

Race and Rhetoric: An Analysis of College Presidents' Statements on Campus Racial Incidents

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For decades, racial incidents have routinely occurred on college campuses. But today, news about them is more quickly and widely shared because of the public's access to technology. In response, it is common for senior-level administrators to release statements about racial incidents after an institution receives widespread negative publicity. This study is an analysis of 18 statements issued by college presidents. Each statement is in response to a racial incident that occurred over 3 academic years (2012–2015). Findings reveal how college presidents' statements broadly 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. Because racist behaviors on college campuses have been constant, the need to address concerns about racial issues will continue, and this study offers a new perspective on evaluating college presidents' responses to highly publicized racial incidents in higher education.

Keywords: racial incidents, college presidents, rhetoric, campus climate, race

White students at Arizona State University partied while drinking from watermelon cups, wearing baggy clothes and throwing up gang signs during a Martin Luther King “Black Party” hosted by the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity (Argos, 2014). Anonymous messages calling for the killing of “Niggers” and “Mexicans” were found on students' residence hall room doors at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (Everett, 2014). White members of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity at the University of Oklahoma were recording joyously singing, “There will never be a Nigger in SAE / You can hang him from a tree, but he can never sign with me / There will never be a Nigger in SAE” (Oklahoma Daily, 2015). Fourteen members of the Bowdoin College lacrosse team dressed as

Native Americans wearing headdresses and war paint during an off-campus Thanksgiving party (Hoey & Chard, 2014). Additionally, White students at the University of North Alabama and Hampden-Sydney College used racial epithets in response to national news about U.S. President Barack Obama (Heim, 2012; Howard, 2012).

For decades, these types of racial incidents have been prevalent on college campuses, but today's connectedness of people by social media, online news stories, blogs, and other forms of digital media visually captures and publicizes racial incidents faster and farther than ever before. In response to negative publicity about these incidents, it is common for one or more senior-level administrators to release official statements, usually for members of the campus community; such statements are often widely disseminated via e-mail and published in campus newspapers. Stripling and Thomason (2015) describe these statements as part of “the measured, legalistic response that so often dominates crisis management in academe” (para. 2). These carefully crafted statements have generally been accepted as is. However, racial incidents have been constant, and we are interested in knowing more about these statements as an

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initial response to race and racism. Therefore, this study's purpose is to identify what aspects of the racial incident, including race and racism, are mentioned in these statements. Specifically, this study analyzes a national sample of college presidents' statements on racial incidents at U.S. colleges and universities across three academic years (2012–2015). In so doing, our exploration is the first examination of how these statements address the racial incident, race, and racism.

Literature Review

The college president is a peculiar academic position. Duderstadt (2007) noted that this position is unlike other academic posts because college presidents usually are not selected by “experienced academic leaders, assisted by faculty search committees, and driven by the recognition that the fate of academic programs—not to mention their own careers—rests on the quality of their selection” (p. 71). Instead, the president is hired by a governing body (e.g., board of trustees). The enormous amount of on- and off-campus interest in the selection of a college president makes the hiring process more like a political campaign (Duderstadt). Because of the unique nature of the position, college presidents face many risks every time they speak in public because their opinions on social and political issues often garner much attention.

Any statement or action that displeases a campus constituency can cost college presidents their job. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, several college presidents resigned or were threatened with termination over their responses to the Black Freedom Movement, Vietnam War protests, or student demands for ethnic studies programs. For example, in 1968, San Francisco State University President Robert Smith called on police to halt student protests, and after violence, he closed the campus indefinitely. When trustees instructed Smith to reopen campus, he resigned (Schevitz, 2008). The resignation came only six months after being named president, a position where Smith was constantly “pushed by conservative trustees on the one side and impatient, angry students on the other” (Whitson, n.d.). More recently, in December 2014, Smith College President Kathleen McCartney apologized after she received backlash for her campus-wide e-mail that stated “All

Lives Matter” as students were using “Black Lives Matter” to call specific attention to the disproportionately high amount of state-sanctioned violence against Black people (Inside-HigherEd, 2014). Similarly, in November 2015, University of Missouri President Tim Wolfe resigned after weeks of protests over racial incidents on the Columbia campus. Wolfe's hesitance to answer, and subsequent response, to students who confronted him and demanded he define “systematic oppression” was circulated on social media. This was one of a series of highly scrutinized reactions before his resignation (Vandelinder, 2015). It is this understanding of the delicacy of the college presidency that guides our study of their statements on racial incidents, but to fully contextualize our study, it is important to understand the impact of leaders' rhetoric and college presidents' role in setting diversity agendas on college campuses.

The Influence of Rhetoric

Rhetoricians and political scientists have spent decades building a body of research that critiques the rhetoric of current or former U.S. presidents, governors, and other public officials (e.g., Burden & Sanberg, 2003; Cohen & Hamman, 2003; O'Loughlin & Grant, 1990; Zimdahl, 2002). The plethora of scholarship on this subject demonstrates that leaders' words certainly warrant attention. Research on the nation's presidents, specifically, offers perspectives relevant to our study of college presidents' statements. Most scholarship on the influence of presidential rhetoric focuses on two areas: charisma and attitudes, and the use of rhetoric for agenda setting.

