

Whiteness Rules: Racial Exclusion in Becoming an American College President

FINDINGS REPORT

BENSIMON
& ASSOCIATES



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Around 1982, as a doctoral student I read *Leadership and Ambiguity* by Cohen and March, a classic in the higher education canon. This book, written in 1974, was about college presidencies, among other things. Cohen and March lured me into loving organizational theory and change. I pulled it off my shelf in the initial months of our study on presidential search and selection processes in California’s three public systems of higher education, because I recalled it included a demographic profile of college presidents. As we point out in our report, the profile of California’s current presidents is not all that different from what Cohen and March found more than four decades ago. The college presidency, in California and nationally, is normatively white.

How could it be that higher education, an institution that is considered to be among the most politically and socially liberal, is also a vestige of white supremacy? Cohen and March described the college presidency as conservative and noted that white men (as most college presidents were at the time) pass through an administrative social filter—from faculty to department chair to dean to provost—and that by the time they get to the presidency they’ve earned the cultural, social, and political credentials that make them presidential in the eyes of trustees and faculty. What Cohen and March did not call attention to is whiteness as a hidden characteristic of the social filter—a characteristic that is the unique property of white candidates.

I can see why Cohen and March did not comment on the whiteness or gendered nature of the presidencies. In the early 1970s, despite the civil rights and feminist movements, racialization and genderedness were only noticed by those who, for the most part, experienced the disadvantages inflicted upon them because of their racial and gender identities.

But even in the 21st century, we still do not call out whiteness as a valued credential that accumulates extra points to those who possess it. Breaking with the silence around whiteness, our report shows all the ways it is embedded at every stage of presidential search and selection processes. While the preference for white (usually male) candidates is troubling, it is not surprising. What is distressing—and perverse—is the many ways in which whiteness forces Black, Latinx, Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander candidates to adapt to, as one president put it, the “mannerisms” that conform to white expectations, in order to make whites feel comfortable.

I stress the role of whiteness because in most discussions about higher education’s failure to diversify faculty and leadership, whiteness is rarely implicated. The failure to pursue and attain racial equity in selecting and appointing faculty and leaders is typically attributed to “not casting the net widely,” “the lack of candidates who have the requisite experience” (i.e., who have passed the social, political, and cultural filters), “lack of interest,” etc.

The prescribed remedies fail because they leave the architecture of the presidential search and appointment process intact. To move beyond palliative, race-evasive solutions, this report describes eight ways in which presidential searches are racialized. In the accompanying toolkit, we provide a set of tools to bring race from the margins of presidential search processes to the center.



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A NOTE ON CONFIDENTIALITY

Due to the sensitivity of the data, the unique stories shared, and the relatively small numbers of Presidents of Color and white women presidents in the UC and CSU systems in particular, the possibility of breaching confidentiality is high. We thus decided to associate quotes and experiences with presidents by “white president” and “President of Color.” For Presidents of Color, noting their racial/ethnic group, gender, and sector could make their data identifiable. With white women presidents, gender and sector identification would have the same effect. Finally, we use the pronoun “they” to help maintain confidentiality and to recognize the fluidity of gender identities and expressions.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Although it is the standard practice of the American Psychological Association (APA) style guide to designate all racial and ethnic groups by proper nouns and thus capitalize them, Bensimon & Associates intentionally deprioritizes the term “white” by leaving it lowercase. This intentional action, a form of advocacy, acknowledges the longstanding mistreatment and wrongdoing inflicted on racially minoritized groups by historical and contemporary forms of white supremacy.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In this report, we demonstrate how white rules have shaped the trajectories and experiences of sitting presidents in California's public systems of higher education. We also highlight the role of search committees, search firms, system administrators, and boards of trustees. Our findings are based primarily on interviews with presidents, system administrators, search firm representatives, and other key stakeholders. Analyses of historical patterns of presidential selection in the UC, CSU, and CCC systems; curriculum vitae of presidents we interviewed; and the job announcements used in their search supplement our findings. While the majority of our data are California-centric, we also spoke with stakeholders outside California. Their experiences confirmed our main findings. We describe our data collection and analysis methods in the Appendix.

In the accompanying toolkit, *Tools to Redesign the Presidential Search Process for Racial Equity*, we outline actions key stakeholders can take to implement a critically race-conscious presidential hiring process. More specifically, we offer recommendations and tools that can assist in de-racializing presidential search processes.

1

Presidential Candidates of Color Must Conform to the White Archetype (page 14)

Candidates of Color need to conform to the white archetype of presidential leadership to be deemed qualified and to be hired.

2

Qualified Candidates of Color Must Dodge the Racial Bias Battlefield (page 17)

Biased appraisals that adhere to white standards result in search committees and decision-makers judging Candidates of Color as a risky choice at best and ineligible at worst.

3

Presidents and Candidates of Color are Burdened with Double Consciousness (page 21)

Because of white supremacy, Presidents and Candidates of Color must live and work in a world where they are seen through white eyes and judged based on white expectations.

4

White Rules Are Hidden in Plain Sight (page 23)

Presidents of Color attest to the benefits of having mentors and participating in executive leadership programs for navigating the hidden curriculum of presidential searches.

5

Search Committees Perpetuate Veiled Racial and Gender Bias (page 26)

The veiled nature of search committee meetings makes it possible for racialized (and gendered and ageist) messages to surface, despite the routine practice of implicit bias training.

6

Executive Search Firms May Talk the Talk, but Are Nowhere Near Walking the Walk (page 29)

Executive search firms (ESFs) play an important supporting role in presidential searches, particularly when it comes to building the candidate pool and facilitating the logistical details of this complex process.

7

Most Presidential Job Announcements Miss the Mark on Racial Equity (page 33)

Many announcements fail to meaningfully address racial equity, which may negatively impact applicant behavior and misrepresent the institution's stance and current progress toward racial equity.

8

Boards Make or Break Racial Equity in Presidential Hiring (page 36)

Boards of trustees are the ultimate decision-makers, and determine who will become the next president of an institution. Beyond selection, boards can signal whether and in what ways racial equity should be a priority.

INTRODUCTION

The education historian Eddie Cole (2020) tells us that in 1870, after the Civil War ended, John N. Waddel, the chancellor of the University of Mississippi, said: “The university will continue to be what it always has been, an institution exclusively for the education of the white race” (p. 17). College presidents today rarely if ever make such publicly racist espousals. Cole contends, however, that sitting presidents are not doing enough to dismantle racist norms and work toward anti-racist ends in higher education.

Under their watch, racist incidents, racial underrepresentation, racially unequal student outcomes, and everyday racism in the form of **microaggressions**, **implicit bias**, and the like, persist. In response to racist events, presidents tend to offer vague responses that decouple the act from systemic racism; that fail to acknowledge higher education’s foundations in **white supremacy** and racial violence; and that at best superficially affirm the value and belongingness of racially minoritized students (Cole & Harper, 2017).

Despite 60 years of continued demands from Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander students for faculty, staff, and administrators who reflect their racial/ethnic backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences (Ryan, 2015), presidents continue to lead practitioner bodies that are overwhelmingly white (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2021; Hussar et al., 2020). Presidential (in)action when addressing racism and advancing racial justice impacts whether colleges and universities—especially those that are historically white—can become racially equitable institutions.

The Black, Latinx, Asian American, Indigenous, and Pacific Islanders students comprising roughly half of today’s student population (NCES, 2021) deserve better from college presidents. Students deserve presidents who have experienced firsthand what it is like to be minoritized in the United States on the basis of race. Students deserve presidents who understand what it takes to succeed,

thrive, and experience joy in the face of systemic racism. Students deserve presidents who do not see them as a “challenge” but as the reason they are in the job. Students deserve leaders who have the know-how and skill, as well as the track record of implementing critical race-conscious and racially inclusive policies, programs, and practices. Students of Color deserve to see themselves in those who hold the position of president. All students deserve to understand that diversity means diversity of students but also in leadership. White students need to see Individuals of Color in positions of leadership, to start to chisel away at the white male archetype that occupies current perceptions of leadership. Ultimately, all students deserve Presidents of Color who can shape a campus’ educational philosophy, direction, and culture in critically race-conscious, equity-minded ways. Yet they are unlikely to find this kind of leader at the helm of their institution.

MICROAGGRESSION

Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate negative perceptions based on identity (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, religion) (Sue et al., 2007).

IMPLICIT BIAS

The ways in which social role expectations, norms, and stereotypes shape our perceptions of individuals from different social groups (e.g., by race, gender, class) in ways that are generally thought to be unfair and/or prejudicial (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013).

WHITE SUPREMACY

The political, economic, and cultural systems where whites control power and resources, where beliefs of white superiority are widespread, and white dominance as well as non-white subordination are enacted daily across institutions, organizations, and social structures (Harris, 1993; Southern, 2022).

Leaders, like all other human beings, have culturally acquired knowledge that influences what they notice, what they know, and how they make sense of their situation—their cognitive frames.

Equity-mindedness (Bensimon, 2007) represents a cognitive frame that is characteristic of individuals who are willing to assess their own racialized assumptions, which they often enact without awareness. An equity-minded leader understands that institutions of higher education, for the most part, have been designed by whites for whites, and is therefore intentional about asking the race question as a standard practice. An equity-minded leader is able to “read” race even when race is not mentioned. They take their responsibility to safeguard racial equity seriously and consistently. Equity-minded leaders understand that they must acquire the funds of knowledge that will enable them to exercise critically race-conscious leadership at all times (Bensimon, 2018). Developing the funds of knowledge that sustain equity-mindedness is intellectual and practical work—it is not about being nice, caring, or sympathetic.

Below are essential characteristics of equity-minded leaders:

- **Equity-minded leaders view the agenda of racial equity as a project centered on corrective justice or reparations (McPherson, 2015) for exclusionary and discriminatory practices (many of which persist today) imposed on People of Color. As an example, equity-minded leaders are willing to eliminate the practice of placing students in remedial education courses as a form of reparation to the thousands of racially minoritized students who were excluded from the curriculum because ostensibly race-neutral practices and policies deemed them as “disadvantaged,” “at-risk,” “unprepared,” and so on.**
- **Equity-minded leaders view the agenda of racial equity as anti-racist. They understand that institutions of higher education having been built by whites for whites, have participation patterns at all institutional levels that are racialized. Through their leadership they create the conditions to ask, “In what ways should these practices/policies be redesigned to be racially just?” For example: How should faculty hiring be changed, and how should decision-making be changed to bring racial implications to the forefront?**
- **Equity-minded leaders accept that the advancement of racial equity on college campuses requires naming and decentering whiteness. Whiteness, as we document in this report, is a process that is embedded in values, credentials, and definitions of excellence, quality, and objectivity, and these persist because race evasiveness goes unnoticed or unnamed, whether in presidential searches, claims of meritocracy, or the myriad routines that keep institutions running.**
- **Equity-minded leaders are not diverted from an agenda of racial equity and justice to protect the feelings of hurt, fear, or anger expressed by white individuals who perceive a focus on racial equity as an attack on their identity.**

“A CONVENTIONAL ELITE GROUP”

Change in who is likely to be appointed a college president has moved at a glacial pace. In 1974, organizational scholars Michael D. Cohen and James G. March called college presidents “a conventional elite group.” To this point in U.S. higher education history, presidents were generally white, middle-aged, married, male, Protestant, native-born academics.

Forty years have passed since Cohen and March’s assessment, and not much has

changed in college president demographics. The following figures are from the American Council of Education’s most recent *American College President Study*, which was released in 2017 (hereafter, ACE 2017 study; Gagliardi et al., 2017):

- Fewer than one in five of college presidents across the country were Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, or Pacific Islander.
- Only 30% were women, most of them white.
- The average age of presidents was 62, and the vast majority were married with children.

- While there was more religious diversity, half still identified as Protestant.
- Eighty percent hold a doctorate, and an even higher percentage served in an executive administrative role (e.g., president of another institution, interim president, provost) prior to their current presidency.

