Research Report

"Coalition of the Willing": Promoting Antiracism Through Empowering Community College Campus Members

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Abstract

Objective/Research Question: Critical race theory (CRT) was used with a basic qualitative study to interrogate how racism unfolds at community colleges and how Black community college presidents enact antiracism. The purpose of this study is to enhance understandings about how community college presidents of African descent construct antiracism, how those definitions are communicated, and the rationale for creating opportunities to disrupt racism within predominantly White campus environments. **Methods:** Six presidents participated in three semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 75-minutes each. The sample included three men and three women. Interviews focused on institutional communications about racial tensions concerning how presidents' identities (e.g., race and gender) influenced decision making with campus stakeholders and presidential roles in defining and enacting antiracism. **Results:** Three themes emerged including how *Accountability matters*, the need for *Space creators*, and importance of developing *Student "critical" mass*. Participants discussed how they created spaces and utilized cultural capital networks to advance campus diversity agendas to benefit their institutions. Presidents posited that although community college leaders were likely motivated to participate in anti-racist practices due to the bettering of institutional image, decisive work needed to be done despite knowing endemic racism occurs in perpetuity. **Conclusions/Contributions:** This study highlights the need for enhanced training of presidents about how to conceptualize and engage campus racism. Additionally,

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presidents posited that the majority of students on their campuses were ready to engage in antiracism leadership activism, but they needed training to be empowered to develop anti-racist programs and practices. Finally, institutions need to develop stronger and more systematic ways to call out racism and promote anti-racist programing and practices.

Keywords

leadership, administration, diversity issues, history of community colleges, qualitative methods, research methods, student retention/achievement, students or student services

Introduction

Research about racism perpetrated by White collegians against Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) on university and community college campuses is well documented (Cabrera, 2012; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Harris, 2019; Harwood et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2019; Truong et al., 2016) The range of racist acts experienced by BIPOC students are multidimensional and comprised of microaggressive attacks, blatant anti-Blackness, challenges to citizenship, expectations to assimilate and cultural erasure, which are interpreted as dehumanizing (Cabrera, 2014; Dancy et al., 2018; Davis & Harris, 2016). To illustrate, recent Blackface occurrences at the University of Oklahoma and Colorado State University where none of the perpetrators were expelled (Hernandez, 2019a; Kirker, 2019a,b), coupled with noose hangings at University of Illinois and Stanford University (Beachum, 2019; Shalby, 2019) provide clear examples of how racism permeates the public sphere for Black students (Breaux, 2017; Hurtado, 1992; Mustaffa, 2017). At Highland Community College in Kansas, institutional leadership were accused of discouraging black students from enrolling and explicitly asking athletic team coaches to cut Black players (Margolies, 2022). Inequities in treatment, outcomes, funding, and support of students of color in general has been found repeatedly in studies of community colleges (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2019; Smith & Fox, 2019).

Sadly, many of these heinous acts go unchecked. In a recent study focused on university president responses to racist events Cole and Harper (2017) found that many presidents "mention the racial incident itself, regularly address the group or individual who committed the racist act, but usually do not acknowledge the systemic or institutional issues that foster racial hostility on college campuses" (p. 318). This approach shows that institutional responses to racism can be both frequent, yet inadequate. Further, Davis and Harris (2016) found that institutional actors, or those "allegedly responsible" (p. 63) to formally respond after occurrence of racial incidents were typically noncommittal in their stances against racist acts. They found that statements were outwardly communicated due to interest convergence (Bell, 1980) in an effort to situate university acknowledgments as necessary.

While many studies have found problematic responses, scholars have long called for more proactive leadership approaches to combatting racism, especially at community colleges (Aquino, 2016; Baber et al., 2015; Kezar et al., 2008; McNaughtan et al., 2021). Baber et al. (2015) posit that institutional leaders of community colleges need to increase efforts to close institutional inequity gaps, which involve more active leadership in both program development and calling out racism as it occurs. To demonstrate how university presidents enacted leadership to advance on-campus diversity agendas Kezar et al. (2008) found highly interrelated non-linear strategies allowed for the construction of transformative networks. Strategies included purposeful hiring of people of color, mentoring faculty of color, developing transformative faculty partnerships, and creating safe spaces for institutional constituents—strategics that could be adapted for community colleges, as well.