Mio, Riggio, Levin, and Reese (2005) examined the effects of metaphor usage by studying U.S. presidents' first-term inauguration speeches. The authors noted that presidents who were perceived to be most charismatic used metaphors twice as much, and as a result, they argued that metaphor usage inspires constituents and can enact action from an audience. How might college presidents' statements about a racial incident encourage action? This is important to our study because we are interested in how college presidents' statements address different audiences.

Ragsdale (1987) studied the effects of the U.S. presidents' primetime addresses on the at-

titudes of political party members from 1965 to 1983. Using approval ratings from The Gallup Poll after major TV and radio addresses, Ragsdale found that there cannot be a dual presidency—meaning, a well-received speech about one topic will not give the same president an advantage when it comes to addressing other topics. This is notable because college presidents speak on a multitude of topics, but scholarship on political attitudes suggests it is fair to analyze statements on racial incidents as standalone moments of rhetoric without examining presidents' statements on another topic (e.g., university budget issues). With regard to agenda setting, Cohen (1995) found that a U.S. president's emphasis on certain topical areas during a speech made the public more concerned about those areas. Thus, increased presidential attention on issues heightened the public's interest in a matter (Cohen, 1995). Despite obvious differences in influence between the U.S. presidency and college presidencies, these questions of political rhetoric hold relevance to higher education. Rhetoricians are aware that words matter. Conversely, political scientists argue that leaders' words are part of agenda setting and have an impact on the public. It is therefore important to understand presidents' statements because they can be used to later set or revisit diversity and climate agendas on campus.

Diversity and Climate Agendas on College Campuses

Since the publication of Sylvia Hurtado's (1992) longitudinal study on students' perceptions of racial conflict on college and university campuses across the U.S., scholars have built an extensive body of literature examining campus racial climates. This work has focused on students' perceptions and experiences with racism, racial conflict, and race relations on college campuses (e.g., D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Pike & Kuh, 2006; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Turner, 1994). Over time, scholars have wisely started to focus on the role of academic leaders in addressing issues of campus racial climate.

Although some attention has been paid to how college presidents set and advance diversity agendas (Kezar, 2007; Kezar & Eckel, 2008), previous studies of presidential leadership have not examined what college presidents

say in moments of racial distress. Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that racial avoidance is commonplace on many campuses. That is, students, faculty, and institutional leaders did not comfortably or routinely engage in conversations about race, racism, or toxins in the campus racial climate. But what happens when college presidents are forced to because of some incident that occurred on campus and garnered media attention? Furthermore, Harper's (2012) findings revealed some sophisticated ways in which racism and racist institutional norms are replaced with safer, less-jarring semantic substitutes.

Instead of calling them racist, researchers commonly used the following semantic substitutes to describe campus environments that minoritized students, faculty, and administrators often encountered: alienating, hostile, marginalizing, chilly, harmful, isolating, unfriendly, negative, antagonistic, unwelcoming, prejudicial, discriminatory, exclusionary, and unsupportive. (p. 20)

Might the same semantic patterns exist in college presidents' statements issued after a racial incident has occurred on campus? These are among the questions considered in this study as we analyze these statements about racial incidents on college campuses, and we aim to address a sizable gap in higher education research by no longer ignoring the influence of college presidents' words.

Methods

The study utilizes higher education literature in its examination of college presidents' role in setting diversity agendas. It also uses rhetorical studies research as an analytical tool to understand college presidents' statements. These two academic areas are ideal for guiding a study of this nature.

Data Source

We analyzed college presidents' statements ($n = 18$) in response to racial incidents that occurred on U.S. college campuses in this study. To acquire these 18 statements, we started with *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) "Campus Racial Incidents" list. This list is an online repository with a summary of racial incidents on college campuses. This list is not exhaustive of all racial

incidents, but it is the only centralized collection of where and when racial incidents have occurred. The summaries usually link to a media outlet's news article about the incident. Focused on racial incidents during the 2012 through 2015 academic years, we noticed more than 50 racial incidents on the JBHE list.

We then read the media coverage that corresponded with each summary on the list. The media coverage often quoted a portion of one or more senior-level administrators' statement about the racial incident. From there, we searched for and retrieved full statements from numerous online sources (e.g., university Web sites, college presidents' social media accounts). We were intentional in retrieving full statements in case media coverage misquoted academic leaders or quoted part of a statement out of context. Therefore, we included only full statements in this study and excluded racial incidents if the full statement could not be retrieved. From there, we included statements attributed only to the college president, or equivalent title of a campus's chief executive officer, because of how these leaders are positioned within the public. We therefore excluded statements released on behalf of institutional communication offices. We also excluded statements from the chief diversity officer, chief student affairs officer, and those statements at-

tributed to the college president along with other senior-level administrators. There were a total of 18 college presidents' statements that met our inclusion and exclusion criteria. See [Table 1](#) for the complete list of the racial incidents associated with the college presidents' statements analyzed in this study.

