

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE AMERICAN  
DEMOCRACY: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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The American democracy is experiencing strain from the erosion of democratic norms and its political, judicial, social, and economic institutions. In short, the American democracy shows signs of democratic deconsolidation. Community colleges are higher education institutions that help consolidate the U.S. democracy by representing democratic values such as equality and opportunity. The purpose of my study was to explore how selected community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. Qualitative narrative inquiry methods, including in-depth semistructured interviews and document analysis, were used to collect data for the study. Three primary themes emerged from the data that addressed the purpose of this study: 1) community college philosophy: blueprint for a vision, 2) consolidating local democracies, and 3) citizens as students, students as citizens. These three themes supported further interpretation of the data that was organized under these headings, 1) the community college democratic mission, 2) community colleges help deepen democracy, and 3) the role of community colleges in the American democracy: public goods, private goods. In summary, my research found that first, my participants believed that community colleges have a responsibility to the American democracy and this responsibility is reflected in their community college mission. Second, my participants framed the American democracy as a continual work in progress and that community colleges help deepen democracy. Third, for my participants, community colleges are not merely distinct in their institutional mission and philosophy, but in their role in supporting the American democracy.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1970s and into the late twentieth century, many countries continued a global trend to democratize their political and social institutions. This political era is known as the “third wave” of democracy (Huntington, 1991). Considering that most of the nations of the world had adopted some form of electoral democracy, Francis Fukuyama (1989) published an article entitled “The End of History?” in preparation of his 1992 book release of the same name. With the collapse of Communism in the same year as publication and the defeat of fascism firmly in the rear view of America, Fukuyama stated that “the triumph of the West...is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism...what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War...but the end of history as such” (p.1). Fukuyama’s position was that humanity had reached an evolutionary endpoint in its political ideology, culminating in the universalization of Western liberal democracy as a final form of government. Simply put, Western liberal democracy would govern the material world for the inevitable future and that there are broad historical trends towards liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1989, 1992). However, this claim ignores a salient truth concerning the history of democracies, that when social, cultural, political, and economic conditions change, so does democracy (Held, 2006).

Democracy is a contested subject and difficult to define (Schedler, 1998). After a century of global trends towards democratization across three major waves (Huntington, 1991), political scholars began to consider what it meant for a country to be labeled a democracy (Diamond, 1994; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Mounk, 2018; Przeworski, 1996; Schedler, 1998). To this point, the agreed upon minimal standard was that a country held free and fair public elections (Dahl, 1971).

However, Schmitter and Karl (1991) posed a question worth repeating: if the mere existence of elections constitutes a democracy, then what happens in between elections? From this problem grew a robust body of literature on democratic consolidation. Linz and Stepan (1996) posited five major areas of a modern consolidated democracy: civil society, political society, rule of law, state apparatus, and economic society. They also close their book with a warning, “Democratic institutions have to be not only created but crafted, nurtured, and developed” (p.457). The implication is that these areas are not democratic *prima facie*. For example, a country might hold public elections while simultaneously preventing freedom of association and communication. Furthermore, these institutions and norms must be renewed and cared for - they are not given entities. In short, democracy is not an “either/or” question but one by degree. Regardless of how one defines a democracy or its component parts, what cannot be ignored is the emergence of democratic deconsolidation. This “fourth wave” (McFaul, 2002) of global political change captures the global trend of democratic countries backsliding toward autocratic tendencies. And, the United States, long heralded as the premier model of democracy, has not been immune to this political development (Abramowitz, 2018; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Gessen, 2020; Haerpfer et al., 2020; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021; Mounk, 2018).

The 2012 report *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future* published by the National Task Force on Civic Engagement reported that the U.S. was afflicted with a “civic malaise” (p.6). Citizens were not engaging with public officials, states were reducing requirements in civic education, and high school seniors were regressing in knowledge of basic civics. Additionally, and even more concerning, fewer citizens were voting in national elections. The 2017-2020 *World Values Surveys* also present bleak findings for the U.S. democracy. Citizens are losing trust in component parts of democratic institutions such as the courts and civil

rights, are increasingly uninterested in politics, open to army rule, and do not acknowledge the importance of living in a democracy compared to previous generations. Additionally, leaders and forms of government with autocratic tendencies have become more popular, politicians are eschewing democratic norms, electoral institutions are under threat, and “fake news” is not only flourishing but weaponized by political parties (Mounk, 2018). In sum, a growing share of citizens either have negative views of democracy or do not believe it is especially important. Put another way, democracy is deconsolidating. These developments affirm the importance of community colleges to prepare citizens for a meaningful role in democracy. To be clear, community colleges are active in facilitating various forms of civic learning; however, these processes are not institutionalized as funding and support remain elusive for many colleges (Kisker, 2016; Kisker et al., 2019).

Democracy benefits from an educated citizenry (Held, 2006). Indeed, one could argue that it is a requirement for a healthy consolidated democracy. Community colleges are democratic institutions that help consolidate the U.S. democracy and their primary areas of support are civic life and institutional legitimacy. Locally situated, a core mission of community colleges is to focus on the needs of their communities (Cohen et al., 2014). State and local guidelines, state and federal funding mechanisms, transfer requirements, and local employers also influence the institutions’ mission (Levin & Kater, 2013). There is, however, no shared set of policies or procedures that regulate civic engagement programs and courses. Neither is there a normative vision outlining the ethical responsibilities of community colleges to prepare students for a meaningful role in the U.S. democracy (Harbour, 2015). However, even when faced with a multifaceted mission and variety of external pressures, over 130 presidents across 22 states have made the commitment to join a coalition dedicated to advancing democracy in America’s

community colleges and foster democratic skills in all students (The Democracy Commitment, n.d.). This national association of community colleges is known as the Democracy Commitment.

### Research Context

A more complete review of the research and literature is provided in Chapter 2 but three areas are especially relevant and important in establishing the purpose and direction of my study. First, democracies across the globe are influenced by their country's political, cultural, social, and economic histories (Diamond, 1994; Held, 2006; Przeworski, 1996; Schedler, 1998). No two are the same. Thus, the American democracy, its history, and the philosophical paradigms that helped shape our current government are examined. This will help clarify how democratic deconsolidation is affecting American political and social processes (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Mounk, 2018).

Second, it is essential to study the history of the community college, its mission, and role in the U.S. democracy. The community college mission is multifaceted by design: tuition-free, open access, and community-based offering transfer programs, vocational programs, and adult education courses (Cohen et al., 2014). The history of the community college shows that these institutions serve many other areas of American life, including a historical commitment to prepare students for a meaningful role in the U.S. democracy (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947). Additionally, community colleges help facilitate social mobility, enroll a greater share of underrepresented students than four-year institutions in support of their open-access mission, and engage in a wide variety of civic education initiatives through academic and extracurricular mediums (Hoffman, 2016; Kisker, 2016; Kisker et al., 2019; Ma & Pender, 2021; Turner, 2016). As such, community colleges are not just social institutions, but democratic institutions that help consolidate the U.S. democracy.

Last, the community college presidency and leadership frameworks are reviewed. Presidents of community colleges can facilitate democratic outcomes in many ways (Albert, 2007; Gumpert, 2003; Moriarty, 1992; Nelson, 2002; Vaughan, 1992, 1986, 2000; Vaughan & Weisman, 1998). Community college presidents encourage shared governance, mediate conflict, support multiculturalism, shape institutional values, commit to the open-access mission, sustain a culture committed to ethical values, and build coalitions with local communities. What differentiates their methods are considerations of local context and the diverse needs of their community stakeholders. However, some presidents have taken further, more immediate action by joining the Democracy Commitment.

The literature review in Chapter 2 addresses these areas in greater detail beginning with the history of the community college, the development of its mission, and role in the U.S. democracy. Next, the literature review further addresses the evolution of the community college presidency and the different ways they support the democratic mission. The final sections of the literature review examine the American Democracy in depth, including its philosophical roots, dominant paradigms, and democratic models that shape our current society. Current challenges that contribute to democratic deconsolidation are also discussed.

### Rationale for the Study

It is important to recognize the significant role of community colleges in the American higher education system. Community colleges are geographically present in rural, suburban, and urban areas; every state in the United States; and virtually every United States territory including Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and American Samoa. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2022), as of January 2022, there were 1043 community colleges operating in the United States and 936 of these were public, state-

funded institutions; another 35 colleges were Native American/Alaska Native tribal colleges; and the remaining 72 were private nonprofit or independent institutions (AACC, 2022). Community colleges are locally governed institutions and primarily funded through tuition, local, and state revenues (Cohen et al., 2014). A 1947 report by the Truman Commission outlined the federal recommendations for the community college: tuition-free, open access, community-based post-secondary institutions offering transfer, vocational, and adult education programs (Presidents Commission on Higher Education, 1947). Community colleges also have historical and current commitments to offering a comprehensive curriculum which now includes adult, occupational, general, vocational, and transfer education initiatives (Cohen et al., 2014). These commitments to the U.S. higher education system, local communities, and their constituents have evolved over time and helped shape the community college mission.

To meet the challenges posed in the background, as contextualized in the research context, there is a need to better understand how community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. Why do some community college presidents choose to embrace democratizing practices? What values, career, or educational experiences do community college presidents identify as pivotal to their commitment to civic education? As Smith and colleagues (2020) and Nevarez and Santamaria (2010) noted, it is important to learn these things so they can be encouraged and institutionalized in the development of current and future leaders at the community college. Community college scholar and advocate of civic education Carrie Kisker and her colleagues (2016) put it thusly: “Acting as an institution or an agent of democracy is not the same as educating for democracy...educating for democracy is an active notion; it implies intention, commitment to an ideal” (p.212). It is not clear that there is a definitive community

college democratic mission; however, community colleges have democratizing effects on citizens and serve as democratic institutions to consolidate the American democracy (Cohen et al., 2014; Dowd, 2003; Hoffman, 2016; Kisker, 2016; Kisker et al., 2019; Ma & Pender, 2021; President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947; Turner, 2016; Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2017). Because of the unique and contextual nature of locally based community colleges, how presidents work towards democratic goals vary. There is much to be understood about the how presidents understand this institutional role, what specific actions presidents take to democratize their institutions, and the broader strategies they employ. Because the research is limited in this area, I utilized an in-depth, qualitative narrative study to further explore these issues.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. My study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do community college presidents understand and explain democracy?
2. How do community college presidents understand and explain the role their institutions should play in the American democracy?
3. What do community college presidents' life stories tell us about their work as leaders and the work of their institutions to contribute to the American democracy?

### Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative research method, I designed a narrative study to answer my research questions. Narrative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of human experience through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2008). I chose this method to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of community college presidents and



how they make meaning of their efforts to prepare students for a role in the American democracy. Narrative inquiry was an appropriate method to meet the purpose of the study by valuing the individual stories of participants and creating the conditions for co-constructing meaning from their experiences. This was achieved through in depth, semistructured interviews and document analysis. This is described more completely in Chapter 3.

### Research Participants

To meet the purpose of this study, I established the following criteria for identifying potential research participants: 1) five or more years of experience as a community college president; and 2) a reputation for facilitating democratic outcomes at their institutions. In planning for this study, I recruited two gatekeepers to gain access and acceptance to this setting and identify potential research participants (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Gatekeepers were provided a list of identifying practices and other considerations to identify presidents with a reputation for facilitating democratic outcomes. My first gatekeeper is an education research and policy specialist, director of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, and consultant for college leaders on several issues including civic learning and democratic engagement. My second gatekeeper was a community college employee for 37 years and president of a comprehensive community college for 12 years. Additionally, both gatekeepers were familiar with the Democracy Commitment and Campus Compact.

### Researcher Perspective

I believe in and employ a constructivist perspective in this study. In constructivism, human beings construct meaning by engaging with the world and make sense of it through their historical and social perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Context and setting are paramount in this endeavor. To prioritize the voices of my participants and ensure the integrity of

this study, I acknowledged my positionality in this research and accounted for my identities, past experiences, ontological position, and political beliefs in a meaningful way through an ongoing process of critical reflexivity. As the researcher, it is also important to acknowledge my perspectives and how they shaped this study.

As I reflect on my perspective on becoming a higher education and community college scholar, I think back to the very beginning of my education journey. I was homeschooled until the third grade. I was taught reading, writing, and math primarily from my mother. My father, a religious scholar, and Church of Christ pastor for eight years, supplemented this work through introductory lessons in Greek and moral lessons grounded in the Christian bible. I have seven biological brothers and four sisters, and we all participated in these lessons; however, we followed no curriculum. I attended public school in California from third to tenth grade. I was an average student but performed well on state and federal tests. During this time, I very involved with our local church and attended three times a week, every week. This is significant for many reasons. First, it was made clear to me that a moral education was tantamount to, if not exceeding, the importance of a public education. Second, because of my deep involvement in the Church, I was exposed to a moral and ethical philosophy far beyond my comprehension. Put another way, I grappled with complexities that I did not understand but through this endeavor I developed a foundation of critical thinking skills that have carried me through my personal and academic life. Third, my experiences of being a member of a Church congregation taught me the value of community and this has shaped my beliefs in democracy. Finally, the ethical dimension of my religious experiences has ingrained within me a deep sense of justice. This has manifested throughout my life in many ways and contributed to my decision to join the military, my

expectations of government, and how citizens treat one another as members of a shared community.

Let me tell you a bit more about my upbringing. After my sophomore year of high school, I moved from the foothills of California to rural East Texas. In this new culture, masculinity was measured by stoicism, ruggedness, and an iron handshake. The church I attended housed a veteran in almost every pew. Although I never spent a college summer in my hometown, that is where I wound up for the holidays. Pious, wealthy men and women would furrow their brows when they discovered I was “studying” English, disappointed that I was not pre-law like their sons and grandchildren. On one occasion one of my uncles, mouth dripping with tobacco, exclaimed “I ain’t never read a book in my life.” However, my hometown was quaint, and the fields were wheat brown with long reeds that I could get lost in. The oil roads were straight out of a John Denver song, and if you took out most of the people and rundown buildings, it would have been a calming place to live. I would be deceiving myself if I denied that these conditions did not have a profound effect upon me. I always loved the close-knit feel of small communities and that influenced my decision when applying for college.

I chose to attend Abilene Christian university for my undergraduate studies, a small, private liberal arts college in West Texas. The most fulfilling job that I had in college was being a resident assistant (RA). Not only did it help me pay the bills and live rent free, but I loved being able to mentor younger students. This was the genesis of my desire to study higher education. I have glossed over the fact that I am one of twelve children. Because of this unique upbringing, I found solitude in books and developed a love of literature and reading. It was for these reasons that I decided to major in English. During my four undergraduate years, I honed the skills developed early in my life: critical thinking, reading, and writing. Furthermore, it was

in my English courses that I began to understand, as best I could, the rich landscape of theory and philosophy. Most importantly, my undergraduate English studies buttressed my capacity for empathy. Let me tell you a story.

When I was 25 years old, I attended a 17-day Army cold weather leadership course above the arctic circle in Alaska. I went in December and temperatures were as cold as -30 degrees. To stay warm during overnight field exercises, we dragged Ahkio sleds laden with cold weather gear, a stove, and an enormous tent. It was exhausting but the exertion helped keep me warm. A free cold weather tip, if you're ever cold, just throw on a bunch of layers and start running around. You will warm up soon enough. Anyways, at night, as was my habit during every field exercise, I read books on my phone. On our second night out after a grueling day of traversing up and around mountains packed down with snow, our instructor asked me why I read. Not what I was reading, but *why* I read. I had never been asked that before, so I took time to contemplate the question. I did not want to answer because I am very introverted and did not know my tent companions or instructor well, but he caught me in a moment of deep, personal reflection. An almost trance-like state I sometimes enter when I read. This was my reply, as best I can remember:

For me, books represent the entire range of human emotions and life experiences. Joy and sadness. Hate and love. Fear and courage. And these take place across space and time. I read to learn more about others, but mostly to learn more about myself.

I'm certain they thought I was crazy, or a pedant at a minimum. The truth I was trying to articulate was that reading, particularly reading widely, nurtures one's sense of empathy.

Consider the following. Stories provide us with possible human experiences that we would not normally experience. Stories allow us to broaden our horizons by creating possible worlds.

Stories transcend the particularities of their plots and characters. Stories appeal to us and involve

us in a personal way. Our lives are not communicated very well like a listed record on a medical chart. This is one reason narrative research has partial origins in the medical community, not from the doctors, but the nurses who listen and hear patients' stories. But I digress.

If you ask a senior drill sergeant the merits of basic training, or a field grade officer the merits of officer candidate school, the response will be that they are baffled at many of the core training practices but agree that they work. Why did I learn to use a bayonet when I was never issued one? College resembled this dilemma for me, albeit with more clarity. The liberal arts education I received helped me examine the complexities of life. The English curriculum left me well read, and with cultivated critical thinking skills. My empathy and worldview were both magnified, but nobody ever told me why that was important - beyond the obvious - or how it would be of use. The closest a professor ever came to answering these questions was the first day of a literary theory class when he stated, "You won't understand most of the class this semester, but one day you will".

Within weeks of completing my undergraduate studies, I found myself in Basic Training at Fort Benning, Georgia. I joined the military for many reasons, some I can articulate and some I cannot. There is a long history of military service in my family. Every household on my father's side has pictures of stoic, uniformed men hanging on their walls. I attended school in the years following the 9/11 attack, and saw many young men and women leave higher education and enter military service to the radical enthusiasm of all around me. I enlisted in the Army infantry just before my college graduation. But I am pragmatic at heart. My decision also cleared me of my undergraduate student loans and allowed me to return to college in an untold future.

During my enlistment in Alaska, I met my partner, and we have two girls, Harper, and Hadley. They are Alaska Native and have helped me discover the joys and pains of parenthood. I

chose to leave the military for my family. I had anticipated a 20-year career, but that was before I had children. When I was given orders for a second deployment, I signed a declination of continued service statement and returned to Texas to pursue a graduate degree. I was unsure of what to study but remembered my passion and the personal fulfillment of being an RA. I decided to earn a Master's in Higher Education, and in my first semester my enthusiasm for learning was reignited. After my first class on the History and Philosophy of Higher Education in the MEd program at the University of North Texas, I knew that when I was finished, I wanted to pursue the doctorate.

Throughout my doctoral studies, I have been engaged in research focused on the role of higher education in the U.S. democracy with an emphasis in the community college context. I co-authored a manuscript under review concerning the need to strengthen civic education at community colleges given the emerging challenges to the American democracy. I have presented research relevant to this study at many national conferences including the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), and the Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC). My progress in developing this research agenda has culminated in this dissertation study. However, because of my myriad of investments on the intersection of education, community colleges, and democracy, I have developed strong opinions and biases. I also spent many years as a leader in the U.S. Army which has shaped my leadership beliefs. As such, there are three core areas that shape my research perspective: my political views, my belief in a community college democratic mission, and my understanding of leadership.

I believe that an egalitarian model of democracy best fulfills the democratic promise of our country. Egalitarianism seeks to disperse political power equally among citizens. Inasmuch,

securing social equality undergirds the egalitarian goal of producing political equality. The intended result is that political power is equally distributed by socioeconomic status, social group, and gender. This creates the conditions for a more equal, equitable, and just society. Fundamental to an egalitarian model of democracy are equal protection of rights, distribution of resources, and access to power. The realization of each promotes political equality (Coppege & Gerring, 2011). Each citizen has a right to choose their own political path; therefore, I cannot let my personal views of the “best” democratic model undermine this study or influence my research participants. An important truth that I came to during my coursework occurred in the political science class Democracy and Democratization. Our life experiences and ontological positions influence what we each deem important both in and to a democracy and no one model can encapsulate them all. There is no singular “best” model. Furthermore, as conditions change within a democracy, certain models ebb and flow in their relevance (Held, 2006). Put another way, democracy does not suffer but benefits from a multitude of perspectives. What is important to one group of citizens differs from another. Thus, it is important to capture a diverse range of presidential opinions and experiences and is a criterion in my recruitment of a diverse group of research participants.

In a democracy, some elements of the community college mission will be more relevant to some citizens than others. I do not view the community college as a panacea to cure democratic deconsolidation; however, I hold strong beliefs formed through coursework and scholarship that a commitment to a democratic mission is becoming more relevant to both our democracy and society. Even if a president shares my political beliefs and understanding of a democratic mission, they are still in the impossible position of being “all things to all people” (Bailey & Averianova, 1998, p.1). In sum, just because a president does not espouse support for

this mission does not mean they do not believe and care deeply for it. Additionally, *how* presidents meet a democratic mission will depend on their localized contexts. I anticipate that presidents will use a variety of methods to meet a democratic mission, and this supports a narrative method to capture these experiences and stories. As presidents' methods will vary, so too will their leadership styles.

Finally, I spent six and a half years in the U.S. army infantry, four and a half as a non-commissioned officer. The leadership style associated with the infantry is authoritative. There is a clear chain of command with little room for personal input. You are expected to do what you are told when you are told. A benefit of this leadership style is strong top-down control enabling the team to complete their mission. Synonymous with an authoritarian style are the concepts of aggressiveness, control, and one-way communication. The soundest leadership advice I was given in the infantry was “when in charge, be in charge”. After many years inculcated in this leadership environment, I find myself reverting to this style in certain circumstances. In my opinion, this leadership model can work in the military context, but is not always compatible with many other types of organizations and teams, including the community college. Community college presidents have the capacity to create and sustain institutional change and their method to achieve these ends is determined by their localized contexts.

#### Definition of Terms

The following terms are important definitions and concepts that are frequently used in this study. They are provided because they may be unfamiliar or have multiple meanings in different contexts.

- *Institution* – a stable and predictable social structure created and maintained to serve the needs of society (e.g., colleges and universities, elections, the courts, etc.)



- *State* – a network of bureaucracies and policies that consolidate power for governance
- *Democracy* – a political system of institutions, norms, civil society, and laws where power is vested and exercised by citizens through free and fair elections
- *Liberalism* - a political and social philosophy that promotes civil liberties, individual rights, and free enterprise
- *Liberal democracy* – a political system that constitutes institutions, ideals, and values grounded in liberalism
- *Democratic deconsolidation* – when the collection of institutions and norms that undergird a democracy lose legitimacy and become weak or stagnant

### Summary

In this chapter, I introduced literature outlining arguments for the deconsolidation of the American democracy, explored the role of community colleges as democratic institutions, and discussed how some presidents of community colleges work towards democratic goals. Considering the indicators of U.S. democratic deconsolidation and the unique position of community colleges to serve as democratic institutions, I believe that research that advances our understanding of how community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy is especially pertinent.

In Chapter 2, I provided a thorough review of the literature relevant to this study. This review constituted three fundamental areas: 1) the American community college; 2) community college presidents; and 3) the American democracy. Additionally, I outlined the theoretical framework anchoring this study. In Chapter 3, I revisit the purpose of the study along with the

research questions. I explained the qualitative narrative approach and outlined the methods, including in-depth interviews and document analysis.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature relevant to my research. A central aim of this chapter was to demonstrate that the purpose of my proposed study, research questions, and methodological approach were informed by the scholarship on democracy, community colleges, and other relevant areas of the higher education literature. This chapter examined questions pertinent to understanding this study: What is democracy? What is the American democracy? How have community colleges supported democracy? How are presidents important actors in this process?

This literature review was organized in three main sections: (1) the American community college; (2) community college presidents; and (3) the American democracy. In the first section, I outlined the history and philosophy of the community college starting in the early twentieth century and ending in present day. Special attention was given to the community college mission. The Democracy Commitment was also discussed as an important organization for community colleges and presidents dedicated to advancing democracy in American community colleges and making democratic skills more available to students. In the second section, I reviewed the seminal scholars of community college presidents and leadership at the community college. It was important to study the senior leaders of community colleges to better understand how these institutions can provide effective leadership for their communities and larger society. A framework of competencies published by the American Association of Community Colleges was also discussed. In the third section, I reviewed the philosophical roots of the American democracy, discussed the conceptualization of a consolidated democracy, and introduced the theory of democratic deconsolidation. In the final main section of this chapter, I outlined the

theoretical framework buttressing this research. My theoretical framework was multipronged and contained three parts: the theory of democratic deconsolidation, the evolution of the community college presidency, and the revision of the community college mission. I discussed how these three concepts collectively provide a unique lens through which I approached my study and served as the foundation for my research questions.

### The American Community College

In this section I reviewed the literature on the history of the American community college. I included perspectives from higher education and community college historians and scholars, sociologists of education, and landmark federal policies. An emerging concept in the literature was the evolution of the community college mission. Discerning the social and political contexts that shaped and changed the mission of the community college was important to understanding the role these institutions have in contemporary American society. As such, this section explored the formation and evolution of the community college mission and the community colleges impact on American society.

#### The Early Years: Junior Colleges (1900-1940)

The junior college emerged at a time when higher education had increased demand but was unable to serve all students. In the United States, in the early 1900s, there was expanded enrollment in public secondary or high schools; however, increasing the number of high schools did not fully meet the needs of the general population. And, there was a need to help many high school graduates gain entry to higher education (Cohen et al., 2014). A junior college curriculum was regarded as an appropriate vehicle to assist in this work. To be certain, some of the earliest arguments for establishing junior colleges were not benevolent.

William Rainey Harper, the president of the University of Chicago, is often credited for creating some of the first junior colleges. Although a product of an elite system of higher education, Harper's vision of junior colleges diverged from the elitist opinion held by his predecessors. Previous proposals calling for the instruction of freshman and sophomores at a separate locality were influenced by the belief that these new institutions should serve as a bulwark of sorts to the "actual" university. Or put another way, they wanted a separate system to ensure students had the requisite education, intelligence, and maturity before receiving formal admission to the university. The system was intentionally stratified. Harper believed that "the last years of secondary school and the first years of college were periods of personal exploration and citizen development" (as cited in Witt et al., 1994, p.18). In short, the early mission of junior colleges was to meet the needs of the average citizen in a changing world, specifically in their local communities, by providing general education courses in preparation to a four-year institution.

Junior colleges continued to expand in the 1920s and 30s. The increasing popularity of adult education courses (Day, 1981) and relatively low tuition during the economic turmoil caused by the Great Depression helped drive enrollments (Snyder, 1993). As families adjusted to new economic hardships, many students were unable to continue in higher education. It is not surprising, however, that student enrollments increased at less expensive two-year institutions as they declined at four-year institutions (Snyder, 1993). Furthermore, commitment to adult education was an important step in institutionalizing community colleges within the hierarchy of the American education system. To this point, the early junior colleges' primary purpose was to improve pathways to higher education (Zook, 1922). Now, citizens not interested or able to attend a four-year institution could acquire skills and knowledge to accomplish other objectives

in life (Koos, 1925). These developments helped institutionalize community colleges into the fabric of American political and social institutions and civic life. Additionally, commitments to adult education, ease of access, and low costs became staples of their institutional profiles and inscribed in their mission.

#### Emerging Community Colleges (1940-1970)

By the end of the 1930s, the relationship between the federal government and higher education institutions had changed. The Great Depression showed that sub-national states had failed to meet the needs of society while the federal government had demonstrated the capacity to support higher education (Zook, 1934). At the close of World War II, Congress passed the Servicemen Readjustment Act of 1944. This legislation, colloquially known as the GI Bill, helped veterans transition back into society by providing direct financial support for higher education (Mettler, 2007). Although most veterans chose to enroll in four-year institutions, the mid-1940s saw the total enrollment of community colleges nearly double as veterans flooded through their doors (Snyder, 1993).

In 1947, President Truman directed a landmark federal commission to “explore whether the principles of the GI Bill might be extended beyond an intense, short-term program” (Thelin, 2011, p.268). Or put another way, would future higher education policy include programs that would increase college choice and affordability? Twenty-eight civic and education leaders were appointed to the commission and community college historian, George Zook, was elected chair. The Truman Commission identified the first two years of college as “a critical period for educating citizens”, hence the emphasis given to community colleges (Hutcheson, 2007, p.108). They determined that some junior college students (now regarded as community college students) might benefit more from terminal education programs than transfer programs

(President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947). Consequently, the Commission determined that community colleges should be tuition-free, open access, community-based post-secondary institutions offering transfer programs, terminal vocational programs, and adult education courses. This closely resembles much of the contemporary community college mission. A noticeable distinction is the emphasis the Truman Commission put on a democratizing mission of higher education. The authors of the report wrote:

Democracy is much more than a set of political processes. It formulates and implements a philosophy of human relations. It is a way of life—a way of thinking, feeling, and acting, in regard to the associations of men and of groups, one with another. . . . To educate our citizens only in the structure and processes of the American government, therefore, is to fall far short of what is needed for the fuller realization of the democratic ideal. It is the responsibility of higher education to devise programs and methods which will make clear the ethical values and the concept of human relations upon which our political system rests. (President's Commission on Higher Education 1947, Volume I, p. 11–12)

Two members, Dr. Martin McGuire and Fredrick Hochwalt, dissented from much of the report warning readers that increased federal control in higher education had potential shortcomings. Accepting more federal aid made community colleges more dependent on the federal government. Potential problems could arise if the federal government decided to promote other priorities or decide to use the nation's public education system to promote its political purposes. However, key promises of the report, as they concerned community colleges, would not be actualized until the 1960s. A significant development during this period was the vocationalization of the community college mission.

Federal and state governments increased opportunity and access for higher education for many reasons. However, preparing citizens for a role in democratic life was a secondary consideration to building up the nation's workforce. Sociologist Burton Clark (1960) identified a trend where community college students were redirected into vocational programs when they were unable to meet academic standards in traditional transfer curriculum. Clark termed this

phenomenon “the cooling-out function” in higher education (p.569). Because mostly working class and underrepresented students were funneled into vocational programs at community colleges, this legitimated an unequal distribution of educational opportunities and, ultimately, employment opportunities. Clark (1960) acknowledged this when he stated, “A major problem of democratic society is inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity” (p.569). Clark explained that going to college represents, for many, the primary means of moving up in society - social mobility. Sometimes it is a last resort for citizens compared to joining the military or getting a job that cannot financially support oneself or their family. This is an issue still with us today and expounded by Bernhardt and her colleagues (2001):

Economic mobility has deteriorated in this new economy, so that workers now face the prospect of more limited and more unequal wage growth from ages 16 to 36. Job instability has also risen in recent years and this rising instability appears to play an important role in explaining mobility trends. (p.174)

Clark (1960) ends his article positing, “The general results of cooling-out processes is that society can continue to encourage maximum effort without major disturbance from unfulfilled promises and expectations” (p.576). Community colleges serve society by facilitating social mobility and preparing citizens for a role in democracy; additionally, the state needs trained workers to manage a burgeoning economy. Whereas in the previous era a commitment to adult education and vocationalization helped institutionalize the place of community colleges within higher education, now these functions presented real ethical challenges. The cooling-out function is a notable issue because it accentuates a fundamental dilemma that community colleges still grapple with – a conflicted mission.

The vocational mission of the community college was also supported through the passing of the 1963 Vocational Education Act which provided federal funds to community colleges.



Prior to this, the vocational mission struggled, with only about a quarter of community colleges students enrolled in any occupational programs during the 1950s (Cohen et al., 2014). The reasoning behind the lack of enrollment is two-fold. The first was the terminal nature of the degree, students simply did not want to limit their options by ending their studies after two years. The second was the relatively small size of most community colleges. Although the GI Bill helped increase total enrollment, average enrollment hovered around one thousand students. Low enrollment usually meant low revenue streams. And, because vocational programs are expensive, often requiring specialized facilities and tools, additional funding sources were needed. The 1963 Vocational Education Act, along with future amendments, supplied federal funds which addressed this problem. The Higher Education Act of 1965 would solve the enrollment issue.

#### A New Vocationalism (1970-2000)

The passing of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which included the creation of the Pell Grant, enabled more Americans to attend a higher education institution (Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Mullin, 2014; Thelin, 2011). It is important to note that the Pell Grant was specifically designed to increase access for students from low-income families, and community colleges, with their traditional commitment to low tuition, benefited heavily from this new policy. In 1970, only five short years after the Pell Grant was established, total enrollment at community colleges doubled, then doubled again ten years later (Snyder, 1993). The increase in total enrollment helped to provided community colleges with revenue to support vocational programs. The proportion of occupational degrees conferred by community colleges during the 1970s exceeded 50% and then peaked at 71% in the early 1980s (Synder, 1993).

The rapid growth of the community college occupational mission sparked debate amongst leaders and scholars devoted to higher education. Some higher education and civic

leaders argued that the purpose of the community college should have broader social aims rather than simply producing semi-skilled laborers for the economy. More broadly, these voices contend that education is a public good that creates informed citizens able to participate in democratic processes (Labaree, 1997). The primary means of achieving this goal is to instill respect and familiarity of one's culture in each citizen through a liberal arts education (Labaree, 1997). This type of education chronicles how people come to understand and process the human experience, specifically within their own cultures. Therefore, when one comes to better understand and connect to their surrounding culture, they will be more invested in the political processes that maintain a democratic society. But if one's educational training was not grounded in the liberal arts, and instead focused on vocationalism, then education is no longer a public good, but a private one.

When vocational programs subordinate the long-term needs of students to the short-term interests of the state, then students can be potentially abandoned to the forces of the global economy (Harbour & Wolgemuth, 2013). Some community colleges leaders and legislators argued, and still do, that the vocational mission was "the best path for developing the national economy, resolving social problems, and improving the lives of individual learners" (Harbour & Wolgemuth, 2015, p.317). These advocates contend that the vocational mission benefits both the individual and the national economy. There are two strong arguments for their positions. The first is that creating workers provides individuals with the means of social mobility, and these private returns are given back to the public in the form of labor. This is best put by Cohen and colleagues (2014) where the authors state, "Individuals gain skills that make them more employable and at higher rates of pay; society gains skilled workers for the nation's businesses and technology" (p.318-319). The second argument is that community colleges emphasizing a

vocational focus were simply following their mission as dictated in the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education. In any event, as total enrollment grew in the 1960s and 70s, community colleges were asked to do more and then scrutinized as some believed they were enabling mission drift. The share of total vocational degrees conferred declined through the 1980s and 90s but remained firmly entrenched as a core part of the community college mission.

Thirty years after Burton Clark (1960) pondered the cooling-out function, fellow sociologists Brint and Karabel (1989) revisited the issue of diverting students from university study. Like Clark (1960), Brint and Karabel argued that community colleges were reproducing social inequalities but acknowledged the conflicting nature of this claim:

Like the American high school, the community college over the course of its history has attempted to perform a number of conflicting tasks: to extend opportunity and to serve as an agent of educational and social selection, to promote social equality and to increase economic efficiency, to provide students with a common cultural heritage and to sort them into a specialized curriculum, to respond to the demands of subordinate groups for equal education and to answer the pressures of employers and state planners for differentiated education, and to provide a general education for citizens in a democratic society and technical training for workers in an advanced industrial society. (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p.9-10)

What is telling about this statement and made clearer than by Clark (1960), is that the focus of our criticism should not be leveled at community colleges, but a capitalist economy that distributes resources in an inequitable manner. In this system, students from affluent communities receive a better funded education and have more opportunities than their peers in poorer communities. The difference is seen in enrollments in four- and two-year institutions that produce white- and blue-collar workers, respectively. Additionally, vocational training also hinders transfer in at least two ways, students are drawn away from their goal of transfer by “the siren call of vocational training” which leads to a job immediately after completing the training and are aggressively promoted and attractively packaged by institutions (Brint & Karabel, 1989,

p.255). Community colleges rest at a precarious fault line between two conflicting imperatives of their mission:

The democratic demand for a college that promotes equality and democratic citizenship and the limitations of a capitalist economy that has only so many good jobs to give out and constantly must be fed with workers who have only those skills and ambitions to fill the mass of middle-level and even lower-level jobs that it does make available. (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p.271)

In sum, community colleges afford many citizens the chance for a low-cost education but also validate a hierarchical system of higher education. As the vocational mission grew in popularity and was at odds with facilitating democratic goals, other aspects of the community college mission, such as transfer and general education, faced challenges (Jacob & Dougherty, 2006).