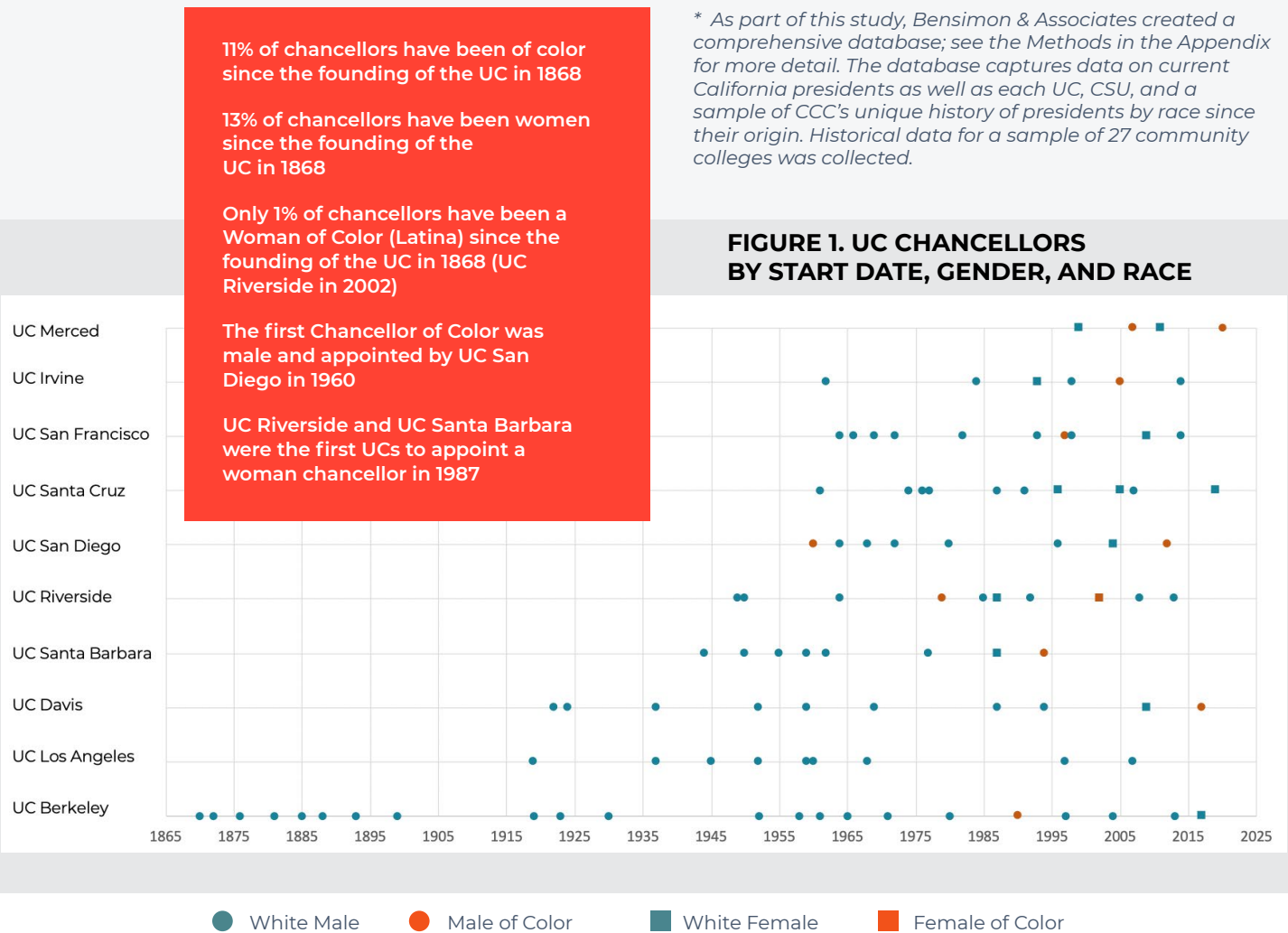
According to John Isaacson, a principal in the executive search firm Isaacson, Miller, higher education's interest in diversity in presidential searches is at "a plateau" (Cooper, 2009).

THE CALIFORNIA CONTEXT

Even California, which has long been celebrated for its progressive public higher education system, mirrors national patterns of college president demographics, historically and currently. In 1974, the year of Cohen and March's study, all University of California chancellors,

and all but two presidents in the California State University and Colleges system, were white men. The outliers: James G. Bond, a Black man, at Sacramento State, and Marjorie Downing Wagner, a white woman, at Sonoma State .

To date, some institutions have only had one president who was not a white man (e.g., San Diego State University, where Adela de la Torre, a Latina, was appointed in 2018; Mt. San Antonio College, where Marie T. Mills, a white woman, served from 1969 to 1972), and some have only had white male presidents (e.g., UCLA, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo). Figures 1, 2, and 3 track the chancellors of the 10 University of California campuses (UC), and presidents of the 23 California State Universities (CSU) and 27 of the 116 California Community Colleges (CCC), respectively, by race/ethnicity and gender since their origins. Figures 4-8 provide chancellor/president demographics, as of 2021.



* As part of this study, Bensimon & Associates created a comprehensive database; see the Methods in the Appendix for more detail. The database captures data on current California presidents as well as each UC, CSU, and a sample of CCC's unique history of presidents by race since their origin. Historical data for a sample of 27 community colleges was collected.

*Data represent chancellor start date, not institution start date.
**Data do not reflect acting or interim chancellors.

19% of presidents have been of color since the founding of the CSU in 1857

Only 5% of the presidents have been Women of Color since the founding of the CSU in 1857

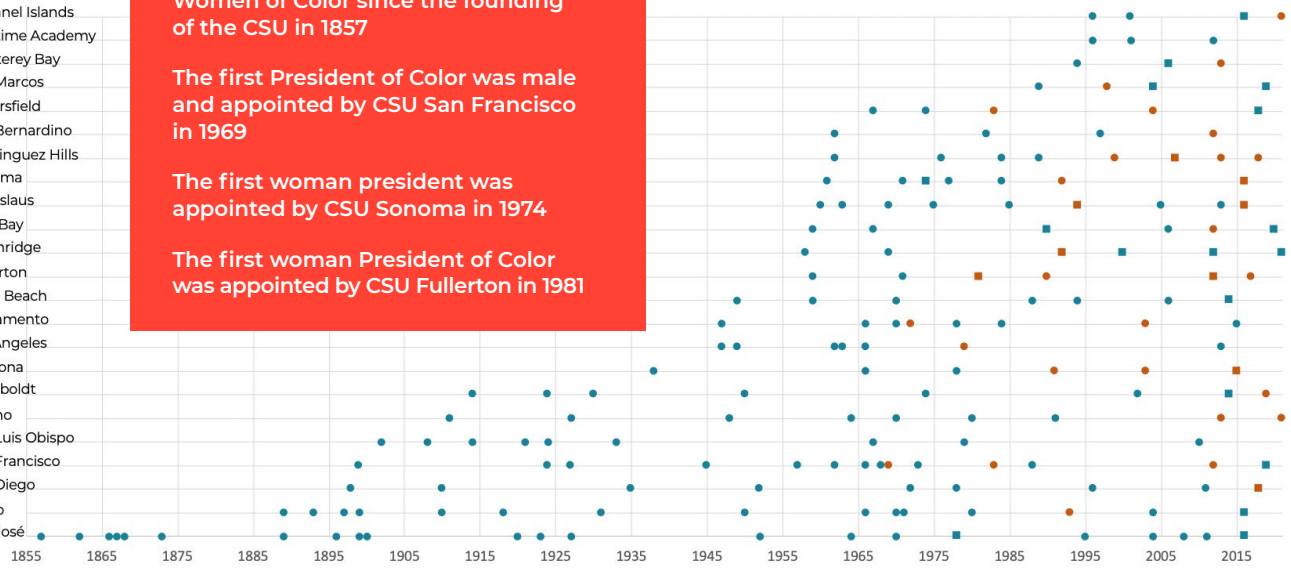
The first President of Color was male and appointed by CSU San Francisco in 1969

The first woman president was appointed by CSU Sonoma in 1974

The first woman President of Color was appointed by CSU Fullerton in 1981

FIGURE 2. CSU PRESIDENTS BY START DATE, GENDER, AND RACE

- CSU Channel Islands
- CSU Maritime Academy
- CSU Monterey Bay
- CSU San Marcos
- CSU Bakersfield
- CSU San Bernardino
- CSU Dominguez Hills
- CSU Sonoma
- CSU Stanislaus
- CSU East Bay
- CSU Northridge
- CSU Fullerton
- CSU Long Beach
- CSU Sacramento
- CSU Los Angeles
- CSU Pomona
- CSU Humboldt
- CSU Fresno
- CSU San Luis Obispo
- CSU San Francisco
- CSU San Diego
- CSU Chico
- CSU San José



● White Male ● Male of Color ■ White Female ■ Female of Color

*Data represent president start date, not institution start date.
 **Data do not reflect acting or interim presidents.
 ***CSU Chico had two presidents in 1931, both white males.

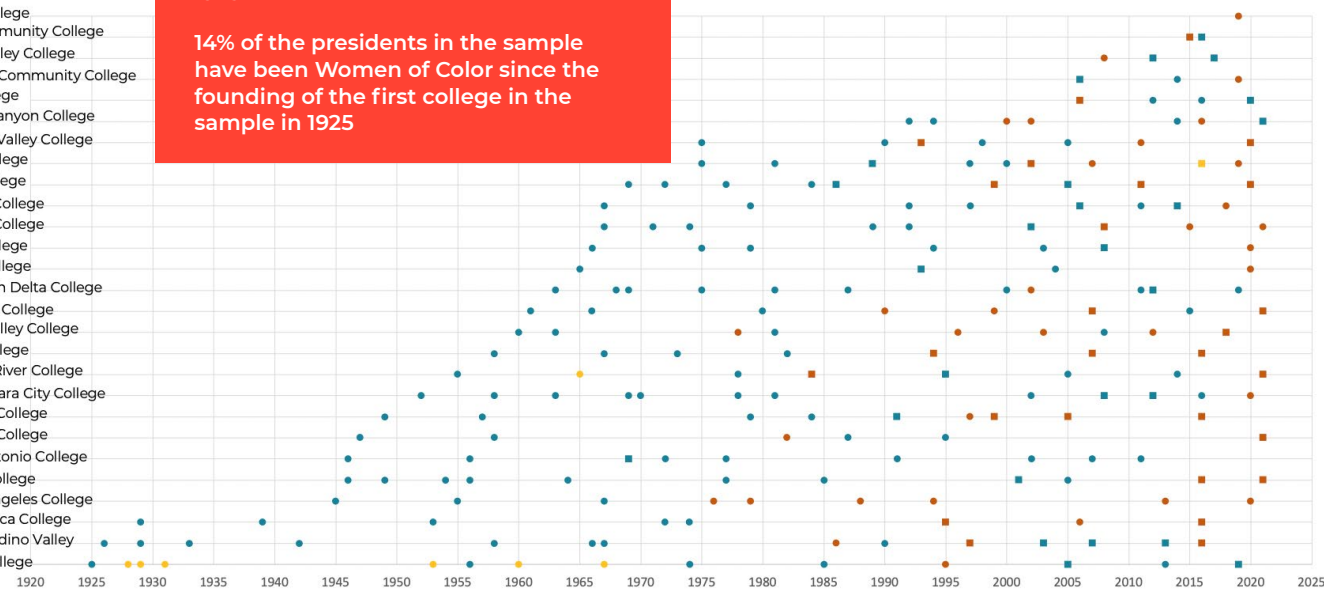
31% of the presidents in the sample have been of color since the founding of the first college in the sample in 1925

26% of the presidents in the sample have been women since the founding of the first college in the sample in 1925

14% of the presidents in the sample have been Women of Color since the founding of the first college in the sample in 1925

FIGURE 3. CCC PRESIDENTS BY START DATE, GENDER AND RACE

- Madera College
- Clovis Community College
- Moreno Valley College
- Woodland Community College
- Norco College
- Santiago Canyon College
- Evergreen Valley College
- Oxnard College
- Skyline College
- Columbia College
- Moorpark College
- Ohlone College
- DeAnza College
- San Joaquin Delta College
- Grossmont College
- Imperial Valley College
- Foothill College
- American River College
- Santa Barbara City College
- Santa Ana College
- El Camino College
- Mt. San Antonio College
- Palomar College
- East Los Angeles College
- Santa Monica College
- San Bernardino Valley
- Ventura College



● White Male ● Male of Color ● Unknown Male ■ White Female ■ Female of Color ■ Unknown Female

*Data represent president start date, not institution start date.
 **Data do not reflect acting or interim Presidents.
 ***Data capture those with the title "president", not "director."
 ****Data capture presidencies once the institution was established as a college.
 *****Grossmont College had two presidents in 1980, both white males.