Analytical Tool

We used [Bitzer's \(1968\)](#) theory of the rhetorical situation as our analytical tool to evaluate college presidents' statements. With our focus on what aspects of the racial incident, including race and racism, are mentioned in these statements, the rhetorical situation is the ideal tool to analyze written or spoken words about a particular racial incident. The rhetorical situation is

a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence, which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about significant modification of the exigence. (Bitzer, p. 6)

Put simply, for this study, discourse is the college presidents' statements, and it has the potential to alter human action. Also, a rhetorical situation does not exist without three key elements: exigence, audience, and constraints. Bitzer defined an exigence as "an imperfection

Table 1
The Racial Incidents Associated With the College Presidents' Statements Analyzed in the Study

Institution	Incident Date	Description	Date of the Statement Analyzed
Mercer	October 15, 2012	Flyer requests White student groups	October 16, 2012
Florida	October 24, 2012	Fraternity members wear blackface at party	October 29 or 30, 2012
Hampden-Sydney	November 6, 2012	Racial epithets used after Obama is reelected	November 8, 2012
North Alabama	December 16, 2012	Football player's racist tweet about Obama	December 17, 2012
UC-Irvine	April 16, 2013	Fraternity posts video, member is in blackface	April 25, 2013
UC-Irvine	Week of May 5, 2013	Racist note put into student's bag	May 14, 2013
San Jose State	Fall 2013 (series of events)	Three White students harass Black roommate	November 21, 2013
Lewis & Clark	Fall 2013 (series of events)	Racist graffiti and chants heard on campus	November 26, 2013
Nebraska	November 13, 2013	Student senator uses N-word in speech	November 21, 2013
Arizona State	January 19, 2014	Fraternity hosts MLK "Black Party"	January 24, 2014
UCLA	February 5, 2014	Racist, sexist flyer at Asian Culture Center	February 24, 2014
Alabama	August 16, 2014	Sorority member brags on not selecting Blacks	August 18, 2014
Sweet Briar	August 28, 2014	"White-Only," "Colored" signs posted	August 28, 2014
Syracuse	September 6, 2014	Soccer player uses N-word, homophobic slurs	September 7, 2014
Connecticut	September 29–30, 2014	White fraternity directs insults to Black sorority	November 18, 2014
Oklahoma	March 7, 2015	Fraternity sings about hanging Black people	March 9, 2015
Duke	April 1, 2015	Rope noose hung on campus	April 1, 2015
South Carolina	April 3, 2015	Student writes N-word on a white board	April 3, 2015

marked by urgency” (p. 6), the audience as “only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse” (p. 7), and constraints as having “the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (p. 8).

Using the rhetorical situation as our analytical tool captures the murkiness and complexity in addressing racial issues on campus. For instance, an exigence—an urgent issue that causes someone to speak or write—is rarely one particular issue. In this study, the racial incident or the subsequent public outrage is the exigence that prompted the college presidents’ statement. In releasing the statement, there is potential the exigence can be altered, which demonstrates what is at stake every time a college president chooses to speak. Similar considerations are present for audience and constraints. With audience being people capable of being influenced by the statement, we use this tool to explore who is addressed in the presidents’ responses to racial incidents. This could be the targeted student population, the perpetrators, or the larger campus community. With constraints having the power to render a statement ineffective, we ask do college presidents discuss institutional or systematic structures that allow racism to permeate on these campuses, and in turn, do these constraints limit or negate the effectiveness of college presidents’ statements about racial incidents? We consider these questions because we understand college presidents’ influence, and we want to explore their statements to determine what is said about the racial incidents.

Lastly, the rhetorical situation, as Logan (2015) argued, is valuable because it emphasizes “the significance of the situation as a precursor for rhetorical discourse” (p. 2). Additionally, it explains “the relationship between the situation, rhetoric, and the meanings that could arise from their interplay” (p. 2). Therefore, the rhetorical situation is an appropriate analytical tool to evaluate these statements when considering our purpose.

Researcher Positionality

As authors, we acknowledge how we are positioned within the broader conversation about race and racism on U.S. college campuses, individually and collectively. Eddie R. Cole is an educational historian whose research focuses on college presidents’ and chancellors’

responses to students’ civil rights protests in the 1960s. His work demonstrates the long history of how academic leaders have responded to racial issues involving members of their campus community. Furthermore, Eddie developed his beliefs on race and racism in higher education through his own family history where his grandparents were limited to segregated options for higher education in Alabama and Mississippi in the 1930s and 1940s. Combined, Eddie’s research agenda and personal experiences guide his perspectives of academic leaders, past and present, regarding race and higher education. Shaun R. Harper’s scholarship critically assesses the ways race and racism impact student success, and he has conducted dozens of campus racial climate reports for colleges and universities. Shaun is also considered an expert on race and racism in higher education. A native of Georgia, he, too, has personally engaged people with the lived experiences of attending segregated colleges.

Collectively, we are both Black faculty members at predominately White universities, and our research findings from our respective studies over the years have demonstrated that racism on college campuses is an old and established problem. The results of present-day racial climate reports and historical studies provide us with a data-based belief that the academic leaders of many institutions can do more to foster inclusive environments for all people on campus. Beyond research, we have also experienced the practical implications of racial climates in higher education. As Black faculty members, we know the demand of mentoring students of color, many of which are not our assigned academic advisees, because they seek out-of-class counsel from faculty of color who look like them. In acknowledging how we are positioned, we believe the study of college presidents’ statements on racial incidents can start an important dialogue about the approach to combatting racism on college campuses.

Findings

The results are organized by the three elements of the rhetorical situation: exigence, audience, and constraints. The majority of the college presidents’ statements mentioned the exigence. All statements focused on audience,

with great variance, but few acknowledged constraints.

