. This chapter will provide a discussion of the importance of the study's findings, conclusions of the study, and recommendations for practice and future research.

### Discussion

Research Question: What thematic patterns exist in university presidential statements addressing sexual assault on college campuses?

In answering the research question, I was able to discover three main thematic patterns within the data. The first theme was the structural pattern of the statements. By having a structure that most statements within the data follow very closely, the content generated in the statements ends up being very similar between each piece of data. The content that exists in the messages is helpful, denounces sexual assault, and provides action items for improvement. These elements are all important to include in a statement, however, when statements follow a formulaic pattern, they lack authenticity and deeper

meaning. This could leave the campus community feeling that the issue has not been addressed in a personal way to their specific institution.

The next theme that emerged from the data was responsibility. This content within the data indicates responsibility as a main component to these statements due to the fact that there needs to be someone or some group accountable for improvement. As mentioned in the findings, the responsibility is different than fault. The theme of responsibility is related to responsibility moving forward in impacting future change, not responsibility for the actions that have occurred in the past. While presidents denounce sexual assault and those who commit sexual violence, the perpetrators are never framed as being "at fault" for the issue. This has potential to skew the interpretation of the audience, as the audience might view this as removing the blame from the perpetrators. Having the president or university community as a whole be the responsible party for fixing the issue seems to take the weight of the crime off of the alleged perpetrators. Presidents need to take a firmer stance on not only denouncing their behavior, but holding them accountable for their actions in a public forum and informing the community of the actions that will take place to restore justice. This would truly demonstrate that their behavior is "unacceptable" and that their responsibility is not null and void in this situation.

The final theme that was observed in data analysis was the positioning of the statements. The theme of the statements' positioning was apparent when analyzing the data. Statements utilized particular language, tone, and framing devices to ensure the content delivered fit the narrative that the institution intended the audience to receive through the message. While most messages were reactionary, a majority of them did not

take on a defensive tone. Although statements were made due to an event that occurred, thus being a reactionary statement, the positioning of those statements demonstrate that the institutional leadership is focusing on improvement towards the future and moving on in a positive way, not defending the institution. While most of the statements were reactionary, some statements were proactive. These proactive statements explain the plans that the institution has to prevent sexual assault on their campuses, not waiting for an incident to occur in order to release a statement. If more statements were being made proactively by university presidents, this ownership of their institutions' messaging can set a tone for the campus culture of what expectations university leadership has of individuals on campus. Similar to the concept of using strong language to display disdain for behavior, having the president set a standard for the behavior that is expected holds individual members of the campus community to a higher standard. Making a connection to the formulaic nature of the statements, the strong language does not always come across as intense as intended. For example, the two most commonly used instances of strong language in the data were "deeply disturbing" and "unacceptable." Due to their frequent use, it is as if the words lose some of their impact as they get used repeatedly. Developing statements that are proactive and utilizing an even stronger tone with language that is not repetitive can potentially impact campus communities. The proactivity will demonstrate that presidents place high importance on prevention of sexual assault as they are addressing the issue before any incident even occurs. Using distinct language that is individualized to the president and the university community will make the messaging more genuine and therefore more impactful, as the personalization can have a strong effect on those in the university community.

All of the elements examined within the positioning of these statements demonstrate that the messages are being framed for the audience to draw clear conclusions, that sexual assault is not acceptable behavior. The messaging, tone, and framing of presidential statements serve as an example of what presidents expect of the members of their institution and campus community.

**Conclusion**

The themes that were discovered in this study have implications for campus climate and campus communities. All of the themes discovered in the findings display that presidential statements have the potential to influence thoughts and behaviors of the individuals who make up the campus community. However, there is more work to be done. Simply having a statement is better than not having said anything, but the standards must be raised to hold institutions more accountable in the prevention of sexual assault. The statements are so generic, that it can be difficult to differentiate between the collective data. Utilizing the word "community" so frequently and placing responsibility on their own campus communities, presidents should be providing a more comprehensive and specific statement that directly resonates with their individual campus communities. More care and effort put into these statements would create a larger and more profound impact on those within the campus community, and could potentially impact the rates of sexual assault on campus long-term through intentional work of shifting the culture on campus related to sexual assault.

**Recommendations for Practice**

From the findings of this study, it is recommended that university presidents take more time and effort in addressing the individuals on their campus regarding sexual

assault. While the statements analyzed in this study are sufficient and make a clear point, they seem to be replicated and reproduced, reducing the impact their words have. Reading some statements, it is not clear which institution they are from aside from the title on the page. In order for these statements to be more powerful and sincere, presidents should take an even more firm stance against the issue and tailor their statement to their individual university community.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study has produced results that can impact campus culture, there is an abundance of topics related to this study that further research could potentially examine. One area of future research could be to survey individuals on campus to understand their thoughts and feelings about these statements, asking questions to see if these statements are impactful to the members of the campus community. This could uncover the question posed if formulaic statements that lack sincerity are still useful or beneficial. To gain even deeper insights, researchers could ask how the words and themes presented in these statements make them feel and how it impacts them as a member of their campus community. If formulaic statements are presented next to statements such as the outlier from this study, individuals could explain how the difference in tone and messaging makes them feel about the leadership at their institution and how that leadership is able to impact culture shift at their institutions.

Another area of research could examine transparency and availability of university presidential statements. In collecting data for this study, it was clear that some institutions do not make this information publicly available. By looking into university communications on a more focused level, gathering statements related to topics different

than sexual assault, researchers can investigate how information is shared and how that can impact the members of their campus community. Understanding what information is made publicly available as opposed to what information is kept secure has the potential to depict the transparency of the institution. This can also be used to examine if institutions are aligned to their strategic plan, mission and vision.

Any approach to future research would be beneficial, as it is clear that this work needs to continue. In order to support the survivors of sexual assault, presidential statements need to be more clear, specific, and obvious that sexual assault is harmful, repugnant, and simply not tolerated. This future research would aid in continuing the conversation, helping to make college campuses more equitable, comfortable, and inclusive spaces where all individual feel safe to live, learn and grow.

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