Beginning in the 1990s, community colleges have been tasked with what Jacob and Dougherty (2006) term a “new vocationalism” mission, garnering support from think tanks, non-profits, philanthropists, and the business sector. In a publication from the American Association of Community Colleges (2000), the committee unambiguously endorsed the workforce development function stating that “Community colleges should view the preparation and development of the nation’s workforce as a primary part of their mission and communicate to policymakers the uniqueness of this community college role” (p. 8). However, this mission faces challenges by decreased demand from corporate customized training, declining state support, and the emergence of new competitors, specifically from for-profit institutions (Jacob & Dougherty, 2006). Therefore, the strategy for new vocationalism was to prepare students for further education in the field, rather than for entry-level positions. One of the benefits of this approach is that these programs tend to enroll students from underrepresented backgrounds. Furthermore, more revenue is generated for community colleges, stronger relationships established with

employers and state governments, and older vocational programs can be revamped with new information on what skills the labor market demands. The negative repercussions are less funds for other programs, the perception that these new courses will be less rigorous, the transfer mission is undercut, and general education is subordinated to technical instruction (Cohen et al., 2014).

#### State Fiscal Support for Community Colleges (2000-present)

Over the past twenty years, three core developments have further shaped the American community college: 1) state divestment for community colleges, 2), the Completion Agenda, and 3), a recommitment to a democratic mission. Because fiscal support for community colleges has become a more visible part of states' budgets and funding has relied more heavily on enrollment, these realities have cemented a close relationship between the first two developments.

#### *State Divestment for Community Colleges*

It is difficult to understand state divestment for higher education and community colleges without an understanding of neoliberalism. As outlined in previous sections, core parts of the community college mission benefit and target local communities and society at large (Cohen et al., 2014). To this point in the community college history, much of its mission and purpose have been cast as a public rather than private good. However, some higher education scholars argue that community colleges have abandoned their commitment from community-based endeavors and instead become “a servant of unfettered, free-market capitalism” (Ayers, 2005, p.536; Ayers, 2015; Levin, 2017). The ideology that has driven this supposed change is neoliberalism. Neoliberal ideology argues that government intervention in public life should support business and industry to protect national economic interests (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal advocates also believe in decentralization, that government should take a reduced role in societal decision-

making process and that the market, propelled by citizens recast as consumers, is more efficient and effective than public and government institutions to address social problems such as education and healthcare (Harvey, 2005; Konings, 2018; Levin, 2017). Another important aspect of neoliberalism is efficiency. For public state and federally funded institutions such as higher education, this has manifested into cost-cutting measures implemented and controlled through strict managerialism, audits, and other accountability measures. One notable result is state divestment for higher education.

To make up for the decrease in funds that resulted from the drastic decrease in funding of social services under a neoliberal regime (Levin, et al., 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), colleges and universities have prioritized revenue generation and have become increasingly reliant on private sources of funding (Levin, 2017; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Thus, neoliberal advocates contend that education should be widely disseminated, with much of the cost born by students, so productive citizens can satisfy employers' workforce needs. Ayers (2005) argued that this is achieved to a great extent through community college education. Ayers (2005) claimed that since the early 1990s both political and community colleges leaders have sought to redirect the purpose of education from "one of cognitive and intellectual, spiritual, moral, and personal development to one of human capital development" (p.537). To be certain, gainful employment that provides for oneself and one's family is an integral part of enrolling in higher education. However, as Piketty (2014) explained, since the 1980s, the top 10% of earners have captured a growing share of total income, reaching almost half of all income by the 2000s. With almost half of all earned income being held by 10% of the population, this means that far fewer households possess an "average" level of wealth and income than was the case in the past (Piketty, 2014). Or put another way, the total wealth of the owning class has increased while the

income of the working class has decreased substantially. Ayers (2005) argued that a staggering wealth inequality is a consequence of neoliberalism and is reinforced through the vocational mission of the community college. At the heart of this neoliberal approach is the belief that employers should determine which skills and knowledge will be transferred through the curriculum and that market forces should determine what learning experiences have value. This is in stark contrast to the traditional mission of the community college which understood education to be a public good that should benefit democratic society. Thus, today, progress is defined in terms of corporate interests instead of broader societal interests. Ayers (2005) noted that neoliberal ideology has lost some of its momentum in recent years with the rise of more community-based and civic programs. This suggests that the community college mission is “both a semiotic endeavor and an ideological struggle between competing discourse regimes” (p.543). Simply put, the mission of the community college vacillates between conflicting societal ideologies and can be beholden to dominant public discourses. To this point, Baldwin’s (2017) exploration of the Completion Agenda becomes imperative to understanding the community college and the evolution of its mission in the twenty-first century.

### *The Completion Agenda*

Community colleges have long focused on providing their local communities with affordable, open access to higher education (Cohen et al. 2014; President’s Commission on Higher Education, 1947). Because community colleges focused primarily on access, completion rates were not a top priority. Now, however, as Baldwin (2017) observed, the open access mission has been replaced with the Completion Agenda. Today, the Completion Agenda dominates the community college reform movement, and the institutional logic driving it is “the success logic” (p. 37). As Baldwin explained, the success logic driving the Completion Agenda

derives its authority from private foundations and state governments, aspirational norms (increasing completions), and informal control systems in the form of incentives and penalties established by state and federal governments (Harbour & Smith, 2016).

Current economic realities reinforce the belief that a post-secondary degree will be required to obtain a job that allows for a reasonable quality of life. Furthermore, reports have surfaced that if the United States does increase the educational threshold of its citizens, the country “would fall behind economically and Americans’ standard of living would decline” (Baldwin, 2017, p.3). These realities and reports, reinforced by the Great Recession caused by the 2008 housing market collapse, raised concerns that reached the White House. Thus, state policy makers, national higher education administrators, and advocacy groups reenergized the shift in community college mission from affordable access to college completion rates. Community colleges are grappling with this new focus and face immense pressure to refocus large portions of their mission as typified by statements from the Brookings and American Enterprise Institutes endorsing the Completion Agenda, recommending that, “States should offer incentives for community colleges to focus more intensively on career education... [and place] ... job preparation more squarely at the center of their missions” (Opportunity America, 2018, p.80). Once more, workforce development, or vocationalism, returned as the primary mission of the community college. A multifaceted mission is inherent in the organizational and social design of community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, as outlined in this literature thread, this has caused conflict for the community college. Despite a myriad of external pressures, some community college presidents have taken steps to recommit to a democratic mission.

*A Recommitment to a Democratic Mission*



Community colleges help facilitate social mobility, enroll a greater share of underrepresented students than four-year institutions in support of their open-access mission, and engage in a wide variety of civic education initiatives through academic and extracurricular mediums (Hoffman, 2016; Kisker, 2016; Kisker et al., 2019; Ma & Pender, 2021; Turner, 2016). These are indicators of support for a community college democratic mission. Ronan (2012) explained an additional way that community colleges democratize students through a focus on the development of “civic skills and a sense of civic agency in students” (p.33). Community colleges educate students about democracy by engaging them in both an understanding of civic institutions and through practical experience of participating in the public sphere. Additionally, as Newell and Saxena (2014) notes, community college students show higher rates of civic learning and democratic engagement the longer they are on campus. Put another way, simply being present on campus and engaging with activities and utilizing resources, being part of the community, democratizes students.

To help scholars in the field understand more about the civic behaviors and programs, Kisker (2016) inventoried civic practices and programs at the community college. Colleges that showed a deep commitment towards this mission signaled institutional intentionality toward civic engagement incorporated “civic learning or engagement in their missions, strategic plans, infrastructure, initiatives and programs, (and) professional development” (Kisker, 2016, p.13). Kisker (2016) also found that civic engagement was incorporated into the academic functions of the college. Some institutions offer courses explicitly designed to improve civic learning and engagement and even offer certificates or degrees in civic engagement and service learning. Finally, many institutions offer extracurricular approaches related to political and democratic processes such as voter registration drives, student government, community service, workshops,

and various activities leading to greater civic and democratic engagement. However, almost no community college has developed a comprehensive approach to assess civic learning.

Kisker and colleagues (2019) further our understanding of the democratizing nature of the community college in a multiple site case study of colleges with membership in the Democracy Commitment. This study is noteworthy because of the focus on deliberative dialogue to solve problems *of* democracy rather than problems *in* democracy. This is an important distinction because with few exceptions, most collegiate civic efforts focus on problems *in* democracy (i.e., policy issues) rather than problems *of* democracy, “how citizens can make democracy work better” (p.276). This approach is novel and significant for many reasons. First, the method used is in and of itself democratic. Deliberation with peers to solve the problems of democracy helps students understand issues from a multitude of perspectives and helps students build capacity for a democratic skill set, civil deliberation with peers to better democracy, “enriching their capacity to act together to solve social problems” (p.283). Second, these progressive efforts to try new ways to instill good civic skills and behaviors in students is a direct result of the efforts of the colleges senior leaders, specifically the presidents. As described below, membership in the Democracy Commitment is just that, a commitment made by community college presidents. As Nelson (2002) identified, presidents stress two important themes when they direct their institutions and communities to civic life, the importance of education to the American democracy and the development of civic virtue. Presidents lead their colleges in discussions of shared values and principles “informed by the leadership which, in many ways, presidents alone can provide” (p.26).

### *The Democracy Commitment*

The Democracy Commitment is a national organization of 200 community colleges in 27 states that support the development and expansion of civic learning and democratic engagement in their institutions and communities (The Democracy Commitment, n.d.). Founded in 2011 by 50 community college presidents, The Democracy Commitment joined with Campus Compact in 2018, a similar organization that encompasses four-year higher education institutions. This organization focuses on four key areas: action civics, civic learning, community engagement, and electoral engagement. Membership in the Democracy Commitment is a visible example of community college presidents recommitting to a democratic mission. However, there is a dearth of literature on these institutions and what steps presidents have taken to further a democratic mission since committing to this organization. One study to date, (Kisker et al., 2019), has produced research on these institutions.

### Community College Presidents

As the most visible leaders of their institutions, it was important to consider how community college presidents provide effective leadership for their colleges and communities. By reviewing literature from the seminal scholars in this field, I gained insight into the role of the president, the evolution of the presidency, and their leadership methods. Furthermore, leadership frameworks were considered to help institutionalize a process of training future senior leaders. A recurring motif from the literature on community college leadership was the importance of the AACC leadership competencies. Thus, it was necessary to understand the role of the competencies, their genesis, and how scholars and leaders interact with them today to provide context for the subsequent literature review. The most recent edition of the competencies (AACC, 2018) and select commentators (Amey, 2022; Eddy, 2012; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Smith et al., 2020) are discussed.

## AACC Competencies

In 2004, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) convened a diverse group of community college stakeholders and leaders to construct a set of leadership competencies. The result was report *Competencies for Community College Leaders* (AACC, 2005) which is now in its third edition (AACC, 2018). Between the first and third editions, the focus has moved from an external to internal focus, specifically “on the character, traits, and abilities of leaders” (Smith et al., 2020). They now cover eleven focus areas and identify aspirational skills or knowledge areas appropriate for faculty, mid- and senior- leaders, and aspiring, new, and current CEOs (AACC, 2018). These areas range from organizational culture to personal traits and abilities to student success. The authors note that this document “is comprehensive and it should be viewed as being aspirational” (p.4). Additionally, it is made clear that no aspiring president has entered the job market having mastered each competency.

Community college leadership models should acknowledge the incredible diversity of community colleges which can range from 500 to tens of thousands of students (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). Given the comprehensive nature of the competencies and the complexity and diversity of community colleges, Eddy (2012) recommended the need for contextual competency in which leaders align their leadership approaches based on their college’s context. This observation is further developed by Eddy and Garza Mitchell (2017) who posited that community colleges should create leadership pipelines tailored to meet the contextual needs of their institution and stakeholders. In sum, some competencies are more relevant to certain institutions than others because local contexts matter. Amey (2022) rounds out these ideas in the following statement:

A set of competencies per se may suggest that you do this, and you get that, and may present a tidy menu of leadership skills to demonstrate and to assess. But leadership is

more a mosaic of practices and opportunities, so it is always a question of when, where, and how individuals develop their leadership capacities and the extent to which others will see these capacities as leadership. (p.446)

Regardless of the method of use or deciding which competencies are relevant to each institution, a final consideration of Smith and colleagues (2020) was to normalize the use of the AACC competencies. Given that the “AACC’s *Competencies for Community College Leaders* is arguably the most field specific competencies we have available for curriculum alignment” (p.124), it behooves community college institutions and leadership programs to coordinate to further institutionalize this leadership framework.

### Leadership at the Community College

This section discussed community college presidents and their leadership as understood by leading authors in this field. Although the subject of study by each author is either the same or closely related, community college leadership and the community college presidency, their theoretical frameworks, findings, and conclusions helped paint a more defining picture of this challenging position. It was important to study the senior leaders of community colleges to better understand how these institutions provided effective leadership for their communities and larger society. Synthesized themes from a review of George Vaughan, Marilyn Amey, and Pamela Eddy and their commentators reveal the following: working to meet democratic goals has deep philosophical roots within the institutions history; the importance of cultural competency; adaptive leadership is needed in a constantly changing institutional environment characterized by the diverse needs of stakeholders and a multifaceted mission; leadership can be understood as both a person and a process; and presidents make deliberate decisions on which missions to follow based on their institution’s local context.

## George Vaughan

George Vaughan is a prominent author on literature concerning community college presidents. Vaughan has authored over one hundred articles and a dozen books primarily related to community colleges. He served on the board of directors of AACC for three terms and worked with governing boards, faculty members, and administrators in several states on issues related to leadership, scholarship, and the history of the community college. He served as president of Piedmont Virginia Community College in Charlottesville, Virginia, for eleven years and as founding president of Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, for six years. Three areas of interest stand out in the scholarly work of George Vaughan: the importance of leadership, ethics, and institutional culture.

### *Leadership and Ethics*

Community college presidents are constantly interacting at the intersection of higher education and larger society. Corporate leaders often ask community colleges to serve the needs of the business sector, often at the expense of others. Special interest groups demand certain programs or courses. Politicians vie for increased outcomes for their constituents. State funding systems prioritize the number of full-time students enrolled (Breneman & Nelson, 1981) or tie funding to completion (Baldwin, 2017). All told, limited resources and a comprehensive mission has resulted in certain groups being served while others are inevitably ignored (Vaughan, 1992). These complex situations help to show that community college presidents are constantly faced with ethical dilemmas in an open-access community college. How community college presidents choose to resolve these dilemmas shapes how community colleges serve their local communities and larger society. Furthermore, what occurs on campus is ultimately subsumed into the larger society as students assume their roles as workers, leaders, and community members.

It is important to define ethics by Vaughan's interpretation: "Ethics...is that set of principles, beliefs, and rules or moral conduct that guides the actions of the members of the community college" (Vaughan, 1992, p.5). For Vaughan, it is the president's responsibility to establish a campus climate that promotes ethical values. Near the end of his publishing career, Vaughan (2000) provided a list of ten presidential "shall-nots" reminiscent of the biblical ten commandments. The first is telling, urging that presidents "shall not lie to or mislead" the institution's stakeholders (p.1). The justification for this edict is grounded in ethics: "As the most visible symbol of the college in the community, the president embodies the values of the college" (p.2). Put another way, the actions of the president are value-laden and serve to direct the values of the institution; therefore, presidents must have a strong sense of ethics to help guide their decisions.

Community standards of right and wrong, rules of ethical conduct, and other forms of legal aspects alone fail to capture the complexity of emerging ethical issues. Instead, ethical values must be subjected to critical analysis and revised when needed. Historically, perspectives on race, gender, and international conflict served as catalysts for change in higher education. For instance, the tumultuous period of the 1960s marked by student protesting racial segregation and the Vietnam War revealed the limitations of higher education leadership (Thelin, 2011). College presidents were no longer able to commit idle leadership. An expectation arose that senior leaders in the academy had an ethical responsibility to speak and act ethically while fulfilling their duties. In response to this accountability movement, leadership texts such as Michael Cohen and James March's *Leadership and Ambiguity*, James Fisher's *The Power of the Presidency*, and Louis Benezet and colleagues *Style and Substance: Leadership and the College Presidency* helped train and guide community college presidents (Vaughan, 1986). Central theses from these

texts posit that while participatory governance is desirable, strong presidential leadership is also required; power is socialized based on the needs of the community; presidents do indeed make a difference; and most presidents aspire to be educational leaders. Vaughan (1986) continued this important work by surveying 75 community college presidents identified as exceptional leaders by their peers. A typology of personal attributes, skills, and abilities required of the successful president were identified. A commitment toward ethical leadership is clear based on the results. Attributes identified as of extreme importance were integrity, judgement, courage, and concern for others. Responses on skills and abilities revealed similar results. Conflict resolution, communication, and selecting capable people were viewed as extremely important.

A fundamental lesson to be drawn from Vaughan's work is that over time, community college leadership has altered in many ways. Vaughan worked and wrote about community colleges and the presidency across decades. His works reveal that the aura of the founding community college presidents has eroded over time. Many former presidents, particularly a founding president, automatically enjoyed the respect of loyalty of institutional stakeholders. That is no longer the case. Consequently, presidents have had to adapt their leadership styles in response to changing social, economic, and political forces. Vaughan (1986) wrote that "while most personal attributes associated with leaders are as relevant today as in the past, new skills are required today that were not required before; even newer skills will be required in the future" (p.206). Whether adapting leadership skills or staying up to date, keeping up for the successful community college president means keeping abreast of changes in larger society and adapting those changes that benefits their institution and community.

Near the end of his publishing career, Vaughan continued to write about the community college presidency. In his book of case studies on community college leadership (2000), the final



chapter is dedicated to the problem of educating or developing current and future presidents. Much of this chapter laments that many community college presidents are nearing retirement and Vaughan feared that their knowledge and expertise would be lost. To pass on the skills and experience of these leaders, Vaughan (2000) urged the American Association of Community Colleges and the American Council on Education to organize retired community college presidents to serve as mentors and consultants to future and new leaders. While this specific proposal never came to fruition, the important takeaway is that Vaughan, an expert on community college presidents, identified a weakness and point of contention in the presidency. How and where would the future of community college president develop their leadership expertise? In 2004, the members of AACC met to identify leadership competencies that have helped institutionalize this process (AACC, 2005, 2018).

### *Institutional Culture*

The community college is unique within the field of higher education in respect to its philosophy. Vaughan (1986) notes that while community colleges are designed to support their local communities, differences in these institutions vary in degree rather than in kind. Put another way, community colleges share the same values, goals, and mission but allocate their efforts based on the needs of their local stakeholders. The most visible symbol of this belief is represented in the community college's commitment to open access. This is not analogous to four-year institutions. The point is that one can see a broad, shared philosophy across community colleges. Philosophy is an important aspect of shaping institutional culture and presidents play an important role in creating that culture (Vaughan, 1986, 1992; Vaughan & Weismann, 1998). Once a college commits itself to an ethical decision-making process, the institutional culture will inculcate these values by judging its processes based upon those values (Vaughan, 1992).

The community college presidency has changed as institutional and societal circumstances have changed. However, a constant is the ability and ethical responsibility of presidents, as individual actors, to shape institutional culture. Presidents have supported the democratic mission of the community college by encouraging shared governance; mediating conflict; understanding and appreciating multiculturalism; a commitment to open access; sustaining a culture committed to ethical values; and building coalitions with local communities (Vaughan, 1992, 2000; Vaughan & Weisman, 1998). The similarities between normative community college outcomes reinforced by a shared philosophy strengthens community colleges as a collection of institutions. However, it is their diligence in recognizing local contexts that democratizes their processes. As new generations of community college leaders emerged, Vaughan realized that although presidents as individuals have the capacity to create and sustain institutional change, leadership as a process becomes more important. Scholars that have critiqued and continued the work of George Vaughan include Marilyn Amey, Pam Eddy, and Regina Garza Mitchell.

#### Marilyn Amey

Marilyn Amey is the current editor of the Community College Review and professor of higher education who studies educational partnerships, particularly STEM networks and those of community colleges; leadership, including how leaders learn; post-secondary governance and administration; and faculty concerns, including interdisciplinary academic work. Amey earned a doctorate in higher education from Pennsylvania State University in 1989 and quickly became a distinguished scholar in the field of community college leadership. Furthermore, her publishing timeframe (1989-present), situates her work between George Vaughan and Pamela Eddy. While Amey read and respected George Vaughan's research on women and community college

leadership, she noted that the attention was on “the problems women have in becoming and being presidents rather than the opportunities for creative leadership that they offer” (Amey & Twombly, 1992, p.143). Such a statement typifies the change in paradigm that Amey helped usher in that was further institutionalized by Pamela Eddy. A review of Amey’s works reveals the following themes: the need to develop more culturally centered frameworks; understanding leadership as a process rather than a position; and the need for leaders who can adapt to meet ever-diversifying needs.

With approximately four-fifths of incumbent community college presidents expected to retire within the first decade of the twenty-first century (Weisman & Vaughan, 2002), Amey and VanDerLinden (2002) were appropriately concerned with preparing the next generation of presidential leaders. In 2002, they published a study that mapped the career paths of 117 presidents. Significant findings revealed that senior administrative positions historically seen as steppingstones to the presidency were predominately held by white men, women were starting to be hired at higher rates, and the path to the presidency was changing. These findings suggest that new presidents were coming in with experiences different from their those hired in the previous generation. How, then, would they learn and choose to lead? According to Amey (2004, 2006), they would do this by choosing to think critically about their roles.

A criticism of community college leadership harkened by George Vaughan was that the demographics of presidents were skewed white and male; therefore, the leadership literature reflected,

That the stories, ideas, philosophies, and ‘truths’ have been those of older white men. The perspectives of white women and leaders of color have been included in the literature only slowly and unevenly. Yet as we know is the case for students, seeing oneself represented in a text can be critical to embracing a role and identity. (Amey, 2006, p.56)

Thus, a challenge to the profession was to develop more culturally centered frameworks that went beyond the dominant models of leadership at the time (Amey, 2004, 2006; Amey & Twombly, 1992). Leaders are key to how organizations function, and as community college governance becomes increasingly complex, presidents need to think differently about their work compared to their predecessors (Amey, 2004). Changing demands and expectations include conflicting organizational goals, federal and state legislation, funding, judicial involvement, public scrutiny, local and state politics, community needs, cost containment, accountability, compliance mandates, changing student demographics, institutional competition, funding models, attitudes and values of key decision makers, institutional culture, and board members (Amey, 1992, 2004; Amey et al., 2008; Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Levin, 1998). Different skills became prioritized such as critical thinking skills, active listening, emotional intelligence, appreciation of other cultures, recognizing the value and limits of one's knowledge, and knowing how to learn (Amey, 2004).

Because Amey has continued to publish research on community college leadership for over 30 years, one can review a more comprehensive, recent publication to reflect on the progression of her research agenda. Amey (2022) continues her work on community college leadership juxtaposed against the AACC competencies. The guiding question for this book chapter asks, what kind of leadership is relevant and appropriate for community colleges of the future? Reiterating salient points from her work 20 and 30 years prior (Amey, 2004, 2006; Amey et al, 2008; Amey & Twombly, 1992; Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002), Amey (2022) reflects on the complex and continually changing nature of community colleges, notes the continued presidential retirements from the old-guard, and posits that leadership paradigms of old no longer serve these institutions. In short, she argues that “community college leadership needs to

continue to be adaptive, to evolve and diversify in order to invite into the leadership space those needed to help the colleges move forward into the future” (Amey, 2022, p.419). Yet, despite this theme being ubiquitous in the literature, community colleges remain gendered organizations not readily supportive of leaders of color or women, especially their leadership styles (Amey, 2022; Eddy, 2010; Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2002; Lester & Sallee, 2017). Thus, a recurring point of contention revolves around institutional culture.

Since Vaughan’s (1998) discussion on the role presidents play in establishing campus culture, this principle has not been challenged so much as debated in context. Amey (2022) wrote that “changing the climate and culture of the college is a core leadership responsibility today in order to cultivate diverse leadership across the college”, however, “leadership striving for more inclusive cultures often gets reduced to a set of accomplishments reported to constituents rather than a daily process of living out values and practicing diversity leadership” (p.434-435). Put another way, scholars agree on the importance of culture, but Amey (2022) argues that cultural change requires leaders who embody *cultural competence*: “a deep understanding of the organization’s culture, its values, traditions, customs, norms, and symbols” (p.433). For Amey, cultural competence is a principal function of community college leaders, an active process that seeks to instill these values across members of the institution writ large. Culturally competent leaders recognize that colleges have distinct cultures; therefore, a principal function of leadership requires connecting people, supporting diversity, and changing values and beliefs to engage change. By practicing effective cultural practices, culturally competent leaders socialize others to do the same (Amey, 2022).

Amey continued and refined Vaughan’s work on community college presidents. While Vaughan preferred a leadership model grounded in an ethically competent president, Amey

challenged us to understand leadership as a process supported by a culturally competent leader. And, like Vaughan, Amey recognized the importance of adaptive leadership. Amey also posed difficult questions for community college presidents. For instance, if community colleges need to constantly adapt their culture to meet ever the diversifying needs of stakeholders and local communities, then they should be hiring and preparing a more diverse pool of leaders. This is exemplified in the following statement by Zamani-Gallaher, “It is not uncommon that racially minoritized students routinely interact with faculty who do not demonstrate awareness of their cultural background, institutional racism, or feel it is imperative to do so” (p.1). And by Nevarez and Santamaria (2010) who stated, “The disproportionate representation of diverse leaders among the administrative ranks is not reflective of the population these institutions serve” (p.353). To accomplish this end, presidents, senior leaders, and faculty need to develop more culturally centered leadership frameworks. The work of Marilyn Amey has influenced and been continued by Pamela Eddy and Regina Garza Mitchell (Eddy, 2010, 2013, 2018; Garza Mitchell et al., 2019; Garza Mitchell & Garcia, 2020; Nevarez & Santamaria, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Wood, 2017; Zamani-Gallaher, 2020).

#### Pamela Eddy

Pamela Eddy is a leading, contemporary author on community college leadership. Eddy has published multiple books and articles on leadership at the community college, serves on multiple editorial boards for journals with a community college focus, and was President of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges from 2011-2012. Additionally, Eddy has served as a consultant for community colleges and on funded grants with a focus on strategies to support community colleges and leadership development. Eddy’s primary and ancillary research focus areas are community college leadership and the community college presidency, respectively.

Following high leadership turnover in the beginning of the twenty-first century (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Weisman & Vaughan, 2002), Eddy addressed problems identified by scholars (i.e., Marilyn Amey and George Vaughan): examine changes at the presidential level regarding minoritized leadership paradigms and demographics through a critical lens; help cultivate emerging leaders; and institutionalize a leadership framework.

Eddy (2013) envisioned five distinct eras in community college governance: the “Great Man” theory of leadership (1900-1930s); Independence (1940s-1950s); Maturation 1960s-1970s; Resource Retrenchments and Stabilization (1980s-1990s); and Leadership in Transition (2000s-present). Over time, the expanding mission, increased enrollment, state financial trends, and demands for accountability increased the complexity of community colleges (Eddy, 2013). Management and leadership practices adapted in kind becoming more multidimensional. With the publication of the AACC competencies (2005), the hope was that emerging community college leaders would use the competencies as a framework to measure their development and prepare for senior positions at their institutions (Smith et al., 2020). An emphasis on competencies denotes a set of skills and traits that are integral to sound leadership regardless of the particular needs of a community college. In her book on community college leadership, Eddy (2010) wrote that “leadership is not composed of a prescribed list of traits or skills”, rather, “leadership is multidimensional” (p.2).

Although presidents have become less “authoritarian managers” (p.129) and more collaborative, “power remains firmly rooted in top-level leaders” (p.131). Eddy (2010) posited that the central challenge of community college leaders is balancing the multifaceted mission and functions of their institutions. Inevitably, some institutional goals will be prioritized over others. Presidents must navigate demands from local and state stakeholders, uncertain funding streams,

changing student demographics, and increased demands for accountability. Clearly, this is an increasingly complex balancing act that presidents from other eras did not grapple with. Thus, contemporary community college presidents require “skills sets and life experiences that differ from those needed in the past” (p.5) to successfully navigate 21st-century challenges. Although leadership philosophies have evolved in response to changing organization structures and the addition of female and non-White leaders, “a reliance on trait-based and hierarchical models of leadership remains” (p.6). Eddy’s (2010) model of multidimensional leadership rests on five propositions:

- (1) There is no single or universal model for leadership at community colleges
- (2) Leaders are multidimensional and multifaceted, relying on different skills and perspectives to address the complexity of their leadership challenges
- (3) Leaders are guided by their underlying cognitive schemas
- (4) Some central beliefs guiding leaders are less open than others to change
- (5) Leadership development should be based on the tenets of adult learning theory, recognizing leaders as learners (p.15)

To be clear, Eddy (2010) did not consider her model of multidimensional leadership to undermine the AACC leadership competencies or any other lists created by leadership theorists. Her position was “there is no right way to lead” (p.33). That proposition broadens how we might conceptualize what good leadership is and helps to move beyond hegemonic norms and normative culture. Put simply, “it is important to begin thinking in more expansive ways about who gets to be a community college leader and how their approaches to leadership might differ from those of the White men who founded the colleges and began leading in a time when challenges were significantly different” (p.33). This is typified in chapter 5 of Eddy’s (2010)



book on community college leadership. Through interview and case study research on community college presidents, Eddy concluded that competencies, cultural competencies in particular, take on new meanings when filtered through a lens of race and gender.

Reiterating her position on the critical importance of cultural competency, Eddy (2010) concluded her leadership book by positing that senior leaders at community colleges must have the capacity to shape institutional culture and “have the ability to scan an environment and determine strategies that best fit the culture traditions, and practices of the institution and its constituents” (p.158). Building off Vaughan (1989) and preceding Amey (2022), Eddy recognized 1) the importance of culture in achieving institutional goals and 2) that senior leaders and the president are best positioned to shape institutional culture. Going further, Eddy (2017, 2018), Eddy and colleagues (2017), and Eddy and Garza Mitchell (2017) provided a more nuanced and critical lens to this position by revealing how culture can be used to challenge institutions to become more equitable and inclusive. At the crux of this change is dismantling the influence of racism on campus, supporting racial equity, recruiting more diverse senior leaders, sharing in the decision-making process, and intentionally mentoring the next generation of community college leaders. Furthermore, these actions deconstruct a community college leadership framework centered on masculine-normed approaches that resist participatory leadership efforts (Eddy & Khwaja, 2019). In short, there must be “an overarching institutional plan to support diversity in community college leadership and a fundamental change to building an equity culture versus merely thinking it will happen on its own” (Eddy, 2018, p.10). Here we see a distinct progression from Vaughan’s scholarship on community college leadership. Eddy recognizes the equity issues that Vaughan identified but posits that “simply thinking that a few

programs or policies will resolve campus problems is not enough” (Eddy, 2017, p.110). Instead, like Amey (2022), Eddy posits that intentional action is required (Eddy & Khwaja, 2019).

Community colleges have become increasingly complex and multidimensional organizations. The problems that community college leaders faced in previous leadership eras (Eddy, 2013) do not apply in a modern context (Eddy, 2010; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Nevarez & Santamaria, 2010). However, how we identify, and train community college presidents has not reflected these changing dynamics (Eddy, 2010, 2018; Eddy et al., 2017; Eddy & Mitchell, 2017; Nevarez & Santamaria, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Furthermore, the demographics of presidents themselves have changed but the unique experiences and beliefs of a new generation of leaders are neither harnessed nor included in normative leadership frameworks (Eddy, 2010, 2013, 2018). Eddy’s work on community college leadership, community college presidents, women in higher education leadership, and ethical decision-making has been refined and continued by Regina Garza Mitchell and her colleagues, and other community college scholars (Garza Mitchell, 2012; Hornak & Garza Mitchell, 2016; Garza Mitchell et al., 2019; Garza Mitchell & Garcia, 2020; Nevarez & Santamaria, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Zamani-Gallaher, 2020).

### Summary

A significant, recurring theme drawn from a review of the community college leadership scholars revolved around the necessity of culture. Vaughan recognized the importance of culture and the unique position the president has in shaping and guiding it (Vaughan, 1986, 1992; Vaughan & Weismann, 1998); Amey challenged leaders to think more broadly about what culture means and to learn cultural competence as a lived process rather than a list of traits or values (Amey, 2004, 2006, 2022); and, Eddy (2017, 2018), Eddy and colleagues (2017), and

Eddy and Garza Mitchell (2017) used a critical lens to reveal how culture can be used to challenge institutions to become more equitable and inclusive. Presidents must also consider the diverse representation at community colleges and develop a leadership framework that meets the needs of a diverse student body (Nevarez & Santamaria, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Wood, 2010; Zamani-Gallaher, 2020). Community college presidents also help facilitate democratic outcomes at their institutions. This is accomplished through both active and passive processes. Support for meeting democratic goals is accomplished in many ways; however, presidents make deliberate decisions on which mission to follow based on their institution's local context and the diverse needs of stakeholders.

### The American Democracy

This section examined the American democracy and the role of higher education in a democracy. It is important to be aware of the philosophical and historical roots of the American democracy to understand its relationship with higher education. However, before one can analyze the value of higher education to society, there needs to be an objective template by which to judge institutions. It is also important to examine what the American democratic model signals is good for both society and its citizens. Put another way, I believe it is essential to examine our ethical and moral heritage to determine if our institutions serve the common good (Adler, 1996). The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States outlines the objectives of our government, to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.

It is noteworthy that the first clause in the Preamble requires an established system of justice, the equitable distribution of economic, social, and political goods (Adler, 1996). Following the liberal school of thought, such a system is shaped around democratic ideals.

Political democracy is established through universal suffrage; economic democracy when citizens are guaranteed the indispensable minimum of economic goods needed for a good life; and social democracy when all forms of discrimination are removed from society. There are at least two important conclusions reached here. The first is that democracy is much more than a political system; it can be an ethical ideal (Dewey, 2008b) or the embodiment of a collection of values (Campbell, 1995; Sen, 1999). And, to paraphrase Plato (2007) in book VIII of *The Republic*, what is valued in society is likely to be cultivated there - the cultural dimension of democracy. Nonetheless, it is difficult for citizens to attain goods that are not valued in society. Thus, secondly, the holistic welfare of citizens is directly promoted, or denied, by government. Therefore, the formation and upkeep of democratic and cultural institutions is one way we can judge a society (Adler, 1996; Campbell, 1995).

History is not teleological. The narrative of history, and thus democracy, is far too complex to establish a linear view of progress culminating in a uniform, just society. Democracy is a historical process, it evolves (Held, 2006). Historical structures and processes cannot be controlled, but we have a modicum of control over our social institutions. Therefore, human affairs can be guided, to an extent, by following the normative goals perpetuated in our institutions (Dewey, 2008a). This lends credence to the conception of higher education as a generational task to prepare the values of the next generation. Simply put, society is shaping itself. And, when social and economic conditions change, the state should respond in kind. If it does not, citizens must be equipped with the capacity to critique proposed values and change stagnant institutions. Herein lies a central purpose of education, to help citizens learn *how* to think rather than *what* to think. If democracy is the source of empowerment for citizens, then

higher education is the catalyst. In the U.S., the foundations of many of our central institutions, including higher education, are grounded in liberalism (Englund, 2002; Ryan, 2015).

## Liberalism

In his book *The Making of Modern Liberalism*, Ryan (2015) opens with a question worth repeating here: “are we dealing with liberalism or with liberalisms” (p.21). The key issue inherent to this problem is that liberals’ political concerns have changed throughout the past few centuries. The aims of liberals in the eighteenth century differ from those in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. During this period, liberalism has forked many times producing classic and modern liberals, libertarians, and neoliberals. Unifying each of these schools of thought is the centrality of liberty.

## *On Liberty*

John Stuart Mill’s (1998) *On Liberty* is a seminal text on liberalism. It is important to note that *Liberty* is just one argument for a certain brand of liberalism, particularly modern liberalism. However, the value of this text’s political philosophy is the articulation of negative freedom. Its correlate, positive freedom, is discussed in the following section with a rejoinder to Mill by Isiah Berlin (2002).

The object of Mill’s essay is to assert what has been termed the harm principle: the only time power can be used to limit the freedoms of citizens is to prevent harm to others. Stated in a political context, government can only interfere with the lives of citizens, against their will, to prevent harm to others. This slight alteration of words is revealing. The state *always* has the raw power necessary to interfere in citizens’ lives, but the object of scrutiny here is if it can ever be legitimate. Mill’s harm principle argues that it can.