Exigence

In our rhetorical analysis, the exigence is the racial incident or series of incidents. Among the 18 statements analyzed, 3 college presidents did not mention the racial incident, 11 mentioned the incident using broad terms without discussing details of the incident, and the remaining 4 offered a detailed account of the incident that occurred on their campus.

No mention of the incident. On December 5, 2013, *The Oregonian*, Portland, Oregon's major daily newspaper, reported on Lewis & Clark College's "multiple instances of racist graffiti and language unfurled on campus this fall" (Hammond, 2013). This included "defaced white boards and posters on at least two occasions with racial epithets and phrases such as 'Jim Crow for life'" and chants of "White Power" in a residence hall. Just 10 days prior to this media coverage, on November 26, Lewis & Clark President Barry Glassner addressed the campus in a statement. He stated, "In light of heightened concerns on our campus and other campuses around the country, I am writing to affirm our commitment to respect and inclusion for everyone in our community" (Glassner, 2013). There were, however, no additional references to the campus "concerns" in the statement, which focused more on the institution's commitment to diversity without mentioning race or the reported racial incidents of that fall.

A similar statement was released by President Michael Crow at Arizona State University. On January 19, 2014, White members of the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity at Arizona State University hosted a "Black Party" during the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend (Argos, 2014). Four days later, January 23, *The Arizona Republic*, the state's largest newspaper, reported that the fraternity had been expelled from campus for the party where White partygoers participated in racially stereotypical behavior, such as drinking from watermelon cups and wearing baggy clothes (Ryman, 2014). The next day, Crow's statement concentrated on the legacy of Dr. King and how that legacy is reflected in the ASU Student Code of Conduct. "At ASU, the students who violate these standards will be subject to disciplinary sanctions in

order to promote their own personal development, to protect the university community, and to maintain order and stability on our campuses" (Crow, 2014). There is no mention of the party, the racist behavior of the students in attendance, or the fraternity that hosted the party. Crow's statement, alongside Glassner's at Lewis & Clark, represents two of the three presidents whose statements did not reference the recent racial incidents that occurred on their campus.

Broad mention of the incident. College presidents' statements that lack details when referencing racial incidents are considered broad. At Syracuse University, Chancellor Kent Syverud's response to a racial incident involving a student-athlete is an example of this. On September 6, 2014, *The Daily Orange*, the university's student newspaper, reported a student on the women's soccer team yelled "faggot-ass Nigger" at someone in a video recording, which was later posted to Instagram. Seconds later in the video, the student said "call me out on saying the N-word. I don't give a shit" (Blum, 2014). The same day, additional media coverage about the racist and homophobic outburst was published online by *The Post-Standard*, the city's major daily newspaper (Mink, 2014). The next day, September 7, Syverud released a statement. He stated "a Syracuse University student made offensive and hurtful comments toward another student," and added that the student's "comments, focused on race and sexual orientation, were recorded and a video of the remarks was shared via social media" (Syverud, 2014). There was no mention of the exact "offensive" language, context for why the language was considered "hurtful," or that the offending "student" was a soccer player who was a prominent representative of the university.

At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Chancellor Harvey Perlman also responded to racial incidents on campus without delving into details about the events. On November 13, 2013, a student delivered a "racial slur-laden speech," which used "Nigger" and condemned the Mexican American Student Association's grievances with how students used sombreros during homecoming skits on campus (Abouezk, 2013). Additionally, during the same timeframe, the word "Nigger" was written in chalk on a campus sidewalk. In response to the two racial incidents, on November 21, Perlman's

statement acknowledged “we have experienced recent incidents of racial and ethnic intolerance and insensitivity,” and later added, “the use of the N-word and insensitive racial impersonations are the recent incidents that demand our immediate attention” (Perlman, 2013). The remainder of the statement challenged the UNL community to be the first line of defense when individuals observe racist acts on campus. “I ask all of you to rise up and say, ‘Not here, not now’” (Perlman). The statement did not offer any details about when or where the racial incidents occurred. Perlman’s message also mirrors college presidents’ most-common (11 of the 18 statements) approaches to racial incidents: Mention the incident using broad descriptors without discussing details.

Detailed account of the incident. Four college presidents’ statements offer intricate details of racial incidents. On October 24, 2012, at the University of Florida, the Beta Theta Pi fraternity’s “Rockers and Rappers” Halloween party featured some White students in blackface (Crabble, 2012). A few days later, President J. Bernie Machen’s statement offered an overview of the offending students’ actions and a detailed explanation of the historic origins of the racist practice:

At an off-campus Halloween party with the theme of “rappers and rockers,” two White students covered their faces and bodies with black makeup and dressed as Black rappers. It is critical to understand that this makeup—whether or not known or intended by the two students to have this effect—evokes “blackface,” which was used by White actors on Vaudeville and in other settings to represent African Americans in a highly demeaning manner. (Machen, 2012)

A related example of this type of statement is found at Hampden-Sydney College.

More than three dozen Hampden-Sydney students rioted with fireworks and bottles while threatening members of the Minority Student Union after U.S. President Barack Obama was reelected on November 6, 2012. Hampden-Sydney President Christopher Howard’s November 8, 2012, response to the students’ angry display documented the details of the evening:

Shortly after 11 p.m. on November 6, a group of about 40 students gathered near the Minority Student Union (MSU) house. In a display of partisan anger, members of the group set off fireworks and broke bottles in response to the presidential election results. At some point, members of the group shouted racial epithets at the men of MSU threatening them with physical harm.