Figure 4. Public Higher Education Presidents/Chancellors in California by Race, 2021

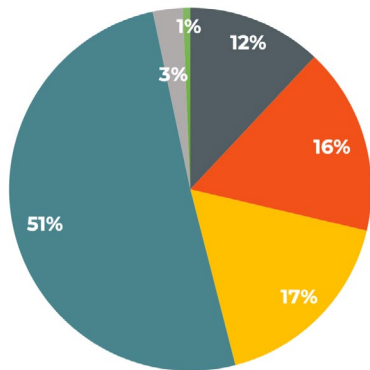


Figure 5. UC Chancellors by Race, 2021

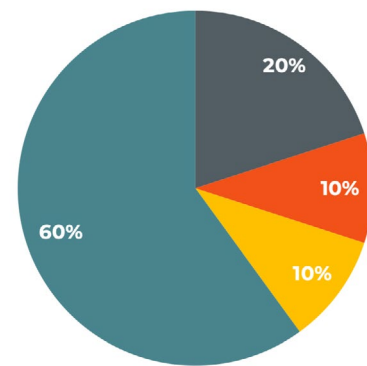


Figure 6. CSU Presidents by Race, 2021

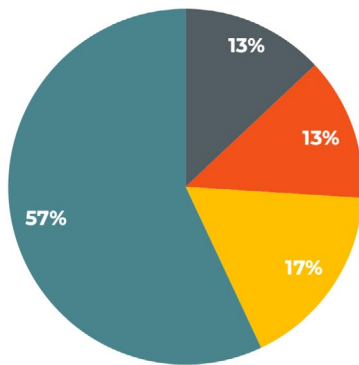
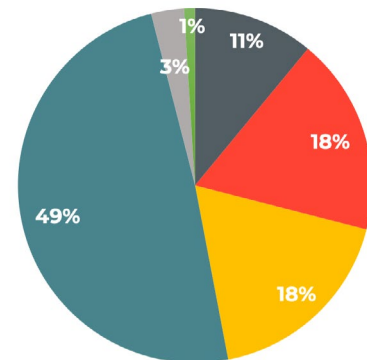


Figure 7. CCC Presidents by Race, 2021



Asian
 Latinx
 Unknown
 Black or African American
 White
 Two or More Races

CHANGE IS ON THE HORIZON, BUT WHEN WILL IT ARRIVE FULLY, AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

At the start of 2022, *Inside Higher Education* ran an article with the headline: “Diversity on the rise among college presidents” (Lederman, 2022a), challenging the idea of a diversity plateau. Eighteen months after a police officer murdered George Floyd and the country entered yet another racial reckoning, there has been an uptick in the hiring of Presidents of Color. During

this period, over a third of college presidents hired have been People of Color, a quarter of whom are Black (Lederman, 2022a). As a point of comparison, 22% of presidents hired in the 18 months before George Floyd’s murder were racially minoritized people.

Whether this upward trend will last is a question historian Eddie Cole says we must approach with caution: best-case scenario, presidential demographics will more or less mirror student demographics; worst-case scenario, trends

reverse and higher education returns to the diversity plateau (Lederman, 2022b).

If history is any guide, racial progress that follows racial violence tends to be short-lived. For a brief window of time in the 1960s, **predominantly white institutions** sought presidents who were interested in and had the skills to address “race relations” (Cole, as cited in Lederman, 2022b). Yet by the 1970s, this was no longer a focus. The president’s job reverted to the standard package of responding to trustee, community, student, faculty, and lawmaker concerns; reconciling conflicting demands and pressures; and keeping up with presidents at peer institutions (Cohen & March, 1974). Once again, presidents were selected through a series of “socially conservative filters” that align with “conventional expectations” of what the role is and who should fulfill it (p. 2).

PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (PWIS)/ HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Those institutions whose histories, policies, practices, and ideologies center whiteness. PWIs, by design, tend to marginalize the identities, perspectives, and practices of People of Color (Cain-Sanschagrin et al., 2022).

UNDOING WHITE RULES AND RACIAL EXCLUSION IN PRESIDENTIAL SEARCHES

For Cole’s best-case scenario to materialize—for more colleges to be led by Presidents of Color who are race-conscious and equity-minded and who understand the needs and dreams of racially minoritized students—the process by which presidents are selected must change. Standard presidential hiring procedures have maintained the conventional elite group and ensured the diversity plateau. Only when higher education experiences the exogenous shock of national racial reckonings might noticeable action follow.

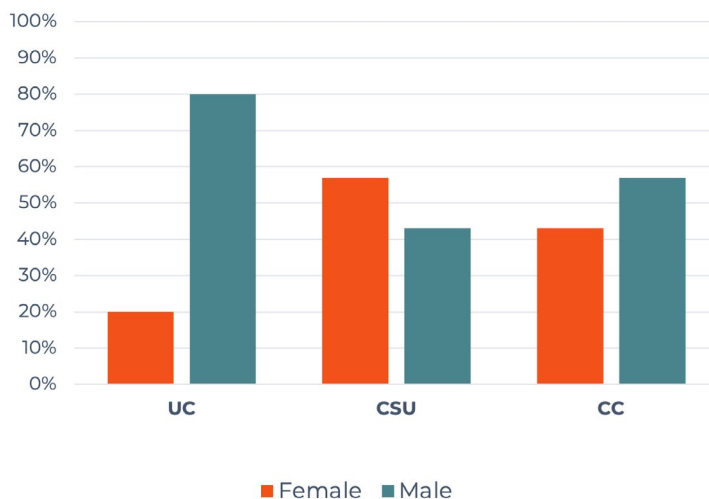
Students—in particular Students of Color—in higher education, and society cannot wait for racial reckonings to propel change in who is hired to lead a campus. Those responsible

for presidential selection—search committees, human resources personnel, system heads, trustees—must move toward the routine hiring of critically race-conscious and equity-minded Presidents of Color.

First, they need to understand that status quo conceptions of *who* a president should look like, *how* a president should lead, and *what* qualifications and experience a president should have: (a) are based on the norms of white men leaders; and (b) privilege those who have held traditional academic leadership positions, the vast majority of whom have been white men (Gagliardi et al., 2017). These status quo conceptions underlie the “rules of the game” that have for far too long created an unfair playing field for presidential Candidates of Color who have the requisite experience, knowledge, skills, and qualifications for the post.

Second, they need to undo the white rules that have reproduced racialized outcomes in presidential selection to the advantage of white men, and institute new standard operating procedures, new expectations, and new filters so Candidates of Color have an equitable chance to become a college president.

Figure 8. Public Higher Education Presidents/Chancellors in California by Gender, 2021



FINDINGS

Based on our thematic analysis, we present eight main findings that illustrate how **racialization** happens in presidential searches. Racialization as a concept has been used by critical race theorists to understand the process through which racial meaning is attached to something that is perceived to be nonracial or devoid of racial meaning. Presidential searches are considered to be race-neutral, at least by those who possess power and whiteness (Gonzalez-Sobrinho & Goss, 2018). We start each finding with a brief overview that captures its essence, then list key takeaways of how this aspect of racialization perpetuates racial inequities in presidential selection, either by advantaging white candidates and/or by disadvantaging Candidates of Color. A full discussion of each finding follows, in which we incorporate experiences shared by our participants.

FINDING #1

Presidential Candidates of Color Must Conform to the White Archetype

The college presidency continues to be white: white demographically—the majority of college presidents across the nation are white men—and white normatively—presidential leadership is associated with the “great white man” archetype. Candidates of Color must conform to the archetype to be deemed qualified and to be hired.

The white man archetype of presidential leadership perpetuates racial inequity by:

- Sending racialized messages about who can and should apply for a college presidency.
- Positioning white men as the “natural” choice.
- Forcing Candidates and Presidents of Color to conform to the white man standard and follow the rules of white expectations.
- Making Candidates of Color feel they risk not getting the job if they stray from white norms.

Some might conclude that the whiteness of college presidencies and the slowness to change are evidence that white men are the most experienced, qualified, and fit to lead colleges and universities—that they rise to the top of a search process to which all candidates are subjected simply shows that the process is “equal” and “fair.” They are literally the “best” candidates who *happen* to win, over and over again. They *happen* to be what leaders look like. They *happen* to possess the “presidential” qualities and exhibit “presidential” behaviors (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

WHITE MEN ARE NOT A “NATURAL CHOICE”

Assuming that white men are “natural” for the college presidency sends two messages. First, to white

RACIALIZATION (ALSO REFERRED TO AS STRUCTURAL RACIALIZATION)

“Connotes a process rather than a static event. It implies a process or set of processes that may or may not be animated by conscious forces...it is a set of processes that may generate disparities ... without any racist actors. It is a web without a spider” (powell, 2013, p.3).

men, that they should apply and will fit right into the presidential club. Second, to People of Color, that they shouldn't apply as they don't belong with the rest of the presidents. One President of Color explained that earlier in their career, “Everybody [they] saw was white,” and so they “honestly never imagined that [they] could ever become the president of any university in the country.”

But what if we look at the white man pattern in a different way? What if we question its naturalness? What if, instead of seeing the routine ascendancy of white men to the presidency as an outcome of happenstance, we see it as an outcome of design? What if we approach *who* we think of as a “president” and *what* we think of as “presidential” as constructions—constructions based on “great man” leadership theories that were developed by white men about white male leaders (Davis & Maldonado, 2015)? And what if, despite its outdatedness, and despite espoused desires for racial diversity and equity in the college presidency, great white man leaders remain the subconscious standard in many searches?

“What we think makes a strong president” is the stereotypical white man in charge who “come[s] in and fix[es] everything that’s wrong.”

Thirty of the 36 presidents we interviewed spoke about the phantom of the white man archetype in presidential searches and in the president's role. According to an executive search firm consultant, “Presidents are [still] seen as the classic white male”

and “what we think makes a strong president” is the stereotypical white man in charge who “come[s] in and fix[es] everything that’s wrong.” This messaging begins in the job call: a comparison of community college presidential job announcements from 1996 and 2016 shows that many are “still searching for a hero” with a masculine style of leadership who will be everything for the institution (Garza Mitchell & Garcia, 2020, p. 162).

THE CHOIR BOOK OF WHITE (MALE) EXPECTATIONS

When a candidate or president is not a white male, a white president explained, “[Y]ou’re going against the trend, and there is a push to conform to what the white male norm is as a president.” According to a President of Color, if candidates from racially minoritized backgrounds were “all out” with their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, that “would derail all of [their] prospects.” They explained that “the white world will embrace somebody who’s Black or Latinx as long as [they] sing from the same page of the choir book.” In the words of another President of Color, this is about “having to fit into the white expectation.” The “choir book of white expectations” infiltrates every aspect of candidate evaluation, including how Presidents of Color should look and sound. For Candidates of Color, evaluation is thus not just about whether they are a qualified leader who can be a good fit for the campus, but whether they are “qualified” and they “fit” enough in the white way.

Present White

We heard from many Presidents of Color that they “must speak white.” For one President of Color, this meant showing search committees and decision-makers that they are “assimilated”:

As much as we talk about inclusion, at the end of the day, if somebody had no mannerisms—I’m talking in terms of body language, eating, talking, using phrases, and structuring sentences that indicated that they were assimilated—the likelihood they would be picked would be zero. Whether they are Black, Latinx, Chinese, or Indian, doesn’t matter; you have to show something that people feel comfortable that you’re assimilated. Or that you can be assimilated.

Have a White Accent

While this president talked more generally about white expectations of verbal and nonverbal communication, we also heard that if Candidates of Color have an accent, it is “an issue.” For example, a President of Color has seen multiple times how search committees “discounted” Candidates of Color, viewing them as “less qualified because of their accent.” In contrast, certain white accents are positively appraised. As one President of Color explained, if you have an accent that decision-makers do not regard as mainstream white American, then you’ll be seen as questionable for the presidency. “Unless, of course, you are British,” the President of Color added. “Then they think it’s cute.”

Don’t Be Too Ethnic

In addition, we heard that Presidents of Color cannot “show up too ethnic” in their physical appearance, especially if they are Women of Color. This means they should not have “big hair,” they should not don “chunky jewelry,” and they should not wear stilettos and heels that are “too high.” Rather, they need to fit into the “visual [white] expectation” so they can be evaluated based on their qualifications and ability to lead. One President of Color shared:

[M]e showing up to an interview with my braids right now would have implications on how people receive the information that I’ve provided in my application materials, and certainly the information that I convey in an interview verbally...

Another said that being told what they should and should not look like sends the message to Women of Color: “Don’t be yourself, don’t sound like yourself.” These messages add extra layers of burden. Woman of Color candidates are not allowed to be their authentic selves. They risk being read as stereotypes: the “angry Black woman,” the “Latina femme fatale,” the “traditional passive Asian woman.” They have to manage the fragility and stereotype bias of those on the search committee who are unable or unwilling to embrace different ways of presenting, acting, and leading.