The harm principle protects the interests of the few to preserve the spirit of democracy: *all* citizens have inalienable rights. Truth is not majoritarian; thus, there must be mechanisms present in a liberal democracy to protect the interests of the few. Protection against a “tyrannical majority” is an argument against democracy originating in ancient Athens (Cartledge, 2016). However, the distinction between the sophists of Athens and J.S. Mill is how this democratic paradox could be resolved. The primary intellectual struggle of Athenian democracy was against democratic tyranny and oligarchy, two sides of the same coin, tyranny of the few over the many, and tyranny of the many over the few, respectively. This quandary was not resolved in antiquity. Mill’s position acknowledges that democracy by itself could lead to tyranny of the many, but this does not mean we should abandon this model of governance. Instead, Mill proposes that citizens have inherent negative freedoms, freedom *from* something, and this freedom applies until it interferes with the freedom of others and this interference causes harm. But, as Berlin (2002) posits, a free society must have the capacity to enable freedoms.

#### *Four Essays on Liberty*

The correlate of negative liberty is positive liberty: freedom *to*. Positive liberty enables one to exercise rights, supplementing Mill’s conception of negative freedom, or freedom *from* (Ryan, 2015). In his articulation of negative freedom, Mill uses education as an example, one that I will expand upon here to include positive liberty. Mill argues that citizens have a right to a basic level of education. However, the state could only legitimately intervene if a citizen was unable to receive an education without the help of the state. Put directly, “an education established and controlled by the State should only exist...to keep the others up to a certain standard of excellence” (Mill, 1998, p.103). This is an argument grounded in negative freedom, or freedom *from* ignorance.

Freedom of speech is not worth much if you are not enabled by education to communicate well in a public space. A free society should enable freedoms. Thus, the state must facilitate a basic level of education so that its citizens can have meaningful participation in matters of governance. This is the positive dimension of liberty – freedom *to*. The importance of this concept is that the state has a responsibility to enable citizens to pursue and achieve goals and gain autonomy (Berlin, 2002). Positive freedom facilitates choice.

### Liberal Democracy

A discussion of liberalism reveals its cohesiveness with democracy. Democracy has electoral institutions that translate popular views into policy. Liberalism provides democracy with a theory of the good life and argues that our social, political, and economic institutions should operate in a manner so that each citizen can achieve it. Thus, liberalism is fundamentally about civic and human rights (Ryan, 2015). A discussion of positive and negative liberty reveals that these two concepts may clash from time to time, but alone they cannot actualize true freedom. Instead, a more just system of government would acknowledge both concepts. This union is found in liberal democracy, a political system that both enables and protects human and civil rights, translates popular views into public policy, and is structured in the interests of society writ large.

### Models of Liberal Democracy

In choosing which normative vision of democracy is “best” in our modern world, one can only learn from, but not entirely implement, the holistic classical models. To be clear, ideals present in classic models such as political equality and equal participation are foundational to democratic thought; however, the world has changed, and democracy has changed in kind. There are numerous reasons why, but the most important is the historical development of the

Enlightenment and the creation of modern bureaucracy. The promise of the Enlightenment was that society would continue to progress by making core social, political, and economic institutions more efficient. This would be achieved by using a rational, scientific approach to improve these institutions. The birth of rationality coupled with technological advancements changed fundamental aspects of how we live, work, and communicate and imposed challenges on governments previously unknown. Therefore, normative visions of democracy have been theorized in response to these developments. However, this is only a partial explanation. Not only do different models assume distinct ontological assumptions, but theorists and citizens each have their own unique conception of reality. Our belief in the power, or existence, of agency, structure, culture, and institutions shapes our perception of how the economy should operate, state is run, policy is formulated, and our concept of justice. Thus, different normative models are theorized and objectively realized.

In a democracy, the rule of the people is legitimized by the consent of the people. In some liberal democracies, the purpose of government is to protect the rights of the individual and pursue policies that correspond with the interests of citizens. This description is termed a protective model of liberal democracy (Held, 2006). However, industrialization, scientific and technological progress, economic growth, massification in education, and a highly developed infrastructure, amongst many other factors, has resulted in the expansion of both government and the state. Such growth across a plethora of institutions requires minute specialization to govern efficiently resulting in the need for technocrats to manage bureaucratic matters. A byproduct of this new normal is that administrative power has coopted the power of ordinary citizens who have become increasingly ill-informed about the inner workings of both society and government and are unable to check or monitor this growing power (Mill, 1998). To counter the



undemocratic outcomes of a glacial bureaucracy, a developmental model of democracy is theorized. Held (2006) envisions a developmental democratic model as committed to the expansion of individual capacities. Citizens need to be informed and able to critically access the outcomes of elected officials (e.g., policy). Education is the primary mechanism to achieve these ends.

### *Democratic Citizens*

Citizenship takes on a different meaning in certain historical contexts. Previous sections have reiterated the necessity for democratic institutions to adapt to changing conditions. Citizenship, or civil society, is no different. The most significant change to democratic civil society is the movement from direct to representative governance.

A discussion on democracy would be incomplete without exploring its genesis in Greece and Athens, our only historical example of consolidated democracies failing. In Antiquity, the formation of democratic city states was a response to unequal class conditions and tyrannical oligarchies. Aristotle harkened democracy as rule of the poor and oligarchy as rule of the rich (Cartledge, 2016). It is no small wonder that political institutions were created to invest power in the poor majority. However, clarification is needed on who this “poor majority” was. Despite its intellectual zenith in democratic literature, Athenian democracy was supported by a slave economy. Many of the incredible feats of democratic Athens (building large navies to wage wars, compensating citizens for political participation, financing professional politicians, etc.) was financially supported by silver mines. The workers of the mines were not workers at all, but slaves. Cartledge (2016) writes the following:

Slaves – and at Athens that means depersonalized, dehumanized, socially dead, and usually non-Greek chattels – were in many key areas of society and economy found indispensable, and therefore constituted a basis of the Athenian democracy. (p.138)

Athenian citizenship had a particular nuance. Being an Athenian citizen meant not being a slave. As such, women were indeed citizens, but with paltry legal and political rights. Full citizenship with political rights and opportunities was reserved for males of means. Thus, Athenian democracy was a patriarchy.

An important distinction of Greek democracy was that it was not a single political entity, but hundreds of local democracies that sometimes federalized into larger political bodies (Cartledge, 2016). Such a localized model of democracy in Antiquity required extraordinary participation from its citizens, hence being termed direct democracy. However, it was not just the historical conditions that lent credence to a direct model.

Greek democracies institutionalized many of our modern democratic norms. A classic example is forming electoral institutions; however, voting is simply a mechanism of control. What citizens voted on was more important. Any elected office (civil or military) was subject to impeachment and any citizen could be banished from the polis in a court of law. Furthermore, citizens voted on the usage of funds, namely from the silver mines. These examples represent institutionalizing a system of checks and balances, term limits and rotation, political and military pay, democratizing legal intuitions, and empowering citizens to shape policy. Never had the “poor majority” wielded such political power. Unsurprisingly, this newfound power was critiqued by would-be-oligarchs and other elites as just another form of tyranny. However, instead of a single despotic tyrant, it was tyranny of the majority.

Many learned elites made arguments in public spaces, the courts, and political assemblies against majority rule. One of the most famous arguments is the metaphor of the ship’s captain found in *The Republic* (Plato, 2007). In brief, a ship’s captain is mutinied by a crew quarreling amongst one another over how to best navigate the ship. The catch is that none of the crew

understand the finer points of navigation, unlike the recently disposed ship's captain. The lesson, in short, is that democracy marginalizes the wise (Held, 2006). Plato's position is that society needs to be led by those who are educated in ethics, leadership, and an understanding of the good life. Moses Finley, an American-British historian persecuted in the McCarthyite witch-hunts, offers a modern rejoinder: "When I charter a vessel or buy passage on one, I leave it to the captain, the expert, to navigate it – but *I* decide where I want to go, not the captain [original emphasis]" (as cited in, Cartledge, 2016, p.308).

Direct democracy is not feasible for a country with a population of 300 million citizens, hence our model of representative governance. However, the values undergirding the spirit of democratic Athens are applicable today. Although our society is managed by technocrats and political offices are dominated by lifelong politicians, US democracy is structured so that citizens have a say in where we should go as a country. And, it is the responsibility of "the experts" to get us there. An overlooked aspect of Athenian democracy is the importance of culture in shaping and institutionalizing democratic norms and values. Liedman (2002) points out the following: "Politics is part and parcel of culture and hence in close contact with everyday life" (p.354). Society embodies the values of its government, for better or worse. So, what is needed is a democratized culture. Higher education is a primary means to meet this end.

#### The Role of Higher Education in the American Democracy

Like other significant institutions in American society, higher education simultaneously promotes equality but adapts to inequality. Sociologist of education, David Labaree, explored the three goals of education in his 1997 article "Public Goods, Private Goods". The three goals, social efficiency, social mobility, and democratic equality, represent the educational perspective

of the taxpayer, consumer, and citizen, respectively. These goals differ across several dimensions, portraying higher education as a public or private good.

The American education system fulfills the goal of preparing citizens through the pursuit of citizenship training, equal treatment, and equal access. According to Labaree, citizenship training creates citizens who embody a “fully developed sense of civic virtue” (p.44). The primary means of achieving this harmonious existence would be to instill respect and familiarity of one’s culture in each citizen through a liberal education. This type of education chronicles how people come to understand and process the human experience, specifically within their own cultures. Therefore, when one comes to better understand and connect to their surrounding culture, they will be more invested in the political processes that maintain a democratic society. The second aspect of democratic equality, equal treatment, was a response to the incredibly diverse populations that came to inhabit America. How do citizens from different backgrounds and cultures come to share a common culture? The answer lies in the universal enrollment of all people, or compulsory K-12 education. This allows every student to potentially share the same educational experience. The last aspect of democratic equality is equal access. For a system to be truly equitable, each citizen must have an equal *opportunity* to access all levels of the system, despite differing levels of privilege, wealth, or ability. To achieve this egalitarian ideal, a dedicated amount of public funds and a willing tax base is required to provide equal and equitable resources and instruction to all students.

The second stated goal of education is social efficiency, operationalized in the forms of vocationalism and educational stratification. When students graduate, they are expected to participate in society by joining the workforce; thus, education needs to train a certain number of students in vocations that maintain the economic and societal infrastructure of the nation. This

goal argues that although it might be necessary for education to create informed and responsible citizens, it also needs to train workers to fix our cars, manage our businesses, and perform medical surgeries. Taking a closer look at these examples, differing levels of education is required to execute each task. The natural progression of such a need is to have a stratified education system. This allows those with more education in specialized fields to complete specialized tasks, and vice versa. The consequence of a system that embodies this ideology is that income inequality becomes inevitable, and like the education system itself, increasingly stratified (Piketty, 2014); inasmuch, this type of system influences individuals to pursue education for private gain.

The last of Labaree's goals is social mobility. Whereas the previous two goals determine education to be a public good, social mobility sees education as a private one. A liberal arts education, grounded in the humanities, has inherent intrinsic rewards manifested in a deeper understanding of one's culture, and by extension, the self. However, social mobility can warp education into a credential with exchange value that can be traded to provide the holder "with a comfortable standard of living, financial security, social power, and cultural prestige" (p.55). To be certain, social mobility is an essential aspect of education in a capitalist, or other socially competitive, society. Social mobility is also a democratizing function. However, when the overarching reason or purpose to earn an education is strictly for personal gain, the goals of education become unbalanced. As Faulkner (2008) wrote: "Sometime in the past two or three decades, the emphasis has shifted from the common good to individual benefit. There is nothing inherently wrong with self-interest, of course, but it cannot be the foundation of what higher education is about" (p.97).

## Threats to American Democracy

Linz and Stepan (1996) posit five major areas of a consolidated democracy: civil society, political society, rule of law, state apparatus, and economic society. Their primary organizing principles are freedom of association and communication, free and inclusive electoral contestation, constitutionalism, rational-legal bureaucratic norms, and an institutionalized market. This is the foundation of conceptualizing democracy as a collection of social, economic, judicial, and political institutions in conjunction with civil society and democratic norms (Diamond, 1994; Held, 2006; Przeworski, 1996; Schedler, 1998). In this conception, democracy is not an either-or question, but one by degree. When each of these areas of democracy are strong, democracy can be considered consolidated. As such, when one or more of these areas faces strain, democracy can be said to experience deconsolidation.

There are clear indicators that the American democracy is under strain and deconsolidating. Respondents to a variety of Gallup polls and World Values Surveys reveal that U.S. citizens are increasingly uninterested in politics, open to army rule, and do not see the importance of living in a democracy (Haerpfer et al., 2020). Additionally, autocratic leaders and forms of government have become more popular, politicians are eschewing democratic norms (e.g., abusing the filibuster), electoral institutions are under threat, and “fake news” is not only flourishing but weaponized by political parties. In sum, a growing share of citizens either have negative views of democracy or do not believe it is especially important. Furthermore, prominent independent organizations dedicated to measuring the strength of democracy has found that the American democracy is backsliding (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021). In general, there is a growing disenchantment with the American democracy (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Mounk, 2018).

## Conceptual Framework

After a review of the extant literature, I theorized a multipronged conceptual framework that anchored my study. There were three components of the conceptual framework: the revision of the community college mission, the evolution of the community college presidency, and the theory of democratic deconsolidation. Each of these concepts were explored in this chapter. Taken together, these three concepts provided the lens through which I approached my study and served as the foundation for my research questions:

1. How do community college presidents understand and explain democracy?
2. How do community college presidents understand and explain the role their institutions should play in the American democracy?
3. What do community college presidents' life stories tell us about their work as leaders and the work of their institutions to contribute to the American democracy?

I believed that a multipronged conceptual framework was necessary for three reasons. First, the American community college serves many facets of American society. Inasmuch, the community college mission is multifaceted in nature. However, its mission is influenced by external factors, local communities, and various stakeholders. And yet, an emergent concept from the literature is the reemergence of community college presidents taking tangible actions to support the American democracy. I hoped to learn how presidents understand the American democracy (RQ1) and the role their institutions have in supporting the American democracy (RQ2).

Second, as the senior leaders of their institutions, community college presidents have considerable influence in establishing institutional culture. They also are powerful actors who can guide their institutions to meet a certain mission. By listening to their stories, I hoped to

learn how and why some presidents choose to support the American democracy (RQ3) and how they understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy (RQ2).

Finally, the theory of democratic deconsolidation serves many purposes. It provided a clear framework to conceptualize democracy and the role of community colleges in a democracy as both social and democratic institutions. Democratic deconsolidation also contextualizes the problems that the American democracy is experiencing. By providing a framework for democracy, this theory helped me understand how presidents understand democracy (RQ1), the role of their institutions in a democracy (RQ2), and how community colleges help consolidate the American democracy (RQ3).



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

In Chapter 1, I introduced the purpose of this study: to examine how selected community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. In Chapter 2, I outlined the important literature related to the topic of my inquiry and established my conceptual framework. In this chapter, I acknowledged my positionality as a researcher and outlined my methodological approach to meet the purpose of the study and answer the research questions.

#### Positionality

I hold several identities that I accounted for during this research process. The most salient of these were the following: 1) I am white, 2) I am a man, 3) I am a veteran. Of course, these identities also had implications for my views about the purpose of higher education and the nature of democracy. To begin, it is important to acknowledge my whiteness and the privileges bestowed upon me by a country built upon the enslavement of persons of color. Whiteness is perpetuated in the U.S. by an ideology and socio-political-economic system grounded in white supremacy. Accordingly, I am afforded privileges by the state and the society denied to others based on the color of my skin. Furthermore, I experience additional privilege by being a man while other gender identities have been and continue to be marginalized. I reconciled that these privileges do not simply stem from normative culture but the very state itself. The ideals of liberal western democracy have not always translated into reality; indeed, it is apparent that the democratic system itself is skewed in the favor of white men. Last, I am a veteran. Veterans in the U.S. are a culturally and politically protected group and a rare example of a minority population privileged by the state through a myriad of strong social policies. I acknowledge that

my experiences and privileges as a white, male veteran differ from other veterans who do not share these identities. Foremost in my mind is the reality that my understanding and appreciation of the American democracy has been influenced by these privileges. I acknowledge that my experiences and subsequent beliefs about the American democracy are not the experiences and beliefs of others. I was committed to establishing rapport with my research participants and was open-minded to their understandings of the U.S. democracy. I continued to account for my identities, past experiences, ontological position, and political beliefs in a meaningful way through ongoing critical reflexivity. This was a continuous process which included personal, written reflections in a journal and seeking out conversations with like-minded colleagues who help me recognize my privileges.

### Research Design

In this section, I revisit my research questions and purpose of the study. I outline my decision to use narrative inquiry and describe my use of qualitative methods including semistructured interviews and document analysis. Finally, I discuss participant criteria, analysis, trustworthiness, research ethics, and limitations.

#### Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. My study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do community college presidents understand and explain democracy?
2. How do community college presidents understand and explain the role their institutions should play in the American democracy?

3. What do community college presidents' life stories tell us about their work as leaders and the work of their institutions to contribute to the American democracy?

#### Narrative Inquiry Framework

To meet the purpose of my study and answer my research questions, I designed a qualitative study using narrative inquiry methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 2008). A qualitative research approach was most appropriate for this study because qualitative research is a naturalistic process that seeks an in-depth, holistic understanding of human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017). I decided on the method of narrative inquiry to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of community college presidents and how they make meaning of their efforts to fulfill the community college democratic mission. I was specifically interested in how these presidents made meaning of their lives by providing stories and narratives of their lives and work. Phenomenology was considered due to the research interest of the lived experiences of community college presidents; however, phenomenology is typically focused on how participants experience and make sense of a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018) and did not fit the purpose of this study. Case study was also considered to explore the social and historical contexts in which this case is situated (Stake, 1995). However, understanding this context did not fully meet the purpose of my study. Narrative inquiry was the most appropriate method to meet the purpose of the study by valuing the individual stories of participants and how they made meaning of their experiences.

Narratology is a relatively recent academic development (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2008) with ancient roots (Aristotle, 1996; Barthes & Sontag, 1982; Bruner, 2002; Hubbard, 1972; Kim, 2016). Qualitative researchers are interested in achieving an

understanding, not the generation of prediction or control. Narrative inquiry is about understanding and making meaning of experience by “experiencing the experience” of individuals “living storied lives on storied landscapes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.24). In a narrative study, we witness the presentation of people in specific situations and become aware of the stories they use to explain their lives and experiences in each context. We participate in dialogue with participants as they share their stories. Put another way, we acquire knowledge by engaging in narratives (Hubbard, 1972). Qualitative researchers refer to this as finding the general in the particular (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Mattingly (1998) expounds upon this concept:

(Narratives) do not merely describe what someone does in the world but what the world does to that someone. They allow us to infer something about what it feels like to be in that story world...Narratives do not merely refer to past experience but create experiences for their audiences. (as cited in Reismann, 2008, p.22)

Narrative begins in experience and stories are one of “if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p.4). Thus, narrative is both the method and phenomena of study. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, narrative “at once looks backward and forward, inward and outward, and situates the experiences within place” (p.140). This was of particular importance as I came to understand the experiences of my participants, individuals that have been shaped by interesting lives and challenging careers in unique local contexts. Narrative inquiry allowed me to co-create meaning with community college presidents given their shared experiences and stories.

Clandinin and Connelley (2000) identify six areas of tension surrounding narrative inquiry: temporality, people, action, certainty, and context. Temporality is a key feature of narrative inquiry. Meaning making is a fluid process occurring across time. Narrative researchers think of events as having a past, a present, and an implied future. Thus, narrative inquiry is not

just about what happened but what could be. Narratives are constantly in motion, “being constructed” and the same holds for storytellers and listeners (Cunliffe et al., 2004, p.275). We are also being constructed and this may include the construction of a more complete or transparent identity. As we reflect on the past, we cannot diminish the influence of the present in how we make meaning of those events or the future that we anticipate (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cunliffe et al., 2004). Thus, meaning making is not a static or linear process, but continuous and not bounded by objective time. A second closely related tension involves people and their lives in dynamic settings. As meaning making is a continuous process, people are constantly in a state of personal change and researchers must “be able to narrate the person in terms of the process” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.30). Put another way, people are the embodiments of lived and developing stories.

A third tension is how action is understood. Outside of narrative, most methods of inquiry view action as directly evidential, that actions provide concrete meaning. In narrative thinking, actions are nothing without the voice of the participant and their context. Without understanding the narrative history of the *participant*, “the significance or meaning of the (action)...remains unknown” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.31). Making meaning of actions is closely associated with the fourth tension, certainty. Positivist paradigms look for causality to explain outcomes. The effect of X shapes an outcome Y. Paradigms that recognize reality as subjective, such as narrative, include the possibility of a multitude of interpretations. Salient to each of these four tensions resides a fifth, context. In narrative inquiry, context is ever present. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, “context is necessary for making sense of any person, event, or thing” (p.32). In the positivist paradigm, *the universal case* is of most interest. A precondition for meeting the standard of generalizability. In narrative inquiry, *the person* placed in context is of

most interest. These descriptions of narrative inquiry coupled with the theoretical framework for qualitative research align with the rationale and research design of this study.

### Participant Criteria

To meet the purpose of this study, I established the following criteria for identifying potential research participants: 1) five or more years of experience as a community college president; and 2) a reputation for embracing the community college democratic mission. Presidents were chosen because of their potential to affect the life of their institutions including their cultures (Amey, 2004, 2006, 2022; Eddy, 2017, 2018; Nevarez & Santamaria, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Vaughan, 1986, 1992, 1998; Zamani-Gallaher, 2020). Life experiences, age, gender, and many other salient identities shape narratives (Kim, 2016). Because I was interested in a range of stories and not the development of shared themes, my intent was to also select participants that represented a wide range of personal identities.

In planning for this study, I recruited two gatekeepers to help me identify potential research participants (Hesse-Biber, 2017). My first gatekeeper is an education research and policy specialist, director of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, and research consultant for college leaders on several issues including civic learning and democratic engagement. My second gatekeeper was a community college employee for 37 years and president of a comprehensive community college for 12 years. Additionally, both gatekeepers were familiar with the Democracy Commitment and Campus Compact. To aid my participants in the gatekeeping process, I provided a list of criteria to help identify participants. This list can be found in [Appendix D](#). Over thirty potential participants were identified by my gatekeepers. I systematically reviewed public information concerning them and their institutions. I then considered the intent of my study and the criteria I set forth and followed up with my

gatekeepers for certain clarifications. From this process I produced a short-list of presidents and reached out to their executive assistants. After consenting to participate in my study, I sent each participant a consent form and asked them to sign and return it before any data were collected.

The consent form can be found in [Appendix B](#).

## Data Collection

Data was collected in two ways: in-depth, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Based on my review of previous narrative studies, many of which involved community college presidents (Frankland, 2009; Gatua, 2011; Luna, 2020; Robinder, 2012; Sosa, 2022; Wolgemuth, 2007), and recommendations from seminal narrative scholars (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2008), I interviewed six community college presidents over two interviews. Data collection methods are described in more detail below.

### *Semistructured, In-Depth Interviews*

In-depth, semistructured interviews were the primary mode of data collection. However, I followed the recommendation of narrative scholars and leaned toward a more unstructured, rather than structured style. In a narrative interview, it is more important to be an attentive listener and ask necessary questions that will further inspire the story rather than attempting to control the pace and direction of the interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2008). This conceptual shift is integral to both a constructivist paradigm and narrative inquiry where the participant is understood as a narrator with stories to tell with their own voice. Riessman (2008) elaborates on this concept with the following: “Narrative interviewing necessitates following participants down *their* trails...it is preferable, in general, to ask questions that open up topics, and allow respondents to construct answers in ways they find meaningful” (p.24-25).

I had six participants and conducted two interviews with each participant. All interviews were conducted via zoom at the convenience of my participants. The first round of interviews ranged from 70-100 minutes, and the follow-up interviews ranged from 25-60 minutes. The follow-up interviews were all scheduled between one to two weeks apart to provide time for a more reflective discussion and exchange that built upon our first interviews. All interviews were audio and visually recorded and this was reflected in their consent forms per IRB policy. I used the Zoom platform to produce raw transcripts and I edited each transcript before sending out for member checking.

#### *Development of the Interview Guide*

An interview guide provides additional context and access to the study's design. In developing my guide, I considered broad constructs emerging from the literature review and my conceptual framework. These constructs included the purpose of higher education, the community college mission, democratic deconsolidation, community college leadership, the role of community colleges in the U.S. democracy, and the relationship among these constructs in presidents' lives. From these constructs I developed my interview guide. The questions were crafted to invite a full narrative discussion and allowed me to engage in attentive listening. The interview guide can be found in [Appendix A](#).

#### *Document Analysis*

To meet the purpose of the study and aid in triangulation, I conducted a systematic review of documents (Stake, 1995). I reviewed three different document types: recent news stories related to the community colleges on issues important and directly relevant to my study; institutional websites; and relevant internal documents made accessible by the community



college presidents themselves. Reviewing these documents helped contextualize the findings and gathered in the interviews. Document analysis protocol can be found in [Appendix C](#).

## Analysis

Narrative researchers are foremost qualitative researchers. Although there is no consensus for analyzing the forms of qualitative data, the development of coding, categories, patterns, and themes constitute the basic elements of qualitative data analysis (Kim, 2016; Saldaña, 2013). Qualitative analysis of narrative data is followed by and distinct from, interpretation. As Kim (2016) stated, “Narrative researchers try to interpret meanings through an analysis of plotlines, thematic structures, and social and cultural referents” (p.190). Taken together, narrative analysis and interpretation work towards understanding the events of a life. Put another way, narrative inquiry seeks to understand human experience that is meaningful. I was mindful of Riessman’s (2008) advice to researchers that, “Narratives do not speak for themselves, they require close interpretation” (p.3). The method of analysis in this study was dependent on the interview data and arose organically (Kim, 2016). My goal was to tell a coherent story that has meaning and significance for me, my participants, and my audience.

## *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis was used in this study. All narrative inquiry is concerned with content – “what” is said, written, or shown – but in thematic analysis, analyzing content is the exclusive focus. In an important distinction from general qualitative methods, thematic analysis “keeps a story ‘intact’ by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases” (Riessman, 2008, p.53). Put another way, stories are not fractured into thematic categories but interpreted as a whole. In thematic analysis, language is a resource rather than a topic of

inquiry; therefore, it is not relevant to interrogate the particulars of discourse, but instead to “focus on the act the narrative reports and the moral of the story” (Riessman, 2008, p.62).

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the term we use in qualitative studies to identify the practices to ensure the research is of high quality. Whereas quantitative studies are, generally, defined by a positivist paradigm and a desire to produce insights that extend beyond the sample, qualitative studies pursue understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kim, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Undergirding the methodological differences between qualitative and quantitative research are the philosophical assumptions each communicates about reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology). Whereas quantitative research assumes a fixed reality waiting to be observed and measured, a qualitative perspective understands reality as “holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.242). However, these two research paradigms differ in more than their ontological assumptions. Qualitative researchers have a more subjectivist epistemology, believing that knowledge is co-constructed by both the research subject and the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Put another way, research is dependent on interpretation; therefore, qualitative methods are scrutinized by a different set of criteria to establish trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative trustworthiness is met by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. When the findings correctly describe the realities of the participants, credibility is achieved. Transferability is met through “sufficient descriptive data” (Merriam & Tisdell, p.298). Dependability is a close analog to reliability, that the results are sensible and consistent with the data collected. Last, confirmability builds off dependability and confirms that the results are substantiated by others. In this study, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985)

and Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) strategies for establishing trustworthiness are used. These include data saturation, thick description, member checking, triangulation, audit trail, and consistent critical reflexivity.

#### Data Saturation

Data saturation is an important indicator of trustworthiness. Put simply, when new, alternative information or themes no longer emerge in the data collection and analysis process, data saturation is reached, and the pursuit of additional data, in this context, will not be necessary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of multiple methods of data collection meets a criterion of triangulation, which further aided in establishing trustworthiness. After collecting data through in-depth, semistructured interviews, document analysis, and member checking, I feel confident that data saturation was reached.

#### Thick Description

Thick description entails extensive description of the experiences, context, and setting of the participants and lends credence to transferability (Privitera & Ahlgrim-DeLzell, 2019). The methodological choices of this study centered the lived experiences of community college presidents through personal narratives. I was committed to ensuring that the stories of the participants were intact and accurate. Member checking aided in this endeavor, but I also relied on lengthy, direct quotes to ensure their stories remained intact and their voices centered. Furthermore, I took care to note my personal observations during lengthy quotes, and spent time to provide a rich description of my participants, their institutions, and the environment in which we interviewed.

## Member Checking

After transcripts were constructed after each round of interviews, I provided a copy to the participants for member checking. This gave my participants an opportunity to check for accuracy, and helped establish credibility, and thus trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## Triangulation

Triangulation uses multiple sources of data, analytical methods, or theories to meet a standard of trustworthiness. Data-source triangulation was met through multiple sources of data (interviews and document analysis) and used to confirm emergent findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). Theoretically, my conceptual framework was a product of the literature review and represents three core areas integral to answering my research questions: a multifaceted mission, evolution of the community college presidency, and signs of democratic deconsolidation. This approach helped me understand the complex problem of democratic deconsolidation and the role of presidents and their institutions in this process. By synthesizing relevant concepts, my conceptual framework influenced my research and interview questions, and thus helped undergird triangulation which in turn help establish dependability and confirmability.

## Audit Trail

Audit trails describe the data collection and analysis processes, including why decisions were made throughout these processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I kept an audit trail and research notes that described how data were collected, analyzed, and how I came to certain decisions made throughout the research process.

## Consistent Critical Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of assessing one's actions and role in the research process and helps keep subjectivity in check (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A reflexive researcher does not just report the findings of the research but is an active participant in analysis and interpretation. Because qualitative research is a social act, reflexivity is how we account for ourselves as researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017). I have included a positionality statement and expressed my research goals and priorities in this chapter. Furthermore, I kept a journal to track my evolving perceptions, procedures, methodological decisions, and personal introspections (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For me, personally, keeping a reflexive journal was the most meaningful methodological decision I made during this study. This process is explored more deeply at the beginning of Chapter 4 and also helped establish confirmability.

## Research Ethics

Ethical considerations in narrative inquiry closely follow the ethical standards of normative qualitative research methods. Throughout this study, I took careful consideration of the following: anonymity, critical reflexivity, establishing trustworthiness, transparency, respect for persons, and informed consent. As noted above, before conducting interviews, I obtained written, informed consent from each participant and I reviewed this document with my participant at the beginning of our interviews. As an interviewer, I was cognizant that some questions intruded upon the personal lives of my participants. To protect participants' confidentiality, I used pseudonyms to conceal all identities, institutions, and communities. During the recruitment and interview processes, I established rapport and created a safe interview environment for my participants. I helped ensure safety and was mindful that Covid-19

was still active in our society; therefore, all interviews were via Zoom. Finally, reflexive journaling helped me identify and bracket my biases and helped ensure that these ethical considerations remained foremost in my mind.

### Limitations

There were two limitations of this study worth elaborating. First, because my study was focused on the experiences of community college presidents and how they understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the U.S. democracy, no student voices, through interviews, were documented in this study. I seek to mitigate this limitation through document analysis and included questions that centered the student experience. While the findings of this study could be enhanced if student voices were explicitly present, this was not the purpose of the study. The second involves the method of analysis – narrative inquiry. Narratives are inherently multilayered and can be ambiguous; furthermore, there is no ubiquitous, agreed upon standard to conduct narrative research. Put another way, the distinction between fact and fiction in narrative is not always clear (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, verifying facts is sometimes less important than understanding their meaning for individuals and groups (Reissman, 2008). Cast in a more personal light, “all autobiographic memory is true. It is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, and for which purpose” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p.261). Rather than focusing on a single, objective Truth, I focused on the link between the participant and the truths their narratives revealed: “The truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation” (p.261).

## Summary

This chapter addressed the purpose of my dissertation and research questions guiding this study. I explained my research method (narrative inquiry), paradigm (constructivism), and potential analysis method (thematic). The research guide lists my interview questions, I outlined my criteria for research participants, and explained how they were recruited through two gatekeepers. Details about how I met qualitative standards of trustworthiness – credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability – study limitations, and reflections on the ethical dimensions of this study were also included.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This chapter is focused on the findings of my study and contains a demographic overview of my participants, six narrative profiles, and an overarching thematic analysis. I begin with the demographic overview identifying participants' pseudonyms, demographics, tenure as president, region of presidency, and institutional pseudonym. I follow this overview with narrative profiles that follow a similar pattern. First, I describe the participant's journey in becoming a community college president; second, I explore their responses concerning the community college mission and the American democracy; and last, I identify an overarching theme that permeates through their life narratives capturing their passion or purpose in becoming a community college president. Finally, thematic elements across each case are synthesized to develop overarching themes. I conclude with a chapter summary.

The data presented in this chapter are a result of narrative inquiry methods to meet the purpose of my study: in-depth semistructured interviews and document analysis. I conducted two interviews with each participant and reviewed twenty-one documents. All participants, actors within each narrative, institutions, and organizations have been assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality.

#### Description of Document Analysis

Document collection and analysis was completed in three phases. The first phase began prior to conducting interviews. After participants consented to participate in the study, I requested signed letters of permission to obtain institutional strategic plans, per IRB policy. This yielded six strategic plans for review, and all were relevant to the study. A template for letters of permission can be found in [Appendix E](#). The second phase occurred during the



semistructured interviews. Some of my participants referenced institutional news stories found in the public domain which I noted and accessed after completing the interview. To be clear, these documents were specifically identified, and I was explicitly encouraged to retrieve them. One participant shared photographs from their life that was emailed to me by their executive assistant. Finally, one participant mailed me a physical copy of a student magazine relevant to our discussion. This phase yielded nine additional documents: six news stories, two photographs, and one magazine. The final phase of document collection occurred after all interviews were complete. There were certain stories my participants told that I recognized could be found through their institutions' websites or in local news stories. All were within the public domain. This final phase yielded six more documents, three from institutional websites and three from published local news stories.

Each of these documents aided in my contextual understanding of their journeys. Although some documents were explicit in supporting claims and stories, others did not reveal any new insights. However, taken together, the documents that I collected prior to my interviews, identified during interviews, and collected afterwards served as a tool for triangulation and provided context to this study (Kim, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995).

### Description of Narrative Analysis

This chapter is structured in such a way to fulfill a requirement and purpose of narrative inquiry – to facilitate understanding through context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Saldaña, 2013). The narrative profiles are also structured to meet this end. In creating the profiles, I was guided by narrative scholars Kim (2016), Polkinghorne (1995), and Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Furthermore, I consulted models

created in other narrative dissertations that prioritized the voices of participants (Gatua, 2011; Kim, 2005; Spaulding, 2008; Wolgemuth, 2007).

First, the profiles begin with an account of each participant's journey in becoming a community college president. Personal narratives, the ones we tell to other and ourselves, are a patchwork of stories woven together. I implemented an "interpretation of faith" (Kim, 2016, p.193), the belief that my participants stories were true and meaningful to their lives. I paid careful attention to salient stories and experiences that sparked a passion for the democratizing purpose of the community college. Rather than assigning a pseudonym prior to analysis, I chose to wait until after constructing their narrative profiles. Kim (2016) encourages narrative researchers to engage in "aesthetic play" (p.84), to be creative in research design and I followed this suggestion. This practice helps to involve the reader in the meaning making process between the self and the world. And, as Kim (2016) writes, "We let our research unfold in a way that preserves its own integrity and let it tell its own tale". With the concept of aesthetic play in mind, for each participant, I chose a name of a historical figure that helped exemplify not only their character but also provided insight into their personality and temperament. In kind, I provide an explanation of each pseudonym at the end of each profile.

Second, I isolated an overarching theme that permeates through their life narratives capturing their passion or purpose in becoming a community college president. I considered Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) concept of a three-dimensional narrative space to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of each president and develop their profiles. Influenced by John Dewey's (1934) *Art as Experience*, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posit that thinking within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space allows us to gain a holistic understanding of a storied life. The three dimensions are 1) the personal and social (interaction), 2) past, present,

and future (continuity or temporal), and 3) the notion of place (situation). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note,

In terms of the grand narrative, we might imagine the terms as an analytic frame for reducing the stories to a set of understandings...pointing to questions, puzzles, fieldwork, and field texts of different kinds appropriate to different aspects of the inquiry. (p.54-55)

Put another way, exploring participants' three-dimensional narrative inquiry spaces provides context for their grand narrative, their journey. Throughout their narratives and in exploring their narrative theme, I consider these dimensions to contextualize their journeys.

Last, I put my participants in conversation with one another through the development of overarching themes. Identifying overarching patterns thematically helped to reduce ambiguity and emphasize context (Reismann, 2008; Saldaña, 2013). I used Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic analysis to analyze the data and referenced Saldaña (2013) to code for themes.