The members of MSU notified campus security. (Howard, 2012)

These presidents offered an in-depth understanding of what had occurred on their campus. Among the 18 statements, Machen and Howard represent the statements (4) that discussed the particulars of racial incidents on campus. The majority of statements (11) mentioned the racial incident from a broad perspective while the remaining statements (3) did not mention the incident at all.

Audience

College presidents are tasked with interacting with multiple audiences at any time, and their statements in response to the racial incidents are no different. College presidents’ statements directly targeted three audiences: the general campus community, the individual or group of perpetrators that committed the racial offense, and those targeted by the racial offense. All of the college presidents’ statements addressed the campus at large by using language about the collective, such as “we” or “our,” when referring to their stance on intolerance. Yet 13 of the 18 addressed the race perpetrators, and 5 of the 18 mentioned the targeted individual or group. These groupings are not mutually exclusive as some statements addressed multiple audiences.

Addressing the campus at large. We consider a statement to address the campus at large when it references the entire campus or a broader group (e.g., students, alumni) in addition to the perpetrators or victimized student or students. An example of this is at the University of California, Irvine. On April 16, 2013, members of the Lambda Theta Delta fraternity posted a parody video lip-syncing Justin Timberlake and Jay-Z’s song, “Suit and Tie.” One member was in blackface, and the video was posted to YouTube with the caption “No racism intended. All fun and laughter” (Taylor, 2013). Nine days later, on April 25, Chancellor Michael Drake’s statement broadly referenced the incident before focusing on the campus at large.

This video, and the symbolism that it represents, is not what we stand for. Our values underscore respect and empathy. We are committed to diversity. . . . We will use this regrettable incident to redouble campus education efforts about the toxic effects of insensitivity. . . . (Drake, 2013)

A similar statement was issued at the University of North Alabama after a White student on the football team tweeted on December 16, 2012, "Take that Nigger off the tv. We wanna [sic] watch football," in response to news coverage of President Obama speaking during a memorial service for the victims of an elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut (Heim, 2012). The next day, December 17, President William Cale's statement addressed the North Alabama campus at large: "Here, the lesson is to all our students who use social media. Incidents, such as this one will linger for years, will be seen by prospective employers, teachers, church members, acquaintances old and new." Cale added, "I know that we will move beyond what has happened. Let us do that in the spirit of the season by continuing to care for each other, and by affirming our shared principles as we build our University" (Cale, 2012). As demonstrated here, Cale's statement addresses the larger university community. This reflects college presidents' most notable focus on audience when considering this element of the rhetorical situation present.

Addressing the racial perpetrators. There were 13 of the 18 presidents' statements that addressed the individual or group who committed the racial act. This means a part of these statements addressed those individuals with racist behavior by usually casting them out of the larger community audience. At the University of Oklahoma, on March 7, 2015, a video was released showing White Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members and their guests chanting in seemingly rehearsed unison, "There will never be a Nigger in SAE / you can hang him from a tree" (Oklahoma Daily, 2015). In response, on March 9, President David Boren posted his full statement to his Twitter account: "You are disgraceful. You have violated all that we stand for. You should not have the privilege of calling yourselves 'Sooners.' Real Sooners are not racist. Real Sooners are not bigots." He added, "Effective immediately, all ties and affiliations between this University and the local (Sigma Alpha Epsilon) chapter are hereby severed" (Boren, 2015).

In the Fall of 2013 at San Jose State University, a Black student was tormented by his White roommates in a series of events "that allegedly went on for months before anyone intervened" (Jaschik, 2013). The Black student

was reportedly called "Three-Fifths" and "Fraction," terms that reference a time when enslaved Black people were considered three-fifths a person in the U.S. The three White students, who lived in an on-campus suite with the student, were also accused of writing "Nigger" in a common area of the suite, parading around a Confederate flag, and binding a metal bicycle lock around their Black roommate's neck (Wollan & Perez-Pena, 2013). Later in the semester, on November 21, San Jose State President Mohammad Qayoumi's statement noted the perpetrators' abusive actions "are utterly inconsistent with our long cherished history of tolerance, respect for diversity and personal civility" (Qayoumi, 2013). This response, alongside Boren's at Oklahoma, is among the 13 from college presidents whose statements directly addressed the perpetrators.

Addressing those targeted. Lastly, when considering specific groups addressed in statements, 5 of the 18 college presidents' statements mentioned the people targeted in the racial incident. An example of this was at San Jose State University. That is where President Qayoumi's statement also mentioned "the victim, an African-American freshman, was targeted based on race" (Qayoumi, 2013).

In September 2014, members of two Greek-letter organizations at the University of Connecticut got into a verbal altercation over race. When members of Alpha Kappa Alpha, a predominately Black sorority, wanted to paint a frequently painted rock on campus, members of the Pi Kappa Alpha, a predominately White fraternity, disputed if the women could paint the rock. The altercation grew into the fraternity members using insults, including calling the sorority's chapter advisor a "fat Black bitch" (Logan, 2014). After nearly two months of continued racial incidents on campus, WTNH News, the local ABC affiliate, reported that a march had been organized for November 18, 2014, involving 200 students calling attention to the campus racial issues (Logan). The same day, November 18, University of Connecticut President Susan Herbst issued a statement. In it she named Pi Kappa Alpha and Alpha Kappa Alpha as the organizations whose members were involved in an on-campus verbal assault. Herbst described it as "ugly confrontation that included insults based on race and gender." In addressing the targeted audience, Herbst stated, "I am ap-

palled by the comments being made anonymously through social media directed at Alpha Kappa Alpha and other members of our community” (Herbst, 2014).