PERSONS OF COLOR’S INTERNALIZATION OF THE WHITE MALE ARCHETYPE

One comment regarding the internalization of the white male archetype is worth mentioning. A current President of Color pointed out that the notion of the white male leader is so entrenched that they can “perpetuate” even if unconsciously by teaching their own mentees that in order to “make it, you have to do these things.” This particular president advocates for Presidents of Color to question how they prepare their mentees and how they hire. For example, are they providing guidance to their mentees to play into white comfort? Are they unconsciously hiring individuals that will not be viewed as a threat? While this is not a solution to the issue, nor are we suggesting that Presidents of Color are to blame, the concern is valid. This president advocates other Presidents of Color “stop playing this game.”

DEMOGRAPHICS MAY BE CHANGING, BUT THE WHITE WAY PERSISTS

Changes to white male norms of presidential leadership are coming too slowly. Even as more People of Color are becoming college presidents, the “shenanigans” don’t stop, one president observed. Another said that Presidents of Color will continue to “get beat up” and have “scars on [their] backs” if they show up as themselves. A third commented, “From my experience, the trauma our psyches, bodies, and souls must endure in these roles is one of the most challenging aspects of wanting to lead authentically, while pushing for student success, student completion, and institutional equity.”

Qualified Candidates of Color Must Dodge the Racial Bias Battlefield

In order to be seen as “qualified,” candidates across race/ethnicity and gender must check the boxes. They must have the “right” academic degrees and the “right” professional experiences that amount to the “right” qualifications. For Candidates of Color, however, checking the right boxes is necessary but not necessarily sufficient. Because of biased appraisals adhering to white standards, search committees and decision-makers can judge Candidates of Color as a risky choice at best and ineligible at worst—even when they check the right boxes.

Biased appraisals based on white standards perpetuate racial inequity by:

- **Privileging candidates who come through academic affairs roles, where there is limited racial diversity at each key level (department chair, dean, provost, other senior officers in academic affairs).**
- **Judging Candidates of Color as risky and white candidates as safe choices.**
- **Implicitly requiring Candidates of Color to do and accomplish more than white men to be deemed ready for the presidency.**
- **Relying on white readiness criteria to assess candidate preparation.**
- **Privileging candidates from peer institutions and discounting candidates from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and other minority-serving institutions.**
- **According greater value to racial equity efforts that do not disrupt institutional values, norms, and expectations of excellence.**

Search committees and decision-makers judge candidates on whether they possess the educational and professional credentials, accomplishments, and experiences to be a college president. As we discuss in

Finding 7, institutions can be explicit about what they need and want candidates to have in order to be eligible for the position. Almost all the presidents we spoke with addressed this point, including one who said that candidates who “checked a set of boxes” got in the pool. One white president said of himself: “I was the best-looking traditional candidate they could find ... I checked a set of boxes ... I’m a middle-aged white male academic who has played all the administrative roles on a campus.” Presidents across the UC and CSU noted that the traditional pathway is through academic affairs: from faculty member to department chair to dean to provost to president. In the CCC, the trajectory differs slightly; however, it similarly moves up the organizational hierarchy: from faculty or staff to director or dean to vice president to president.

When it comes to Candidates of Color, the question is: Does their CV check the boxes search committees construe as worthy, qualified, and ready to be a college president? We learned that the answer to this question is not straightforward, since what is traditionally deemed “worthy,”

“qualified,” and “ready” is racialized and rife with bias. Even when Candidates of Color check the boxes, it might not be enough—it has to be the “right” boxes. According to a President of Color, this is because “there’s so much labeling that goes on in our industry, and blocking people.” Far too common is a questioning of the credentials of Candidates of Color: “You didn’t go to the right school? You didn’t have the right degree?” A search firm consultant suggested that Candidates of Color have to be the “Jackie Robinson” of presidents in order to be deemed worthy, qualified, and ready.

Candidates of Color have to be the “Jackie Robinson” of presidents in order to be deemed worthy, qualified, and ready.

Across the interviews, we found five biases that lead to racialized evaluations of Candidates of Color.

TRAJECTORY BIAS: PRESIDENTS ARE ACADEMICS

Writing in 1974, Cohen and March concluded that “presidents are academics” whose “values are that of academe.” The ACE 2017 study shows that 81% of sitting presidents were faculty members at some point in their career (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Compare this to the 70% of presidents who reported they were once faculty in the ACE 2011 and ACE 2006 studies. The most common role prior to the presidency was in academic affairs as provost/chief academic officer, dean, or other senior executive (42% of respondents, which has remained more or less constant over time). This pattern is evident among UC chancellors, where nine were deans or provosts (one was a president), and the CSU presidents, where 14 of 23 were previously in academic affairs. In the CCC, almost the same number of sitting presidents were either a president of another institution or in academic affairs.

From our interviews, one white president said, “I probably had the requisite preparation, with the exception of not being a dean or department chair.” A President of Color said that “most folks in [their] circle thought that [provost] was an important

stepping-stone to the presidency.” Another President of Color shared that Candidates of Color outside of student affairs need to “find some way of doing academic stuff” because they will need “support from the academic people.” A search firm consultant recalled how faculty on the search committee objected to the appointment of a Black candidate because they did not have the right degree, institutional pedigree, publications, and accomplishments. A white president noted that during the search for their current role, the faculty members of the search committee asked for a meeting after the search committee interview to demonstrate that “I had the academic vision that they were looking for.”

Racial Exclusion in Academic Affairs

From a racial equity perspective, however, there is a problem with relying on the academic track as a marker of readiness for presidential leadership. Presidents across race/ethnicity and gender in our study pointed to patterns of racial and gender exclusion from the roles and experiences that search committees and decision-makers typically associate with presidential leadership. As one white president said, “[E]veryone who’s currently credentialed has 20 or 30 years of experience, [and] well, we can all admit the last 20 or 30 years has not been an open invitation for everyone to have the same kinds of experiences.” Thus, trying to find “that highly credentialed person is itself exclusionary.”

Several presidents suggested that diversifying the presidency begins with diversifying department chairs, deans, and provosts. Some mentioned how their campuses are trying to do their part through structured leadership initiatives for faculty and staff. A President of Color warned, however, that expanding who has access to these key administrative and leadership opportunities is not enough; Candidates of Color, in particular, have to be well supported (e.g., with resources and mentoring) and allowed to learn on the job. This is not always the case, unfortunately.

RISK BIAS: WHITE CANDIDATES ARE SAFE CHOICES, CANDIDATES OF COLOR ARE NOT

Even when Candidates of Color check the “right” academic boxes, they can be perceived to be a risky choice. In contrast, white candidates tend to be perceived as safe choices. About half the presidents we interviewed commented on this point. A President of Color shared how in one search, the choice came down to them and a candidate with

similar credentials who was a “prototype of a white male: blond, good-looking,” and well-regarded in their field. The board selected the white candidate because he was the safe choice. “We picked him because with him we knew where we were gonna go,” someone explained to the President of Color. “With you, we thought we would be on an interesting ride. We just didn’t know.” Another President of Color touched on this sentiment, noting that “riskiness” is associated with “anti-Blackness” ... “The more melanin in your skin, the riskier a choice.”

READINESS BIAS: WHITE STANDARDS BENEFIT WHITE CANDIDATES

When it comes to Candidates of Color, it doesn’t matter how accomplished they are on paper; they can be invalidated by those who don’t think their qualifications and experience are good enough. A sitting President of Color commented that “there’s readiness for the job, and [there’s] perceived readiness.” Because of the latter, Candidates of Color need to do more to show search committees they’re prepared to lead a campus.

Another President of Color added that the standard to which their readiness is compared is white men; in order to stack up, they had to go above and beyond. They said, “I felt I wasn’t deemed to be ready unless I demonstrated I have done much, much more, compared to white males.” A second President of Color similarly observed that “readiness” in presidential search is based on whiteness and white expectations (see Finding 1). As such, Candidates of Color will never be more prepared than white candidates. They also noted that readiness is rarely, if at all, premised on whether candidates can productively address the consequences of racial violence and ongoing racism. For example, this president said that boards of trustees do not seem overly anxious or concerned with white presidents who have done a lackluster job supporting their campuses and working toward racial justice after the murder of George Floyd.

INSTITUTIONAL BIAS: ONLY CANDIDATES FROM PEER INSTITUTIONS NEED APPLY

Several presidents commented on the lack of what a President of Color called “mobility

throughout our industry” so that institutions can “be open to the best leaders, wherever they come from.” In part, this includes a bias against candidates—including those with the right educational credentials—who are working outside higher education. As reported in the ACE 2017 study, only 15% of sitting presidents surveyed were not in higher education before assuming their current role (Gagliardi et al., 2017). But it also includes a positive bias for candidates who made their professional mark at institutions perceived to be in the same peer group, and a bias against those who work at institutions seen as different or less worthy. This sector bias represents a higher education pecking order or caste system, where higher-ranked institutions on the Carnegie Classification system represent the elite, and those from lower ranks or from Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are considered the Dalits or untouchables.

The selection of a president from a peer institution makes some sense. Not all higher education institutions are alike. The “academic creed” varies based on institutional type and, with it, presidential leadership (Cohen & March, 1974). Community colleges are not like broad-access baccalaureate institutions, which are not like regional comprehensives, which are not like liberal arts colleges, which are not like research universities. Even within institutional type, there are differences. Community colleges include those that have a vocational and technical focus, and those that offer baccalaureate degrees. Research universities count among them some of the most selective institutions in the country, but whether they are public (e.g., UCLA, Berkeley) or private (Stanford, The University of Chicago) can shape the kind of leadership needed. Even within the same system, there are notable differences. Take, for example, the University of California, where some campuses have a suite of professional schools, including a complex medical and health enterprise, while others are more focused on undergraduate education with limited graduate offerings.

Racial Exclusion through Institutional Exclusivity

An overemphasis on institutional fit can be limiting, however. First, it assumes that candidates who learned how to be leaders and who have been successful in leadership roles at non-peer institutions do not have much to offer. A white president whose career spanned different

institutional types said, “There isn’t a day in [my current job] that I don’t use what I learned at [my previous institution].” Second, emphasizing institutional fit in a search can lead to what this president called “institutional exclusivity.” Institutional exclusivity, in turn, can hurt the cultivation of “more diverse candidate pools.”

A search firm consultant provided evidence of this president’s hypothesis. From their experience, search committees at elite, predominantly white research universities are not keen on candidates from HBCUs, nor HSIs. Search committees, especially the faculty members, perceive HBCUs and HSIs as lesser institutions. Candidates from such institutions would thus “dumb us down.”

A President of Color noted, “You can be a good leader of many types of institutions, because there’s so much that’s common.” Yet, this perspective is not universal, and it appears that institutions that tend to do a better job at hiring and supporting Faculty and Administrators of Color to potentially become campus leaders are not considered “good enough” at predominantly white research universities.

RACIALIZED EVALUATION OF RACIAL EQUITY QUALIFICATIONS

Finally, we heard from presidents that judgment about racial equity commitments varies. The presidential job announcements analysis showed that few announcements noted a preference for candidates with racial equity competency and evidence of racial equity accomplishments. In interviews, we learned that Candidates of Color who are more forward and explicit in their racial equity commitments—whether in their administrative work, research, or disciplinary orientation—are perceived as being too focused on race. Whether these candidates’ portfolios are in fact primarily race-focused is not what matters; it’s the perception that search committees and other decision-makers have of their portfolio.

These perceptions have power. According to several Presidents of Color, the message that Candidates of Color should “stop doing research on diversity” is out there. In fact, we spoke with a Person of Color who has a reputation of being “very vocal regarding race, racism, and racial equity.” They have applied for several presidencies and have found that when pursuing the role at an institution “that is not comfortable with these topics,” they are “unwanted.” Relatedly, a white president shared the typical white view of Candidates of Color with a

degree in Ethnic Studies (e.g., Black Studies, Latinx Studies, Asian American Studies): “[T]he faculty will ... not hold them in the esteem that they will in other areas ... and I think that counts against them.”

Yes to Iterative Change, No to Radical Transformation

From other presidents, we learned that focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion—racial and otherwise—is not always negatively viewed. Some Presidents of Color surmised that their experience developing programs to enhance diversity in disciplines and fields with underwhelming numbers of Students and Faculty of Color was a plus factor in their selection. For example, one talked about how as dean they expanded Black student access to a doctoral program, and hired Black and women faculty, during their search committee interview. For this President of Color, the trick was to show the committee that “you are not just supportive of diversity, but that you are genuine in your approach to diversity, that you really believe in the power of diversity.”