#### Paradigmatic Analysis and Coding

I employed paradigmatic analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), or the analysis of narrative in developing this chapter. According to Polkinghorne (1995), this method, "produces cognitive networks of concepts that allow people to construct experiences as familiar by emphasizing the common elements that appear over and over" (p.10). This method is supported by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) who note, "An inquirer composing a research text looks for the patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across an individual's experiences and in the social setting" (p.132).

Analysis of narrative was essential to develop individual narrative themes derived from participants' journeys in becoming community college presidents. In each case, themes were "inductively derived from the data" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.13). To develop and synthesize codes, I followed Saldaña's (2013) narrative coding techniques to better "understand the human

condition through story” (p.132). Saldaña (2013) recommends up to sixteen different elements of coding to focus analysis. Based on my participants narratives and the shape of their stories, I prioritized three elements: 1) tone, which considers the pitch, quality, and inflection of voice to signal meaning; 2) storyline, natural turning points and climaxes in their stories; and 3) theme, the moral and life lessons their stories communicate. Common thematic elements across each case were then synthesized to develop overarching themes to align with the purpose of the study (Reissman, 2008; Saldaña, 2013).

### Establishing Trustworthiness

To encourage my participants in their storytelling, I was “attentive, interested, and responsive” (Labov, 1997, p.397). For each interview I prepared an interview guide and placed a reminder at the end that also helped account for my implicit biases. To quote from Reissman (2003), “Narrative interviewing necessitates following participants down *their* trails...it is preferable, in general, to ask questions that open up topics, and allow respondents to construct answers in ways they find meaningful” (p.24-25). I read this line constantly and was often rewarded with deep insights and valuable context by offering a simple nod or verbal queue in place of an extended question.

To meet standards of trustworthiness, I followed the recommendations set-forth in Chapter 3 (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Kim, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). During data gathering and analysis, I kept a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before every interview, when reviewing field notes to create the narrative profiles, or developing themes, I would reread portions of the journal then log my own thoughts and feelings of the day. I took the following into consideration: procedural notes, my decisions and why; my relationship with the

participants; who I am, my biases, background, values, beliefs, and upbringing; revelations; important concepts I was currently grappling with; and anything that caused confusion or anxiety during these processes. My journal included personal anecdotes, definitions of terms like *phronesis*, “to do the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right way”, and advice to my future self. What emerged was clarity, answering questions posed to myself, a deeper understanding of myself, and realizing the importance of a reflexive journal as a continuous process whose benefits strengthen with time.

Keeping a reflexive journal aided in my field notes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). This running document for participants noted everything from their “setting” in our first zoom meetings to the *nth* reread of a transcript identifying what was not said or noticed before. Having access to a recording of each interview was immensely helpful to this process. I was able to rewatch interview segments in “real time” noting pauses, inflection, pitch, and tone of voice; emphasis on particular words or phrases; capturing eye movements and stares denoting concentration to wistfulness; and reexperiencing interviews for myself as coparticipant and researcher. Many of these observations are present in the chapter within brackets - [*observation*].

I used narrative smoothing to create the narrative profiles (Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995). I stayed true to the linear structure of their narratives, only breaking from their timeline to provide context or to combine fractured narrative segments. When I did break from their timeline, the decision was not made lightly, and I identify jumpcuts between stories. However, I recognize that my own theoretical interests (Reismann, 2003) and research agenda (Kim, 2016) played a role in shaping their narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I employed thick description in relating their stories, relying on lengthy, direct quotes to capture their stories and I centered their voices. Each participant was provided a transcript after all interviews were

concluded for member checking. I thanked them for their participation and asked for confirmation of the accuracy of data collected. Each participant was also invited to make corrections, offer feedback, or request a revision or omission. No participant requested changes to their transcript.

After reviewing the narrative inquiry literature and model narrative dissertations to structure this chapter, I reached out to current scholars in the field who utilize narrative methods and researchers familiar with my research purpose. Furthermore, I presented my dissertation findings at the Council for the Study of Community Colleges 2023 annual conference. I considered suggestions from other researchers and was also rewarded with confirmations of my decisions. I concluded each narrative profile, coding, and thematic analysis when data saturation was met. I also utilized triangulation through this process, referencing strategic plans, local news articles, and other documents provided by my participants to confirm the emergent findings and contextualize their journeys.

Taken together, this chapter helps us better understand each participant's journey in becoming a community college president, recounts life experiences that sparked their passion for the democratizing purpose of the community college, and provides the needed context to best understand their stories in reference to my research questions.

Table 1

*Demographic Overview*

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Tenure as President	Geographic Region	College Acronym
John	70s	Male	Black	19 years	South	SCC
Abe	60s	Male	White	11 years	South	MCC
Eleanor	50s	Female	White	12 years	Northeast	NSCC
Robert	60s	Male	White	19 years	Northeast	SDCC
Ida	60s	Female	Black	11 years	Midwest	MSCC
Franklin	50s	Male	White	21 years	South	ESCC

## John: The Wind Walker

“I think I probably started becoming a community college president [*he shook his head*] long before I knew that community colleges existed. I had a very interesting [*he paused*] upbringing if you will...”.

### The Journey

My first interview with John occurred Christmas week in the morning hours. I remember looking out the window behind him and seeing a row of trees quite still in the cold winter air. John is the president at South Community College (SCC). While exploring SCC’s institutional website, I found pictures of the campus and surrounding community that helped me gain a better understanding of the SCC setting. SCC is a public comprehensive community college in the southern United States and its campus is surrounded by rolling terrain, small hills, and mountains. The local community is rural and demographically predominately white. Several bond referendums in the past few decades, spearheaded by John, provided funding for multiple new facilities and renovations for SCC, rejuvenating the campus and providing service for the community.

John was seated comfortably in a medium-sized black chair, a few choice awards and plaques flanking him on either side. There was a painting over his right shoulder that caught my eye. It was difficult to decipher, not because I was viewing it through a zoom screen, but because it resembled an impressionist painting, shadowed figures were in the background with bright, rich colors dominating the edges and corners. It appeared that nothing was out of place in his office; everything was exactly where it should be. John wore a blue dress shirt with the top button undone, no tie, and a dark navy suit jacket. His hair and beard were almost completely white and well groomed, thin glasses disappearing into his hair. He was relaxed, a demeanor that never changed during our interviews. His tone matched his demeanor – calm and soft-spoken. He

spoke slowly and deliberately, the kind of conversationalist who you can tell has thought, or is thinking in the moment, about everything they say. His eyes were his most noticeable tell. He would look anywhere but at the camera when deep in thought, but often snapped to the camera once he found the rhythm of his answer. To start our interview, I asked him the same opening question I asked all my participants, “Would you please describe your career path in becoming a community college president”. He immediately looked up and to the left and with a hint of a smile softly replied, “Yea, I’ll do my best”. He then delivered the quote that I use to open his profile, “I think I probably started becoming a community college president *[he shook his head]* long before I knew that community colleges existed. I had a very interesting *[he paused]* upbringing if you will...”.

John was born into poverty. His family, father, mother, and four siblings, lived in a small home in the rural American South. He made it clear that family is important to him, “I grew up in a wonderful family. My mom and dad *[he paused, emotion creeping in]*, they were the best.” He described his community as “really kind of depressed” with three communal options available to him: 4H, boy scouts, and church. From the start, John displayed a keen awareness of how his experiences leading up to becoming a community college president shaped the type of leader he became. The recurring theme of resources, and lack thereof, is ubiquitous in his life narrative. It shaped his values, purpose, and morals. He understood that the quality of his democratic participation was tied to his resources and the direction, programs, and culture he implemented in his community colleges directly reflects this. He told me,

We had, I mean just almost no resources...we had no income and I remember it was about this time of the year [winter] one year and we barely had food to eat, but we didn’t have anything for Christmas. And there was a gentleman who lived down the street from us. I think he had five or six kids of his own, but he had a job, and he was able to work. He brought a wheelbarrow filled with food to our house, *[he smiled as he remembered]* and fruits and nuts and candy. And that was our Christmas, and we were very, very happy



about that. And I'm thinking that somewhere along the way it became seated in the back of my head that I wanted to have the kind of resources that would make sense to me when I became an adult. I also think it became part of my framework that *all* people should have opportunity to have resources.

In hindsight, it is not surprising that John opened our interview with this story. From a very young age, John not only understood, but experienced the obstacles that one encounters when living below the poverty line. He began picking cotton at the age of six and was paid about three dollars for every hundred pounds of cotton. When he was ten, he supplemented his income by cutting people's grass. By the time he was fifteen, he had a full-time job working second shift at a cotton mill after school. During the weekends, he worked as an orderly and janitor in a nursing home. As he explained,

Learning work ethic, that was one of the good things that came out about that. I learned the importance of hard work and how to reap rewards from that work. I learned how to interface with people who were different from me...the patients in this nursing home, based on my recollection, were 99% if not 100% Caucasian. So, the staff there was a little different from that [*he chuckled*]. But I did learn how to interface with people whose background and experiences were *incredibly* different from mine.

Limited resources were only one of many challenges John's family faced. He continued his story telling me,

You know, we weren't able to really participate in democracy like a lot of other people for that reason [limited resources], but also because we were African American in the 1950s. My parents were African American in the 1940s and beyond that, and things were very, very different, as you well know.

Until the sixth grade, John attended a Rosenwald school. Founded by Julius Rosenwald, a Jewish American business and philanthropist, in collaboration with Booker T. Washington, five thousand Rosenwald schools were built in the South during the early twentieth century to address the chronic underfunding of public education for young African American students (Aaronson & Mazumder, 2011). John's school was a two-room wooden school with a potbelly stove. One year during an especially cold winter, the students fed too much wood into the stove resulting in the

building being burned to ashes. Despite the catastrophe, this event did provide John with an opportunity. He told me,

In my county, these school officials [*he smiled incredulously*] apparently didn't get the 1954 decision *Brown versus Board of Education*. They didn't get the outcome of that decision. So, we were still operating in a segregated school system. And, nonetheless in '65, '66, a decision was made, and I wanted voluntary integration. If you wanted to attend a school that was different from what you had been attending, that was your prerogative to do so, [*he lowered his voice*] at your own risk, of course. And in my county, not one white student chose to go to a black school, not surprising. About twenty students in the entire county did integrate into white schools during that year. And my sister and I were the only two students of color who attended [our school]. And I tell you what [*he paused for effect, holding my eyes through the camera*] that was a learning experience. It was a huge learning experience. I learned that in some cases people kind of accepted you. In many cases they did not. So, I don't want to say that it was 100% hell, [*he smirked in a silly way*] it was only partial hell. That experience overall helped prepare me for the community college president that I am today.

John described how not everyone was accepting of him and his sister, and how they did not have any problem letting them know. He then related a story of joining the school basketball team, again, being the only student of color on the team. He said, "I think about my basketball coach. I'm the only brother on the team and all my teammates wore white uniforms, and my uniform was blue." He shared a picture of his 7<sup>th</sup> grade basketball team. The photo was grainy, a classic shot of an old basketball gym, wooden floors clean and mopped, a basketball rim above the team. John, distinctly, was the only person of color in the picture and the only one wearing a blue uniform. Despite my efforts to remain neutral, he caught a grimace on my face. He noticed, pointed a finger at me with a big smile and replied,

The expression on your face, it's much similar to the expression of others when I show them that picture. The irony in that is, that it's not what it looks like. And, I think that in itself has also kind of helped me to become a community college president. Things are not always the way they look.

In truth, John told me, the reason he wore a blue uniform was because he made a late decision to join the team, and the coach, who was also the principal, said, "John, I don't have any

more uniforms, but if you want to play, and if you don't mind wearing this blue uniform, you can play". Here is the moral John described as he conveyed his story,

All of this is helping me understand that sometimes you don't come with the equipment you need. You don't have necessarily the skills you need. But there are people who will work with you and give you a chance. And, I think that's much about what we are in community colleges...we take people where they are, and take them as far as they can go. And I want to add to that, [*he spoke deliberately, emphasizing each word*] not as far as they want to go, but as far as we can take them to go. Because, sometimes, they don't want to go that far but they have the capacity to go much further.

John played on the team for two years and then entered high school. A couple months before his high school graduation, John's guidance counselor called him to his office. John told me,

And I went to his office a bit nervous. I must say it, wondering, "Why does he want to talk to me? What have I done?" And so, he said to me, "John, you're almost finished with high school. What are you going to do with your life?" And I told him what my plans were, and my plans were very, very straightforward, and very simple. I wanted to get a *first* shift job in that cotton mill so that I could get off work in time [*he smiled broadly*] for people to see me driving my new used car...I told him that and he started and said, "Well, I think you can do better than that". Now Jonathon, we when talk about democracy, you know, I like to think about education and preparing people. Now, I had been in high school, obviously for a collective total of four years [*he paused for emphasis*], but not one time had someone sat down with me and said, "Hey! Here are the courses you need to be taking to prepare yourself for college." Not one time did someone in that school sit down with me and say, "There are colleges out there and you need to be in one." Yes, my mom and dad said, "I want you all to go to college", and that was an aspiration they had. But it wasn't really a reality in *my* head until I had that conversation with the counselor. After which, of course, he helped me to apply for financial aid. He helped me apply for admissions. And the rest is kind of history.

John applied and was accepted into a private HBCU within the state. He continued to work full-time through college, often taking 18-21 credit hours a semester, finishing his bachelor's degree in three and a half years. Upon graduation, he took a job at County Community College (CCC, a pseudonym), a public comprehensive community college in the southern region of the state. Demographically, the county is predominately black with many

families living below the poverty line. The land surrounding CCC is rural, the population spread out over large swaths of land. He smiled softly as talked about his first employment at CCC,

My first job fits *so* nicely with what we're talking about today. I was Director of Human Resource Development, not HR [Human Resources]. It was where we worked with people who were underrepresented, socioeconomically disenfranchised, to help them get some kind of skills under their belt. Maybe a GED, some adult basic education classes to get them oriented to careers and jobs that they could do, or continue on from where they were into a curriculum program...At some point the president of the college invited me to be his executive assistant...I started in community college work in 1974, so it was 1980 when he invited me to be his executive assistant and director of institutional research...I liked what I saw. I got a better understanding of what this work is all about. [*He looked into the camera for emphasis*] And *that* is when the light bulb came on that I wanted to be a community college president.

Here John made a leap in time, fast-forwarding six years, brushing over his decision to return to college and earn a master's in higher education (MEd) at an in-state public university. Because of his longevity as executive assistant to the president, years of director experience, and graduate education, John was well positioned to take on a new role – Dean of Students.

One day, the CCC president called John into his office and said, "John, the Dean of Students...well, today is her last day". The president was separating her from the college. This is how John related the story. The president asked John,

"Do you know anyone who can be Dean of Students?"...And I [John] said, "Sure." [The president] said, "Who?". And, I said, "Me", and he laughed. It was quite the chuckle he had when I said that to him. But after we conversed for a few minutes he said, "You start in the morning".

I remember being excited for John as he opened this story. In my mind, I pictured him in present day circumstances, an experienced higher education professional with a new MEd ready to take make the next step in his career path. However, my excitement was short lived, because this was not in the present day. He continued his story,

We didn't have email in that way, or anything like that. [The president] sent out the memorandum, got it circulated. So, the next morning, I was there early. I was excited, ready to start as Dean of Students. I got to my office, and the Chairman of the Board of

Trustees was in the office that I was to occupy with all the staff in student services...And the purpose of that meeting [*his cadence slowed*] was to come up with a way to *stop* my appointment from going forward. [*He paused for a moment*] Now, I had been at the school from 1974-1980 so quite a while. And, I had proven I moved up. I'd gotten the appropriate degrees and had excellent evaluations. But it was who I was [*he shook his head slightly*]. It was how I looked [*he shrugged, exacerbated*]. I was not anything other than that.

John decided to wait in the reception area and amicably chatted with the receptionist. The Chairman of the Board eventually left John's office without acknowledging him. John continued his story,

Somehow, I managed to work through all the minutia around "We don't need a Black chief student services officer" to holding that position for a total of sixteen years. [*He gained momentum and brightened noticeably*] And by year sixteen, most of the staff I started with were still with me and we had become a very strong team. And, those kind of things that just, I won't say dissolved, but were certainly mitigated to a large extent. All of this is preparing me to say, "Hey! One day, I want to lead a college and I want to make sure that everyone has a fair chance, and that we give them the support they need to be successful."

During his tenure as Dean of Students, John completed his doctorate in Adult and Community College Education at the public, flagship state university, positioning himself for a presidential role. After serving as Dean of Students at CCC for sixteen years, John got his first opportunity and became a community college president at Northwestern Community College (NWCC), a public comprehensive community college with the distinction as the largest post-secondary institution in the state.

His first tenure as a community college president lasted nine years. He proudly told me that during his presidency, enrollments grew from 14,000 to 24,000 students and he invested \$120 million in campus infrastructure. Despite the impressive nature of these numbers, John glossed over these facts as simple statistics and instead immediately told me about his Middle College program. Situated directly across from his college was the only majority African American high school in the state. His goal was "to get every student in that high school enrolled

in some class in the community college term after term after term, to give them a heads up on a better life.” This is how John described the school and program:

This was an underrepresented school for the most part, white flight had been in play, and it was a majority African American, and in the mixture were other underrepresented students. ...Our idea was that every student in that high school would take some college course...so that they could get their foot on that campus because they could actually walk up and get a feel for what we were about.

It was not enough, however, to simply enroll students and get them on the campus. John was equally concerned with the future of their lives. When I encouraged him further, he said emphatically, “We had a *duty* to prepare those high school students to join a college pathway”. To provide students with an opportunity for further higher education after his community college, John met with representatives from several four-year institutions in the state to ensure 1) his students could transfer to neighboring institutions, and 2) that they would have scholarships available to pay for their continuing higher education. Again, recognizing the need to invest resources into the community. He further noted that the graduation rate at the high school across the street from NWCC was around 60% when he became president. However, he told me,

By the time I was leaving, the graduation rate was up to about 80%. The college going rate moved from being one of the lowest in the state to one of the highest among high schools, [*he gave a gleeful smile and raised his arms up*] all by design....and, we also talk about democratization. We have to talk about resources again and giving people a fair deal, a fair shake. I developed a scholarship bank. I knew that if we got those young people into our community college upon graduating from high school, even after they had taken classes via the dual enrollment format they would need resources to move on beyond that.

After circumventing a state regulation that limited support for high school students taking college courses, John was able to secure a scholarship for every student who participated in his Middle College program. At this point in our interview, John’s story transitioned to accepting the presidency at his current institution, SCC. This transition is exactly how John narrated it, speaking about his Middle College program directly into accepting the SCC presidency. For

John, accepting the SCC presidency meant returning home. SCC is a public, comprehensive community college located in a majority minority community that leans politically conservative. SCC has a rich history within the state, one of the first community colleges built in the higher education system. The community is large and serves nearly two hundred thousand citizens across thirteen towns. A large river cuts through the middle with several parks checkerboarding the land. Within a minute of telling me his transition to SCC president, John said, “I have really focused my attention on making this college a place where students want to be and where students can succeed”. Excited, he told me about his success in securing multiple bond referendums and special state appropriations, replicating what he accomplished at NWCC. This money was invested into SCC, building out many of the colleges, facilities, and modernizing programs to align with business and industry norms: biotechnology, electronics, automotive technology, engineering, culinary arts, and esports. In his own words, “So I’ve been working very hard here to provide resources for students. We’ve added nineteen curriculum programs” he said with a smile. He continued,

If you really want to do students a disservice, enroll [them] in programs where there is no future for employment. This is about democracy, [*he furrowed his brow and stressed*] this is about understanding that it is imperative that we invest what resources we [have] to make sure that it undergirds the success of students.

### The Community College Mission and the American Democracy

After concluding John’s journey in becoming a community college president, we addressed my remaining research questions. It is worth explaining the cadence of the remainder of our interviews. Of all my participants, John gave the lengthiest reply to my first question. In contrast, but understandably, he was more succinct in answering my remaining questions. However, this in no way detracted from the quality of his responses. Instead, his rich narrative journey contextualized his beliefs and stories for me, allowing for a deeper understanding that I

otherwise would not have had. His narrative theme of resource equity was explored repeatedly, so too was how SCC and NWCC used institutional resources to work with students in need. After such a lengthy first answer, I was a little disoriented taking back the reins of the interview, torn between furiously recording notes and wanting to hear more, a testament to his stories and the passion in which he disclosed them. Thankfully, I consulted my interview guide and asked John about his community college mission and what it meant to him. He shared the following story about a student name Brian (a pseudonym),

This is why I'm [in my 70s] and still at the helm [*he smiled broadly*]. Brian's family was similar to mine, his family had limited resources. He had to quit high school [*he paused for emphasis*] to work. To help bring resources into his home. He loved to watch Matlock [a legal drama], so he aspired to become a lawyer. Eventually he managed to get here, and he earned his GED and his associate degree. He went on to the [flagship state university] where he earned his bachelor's degree and his law degree. And now [*he tilted his head to the side and grinned*] he is a principle in a law firm. He could have very easily stayed in the same type of job he had when he quit high school and never gone beyond that point, [*He slowed his cadence and emphasized*] had it not been for the community college. I'm not saying we did it *for* him. We did it *with* him and we were here for him, and those are the kind of stories that I could talk about all day long. We take people where they are and take them as far as they can go, and that makes all the sense in the world to me, even to this day.

Here again we see a resurgence of his narrative theme – resource equity. Consider again the question posed, what SCC's mission meant to him. To John, the values of SCC are built around equity and community, and the goal of SCC is to assist students in their journey to personal fulfillment. At this point, we moved into a broader discussion and talked about the American democracy. I asked John how he came to understand the American democracy and he replied,

You know, in a literal sense, it's about having elected officials - congress and state level, etcetera. And why would we have those officials if it wasn't to ensure that there is fairness and equity? And we have systems that support and help to sustain, when necessary, people. But I think mainly to help people sustain themselves and grow... [*he abruptly stopped, cocked his head to the side and continued*] I visited with one of our accounting instructors last week before classes for the semester and the accounting



instructor and I had it a little chat and she shared a book with me. And I said [*furrowing his brows*], “Well, you are teaching accounting. What's the purpose of *that* book?”. And she said that she thinks it's important. And I think we have faculty all across our campus that think it's important that people not just learn what it is in this specific area, [*he directed his gaze at me*] but how does that apply to life? How does that apply to society? And we were talking about [*he paused*], wealth, the title of the book is *The Whiteness of Wealth*. It's by Dorothy Brown. And so those are some of the things we're trying to do here, and it's not just me doing it. It's our faculty having an understanding that it is important for people to kind of know where we've been, where we are, and where we can go. [*He nodded his head and smiled*] Next question Jonathon.

John led off with a familiar point in his narrative, that institutions and leaders in democratic society have a responsibility to promote fairness and equity. In the frame of SCC, John recognized that this is not something that can be accomplished alone. There must be buy-in from the administrators and faculty. Put another way, these values must be imbedded in the institutional culture. This sub-theme is explored more deeply in his response to the question, “what responsibility do community colleges have to the American democracy”. He answered,

Gee! [*He shook his head then abruptly snapped his attention towards me*] You know we're the People's College...And I think we have a responsibility as we take and invest taxpayers dollars into education and training that we do everything we can within those resources to support democracy and fairness and equity, and all of those things that go with it...When we stop doing that, when we stop recognizing that we have different students that have different needs, when we stop recognizing that we are the *conduit* between where they are and where they can be, then I don't think [*he began to shake his head and his mouth turned down*], we're not the People's College anymore.

This set the stage for our final exchange. I asked him how SCC prepared students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. He did not respond immediately, but took a moment then declared,

I think it's an evolving approach. And I think it's something [*he grimaced and changed course*], it's not something you can dictate. But I think the spirit of the college and the climate of the college lends itself to faculty and staff [*he leveled his gaze and emphasized slowly*] embracing this. And in doing so it becomes sort of embedded, at least to an extent in the curriculum and the services we provide. And the support through the support programs that we have. It's all focused on maximizing the benefit of our college resources to benefit students. So, if for clarity, and I may muddle it even more, let's say that that you *will* prepare students for the American democracy, [*he brought his hand down*

*forcefully on the table*] and this is how you do it. It wouldn't get very far. But hopefully, we have an environment where people see it as their duty to work toward this individually and collectively.

I pressed him further here, intuiting that he had more to say, and asked if he could tell me more about the importance of shaping and guiding institutional culture. He spoke about the design of SCC programs to reach low-income and disenfranchised students to help facilitate participation in the college, community, and democracy, “to help them feel like they belong here”. He then delivered his final story about a program that he had just started that week. He was working with a judge to redirect 16–18-year-olds with misdemeanors into the SCC, and not the prison or court system. They partnered with the public schools, the superintendent, juvenile delinquency, and the court system to defer them to SCC. He explained further, “So this is another way that we give people opportunity and help them to enjoy the democracy in which we have and contribute to it rather than take away from it.”

#### Thematic Analysis – Resource Equity

When I asked John about his journey in becoming a community college president, he reached back into his memory and anchored his journey in his earliest experiences of remembering when his family struggled with poverty. From this experience came a defining purpose in his professional life, “I wanted to have the kind of resources that would make sense to me when I became an adult. I also think it became part of my framework that all people should have opportunity to have resources.” This desire influenced the incredible work ethic that John has today and speaks to the cruelties that a life in poverty can bring. Or more specifically, it speaks to the cruelties of vast social and economic inequities that the American democracy has not resolved. John started picking cotton at the age of six and took on various part-time work until landing his first full-time job at fifteen. He explained that living with limited resources

prevented him and his family from participating in democracy. However, there were other temporal dimensions that prevented democratic participation - John and his family were a Black family living in the 1940s and 1950s in the southern United States. As John notes, “things were very, very different” during that time. To be blunt, he lived in a starkly racist period in American history and his stories communicate this fact.

The dimension of place also contextualizes John’s narrative. Living in the southern United States situated John in a culture with historical roots that discriminated and marginalized African Americans. The institution of slavery has remnants in southern culture and John experienced these in many facets of his life. He picked cotton, attended a two-room Rosenwald school for Black youth, enrolled in and integrated an all-white school, and worked in an all-white nursing home all before graduating high school. In his own words, grappling with racism in the rural south was not “100% hell, it was only partial hell”. Even in the present day, John still acknowledges the cultural tension he experiences being a black man in the south, noting that in his county “even to this day people still scratch their heads at my being president here [at SCC]”. Coupled with his family’s poverty, the cultural context of the south gives further context to his desire to ensure everyone has a fair chance in life.

John was explicit in his belief that the community college had an imperative to not just be fiscally responsible, but to invest resources in an equitable manner. As John shared with me,

I think we have a responsibility as we take and invest what resources we have to make sure that it undergirds the success of students...and I think we have a responsibility as we take and invest taxpayer dollars into education and training that we do everything we can within those resources to support democracy and fairness and equality, and all those things that go with it.

This commitment to an equitable distribution of resources is indicative of the multifaceted mission of the community college mission – including a focus on the needs of the

local community and support for the open access mission. As John explained, it is not enough to simply enroll students. The community college has the added responsibility of using taxpayer dollars in such a way that benefits the community, the students. However, these decisions, these practices, these intents do not simply arise from the ether. Community college presidents shape institutional values and sustain that culture (Amey, 2022; Eddy & Mitchell, 2017; Vaughan, 1986, 1990, 1992; Vaughan & Weisman, 1998). Furthermore, they must exhibit a cultural competence to connect people and stakeholders, support diversity, and shape institutional values and beliefs. In doing so, they socialize others to do the same (Amey, 2022; Eddy, 2018). I found tangible, concrete examples of these values and cultural inundation is in the SCC strategic plan. Not surprisingly, John played a pivotal role in developing this plan.

The document opens with a clear mission paraphrased as follows: “To support and prepare all members of our diverse community to succeed”. This mission is undergirded by five values. Two notable values articulated in the document are 1) *community*, promoting collaboration and partnerships, and 2) *equity and inclusion*, embracing the diversity within the community, provide a sense of belonging, and facilitate access to resources people need to succeed. In turn, each value is coupled with a strategic priority that outlines an objective and metric to assess performance.

After completing his narrative profile, I chose the pseudonym John for this participant. Beyond basic demographics, my participant shares many similarities with the inspiration for his pseudonym, Congressman John Robert Lewis. Congressman Lewis was also born into poverty in the American South in 1940 and is best known for his philosophy of non-violence as a civil rights activist beginning in the 1960s (Lewis & D’Orso, 2015). Reading his biography, I was struck by the union of gravitas and humility embodied by Congressman Lewis. These same

characteristics also surrounded John like an aura, emanating in a comforting manner. Through the duration of our interviews, John's voice rarely wavered in pitch or cadence. He was soft-spoken and only fluctuated his tone for emphasis. The principal title of Congressman Lewis' biography, *Walking with the Wind*, is a metaphor for the continued struggle against civil and racial inequities in the United States and the decision to walk with, not against, the torrent. Furthermore, a primary theme of this biography is how communities can participate in democratic processes to make a better world. This theme, along with many of the best characteristics of Congressman Lewis, led me to choose the pseudonym John.

#### Abe: The Legacy of a Leader

"You know, being a president, you always want to pick something that you feel you can leave a legacy to. I do that; I put a little bit in about democracy."

#### The Journey

My interviews with Abe were conducted two weeks apart at the beginning of winter. Because of the time difference, I was up much earlier that day. It was pitch black outside and I remember the temperature just dipping below the freezing point and witnessing the first of our many Alaskan snowfalls that winter. Abe, however, was enjoying mid-70s sunny days in the American South, sunshine, and all. His institution, Metropolitan Community College (MCC), is part of a large state system of community colleges on the outskirts of a bustling metropolitan region. Before our interview started, I remember sifting through the MCC homepage and looking through pictures of the campus and its community. Through luck or design, the MCC campus is encompassed by a wealth of green in contrast to the muted urban environment of its neighboring cities. The grass is manicured and ubiquitous, trees flank the walking paths, rows of potted plants and flowers welcome students into buildings, and a small pond rests at the southern end of campus. The MCC community is large and diverse, the system serving over two million citizens

with a burgeoning Asian-American community. Abe noted that the MCC county has the highest concentration of Vietnamese citizens in the surrounding area, but that their heritage was not being recognized.

In our first interview, I was immediately drawn to a line of history books on a bookshelf directly behind his head. I am a lover of books and am always curious about what others choose to read. I not so subtly tilted my head ninety degrees every so often, faking cracking my neck, so I could read the titles. Of the seven or eight I could see, about half carried the name or picture of an American founding father. These books had the appearance of being shuffled around, leafed through, and tilted in various directions. Take it from an English major and life-long reader - these books were not ornamental. They meant something, they were used. We established rapport through our shared love of literature, and this augmented our conversations about history, political philosophy, community colleges, and the American democracy. He spoke eagerly, bursting with ideas and life experience. It was clear that he had reflected deeply on his professional journey, identifying with ease the central experiences that define his legacy as a community college president. He smiled easily and was always energetic, often speaking so fast that without consulting a written transcript I would have missed many of his insights. However, when he wanted to signal that something was of particular importance, he would slow his cadence to great effect. After listening to his interviews over time, I realized that his naturally brisk pace could also be attributed to the great deal of information that he had to share in response to my questions. Put another way, Abe was not in a hurry, he was simply talking about his passion and purpose, and he was excited to do so. I opened our interview with the following question: "Please describe your career path in becoming a community college president. What was this journey like for you?".

Growing up in a large metropolitan city in the Northeast, Abe was a sound man, or audio engineer, for a local band. Nurturing this passion, he attended a public in-state university during the 1970s to study television and radio. After graduation, he was employed by a large television corporation during an exciting time in television and radio, “Magic Johnson, big NCAAs, a very exciting time”. However, all good things must come to an end, and his family faced challenges when both Abe and his partner were laid off within the same week, although he noted it felt like within the same day. Radical problems sometimes require radical solutions; thus, Abe and his partner sold their vehicle to rent a van and drove to a large city in the South with a burgeoning economy. While struggling to find a job, Abe saw an advertisement at Big City Community College (BCCC), a public comprehensive community college in the heart of the city, to start a two-year video technology program. He applied and was hired on a six-month contract. He stayed for fifteen years, building up a program from scratch. The program still exists today.

Like many community college leaders, Abe was encouraged by his BCCC mentors and peers to enroll in an MEd program to enter the foray of community college leadership. He attended a large public research university, North State College (NSC), in the northern region of the state, about an hour commute from BCCC, and completed the program “in eighteen months, in and out”. During this time, his NSC professors tried to persuade him to complete a PhD in higher education, telling him that “you got to go here”. However, Abe was hesitant, he had twin children and did not want to commit to a long program and countered that he was “too busy”. His objections fell on deaf ears. His supporters and partner encouraged him to apply, “So I went in, got my doctorate [in seven years], and by the time I’d finished my doctorate, it was time for me to leave [BCCC]”. Succinctly put.

During his doctoral program, he was promoted to Dean of Technical Education at BCCC which allowed him to work as a consultant for the state higher education coordinating board. Abruptly, he took another Dean's position at the flagship campus of American Southwest Community College (ASCC), which he described as "okay, but not the best". After a quick two-year stint at ASCC, Abe returned to the southern state where he began his community college journey. He worked at Southeastern Community College (SECC) for about ten years, four years as Dean of Instruction with oversight over nursing, healthcare, and developmental math to expand his institutional knowledge, and six years as Vice President of Academic Affairs. During this time for reasons he could not explain, he commented, "maybe I want to do a back path to the presidency". To this point in Abe's narrative, his stories were fragmented and rushed, only giving me the highlights. However, on becoming a Vice President at SECC, his narrative deepened, and we began to uncover a theme central to his journey – discovering purpose.

It was as Vice President of Academic Affairs that Abe began to understand "the difference a community college can make when it comes to civically engaging students". He then recounted a story that laid the foundation for the remainder of our interviews. The SECC History department was hiring a new professor, Jerry [a pseudonym], a community college scholar. Jerry had successfully interviewed with the History and Political Science departments and meeting with Abe was the last step in the hiring gauntlet. In Abe's words,

I met a wonderful person who I still keep in touch with, Jerry. I hired him [*Abe began to smile*] as a history instructor. He came to me, I interviewed him, and I remember he had a Jerry Garcia tie on. He sat there and I asked him, "Tell me, what's your passion?". Jerry told me about a whole lot of stuff about civic responsibility working up in [the Midwest]. [*In a rare moment, he slowed his pace*] And it's kind of one of those things where all of a sudden [*his cadence slowed further, emphasizing*] it hit me that I had a *purpose* for what I was doing. [*He paused, looking into the camera, became objective*] You know, I was kind of just doing my job. You know I was Vice President; ran programs; let's graduate students; let's get them jobs. [*Here he brightened*] Then when I talked to Jerry, it's like "Oh, my gosh! I never thought about that". We *really* have a responsibility in education."



I break his story here to make a needed observation. Not knowing the arc of Abe's journey, it would be easy to criticize him. How does one earn a graduate degree in higher education and work in the field for so long without considering the broader responsibilities of senior leaders in higher education? But this is an unfair assessment. Through another lens, Abe is simply being honest. He acknowledged that he missed something very important, something essential. However, once he came to this understanding, he committed fully. Abe's interaction with Jerry is the turning point in his narrative; it is where he began to discover his purpose. It is important to acknowledge this perspective before reading his closing thoughts for this story. Abe exclaimed that,

All of a sudden, [*he began to shake his head*] it was literally overnight [*his head swayed back as if punched*] my whole life changed, right there. If we're going to have a true democracy in this country, you have to have individuals that vote, but also be educated in civic responsibility to help a community grow [*He leveled his gaze at me and nodded his head*].

Abe hired Jerry, who subsequently introduced him to a group of like-minded community college leaders interested in the civic and democratic responsibility of the community college. Abe joined these leaders in their endeavor to institutionalize their organization into the broader community college field. He described the intent of this organization as follows, "We wanted to move away from service learning, which is really go work at a food bank twice a week, to [*with emphasis*] how do you change your community civically?". They went on to form the Democracy Commitment.