These are among the college presidents’ statements that mentioned the targeted individual or groups. We also find that it is less likely for college presidents’ statements to offer a specific description of the people targeted in a racial incident. This is especially true when compared to how often the perpetrators are addressed.

Constraints

Of all the rhetorical situation elements, constraints were least common in college presidents’ responses to racial incidents. As we explained earlier, constraints can limit the effectiveness of the statement. Among college presidents, 3 of the 18 statements analyzed referenced constraints. In our study, the most prominent constraint is the broader societal or campus-wide culture that does not work to dismantle systematic and institutional racism.

Acknowledging constraints. On October 15, 2012, an anonymous flyer at Mercer University called for the need to celebrate “White History Month.” It also called for the establishment of White student organizations because “there are African American Societies, Black Student Organizations, and Indian Heritage Associations” (The Cluster, 2012, para. 2). The next day, Mercer President William Underwood responded with a statement. In part, it read that the flyer “demeaned efforts to promote education about people of diverse races and cultures and their contributions to our society.” That sentence followed a similar rhythm as the other statements in how it celebrated difference at Mercer. Yet Underwood’s statement went further and acknowledged the flyer was only a snippet of the problem college communities face when determining how to address race and racism. He recognized the challenge of determining “how best to move beyond centuries of legal, institutional, and cultural racism in America” (Underwood, 2012).

On August 28, 2014, at Sweet Briar College, “Whites Only” and “Colored Only” signs were placed over doors and water coolers in a residence hall (Jones, 2014). Sweet Briar’s Interim President James Jones responded with a state-

ment the same day. Similar to his colleague at Mercer, Jones’ statement made direct connections between current efforts for racial inclusion on college campuses and how racial incidents are part of the long history of racism in America. He stated, “For someone who grew up in the deeply segregated South, those words recall to me a world of racial discrimination, disregard for human dignity, and institutionalized prejudice” (Jones). In fact, Jones also said the “Whites Only” and “Colored Only” signs were “. . . mirroring apartheid South Africa . . .” (Jones).

These statements at Mercer and Sweet Briar acknowledged, to some extent, systematic, historic, and institutional racism needs to be addressed when responding to racial incidents. Without doing so, these presidents noted that any statement or follow-up initiatives would be met by the constraint of systemic issues of race. Three of the 18 statements analyzed mentioned this in some capacity.

Discussion and Implications

College presidents are oftentimes willing to address the racist but rarely the racism. We see this emerge in a number of ways across the findings, such as how presidents’ statements hardly mention the racial incidents, make perpetrators the focal point, and rarely situate racial incidents within larger issues of systematic and institutional oppression. Our discussion section focuses on the implications of the study. In order, we will discuss (a) how the racial incident is discussed, (b) who gets addressed, (c) systematic and institutional racism, and (d) the role of chief diversity officers.

The Racial Incident

It is important to note presidents frequently use these statements to recommit the entire campus community to building a more-inclusive campus following a racial incident; however, presidents rarely go on record to mention the details of the incident that runs counter to the community they commit to fostering. On one hand, this approach could simply be presidents intentionally not giving the perpetrators more public attention for the racist acts than already gained prior to the statement. It is feasible that the team of administrators preparing

the statement may use it as an opportunity to move the public beyond the incident itself, and therefore, most statements only briefly mention the racial incidents, if at all. On the other hand, presidents' statements that hardly acknowledge the racial incident only perpetuate what previous research has described as racial avoidance on college campuses.

On college campuses, "race remained an unpopular topic and was generally considered taboo in most spaces, including classes other than ethnic studies" (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 16). Take the March 2016 results of the annual Survey of College and University Presidents, for example. The vast majority of college presidents—84%—feel race relations on their campus are "excellent or good" (Lederman & Jaschik, 2016). This is important because presidents' emphasis on certain topics heightens the public's interest and concern for said topic (Cohen, 1995). As a result, a president's lack of emphasis on the racial incident may suggest its lack of importance. This finding also has implications for institutional history. Iverson (2007) found that diversity statements that does not mention the racial incident "filters out and censors the racial reality," and "conveys a white-washed version that appears to be the only truth" (p. 604).

Therefore, academic leaders—knowingly or not—are crafting statements that respond more favorably to positive public relations than they do to publicly addressing racism on campus. This potentially makes it more difficult to implement actual racially inclusive initiatives later because the statement to the racial incident hardly or did not mention race. Thus, the historical record of this incident will show that the statement, one of the first artifacts of the institutions' immediate response, had no recollection of the racial incident itself.

Who Is Addressed?

Presidents' statements always directly address the larger campus community (e.g., student body) beyond the perpetrators and the students targeted in the racial incident. Understandably, the entire campus community is a focus. In this case, it is clear presidents challenge the larger campus community to renew its commitment to the institution's values. Equally, the need to dismiss the perpetrators and their

behavior from the community holds value. The implication is the perpetrators' actions are distanced from the rest of campus. This is seen how college presidents place attention on "individuals," "those students," or "those few of us" who are outliers to the inclusive values of the campus. However, the rarity that these statements address the individual or groups targeted in the racial incidents impacts how the victimized persons are brought into immediate and long-term institutional response to racism.