What about the qualifications and accomplishments of Candidates of Color make them stand out? First, their scholarly accomplishments are generally not in race-focused areas, and their administrative and service work include more than DEI initiatives. For example, these candidates could be engineering, economics, or legal scholars who also care about racial representation in their fields and institutions. This signals that they are a top-notch scholar with administrative chops who happen to do DEI work. Second, their DEI approach does not call for immediate, radical transformation, but iterative change that does not require institutions to reassess their values, norms, and expectations of excellence. Returning to the President of Color quoted earlier, they explained that as dean, they hired faculty “superstars” who “happened to be women and People of Color.” All the faculty have “done extremely well” at the institution, which indicates they met the established criteria of merit and fit without disturbing existing institutional arrangements.

Together, these two factors suggest that Candidates of Color for whom DEI efforts are one piece of their broader portfolio, and who use DEI strategies that fit the right page of the white choir book, are wanted. This appears to be a winning combination that results in search committees seeing them as worthy, qualified, and ready.

Presidents and Candidates of Color are Burdened with Double Consciousness

Because of white supremacy, Presidents and Candidates of Color must live and work in a world where they are seen through white eyes and judged based on white expectations. Despite their qualifications and accomplishments, Candidates of Color can't be certain whether they are a serious contender for the role or being used to "diversify the pool." Once in the role, they are often the first President of Color at their institution, and bear the extra responsibility of being good enough that decision-makers don't consider their hire a failed experiment. In contrast, white candidates and presidents—especially men—can be themselves.

The burden of whiteness perpetuates racial inequity by:

- **Subjecting Candidates and Presidents of Color to ongoing racial assaults and scrutiny.**
- **Making Candidates of Color second-guess their worthiness, readiness, and qualification for the role, and whether they can show up as their authentic selves.**
- **Allowing white candidates and presidents, especially men, to be themselves, to be forgiven for transgressions, and to be comfortable in white spaces.**

man, etc. They are subjected to a steady hum of racial assaults. For example, at a meeting of college presidents, a meeting attendee asked a President of Color, "What do you do at [name of institution]?" This seemingly innocent question is a racial microaggression: underlying it is the assumption that a Person of Color can't be the president and so must be someone else. The President of Color responded by asking the same question—"What do you do?"—"Just to make them understand how ridiculous the question was."

For racially minoritized people, living in a white supremacist society means there is no rest from having to see themselves through the eyes of white people, as they struggle to be their authentic selves. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) named this phenomenon "double consciousness," and characterized it as the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." (p. 194). Du Bois developed "double consciousness" to describe the burden of whiteness for Black people specifically, but as we saw in our interviews, Presidents of Color across racial/ethnic groups experience it as well. Of the 20 Presidents of Color we interviewed, 19 had something to say about how they were/are racialized, first as a candidate and now as president. Eleven white presidents spoke to this point.



As our first two sets of findings suggest, racially minoritized presidents have and continue to deal with white expectations and navigate the racial bias and systemic racism endemic in white spaces. Whether they like it or not, they are always racialized and gendered, seen first as a Black woman or man, Latinx, Native American, Asian woman or

AS A CANDIDATE: THE BURDEN OF PLACATING THE WHITE IMAGINATION

As candidates in the search process, they see their race and gender “playing a part in what’s going [on], in what’s unfolding.” They don’t know whether they’re a serious candidate or whether the search firm is bringing them into the pool for “diversity.” They cannot be certain if they’re a “DEI candidate” or “affirmative action hire,” or if they’re being considered because they can do the role, and can take on presidential responsibilities and lead. They’re unsure if they can be their authentic selves, because being unapologetically themselves risks judgment of being too Asian, too Black, too Latinx, too Indigenous. It risks making the white members of the committee uncomfortable. “If I came across as super Chicano,” one President of Color said, “I would derail all of my prospects.”

Candidates of Color are acceptable as long as they fit into the white imagination of what a Latinx, Asian, Black, or Indigenous person is (Morrison, 1993). Unfortunately, many boards of trustees and search committees “can’t visualize a President of Color in their [institution],” and that’s the “reality of what we’re dealing with here,” said a President of Color. They’re lucky if they’re chosen for a campus where they can be “too Black,” be accepted, and be able to do the work of making a difference in the lives of Students of Color.

AS PRESIDENT: THE BURDEN OF BEING THE FIRST AND ONLY

Far too often, they are the first President of Color in campus history, and/or the first of their racial/ethnic group in the role (see Figures 1-3). Being the first and only brings “scrutiny” from others “cause you stand out,” said one President of Color. It heightens racial awareness because “you’re conscious of people being aware of you,” and so “you don’t wanna do anything that would give the wrong impression.” Even though it’s important for presidents to see themselves in the institution, for Presidents of Color “that’s impossible.” And ultimately, Presidents of Color have more responsibilities “beyond the responsibilities of the job.” If the first President of Color—or the first Black president, the first Asian president, the first Latinx president, or the first Indigenous president—at a predominantly white campus does not do a “good enough job,” then the “naysayers” would view their tenure as a “failed experiment.” Presidents of Color hold the responsibility of “do[ing] a good enough

job” so they are not the last and “people don’t use that as an excuse not to hire [another President of Color or president of their race/ethnicity] in the future.”

WHITE CANDIDATES AND PRESIDENTS: NOT RACED, NOT OTHERED, JUST... THEMSELVES

As Presidents and Candidates of Color live and work as raced individuals, white presidents, particularly those who are white men, can move through the world without feeling othered, without needing to wonder how racially minoritized individuals view them. Three-fourths of the presidents we spoke with—including 12 Presidents of Color and 15 white presidents—noted this. White presidents and candidates can choose to be aware of their racial identity, to learn about race and racism, and to disengage from racial equity work with little if any lasting professional consequences. A white president told us that due to a luggage mishap, they showed up for the interview in informal clothing and were reassured that they would fit right in. In this example, the white president was given a pass; they were forgiven and made comfortable despite the transgression. When white candidates show what they’ve learned about race and racism in the United States, when they espouse commitments to anti-racism, when they work to advance DEI, they’re given full credit and celebrated for serving “underrepresented minorities.” White men in particular can cry without being considered emotional, be forceful without being deemed angry, and stay quiet and be lauded for being thoughtful. “For white male candidates, I don’t think there’s the degree of having to prove yourself that there is for candidates from marginalized communities,” a white president observed. “That’s an advantage” that white men have. “[T]here’s more comfort.” In fact, one white president was cavalier about the process in that they expressed that they went into the interview not necessarily caring about the outcome. They said, “If you don’t care, and don’t care in the sense that you’re not worried about the outcome, you’re pretty comfortable... it was a low-stakes interview for me.”

White Rules Are Hidden in Plain Sight

For the most part, presidential search is a process known only to those who experience it, whether as a candidate, member of a search committee, or other involved stakeholder. From reviewing a job call to interviewing to dealing with search firms, there's a lot that is known to some and veiled from others. Who is in either category typically breaks down along the lines of race/ethnicity, gender, and class privilege. Learning the "hidden curriculum" of presidential search takes the support of others, although the guidance provided does not always help Candidates and Presidents of Color practice authentic leadership.

The hidden curriculum perpetuates racial inequity by:

- Assuming that the intricacies of presidential search are known by all.
- Letting Candidates of Color believe it is enough to work hard and be a fit for the position.
- Making the purpose of executive leadership programs and mentorship more about getting the job and less about practicing authentic leadership.



More than half the presidents we interviewed spoke about the "hidden curriculum" of presidential search. In general, a "hidden curriculum" includes all the things that aren't explicitly taught, but that a person is nevertheless supposed to know how to do to succeed in a particular task, responsibility, or role (Calarco, 2020). It might be hard to imagine why presidents who have the degrees and have devoted their professional life to academia would say there is a hidden curriculum to becoming a college president. Yet they used words like "mystery" to describe

the process, and commented that "a lot of people don't quite understand how to prepare for these positions," that "even when they prepare, they're expecting it to be like an SAT exam."

HOW DOES THE PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH PROCESS WORK?

Presidents of Color referenced the hiddenness of specific aspects of the process. For example, of the job ad, one shared that when they first applied for presidential roles, they didn't know that "there are code words," that "there's a way to read it," and that "if you know how to read it, it tells you a lot about what the institution is looking for, and what are their challenges."

Indeed, our analysis of presidential job announcements found there are a host of messages and signals in these announcements, and it is incumbent on candidates to interpret them in ways that would make them stand out as a candidate.

Of the interview process, another President of Color noted that candidates can't just answer the questions in whatever way they wish. In 45 minutes, candidates have to find a way to distinguish themselves while providing responses that are adroit, succinct, and effective. This can be challenging given that interviews are often "a little orchestrated" and "fairly methodical." Candidates cannot show that they are surprised by a question and come off as if they are "a deer in headlights."

Of search firms and using executive coaches to prepare, a third President of Color commented: “I don’t think a lot of Folks of Color or people with my background have a sense” of how search firms can “elevate you or not,” or of how others use executive coaches to help them prepare. In their case, they believe that it’s “just like going through your doctoral program: If you put in your time and energy, and if you write a really good document, that [the search committee] will see you. And if the fit is right, you’ll get selected. Now, how naïve is that? How naïve?”

“I don’t think a lot of Folks of Color or people with my background have a sense” of how search firms can “elevate you or not,” or of how others use executive coaches to help them prepare.

These quotes point to problems with having a hidden curriculum. First, they point to the fact that the hidden curriculum of presidential search is not hidden to all. Clearly, some know what the role is about and how to get there. The trouble is that those in the know may not realize that others don’t possess the same information, or they might intentionally withhold information to see whether others can figure out the rules of the game on their own.

THE BENEFITS OF EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS AND MENTORSHIP

Many Presidents of Color we interviewed sought support to make sense of the college presidency, what the job requires, and what it takes to become a president. They participated in executive leadership programs, worked with executive coaches, and had mentors who helped them become a college president. Indeed, our review of sitting presidents’ curriculum vitae showed that Presidents of Color tended to participate in multiple leadership training programs, compared to white presidents. One white president acknowledged that these programs are “really important”; however, they never participated in any program since any “extra time” was devoted to research, not “tak[ing] a class.”

Of those programs, one President of Color said they are critical in preparing candidates for the technical aspects of the process. For example, these programs help those considering a presidency with their presentation: their resume, their dress, their answers to interview questions. The programs are also useful in offering a sense of the landscape of higher education institutions and a sense of the scope of the president’s job. Another President of Color did several executive leadership programs and worked with an executive coach, which together helped them “fully understand the magnitude of going in for a presidency.” A third President of Color reflected on the importance of a mentor who helped them figure out how to get the “scoop about the college”—what to pay attention to, documents to review, people to speak with—and how to work out the relationship between the college and the community. As a result, this president was able to judge whether the presidency at this college is “where I wanna be” and where they could make a difference.

In contrast, we repeatedly heard from white presidents that they did not participate in leadership programs, nor have mentors—or if they did, they did not regard them as an essential ingredient for their journey to the presidency. In short, many of them did not need the extra support; they made it unassisted or single-handedly. According to one college president, because they “never thought about [the presidency] as a career track,” they “hadn’t made investments in it.” Another explained that they got to the presidency on their own, that “nobody helped [them] prepare,” and that “most of [their] information [was] from the recruiting firm that calls you and tells you generally what to expect.”

Presidents of Color and white presidents have strikingly different relationships with the hidden curriculum. This difference could lead to the conclusion that white candidates are better prepared and equipped for the presidency. Calarco (2020) disabuses us of that thought, explaining that whether a person knows the hidden curriculum has nothing to do with being qualified for a role. Rather, this is about how “those who are white, affluent, male, cis-gender, heterosexual, native-born, and able-bodied” (p. 3) are not only more likely to be able to navigate academia’s white rules, but also to be seen by the powers that be as worthy and deserving of admission into the inner circle and judged as smart and a good fit.

GUIDANCE FOR GETTING THE JOB, NOT NECESSARILY FOR BECOMING AN AUTHENTIC LEADER

Finally, even as many Presidents of Color highlighted the vital role of mentors and executive leadership programs in navigating the hidden curriculum of the search process, some were conflicted over what they were told and encouraged to do. For example, early in their career, a President of Color recalled a senior Colleague of Color saying, “He doesn’t look presidential” of another President of Color. The President of Color who relayed this experience said that it shifted how they present and behave.

Another President of Color was troubled by the suggestion to change what they say and do in the name of getting things done. This advice was given at an executive leadership program when participants were told to replace “equity” with “economic mobility” when facing “constituency groups” that “are not responsive to the language” of “equity.” While this guidance was meant to help leaders “effectively work” with constituency groups and “usher in practices that will lead toward equity without naming it,” what this president heard is that leaders should *not* be who they are if “the field is not ready” for them. This was “frustrating,” not only because the president doesn’t believe in the advice, but because they can’t be “authentic to [themselves] as a leader who believes it’s important to be intentional with [their] language and [their] examples.”