These studies provide nuanced perspectives about how institutional actors may purposefully communicate responses about racial incidents that constitute ethnoviolence (Davis et al., 2022; Ehrlich, 1994; Perry, 2002; Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2019), hate crimes (Rodriguez, 2015; Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012) and racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1969; Sue & Constantine, 2007). Institutional acts include "those racially marginalizing actions and inertia of the university evidenced in structures, practices and discourses that endorse a campus racial climate hostile to People of Color" (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 673). Kezar et al.'s (2008) study focused on systemic utilization, diversity creation, and student interactions: "every president mentioned the pivotal role of their relationship with students as a way for them to help support students of color by checking their assumptions, reminding them of their passion, and asking for input in guiding their work" (Kezar et al., 2008, p. 88). It is important to note that in the majority of studies mentioned the focus was on Historically White Institutions (HWIs) where few presidents were of African descent. We acknowledge that HWIs are a function of settler colonialism created for the sole purpose of only educating White Americans (Fanon, 1961). Furthermore, we understand that White Institutional Presence (WIP) is used to maintain "White cultural ideology in the cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge" (Gusa, 2010, p. 464) by excluding faculty, students, administrators and staff of color who otherwise benefit from on campus diversity agendas (Adserias et al., 2017).

In this research, we recognize that institutional preparedness to respond to racism on campus is predicated on the experiences of community college leaders, in this case presidents. Moreover, while community college presidents of varied racial backgrounds have attempted to create antiracist campus environments, this research focuses on community college presidents of African descent[1] (Bradley, 2019; McNaughtan & Hotchkins, 2021; Phelps et al., 1997; Vaughan, 1989). To this point, the purpose of this study is to unpack the experiential knowledge and actions of six Black community college presidents by highlighting how antiracism is communicated, and the rationale for creating opportunities to disrupt racism within predominantly White campus environments. Our study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. RQ1: What perceptions do presidents of African descent at community colleges have on how to promote antiracism on the campuses?
2. RQ2: How do presidents of African descent navigate PWI campuses to best empower campus community members to engage in anti-racist practices?

Utilizing critical race theory (CRT) as an interrogational lens, we applied a basic qualitative study methodological approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, since the subject matter we broached is timely and critical in community college literature and practice, we offer this nuanced perspective to further broaden the scope of research about this topic.

Background

College Presidents of African Descent

The path to becoming a community college president of African descent consists of overcoming numerous impediments to include: implicit bias (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2015); White leadership prototype (Rosette et al., 2008); lack of mentorship (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Holmes, 2004); "double jeopardy" phenomenon (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Lomotey, 2019); and being stereotyped as disadvantaged if Black and a woman (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Ultimately, in order to better understand how Black presidents govern community colleges, it is important to know what issues they prioritize and the extent to which the issues occupy this institutional type. According to Gagliardi et al. (2017), 80% of community college presidents are White juxtaposed to 9% Black, Afro-Caribbean or African American. When asked about the *Importance of College Presidents Ensuring Positive Campus Climate for Minorities* nearly 62% of Black community college presidents believed it important to "make clear in public statements that the status of racial minorities on campus is a high priority" while only 57% of White community college presidents shared the same perspective. Similarly, 65% of Black community college presidents felt the need to conduct a "review of policies and procedures to eliminate racial bias" and 62% of White community college presidents believed the same.