The choice of what is or is not said in presidential rhetoric determines what, or in this case who, is valuable (Cohen, 1995). This is important when considering the role of presidents in executing diversity agendas on campus. As Kezar (2007) found, presidents can be role models for how others can move a diversity agenda forward. Therefore, recognizing the individual or group targeted by a racial incident appears to be a valuable initial effort to bring them back into the broader campus community. Davis and Harris (2016) explained that a critical aspect of institutional leaders' response to racial incidents is "the ability to provide evidence of a systemic approach to the situation that becomes embedded in the campus organizational structure . . ." (p. 74). The committees formed to address racial incidents "must include a diverse representation of students, student affairs professionals, faculty, and administrators" (Davis & Harris, p. 74). These scholars have provided evidence of the need for public and systematic involvement of a range of campus voices in addressing racial incidents, and it is likely the same call for diverse representation should be considered in college presidents' statements on racial incidents.

Systematic and Institutional Racism

In recent years, students have demanded college presidents address not only the perpetrators after a racial incident, but they have called for these academic leaders to also acknowledge that systematic and institutional oppression exists on campuses. An example of this is seen in our earlier reference to the 2015 confrontation between University of Missouri students and then-president Tim Wolfe. Ultimately, what the Missouri students, alongside thousands of students from other campuses, argue is that racial incidents are part of a larger issue of race and

racism at their institutions. Therefore, presidents' statements that only reference the current racial incident are oftentimes seen as insufficient, and there are several implications for not mentioning systematic and institutional barriers in responses aimed to address race and racism.

The long history of how race and racism has shaped higher education must be underscored. The inequitable funding of Black colleges led to the inability to develop collegiate-level curricula at several of these institutions well into the early 1900s, and at some private Black colleges, the White administrators, faculty, and trustees of the campus enforced racist policies into the late 1920s (Anderson, 1988). Beyond the Black colleges, predominately White universities in the Northeast and Midwest, between 1930 and 1943, awarded 317 Black people the PhD, but only three Blacks with a PhD were hired by these same White universities (e.g., University of Chicago, Columbia University) during this same timeframe (Winston, 1971). Additionally, Black students at some of these institutions were forced to sit in the back of class, or if White students needed to sit on the back row, they had to keep at least one empty chair between themselves and their nearest White classmate (Evans, 2007). Not just limited to Black people, similar experiences are woven through the history of Latinos in higher education (MacDonald, 2013).

Noting this history, there is something to be said that so few college presidents' statements discussed historical, systematic, and institutional racism when responding to racial incidents on college campuses. In essence, the statements profess a value for difference while positioning the racial incident as an isolated occurrence that is not the norm. Yet Bell and Hartmann (2007) explained that by "appearing to recognize difference, yet failing to appreciate White normativity and systemic inequality, current diversity discourse makes it difficult to construct a meaningful multiculturalism or genuinely progressive politics of race" (p. 896). Relatedly, "an incremental approach to inclusion without simultaneously challenging institutional hegemony will have, at best, a null or, at worst, a negative impact toward a vision for equity in higher education" (Harris, Barone, & Patton, 2015, p. 33). In summary, both historical and contemporary research explains how systems of oppression are embedded in cam-

pus, and that these systems foster the individual acts of today's racial incidents. College presidents' statements that do not acknowledge this history of exclusion only further their inability to truly address or redress racial incidents. Thus, the constraint of systematic and institutional racism controls the decision, actions, and rhetoric of presidents, and if they do not acknowledge these systems and history, the overall institutional response is ineffective.

The Role of Chief Diversity Officers

Worthington, Stanley, and Lewis (2014) posited, "all higher education leaders should embody and demonstrate the critical values of equity, diversity, and inclusion . . ." (para. 1). This supports our focus on why college presidents are important and have a role in addressing race and racism. However, Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) also have a distinct role in college presidents' statements, as well as other forms of response, to racial incidents on college campuses. There is the responsibility of CDOs in "taking into account the expertise of existing senior leaders, and advancing a diversity portfolio that reflects institutional values, mission, and culture" (Stevenson, 2014; Worthington et al., 2014, para. 1)."

Many of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) professional standards for CDOs directly relate to this study's findings. There is the expectation that CDOs know the process for responding to bias incidents (Worthington et al., 2014). The frequency of racial incidents and the subsequent public attention further solidify the importance of institutional response, and the need that CDOs and college presidents be in tandem to prepare these statements. Also, CDOs should know how to apply campus climate research to the practice of being inclusive (Worthington, Stanley, & Lewis). Therefore, CDOs are equipped to ensure the considerations for the targeted individual or groups are made when in consulting with college presidents to develop the initial response to racial incidents. Finally, CDOs must also know the sociopolitical context and culture of their campus to successfully impart change (Worthington, Stanley, & Lewis). This emphasizes the need to address systematic and institutional racism. Recognizing these constraints aligns with NADOHE standard that

CDOs must know and understand how racial incidents are situated within the context, culture, and history.