A few years later in 2011, Abe received a call from MCC. They wanted him to apply for the presidency. Despite his humility, he accepted the invitation and began the hiring process. While meeting with a member of the search committee, Abe was asked about his proposed goals for MCC. Abe replied that he wanted to bring the Democracy Commitment to the college. When

he met with the Board of Trustees, he reiterated this goal and one of the members became skeptical and with a raised eyebrow asked, “Well, what do you mean you want to bring democracy here?”. Abe replied,

We need to understand that we need to produce civically engaged students to help our community. And in the Democracy Commitment, this discussion doesn’t take place just in political science and government classes. [*He shifts to the present*] Civic responsibility is now [*in the present day*] part of the [*state*] coordinating board’s core values. You have to include it in your instruction somewhere, and most colleges, what they do is they just do a module on political science. You know, what voting is, and they check their box off. We wanted to make it part of the fabric of our institution and the fabric of our discussion in [*with emphasis*] all classes...make it a part of our mission. That’s a part of the job I enjoy, [*he smiled broadly*]. You know, being a president, you always want to pick something that you feel you can leave a legacy to. I do that; I put a little bit in about democracy.

It was through these stories that I first saw Abe’s passion for institutionalizing civic responsibility at MCC, but also a glimpse of the second half of his theme – leaving a legacy. To explore the union of these themes further, I looked deeper into his tenure as MCC president as we address the remainder of my research questions.

### The Community College Mission and the American Democracy

I wanted to know more about the MCC community, so I asked Abe to tell me a story about the local community. He began describing the local demographics, noting, “You know, I have Vietnamese students that come from an hour away to come to my campus rather than a campus that is right around the corner from them because we have a larger Vietnamese population [at MCC]”. He explained that they felt more welcomed at his college and since he accepted the MCC presidency, the percentage of Latinx and Black students doubled, Asian-Americans had quadrupled, and white students had almost halved. He transitioned into a story from a week prior to our interview about a dual credit faculty member teaching at a local high school,

They were talking about diversity and what they can do to give back to the community, like we were talking about, getting more involved in the community, on how they can make a change. They talked about recognizing the Vietnamese refugees from Vietnam. Folks that we have a lot of...and it just so happens that the same week [the mayor] was having a town hall meeting. We have [*a business district?*] that he wants to get more emphasis on, and the students decided to show up at the town hall meeting and gave a presentation that there should be a memorial for Vietnamese refugees. [*He emphasized*] I mean, these are sixteen-year-olds who got a standing ovation, pulled aside, and the leaders of the community now want to take that forward to city council to try to get it memorialized. That's change, that's what we're trying to tell the students. [*He slowed his cadence*] That you *do* have a voice in who you are as part of the community. [Cultural differences in the community] are not celebrated as much, and the students want to be recognized for their heritage because they're here because of their parents and grandparents. I have a number of faculty who were refugees as children. In fact, one of my [faculty] said he was traded for a bag of rice to get out of Vietnam back when he was a child, he tells me these stories.

Abe believes that a community college should be a reflection of the community and told me about his efforts to diversify hiring practices at MCC. He explained that if he had two candidates of equal caliber, but one was bilingual and Vietnamese, he would hire them "because that helps my students, I have a large population of Vietnamese students [who need] ESL programs." He reflected for a moment then said, "I think that's one of the reasons why our enrollment [of Vietnamese students] is so high at my campus. You know people talk; groups talk to each other." When I asked Abe how he came to understand the American democracy, he said "all voices need to be heard, recognized, and valued".

We continued our interview, and I asked him what responsibility the community college has to the American democracy. He became excited,

[*He smiled pleasantly*] That's a really good question, that should really be your first question in your dissertation. [*His demeanor shifted, becoming serious*] We do have a responsibility. Community colleges have evolved from being the Junior College to really being the college of the community. [*I gave a guttural affirmation, this line striking a chord with me and he nodded in understanding*] Our responsibility is to help the community grow. Cities around the country in crisis, they go to the community college for the solution; they don't go to the [four-year] university...Our role [as community colleges] is to improve our community and improve our constituents. And the people in

our community have to see the community college as a place to go to improve themselves [*he paused for effect*] and to help improve their community.

A leader's legacy is built on more than a vision or a list of accomplishments. It also includes how you inspire others. The theme of legacy permeates Abe's narrative, but he is not the only actor. He spent ten years nurturing a culture of civic engagement and democratic participation. It is difficult to claim that the actions of MCC faculty and staff in his stories are a direct result of the culture he fostered, but one can infer that it set the conditions and encouraged them. This is reiterated in response to the following question, "can you share a story that communicates what your institution's community college mission means to you", then hammered home in his final story. Abe responded,

At the community college, [*he slowed his cadence*] our students come from our zip codes, [*he paused for effect, emphasizing*] and they stay in our zip codes [*He held my gaze*]. Our mission is evolving, we have a [higher education accrediting body] visit coming up and I insisted, and made a very good case, to include civic responsibility in our mission for the first time. That is what we do. We are here to be part of the community, and help the community grow by producing individuals that will go back into the community, because this is where they came from, with the thought process, "How can I make a change to leave the place better than where I came from?" [*He paused for effect*] I think that my job as a president, [*he emphasized, eyes wide*] and it took me ten years, this wasn't just "Hey guys, we have civic engagement now!", I mean, this took a long time to do - to create an environment where students [and faculty] feel comfortable expressing their views.

How can we contribute to our communities democratically? I asked Abe, "How does your institution prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy". Once again, the theme of legacy emerged from his story, but this time from multiple contexts. I close with a warning, the following story is graphic, but one that needs to be told. Abe told me,

We took a group of students to [a Civil Rights Museum]. It's a new museum about people that were lynched. They have stones with all their names [on them]. So, the students went there, and they also [travelled out of state and] went to [a bridge, the site of an infamous lynching of a young black man by two white men who were acquitted by an all-white jury] and met somebody who actually crossed the bridge, [*he shook his head*] very moving for them. Well, they [came back and] found out that there was an individual

who was lynched here [near their city], and they found the tree. They found the land where it was done, the faculty and the students. They started at the city organization and got a grant to buy the land, made it into a monument, and they got some of the dirt and brought it back to the museum.

Through these stories, it is clear that Abe recognized that community colleges have a responsibility to their local communities. Abe's passion for representing the entirety of the MCC community helped democratize the community, expanding representation and commemorating those affected by racial injustice. Furthermore, his stories communicated civic engagement and responsibility in action, the very legacy he worked to instill in MCC culture. This is a powerful example of how MCC is preparing students for a meaningful role in the American democracy.

#### Thematic Analysis – Discovering Purpose, Leaving a Legacy

As I mentioned above, to open our interview, I asked Abe the same question I asked all my participants, "Please describe your career path in becoming a community college president. What was this journey like for you?". Abe gave terse responses to provide the necessary content for his journey: where he was born, where he attended college, etc. But when we arrived at his story about interviewing Jerry, the history professor, his stories changed; they became longer, had more depth, and spoke to something greater than himself. His interaction with Jerry was a defining moment in his personal and professional life,

*[in a slow cadence]*...all of a sudden it hit me that I had a *purpose* for what I was doing. You know, I was kind of just doing my job. You know I was Vice President; ran programs; let's graduate students; let's get them jobs. *[Here he brightened]* Then when I talked to Jerry, it's like "Oh, my gosh! I never thought about that". We *really* have a responsibility in education."

The way he introduced this story and the radical shift in his cadence, length of reply, and weight of his words signaled the importance of this moment. He wanted me to know that this epiphany meant something, not just to him, but to his college and community. He was awakened to the democratizing purpose of the community college. Once established, he committed to this

ideal and turned to serving MCC, creating and nurturing a democratic culture defined by civic responsibility. But he also left a legacy within the community: in the growing shares of students who did not find representation at other colleges; in memorials yet to be raised celebrating diversity; in the stories of citizens and students marginalized in a society and culture that often overlooks them. Put another way, yes, he discovered his purpose; but most importantly, he acted on it.

After completing his narrative profile, I chose the pseudonym of Abe for this participant. A voracious reader of American history, Abe often referenced books that he was currently reading to support or compare his beliefs. Near the end of our final interview, he talked about an Abraham Lincoln biography he was reading, *And There was Light* (Meacham, 2022), a book that I started as well. Lincoln's life story illustrates the roots and durability of racism in US society, but also the capacity of a leader's conscience to influence and change institutional culture. Put another way, his life is an exemplar of the purpose and legacy of democratic leaders, the thematic union of Abe's journey.

#### Eleanor: A Culture of Service

"I think [as a leader] that you have to bring to an institution [a culture of] caring and concern for your students, while making sure you're meeting the economic needs of your community."

#### The Journey

Eleanor was my first participant, and I was simultaneously nervous and excited to begin our interview. Her institution, North State Community College (NSCC) is in the northwestern corner of the state nestled in a valley below rolling hills. Looking at NSCC's website and the pictures of the community, I was drawn to the familiar terrain. As someone who grew up in the foothills of California, I appreciated the sea of trees that encapsulates the college, stretching out

towards the hills, enveloping them. Our interviews were conducted in the fall, and I imagined the rich shades of brown that would transform the college landscape. The clearing in which NSCC rests is dotted with trees, scattered in around the campus. Parking lots encircle NSCC, but this ensures that special quality one feels when walking through a college campus unabated by traffic, somehow bustling with people, but with an organic calm. Our interview started at 9:00am, Alaska time, and I remember being energized through caffeine and a good night's rest.

When we began, my first impression was more a feeling than a logical thought. She was very comforting to speak and listen to, soft spoken with only the slightest variations in her voice and tone, the pitch of her voice uniform through our interviews. Her cadence had slight fluctuations, neither too slow nor too fast. To signal emphasis, she used her eyes and hands rather than voice, looking directly into the camera or gesturing when making a significant observation or statement. In both of our interviews, her attire was polished and professional. In both interviews, she wore a thin golden necklace loose around her neck, tweed jackets over a dress shirt, and large, blue-patterned framed glasses. Her zoom background was a custom picture of her office. Three pictures, symmetrically placed, were above her depicting various NSCC intersections and walkways. The type of special places that are built to reflect modernity but are located too close to nature to make a full transition. Flanking her were two potted plants, simultaneously manicured but wild, set in an office space, reinforcing this environmental tone.

Not surprisingly, I bungled the opening minutes of my first dissertation interview, chatting amicably with Eleanor and getting lost in the rhythm of her stories talking about the beginning of her journey, unprompted. I remember realizing that she was providing me with the essential essence of a narrative interview – thick, rich description – and I hastily stopped her so that I could start recording and ask her the question she was already answering: “Would you

please describe your career path in becoming a community college president. What was this journey like for you”. Here, we begin.

Eleanor was raised in a small rural town and as a high school student, her parents did not approve of her desire to attend college. Instead, they wanted her to get a job after graduation to support herself. She decided to continue her education and completed a bachelors in psychology at a private liberal arts college in the northeast. For much of her early adult life, Eleanor was a stay-at-home mom raising two sons who are four years apart. Her husband, Mark, worked lucrative but short-term jobs in the hospitality sector, resulting in their family moving across and between the American southern and northeastern regions. During a longer stint in the Deep South in the late 1980s, Eleanor earned a Master of Education in counseling from the state flagship university. Her first exposure to the community college came in the early 1990s.

Although her partner, Mark, held several lucrative positions, at one point they found themselves between jobs and living on a generous severance package. In search of a job, Eleanor volunteered at a local career center and found that Mountain Valley Community College (MVCC), a public comprehensive community college, needed a student services specialist. She applied and was offered the position part-time. Her “office” was in the stairwell leading to the top floor of a refurbished barn. Naturally, there were many dead flies around because the barn housed cattle in a not-too-distant past. Eleanor wore many hats, including having to call 1-800-[cattle] when the local cows got loose and wandered onto campus. She used a pushcart to “meet a student in any class, any space that was available”. She worked in this position, part-time, for almost four years before briefly accepting a full-time position at a neighboring, rural community college on an eighteen-month contract. Eight months in, however, MVCC reached out and offered her the student services position back, but full-time; she accepted.



During this time, MVCC was expanding their campus after receiving a state grant to build a new student services center. The grant covered five new full-time positions, including a deanship with oversight of the center. A new dean was hired, Amy, a woman with “a temper like nobody’s business” and an abrasive leadership style that caused “probably four or five administrators during her time [to leave their] keys on the desk and said, ‘I’m out of here!’”. At this point in our interview, Eleanor broke away from her narrative and commented that the following story was where she began to recognize the skills necessary for a community college president.

After a particular painful experience, an administrator quit and met with the MVCC president explaining the toxic working conditions and how unreasonable Amy was. The president “physically came and Human Resources removed her from campus and reassigned her because she still had an active contract.” As the president helped escort Amy across campus, the president “saw a piece of trash on the grass, bent over, and picked it up and Amy asked [incredulously] ‘How do you as president pick up the trash?’”. Eleanor, imitating the president’s reply, opened her eyes wide for emphasis and replied, “It’s my campus. I care about the appearance of it, and of course I’m going to pick up trash if I see it”. Eleanor immediately rocked back in her chair with a wide smile.

The way that Eleanor delivered this line, and her prompt reaction, was telling. Remember, she indicated at the beginning of this short story that this is where she began to recognize the skills a community college president needs. Her narrative theme – a culture of service – begins to shine through, including her belief that a president has agency in establishing and upholding the culture of the community college. This is explored more deeply as we continue down her narrative.

Because of Amy's abusive leadership practice and now with every senior position between Eleanor and the Deanship vacant, Eleanor was the only one at the burgeoning center who had a clue what was going on. She explained,

We were about to open the new [Student Services Center]. Now, let's fast forward to 1999. So, [*she leaned in close to the camera*] I actually hired the faculty, I bought the furniture for the offices, chose the carpet color, chose the pink color. Oh, [*she chuckled*] my best story is when the auditors came when we were still in this trailer. And of course, I would do placement testing and would do some financial aid advising; I did enough to get the students working with the financial aid director and academic advising. But you know, when it came time to pay their tuition, I had to take their money and put it in a bank bag. Well, at the end of the week, that money had to get to the bank. So, I did the deposit slips, and I would take it to the bank and give the business office their receipts. Well, the internal auditor came and asked me how things worked there, and I told him. He said, "Well, you can't be doing that, you can't be handing the money and depositing it. That's just a violation of audit procedures." I said, "Well you tell MVCC that. What do you want me to do? Leave the money in the drawer?" I mean, seriously? [*She leaned back with an incredulous but humored smile*] So, that's a little bit of an idea of the breadth of this skills that I had, plus I was teaching the student development class, so I had classroom experience [too]. Before I became Vice President, I was teaching five sections a semester of that.

Eleanor was quickly promoted to Director of Student Services, a position she held for two years, then went through "a competitive interview process" and was promoted again to Vice President of Student Success. During her tenure as vice president, Eleanor completed a remote PhD in higher education at a public research university in the Midwest. After four years as vice president and a doctorate completed, she noted "this is where my journey to the presidency started". During this time, a new president came and went, and interims cycled through until a new president, Anabelle, was hired from a small nearby community college with "maybe five or six hundred students". Eleanor considered her own responsibilities comparatively and thought "I could be the president there" and applied for the vacant presidency that Annabelle just left. Eleanor met with Annabelle, informing her of her intentions, stating, "We have a well-oiled machine here in student services. I feel like [*she opened her eyes wide in sincerity*] I've given it

everything I can, things are going really well, but I think there's another chapter for me out there." Annabelle immediately took Eleanor under her wing. Brimming with humility, Eleanor explained, shaking her head and emphasizing,

[Annabelle] put the wheels in motion for me. Talk about a mentor! She went and talked to the Chancellor and before I knew it, I was on search committees for positions at the systems office, I was re-engineering task forces, and then in the spring of 2010 [*she leaned in for emphasis*] three [in-state] schools came open for presidencies.

She applied to each; however, none were a good fit. These institutions had various underlying issues requiring specialties that she did not possess. The first presidential hiring committee was seeking someone with a coal mining background, and the following committee a finance background. The third did not progress to an in-person interview. Discouraged, she thought, "I am going to put this thing to rest". However, she was contacted through a head-hunting firm and encouraged to apply at a rural community college in a neighboring state. She flew down two days prior to graduation, conducted a quick interview, and flew back in time for graduation. A few days later, a search consultant contacted her and said,

"Look, I want to tell you, you were not selected for this position, However, there is one out there for you. I guarantee it. When you see who was actually selected for this position, you'll know why you didn't get it." [*Eleanor shook her head*] So, basically, they wanted a good old boy. They didn't want a woman. I guess I was thrown into the mix for the heck of it or whatever. So, I said "look" to myself, I'm done with this. I'm not going after any more. This is really too time consuming. I'm just going to hunker down and be happy with what I've got, [*she gestured, arms wide*] because I was very happy. Then, the Chancellor calls me, and he says "Eleanor, how would you like to say 'I've done it' instead of 'I could do it'".

Another presidency had opened at a rural community college within the state, and they wanted her to be interim president. She accepted. Three months in, the head-hunting firm reached out again about an open presidency at a rural community college in the north, NSCC. She initially decided to not apply because she had just accepted her current position as interim president. And, she did not want to burn bridges with the Chancellor thinking, "I have to be able

to finish this thing out”. Thankfully, NSCC had an interim as well who stayed until Eleanor finished her current contract. When the interim at NCSS left and a search for a permanent president opened, she applied and accepted a job offer a month later. She is now going on her twelfth year and is the first woman president of NSCC.

#### The Community College Mission and the American Democracy

Reflecting on her experiences, Eleanor noted, “I think student services is an excellent background for the presidency...it was basically where my core values were in terms of my work...to have students come first”. When I asked, “Can you share a story that communicates what your institution’s community college mission means to you”, Eleanor recalled being on the NSCC campus for the first time and experiencing the tipping point for her decision to commit to the presidency,

One of the things that sold me on NSCC was banners that were around campus. [*She leaned in closer to the camera*] They said, “Your success, our success”. That’s core to my philosophy as a student services person. I’ve always had the student at the center of what I was doing or thinking. [*She paused, reflecting*] That’s pretty descriptive of who I am in my role at the college. I’m very, very much student focused, and student centered. And, you have to look through the lens of equity when you have a student complain or a parent complain and that kind of thing... To have student come first, to know what their needs are, that’s why we’re here, to serve them. When I saw that, it just spoke to me. These people believe in the same thing that I do.

When I commented that I appreciated the slogan “Your success, our success”, she continued,

That told me what the culture here was...that’s the philosophy of our culture. It runs through our faculty, our student services, our staff. Everybody seems to have the best interest of students, [*she paused and looked straight into the camera*] and if you don’t, you probably aren’t going to last long here. So, I don’t mean that in a mean way. But I mean, it’s not going to be a good fit for you, because that’s who we are, and you’re not going to be happy here.

I wanted to travel deeper down this narrative trail that Eleanor had opened. She spoke with such passion, and I intuited that this was a significant moment in her journey. I asked her to tell me more about this experience and why it resonated with her. She replied,

I wanted to be at a place where people felt *that* way and felt the same way I did about students. Because when you're not in that environment it makes leadership very, very difficult. I'd say the institution where I was interim, [*she leaned forward close to the camera*] I'm not so sure a [student centered mindset] permeated through that culture. And it's not something you could really put on paper. [*Her eyes narrowed, focused, digging deeper within her mind*] It's not words, it's a feeling that you have and when you're around [the campus]. People who really care can observe even from a distance how you're treating students [*she became objective*] and I didn't get that warm fuzzy at that school, and I think it's because a lot of it didn't come from the top, the president prior to my coming there was extremely focused on workforce development. I mean, yes, you have to be focused on workforce development. But there's a balance. I think [as a leader] that you have to bring to an institution [a culture of] caring and concern for your students, while making sure you're meeting the economic needs of your community.

It is easy to get lost in these memorable events and lose sight of the fundamental question on the table. I had asked Eleanor about her community college mission and what it meant to her. She chose to share the moment when she connected an element of NSCC culture with her student services philosophy: "Your success, our success". Through the moral of her stories, I began to understand that Eleanor associated a culture of service with the community college mission. Both servant leadership and the importance of institutional culture are prevalent themes across all my participants narratives. However, Eleanor's narrative focus and personal dedication to these themes sets her apart. They are the essence of her narrative journey. When looking back at her supporting stories, these themes are contextualized: "I had this pushcart and I would go meet a student in any class, any space that was available". Or in the dichotomous leadership styles of Amy and Annabelle. Amy, being reassigned for creating a toxic work culture, witnessed Annabelle picking up trash, challenging her and Annabelle replying, "It's my campus. I care about the appearance of it, and of course I'm going to pick up trash if I see it". The choice of these stories is not coincidental, the same moral is reiterated time and again. We continued to unpack these themes – a culture of service and servant leadership – as we explored my remaining questions.

I asked Eleanor, “How did you come to understand the American democracy?”. She responded, “I think the inclusivity of community colleges, the way we touch our communities in so many different ways, is indicative of being Democracy’s College, [*she shrugged in a matter-of-fact way*] it’s the People’s College, you know?”. She paused and, unprompted, redirected our focus to a secondary question in my interview guide – she quoted “Can you tell a story about the impact your institution has had on your local community”. She then shared this story,

We had a paper mill close [during the pandemic] which displaced six or seven hundred workers. A cohort of about one hundred [of them] wanted to go through our [workforce development program]. [The facility where it is located has] been under development since 2018 and it's a quite remarkable space. [*She leaned back and settled into the story, enjoying the description of the program*] We have easily over three million dollars-worth of equipment in that space. It's got advanced manufacturing, industrial maintenance, welding, woodworking, robotics. Anyways, the list goes on and on, but we were able to get those workers and federal funds to pay for [their training]. [When using these funds] the clock starts ticking, [*her demeanor became more serious*] and there's no leeway whatsoever, you only have so much time to get your training done. So, we had to divide those groups up into like nine students with one instructor, the limit was ten [because of new Pandemic guidelines]. [*She rested her head on her hand, remembering this struggle, eyes widening slightly*] And around the clock we trained those workers, got them graduated, and out into other jobs during a pandemic. So, [*she leaned back again with a hint of a smile, relaxing again*] I think that's one of the greatest stories that we have.

Without pausing, she launched into a description of their robust nursing program that students can attend locally in-person, or remotely from out of state. She commented,

Those are two examples of how we really do impact the community. But it’s interesting, [*she settled back in her chair, reflecting*], when you're in the public and meet people, you can see how we, the college, impact the community in *so* many ways. And our graduates [and parents] are out there spreading the word. So, you’re constantly getting comments like, “Oh, yeah, my daughter went through the nursing program”, or “My son went through the auto tech program”, so on a daily basis you get feedback like that [*she leaned forward, nodding, a hint of a smile on her lips*].

Eleanor parallels her understanding of the American Democracy with how community colleges influence their communities, creating the conditions to support human fulfillment however it can. Eleanor’s commitment to human fulfillment was demonstrated in her final story.

While preparing for our final interview, I recognized the pattern of Eleanor referencing institutional culture when speaking to the community college mission. Therefore, I closed our final interview with this question: “Could you share a story that speaks to the relationship between culture and the community college mission?”. Here is her story,

We publish a literary magazine every year through [a national association dedicated to the humanities at the community college]. The name of our magazine is *Manifest* [a pseudonym], and [we have won regional and national literary competitions]. In fact, [*she began to smile*] I just saw the student editor this morning. A few of her advisors came to the board meeting to talk about their experience in developing this magazine. [*She leaned in*] But I think if you could see the editorial board of the magazine, and the way that the faculty and staff on that board really shepherd those students along into their art, their poetry, and their short stories, I think it goes a long way [in showing] how the culture of this college really embraces the mission to [*she leaned back*] deliver diverse and relevant education centered around student success in the support of an engaged community.

Eleanor mailed me a copy of *Manifest*; it rests on the table next to me now as I write.

There were no thematic or other requirements bounding or directing submissions; instead, the theme arose organically and is alluded to in the title. As I leaf through the many submissions – poems, photographs, essays, shorts stories, testimonials, drawings – I feel the mass catharsis contained within. A multitude of expressions that speak to the human condition, the desire to create and the desire to be heard.

#### Thematic Analysis – A Culture of Service

The genesis of Eleanor’s narrative theme, a culture of service, is seen in her first story. Working out of a refurbished barn, she used a pushcart to “meet a student in any class, any space that was available”. This story exemplifies her values and understanding of leadership as service. When we look to the stories that form the middle of her narrative, we see dichotomous examples of institutional culture. First, Amy, who led a toxic culture, witnesses Annabelle picking up trash, “How do you as president pick up the trash?”; the rejoinder, “It’s my campus...of course I’m going to pick up trash if I see it”. She reflected on how working in student services shaped

her values and tells the story of being on the NSCC campus for the first time. She saw the banners that read, “Your success, our success”, and “when I saw that, it just spoke to me. These people believe in the same thing that I do.” As we explored in her closing stories, that is the type of student-centered culture she seeks to institutionalize. Institutional culture is difficult to change, it requires vision, strong leadership, and buy-in from stakeholders. Eleanor’s journey shows us the strengths of a culture of service when it is institutionalized, part of the institution’s daily life. The community and students all benefit. Furthermore, she described the intersection between the American democracy and the community college mission as supporting human fulfillment and paralleled this concept with a culture of service. Simply put, a culture of service supports and improves our well-being.

After completing her narrative profile, I chose the pseudonym of Eleanor for this participant. In American history, Eleanor Roosevelt is revered for many reasons. She championed human and civil rights for underrepresented populations, was a national voice and leader in the feminist movement, and sponsored countless programs, events, and projects related to these endeavors (Jabour, 2021). When examining the narrative of her life, one sees how Eleanor Roosevelt used her privilege and position to change the culture of institutions to improve equity among underrepresented populations. She challenged the concept of *de jure* racial segregation at a human welfare conference in Birmingham, Alabama, understood that economic security and education for all citizens were essential to the health of democracy, and championed diversity of representation and thought in political and social institutions (Jabour, 2021). Her life’s work and my participant’s share a theme of working toward democratic equity by engaging with and changing institutional culture. For these reasons, I chose the pseudonym, Eleanor.



## Robert: Bringing the Community Together

“At the culinary and event center, people come together and gather and eat and converse, and we have corporate retreats there, weddings, board retreats, and my rotary meets there now. You know it's a gathering place to bring the community together. I see that as an extension of the community college mission, providing *more* access, a different kind of access to bring the community together.”

### The Journey

I am a natural introvert and am often surprised by the energy emitted by extroverts.

Robert is such a person, beaming with infectious happiness, a smile punctuating every sentence and arms waving for emphasis. Despite his verbosity, Robert was quite humble, often expressing surprise and gratitude after climbing another rung on the corporate ladder, attributing luck where competence should be applied. He worked behind a standing desk, which did not surprise me given how much he gestured when he spoke. His office existed in the liminal space of organized chaos – too full to be considered “clean” but too organized to be considered “dirty”. Leather couches and chairs were neatly positioned around his office, cleaned off in preparation to receive visitors. I could see the campus through Robert’s office window and students passed by from time to time. The table below the window had reams of papers stacked haphazardly on top, a potted plant flirting with being overgrown. The table closest to his standing desk was neatly stacked with books and various documents. In the three weeks between our two interviews, the setting within his office changed only slightly, a new book here another stack of papers there. My impression was he had many interests and duties and bounced between and among them. He dressed in business casual, a professional buttoned up long sleeve, top button undone, and a t-shirt underneath. He wore black framed glasses in stark contrast to white hair that resembled the liminal state of his office – organized chaos.

Both interviews were held in the morning hours, and I was happy to see a glimpse of his campus, Sunny Day Community College (SDCC), from his window; although, I was jealous of

the sunshine beaming through. Our second interview crept into November when the sun chooses to ignore Alaska, situated at the top of the northern hemisphere, causing daylight to be scarce. SDCC is a public, suburban comprehensive community college part of a larger state system situated in the northeastern United States. From pictures on the SDCC website, I saw rolling hills shape the horizon and a large river and multiple interstates parallel the campus. The local community was once a powerhouse in manufacturing; however, many of the corporations moved on and the current industry attraction is in healthcare buttressed by a large college town. I began our interview in a familiar fashion and asked him to describe his journey in becoming a community college president.

Robert was born and raised in the northeastern United States. He was a first-generation college student, his father was a truck driver, and his mother was a stay-at-home mom for Robert and his three younger sisters. During elementary, middle, and high school, Robert was involved with many after school activities including but not limited to athletics, community organizations, yearbook editor, multiple student clubs, etc. Brimming with enthusiasm, Robert described his transition to a local public community college and desire to continue his active participation in student activities. “So” he told me, “I got into college, and I did the same thing, and of course, in college, clubs and organizations are a huge deal”. Like many college students, he considered switching his major, desiring to become a teacher. He worked part-time at a country club selling golf equipment for his uncle, [*smiling broadly*] “I was never a great golfer, but I love the retail side of things”, helped run the pro-shop and set up local tournaments. He then transitioned into meeting the first significant mentor of his professional life,

At the community college there was this guy, [*he paused for effect*] James. He was the director of student activities [*he chuckled*] and no matter what I did, there he was! As the director of student activities, of course, he was involved with all the clubs and organizations in one fashion or another with intramurals and the sports complex, travel,

he offered trips to Snow Mountain [a pseudonym], involved with the school newspaper, and anywhere the student activities and money was being spent, he was involved. So, I thought, “Wow! This is [*a smile blooming on his face*] an intriguing job he has.” I didn’t know, [because nobody in my family went to college], what kind of college careers you could have besides being a professor; you could be a teacher, but I didn’t know anything about all the administrative jobs until I got there.

James mentored Robert and told him about his journey in becoming the Director of Student Activities: majoring in recreation, earning a master’s, and working as a residence hall director. James’ story had a profound effect on Robert who followed in his footsteps,

I really enjoy all my work around athletics, you know my running, my golfing, my soccer, and working at the country club. And I thought, gee! I never thought about majoring in recreation or physical education, or anything like that. I knew I wasn’t going to be a physical education teacher. [James] would say, “Hey, you know, we have these organizations, the National Association of Campus activities and the Association of College Students International. They have these events where students to along with the professionals, and they have workshops and all this stuff, and we talk how to put on student activities. If you’d like to come to one of those meetings with us, I always bring a handful of students to these meetings because that’s how they work. You could learn a lot more about the field.” So, I said, “Sure! [*he grinned*] I’d love to do that! [*chuckling*]”.

James helped Robert make social connections with other directors, unions, and organizations across the state. Whenever he bumped into someone new, Robert would ask them how they got into student affairs and pieced together how he could make his own journey into the field. He changed his major to physical education and recreation deciding, “I’m going to be a student activities director when I grow up” he said with a smile. He continued as James’s mentee for another two years, then transferred to a private four-year research university. He immediately applied for a job as an activities assistant, he laughed and noted, “They actually had paid positions in the student union...it was no longer just volunteer”, brimming with happiness, “and the rest is history.” He worked as a residence hall assistant through his undergrad, becoming resident hall director his senior year and continued in that role until he completed an MEd in 1980. With his strong student affairs background, he accepted a position as Director of Student

Activities and Athletics at Urban Hill Community College (UHCC), a large public comprehensive community college. He told me,

And I got that job, and I was there for just two years. I thought I'd be there for the rest of my life. I thought that this is it. I've died and gone to heaven. I'm going to be in this job for the rest of my life."

Here Robert focused a bit, describing why he moved on from a job he so clearly loved. In his new position, he advised the student government which he described as "an activist student government." It was reminiscent, he said, of the 1960s when students challenged universities with various strikes protesting or supporting social conditions and events such as the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. As Robert explained, "We had a very Machiavellian president, to put it politely" who was concerned about how this would be perceived at the state house. And "the [UHCC] president really wanted me to be quite controlling and manipulative with our student leaders, [*shaking his head*] and that just wasn't me." He quit soon after this encounter, reflecting that, "I'm not going to be happy in that environment where he expects me to be manipulative and Machiavellian with students".

He then moved farther north and took a position at Urban State College as Director of Residence Life. He considered taking on greater roles at the university and applied for an assistant dean position but didn't get it. However, his dean, Ryan, a second mentor, changed his life with the following advice,

"You know, Robert, you ought to think about being a college president, specifically a community college president. You're a graduate, you just came out of a community college job. You could be a community college president someday." [*Robert makes an incredulous but humorous face*] It had never entered my mind! Not even remotely had it entered my mind that I could go from being a residential life and student activities director to being a college president.

Robert took Ryan's advice to heart and decided that if he was going to stay in higher education, he needed a doctorate to move into senior positions. His beginnings in student

activities had nurtured his passion for being with people and bringing people together. These experiences are notable and helped shape his passion as a community college president. Now, he pursued a fellowship at a large private research university in the northeast covering three quarters of his doctoral tuition and became a residence hall director again, “I got into the program there, absolutely freaking loved it. Had a ball!”. His classmates were working professionals from across the state and Robert described his classes as “a laboratory for learning about higher education at a university”. With the goal of a community college presidency in mind, he chose to research community colleges for all his projects and papers. For his dissertation, he conducted an in-depth qualitative study of a high-profile president and inculcated himself in his leadership team for a year.

He graduated with his PhD in higher education in 1989 before taking on a series of positions at multiple institutions across the northern and southern United States improving access to higher education institutions. The solution was to create interactive television outposts across each state “to put everybody within twenty miles or less of a college”. He continued in this work for several years until a director’s position opened in his “old backyard” up north to set up distance programs; he accepted.

Robert was quickly promoted several times before making a lateral move to Vice President at Public Technical Community College (PTCC) where he stayed for six years. As vice president, Robert was afforded the opportunity to engage with the community. He recalled a story during this time about a president from a neighboring institution. As Robert explained,

We had a president just down the road and he started spending his endowment on the neighborhood. He was kind of ahead of his time, and *literally* invested in the community that the college was located in. I was part of Campus Compact back then and have been involved in it on and off ever since. We had a conference at his place, and he spoke to the importance of colleges and universities with very healthy endowments. Obviously, a lot of the endowment is restricted, but where you can, make investments in your community.

I asked the question, “Well, community colleges don’t have big endowments, not something we can really do”. *[Robert’s head snapped to the camera]* And he said, “Well, be a convener. Bring people in your community together.”

Robert connected his work in student activities, bringing people together, with this concept to be a convener – to bring the community together. This experience had a profound effect on Robert, as we will discover deeper into his narrative. After six years as a vice president at PTCC, Robert began applying for community college presidencies and was picked up by a headhunting firm who directed him to a college in the Midwest where he “spent six glorious years as president”. However, the call of family and the northeast became too much. The SDCC presidency opened, he applied, was chosen, and moved back home. At the time of our interview, he had been president of SDCC for thirteen years.

#### The Community College Mission and the American Democracy

When I asked Robert, “what responsibility does the community college have to the American democracy”, he lamented the decline of high school civics. We had discussed how he came to understand the American democracy and he identified his high school civic course and his father, a news junkie, as his primary sources. He continued,

It’s not being done in high schools, and it would probably be impossible in this political environment to bring it back. We have [learning objectives] where we offer civics as a one way to meet the civic engagement [learning objective]. It’s not a requirement, and not what I envisioned. *[His disappointment was evident, tone dropping]* We envisioned actual civic engagement attached to the classroom...one of my big disappointments here... *[he paused and recouped, gaining momentum again]* I think somebody's got to do it, and as Democracy’s College it ought to be community colleges.

He spoke to the challenges and explained the difficulties in instilling a culture of civic engagement among faculty. It is important to recognize the challenges that presidents face; not every aspiration can be actualized. I appreciated Robert’s honesty admitting this disappointment

to me. We pressed on and I asked him to share a story that communicated what his institution's community college mission means to him. He told me the following story,

I'm half Italian on my mother's side, the cooking side, thankfully, so I like good food. My wife and I are foodies. [There's a] stunningly beautiful historic building we decided to fix up and put a culinary center in there. [We completed the renovations] and two months before Covid hit we opened it...[*he chuckled wryly*] So, we get in there January, Covid hits and everything shuts down, and for a year and a half did almost nothing in there. Today we have about twenty-five, thirty students in the program. We can handle one hundred and twenty-five, but as an event center it's *hugely* popular, and that's kind of the culmination of the story, because [*he smiled*] food brings people together. So, I envisioned, all kinds of food gatherings there to bring the community together in many ways, in a microcosm, and in a very specific way that the community college brings people from all over the community together. [*He gestured right then left*] But then we scatter them around into different classrooms. At the culinary and event center, people come together and gather and eat and converse, and we have corporate retreats there, weddings, board retreats, and my rotary meets there now. You know it's a gathering place to bring the community together. I see that as an extension of the community college mission, providing *more* access, a different kind of access to bring the community together.