Search Committees Perpetuate Veiled Racial and Gender Bias

Search committees do their work out of the public eye. While this allows members to have open and honest conversations about presidential candidates, the veiled nature of search committee meetings makes it possible for racialized (and gendered and ageist) messages to surface, despite the routine practice of implicit bias training. Unless critical race-conscious accountability exists *within* the committee, such messages communicated covertly or overtly can convey to racially minoritized candidates that they are not serious candidates.

Search committees perpetuate racial, gender, and age inequity by:

- **Making implicitly or explicitly racist, gendered, and ageist comments in search committee deliberations that can undercut the chances of Candidates of Color, women candidates, and older candidates, regardless of whether they fit the traditional mold of a college president.**
- **Sending nonverbal cues that signal to Candidates of Color that they are not serious contenders for the role.**
- **Confirming the assumption that Candidates of Color and women candidates may hold that they are perceived in a negative light because of their racial/ethnic and gender identity.**
- **Messaging to Candidates of Color that they need to say things and act in ways that preserve the comfort—especially the white comfort—of search committee members.**

Search committee members can help recruit potential candidates. They're involved in constructing the job announcement, and they're on the front lines of screening and recommending candidates. They review application materials to develop the list of candidates for first-round (CSU, CCC) or semi-finalist (UC) interviews. They then conduct the interviews and recommend the short list of finalists for board of trustee (CSU, CCC) interviews or for system head appraisal (UC). Each of these actions involves individual and/or collective decisions that turn on beliefs, attitudes, biases, and normative ways of thinking that can help or hinder the hiring of People of Color (Danowitz Sagaria, 2002; Liera & Ching, 2020). In addition, research shows that committee members' salient social identities, as well as their status and position in the academic hierarchy, can lead to biased appraisals that work against racial diversity and equity goals in hiring, and that keep the white status quo intact (Hakkola & Dyer, 2022).

RACIALIZED, GENDERED, AND AGEIST MESSAGES

It is worth noting that in addition to racialized messages, our interviews indicate that search committee members still make overtly gendered comments in closed-door deliberations. A search firm consultant, who observes search committee meetings as part of their role,

commented that gendered conversations are still common during search committee meetings. For example, the consultant recalled “inappropriate comments” such as referring to a woman candidate as “dowdy” or that the woman candidate appeared “motherly” and presented “like a Jewish woman.” While not directed verbally to the candidate, such comments reflect the discourse in which college presidents are being selected, and speak to barriers women candidates encounter in the search and appointment process. They also represent what is known as the double bind for women in leadership positions: where gender stereotypes create a no-win situation for women leaders. For example, when women are perceived as taking charge (i.e., behaving in line with the white man archetype), they are viewed as competent but disliked, and when women leaders are caring/motherly, they are perceived as soft or less competent leaders (Fréchette, 2009). Such comments underscore gender-biased beliefs of how leaders should look and present themselves. Not only do such comments position the candidate as not fitting a traditional model of college leadership, they could silence women on the committee, creating an environment that is hostile to woman candidates *and* woman search committee members.

Further, our interviews show that detrimental comments were made toward older candidates, as evidenced by one white president who reported that when they served on a search committee, there was a discussion about the age of one of the candidates. Despite this being against all that is taught in EEO training, the conversation occurred, illustrating that search committees are a subset of society and the same factors that allow racism, sexism, and ageism to persist do not go away with search-committee DEI training.

CANDIDATES OF COLOR ARE EXPECTED TO PRESERVE WHITE COMFORT

Common across Presidents of Color is the observation that search committee members signal that they are uncomfortable with “race-talk.” For example, a Person of Color who has participated in several presidential searches said that they often answer questions using “examples that are more

based on equity and racial equity specifically.” In the process of answering these questions, the candidate said, “I can see people feel uncomfortable with my responses. Sometimes I’ll try it and then reframe to provide another example so that I’m helping that person feel comfortable.” When the candidate was asked how the committee looked uncomfortable, they said committee members will “squinch eyebrows”, “squinch eyes”, or “fold arms.” They went on to say,

I knew that I would not be selected to move further, I was certain of it, because I could tell that people were uncomfortable with my responses, especially the external community members on the committee, the older white people, I could tell they were uncomfortable. I think there may have been a couple of Latinos, one African-American perhaps, and I could tell they were rooting for me. You can see it with a smile on a face or a nodding of a head, but I was not winning over the entire committee, I could tell.

Presidents of Color also shared how their engagement with the search committee was “delicate” or a “bifurcated experience” in which they had to “walk a fine line.” According to one President of Color, on the one hand, some members seemed to be communicating the “hope” that the next president won’t “let up the accelerator” since “we really need to do this equity work.” On the other hand, there was “the faction of individuals in that space that were like, ‘We’re not interested in doing that, we just wanna talk student success.’ Managing these competing values in an authentic way is a challenge, and, according to this President of Color, the trick is to show that while one values Students of Color, one also values “students in general.”

Presidents of Color also shared how their engagement with the search committee was “delicate” or a “bifurcated experience.”

Such bifurcated experiences and the need to walk a fine line are perhaps the reason one President of Color concluded that presidential selection is a “crapshoot.” In the end, they reasoned, “It all comes down to how the committee feels about you. Did they feel comfortable, did they feel good about what you were saying, or were they uncomfortable with your answers?” Another President of Color was more pointed: “Only People of Color that do not make white people feel uncomfortable will make it; they cannot get too angry [or] have names that are hard to pronounce.”

Executive Search Firms May Talk the Talk, but Are Nowhere Near Walking the Walk

Executive search firms (ESFs) have become integral to presidential search, and in California are staple features of searches in the UCs and CSUs. ESFs play an important supporting role in presidential search, particularly when it comes to building the candidate pool and facilitating the logistical details of this complex process. As with all supporting actors, however, ESFs can play a major role in advancing or slowing down progress toward racial equity in presidential search. Even when they “talk the talk,” there are several problems that hinder them from “walking the walk.”

Executive search firms perpetuate racial inequity by:

- Believing that presidential search is racially equal and fair, and that post-racial conditions apply.
- Ignoring or being unaware of the differential experiences between white men, white women, and People of Color who are qualified to become college presidents.
- Assuming that candidates, regardless of racialized experiences, would know to and be willing to put themselves forward as a candidate.
- Relying on existing networks—which can be predominantly white networks—to include potential candidates in the ESF database and in the pool for searches.
- Privileging “paper diversity” in pool-building, rather than cultivating a pool where all racially minoritized and white woman candidates will be serious contenders.
- Wasting the time of Candidates of Color and white women in STEM, who may be included in a pool to demonstrate “paper diversity.”
- Absolving themselves of responsibility for racial diversity and equity once a “diverse pool” is presented.

Using executive search firms (ESFs) is currently standard operating procedure in presidential search. This was not always the case. Using ESFs is a practice imported into higher education in the 1970s from the corporate sector, where they have been used since the post-World War II era (Lingenfelter, 2004). In the mid-1970s, only 2% of higher education institutions worked with ESFs to hire new presidents (Wilde & Finkelstein, 2021). Now most presidential searches are staffed by ESFs, including chancellor searches in the UC and presidential searches in the CSU. The CCCs veer from this pattern, with ESFs less common in presidential searches, relative to the other two systems. They are also more likely to use local search firms staffed by former community college presidents.

What do ESFs do? In a nutshell, they support candidate recruitment, job announcement development, applicant pre-screening, candidate engagement, and all-around logistics to ensure a smoothly run process (Howard Perry, 2014; Lingenfelter, 2004).

Despite being the “most noteworthy change” in search processes over the last four decades (Wilde & Finkelstein, 2021), there is considerable debate within the higher education community as to the value of using an ESF (Lingenfelter, 2004; McLaughlin & Riesman,

1990; Moody, 2022). Some argue that ESFs, when working in partnership with institutions, save the search committee precious time by organizing the paperwork, structuring the process, and acting as an intermediary between the institution and prospective candidates (Lingenfelter, 2004; McLaughlin & Riesman, 1990). Others are skeptical. An uptick in the use of ESFs has detached boards—the governing bodies that typically are the final decision-maker in presidential search (see more in Finding 8)—from the process, contributing to a rise in average presidential salaries; with respect to racial equity, it has introduced additional layers of bias (Howard Perry, 2014; Kelderman, 2017; Lingenfelter, 2004). Through our interviews with presidents and search firm representatives, we identified four problems with how ESFs operate that have not resulted in noteworthy changes in the racial representation of the college presidency.

THE BELIEF PROBLEM: PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH OPERATES UNDER “POST-RACIAL” CONDITIONS

As the findings presented above show, presidential search is rife with bias, and the deck continues to be stacked against Candidates of Color. Yet many ESF representatives we interviewed believe that presidential search is a fair and objective process. They believe the playing field is equal, that the best candidate for the position—regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, etc.—will come out on top. They believe their work is done in an impartial manner. Seventeen presidents across race/ethnicity and gender expressed that ESFs believe the search process is fair for all.

While no ESF representative used this term, it appears they tend to think presidential search now occurs under “post-racial” conditions, namely that racism and racial bias are no longer barriers in hiring college presidents (Dixon et al., 2015). For example, one representative said, “By the time people have served as a vice president or a president who wants to be a chancellor, they’re pretty seasoned administrators, irrespective of gender or race. I do not see anything that would benefit a white person over someone else. There might be, I am not saying there isn’t, but it’s a pretty fair process.” Another acknowledged that while biases may occur at some point during the process, by the end it’s a wash because “the best candidate always rises to the top ... They care, they know how to interview. They’re authentic. They’re well prepared.” In this representative’s estimation, “[T]he search process works really well.” And if there

are biases, they turn on gender, not race. “I do not see any differences by race, but a difference I do see is for women,” a representative said. Women, they observed, “do not want to move ... [I]t’s like, ‘Oh, I got to wait three more years til my son gets out of high school.’”

These comments present a version of presidential search that is raceless. These data suggest that for search firms, there is no sense of the hidden curriculum, the burden of whiteness, the racialization of qualifications, or the white-man standards of presidential leadership. Rather, ESF representatives project a vision of presidential search through rose-colored glasses. ESFs want to be an “objective third party” and “argue they are exercising a process that is absent of any bias,” a President of Color said. “The results show that it is not bias-free.”

THE RECRUITMENT PROBLEM: “GETTING ON THE LIST” IS “INSIDER BASEBALL”

Although a person interested in being considered for a presidency can respond to the job announcement or be nominated, much of the recruitment happens through ESFs. Indeed, recruitment is one primary reason institutions hire ESFs, which, if they are any good, have deep and wide-reaching resources from which to draw (Scanton, 2016). A critical piece of ESF recruitment strategy is “the list,” the database/Rolodex of names they’ve cultivated over time. Search representatives shared that these databases can be quite comprehensive, and searchable by race/ethnicity and gender. It is ESF standard operating procedure to be continually adding possible candidates to their database.

“Getting on the list” is a critical step for those who might be interested in becoming a college president.

“Getting on the list” is a critical step for those who might be interested in becoming a college president (or provost, dean, vice president, or other senior and executive-level positions). Once you’re on the list, your phone may not stop ringing.

Many of the presidents we interviewed said ESFs contacted them once to several times a month about opportunities at other institutions. These opportunities could be presidencies, but they aren't always. One President of Color commented that since "there's been a fair amount of turnover in presidencies," they get calls "maybe once a month." They added that some ESFs "don't actually know what you're doing now"—that is, they haven't done their homework—and reach out about a "deanship or something."

Given the importance of "the list," how do people get on it? We heard from presidents that "getting on the list" is confusing at best and racialized at worst. To begin, "getting on the list" is what one white president called "insider baseball," and can be considered another feature of the hidden curriculum of presidential search. In the case of a white president, it wasn't until they were denied the role that they figured out they need to be on the ESF's "radar" and that this was the only way to have an "in." They noted, "I knew I had to throw my hat in the ring, I had to tell someone I wanted to do it—people have to know, and this is how I got on their list." The ESF "did not find me," but once they were on the list, "each time something came up, I got a call." This president concluded that people "have to take the first step," but "some people do not know that." A search firm representative confirmed this sentiment. "People get on the list by putting themselves there. We become aware of folks in different ways—sometimes they send us emails or personal correspondence, or through other networking opportunities. Some will come up to us and introduce themselves during conferences, or simply by calling the firm to introduce themselves."

The white president's experience suggests that getting on the list can be a problem for all candidates. Taking into account our earlier findings, this problem can be especially impactful for the chances of Candidates of Color to get on the list. A search firm representative said that "everybody who works for the firm either was a president or previous administrator." Thus, between all the team members, "we know most people throughout the state." On the surface, this

"far reach" of potential candidates (Scanton, 2016) sounds promising. Consider, however, the history of who has tended to be a president or executive-level administrator by race/ethnicity. Assuming they're white, it's possible their networks are primarily white. Thus, relying on their networks will not necessarily diversify the presidency.