To elucidate our point that community colleges must respond to racism, we are mindful that "the history of the US higher education reflects a deep commitment to Black degradation as fundamental to the maintenance of colonial order" (Dancy et al., 2018, p. 177), which adversely contributes to the fact that Black faculty are underrepresented, suffer from tokenism and are burdened with "diversity" work at community colleges (Lara, 2019; Niemann, 2016; Wheeler & Freeman, 2018). Although community colleges have overwhelmingly served as valuable entry points for students of color to achieve degree conferral (Baber et al., 2019), color-blind racism still occurs in places like financial aid where under-resourcing of urban campus students and staff impede degree attainment (White & Dache, 2020). Additionally, LGBTQIA+ students of color applied social and navigational capital to locate resources and a sense of community due to an absence of institutional structural supports that were provided

for their heterosexual peers (Whitehead, 2019). These studies provide clear examples about why the perspectives of Black community college presidents need to be amplified and why racism at community colleges must be directly addressed since, "as representatives of the most diverse sector of higher education, community colleges bear a special responsibility to champion the values of inclusiveness and equity" (Bumphus, 2016, Foreword section). Therefore, how does actualization of being a "champion" look when the community college president is of African descent?

Being the president of a HBCU has been broached in the literature and includes research about how the intersection of professional and personal leadership characteristics influence challenges, length of presidency, mobility and career paths (Commodore et al., 2016; Elliott et al., 2019; Henry, 2009; Herring, 2010; Mishra, 2007; Strayhorn, 2022). Herring (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study with 22 HBCU presidents and found the following three key items: (1) participants understood the nuanced institutional culture, values and assumptions of their colleges; (2) participants realized their ascent to president dependent on those within their circles of influence; and (3) participants knew finances, recruitment and retention of students, time management, constituent relationships, campus morale, and change were amongst their greatest impediments. Although these studies speak to the complexities of being a college president of African descent, they lack a distinct focus on the contextual differences between HWIs, PWIs and HBCUs.

Black College Presidency at Predominantly White Institutions

What it means to be president at PWIs, as a person of African descent, is racialized, gendered and at times troubled. Several comprehensive studies about the ecology of PWIs locate numerous universities as sites of hostile campus racial climates (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1998; McNaughtan et al., 2021) where the resulting adverse impact on faculty, administrators and students of color is racial battle fatigue (Espinosa et al., 2019; Hartlep & Ball, 2019; Mwangi et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2007, 2011). Subsequently, Black presidents are in the midst of not only determining how to grapple with pervasive racism, but also designing strategic plans that employ best practices to address racial conflict. Harper and Hurtado (2007) identified nine emergent themes for campus racial climate and institutional transformation at PWIs. The most relevant theme to this study was entitled "Race as a Four-Letter Word and an Avoidable Topic" which explained how conversations about race were isolated and rarely engaged unless within ethnic studies courses. Furthermore, if PWIs frame discussions about race as taboo it is understandable that when racial incidents occur institutional responses are historically uninformed, affixed on the present in terms of isolated events and fail to "have a proactive approach to addressing issues of inequality" (Davis & Harris, 2016, p. 65) in comprehensive diversity-centric ways (Kezar et al., 2008) that are institutionally comprehensive.

The racialized challenges experienced by presidents of African descent presently are similar to those found at the turn of this century. For instance, Robinson (1996)

found that Black presidents of PWIs experienced racial stereotyping, discrimination, a lack of administrative development opportunities, and negative public opinion, each of which impinged upon their ability to perform administrative duties perform duties. In agreement with these findings, Holmes (2004) found "a number of the presidents indicated that race can be a contributing factor in developing relationships with various constituents depending on the institution" (p. 32) and that this phenomenon is also experienced by other administrators of color who are not presidents (Burgess, 1997; Holmes, 2003). Furthermore, along gendered lines while Black male presidents were married to women who sacrificed their career trajectories to raise children and allow for professional pursuits, Black women presidents experienced marital difficulty and divorce due to holding an administrative position that was not "traditional" for a wife (Holmes, 2004; Jackson & Harris, 2007). These findings inform our mindfulness that "the lived experiences of African American women are not located within separate spheres of race, gender and social class. Rather, these spheres intersect and shape social realities that are not captured within traditional feminist discourse" (Stanley, 2009, p. 552) and are bound by intersectional overlapping systems of racialized and gender oppression (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989, p. 199; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hernandez, 2019b; Oikelome, 2017; Parker, 2005).