Robert talked passionately about the culinary and events center, and it was a wonderful exemplar of his narrative theme, bringing the community together. I wanted him to speak more on this theme and commented that this sounded like a meaningful experience to him. He spoke about their ethnic cooking classes, different food festivals, and bringing "culinary flair" to the town noting that, "community colleges everywhere bring slices of their communities together" and this resonated with him. He then told me a story about a problem in the local community. Many of the city agencies were looking for neutral ground to combine many of their services. Robert explained,

The head of the industrial development agency (IDA) came to me and said, "What would you think about putting our one-stop economic development center on campus". [The SDCC] mission is to serve [*with emphasis*] the county. It's not to serve any one community, neighborhood, or group of people but to serve everybody in the county and the surrounding counties as well. So, they ended up moving and [the IDA built] a building right here on campus. So again, bringing people together [*he shrugged*] who otherwise wouldn't have been coming together. They would have been going to separate places for the Industrial Development Agency, the Chamber of Commerce, and the

Manufacturers Association. Now they're all under one roof, with also a training center for our local big credit union...So, we're bringing people together that way as well, and all that stems from the high priority, at least for me, anyway, and many community college leaders to be a place to bring people together on the campus, who otherwise might not come together in other parts of the community. We do this every day with our students coming to campus, [but] this is more focused and intentional.

Here again we see Robert's passion coming to fruition. What I enjoyed about this story was his willingness to connect all aspects of the SDCC community together, whether they be students, citizens, city government, or corporate entities. It also discerns a unique aspect about the community college as an institution and its capacity to reach so many people and groups from all parts of community life.

#### Thematic Analysis – Bringing the Community Together

In America, citizens read the opening words of the Preamble to the United States Constitution, “We the People”, as a sign that citizens are the source of legitimacy and power in our democracy. Indeed, the people are the *prima facie* power in all historical democracies. The “people”, in political theory, is commonly understood as civil society (Held, 2006). One of the more commonly understood indicators of a consolidated democracy is a healthy civil society. Robert's passion, and narrative theme, speak to bringing the community, civil society, together in different ways. This passion was nurtured early in his career in student activities and by his mentors. The open-access mission of the community college is a core function of the institution; but Robert recognized that more could be done.

Understanding the dimension of place in Robert's narrative reveals how he seeks to fulfill the democratic purpose of the community college. In his stories, the community college is a place of great import for both the community and community college students. At the heart of this work is the facilitation of engagement and belonging; getting students invested in the college, the culture, and to interact with others. Robert's passion for place, for the community



college as a communal site for democratic gatherings and participation cannot be fully understood without considering the social dimension of his narrative. For Robert, place is the venue where he and others in the community build and then facilitate human relations. As Robert explained, SDCC is a site for deliberate dialogue debates, forums, and voter registration drives. It is also the place where meetings happen for the civic engagement board, civic programs, industrial agencies, local corporate and economic associations, and city government entities. And all of these happen with the intentional organization of the community college. These interactions bring people together who might otherwise go to disparate places, “I bring that world together, and we bring people together in a different way”. When I asked Robert how his institution has impacted his local community. He replied,

If you look around, you know, at the top corporate and government and nonprofit leaders in this community, you can’t turn around at any community event and not run into someone who’s, you know, a leading institution in the region who didn’t go to this college. It’s amazing! The current county executive is a graduate. His predecessor was a graduate. Her predecessor was a graduate, seven or eight of the nine county executives since the position was constituted, a current state senator, the previous state senator, my vice president, my chief academic officer, a number of faculty and staff, just so many. The biggest developers in the region, there’s just way too many people in that category here in this region who are leaders in their field who started [at SDCC].

After completing his narrative profile, I chose the pseudonym of Robert for this participant. Robert Putnam, who some call the “poet laureate of civil society” (Deparle, 2015), is a seminal scholar in the field of political science. His comparative study of regional differences in Italy suggested that civil society, specifically social capital, is key to institutional performance and the consolidation of democracy. My participant’s passion for his community is evident in his journey in becoming a community college president but shines in his stories about the mission and purpose of the community college. In his own words, “half my job is in the community”. His

Italian heritage and dedication to bringing the community together led me to his pseudonym – Robert.

### Ida: Support through Service

“It’s all about service, and I would say to anybody thinking that they want to be in a leadership role as a college president to realize that the purpose of that role is to give the support to students, faculty, and staff to do their jobs effectively and to help our students to complete their goals.”

### The Journey

Ida spoke in a very comforting tone and reminded me of my own grandmother, which makes sense considering she is a grandmother of ten. When I rewatched our interviews, my shoulders rolled back, and I became quite relaxed all over again. Being in such a state was comforting, but it threw me into a stark juxtaposition when, in the same comforting manner, she would succinctly convey soothing wisdom or startling revelation. There was little fluctuation in her tone, cadence, or physical queues. She most often signaled emphasis with her eyes, looking directly into the camera at choice moments. Although there were only slight fluctuations in her voice, over time I began to recognize their significance. Put another way, she was prudent in her mannerisms, to great effect. Because of the quasi-unstructured design, nothing she said could be scripted. Instead, her responses resembled a union of free associative thought and a life’s worth of reflection. Early in our first interview together she commented with a comforting smile, “Let me know if there’s something you asked that I didn’t quite answer because when I start talking, I go off in a lot of different directions”. This statement was preceded by an eloquent, powerful reflection on what democracy meant to her; living through the Civil Rights movement as a child; witnessing people participating, marching, and voting, changing their communities’ lives for the better. This powerful statement is explored more deeply in her narrative journey.

Both of our interviews offered surprises. In our first interview, Ida was zooming in from car after returning from an unexpected presidential task. I would like to note that she could have cancelled and taken time for a mental break on her drive home, but she chose to speak with me, and I am grateful for her diligence and work ethic. The morning of our second interview, I remember waking up and literally not being able to reach my vehicle, let alone drive it. Alaska was experiencing an inordinate amount of snow, seemingly a misnomer, and I zoomed in from my home that day. In our second interview I was able to see her office for the first time. In a familiar way, it had a lived-in quality about it. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Ida slept in her office or spent an inordinate amount of time there. But it had the feel of personal ownership; indeed, Ida had been president at Midwest Suburban Community College (MSCC) for eleven years. Potted plants sat in natural spaces on tables and windows. A bookshelf nested in the corner with books leaning this way and that. Smaller items such as mints, tissues, awards, and plaques were where they fit most naturally. It was as if every item in her office had been in several places but came to rest exactly where they needed to be. Her office had the feeling of a home, allowing one to relax in a space that wasn't threatening by being immaculate. There was not a couch in that space, but if there had been, I would have jumped at the chance to prop open a book then promptly fall asleep from relaxation.

MSCC is a public comprehensive community college located in the suburbs outside of a thriving populated midwestern city. Looking at pictures and videos on MSCC webpages, the campus is adjacent to a large state preservation. MSCC is flanked on one side by the backdrop of modernity, large buildings in a thriving metropolis, and by swaths of nature, forests, trails, and flat open spaces, on the other. For me, MSCC had a classical college ambience. The campus sprawls outward from the center, parking lots on the outside, and browned walking paths lazily

stripe sections of green grass. Ponds flank the edges of campus bending toward the center as if wishing to creep in. It was winter and Ida was dressed professionally, but comfortable. A white wool sweater jacket rested on her shoulders complimented by a white glowing necklace. She contrasted these colors with a dark undershirt, large soft-brown rimmed glasses, and black hair. We began our interview with my lead-off question, “Would you please describe your career path in becoming a community college president? What was this journey like for you?”.

Ida was born and raised in a small, rural town in the Deep South, “in a segregated South”, with stark differences in resources between social groups and classes. Living in such conditions is complicated, to put it lightly, and raising children in these disparate social conditions was another matter entirely. I could tell Ida had great respect for her parents and the challenges they successfully overcame in raising her. However, she mentioned very little about her life up until her first employment at the community college, MSCC. Still, throughout her narrative, she provided glimpses of her childhood and how it shaped who she has become. Ida told me,

My grandmother couldn’t vote because of the time when she became an adult. She wasn’t allowed to vote, but my grandfather was allowed. [*She cocked her head slightly*] But then I learned later in life, even though he was *allowed*, he was controlled. It was a control issue. You know, you couldn’t just freely walk in and vote. And so, then my parents got old enough, they voted, and then they instilled in us the importance of participating in civic organizations. [*She shakes her head for emphasis*] But, you know, not every child grows up in that type of household. So, as an educator, I see it as my responsibility to say, okay, what can I do to support people who may not have had that kind of support and experience that I had? I’m grateful for what I experienced, but at the same time, what can I do with what I have learned to help other people? [*She nodded her head in affirmation*].

This is the first of many stories that contribute to Ida’s narrative theme – support through service. Ida’s journey in becoming a community college president is notable for many reasons. But, in relation to her peers, a distinguishing aspect is her longevity at MSCC. To begin, Ida thanked me for including her in my research, humility shining through. Then she began her story thusly,

I've been fortunate enough to work at MSCC for [almost forty years now]. I started there in [the mid-1980s]. My husband and I and my family moved to the Midwest area in [the mid-1980s]. My husband is a Baptist minister and was called to pastor at a church in [the Midwest]. But before that, we were living in [the South] where I served as a librarian at a private [Liberal Arts College]. When we moved, we had young children and I was looking for a part-time job in library science. My master's degree is in library science, and I opened a Sunday [newspaper] and there was a position for a part-time reference librarian at MSCC. I was not familiar with MSCC. Matter of fact, I had not worked in any community college setting before that.

Ida worked in her part-time role for two years before being hired on a full-time tenure track line in the library. She held this position for just over a decade before taking her next significant step towards the presidency by taking an administrative position at MSCC in professional development. It should be noted that around the turn of the twenty-first century, many community colleges began committing resources to professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. In doing so, MSCC received a federal Title III grant to better prepare faculty to support diverse student learners. An Assistant Dean's position was created with this funding, and Ida applied, was offered the position, and accepted it. This was a risky decision because not many higher education professionals give up a full-time, tenured faculty position for an administrative one. Here are Ida's reflections on this decision,

I was looking for a new challenge and I thought this would be a great opportunity, having been at the college for [over a decade]. It was a place I loved working, loved the people there, and so I just thought, "Okay, here's my opportunity". We created a center for teaching and learning (CTL); not only had to develop the programming in that space, but also develop the space itself, which was a really nice opportunity. I got a chance to meet people from across the United States, different community colleges that had CTL's in place, got ideas from them, and learned from them. The Title III grant lasted for five years, and we were able to complete the grant successfully within budget and met all of our goals. By that time, I was encouraged by our President and the Vice President of Academic Affairs, whom I reported to, to actually pursue my doctorate degree.

Stories are magnificent vehicles for communicating, but it is also paramount to recognize what is omitted from the stories we tell, and why. Like her manner of speaking, Ida's story here is laced with humility. Consider the amount of time passed in this story and what was

accomplished: receiving a massive Title III federal grant; moving to a senior administrative position and assuming professional risk (losing tenure); creating a center from scratch; learning from others; five years later, all goals met within budget; then encouraged by her supervisor and the president of the college to pursue a doctorate. Ida never elaborated further, but one might safely infer that the president and her supervisor were impressed with her success in a new senior role. And, her humble personality and habit of crediting others unequivocally signaled leadership talent. Ida continued her story. She felt comfortable applying for a doctoral program because her children were either just finishing or just starting college. Consistent with her style, she attributed her success the support she received from others, saying,

I finished my [hybrid-distance PhD in Education with an emphasis on community college leadership] at Midwest Research University (MRU) because of professors [who] encouraged us to stay on track, you know? Many times, many times you start this journey, the course work, the three years of course work goes by smoothly, but when you get to the dissertation stage, you know, life happens, and so many interruptions can happen. [*With emphasis*] But they encouraged us, and we had once-a-month meetings to make sure that we stayed on track. And so, I was able to compete my doctorate [in four years].

This passage made more sense to me as I came to understand Ida better. Here we see another example of her narrative theme – support through service – and how it influenced her professional life. In this case, her faculty at MRU provided a service to check on their doctoral students in the dissertation phase. They took time once a month to meet with students, provide them with a sense of accountability and encouragement, and Ida recognized that this support, this service, was integral for her doctoral completion. A few years after earning her PhD, the Vice President for Academic Affairs position opened at MSCC. In her own succinct words, “I applied for that position at MSCC, and served in that role for two years”. Here again we skip our way across time. Ida told me,

The president of the college who had served the college for twenty-one years announced his retirement in 2011 and I decided to take the risk and apply for that position. And in 2012 the board selected me from a group of candidates. There was a national search, but I was selected to serve as president. And so, I've been fortunate enough to serve in that position for the last ten years, and that's the gist of my story, my professional career. [She smiled warmly] But along the way I have had a lot of support, [*she shook her head in gratitude*] a lot of help, you know? None of us can do these jobs by ourselves. So, I'm grateful to have spent [almost forty years] of my life at MSCC.

Again, Ida's humility shines through. Gratitude, support, service, each of these are present in this story and through her narrative. Understanding her journey in becoming a community college president and how she interprets that journey through her stories reveals much about her motivation, character, and leadership philosophy. This understanding provides the context to understand the deeper questions answered in remainder of our interview.

#### The Community College Mission and the American Democracy

Although Ida was more concise when speaking about herself and her journey, her responses to my questions about the community college and the American democracy were quite the opposite. She gave rich, lengthy answers, not in a rambling side-tracked manner, but one propelled by passion and deep understanding. To prepare my first question, "can you share a story that communicates what your institution's community college mission means to you?", I commented that I appreciated the clear and straightforward way the MSCC strategic plan was written. The mission was laid out and clear, and the purpose, vision, and goals were linear and easy to follow. To answer my question, she began with a summary of the creation of community colleges, taking note of the intentional stratification. She continued,

[William Rainey Harper's] reasoning [*she smiled*] was not as altruistic as you would think, he didn't want everyone to go to his college, the University of Chicago; [*she chuckled*] so, community colleges were founded. Therefore, there was a college for most of us and a college for some of us [*she laughed*], [but] community colleges proliferated. I feel community colleges, similarly to the opportunity that I had to go to school in [the Deep South] through a land-grant institution, are accessible and affordable for people to be able to improve their lives through higher education. And so, I equate community

colleges as a People's College. Regardless of your abilities or your readiness for college, [*She looked straight into the camera*] we have programs that can help, and I think that is very, very important. Not everybody has the same opportunities to advance themselves, but I think we should give everybody the opportunity to advance themselves if they would like to do so. And at MSCC we pride ourselves in reaching out to the community, in a number of different ways, with through our TRIO programs, we start with our middle school students letting them know we are here, [*with emphasis*] we are their community college. And regardless of what their pursuits are, we can help them get there. We reach out to our high school students with dual credit partnerships that we have with our high schools, and then working very closely with the superintendents in our areas. And then our articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities to make sure that our students have a clear path to be able to continue on to bachelor's degrees and beyond, if that is what they desire to do. So, I see community colleges as a lynchpin. You know, we *connect* people from all walks of life, returning adults who are coming back looking for a second career. We look for opportunities for people who have been dislocated workers who need to come back to be retrained in this economy where technology positions are sought after, in high demand. But I say all that to say, our mission and purpose is to serve [*she looked into the camera*] all sectors of the community, regardless of where they came from or how they started.

This statement typifies Ida's narrative theme of support through service. Not only does she name a plethora of potential students from many walks of life, middle and high school students, those needing continuing education, dislocated workers, but offers that "we should give everybody the opportunity to advance themselves if they would like to do so". She continued,

We have very large English as second language and adult basic education programs. To speak to our mission, a few years ago in our state, the governor at the time, in his efforts to try to reduce the state budget, held back money for higher education. And one of the areas that was impacted and affected most severely was our adult basic education programs because they relied totally on state grant money. But I believe, and the college board and the administrators all believe, that that was one of the areas that we could not afford to cut back on, not because of financial reasons, but because of the impact and effect it would have on the community. So, we continue to fund our adult basic education program, even without the state grant money, and I am always grateful for the support I got from the Board to do that. But that speaks to, if you understand what your purpose and mission is, [*with emphasis*] then the money should follow that purpose and mission. And so, as we work on our strategic plans, it's focused on who we serve and why we are there. It's to serve students, regardless of where they come from and how they start.

Ida equated the MSCC mission with serving the entire community regardless of their circumstances. It is notable that she recognized the importance of outreach to not just high school



students, an easy population for a community college to advertise to, but middle school students as well, “we are their community college”. I have worked in university Outreach programs myself, but this is the first time I heard such benevolent paternalism towards such a young population. This compassion was extended the opposite way as well. The decision to fund adult basic education after the state dropped funding speaks volumes. She identified the primary concern as “the impact and effect it would have on the community”. Ida was sure to include the Board as a partner in this concern, but look closer at how the support was given, “I am always grateful for the support I got *from the Board to do that*” [emphasis added]. Given that statement, it appears that Ida was the one that brought this plan to the Board and petitioned for MSCC to fund adult education out of pocket. Regardless of what we can infer here, the outcome and decision is still remarkable. We continued and I asked, “What responsibility does the community college have to the American democracy”. She responded,

Well, you know, community colleges are a perfect example of what a democratic society represents. I've been to conferences where people from other countries have come, and they would like to have a community college system, you know, because in some countries there are secondary schools. But then to go beyond secondary schools it's only for the privileged, or they have to be a certain class of people to have access to higher education beyond a secondary school. So, we've had people want to replicate the community college system. So, [*with emphasis*] I think the community college is a perfect example of what a democratic society can offer for people to have opportunity.

Ida provided a short, but clear answer here that sets up the remainder of her responses. We explored what community colleges offer democratic society through the next question, “How does your institution prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy”. She described an MSCC program where difficult dialogues were facilitated at the community college concerning current events. She explained that this is an important endeavor because of the current challenges we face in simply communicating with one another, person to person, citizen to citizen. She explained,

I don't like to blame social media for everything, but I think it has a lot to do with the way people are communicating now, you know, with the hate speech, the disrespect, the disregard. You know a lot of that has to do with the fact that they can make these communications behind closed doors pretty much. And so, what we want our students to be able to do is to be able to express themselves, but do it in a respectful way, you know, and be able to make your point, provide your rationale, and be respected for it. I may not agree with you, but in my it's my responsibility to respect you for it...On soon occasion I will write a letter to the college community, [saying] we love and respect everybody, and let's give everybody that opportunity to be as successful as they can be by making this a welcoming and open community. But the way you do that is that you have to teach everybody to be respectful of one another. And so, an example of the difficult discussion's conversation. Yes, these might be difficult topics, but we can do it in a respectful way, and I would hope that something like that would resonate across the country. We need that right now; you know we really do need that. I can tell you what my political opinion would be, but at the same time, you're person I'm a person and we're all trying to strive towards the same thing – a peaceful life. A place where families are safe and secure, and I think if people sat down and talk to each other more respectfully, more honestly, they'll realize they're more alike than they are different and some of this hate will go away. I keep praying that the hate will go away.

Hosting dialogues on campus, a neutral safe space, to promote healthy discussions is a familiar recommendation that I received from many participants. Ida stressed the immediacy of these dialogues, “We need that right now; you know we really do need that...I keep praying that the hate will go away”, alluding to the many challenges the American democracy is facing. However, she also noted a shared desire regardless of political persuasion, to live a fulfilling peaceful life. We continued to unpack these ideas and I asked Ida how she came to understand the American democracy. She replied,

Well, you know, in my own personal experiences, growing up in a segregated South, I grew up in a small town in [the Deep South], and as a child you don't [*she paused*] realize what the differences that are being made and what resources you have in your school compared to resources other people might have in their schools. But as an adult, you learn about the discrepancies and the inadequacies [*she paused again*] but at the same time we live in a country where we have a power. Each person has the power to make a difference [*she looked into the camera*] if they participate in the democratic process. You know each person has that power. Now, right now we're in the voting season, and I'm sure in Alaska you're bombarded with ads [*she laughed*] it's the same way here and in every state. But it's our responsibility as educators to educate our students on how to think critically, be able to analyze things that they hear and read and learn for themselves, and not depend on what other people say, you know? So, on our campus [we have] the

Democracy Commitment. It's about getting students to be more civically engaged and we want them to know that voting does matter. It's not a partisan effort. [*With emphasis*] It's more about teaching them their civic responsibilities and what that means to themselves and to their communities...So what does democracy mean to me? Democracy means that the segregated South changed because the people participated. [*She emphasized each statement here*] People marched; people voted; people spoke up; people were there. They didn't sit back and decide, "okay, this is happening, I don't, or I can't do anything about it.". You have to participate. And so, I'm hopeful that our students, as they participate in the Democracy Commitment events, and activities, that they learn that they, too, have that power to do something to change their lives for the better, to change their communities' lives for the better.

Most salient in this answer is the recognition that Ida's upbringing, her experiences, and her personal identities shaped her understanding of the American democracy. For Ida, the American democracy requires active participation. Nevertheless, this participation only becomes meaningful when we understand the reasons for acting. When one learns, through critical thinking, about our shared history and that change needs to occur in society and that the people hold the capacity to make these changes.

Ida also captures an essential function of education in a democracy: learning to think for oneself. The ability to think critically and not depend on other sources is not just important, it is essential. What is the value of voting if you do not know who you are voting for, what their political agenda is, their motives as an elected leader? She continued,

As I mentioned to you, as a child growing up, you're not aware of the institutions that you are in. And then the more you learn and the more you read about history, then you realize that how much information is controlled [*she chuckled incredulously*]. So, I think about as a child we have television in our home, but the access to move to information was limited. So again, you know, you think about who decides what news people hear and how much information that is actually shared that is accurate or truthful. [*With emphasis*] Oh, and we're definitely living that today. Okay, so of course when I was a child, we didn't have social media. We had media, but it was a very controlled, limited news, okay? So, [*she paused*] even though when I was in high school, it was a probably the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement where there were lots of sit-ins that happen, a lot of demonstrations, not only because of segregation, but also the Vietnam war was a big issue. But in reality in the town that I lived in, it was not a conversation that we had in school. It wasn't a conversation that my parents had with me at home. Now I would imagine my parents talked to other adults about what was happening, but not as a young

person was I involved in that type of conversation. And the reality of it is when I went to college, we pretty much [*she shook her head*] learned what the textbook had. It wasn't until I got to graduate school and you learn how to do more excessive research on your own, and you start to read and learn about things that you weren't exposed to before.

Ida explicitly stated several times that information was and is controlled through media and through education institutions. Furthermore, not only is information controlled, but how much of it is "accurate and truthful"? So, yes, it is important to learn the value of critical thinking and how to arrive at answers through ethical research. However, this become exponentially more important when the truth is hidden, propagandized, or delivered in bad faith. Her answers here were so powerful that I dedicated the bulk of our final interview in exploring these ideas further. I asked her to again elaborate on experiences that helped shape her understanding of the American democracy. She responded,

If the institution of democracy was not challenged when people did do the sit-ins, when people did demonstrate, when people did protest to make sure that laws were changed or to make sure that actions by local state and federal legislators were changed, [*she nodded her head, the pitch of her voice rising, emphasizing*] and we still have a lot of work to do. People were given the right to vote where they could have a voice on who represented them. If that didn't happen, then the segregated South may still be existing. So, when I talk about the American democracy, because we people were able to demonstrate, people were able to raise their voices, people were able to protest. Was it easy? [*Emphatically*] No. As you know, in history, you can look at film, you look at video, you can look laws that were made. You know, even real estate laws that were made for redlining so many things that [*nodding her head*] had to be undone and still have to be undone to make our world a more equitable and fair place to be. But it's possible through a democratic organization, and when people, everybody has that voice about what they want their government, what they want their lives, what they want their institutions to look like. And so that's how I came to understand [democracy], in growth and learning on my own, my own research, my own ability to discern what's factual and what's not. You know that takes growth though, it doesn't happen overnight. And so, as an educator, I see my responsibility to support [and provide] opportunity to others so they can see they do have a voice. They do have an opportunity, you know, even at a college campus where we have participatory governance. You know, I don't sit here in my office and make all the decisions on my own. This is a *shared* responsibility. I didn't make the decisions on my own, this is a democratic organization. You listen to other voices because everybody has different experiences.

Here again Ida acknowledged that present challenges that the American democracy is facing. To be abundantly clear, the American democracy is facing problems and strain. As Ida explained, today

... we still have a lot of work to do...even real estate laws that were made for redlining so many things that had to be undone *and still have to be undone* to make our world a more equitable and fair place to be... ” [emphasis added].

And, if that work was not done in a not-too-distant past, “then the segregated South may still be existing [today]”. For clarity, the practice of redlining is racist although companies often claim their goal is to withhold social or public services from populations or regions where it is not profitable. Put another way, redlining means that profits are more important than people. But Ida delivers these truths in the best of ways. Consider how she closes this length discussion. She considers it her duty as an educator to support and provide opportunity to others. To end our interview, Ida recalled her presidential inauguration. It was the last story she told and was delivered with a sense of finality and purpose. I know of no better way to end her narrative journey than through her own words,

The theme of my speech was service to our students, service to our community, and service to each other. So, it’s all about service and I would say to anybody thinking that they want to be in a leadership role as a college president to realize that the purpose of that role is to give the support to students, faculty, and staff to do their jobs effectively and to help our students to complete their goals. And so, you take the onus from what benefits are for me, to [*she looked into the camera, emphasizing*] how can this job be used to benefit others?

#### Thematic Analysis – Support through Service

Ida’s narrative theme of support through service is ubiquitous through her narrative. Time is an elusive dimension in all stories, but it reveals much. Take for example Ida’s stories about her achievements. Whether it was creating a center for teaching and learning from scratch and encouraged to pursue a doctorate by the president; completing that doctorate and attributing

her success to faculty support; or being selected as president from a national search and closing with, “along the way I have had a lot of support, a lot of help, you know? None of us can do these jobs by ourselves”. The gaps in time are where Ida did her work, had her struggle. She decided not to elaborate on that aspect of her journey. However, she did remind us that leadership is service, that we cannot do these monumental tasks alone, and that we all need help in our lives. Ida was grateful for the support she received over the course of her career and respected those who understood that leaders do not serve themselves but serve others. These experiences shaped who she became as a community college leader, and she extended support and service to all aspects of the MSCC community.

Every story is unique, but out of all my participants, only Ida described her presidential journey with one place in mind – her community college, MSCC. This goes beyond simply being employed at the same institution for over three decades, she went to college in three different states for three different degrees. Following her theme, Ida had a deep respect for the community college that invested in her and so she invested herself in the college and the community.

Consider the following once more,

I was looking for a new challenge and I thought this would be a great opportunity, having been at the college for [over a decade]. It was a place I loved working, loved the people there, and so I just thought, ‘Okay, here’s my opportunity’”.

Place does matter, and it manifests in different ways. What is to be learned here? All of us interact with others and reflect upon these experiences, but this is not enough. The next step is to put these experiences into positive action, making it a part of our ontology, how we see the world and interact with others.

After completing her narrative profile, I chose the pseudonym of Ida for this participant. In American history, Ida B. Wells is known for her passionate defense and service to the Black

community through journalism, education, civic life, and political organizations. When reading about Ida Wells' life, there was a familiar rejoinder to social issues that describe her motivation and life purpose. It goes as follows, there was a social problem, and so she decided to do something about it (Nettles, 2019). Ida Wells served and advanced the interests and quality of life of Black Americans for the entirety of her adult life. Four decades of which was in the Midwest. Influenced by these parallels, but primarily due to my participant's embodying the same selfless service as her namesake, I chose the pseudonym of Ida for this participant.

#### Franklin: Riding the Wave

"I think democratization from a community college perspective means that you are not just bringing in and accepting [students], but that you're reaching out to people who, because of circumstances, some of those related to their own personal circumstances, can be left out of what is the gateway to economic opportunity, which is higher education."

#### The Journey

My first impression of Franklin was that of a consummate professional, put together and clean cut, reminding me of a politician. Despite being on zoom, he did an incredible job of holding "eye contact" with me through the camera lens, a difficult feat for those who are familiar with video calls. When he spoke, he was calm, direct, and confident in communicating his experiences. It was rare that he broke from his remarkable consistency in voice, tone, and cadence. When he did, it was slight, and often a sign of emphasis. Although each my participants held doctorates and displayed an intimate knowledge of the history and philosophy of the community college, the type of understanding Franklin demonstrated, perhaps gained only through experience, really stood out. He too showed knowledge of state and national community

college philosophies, but he also intertwined larger social science research into our conversations. He referenced the findings of Raj Chetty and colleagues (2017), who found that upward social mobility in America has not stagnated, but significantly declined due to uneven economic growth. I asked how he came to study Chetty's work, he replied, "I've always had an interest in economics related to economic mobility". The genesis and nourishment of this interest is explored in his journey and helps us better understand his narrative theme – educating for the community.

In both of our interviews, Franklin was immaculate in his dress. He wore a tie and a buttoned up collared shirt. He did not wear a suit jacket in our first interview, but I could tell that it was nearby. He wore minimalist glasses, and his white hair and beard were neatly trimmed. His office resembled my textbook idea of a president's suite. A large banner flanked his desk and an expansive bookshelf rested against the wall overflowing with books, papers, pictures, foam fingers, cups, and other memorabilia. A line of pictures rested on and above the bookshelf, everything from grainy black and whites to colorful pictures. His institution, Eastern Suburban Community College (ESCC), is a large public, comprehensive community college located on the outskirts of a large city in the American South and part of a larger community college state system. The ESCC student population, unduplicated headcount, was well over fifty thousand students. Looking at campus photos on the ESSC website, the campus is very modern, new buildings forming an oval with small ponds tamed by human design fitting like puzzle pieces in the open gaps. Trees were bountiful but did not envelope the landscape. Bird's eye pictures of the inner quad campus had the familiar crisscross of paths that students form through ease of access and which no engineer can plan or predict.



Franklin's description of his journey in becoming a community college president was unique for many reasons, two will be identified here. First, his discussion of his life prior to discovering his purpose - the union between his personal interests in technology and how technology can improve workforce development - was more limited than other participants. Second, while my other participants could intuit their driving purpose in committing to a community college presidency and often worked towards this clarity deep into our interviews, Franklin named his from the outset. As he told me, "The arc that's been the drive for me is this notion of workplace, workforce, and particularly technology disruption and helping people, you know, ride the wave instead of getting bowled over by the wave".

More specifically, when I asked Franklin to describe his journey in becoming a community college president, he humbly replied, "Well, it never was intended". He began by describing his first defining moment that shaped his passion and professional purpose,

I was in college at a time when, [*he paused and smiled*] technology and computerization was just kind of coming into being. When I was in college, personal computers were just kind of coming into the forefront. In fact, I didn't have a personal computer in college. We all went to the library to write our papers on computers. But, during that time, I also worked at a little manufacturing facility in [the South]. And the year after I graduated from college, I had this opportunity to participate in a business study program in Japan where I got to visit lots of manufacturing facilities. I became somewhat fascinated by what I saw in terms of differences compared to where I worked in [the states], and the big difference being technology and robots and automation in Japan, which was getting a lot of attention in the '80s. And so, in my mind, [*his cadence slowed*] I kind of became very focused and obsessed and willing to study the transition that people, particularly older workers in the workplace, make from the kind of environment where they work without computers to environments where you're working in a very computerized environment.

Here is another point that distinguished Franklin from his peers. Franklin focused on connecting macrolevel processes and systems while my other participants focused primarily on their local communities. Put another way, they focused on the scope of their individual institutions and communities while Franklin thought in terms of state or national scales. To be

clear, attending to the local community is a concrete purpose of the community college, and Franklin certainly did this as well. However, community colleges are a part of a larger higher education system. Therefore, if one seeks to create change at the system level, then one's modes and methods of enacting change should operate at be aligned with policy and practice at that level. This point is elaborated in my discussion of Franklin's journey.

At this point, Franklin quickly made several great leaps in time. He earned both of his graduate degrees at a public research university in the northeast. He told me about the interdisciplinary nature of his PhD and research, an amalgam of industrial organizational psychology, technology and the workforce, the economy, public policy, and engineering. Then explained how after completing his PhD, his first position was at the U.S. Department of Labor, "where I became kind of the person focused on technology changes and then got recruited over to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, part of the Department of Commerce, to do workforce stuff. And then, came back to [the South]". Then, back in his home state, Franklin worked in the state government as a Vice President within workforce development before being selected to his first community college presidency. There is much to unpack here. Franklin worked at the executive level in two departments in the federal government before transitioning to a state government. From there, he was selected as a community college president. Franklin also holds the distinction as my only participant who was a community college system president, a role he held for five years after his first presidency.

The summation of his journey and the positions Franklin held at the federal, state, and community levels contributed to his current community college philosophy and, by extension, his institution's strategic plan, that is, to be a ladder college. In this framework, the purpose of

the institution is to connect educational and community programs to help propel people forward.

As Franklin stated,

You know, [*in a matter-of-fact tone*] rich places talk about talent attraction and poor places talk about workforce development, and I think what we are is we're very rich in opportunity, but we know we're challenged in terms of the economic mobility of people who grow up here poor. It is what we call ladder economics, if we will, or we think that approach is what can help change that because it's not just about helping folks get job opportunity. [*A slight shift in tone for emphasis*] It's also how you help them get career mobility... You know you come into a program, and we help you get a job with that program. But it's also thinking about, well, maybe we helped you get that job with this program, but you can come back, and you can keep moving forward in a degree, and maybe you can keep moving forward with this strategic transfer partner. Or maybe you can work an apprenticeship and get experience at the same time. So, it's thinking not just about putting programs out there, [*he tilted his head*] but also how the programs connect together so that people can connect [them] like a ladder. The idea is if they're connected, you know, you can climb higher than you would otherwise.

I appreciated Franklin's clear description of the ESCC workforce philosophy. He then shared a story that encapsulates his efforts and philosophy as a community college president, expounding on the concept of being a ladder college. Franklin shared that,

David [a student] was a poor kid from the southeast [state] area. He was in programs for disadvantaged youth in our region. His parents told him in the eighth grade that they didn't see any way they'd be able to afford for him to pay for his college, so he kind of either took it upon himself, or with their encouragement tried to figure out, you know, what he would do about that. And so, as an example, we have four early college high schools. Those are public high schools. Two are on our campuses that are where you have community college and high school happening at the same time, and he was in our health sciences early college which gave him a real head start. And [*with pride in his voice*] he was able to earn a ton of credit while in high school. In fact, when he finished high school, he already had an associate degree and then he got so much credit that when he transferred to [a state university] that when his classmates of the same age were finishing their bachelor's degrees, he was finishing his MBA. [*With a slight smile*] And so, here's a kid that was in eighth grade with parents saying "I don't know how you'll go to college" to now he's finishing his MBA while others are finishing their bachelor's. And then the next year he went to [a prestigious state university] where he got an accelerated master's in public health, [*he leaned back*] and now he's back at [the state university] getting his MD. So, he'll be an MD, Master of Public Health, and an MBA at the age of twenty-six. But at the age of fourteen [*he chuckled*] he wasn't sure whether, from what his parents were saying, whether [*he could*] go to college or not. So, you know, I think it's about having very *clear* connections between programs; in this case,

high school to community college and then clear transfer opportunities...he just kept climbing to the next rung and the next rung, so that's what I mean by ladder college.

What I appreciate most about this story is that while Franklin implied that David's story is unique and memorable, he mentioned he had many other student stories he could have shared. Indeed, he commented that he can go into any hallway of ESCC and find a story that motivates him in a similar way. Meaning, David's student journey highlights the best of what a community college dedicated to workforce development and with intentional structure and partnerships can provide for the community. However, this is happening at scale within ESCC, all by design.

### The Community College Mission and the American Democracy

As we moved deeper into our interviews, we began to explore how the relationship between the community college mission and the American democracy. The first question we addressed was, "How did you come to understand the American democracy". Franklin answered,

Well, what it means to me, and particularly through community colleges, is opportunity that is not limited by birthright, or you know any type of limitations that you would have seen other places; [*With emphasis*] that everybody has a shot. And you know what I think our mission and vision is based around that within community colleges. Community colleges have been called the Ellis Island of higher education [by George Vaughan]. In other words, metaphorically taking higher education immigrants, and every place has this, where [for people to go beyond] high school was something that you just would not have considered were it not for the community college. And it wasn't that long ago when most people did not go to college.