To boost the racial/ethnic diversity of the list and build a more diverse candidate pool, ESFs look to racially focused associations. We interviewed presidents who were skeptical if this is enough. One President of Color said, "Search firms need candidates to be successful after they have done their work," for example, "they need people who shine in business settings" and because of this, "they are unlikely to suggest candidates that are too different from the norm or that challenge the conventional way or system of education." As we noted in Finding 2, an emphasis on "institutional fit" can have racial effects. It appears that rather than mitigating the detrimental impact of institutional fit, the business interests of ESFs compound the problem.

THE POOL PROBLEM: IT'S ALL ABOUT "PAPER DIVERSITY" AND OUTREACH OVER OUTCOME

The challenge, we learned, is not about disagreement with the premise of needing to have a diverse pool; rather, it's with how diversity in the pool is achieved, and when ESFs are more motivated by recruitment/outreach than by racially diverse outcomes. Presidents of Color, along with some white presidents, voiced concern with "paper diversity," which refers to having a pool with racial/ethnic representation for the sake of have "a diverse pool," which in the current environment means having enough Candidates of Color and white women in STEM in the mix of possibilities.

There are at a minimum four downstream effects. First, if someone fits into either category, ESFs "will try and interest you in their positions to get a diverse pool," said a white president, regardless of whether one is a good fit for the job. Second, once they have created the diversity pool, ESFs feel "their job is done," a President of Color said, effectively absolving themselves of the responsibility of facilitating a racially fair and just search process. Third, diversity becomes a task of checking the box. A President of Color observed that paper diversity reinforces that "everyone" simply wants to "check the box, the board checks

the box—they got a Person of Color; the search firm checks their box, they got their Person of Color in there.” Fourth, echoing our earlier finding about Candidates of Color always being in a state of double consciousness, paper diversity puts them (and white women in STEM) in a “delicate” mind frame. According to a President of Color, candidates want to believe they’re in the pool because they’ve earned their spot, but they’re “always a bit skeptical.” Another President of Color felt that when dealing with ESFs, they feel they’re included in the pool simply because of their race:

“Search firms almost always acknowledge my ethnicity in some way in the process—I speak two languages, or I’m from an urban area. They never say it is an advantage—but in some way they affirm my participation in the search process by saying these things. They believe they are including diversity in the search by including me. This is the optic by which they are operating and then oblivious to the outcome. When you look at the small number of actual hires, it is not good. The search firms tout their successes, but they view success only by who is in the pool.”

THE RESPONSIBILITY PROBLEM: PASSING THE BUCK AFTER DIVERSIFYING THE POOL

In light of search firm representatives’ post-racial beliefs, it’s unsurprising that they believe if there are biases in the process, it’s the bias of others—not theirs—that is the issue. Their responsibility for racial diversity and equity begins and ends with organizing a diverse pool. It doesn’t matter if they privilege “paper diversity”; the fact remains that the pool is “diverse.” What happens after, during search committee and board of trustee deliberations, is not their responsibility.

This idea of passing the buck of racial equity is evident when search firm representatives describe their role in hiring a President of Color. As one representative said,

“We are charged with DEI upfront, but when you break down the process, we actually have very little control, because the decisions are being made by a search committee or some equivalent body, and ultimately a board of trustees. And so, recruiting a strong and diverse pool is only part of the equation. The search committee actually has to pick them, and then they have to be advanced through the search, but yet search firms are held accountable to the outcome.”

Another search firm representative expressed a similar sentiment and placed the blame for the continued hiring of white presidents on the institution:

“We can create a diverse pool with individuals with a range of experiences and those that do not fit the traditional mold, but the problem is, search committees want to see what they have always seen. For example, sector bias, that if you don’t come from an R1 or R2, you can’t possibly run an R1 or R2 enterprise. If you come from the community college sector, you can’t possibly know what it’s like to run a regional comprehensive institution. We know that R1s and R2s are not as diversified as the other sectors, and so if we only look to R1s and R2s, yes, the candidate will understand the system, but they will most likely be white because there are less Candidates of Color in R1s and R2s. That is the ballgame. We cannot be blamed when intersections of bias are happening inside the institution.”

The second quote echoes what one white president, whom we discussed earlier, said about institutional exclusivity in presidential search. In this way, we do not quibble with the sentiment; what we take issue with is how this representative steps back from what could be ESF responsibility for genuine racial diversity and equity in the presidential search process.

Most Presidential Job Announcements Miss the Mark on Racial Equity

Presidential job announcements have an ostensibly simple purpose: communicate that the position is available, and provide information to interest potential applicants. An artifact of the search process, job announcements signal to applicants an institution's goals and priorities, and whether racial equity is a central concern. Our analysis of a subset of UC, CSU, and CCC job announcements shows that most fell short on signaling racial equity as an authentic institutional priority, and equity-mindedness and critical race consciousness as essential qualifications.

Job announcements perpetuate racial inequity by:

- **Failing to address racial equity in describing the institution's context, historical and/or contemporary racially exclusive practices, and efforts to correct those trends.**
- **Siloing racial equity efforts rather than infusing racial equity across all presidential responsibilities.**
- **Only addressing equity as it relates to students instead of other campus constituencies (e.g., faculty, administrators, staff, etc.).**
- **Lacking specific equity-minded language.**
- **Delineating the characteristics of desirable candidates in ways that advantage traditional leadership pathways and experiences that have historically failed to diversify the college presidency.**

Studies show that the language used in job announcements plays a critical role in signaling institutional norms and priorities, as well as what is desired and valued in potential candidates (Liera, 2020; Tuitt et al., 2007). Simply put, language matters. Our analysis shows a tendency toward race-evasive language, meaning that rarely was language related to race, racism, and racial equity used. In less than a quarter of the announcements reviewed did we find evidence of race-conscious language and specific mention of racial equity as an institutional priority. Yet, of those announcements, three also included deficit and race-evasive language.

EXCLUDING RACE IN THE PAST AND PRESENT

Nearly all presidential job announcements began by describing the institution's unique context and history within the larger state system (UC & CSU) or local community (CCCs). We found that all but one of the announcements we reviewed failed to tell the entire story related to racial equity. For example, one announcement (CSU) touted the institution as the "second largest land-holding university in California, and one of the largest land-holding universities in the nation" (p. 1) without acknowledging the Indigenous populations that inhabited those lands before being violently removed. We

believe this is important, as many campuses are currently reckoning with their histories of racial exclusion.

Only one example engaged the institution's historic legacy of exclusion. This announcement (CSU) stated that the university started with an "all-male enrollment" and did not enroll women until the 1960s. An acknowledgment of past exclusionary practices models equity-minded leadership, because it calls attention to the origins of unjust practices and their long-term consequences. Though it may initially seem counterintuitive to provide information that may be perceived as showing the university in a negative light, it reminds leaders of the necessary imperative for restorative justice and institutional responsibility (Bensimon, 2018; Wood & Palmer, 2014). Even so, this example is still limited in its failure to describe racial exclusion.

Many announcements made minor references to current racial demographics, despite alluding to racial equity as a priority. This provides no public benchmark for where the campus is or has been in this regard. Thirty institutions acknowledged that they are a minority-serving institution, but many stopped there and did not discuss how the campus actually serves racially minoritized students through their actions and outcomes. We did not find any evidence of job announcements that situated student racial demographics in context. Also, none called attention to explicit initiatives—proposed or current—to increase the number of racially minoritized students on campus.

Many announcements made minor references to current racial demographics, despite alluding to racial equity as a priority.

SILOING EQUITY TO THE EQUITY SECTION

Nowadays, nearly all institutions realize that their job announcements must describe current campus efforts toward racial equity, but we found that over half did so in a narrow way that compartmentalized equity into a single section rather than embedding it across multiple sections. Most often, diversity and

racial equity were treated from the standpoint of representation, and there was little to no discussion about increasing faculty diversity, or about the campus racial climate. Five campuses went beyond the performative treatment of racial equity.

For example, one announcement (CSU) stood out because it included an equity section that featured awards received by the university for achievements associated with minoritized student success, and it referred to specific racial groups such as "Hispanic students" and "African American students" rather than aggregating them into a race-neutral category such as "underrepresented." It went on to describe equity efforts in three other areas highlighting Students of Color (many announcements did not explicitly use the term "Students of Color"), "social justice roots," and inclusivity.

Another announcement (CCC) stood out because it embedded equity across multiple sections. It had an equity section and a diversity section, which illustrated that the institution considered these different topics. Their language was also more nuanced. For example, the announcement described a "framework to take action that would support rooting out racism and inequity by developing policies and practices to address intended and unintended racial inequities that exist." This announcement was among the select few that explicitly called out racism and inequity, and connected them to institutional policies and practices, which is a vital ingredient for spurring anti-racist institutional transformation (Bensimon, 2018).

EQUITY-MINDED AND CRITICALLY RACE-CONSCIOUS LEADERS NEED NOT APPLY

Finally, on the whole the job announcements sent, at best, mixed signals as to whether a candidate who practices equity-minded and critically race-conscious leadership would be welcomed, valued, and professionally successful at the institution. Indeed, we only found five announcements where specific equity-minded competencies were prioritized. More than 60% of the announcements did not even mention or prioritize diversity and inclusion experience in candidate qualifications, and in less than a third was experience with equity mentioned. This was true even in Hispanic Serving Institutions. For instance, one announcement (CCC) mentioned that a minimum qualification for the presidency was an "understanding of the diverse academic, socioeconomic, cultural, disability,

gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnic backgrounds” of students, but did not mention having an understanding of Latinx students specifically, despite the college’s location in a historically Latinx community.

Other announcements indicated a preference for candidates who have “demonstrated commitment to the success of first-generation, underrepresented students.” While “underrepresented” could be “code” for racially minoritized students, the fact is that specific racial groups are invisible in job announcements. This could be interpreted as a lack of awareness that racial equity is an urgent agenda in California. Alternatively, it suggests an extreme interpretation of what kind of race talk is allowable under California’s (Proposition 209) ban on affirmative action.

The most commonly mentioned characteristics, credentials, and accomplishments of desirable candidates reflected the white archetype of presidential leadership and perpetuated a preference for the traditional pathway to the presidency that has been and continues to be a racial filter. More than three-quarters of the announcements signaled that candidates who adhered to the traditional pathway were desired.

Boards Make or Break Racial Equity in Presidential Hiring

With presidential hiring, boards of trustees are the ultimate decision-makers. While search committees advise and system heads recommend a finalist, by policy, boards vote on whether the finalist will become the next president of an institution. Beyond selection, however, boards can signal whether and in what ways racial equity should be a priority. Not all boards have members who are equipped to make the case for why racial equity matters in presidential hiring.

Boards perpetuate racial inequity by:

- **Not making racial (and gender) equity a priority in presidential search.**
- **Not holding system heads accountable for presidential diversity.**

and Alumni (2016), presidential selection is the single most important job a board performs.

A recent study found that governing boards can act as “electrical sockets” for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts; when board members prioritize DEI efforts, they in essence goad institutions to move racial equity forward (Morgan et al., 2022). However, boards can also serve as barriers to DEI efforts when there is a lack of support or prioritization of such work (Morgan et al., 2022; Rall, 2021). This same idea can be applied to the important role of selecting a president. Boards can set the tone and the direction for the search and appointment process (Johnston & Ferrare, 2018). They can elevate racial equity as a key priority of the search or they can ignore it, which sends a strong message to internal and external constituents about the place of racial equity in the final decision (Rall, 2021). In essence, boards can either provide the energy and support to search and appoint a President of Color who will prioritize racial equity, or they can deflate this effort and serve as a barrier. Further, they can hold system heads, and by extension, search committees accountable for centering racial equity in selecting the next president. Although our interview protocol did not focus specifically on the role of boards in presidential search, half the presidents we interviewed commented on the power of boards to make or break the hiring of a President of Color.

According to recent report released by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, boards across the country are dominated by white men. At public colleges and universities, 65% of board members are white and 63% are men, showing that board composition has not kept pace with the changing demographics of the student population (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2022). This is important, because boards are the governing bodies behind many university and college systems. They influence decisions that impact the campus in a variety of ways, including the selection of a new president (Rall et al., 2020). This is the case in the UC, CSU, and CCC, where the UC Regents, the CSU Board of Trustees, and trustees of CCC districts, respectively, are positioned as the ultimate decision-making bodies in presidential hires. According to the American Council of Trustees


For example, one President of Color said that they believe their ethnic background was a “factor” in their hiring, and the intention was set by the board. They said, “I think there was a strong intentional focus by the search committee and board to look for diverse candidates.” Another President of Color echoed this sentiment by saying that their system leadership’s agenda was to diversify the presidency, an agenda the board supported. This president argued that the reason they have seen an increase in presidential diversity is because “decision-makers and the board” made it possible.