Considering the increase of racial incidents on college campuses since the presidential election of 2016 (Andrade, 2019; Giroux, 2017), which includes the University of Virginia White Supremacist protest (Peters & Besley, 2017), efforts to challenge racism within collegiate contexts are necessary. By using critical race theory (CRT) to analyze the qualitative narratives of six community college presidents of African descent, we used a basic qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to further elucidate current literature about how to best empower campus community members to engage in the practice of antiracism.

Theoretical Framework

This study is part of a 3-month research endeavor where we used basic qualitative methodology, coupled with CRT, to examine the epistemological perspectives of six presidents of African descent who preside over predominantly White community colleges while utilizing their positions to promote antiracism on campus. Previous research used CRT as a counternarrative to oppose majoritarian deficit perspectives about people and students of color who were situated as invaluable not only higher education, but also society (Davis, 2016; Garcia et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, 2019). We applied the following CRT tenets (Howard, 2008; Matsuda et al., 1993): (1) CRT acknowledges that racism is endemic; (2) CRT challenges legal notions of meritocracy, objectivity, neutrality and colorblindness; (3) CRT insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law while being in opposition to ahistoricism; (4) CRT foregrounds experiential knowledge of people of color when analyzing society and law through counterstory telling; (5) CRT is interdisciplinary; and (6) CRT seeks to eliminate racial oppression by ending oppression. Furthermore, we undergird this study with interest convergence (Bell, 1980) where

"the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (p. 523) and racial realism (Bell, 1991) which "requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph" (pp. 373–374). Finally, CRT served as the lens for the analysis of participants' perceptions about antiracism and their preparedness to facilitate opportunities for campus community members to engage in anti-racist practices.

Purpose of the Study

A basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used to focus on a specific phenomenon to understand how participants place meaning in and gain an understanding from their experiences. In this instance, how six college presidents of African descent prepared campus community members to engage in antiracism actions, by applying an anti-racist institutional agenda, was the phenomenon in question. Although the terms "Black" and "of African descent" are not synonymous, due to study participants self-identifying as both, they are used interchangeably. Our study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. RQ1: What perceptions do presidents of African descent at community colleges have on how to promote antiracism on the campuses?
2. RQ2: How do presidents of African descent navigate PWI campuses to best empower campus community members to engage in anti-racist practices?

Data and Methods

Six community college presidents of African descent participated in three semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 75 minutes each. Further, archival documents and publicly available institution information about individual community colleges were included in the data to help understand the context of the campus for the president. For example, the demographics of the student body, urbanicity of the surrounding community, and structure of the community college in relation to the state higher education system were reflected on as part of the data analysis process. The sample included three men and three women who were selected using a snowball sampling approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017). To illustrate, President Gabe participated in a previous study about university presidential leadership and agreed to provide a list of potential participants for our study. According to Yin (2017) and Creswell and Poth (2017) four to six participants "provide ample opportunity to identity themes of the cases" (p. 160) so we settled on the latter number to conduct the study. Each of the interviews were conducted over Zoom as web-based interactions that were recorded, transcribed and the data corpus underwent a cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2017).

The study criteria were: (1) self-identify as a person of African descent; and (2) be a president of a community college. Presidents had an average of 5.6 years of

experience ranging from over 10 years for one president and just under 2 years for another. Four of the six presidents oversaw campuses of more than 10,000 students while the remaining two presided over campuses with approximately 5,000 students. The first interview focused on the role of the president in communicating with campus community members about racial tensions, with an emphasis on how the president's identities (e.g., race and gender) influenced decisions and ability to support campus stakeholders. The second interview focused on the president's role in defining antiracism and how students are empowered to combat racism. The final interview focused on the concept of racial battle fatigue and how presidents perceived its influence on their leadership. Each interview was conducted in a semi-structured format to capture detailed lived experiences about being college presidents (Yin, 2017).