I appreciated Franklin's decision to answer this question through the lens of the community college, a trope consistent in his narrative. Answering this way, he gives, in respect, two answers. First, that in the American democracy, opportunity should not be limited by birthright. However, that is the unfortunate reality in our American democracy and shown by Chetty and colleagues (2017), who Franklin cited in our interview. But because of community colleges, many individuals who would have been left out of higher education are provided opportunity. Hence, the George Vaughan reference paralleling community colleges to Ellis

Island. Franklin continued, quoting one of his mentors, Houston, a prominent community college scholar in the state who said,

“Don't ever forget that community colleges are America's gift to higher education”. And [Houston] made the point that public school education came from someplace else. University based education, has been around years and years and years and then came to America. [*With emphasis*] But the idea of a community college education, which was really about democratization of higher education, was influenced by who we are, the democracy that we are...Democracy in the United States was a catalyst for [community colleges] and some will refer to community colleges as Democracy's Colleges. And I always emphasize that we are *different* from other parts of higher education, and I like to say we are as proud or prouder of our inclusivity as others are of their exclusivity.

Like many of my other participants, Franklin noted that community colleges are a distinctly American conception and a democratizing force in our democracy. He also articulated the open access mission of the community colleges, being proud of inclusivity, as an example of democratization and community colleges embodying the moniker Democracy's Colleges. But these are more than just words of recognition. Franklin identifies a core philosophy of community colleges, the open access mission, and names it as a guiding influence given to him by a mentor. This claim is elaborated on as we continued our interview. I asked Franklin, “What responsibility does the community college have to the American democracy”, and he replied,

Our responsibilities tie back a lot, in my opinion, to our educational and economic mobility role. But because of who we are, we have to reach people who too often are left out of higher education. And so, I think democratization from a community college perspective means that you are not just bringing in and accepting [students], but that you're reaching out to people who, because of circumstances, some of those related to their own personal circumstances, can be left out of what is the gateway to economic opportunity, which is higher education.

Not only did Franklin recognize that community colleges have multiple responsibilities, but he doubled down on the workforce mission to facilitate economic mobility. Furthermore, through the philosophical lens of the open access mission, he communicated that to truly fulfill

the workforce mission community colleges must reach out to those who are “left out”. Again, he invoked his mentor, Houston, saying,

[Houston] talked about community colleges as the Golden Door to opportunity [and] he would often talk about total education. There used to be a philosophy during the sixties that came out of the war with Vietnam, it was a philosophy of war called Total War, which really meant, you just go in and take out everything. And he kind of took a spin on that and said we need total education, which is when you go in, and you have education for everybody, everywhere...the motto he would quote that we all kind of worked under was to take people where they are and carry them as far as they can go. From that standpoint it's not just “okay we'll take everybody”. It's that we've got to pro-actively reach out to people who would not think there is any opportunity for them and then we will rally around them because [*he paused*] carry is a little bit paternalistic. You know we don't come and carry them. We really rally around them, and they gain their own empowerment and voice, which is a democratic ideal as well. And then, once people rally around them, perhaps they haven't been able to experience this previously in their lives, then they rally around themselves, and they find their own voice and their own empowerment.

Here Franklin explains a concept that demonstrates a deep commitment to democratization, “We really rally around them, and they gain their own empowerment and voice, which is a democratic ideal as well”. The ESSC workforce development philosophy is to intentionally reach citizens left out of higher education and rally around them to actualize social mobility and economic stability. Put another way, both the methods and structure are democratic in and of themselves. Commitments to equitable access and workforce development are more than just Franklin’s passions or a broader community college philosophy, they also manifest in ESSC’s strategic plan as well, institutionalizing these missions. When I asked Franklin, “Can you share a story that communicates what your institution’s community college mission means to you”, he explained,

Well, in our mission we kind of talk about two pillars, and you can see our strategic plan is based around those pillars, our mission statements, so it's equitable access to higher education as well as economic mobility. And the roots of our college go back to both of those two primary pillars.

The ESCC strategic plan is structured exactly as Franklin described in his narrative. The goals support the mission in a linear way: equitable outreach to improve access, learning skills valued in the labor market, completion, transfer, and entering the workforce better off than when one started. Put simply, a ESCC is a ladder college and a clear example of institutionalizing its mission. Here we turned to my final question, I asked, “How does your institution prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy”. To begin, Franklin spoke to the blatant polarization in American society and how this is reflected in Congress. However, he also believes that community colleges are “the most universally supported bipartisan part of education”, because,

For the most part, [*he spoke deliberately, slowing his pace*] people believe in the idea of democracy and opportunity for everyone and support community colleges as a place where everyone can find that opportunity and achieve on their own...At the end of the day, [*with emphasis*] it's all about giving people the avenues, pathways, resources, and the capabilities to be able to better their lives and their family through education, and pretty much everybody gets behind that. That's pretty much the American democracy personified. It is the American dream, [*he rested his hand thoughtfully on his chin*] and I think community colleges as much as any institution are the keepers of the American dream. And while people may have disagreements about what that means, they typically see community colleges in a way that they value regardless of where they are on the political side of the spectrum.

Franklin made a prescient observation of the bipartisan support that community colleges have. However, the community college's commitment to workforce development is a contentious topic in the scholarly literature, particularly among sociologists. Community colleges have long promoted the goal of social efficiency, to prepare workers for society. Critics of this vocational mission, primarily sociologists, point out the “cooling-out function” (Clark, 1960) of this endeavor that reproduce social inequalities (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Franklin was well aware of these arguments and offered a rebuttal. I close his narrative journey as he closed our

final interview, in defense of the vocational mission and doubling down on his narrative theme – educating for the community,

People discount first jobs. So, a foothold training program would be a like a program that gives you a certification that allows you to get a job, it's the first job along the way, you know, not intended to be the last job. But it is the idea that it gives you a foothold into that work world. But if we do it right, and if it allows for it, maybe we can give credits back towards a degree. And we have apprenticeship programs where you can work and get experience at the same time and have transfer programs where you could get transfer seamlessly to keep going. I think a lot of people discount community colleges because they see [*he paused*] the short-term aspects of what we do in workforce training, and the more academic aspects of what we do in terms of degree should not be necessarily two different sides of the house. They can be connected, and for a lot of working adults, that's what they need. They need to need to be able to get into the workforce with something that gives them a foothold, but they need to keep working towards something else that's going to give them career mobility. So, you know it's not planning for the job, it's planning for mobility, and a short-term certification, particularly for a working adult, is often the first step towards mobility. It's not the last step.

#### Thematic Analysis – Educating for the Community

When looking back at his first story, Franklin took us on a trip to the past where he was struck by living at the cusp of massive societal change – the digital age. He intuited that this “technological disruption” could cause people to be “bowled over by the wave” of technological change. He witnessed the long-term future investments Japan was making within this historical and economic context, and this made an everlasting impression on him. This passion was the onus for his professional life: working in state and federal government, and then becoming a community college and system president. Franklin was invested in shaping the future, at scale, where workers would not be displaced or disrupted by technological change.

Education is an investment that reaps rewards for both the individual and the community. A question to be considered is, which community? Here Franklin joins the chorus of my other participants when he said, “Everybody [at ESCC] is from here, for the most part, and everybody is going to stay here. So, it's really about the strategies of pulling people up through education



not so much pulling people in from other places”. It is worth recalling sociologist of education, David Labaree, and his exploration of the goals of education (1997). He characterized the goal of social efficiency, training workers to be productive members of economic society, as a public good. In broad terms, this rings true for higher education; however, when we consider the dimension of place in the context of community college education, the public good is associated more to the defining characteristic of this institution – the local community.

While Franklin declined to share a great deal of personal information about his journey, he provided a wealth of information about his interactions with others. Franklin was nominated by both ranking members of the Democratic and Republican parties to give testimony to both the United States Senate and House committees and subcommittees on workforce development and student success innovations and policy. First as system president and many times thereafter. A testament to his expertise and reputation, but also his willingness to interact with community college stakeholders as the highest social level. At the close of first our interview, we discussed what makes a good community college president. He referenced his work as system president and advising various boards when they were hiring presidents. In a rare break in character, he showed slight frustration (a simple exhaling of breath), and looked side-to-side before explaining,

Sometimes I feel some of the community college presidents and institutions right now put a little too much emphasis on the transformational president. You know, the person who’s going to come in, and you know, when I was a kid there used to be a cartoon called Underdog. And Underdog had this theme song about you know, “I’m here to save the day” [*he sang, fist raised in the air like superman flying*], you know, and too many community college presidents walk into jobs like they’re here to save the day. Not respecting the mission and the things that have gone on, you know the circumstance. Too often we undervalue [the mission focused president] and overvalue the person who can give the ten-minute stemwinder [slang for rousing speech].

After completing his narrative profile, I chose the pseudonym of Franklin for this participant. Franklin was not just a community college president; he worked in federal and state governments and was a community college system president as well. Appropriate to these positions, Franklin's passion influenced him to think and act at scale. An important similarity between my participant and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) is dedication to the blue-collar workforce. FDR led America through the Great Depression, transforming the country through the New Deal policies that prioritized creating jobs for dispossessed workers (Kennedy, 2009). For these reasons, I chose the pseudonym of Franklin for this participant.

### Overarching Thematic Analysis

To further understand the experiences of six community colleges presidents with a passion for the democratizing purpose of the community college, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify overarching themes. As outlined in Chapter 3 and described at the beginning of this chapter, I analyzed and coded data in accordance with the vision of Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic analysis and the tactics of Saldaña's (2013) narrative coding method. This section presents the overarching thematic findings across each narrative profile. I used many strategies to enhance trustworthiness including thick description, reflexive journaling, member checking, and triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Kim, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Three final themes and their respective subthemes were established: 1) community college philosophy: blueprint for a vision, 2) consolidating local democracies, and 3) citizens as students, students as citizens.

Table 2

*Themes*

Themes	Subsidiary Themes
Community college philosophy: Blueprint for a vision	Being Democracy's Colleges Mission focused leadership
Consolidating local democracies	Recognize and address local inequities Democratize opportunity Bring the community together
Citizens as students, students as citizens	Total education Nurture democratic norms

## Community College Philosophy: Blueprint for a Vision

The first theme to emerge from the data identifies how my participants understood the intersection of the American democracy and the community college. Through their narrative journeys we identified their rationale, why they are passionate about this work. Here we elaborate on the guiding principles and framework to achieve their purposes. This is accomplished through the exploration of two sub-themes, 1) being Democracy's Colleges, and 2) mission focused leadership. The first sub-theme serves as the principal framework for their understanding in meeting the democratic mission.

*Being Democracy's Colleges*

Each of my participants explicitly referred to community colleges as "Democracy's Colleges" or "the People's College". Although each of my participants held doctorates, not all were in the field of higher education. Furthermore, only half explicitly studied community colleges within their graduate work. Despite differences in their graduate educations, all were intimately aware of the philosophy of the community college and used this philosophical framework to serve as a guide.

To understand the community college philosophy is to understand its multifaceted mission: to be tuition-free, open access, community-based post-secondary institutions offering transfer, vocational, and adult education programs (Cohen et al., 2014). In essence, this means that to achieve the vision of the community college, one must follow the mission. Here two strands from my conceptual framework converge. First, the community college mission is multifaceted, and, secondly, community college presidents have agency in committing to a particular aspect of the mission. Franklin noted,

Some will refer to community colleges as Democracy's Colleges. And I always emphasize that we are *different* from other parts of higher education, and I like to say we are as proud or prouder of our inclusivity as others are of their exclusivity.

Franklin is stating that community colleges are distinct from four-year universities because of their inclusivity, the open-access mission. To recall his passion, Franklin was dedicated to workforce development and helping people not get bowled over by the wave of technological disruption. While four-year institutions certainly train workers for social efficiency, they are exclusive in their targeted population; education for some, not for all.

When I asked Eleanor, "How did you come to understand the American democracy?". She responded, "I think the inclusivity of community colleges, the way we touch our communities in so many different ways, is indicative of being Democracy's College, [*she shrugged in a matter-of-fact way*] it's the People's College, you know?". She followed this statement with a story of retraining workers displaced during the pandemic. Robert responded to this same question by lamenting the decline of civics in high school and stating, "I think somebody's got to do it, and as Democracy's Colleges it ought to be community colleges". And in our interview, Ida commented, "I equate community colleges as a People's College. Regardless of your abilities or your readiness for college, [*she looked straight into the camera*]

we have programs that can help, and I think that is very, very important.” Again, we see the inclusivity of community colleges as a guiding framework. Abe noted that, “community colleges have evolved from being the Junior College to really being the college of the community.” John, synthesizes these statements in the following way,

You know we’re the People's College...And I think we have a responsibility as we take and invest taxpayers dollars into education and training that we do everything we can within those resources to support democracy and fairness and equity, and all of those things that go with it...When we stop doing that, when we stop recognizing that we have different students that have different needs, when we stop recognizing that we are the *conduit* between where they are and where they can be, then I don't think [*he began to shake his head and his mouth turned down*], we're not the People's College anymore.

For my participants, to be Democracy’s Colleges means to focus on the local community and provide education that is not limited by one’s circumstances. Abe’s comment is of particular interest, he recognized that community colleges have evolved since their inception to be “the college of the community”. In this framework, the mission of the community college is directed towards and for the local community. When we spoke about the American democracy or programs that met a democratic purpose, many of my participants would frame their understanding using the community college as a lens. When I asked Franklin how he came to understand the American democracy, he said, “Well, what it means to me, and *particularly through community colleges*, is opportunity that is not limited by birthright” [emphasis added]. Eleanor was explicit in her thought process when reading this question in the interview guide I sent prior to our first interview, saying, “When I read that question, I remember using the term Democracy’s Colleges”. We then discussed a paper written by George Boggs (2010) titled “Democracy’s Colleges: The evolution of the community college in America”. John offered a similar reply to this same question, giving a broad description of the American democracy and immediately following that statement with, “And so, how does that apply to what we do here [at

SCC]”. Again, framing his understanding through the lens of the community college. This led him to talk about SCC’s involvement with Campus Compact and other democratic programs that helped students “to understand better how they could engage in our democracy as members of society”.

It is notable that each of my participants framed their understanding through the philosophical lens of the community college. However, it is more important to recognize that they were intimately aware of what this philosophy was. Whether through a mentor, graduate education, self-education, or otherwise, my participants concluded that a community college philosophy is mission focused. This sub-theme is explored below.

### *Mission Focused Leadership*

Mission focused leadership complements our understanding of community colleges as Democracy’s Colleges. Community college presidents are tasked with juggling a multifaceted mission while pressured from other sources to be all things to all people, a monumental if not impossible task. To reconcile this quandary and pursue their passions identified in their journeys, some of my participants framed their understanding of the American democracy through the lens of the community college. For example, Franklin said,

Well, what it means to me, and particularly through community colleges, is opportunity that is not limited by birthright, or you know any type of limitations that you would have seen other places; [*With emphasis*] that everybody has a shot. And you know what I think our mission and vision is based around that within community colleges.

And Eleanor, “I think what it means to me to be Democracy’s College is that it goes to the core of what the community college does because we serve a diverse and population. We are incredibly inclusive.” Or after losing state funding for adult basic education, Ida and the MSCC Board decided to fund the program because, “If you understand what your purpose and mission is, then the money should follow that purpose and mission”. Through the lens of the community

college, mission focused leadership means following the guideposts already set forth in the community college philosophy. The vision is already there, and the mission follows the vision. Put another way, understanding the history and philosophy of the community college and conceptualizing the college as a democratic institution is essential to this work. Once these are understood, they become lasting guideposts. Abe's narrative theme speaks to this concept. After his interview with history professor Jerry, he was struck that, "We *really* have a responsibility in education". From that point forward, Abe spent over a decade nurturing a democratic culture at MCC, helped form the Democracy Commitment, and sought to leave a legacy with a democratic focus, "You know, being a president, you always want to pick something that you feel you can leave a legacy to. I do that; I put a little bit in about democracy". When we turn to Franklin and his passion for the workforce mission, we see how it permeates through every aspect of his narrative journey. He was "ate up with the mission" as he said.

To be abundantly clear, my participants did not view themselves as "saviors" for the communities; indeed, many of their narrative themes communicate the opposite, leadership through service or servant leadership. Franklin, in a rare display of displeasure noted this in our interview when he said,

Too many community college presidents walk into jobs like they're here to save the day. Not respecting the mission and the things that have gone on, you know the circumstance. Too often we undervalue [the mission focused president] and overvalue the person who can give the ten-minute stemwinder [slang for rousing speech].

Through their efforts to be mission focused leaders and filtering issues and programs through the lens of being Democracy's Colleges, a prominent outcome of this work is the democratization of their local communities.

## Consolidating Local Democracies

The second theme to emerge from the data explores how community colleges help consolidate their local democracies. One of the fascinating aspects of the American democracy is its many layers. The country, individual states, down to cities and local communities all represent different scales of democracy. Each has its own government, elected officials, economy, social institutions, and citizens. One can see how community colleges help consolidate their local democracies through the following sub-themes: 1) recognize and address local inequities, 2) democratize opportunity, and 3) bring the community together.

### *Recognize and Address Local Inequities*

This sub-theme is twofold because it is not enough to recognize where inequalities exist, action must follow. As Ida explained, “It not only takes the college president that understands that commitment, but also people who would do the work every day”. All my participants identified problems within their communities that their colleges could address. John’s partnership with a local judge to redirect 16-18-year-old youths with misdemeanors towards the SCC system rather than the court or juvenile delinquent system is an exemplary example of this concept, “So, this is another way that we give people opportunity and help them to enjoy the democracy in which we have and contribute to it rather than take away from it”. There is much to laud about this social program, particularly John’s continued efforts to reach underrepresented populations within the scope of his community. However, addressing local inequities means doing the simple things as well, John noted, “Our students have gone out and participated in creating food drives for people who don’t have adequate food supplies”. Or as Abe clearly explains, “Our responsibility is to help the community grow...the people in our community have



got to see the community college as a place to go to improve themselves to help improve their community”.

For Ida and Eleanor, both their narrative themes speak to this sub-theme, support through service and a culture of service, respectfully. For Eleanor, this began in her earliest days as a community college professional, working part-time in student services out of a refurbished barn. Yes, she would meet a student anywhere anytime, and bring her pushcart with her, but it is easy to get lost in the forest of this theme without looking at the individual trees. This was the first student-centered story Eleanor told me,

A student came up, she had three children in tow. We sat down and we talked about what she wanted to do. Turns out her husband was incarcerated. So, I helped onboard her, helped her get her financial aid in order, and kept the pep talks going. She is very bright. She became the president of Phi Theta Kappa, which is the honorary society for community colleges. She became very engaged in the college community, was a 4.0 student, went on to transfer to [a large public research university] to earn a bachelor's degree, and landed a family sustaining wage.

Or for Ida, looking for opportunities and different ways to serve the needs of the community and ensuring they have support in their endeavors, saying,

I see community colleges as a lynchpin. You know, we connect people from all walks of life, returning adults who are coming back looking for a second career. We look for opportunities for people who have been dislocated workers who need to come back to be retrained. And in this economy, where technology positions are sought after, in high demand, we have a nationally recognized cybersecurity center on our campus... We have a very large ESL English and second language programs, adult basic education programs... Our mission and purpose is to serve all sectors of the community, regardless of where they came from or how they started.

Inequity takes many forms, sometimes it is monetary, but it can also be cultural. Abe spoke at length about this, telling many stories of his efforts to diversify his faculty and staff to ensure that MCC reflected the community, “I think that’s one of the reasons why our enrollment [of Vietnamese students] is so high at my campus”. Furthermore, he fostered a culture at MCC that speaks to this work, resulting in his students and faculty petitioning the local city

government to memorialize Vietnamese refugees and establish a monument in remembrance of a local citizen lynched by white men in the county. Abe recognized that cultural representation and commemoration matter and addressing these cultural inequities not only works to improve communities and institutions but democratizes them.

Franklin, consistent in his methods, used Chetty and colleagues (2017) research to look at the economic mobility around ESCC. He noticed that “if you look at economic rankings of any type, we’re usually in the top five”; however, when he investigated economic mobility, the likelihood of being poor as an adult if you were poor as a child, the county did not perform well. In direct response to this, he adjusted the ESCC strategic plan, “to position ourselves to be the institution that’s most responsible for making sure that’s not the case anymore. And that’s where reaching comes in versus taking. You got to reach out to places more”. To further this work, Franklin referenced, “the vulnerable health index of communities” and strategized on how to “deliberately get into [those] communities”.

My participants, true to the narrative journeys, found distinct ways to identify and address social, cultural, and economic inequities in their respective communities. This work was accomplished at different scales using different methods but worked towards similar outcomes – democratizing their communities. Other methods to achieve this end are found in the community college mission, namely the commitment to open access.

### *Democratize Opportunity*

The primary means to democratize opportunity is through the open access mission of the community college. Although each of my participants spoke to this sub-theme, Franklin provides the best metaphor. He invoked George Vaughan’s concept of community colleges as the Ellis Island of higher education taking in the people who have been left out. Or to be literal, as Abe

said, “We don't turn anybody away. We take the top one hundred [percent] of all high school graduates. I always teach my university partners about that”. Democratizing opportunity means that citizens should not be limited because of socioeconomic factors or, as Franklin put it, “anything that would cause a barrier or limitation to someone going beyond high school who wants to”. To be clear, this is not being done at four-year institutions who are more exclusive in their enrollments by institutional design. And as Ida notes, community colleges are not just accessible, they are affordable so that citizens are “able to improve their lives through higher education”. Put another way, community college opportunity comes without a heavy monetary cost. To be certain, resources other than money are expended while attending college, but the affordability of a community college education democratizes the opportunity allowing it to be more universally actualized. Franklin noted,

We take everyone who applies and try to help everyone succeed. We don't lower our standards, but we try to help everyone succeed, and that's a different way of looking at it. It's also a more democratic way of looking at it in terms of opportunity.

Additionally, all my participants referred to a unique aspect of community college graduates. Quoting Abe, “At the community college, [*he slowed his cadence*] our students come from our zip codes, [*he paused for effect, emphasizing*] and they stay in our zip codes”. This can result in an impressive local lineage, emphasized by Robert in his jovial way,

If you look around, you know, at the top corporate and government and nonprofit leaders in this community, you can't turn around at any community event and not run into someone who's, you know, a leading institution in the region who didn't go to this college. It's amazing!

Franklin made a similar observation in the ESSC community, graduates holding positions in city government, business, and ESSC. This shared educational experience is notable for local communities and emphasizes the impact that community colleges make. Franklin further noted that,

At the end of the day, [*with emphasis*] it's all about giving people the avenues, pathways, resources, and the capabilities to be able to better their lives and their family through education, and pretty much everybody gets behind that. That's pretty much the American democracy personified. It is the American dream, [*he rested his hand thoughtfully on his chin*] and I think community colleges as much as any institution are the keepers of the American dream.

During John's first presidency at NWCC, his work in ensuring opportunity for underrepresented high schools exemplifies this statement. He traveled around the state and met with state officials and four-year institutions to develop pathways and secure scholarships so that, "we would have enough scholarships for every student". Again, democratizing opportunity within his community, John explained, "It's kind of like democratization as a way to give some underrepresented students an opportunity for a hand up". He implemented this same model at SCC, "We had a *duty* to prepare those high school students to join a college pathway". A cautious observer might comment that the open access mission is part and parcel of all community colleges. But what distinguishes my participants from their peers is their deliberate commitment to facilitating and expanding this mission. And through expanding access, they bring their local communities together.

### *Bring the Community Together*

Community colleges enrich civil society by bringing the community together. Most noticeably, this relates directly to Robert's narrative theme. His story about the culinary and events center typifies this work. In his words,

At the culinary and events center, people come together and gather and eat and converse, and we have corporate retreats there, weddings, board retreats, and my rotary meets there now. You know it's a gathering place to bring the community together. I see that as an extension of the community college mission, providing *more* access, a different kind of access to bring the community together.

Robert was encouraged to be a convener and bring people together, a skill he learned early in his student activities background, "A high priority, at least for me, anyways, is to be a

place to bring people together on the campus who otherwise might not come together in other parts of the community”. At the heart of this work is the facilitation of engagement and belonging; getting students invested in the college, the culture, and to interact with others.

Many of my participants also talked about the importance of being seen in the community. As Robert noted, “half my job [as president] is in the community”. This was echoed by Eleanor who is a board member of seven civil or city organizations, she said, shaking her head,

I was so externally involved that I wondered if I really had a job here at the college [*she laughed*]...So community involvement of employees here [at NSCC] is very strong, there’s a lot of community ties and connections and our people serve on lots of local boards whether it be in social services or the Arts Council.

But there are other ways to facilitate community. During Covid, Eleanor noted that NSCC was one of the few spaces in the community where people could be outdoors in a safe manner, saying,

Recreation parks were closed, everything was closed, and we chose not to close. We put up signs [that said] “You’re responsible for yourself and distancing”. People came out here, it wasn’t like huge crowds of people, but consistent flow. I mean every single day the community comes out to use our outdoor facilities. We have a large walking track that’s a little over a mile that interconnects and goes completely around the athletic complex. We have a brand-new softball field...I feel like we have the space to share, and we’ve done that programmatically.

Many of my participants made efforts to bring the community together through various programs. Voting drives were the most common examples. Abe told me MCC, “had the largest number of early voters in [the county]. I’m talking three-hour lines here during the week...we did a big voter registration with students, so faculty got deputized in order to do it”. Ida shared that MSCC has received, “certificates of recognition from the [MSCC county] Board of Elections for the number of students who volunteer their time to work at the polls”. Ida

recognized that as president, she had a responsibility to speak to the community about current events and start conversations. She told me,

Two summers ago, during the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, I addressed that and said, “Yes, Black lives do matter”. And some people [in the community] were concerned that “all lives matter”. Yes, all lives do matter. But the reality of it is in this particular situation, the emphasis on Black Lives Matter came to the forefront simply because of the police brutality that was taking place. And so, it needed to be brought to the forefront that our lives are as important as anybody else’s life.

Ida brought the community into conversation with one another. She took a stand and initiate the conversation; however, her work did not end there. A program that stems from this work is hosting difficult conversations at MSCC. This work is elaborated on in the following section.

#### Citizens as Students, Students as Citizens

The third theme to emerge from the data reflects how students and citizens are conceptualized. The first part of this theme, citizens as students, relates to how my participant’s think about their citizens – that all citizens are students. The second part of this theme, students as citizens, relates to how my participants prepare them. This theme is explored through two sub-themes: 1) Total education, and 2) Institutionalize democratic culture.

##### *Total Education*

The title of this sub-theme, total education, comes from a reference from Franklin’s interviews. He was talking about one of his mentors, Houston, and his educational philosophy that resonated with Franklin. He said,

[Houston] talked about community colleges as the Golden Door to opportunity [and] he would often talk about total education. There used to be a philosophy during the sixties that came out of the war with Vietnam, it was a philosophy of war called Total War, which really meant, you just go in and take out everything. And he kind of took a spin on that and said we need total education, which is when you go in, and you have education for everybody, everywhere.

As I prepared for this dissertation, despite laying a firm foundation to understand this concept, I missed this point for too long. I'll explain. When I thought about my purpose statement and how community college presidents prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy, for too long I thought in tactical terms. Meaning, the actual programs and methods they used to achieve this end: voter drives, seminars, debate forums, student government, etc. What I came to understand, in this research context, is that the philosophy, the strategy, is more important than the method. Who is the central actor in the programs I mentioned: *enrolled* students. None of my participants thought in these terms. Put simply, all my participants viewed the entire community, each citizen, not as potential students, but as students that they had a duty to reach. This goes beyond recruitment. If a citizen had a problem that the community college could address, an effort was made to help. In sum, *all* citizens were students and the way they prepared them for a meaningful role in the American democracy went beyond the tactics – the programs. They thought and acted in broader, more inclusive terms. This chapter is bountiful in examples of reaching citizens who were not enrolled students: workers displaced by the pandemic; youth with criminal records; high school students; middle school students; continuing education students; underrepresented cultures; city government; civil groups. Take your pick, each group has a story related in this chapter. The concept of total education is unique to the philosophical framework of the community college because higher education is stratified by design and community colleges are the only educational institution with a mission of this focus.

#### *Nurture Democratic Norms*

To close this section, we explore the final sub-theme, nurture democratic norms. This sub-theme speaks to the second part of the overarching theme, students as citizens. All my

participants thought in terms of students as future citizens. In the previous sub-theme, I listed several tactics that community colleges use to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy, all of which were used by my participants. What I noticed through my interviews was my participants valued these programs, but they understood that institutionalizing a democratic culture was a more powerful way to meet the same ends. And if programs were mentioned, they were in terms of nurturing democratic norms.

The best example of nurturing democratic norms is through community dialogues. As Ida put it, “How would you express yourself if you don't have the same opinion that another person might have... I may not agree with you, but it's my responsibility to respect you for it”. Often these discussions revolve around current events, as Eleanor put it, “What’s going on today in our society?”. Abe told me about a debate about guns on campus at MCC and commented that it is important to hear both sides of any debate because “the dialogue is more important than the democracy. The dialogue is what needs to happen because that’s where there’s a free exchange of ideas”. And as Ida considered, “These might be difficult topics, but we can do it in a respectful way, and I would hope that something like that would resonate across the country. We need that right now; we really do need that.” Ida speaks to the greater outcome of these deliberate dialogues – institutionalizing democratic culture. Put differently, when student become citizens, the habits and norms cultivated at the community college will work towards changing the broader culture.

Abe and Ida speak to this idea in how they think about voting programs. Both were explicit that the civic outcomes were more important than the act. Yes, voting is important, but as Abe explained, “Our role in democracy is not to get people to vote, it’s to get them to be civically responsible”. Mounk (2018) speaks to this extensively in his work. The erosion of



democratic norms has accelerated in the last decade. Because norms are not codified into law, it is a social contract that we agree to follow to, try, and maintain fairness and equity. Even the most basic of democratic norms – the peaceful transfer of power – is no longer a given. These are serious concerns that speak to the deconsolidation of the American democracy. The fact that my participants spoke in these larger terms is telling, both discouraging that they are realized, but encouraging that they are being addressed at the community level.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented my findings from my narrative inquiry study seeking to understand how community college presidents prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. I described the collection and analysis of documents and the narrative analysis process. I provided six narrative profiles, one for each community college president, and isolated a theme that captured their narrative journey. Three themes emerged from thematic analysis across narratives: 1) community college philosophy: blueprint for a vision, 2) consolidating local democracies, and 3) citizens as students, students as citizens. These themes are explored further in Chapter 5 in relation to my research questions and provide implications for research and practice.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Chapter 1, I established the purpose of my study: to explore how community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. In Chapter 2, I explored three relevant literature strands that addressed the American democracy, the American community college, and community college presidents. From these three literature strands, I created my conceptual framework. In Chapter 3, I acknowledged my positionality as a researcher and outlined my methodological approach using narrative inquiry to meet the purpose of the study and answer the research questions. In Chapter 4, I reported the findings of my study and provided a demographic overview of my participants, six narrative profiles, and an overarching thematic analysis. Three themes were established: 1) community college philosophy: blueprint for a vision, 2) consolidating local democracies, and 3) citizens as students, students as citizens.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings in relation to my three research questions:

4. How do community college presidents understand and explain democracy?
5. How do community college presidents understand and explain the role their institutions should play in the American democracy?
6. What do community college presidents' life stories tell us about their work as leaders and the work of their institutions to contribute to the American democracy?

I then discuss the implications of the study and explain how the findings build upon the extant literature. I also provide recommendations for practice and future research related to this inquiry. Finally, I close with a summary of the study.

## Answering the Research Questions

### Research Question 1: How do community college presidents understand and explain democracy?

Each of my participants described the American democracy in different ways. This is not surprising given the unique and often complicated structure of democracy (Held, 2006).

However, two notable similarities stand out. First, all my participants described inequities personally experienced or outwardly seen during their lives, underscoring the unequal nature of the American democracy. This is a notable observation because these experiences not only shaped their understanding of the American democracy, but their passions as well. Second, my participants understood democracy as an ideal to strive towards.

For two of my participants, Ida and John, their understanding of the American democracy was influenced by the economic and racial injustices they experienced growing up. Looking at John's life, his family lived in a cycle of poverty and had little to no agency in the democratic process, "We weren't able to really participate in democracy like a lot of other people for that reason [*limited resources*], but also because we were African American in the 1950s". These experiences emboldened them to participate and seek change to the American democracy, something they both witnessed in their lives. As Ida commented, "Democracy means that the segregated South changed because the people participated. [*She emphasized each statement here*] People marched; people voted; people spoke up; people were there". While action is essential to this work, so too is educating others on the historical conditions of the American democracy. As John said, "It is important for people to know where we've been, where we are, and where we can go". Ida synthesizes these comments in the following statement,

I'm grateful to have lived this life... I see it as my responsibility to say, okay, what can I do to support people who may not have had that kind of support and experience that I had? But you know, I'm grateful for what I was experienced at the same time. What can I do with what I have learned to help other people?

For my remaining participants, they too recognized inequities in the American democratic system, but often spoke in broader terms of democratic norms and facilitating equal opportunity. As Abe commented, “You know, democracy, there isn't one definition, but all voices need to be heard, and they need to be recognized and valued”. And Eleanor, in response to this question immediately referenced the term Democracy’s Colleges, said, “I think what it means to me to be Democracy’s College is that it goes to the core of what the community college does because we serve a diverse population. We are incredibly inclusive.” Franklin too spoke about democracy in this manner, saying, “Well, what it means to me, and particularly through community colleges, is opportunity that is not limited by birthright, or you know any type of limitations that you would have seen other places”. These statements underscore the second point, they understood democracy as an ideal.

As explored in Chapter 4, my participants worked to consolidate their local democracies by identifying and addressing local inequities, democratizing opportunity, and bringing the community together in different ways. The particulars of these actions are exemplified in their stories, driven by their passions. This work also speaks to the belief my participants had that despite the inequities, democracy was an ideal worth working towards. They understood that liberal democracy, despite its flaws, offered tangible answers to problems that their communities were struggling with. In short, they recognized the gap between the promise of democracy and the practice of democracy, and their work was centered around closing this gap within their local communities.

Research Question 2: How do community college presidents understand and explain the role their institutions should play in the American democracy?

My participants explained the role of their institutions in the American democracy primarily through the lens of the community college mission: tuition-free, open access, community-based post-secondary institutions offering transfer, vocational, and adult education programs (Cohen et al., 2014). Inasmuch, they understood the role of their institutions in the American democracy to educate and prepare citizens and be the conduit between where they are and where they can be.

As Abe so poignantly noted, “Our role in democracy is not to get people to vote, it’s to get them to be civically responsible”. Civic responsibility is the larger goal and focus of educating citizens, and this is accomplished in a variety of ways. This understanding speaks directly to the observations provided in The President’s Commission on Higher Education (1947), which posit,

To educate our citizens only in the structure and processes of the American government, therefore, is to fall far short of what is needed for the fuller realization of the democratic ideal. It is the responsibility of higher education to devise programs and methods which will make clear the ethical values and the concept of human relations upon which our political system rests. (Volume I, p. 11–12)

This is the onus for many of the best practices and programs identified in Chapter 4: deliberate community dialogues, how to petition one’s government, be a convener for the community, learn about and from current and historical events, nurture a culture of service, and nurture a democratic culture. However, as John explained, “It’s not something you can dictate”. Instead, he continued, “I think the spirit of the college and the climate of the college lends itself

to faculty and staff embracing [this purpose], and in doing so, it becomes embedded in the curriculum and the services we provide”. This is why the community college philosophy is the blueprint for the vision. Yes, there are actionable programs and examples one can follow to meet the democratic mission of educating students for democracy; however, my participants show that more is required, and more is possible. It must become part of the fabric of the community college itself. Present in the curriculum, in the actions of faculty and staff, and recognized externally. Eleanor came to this conclusion when I pressed her on why reading the slogan “Your success, our success” on NSCC banners was so important to her. She reflected and said,

I wanted to be at a place where people felt *that* way and felt the same way I did about students. Because when you're not in that environment it makes leadership very, very difficult... I mean, yes, you have to be focused on workforce development. But there's a balance. I think [as a leader] that you have to bring to an institution [a culture of] caring and concern for your students, while making sure you're meeting the economic needs of your community.

The balance that Eleanor references is pivotal because of the diverse needs of students, they are not a monolith. Recognizing their different aspirations and stages in life is necessary. This contextualizes being a conduit for citizens. For example, Franklin spoke passionately about community colleges being the conduit to a better life and shaped ESCC's strategic plan on the twin pillars of economic mobility and equitable access to higher education. He said,

I think democratization from a community college perspective means that you are not just bringing in and accepting [students], but that you're reaching out to people who, because of circumstances, some of those related to their own personal circumstances, can be left out of what is the gateway to economic opportunity, which is higher education.