Future Research

This is the first analysis of what aspects of the racial incident, including race and racism, are mentioned in college presidents' statements. Our study analyzes the content of the statements as a single entity. Yet there are numerous ways future research on this topic can be expanded.

First, future studies could analyze the statements of all senior-level academic leaders after a racial incident. As stated earlier, we took a particular interest in college presidents because of the uniqueness of this academic leadership position; however, as indicated by NAHOHE, it is a professional standard that CDOs, and likely other members of senior administrative teams, consult with each other when preparing their statements. We are also certain college presidents are oftentimes involved in drafting or approving the racial incident statements issued by other senior-level administrators (e.g., dean of students). As a result, a future analysis of all senior leaders' responses to racial incidents may offer more generality on all of higher education leadership, not just college presidents.

Second, we did not analyze statements in response to national and global issues of race. Future studies focused on administrators' statements may want to consider statements released by institutional leaders about student unrest over these issues. For instance, in December 2014, there were numerous college presidents' statements in response to students' on-campus outcry over two particular nonindictments of White police officers who killed unarmed Black men. Students held on-campus "die ins," a demonstration where students lay on the ground in memory of Michael Brown's death in Missouri, and student-athletes at Georgetown University and the University of Notre Dame wore "I Can't Breathe" t-shirts in memory of Eric Garner who died from a police chokehold in New York (Lesar, 2014; Wang, 2014). Statements about these national incidents were omitted from this study because the expectation for college presidents and other senior-level administrators to address off-campus, societal racial incidents is not a direct job responsibility compared to those incidents that occur on campus; however, na-

tional events are obviously of interest to students, and therefore, future research could move beyond campus-specific incidents and also focus on statements about national racial issues.

Moving beyond analyzing statements, future research could evaluate the events that occurred months or years leading up to and following a racial incident on campus. There are some scholars who deconstruct responses to racial incidents (see Davis & Harris, 2016). Building on their work, there are numerous questions to be asked that could deepen our understanding of college presidents' statements: Were there demands the president resign or be fired? Did the institution see an increase in programming about racial issues on campus? Was a CDO hired or tasked with new responsibilities? There are many layers to evaluating race and racism on campus, and presidents have varying social standing on their campus based on the constituency (e.g., students, faculty). For where one president may be championed as a positive influence on addressing issues of race, another president could be under scrutiny for not addressing those same issues. This consideration simply acknowledges that the campus racial climate matters. Furthermore, research that investigates the sociopolitical contexts of each campus is important. Does the president report to a university system leader or directly to a board of trustees? Does the president's institution have a reputation for racial incidents or is its history considered more liberal, diverse, and inclusive? How does being a faith-based institution or a state-supported institution influence how a college president addresses the moral or ethical responsibility to address bigotry? These considerations of the before and after could offer additional insights on the differences in presidents' statements.

Lastly, there is a need to examine connections between administrators' own personal identity and their responses. Leaders' own reputation for being in touch with campus racial issues and assertive in addressing those issues may impact how these statements are received. For instance, after racial incidents involving sorority women at the University of Connecticut and the University of Alabama, women served as presidents of both campuses, and each statement mentioned the victimized student population (i.e., Black women). This begs the question, does a president's perception of see-

ing one's self as a potential victim give them insight into how they respond? This intersection of professional and personal identities also brings us back to the beginning of this article and how social media, online news stories, blogs, and other forms of digital media provoke a response. How quickly college presidents and other senior-level leaders issue statements (e.g., weeks, months), if they choose to respond, and the form of media (e.g., video, Twitter) used to respond are both areas of further study.

Conclusion

In closing, the semantics of rhetoric matter, and therefore, attention placed on college presidents' statements is warranted. In only three recent academic years, racial incidents on campus have not become any less jolting than decades past. Now, with the increased social and digital media platforms, a racial incident on campus can be shared wider and faster today than ever before. Yet presidents' carefully crafted language in response to these incidents is consistently safe, ambiguous, and avoids directly mentioning the racial incident. Because patterns in racist behavior on campus are constant, and as college presidents are faced with student protests over other social issues (e.g., racial profiling, police brutality), understanding college presidents' words will continue to be important.

Furthermore, this article provides an entry point for us to rethink the college president's statement and reimagine it as a tool to start meaningful dialogue around race and racism on college campuses. Currently, many of these statements are exceedingly vague with little mention of race and racism. This likely explains why Jaschik (2016) noted that following a racial incident, "relatively few people read the statement or remember it a few days later" (para. 1); however, this perception means more than that college presidents' words are simply forgettable. This is a potential indictment that academic leaders are seen as saying and doing nothing about race and racism, and the statement is only further evidence of this perception.

Today, dozens of U.S. college campuses have students making demands to senior-level administrators to confront racism. This has put many academic leaders between students' demands and pushback from constituents who do

not believe race or racism is a problem. This lets us know two things: (a) there is a need for academic leaders to say the word racism, and (b) the frequency of these incidents suggests students, and others on campuses, need to know what racism is. Every academic year, incidents prove that race and racism is not a rare, one-time occurrence on campuses, and college presidents' statements set the tone for how racist behavior will be tolerated and addressed. Not addressing systematic and institutional racism may be the difference between academic leaders being perceived as reactive instead proactive in addressing race and racism. This article's findings provide evidence that this does not happen often or directly, but if leaders did react more forthright, there is the potential these statements may not be needed one day.

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