Data Analysis

Interviews for this study were coded utilizing discourse analysis techniques and filtered through CRT, which focused comments made by participants and how they structured their comments in relation to the questions (Gee, 2014). In order to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we established credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability by engaging in triangulation through achieving thick description via multiple data points. Afterward, we audited the research process by conducting member checking with participants to confirm their perspectives coupled with a peer debrief of the research.

The interview coding process employed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach to coding qualitative data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Triangulation was accomplished by confirming coded data after an extensive review of the interviews (Patton, 2001) and by matching priori labels to mirror CRT tenets, which allowed emergent themes to be triangulated across participant interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Saturation was reached and no new codes emerged following the initial coding of the researchers (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding occurred when the data was reconstructed in new ways, during multiple meetings with the research team, by establishing associations amongst the themes and sub-themes to raise the data to higher levels of thought (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

Guided by CRT, this study focused on the experiences and perceptions of community college presidents of African descent who navigate racism, so the overarching emerging codes elucidate their perceptions of how to promote antiracism on college campuses, which resulted in three themes. Three salient themes emerged: *Accountability matters*, *Space creators* and *Student "critical" mass*. The results of this analysis are represented by theme specific quotes from study participants. For convenience, we identify each of the six respondents by pseudonyms and avoid specific campus details in connection with each president to protect the anonymity of participants.

The first theme focused on identifying racism through active approaches to antiracism by applying accountability to whomever and they discussed the need to be proactive through using their position, which confirmed CRT tenets *racism as endemic* and *elimination of racial oppression*.

Accountability Matters

The first emergent theme is that presidents identify racism and hold perpetrators accountable. President Zora argued this was critical to the president's role:

> Our role involves eliminating racism in our environment and holding people accountable for doing the right things. I think about my communication from the very beginning, from my faculty orientation, to my meetings with the service workers to my monthly newsletter. I partner with people in the community to do a dialogue, every year on difficult conversations and how we can work together to improve our community.

It was clear for this president their responsibility to promote antiracism was infused into role functionality and communication with stakeholders as it pertained to institutional functionality, which included hiring and staff training. Furthermore, this president discussed how they felt strongly that hiring pools must include people of color in order to be legitimized and not perceived as continuing a history of embodying a racialize status quo, which is an example of institutional accountability.

Institutional context and how it changed the accountability expectations presidents held for students was discussed at length by President Gabe who talked about the "nasty history" of the surrounding community that was associated with prevalent "racial tensions and divisions." President Gabe argued that one reason the president had to engage with these issues is because members of the campus community, particularly those from marginalized groups, often feel disenfranchised by the racism they experience and are unaware about how to address these issues:

> I do not see students feeling empowered even when I talk to students about issues and challenges [racial] they are having, whether it be in their personal lives or something that has to do with what's going on here at the college. I don't see them verbalizing, to me, the connections that I think are woven throughout their experiences, I don't see them making those connections. And many times, I see them blaming themselves for things saying 'I should have known' or 'I should have done better.' And I'm like, What?

This example highlights students' needs pertaining to how the president must lead to demonstrate what is acceptable juxtaposed to the responsibility of student body members to actively address issues that contribute to a hostile campus climate. President Red went as far as to say that "one of the reasons I'm in this position is so that we can run people out who have that attitude {racist}," which not only illustrates an active role to acknowledge and enforce practices that eradicate racism on campus, but also serves as an example of personal accountability. Another example of how these

presidents challenged racism was by first acknowledging it in order to eliminate it as discussed by President Zora who stated: "We can acknowledge that there it is a conversation to be had. Because we can ignore that or we can embrace it as an opportunity. We can fear it [racism] or we can use our influence to start a conversation at the highest level of leadership on campus." This president explained that campus leaders may be ignoring difficult conversations about racism out of fear, which provides an unmet opportunity to actively address who is adversely impacted and their sources of trepidation. President Adelaide built on this idea when defining antiracism as "social justice, and equity, and ensuring that our most disproportionately impacted students know that the college is taking intentional efforts to lift them up when they are violated," which was another example of applying accountability. President Adelaide also provided an example of attacking demographic inequity, which is often interpreted by campus community members as racism by exclusion, offering the following perspective: "we are very vocal, intentional about hiring faculty that are committed to social justice and educational equity and who reflect the students experiences on the college." These examples show how using an antiracism institutional agenda makes employee demographics diverse.