This speaks to a primary theme revealed in Chapter 4, citizens as students, students as citizens. My participants considered all citizens within the scope of the community college. When John talked about his Middle College program, he said, “We had a *duty* to prepare those high school students to join a college pathway”. The community college mission helped my

participants explain the role of community colleges in the American democracy, but they understood the role of their institutions to educate and prepare citizens and be the conduit between where they are and where they can be.

Research Question 3: What do community college presidents' life stories tell us about their work as leaders and the work of their institutions to contribute to the American democracy?

My participants' life stories show that they developed a passion for the democratic mission of community colleges drawn from their personal experiences living in the American democracy and recognizing or experiencing inequities in American society. And, each made it their work to address these ills within their local communities through their community colleges. To be very clear, all my participants were dedicated to this purpose and driven by their passion; however, this was not their primary priority. This statement feels jarring in a way, to hear and to write. However, I turn to my participants to provide context. Starting with Abe,

Keep the [democratic] passion as a driving force, but not as your first priority, because you still have to run a college. My first responsibility is to the well-being of this campus. If you say, "I'm coming in with this passion", then it's about you. [*He emphasized*] It's not about you. It's about the people in this building [*he said, looking and gesturing around him*]. I got ten thousand students, three hundred employees. It's about them. My job is to educate them on what our role is in the community, [to be] civically responsible".

The passion is essential, but it cannot be all-consuming. The life stories of my participants reveal that their work as leaders of community colleges were shaped by their personal values, and they used their agency as president to serve students and meet the needs of their communities. Each of my participants accomplished this in different way, leaning on the unique aspects of their institutions and communities. As Franklin said, "Identify with what is unique about community colleges [and] respect mission focused leadership". Looking at the journeys of Ida and Eleanor, get involved with the community, invest time and resources there.

Support students outside the classroom as much as one would inside. These actions work towards building the culture, which, as Ida reminds us, is all about service, “How can this job be used to benefit others”.

## Discussion

### The Community College Democratic Mission

The community college mission is traditionally understood to be tuition-free, open access, community-based post-secondary institutions offering transfer, vocational, and adult education programs (Cohen et al., 2014). However, my participants believed that community colleges have a responsibility to the American democracy and this responsibility is reflected in their community college mission. This is an important addition to the literature because while democratic outcomes are actualized through a community college education (Hoffman, 2016; Kisker, 2016; Kisker et al., 2019; Presidents Commission on Higher Education, 1947; Ronan, 2012; Turner, 2016; Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2017), not all presidents commit to a democratic mission. Kisker and colleagues (2019) recognized that given the unique and contextual nature of community colleges, “It may not be possible to make blanket statements about how community colleges understand the notion of educating for democracy or why it may be important to their democratic mission” (p.214). The narratives of my participants reveal that presidents have agency in following a certain mission, affirming the work of many scholars (Albert, 2007; Gumport, 2003; Moriarty, 1992; Nelson, 2002; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Vaughan, 1992, 1986, 2000; Vaughan & Weisman, 1998). Simply put, presidents are a primary catalyst in fulfilling the democratic mission. They tap into the latent potential and mission of community colleges as institutions, and some choose to champion the democratic mission more than others.



What distinguishes these presidents and their stories? Looking at the narrative journeys of my participants, they perceived inequities in American society, recognized how the community college could address them, and used their positions as president to act. It was a deliberate choice. However, they went about this process in different ways. Ida and Eleanor focused more on establishing democratic cultures of service, affirming the findings of Vaughan (1986, 1992) and Vaughan and Weisman (1998) on the importance of culture. They also embodied cultural competence (Amey, 2004, 2006, 2022) by displaying a deep understanding of their institutions' culture, norms, and values, and the importance of culture in achieving institutional goals (Eddy, 2010, 2017, 2018; Zamani-Gallaher, 2020). Abe has spent a decade instilling democratic culture at MCC and gave many examples of challenging and changing institutional and community culture to be more inclusive and equitable. His work affirms the conclusions and recommendations made by many community college scholars dedicated to diversifying community college leadership practices (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Wood, 2017; Zamani-Gallaher, 2020) and faculty and senior leader positions (Nevarez & Santamaria, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

Looking through the lens of democratic deconsolidation, the findings of this study support the claim that participation in democracy is sterilized when education and resources are unequally distributed (Coppege and Gerring, 2011; Diamond, 1994; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Mounk, 2018; Przeworski et al., 1996). More specifically, Przeworski and his colleagues write that, "Poverty is a trap" (p.49) and Linz and Stepan note that if a democracy does not provide "some alleviation of gross inequality, democracy would not be sustainable" (p.13). Two of my participants specifically addressed these issues within their communities. John was very aware and dedicated to alleviating differences in resources. His narrative journey began with

experiencing resource disparity and learning how this limits participation in democratic society. This became a driving passion for John, and he championed this cause throughout his professional life. Franklin too was concerned about economic disparity, but through the lens of education not keeping pace with technology. His dedication to improving and educating the community, specifically the workforce, speaks to how ESSC is deepening its local democracy.

We also cannot ignore the findings from The National Task Force (2012) that American society is experiencing a civic malaise or from Mounk (2018) on the social indicators of democratic deconsolidation. This is the sphere in which Robert influenced his community through his narrative theme of bringing the community together. Robert recognized that bringing the community together is an extension of the open access mission and speaks to the theme that all citizens are students of the community college. His passion ranged from consolidating the local government, inviting in business partners to improve the local economy, to the more grass roots focus of being a convener of civil society. These actions respond to the findings of Mounk (2018) and The National Task Force (2012) and warrant a deeper look at how community colleges can democratize their communities and address various social ills. Robert's theme also affirms the claim that president's facilitate democratic outcomes but within the scope of their communities' needs (Cohen et al., 2014). Taken together, the narrative journeys of my participants support the existence of a democratic community college mission. And, this work helps consolidate, or deepen, their local democracies.

#### Community Colleges Help Deepen Democracy

A primary theme of Chapter 4 is that community colleges help consolidate their local democracies - their local communities. This finding is buttressed through the subthemes of recognizing and addressing local inequities, democratizing opportunity, and bringing the

community together. What is notable is that while some of my participants expressed concern about the health of the American democracy, they did not frame their concerns as democracy in decline. Inequalities and inequities certainly exist in both their communities and larger social society and my participants were impassioned to alleviate these social ills.

Community colleges do have the capacity to deepen democracy within their local communities and this is supported through the narratives of my participants. Indeed, many of the concerns they noted were being addressed by their institutions. Furthermore, they often commented on the progress that has occurred over the long arc of the American democracy. Simply put, they did not voice immediate concerns about an inevitable decline of the American democracy but neither did they speak convincingly of a consolidated American democracy. This means that they believe the American democracy is a work in progress and community colleges are an important part of the deepening process. And, this finding furthers the work of Diamond (1994), Foa and Mounk (2016), and Mounk (2018).

The concept of deepening democracy is distinct from preventing democratic erosion or deconsolidation. Political theorist Diamond (1994) contextualizes this concept, “The democratization of local government goes hand in hand with the development of civil society as an important condition for the deepening of democracy” (p.9). A key difference in this study’s findings is that while other recommendations from The National Task Force (2012) or Kisker (2016) and Kisker and colleagues (2019) focused on civic learning and literally preparing students, my presidents did not solely think in these terms. They also focused on the local community. Put another way, while the reports and recommendations from these documents are important and relevant, they do not capture the entire narrative. Instead, the findings from this study extends the observations provided by The National Task Force (2012), Kisker (2016), and

Kisker and colleagues (2019). You must first prepare citizens to receive civic education by helping them move to a place that allows them to focus on these needs. Can they pay their rent, do they have a job with a livable wage, are they recognized by their government, or in the social and cultural institutions present in the community? As Foa and Mounk (2016) write,

People can have an abstract allegiance to “democracy” while simultaneously rejecting many key norms and institutions that have traditionally been regarded as necessary ingredients of democratic governance. Therefore, if we are to understand why levels of support for democracy have changed, we must study the ways in which people’s conception of democracy, as well as their degree of engagement with democratic institutions, have changed. (p.8)

Again, community colleges are not a panacea, but they have remarkable flexibility in solving problems within a community that are distinct from four-year institutions. And, as explored in Chapter 4, they help deepen democracy by recognizing and addressing local inequities, democratizing opportunity, and bringing the community together. These findings are important, new additions to the literature of democratic deconsolidation and the deepening of democracy. A final consideration is the role of education within this process.

#### The Role of Community Colleges in the American Democracy: Public Goods, Private Goods

An underlying belief permeating through this study is that education is an effective means to make lasting social change. Democracy is fundamentally a social process (Held, 2016), and education informs that process. We must be cognizant of our country’s history and the arc of higher education which has influenced the current nature of our democracy. As John said, “It is important for people to know where we’ve been, where we are, and where we can go”. Labaree (1997) initiates this conversation, but after listening to my participants’ stories, he does not explain the full role of higher education in the context of the community college. This study does affirm Labaree’s claims that education helps prepare citizens develop a sense of civic virtue, equalizes opportunity, and instills respect and familiarity between cultures. Furthermore,

community college promote social efficiency through the vocational mission, and social mobility through the open access mission. These goals are supported and seen in many of my participants' stories. However, some claims made in his article fall short of explaining the role of community colleges in the American democracy.

The fundamental claim that Labaree (1997) makes is that the educational goal of social mobility is an inherently private good that has progressively dominated the goals of democratic equality and social efficiency which he casts as public goods. Labaree laments the prominence of social mobility and makes an extraordinary claim, "Whereas social mobility shares with its partner [social efficiency] in the progressive agenda a concern for equal access, it stands in opposition to the notion of equal treatment, and it works directly counter to the ideal of civic virtue" (p.65). He continues,

Schooling for social mobility undercuts the ability of schools to nurture [civic virtue] and the behaviors it fosters: devotion to the political community and a willingness to subordinate private interests to the public interest...From the perspective of democratic equality, schools should make republicans; from the perspective of social efficiency, they should make workers; but from the perspective of social mobility, they should make winners." (p.66)

In his explanation of social mobility, he frames education as being warped into a credential to provide "a comfortable standard of living, financial security, social power, and cultural prestige" (p.55). His concern is that the private benefits of education are slowly overpowering the public benefits. Sociologists of education Clark (1960) and Brint and Karabel (1989) support and further these claims and narrow their focus to the community college. Their position being that vocationalism promotes the "cooling-out" function of higher education (Clark, 1960), reproducing social inequalities (Brint & Karabel, 1989). The community college mission and my participants' narratives offer a different perspective. Labaree's understanding of higher education does not differentiate between community colleges and four-year institutions and this is a major theoretical issue.

The four-year university and the community college are distinct sectors of the American higher education system. Inasmuch, they have different missions and different goals. To be

certain, there is a natural crossover between these institutions reminiscent of a Venn diagram, two circles with an overlapping middle; however, Labaree does not identify the differences between these institutions. His claim that social mobility degrades democratic equality can only be understood by exploring his concept of democratic equality. He lists three operational forms: citizenship training, equal treatment, and equal access. First, his belief that citizenship training is achieved primarily through classroom learning and experience is in direct contrast to my participants. Certainly, my participants recognized the importance of civic learning; however, through the community college mission, they had an expanded notion of how community colleges achieve this end. The theme of consolidating local democracies stands out here, to recognize and address local inequities, democratize opportunity, and bring the community together.

Equal treatment, for Labaree, means “to provide equal education experiences for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, and sex” (p.45). A laudable goal that is a shared value of both higher education institutions. However, equal treatment is neutered without equal access. What is the point of an equal educational experience if admission is fundamentally unequal and exclusive? Regarding equal access, Labaree fails to understand this concept through the lens of the community college. He wrote,

The mobility and efficiency goals for education have pushed the common school goal of democratic equality into a corner of the American schoolroom. Citizenship has largely given way to self-interest and economic necessity, and equal treatment has succumbed to the powerful pressure (from both consumers and employers) for educational stratification. The only component of the political purposes of schooling that still exerts an undiminished influence on the schools is the ideal of equal access. The expansive political hopes of the common schoolmen over the years have become lodged in this part of the original dream. Yet the influence of this remaining hope on the schools has proven to be substantial, and this influence is perhaps most visible in the way *it has undermined the effectiveness of schools at promoting either mobility or efficiency*. (Emphasis added, p.69)

Herein is the most flagrant example of Labaree not acknowledging the differences between community colleges and four-year institutions. For community colleges, as described by my participants, equal and open access is the bedrock of democratizing opportunity and recognizing and addressing local inequities. Furthermore, equal access helps ensure that citizens can enter and progress through the workforce through higher education. For Labaree, equal access is a problem. He explains,

From the perspective of the mobility and efficiency goals, democratic pressure for equal access to schools has simply gotten out of hand. The problem is that, in a society that sees itself as devoted to political equality, it is politically impossible to contain the demand for schooling for very long". (p.69)

Why is equal access a problem for Labaree? Because four-year institutions do not have the capacity to handle the demand for education at the highest levels. Indeed, this was a primary purpose for the creation of community colleges, to intentionally stratify higher education by levels of preparation and serve as a bulwark to the four-year university (Cohen et al., 2014; Witt et al, 1994). Ida addressed this in our interviews and highlights the unique philosophy of the community college when she said,

[William Rainey Harper's] reasoning [*she smiled*] was not as altruistic as you would think, he didn't want everyone to go to his college, the University of Chicago; [*she chuckled*] so, community colleges were founded. Therefore, there was a college for most of us and a college for some of us [*she laughed*], [but] community colleges proliferated. I feel community colleges, similarly to the opportunity that I had to go to school in [the Deep South] through a land-grant institution, are accessible and affordable for people to be able to improve their lives through higher education. And so, I equate community colleges as a People's College.

Ida offers a counterargument to the importance of equal access compared to Labaree (1997). To further distinguish the mission and philosophy of these institutions and the role of community colleges in the American democracy, the vocational mission is addressed and the positions of Clark (1960) and Brint and Karabel (1989) examined.

Community colleges promote social efficiency by preparing workers for society through the vocational mission. Franklin defended the vocational mission and argued that it also helped fulfill the democratic mission, noting,

People discount first jobs. So, a foothold training program would be a like a program that gives you a certification that allows you to get a job, it's the first job along the way, you know, not intended to be the last job. But it is the idea that it gives you a foothold into that work world. But if we do it right, and if it allows for it, maybe we can give credits back towards a degree. And we have apprenticeship programs where you can work and get experience at the same time and have transfer programs where you could get transfer seamlessly to keep going. I think a lot of people discount community colleges because they see [*he paused*] the short-term aspects of what we do in workforce training, and the more academic aspects of what we do in terms of degree should not be necessarily two different sides of the house. They can be connected, and for a lot of working adults, that's what they need. They need to need to be able to get into the workforce with something that gives them a foothold, but they need to keep working towards something else that's going to give them career mobility. So, you know it's not planning for the job, it's planning for mobility, and a short-term certification, particularly for a working adult, is often the first step towards mobility. It's not the last step.

Franklin's final line, "It's not the last step" speaks volumes. Recalling ESSC's strategic plan, a community college degree or certificate is one rung on a continuous ladder that helps citizens progress from one place in their lives to the next. This fluid notion of how the community college facilitates various outcomes is notable and speaks to the unique nature of this institution. They pull citizens in from the community, but also up as well. Ida spoke to this when she said,

At MSCC we pride ourselves in reaching out to the community, in a number of different ways, with through our TRIO programs, we start with our middle school students letting them know we are here, [*with emphasis*] we are their community college. And regardless of what their pursuits are, we can help them get there. We reach out to our high school students with dual credit partnerships that we have with our high schools, and then working very closely with the superintendents in our areas. And then our articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities to make sure that our students have a clear path to be able to continue on to bachelor's degrees and beyond, if that is what they desire to do. So, I see community colleges as a lynchpin. You know, we *connect* people from all walks of life, returning adults who are coming back looking for a second career. We look for opportunities for people who have been dislocated workers who need to come back to be retrained in this economy where technology positions are sought after, in



high demand. But I say all that to say, our mission and purpose is to serve [*she looked into the camera*] all sectors of the community, regardless of where they came from or how they started.

These statements show the need for researchers to reexamine the discussion by Clark (1960) and Brint and Karabel (1989) to determine if there are further points of alignment or discord that might be explored through empirical research. In sum, these statements reveal that my participants had a different perspective about the mission and philosophy of the community college and its role in the American democracy compared to four-year institutions. Furthermore, their description and understanding of Labaree's (1997) goals of education through the lens of the community college mission show that community colleges serve a different role in the American democracy and this needs to be acknowledged and explored through future research.

#### Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations for practice are intended to provide a guide for community college senior leaders to reference in pursuit of the community college democratic mission.

1. Given my findings in this study, I recommend that aspiring presidents develop a deep appreciation for the history and philosophy of the community college. All my participants were intimately familiar with the community college philosophy and mission. This guided their decisions at the macro and micro levels of leadership, from establishing the vision and strategic plan of the college to deciding which individual programs to champion. This understanding is essential to this work. It is the lens which my presidents used to understand the American democracy and to be mission focused leaders. However, it would be naïve to believe that all candidates for a community college presidency have this knowledge. Accordingly, to continue the work of community colleges as an institution promoting the

consolidation of democracy, I believe that higher education graduate programs should require students to study the role of community colleges in the American democracy. This could be achieved by specific coursework or internships or mentoring. But, in every case, prospective community college presidents should be able to show how the mission and philosophy of the community college is a central factor in their decision-making process. Additionally, once their graduate training has been completed, I recommend that community college search committees include an opportunity for presidential candidates to discuss the community college mission, what it means to them as leaders, and explain how it shapes their role as president.

2. The findings from my study show that although programs are important in the pursuit of preparing students for a meaningful role in the American democracy, institutional culture is indispensable. Ida and Eleanor's narrative themes speak to this point, but all my participants explicitly spoke to the power of institutional culture. Individual programs such as voter drives, community events, and deliberate dialogues are wonderful and needed tactical examples; however, shaping and directing the culture to become more democratic is not only preferred, but it also sets the conditions for these outcomes to be more universally actualized. Buy-in from staff, administrators, faculty, students, and other institutional and community stakeholders helps these values, these norms, to permeate across all aspects of the community college and into the community. To develop a culture that can support a community college's work in pursuing the democratic mission, I recommend that institutions regularly conduct cultural assessments that specifically focus, among other things, on the style and manner of internal communications, the processes used internally to identify and solve problems, and the policies that the institution employs to address community educational needs. If

conducted effectively, these assessments could tell institutional leaders how their institution is performing in its responsibilities to establish an equitable culture and prepare students for democracy.

3. Additionally, my findings underscore the importance of providing high quality opportunities for institutional leaders (but, also including faculty and staff) to engage with the local community. This might be accomplished by having members of the college community join civic organizations, volunteer for leadership positions in the community, network with partners in the community in pursuing their specific goals and objectives, or systematically communicating with parents and students. This work should be incorporated into the institution's strategic planning process, assessed using measurable goals and objectives, and then systematically evaluated to ensure progress is ongoing. This work is important to community colleges pursuing a larger role in developing their local democratic culture because, as my participants explained, investing time in the community will help identify how your community college can address inequities in the local community. To be sure, community colleges are not a panacea for all problems; but they have remarkable capacity to serve many different areas of public life. Community colleges are also unique, influenced by their community's history, economy, culture, demographics, and many other factors.

Accordingly, institutional leaders should learn about what makes theirs unique.

4. A primary theme in Chapter 4 revealed that my participants viewed all citizens as students. To limit one's focus on enrolled students or potential "markets" of students is to fall far short of the democratic mission. Some of the most powerful examples in Chapter 4 are my participants recognizing that the community college is for the entire community and all its citizens. Examples include travelling across the state to petition universities and state

politicians to secure scholarships for outgoing students, retraining workers displaced by circumstances outside their control, petitioning the local government to memorialize cultural groups minoritized in the community, or being a convener for various civic organizations. Given that a key mission of community colleges is to be open-access institutions, presidents should ensure that the open-access mission is explicitly stated within their institution's strategic plan. Most importantly, equitable access strategies should be included to help target populations and sectors of the community that are underrepresented.

5. Senior community college leaders interested in this work must seek mentorship and then pay it forward. None of my participants became community college presidents by themselves. This goes beyond the support of family and friends, which is important. Many of my participants were mentored by other presidents while others had mentors who were community college scholars. There is no current, codified pipeline for community college presidents. Furthermore, while the AACC competencies (2018) can serve as a guide, it is not an institutionalized document used in preparing future senior community college leaders (Smith et al., 2020). Therefore, it behooves current presidents dedicated to the democratic mission to mentor senior community college leaders and pass on their knowledge and values. Additionally, following the recommendations of Zamani-Gallaher (2020), Nevarez and Wood (2010), and Wood (2017), mentors should seek to instill cultural awareness in their mentees to better serve the diverse range of students at the community college. Presidents should identify why aspiring presidents and senior leaders are passionate about the democratic mission and help them identify why they are passionate about community colleges. In short, every community college president should mentor aspiring community

college senior leaders and institutionalize these relationships within their institutional cultures.

6. Finally, it is important to consider the role of state community college systems and how they may further deepen democracy within their institutions and communities. At the system level, Presidents could consider enrollment in the Democracy Commitment to support the development and expansion of civic learning and democratic engagement and build an institutional culture that values the community college democratic mission. Not only would this decision set a clear commitment and precedent for the system's community colleges, but membership also provides opportunities to engage in and progress national democratic initiatives and projects. Current dialogues and issues being addressed through the Democracy Commitment and its institutional members include political engagement, inequality, deliberative democracy, community conversations, civic agency, and civic curriculum development (The Democracy Commitment, n.d.).

#### Recommendations for Future Research

The American community college has been studied since its inception. However, my study underscores the need to explore the role of the community college in the American democracy and how it is unique from four-year institutions. Future research is recommended in the following areas to progress this field of research and build upon the findings of this study.

1. In Chapter 2, I introduced the work of Labaree (1997) and his conceptual article on the public and private benefits of higher education. He posited three goals of higher education – social efficiency, social mobility, and democratic equality – each important, meaningful, and helpful in understanding the broader goals of higher education. However, my findings reveal that they do not capture the broader goals of higher education specific to the community

college. As related by my participants and outlined in the Discussion section, community colleges serve a different role in the American democracy compared to four-year institutions. The goals of the community college are found in its multifaceted mission, and a comprehensive understanding is provided by Cohen and colleagues (2014). However, given that the American democracy, and American society, have experienced changes in its social, political, cultural, and economic spheres, further empirical and conceptual research into the work that community colleges are doing to consolidate democratic communities is warranted. More specifically, I recommend that researchers use qualitative methods to collect data from community colleges senior leaders and scholars who understand the fundamental differences between these institutions, their philosophies, missions, and role in the American democracy.

2. My study's utilization of the theory of democratic deconsolidation is a unique contribution. I found that there are two primary benefits of this theory that are applicable to this field of study. First, this theory helps us conceptualize democracy as a union of social, political, cultural, and economic institutions, civil society, and democratic norms. Second, the theory of deconsolidation can help us understand the points of contention, or deconsolidation, in the American democracy. A variety of publications speak to the intersection of democracy and education and the deepening of democracy as an end goal to be reached (Coppege and Gerring, 2011; Diamond, 1994; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Hoffman, 2016; Kisker, 2016; Kisker et al., 2019; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Mounk, 2018; Presidents Commission on Higher Education, 1947; Przeworski et al., 1996; Ronan, 2012; Turner, 2016). This is admirable but it does not help us understand the processes of consolidation and deconsolidation or the broader implications for public higher education. Given the findings of this study, I recommend that researchers conduct longitudinal qualitative studies that collect data from

community college students to better understand how they understand the American democracy, how their understanding changes throughout their lives, and the areas in which they perceive democratic erosion.

3. Community college presidents and community colleges as institutions are the joint subjects of this study. A common refrain from all my participants was that meeting a democratic mission requires a group effort, nobody can do this work alone. Many of my participants encouraged me to reach out to various faculty and administrators at their institutions to not only provide further context, but because they were invested and involved in this work. Inasmuch, qualitative single-site case studies that explore how a community college fulfills the democratic mission will further this research and reveal how different actors and departments work together in this process. Accordingly, I recommend that researchers identify community colleges that have a demonstrated record of committing to the democratic mission and then select those most likely to provide data concerning large scale centers and programs that involve multiple actors within the institution. With these institutions selected, researchers could then address the following three research questions which would build upon the findings reported in my study:

- a. How does the community college mission and philosophy guide the work of institutions to fulfill the democratic mission?
- b. How do community college civic engagement centers fulfill the community college democratic mission?
- c. How do community college civic programs deepen democracy in their local communities?

4. Boards of Trustees, whether elected or appointed, play an important role in the decision-making process at community colleges (Amey et al, 2003; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2007; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Vaughan, 1992, 1986; Vaughan & Weisman, 2003). However, their role in supporting the democratic mission was not explored in this study. Given their proximity to community college presidents and agency in guiding their institutions, I recommend that researchers conduct quantitative surveys to better understand how Boards of Trustees understand and meet the community college democratic mission. The benefit of quantitative surveys drawn from national samples could help reveal broader trends regarding the attitudes and practices of board members associated with this work. Questions could be developed using the following areas as key survey sections:
  - a. Career pathways
  - b. Leadership preparation
  - c. Competencies for Board members
  - d. Key Board functions
  - e. Professional activities and perceptions
5. Last, for my participants, race was a salient construct in their understanding of their responsibility to help advance democracy, facilitate democratic culture, and enact democratic policy and practice at community colleges and in the communities they serve. I believe that community college presidents need to recognize that upholding the current standards of educational opportunity or taking a race neutral stance is antithetical to liberal democracy. The importance and benefits of diversity to liberal democracy are manifold (Held, 2006); however, so too is justice (Adler, 1996; Held, 2006; Mill, 1998; Ryan, 2015). The American democracy has changed as cultural, social, and economic realities have changed. Community



colleges, as Democracy's Colleges, should change in kind. Put another way, the community college mission, largely unchanged in the past seventy years, should reflect the changes and needs of current democratic society. Therefore, I believe presidents need to move beyond the status quo, prioritize social and racial justice, and institutionalize these priorities in their institutional missions.

To be clear, equal opportunity and open access are fundamental to the community college mission and help deepen democracy; however, my participants' life stories reveal that more is possible and needed in the American democracy. For example, Abe's work in expanding cultural representation and hiring faculty and staff to reflect the diversity of the MCC community, Ida's work in addressing race in MSCC deliberate dialogues, Franklin's work and research concerning the health index of the ESCC community, and John's work in partnering with majority-minority high schools to create educational pathways speak to these ends. Furthermore, it is important to consider the broader lived experiences of younger people of color working at community colleges and their views about democracy and its intersection with the American community college. Although all my participants believed in the power of democracy to create social change and recognized the racial and social progress throughout their lives, it is important to consider the viewpoints of younger generations who do not have the privilege and power of a community college president. Thus, I recommend that qualitative research explore the lived experiences and understanding of younger faculty and staff from minoritized populations concerning the American democracy and the role of community colleges in deepening and consolidating democracy in their local communities.

## Summary

This qualitative narrative inquiry study explored how community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. Three primary themes were found that address this purpose: 1) community college philosophy: blueprint for a vision, 2) consolidating local democracies, and 3) citizens as students, students as citizens. These themes contributed to the extant literature, challenging, affirming, and expanding on different points. Three areas discussed were 1) the community college democratic mission, 2) community colleges help deepen democracy, and 3) the role of community colleges in the American democracy: public goods, private goods. First, my participants believed that community colleges have a responsibility to the American democracy and this responsibility is reflected in their community college mission. Second, my participants framed the American democracy as a continual work in progress and that community colleges are an important part of the deepening process of democratization. Third, community colleges are distinct from four-year universities in their institutional philosophies, and in kind, their role in the American democracy. Last, I offer recommendations for presidents interested in this work, and close with recommendations for future research. The findings of my study contribute to the literature within this field; however, there is much to learn from other institutions and community college leaders engaged in this work. The findings of this study can help guide those with a passion for the democratic mission of the community college. This work will never cease, because democracy is a social process that changes as society changes, and therefore requires a new commitment from each generation to the next. Finally, it is important to understand that community colleges are not just social or educational institutions, but democratic institutions that help consolidate the American democracy by deepening

democracy in local communities. If the survival and success of democratic nations and democratic societies is contingent upon the strength of local democracies, a claim that I believe to be true, then community colleges are not only important higher education institutions but vital to the success of the American democracy. These institutions may be some distance from the political power centers of their state. However, my study reveals that when led by presidents who are committed to democratic values that deepen democracy, community colleges may also function as a wellspring of democracy, a source for renewal, regeneration, and the pursuit of justice for all Americans.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Primary questions:**

1. Would you please describe your career path in becoming a community college president?  
What was this journey like for you?
2. Can you share a story that communicates what your institutions' community college mission means to you?
3. How did you come to understand the American democracy?
4. What responsibility does the community college have to the American democracy?
5. Considering current problems in the American democracy, how does your institution prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy? How have you changed your approach in recent years?

**Secondary questions:**

1. What do you think were some of the most important experiences or lessons that helped you in your path to the presidency?
2. Can you share a story about the impact your institution has on your local community?
3. What advice would you give to future community college presidents who have a passion for the democratizing purpose of the community college?
4. What other stories or experiences would you like to share?

APPENDIX B  
DOCUMENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

I intend to examine the documents that are relevant to achieving the purpose of the study and answering the research questions. There are three categories of documents that I plan to review, all of which are publicly available:

1. Recent news stories related to the community colleges on issues important and directly relevant to my study
2. Institutional websites
3. Relevant internal documents made accessible by the community college presidents

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM





UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS®

### **Informed Consent for Studies with Adults**

**TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY:** Community College Presidents and their Role in the American Democracy: A Narrative Inquiry

**RESEARCH TEAM:** The primary investigator is Jonathon Sanders, a doctoral student in the Higher Education program in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education. This project is his dissertation research and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Clifford P. Harbour, Professor (ret.) in the Higher Education Program.

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Taking part in this study is voluntary. The investigators will explain the study to you and will answer any questions you might have. It is your choice whether you take part in this study. If you agree to participate and then choose to withdraw from the study, that is your right, and your decision will not be held against you.

You are being asked to take part in a research study about how community college presidents prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy.

Your participation in this research study involves taking part in at two in-depth, semistructured interviews with the primary investigator that will take place through a video chat platform. Each interview should take up about 60-90 minutes of your time. More details will be provided in the next section.

You might want to participate in this study if you are interested in discussing how community college campuses presidents prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy and guide their institutions to facilitate civic outcomes. However, you might not want to participate in this study if you do not have the time needed to engage in the interview.

You may choose to participate in this research study if you are a community college president. The reasonable foreseeable risks or discomforts to you if you choose to take part are not beyond what you would normally experience in your regular everyday life which you can compare to the possible benefit of sharing your experiences and perspectives related to supporting the American democracy which will contribute to the growing body of scholarship on this topic. You will not receive compensation for participation.

**DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:** The following is more detailed information about this study, in addition to the information listed above.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** The purpose of this study is to explore how community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy.

**TIME COMMITMENT:** Your participation in this study will include two interviews, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes conducted over a video chat platform.

**STUDY PROCEDURES:** The data generated in this study will be gathered through interviews with 6-8 participants. During the interview, we will discuss a variety of topics related to the purpose of the study including your own professional pathway that led you to your current role, your understanding of leadership, the American democracy, and the community college mission. For interviews conducted through the Zoom video chat platform, the audio and video from the interviews will be recorded; however, only the audio will be used for transcription and analysis purposes. Audio will be transcribed by the student investigator or will be done by an IRB-approved transcription company. The data will be kept confidential (participants will be assigned pseudonyms) and will be stored on a secure UNT OneDrive account, only accessible to the student investigator and his dissertation committee.

**AUDIO/VIDEO/PHOTOGRAPHY:**

☐ **I agree** to be audio recorded/video recorded through the video chat platform during the research study. This is required in order to participate in the study.

☐ **I do not agree** to be audio recorded/video recorded through the video chat platform during the research study.

The recordings will be kept with other electronic data in a secure UNT OneDrive account for the duration of the study.

**POSSIBLE BENEFITS:** We expect the interview will serve as a space to share about the work you do as a community college president; we believe this can be fulfilling. We hope to learn more about your experiences and perspectives related how the community college and its presidents support the American democracy. We anticipate that your stories and experiences may lead to findings that will contribute to the literature on how community colleges can build capacity to support the American democracy and prepare future community college senior leaders.

**POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS:** We do not anticipate any risk or discomfort because this study is not beyond what you would normally experience in your regular everyday life.

If you experience excessive discomfort when completing the research activity, you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty. The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen, but the study may involve risks to the participant, which are currently unforeseeable. UNT does not provide medical services, or financial assistance for emotional distress or injuries that might happen from participating in this research. If you need to discuss your discomfort further, please contact a mental health provider, or you may contact the researcher who will refer you to appropriate services.

This research study is not expected to pose any additional risks beyond what you would normally experience in your regular everyday life. However, if you do experience any discomfort, please

inform the researcher, or contact the UNT Counseling Center (available 24 hours) at (940) 565-2741.

**COMPENSATION:** No compensation will be offered for participation in this study.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Efforts will be made by the research team to keep your personal information private, and disclosure will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. All electronic data collected from this study will be stored in a secure location on a secure UNT server for at least three (3) years past the end of this research, specifically in a password protected computer. Research records will be labeled with a pseudonym and the master key linking names with codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location.

The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as a participant. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB will first evaluate the use of any information that is identifiable to you, and confidentiality protection would be maintained.

**CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the primary investigator, Jonathon Sanders at [redacted] or the supervising faculty member, Dr. Clifford P. Harbour at [redacted]. Any questions you have regarding your rights as a research subject, or complaints about the research may be directed to the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at 940-565-4643, or by email at [untirb@unt.edu](mailto:untirb@unt.edu).

**CONSENT:**

- Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above.
- You confirm that you have been told the possible benefits, risks, and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits.
- You understand your rights as a research participant, and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study; you also understand that the study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- By signing, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

Please sign below if you are at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

---

**SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

**DATE**

---

**SIGNATURE OF PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR**

**DATE**

**\*If you agree to participate, please email a signed copy of this form to the research team at [redacted]. They will provide you with a copy to keep for your records.**

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT CRITERIA

## **Criteria**

1. Five or more years of experience as a community college president
2. A reputation for embracing the community college democratic mission

## **Important Factors to Consider in Assessing Reputation**

- Institutional membership in the Democracy Commitment or Campus Compact
- Participants that represent a wide range of gender, ethnic, and cultural identities
- Reputation for embracing the democratic mission:
  - Institution incorporates civic learning or engagement in their mission, strategic plan or goals, infrastructure, initiatives and programs, or professional development
  - An established center or office to guide democratic learning & activities
  - Offer certificate or degree in civic engagement or a related program
  - Provide leadership opportunities for students (student government, student led community engagement, civic leadership internships, debate forums)
  - Awareness of social change (seminars on current events, race or ethnically centered seminars, sustainability education and awareness seminars)
  - Sponsor student groups in civic efforts; civic engagement requirement for student groups
  - Environment: displays or other visual indicators with the purpose of generating thought or discussion on civic issues
  - Voter education and registration drives
  - Provide information on local, state, or national political candidates and the primary issues for the election cycle

APPENDIX E

LETTER OF PERMISSION TEMPLATE

Dear Jonathon and Dr. Harbour,

Thank you for explaining the study Jonathon is doing to complete requirements for a PhD degree in Higher Education from the University of North Texas. I understand that the purpose of the study is to explore how community college presidents understand and articulate the responsibility of their institutions to prepare students for a meaningful role in the American democracy. I also understand that the research method will be narrative inquiry. This method will include in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis. You have indicated that there are three focus areas of your study: 1) why some community college presidents embrace the institution's democratic mission; 2) what values, career, or educational experiences they see as important to fulfilling this mission; and 3) how we can better prepare future community college senior leaders to meet this mission. I understand that participation in your study will only require two Zoom interviews with the college president and limited collection and analysis of specific documents concerning your project, more specifically, the institution's strategic plan and program documents regarding civic education. Additionally, I understand that this research will not require use of our institution's facilities, equipment, or supplies. With these understandings, I approve the study and you have permission to proceed at our college.

Sincerely,

[College President]



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