That said, other presidents recalled experiences where boards were not as supportive in hiring a President of Color or woman president. For example, a President of Color said, “[T]here are board members that are racist and can not visualize a President of Color, despite the demographics of the area.” A search firm consultant said that in one particular search, during a board discussion of who should move forward in the search, a trustee said of a Black candidate from the South, “Well, we can’t vote for that person, I can’t understand a word that they’re saying.” The search firm consultant “could not believe that we were having this discussion.” Another president recalled how board members had issues with candidates’ areas of study. In one example, a white president recalled a board member giving a woman candidate a “hard time” because they do “feminist work.”

A white search firm consultant said that in some cases boards “behave bizarrely,” and they attribute this to the fact that they are “elected officials, they’re community members,” and “they have never worked in education,” which means they may not have had exposure to DEI work. But when it comes to racial equity, it is not tenable for boards to lack DEI experience. Another white search firm consultant with over 30 years of experience in higher education CEO searches said that boards are “where the rubber meets the road on a lot of these things.” While speaking more generally, a white president also pointed to the notion of accountability. They said, “I worry that we don’t hold people accountable at the right level in terms of hiring, and I worry that no one wants to own

the problem.” Boards need to hold system heads and search committees accountable for racial equity in presidential hiring, and they need to own the problem. Since boards have the final decision, if their agenda does not reflect racial equity, and if they have not been trained to be critically race-conscious, it is unlikely that institutions will veer from the traditional white male norm of college presidents.

“I worry that we don’t hold people accountable at the right level in terms of hiring, and I worry that no one wants to own the problem.”



The underrepresentation of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian American, and Pacific Islander presidents is frequently perceived to be a supply problem—i.e., a lack of qualified candidates—and to weak recruitment practices—i.e., not casting the net widely. Our report shows that the problem is blindness to the ways in which presidential search practices, along with myths about fitness, work in favor of white candidates and against racially minoritized candidates—and often against white women as well. The fact that the color of presidencies has stayed fairly consistent over the last five decades attests to the power of white supremacy to maintain racialized practices and structures under the guise of fairness and objectivity. To address the eight obstacles that keep racially minoritized candidates out of the presidency, it will be necessary to dismantle how presidential searches are done—the job announcement, the formation of search committees, the expectations of search firms, the review criteria, the interview process, and so on—and reconstruct them to lift up Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian American, and Pacific Islander candidates. To make this possible, our *Tools to Redesign the Presidential Search Process for Racial Equity* provides presidential hiring stakeholders with tools and recommendations for developing critically race-conscious standard operating procedures for hiring college presidents.

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METHODS

The overarching question we sought to answer was:

In what ways are presidential search practices in California's three public sectors racialized?

The research team designed a multi-phase strategy involving the collection of different forms of data from a variety of stakeholders involved in the presidential search process in the UC, CSU, and CCC. To guide each phase, we developed more specific questions. Taking a multi-phase approach enabled us to holistically understand the intricate details of how a president is recruited and selected. Before initiating data collection, the study underwent a thorough ethics review by WCG IRB.

PHASE 1: UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT AND HISTORICAL PRESIDENTIAL LANDSCAPE IN CALIFORNIA

Database Creation

Our two research questions to guide database creation were:

- What is the racial/ethnic gender and professional profile of current and past chancellors/presidents in the three California public higher education sectors?
- What patterns, if any, can be discerned by undergraduate racial/ethnic composition, institutional type, and geographic location?

The database captured three categories of data for each public institution in California, including (a) presidential characteristics; (b) institutional characteristics; and (c) community characteristics. For example, we collected data on presidential demographics, salary ranges, highest degree, and discipline, as well as previous role. Institutional and community characteristics included student composition, Carnegie classification, campus setting, and dominant political orientation, to name a few. All data came from publicly available sources.

Additionally, we collected data on all past UC chancellors and CSU presidents, and a sample of 27 CCC presidents. This collection effort allowed us to not only identify the current presidential landscape within and across each sector, but also to identify which institutions have employed the most Presidents of Color and woman presidents (including white), and which have never hired a racially minoritized president or a woman president. Our data collection included each president's tenure and highest degree by institution. Again, all data came from publicly available sources.

College / University President Database

Becoming a College President in California's Public Colleges and Universities: An Inside Look at How it Happens

Institution Name		
President/ Chancellor	Current President/Chancellor	
	Start Year	
	Previous Position / Role	
	Previous Position/ Role	
	Bio Link	
	Race	
	Gender	
	Aspen President's Fellowship	
	Highest Degree	
	Discipline	
	Salary Range	
	Institutional Information	Institution Start Year
		Enrollment Size
		Single/Multi-College District
Student Composition		
Largest Racially Minoritized Student Population		
Majority Undergraduate Age		
Largest Racially Minoritized Faculty Population		
Carnegie Classification		
CC Region		
Community Information	Campus Setting	
	Dominant Community Political Orientation	
	Racial / Ethnic Composition of the Surrounding Community	
	Largest Racially Minoritized Population in Community	

**As part of this study, Bensimon & Associates created a comprehensive database. The database captures data on current California presidents as well as each UC, CSU, and a sample of CCC's unique history of presidents by race since their origin.*

Mapping the Process and Preliminary Interviews

In addition to having a firm understanding of the current and historical presidential context, we needed to understand the intricate details of each search process. The following research question guided this aspect of Phase 1:

What are the stages of the search processes in the three California public higher education sectors?

Using publicly available materials (e.g., hiring policies, presidential search websites, press releases), we drafted presidential hiring process maps for the UC, CSU, and two community college districts (Long

AN OUTLINE OF THE UC CHANCELLOR SEARCH PROCESS



Beach City College, a single college district, and State Center Community College District, a multi-college district). Interviews with 13 stakeholders in each sector allowed us to verify the accuracy of our draft maps and modify them as needed. Table A1 details who we spoke with, by role.

With these maps we were able to determine similarities and differences across and within the sectors, as well as identify the key decision-making points where whiteness and racialization advantaged white candidates and disadvantaged racially minoritized candidates. Additionally, the maps helped us decide which aspects of the presidential search process to develop recommendations for in *Tools to Redesign the Presidential Search Process for Racial Equity*.

TABLE A1. PRELIMINARY INTERVIEWS

Role	Number
Trustees	1
Presidents (Current and Former)	8
System Administrators	3
External Consultants	1

Bensimon & Associates acknowledges that while the UC and CSU have system-level processes for selecting and appointing institutional leaders, the appointment process in the state’s community colleges is localized, meaning the processes vary by college district. As a result, the research team created two community college maps (Long Beach City College and State Center Community College District), attempting to capture some of the nuances between different districts. The specific districts were selected to represent processes at a single and multi-college district, as well as different regions of the state (Long Beach City College is located in Southern California, and State Center Community College District is located in the Central Valley). While the selection of these two districts may not be representative of all districts’ selection and appointment processes in the state, the maps provide two variations that may be similar to processes enacted at other community college districts in California.

PHASE 2: CAPTURING PRESIDENTIAL EXPERIENCES: IN-DEPTH CASE STUDIES OF SELECTION AND APPOINTMENTS IN THE THREE SECTORS

Our data collection in Phase 2 included interviews with current presidents and other stakeholders, and the analysis of a sample of presidents’ CVs and job announcements.

Interviews

We interviewed 54 individuals who represent a variety of different stakeholders across the three sectors and the search and appointment process, in spring 2022. This part of the research study was guided by the following questions:

- How do presidential search practices that result in the hiring of Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, or Indigenous leaders compare to those that lead to white leader appointments?
- How do the pathways of Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, or Indigenous appointed leaders compare to those of white leader appointments?
- How does whiteness and racialization in presidential search and appointment processes shape hiring outcomes?

Our interview effort largely focused on current presidents. Formal invitations from College Futures Foundation were sent to all UC chancellors and CSU presidents, and to a sample of community college presidents. Given the number of community colleges in the state (116 as of June 30, 2021), it was not feasible for us to reach out to all sitting presidents during our research time frame. Our sampling was informed by findings in our preliminary interviews and information from our database. Using a maximum variation sampling strategy, we selected community college presidents based on: (a) community college region in the state; (b) single vs. multi-college district; (c) student demographics; (d) history of hiring racially minoritized presidents; and (e) having a presidential hire in the last five years. Our final sample included 36 sitting chancellors/presidents.

In addition to sitting presidents, we interviewed 10 search firm representatives representing 9 different search firms ranging in size, sector focus, and state versus national reach. The search firms were identified during the preliminary interviews in Phase 1. Finally, we conducted a small number of interviews with individuals named via “snowball sampling.” For example, several presidents we interviewed encouraged us to speak with former and current presidents outside California.

TABLE A2. INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS BY CATEGORY

Role	Number
Presidents of Color	20
White Presidents	16
System Administrators (Current and Former)	4
Trustees	1
Out-of-State Presidents (Current and Former)	2
White Search Firm Consultants	6
Search Firm Consultants of Color	4
Community Members	1

Our interview protocols underwent an iterative review and feedback process. For example, for the president interview protocol we started with determining what the interviews needed to cover. Once we decided on focal areas (e.g., trajectory to the presidency, search process for current role, reflections on race and gender in their search process, overall reflections on racialization in presidential search, and recommendations for improving presidential search), we drafted questions, refining language and sequencing over several rounds of research team review. We then pilot-tested the protocol with a former college president from a state institution outside California. The final protocol included 19 questions. We shared top-level questions with each president before the scheduled interviews.

ANALYSIS

Most interviews were recorded with participants’ permission. When a participant chose to not record the interview, the interviewer took notes. Recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber and reviewed by the interviewer for accuracy, in preparation for analysis. We pursued an inductive thematic analysis and refined themes during research team meetings. Once themes were identified, a sample of Presidents of Color and white presidents were asked to review the themes to ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis. The reviewers who provided “member-checking” included interview participants as well as presidents who did not participate in the study.

Curriculum Vitae Analysis

The goal of the CV analysis was to (a) understand their educational and employment history and their scholarly and practical expertise; (b) examine pathways to the presidency; and (c) discern race and gender patterns in these pathways. Our guiding research question was:

- What are the credentials and academic and experience pathways, leading to the presidency, and in what ways do these pathways facilitate or inhibit candidates from racially minoritized backgrounds?

We asked the presidents interviewed to submit their CVs. We collected 35 CVs from nine UC chancellors, 17 CSU presidents, and nine community college presidents. We used the findings of the CV analysis to supplement the interview findings, and to support recommendations for the *Tools to Redesign the Presidential Search Process for Racial Equity*.

Job Announcement Analysis

Presidential job announcements are an important aspect of the search and appointment process. The purpose of the job announcement analysis was to better understand the ways presidential job announcements engage in racial equity and equity-mindedness. We collected presidential job announcements in one of three ways: (a) from interviewees; (b) from human resources staff; and (c) from internet searches. This resulted in 38 job announcements: six from the UC, 23 from the CSU, and nine from the community colleges. Each of the 38 announcements led to the appointment of a current president or chancellor.

A protocol was developed to assess how well presidential job announcements include racial equity and equity-mindedness. To develop the protocol, a literature review was completed of prior research on job announcements, job signaling, and the factors that tend to make job announcements more attractive to racially minoritized candidates (e.g., Breugh, 2013; Cober et al., 2003; Gaucher et al., 2011; Linos, 2018; Schmalting et al., 2017; Thomas & Wise, 1999). The initial protocol was based on that literature and the concepts of racial equity and equity-mindedness. The protocol was applied to a small sample of job announcements. The full research team also pilot-tested the protocol with a sample of job announcements, and provided feedback to finalize the protocol. The final protocol allowed for an examination of job announcements for concepts related to equity-mindedness, such as:

- How do job announcements signal that one of the president's responsibilities is for racial equity in terms of recruitment, retention, and outcomes across stakeholder groups?
- How do job announcements signal that the institution itself acknowledges its own exclusionary practices, and is committed to ongoing and equity-minded transformation across stakeholder groups?
- How do job announcements include (or not include) racial equity-related practices, programs, and policies?

To analyze the data, a list of preliminary themes were created. The research team met to review the themes, noting areas of overlap and difference, to settle on a final list of themes. These themes informed the creation of the Presidential Job Announcement Assessment Tool, presented in the *Tools to Redesign the Presidential Search Process for Racial Equity*.