Spaces Creators

In addition to providing specific thoughts about how they use accountability to address racism on campus participants discussed their role in empowering campus community members to do the same. This second theme was the most consistent theme mentioned by presidents and focused on the need to create spaces and opportunities for anti-racist conversations for campus community members to dismantle notions of meritocracy, objectivity, neutrality and colorblindness, which confirmed the CRT tenet *foregrounds experiential knowledge of people of color* and *resistance of dominant ideologies*.

President Adelaide made it clear that presidents should not feel that they can create "safe" spaces, but that they should seek to ". . . use another word to replace safe" since the act of navigating racism is a dangerous undertaking. Specifically, President Adelaide continued, "the President has to lead by example, and have these brave, courageous conversations and then create brave environments for students to exceed academically." This comment on the role of the president to lead and develop these conversations was echoed by President Zora who said, "I'm trying to change the college's common understanding of differences and microaggressions by identifying those having transparent conversations about it" and the adverse impact of experiencing racism. President Zora then discussed that the overarching outcome of engaging in purposeful conversations about racism is to "change their behaviors and attitudes. Attitude first, so that people can change their behaviors" as a result of having spaces to broach race-related topics.

While some presidents discussed this idea of creating spaces and how to encourage conversations, others simply acknowledged that the impact of racism enhances the need for these types of conversations. For example, President Gabe stated:

> You know, racism is this thing that's in the air we breathe and yet it's killing us. This notion of it is so embedded and woven into the fabric of every single institution that exists in our country and inside of our institutions of higher education. And so you find yourself trying to create protective bubbles and trying to mitigate the marginalization, oppression, disenfranchisement, exclusion, and all the other nasty things that go along with racism, and hoping that good things will grow.

President Gabe continued by expressing a concern that even with work "the soil was tainted" with racism and leaders should expect a difficult journey in order to better the entire college community. President Pluto lamented a similar plight of the consistent challenges associated with racism and then discussed their "antiracism work," stating that their goal was "focused on creating an environment for discourse around how to be an anti-racist" which needed to be modeled at the highest institutional levels. This mentality was common for each president interviewed as they all understood racism as existing in perpetuity and in need of being eradicated through applying preemptive antiracism means.

President Red added his thoughts that these conversations should happen before an incident stating:

> Don't wait for an event to occur. Have events on campus that address the potential reality of racism occurring or racist activities occurring. Whether or not it's already an issue in your community, I mean, one of the things that I did along the way was to make it clear that treating me in a racist manner or treating people on campus in a racist manner, was not going to work. And I would act quickly and swiftly to address those issues.

President Red articulated the importance of not only developing these activities prior to issues, but also to immediately address racist issues should they arise. In short, all respondents discussed the need for anti-racist conversations and programing to be encouraged in order to support and educate the entire campus community, or as one president said, "the world is not just a LGBTQI center, the world's not just a Black center. And so, I think the president has to figure out a way to create safe environments" that are completely inclusive by preparing institutional constituents to combat the inevitable.

Student "critical" mass. The final theme that emerged concerned perceptions about how their presence as presidents of African descent challenged what it meant to be an university president at a PWI concerning false notions that they are viewed the same as White presidents. Additionally, their being Black served to empower faculty, staff and especially students who viewed them as administrators who were "Black and proud" (President Adelaide), which confirmed CRT tenet of *challenges notions of meritocracy, objectivity, neutrality and colorblindness*. For example, President Red stated:

> I think for students, I have definitely seen it{empowerment} and I have heard them say, I see you, I see myself in you. You are Black and I am Black. And that makes me feel like I belong, like somebody has my back. So, there's some sort of lift I believe that many students of color feel just by seeing me walk around in the hallways and engage them in conversation. So, I think there is some level of empowerment that comes along with that. And maybe some safety, some security, some protection.

The perception of President Pluto was echoed by President Gabe who claimed "having me in the environment as an African American makes the place more accountable and conscious of how they treat people" since presidents also support of students of color. President Gabe went on to discuss the perceived common experiences he shares with students by illustrating common microaggressions experienced, which confirmed that people recognized his racial identity and were not colorblind in their actions. Most of the presidents also discussed how their presence on campus led to increased applicants of color due to their target efforts to prioritize qualified diversity hires.

In some cases, presidents pushed hard for increased diversity in hiring due to understanding that merit is not the great equalizer to racism. For example, President Adelaide stated: "I told her [Dean of Academic Affairs] don't bring me pools of prospective faculty without any diversity, because I'm going to not consider them." As a parallel to diversifying employees, President Zora addressed the importance of students seeing diversity by saying that being a president "is about connecting your students to each other, and to us, so that we all do whatever we can do to make them successful. I don't care what color they are!" This perspective highlights how increased representation of diverse faculty and staff can lead to increased connections with students, particularly those from marginalized groups, which defies objectivity since race matters (West, 2017). One president argued that the ahistoric nature of a PWI functions to yield a lack of diversity and hinders students' ability to feel empowered to promote antiracism, stating "I do not hear students of color engaging on this campus, or necessarily in the community in what I would say, are really vocal positions public positions and stands that promote anti-racist practices and positions (President Gabe)." President Gabe proceeded to discuss how the lack of diversity in the community may make students of color feel alone on campus. While discussing the role of the president to empower students, President Adelaide argued that "if you're any academic leader, it is your responsibility to understand the fabric, where the population has been disenfranchised, and compromise with integrity." President Adelaide went on to clarify that PWIs have to take a radical stance, recognize the institutional context and purposefully lead in "critical" ways that support the masses of students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Discussion

The overarching purpose of this study was to unpack the experiential knowledge and actions of six Black community college presidents by highlighting how antiracism is communicated, and the rationale for creating opportunities to disrupt racism within predominantly White campus environments. Through the use of a basic qualitative approach, guided by critical race theory (CRT), the emergent themes centered on how Black presidents promote antiracism and empower campus community members to engage with anti-racist programs and practices. Similarly, participants discussed how they created spaces and utilized the cultural capital of network members to advance campus diversity agendas to the benefit of their institutions (Kezar et al., 2008). Furthermore, our study presidents posited that although community college leaders were likely motivated to participate in anti-racist practices due to bettering the institutional image, which is a

function of interest convergence (Bell, 1980), participants still applied a proactive approach to addressing endemic racism despite knowing it would occur in perpetuity, an example of racial realism (Bell, 1991).

The themes identified in the data were intertwined with CRT tenets: *racism as endemic*, *elimination of racial oppression*, *foregrounds experiential knowledge of people of color*, *resistance of dominant ideologies* and *challenges notions of meritocracy, objectivity, neutrality and colorblindness* (Howard, 2008; Matsuda et al., 1993). And we now better understand the relevance of why community college presidents of African descent purposefully engage in anti-racist work as both professional and personal due to recognizing they are "expected to be Black by Black people and to decide for Blacks, by all others, mostly White" (President Gabe). Examples like this not only confirm that community college presidents of African descent have experiences that their White colleagues never have to navigate, but also reminds us that a DuBois (1948) "double consciousness" still applies. Based on the shared narratives, we find it important to frame the anti-racist actions of participants as representative of not only an example of data-based leadership application, but also as racism responsive preparedness. This framing is now unpacked with a clearer understanding that the racialized identity of presidents informed why they acted for the greater good despite knowing the gaze of Whiteness expected them to never have an explicit agenda for Black faculty, students, administrators and staff.

Consequently, participant narratives are coupled with a need to shift institutional priorities and practices (e.g., recruitment and hiring of a diverse pool of candidates, creation of institutional support centers for marginalized groups, and making equity a campus priority) in similar ways that coincide with the findings of Kezar et al. (2008) and Davis and Harris (2016). However, these actions also deviate when it pertains to how personal and institutional accountability is actualized prior to hiring while being simultaneously modeled directly to campus community members with the expectation they embody anti-racist behaviors. Our participants used the presidency in a premediated manner that attempted to integrate antiracism practices into the institutional ethos and expected to see it manifest throughout the campus ecology. For example, although participants were mindful that being president did nothing to change the fact that racism is endemic, they understood that being of African descent mattered since each participant had influence concerning the increased representation of faculty, administrators and staff of color. Finally, participants were keenly mindful that in order to empower students to view themselves as able to overcome systemic racism, direct yet purposeful outreach needed to be conducted in a face-to-face manner to establish a narrative that college presidents too were not beyond reproach.

These findings stand in contrast to the Cole and Harper (2017) study that found responsive presidential communications, to a racially charged incident, rarely called out the systemic challenges connected to incidents and also failed to consistently provide proactive ways to educate their campuses on anti-racist programing. Our study provides an important step toward better understanding how presidents of African descent enact and embody leadership as it pertains to positively informing the racialized functionality of a community college campus by systemically challenging an

overarching White Institutional Presence (Gusa, 2010) that is highly contextualized at PWIs. Secondly, the proactive ways in which study participants engaged in anti-racist programing and policy formation were counter to the findings of Harper and Hurtado (2007) where despite knowing campus environments were racist, administrators refused to intervene due to fear of retaliation. Third, this finding allows for additional research about how presidents of color, generally, engage campus communities (i.e., faculty, staff, administrators and students) about the institutional operationalization of antiracism. To illustrate, one of our study participants discussed how their approach to faculty empowerment about issues of racism was inherently nuanced when focusing on students, which serves to lessen aversions to racial trauma that is endemic on PWI campuses (Gusa, 2010; Harris, 2019; Harwood, 2018; Katz et al., 2019; Solorzano et al., 2000) and aligns with the McNaughtan et al. (2018) finding that university president's communication varies when directed at students and administrators.

The unique perspective of our sample including only presidents of African descent at community colleges provides an important and unique contribution to literature and practice given the historical inequities and challenges present at PWIs (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019; Martin, 2020; McNaughtan et al., 2021) and the voice of presidents of African descent being mostly absent in much of the literature. The themes of this study highlight four specific implications for practice. First, presidents in this study repeatedly discussed how their presence on campus provided strength to students that led to altered practices to increase inclusion. Secondly, broadening role of the community college presidents to include enacting an anti-racist leadership agenda that leads to a more inclusive and anti-racist campus community should be the bar. Third, in order to be an impactful president who approaches racism with a responsive preparedness one must possess the leadership competency of promoting and cultivating an anti-racist campus culture. Finally, the increased representation of faculty and staff of color has the potential to mediate the disturbing increase in racist incidents across the country (Katz et al., 2019; Truong et al., 2016) by providing students a more realistic view of the diversity that exists in the world and providing students of color with mentors where they can see themselves—as one president participant so eloquently discussed.

Conclusion

The lack of antiracism training for new community college presidents is well known and this study highlights the need for enhanced training for presidents pertaining to best practices to pre-plan for racism and recognize it systemically in order to adequately respond when it occurs on campus. In addition, community college presidents in this study posited that the majority of administrators, faculty and students on their campuses were ready to lead and be taught about how to further develop anti-racist programs and practices. This type of training is not only needed to support students, but also important to recruit and retain a more diverse student body (Garza Mitchell & Maldonado, 2015; Martin, 2021; Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012). Finally, this study confirms that institutions need to develop stronger and more systematic ways to call out racism while actively promoting anti-racist programing, policies and practices since

participants believed that while it is good to engage students after an incident, the best approach is to act on foresight before racially charged incidents occur.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. Although the terms "Black" and "of African descent" are not synonymous, due to study participants self-identifying as both, they are used interchangeably.

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