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## “We Live in Two Worlds”: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of Foreign-Born U.S. College and University Presidents

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## **“We Live in Two Worlds”: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of Foreign-Born U.S. College and University Presidents**

### **Abstract**

Within this phenomenological study, we explored the lived experiences of 15 foreign-born U.S. college and university presidents (USCUP) to determine how their cultural background and traditions may have influenced their leadership and prepared them to lead. We also examined the strategies foreign-born USCUPs, who also self-identified as people of color, utilized to navigate to and through the presidential pipeline. We used asset-based community development to theoretically frame the study. The following research questions shaped this study: 1) What are the experiences of foreign-born USCUPs in their journey to the college presidency, and how do foreign-born USCUPs perceive the influence of their cultural background on their journey to the presidency? 2) What strategies and approaches can be identified from the experiences of foreign-born USCUPs in navigating the presidential pipeline and advancing to the presidency? Five themes emerged: 1) Coming to America; 2) Living in Two Worlds; 3) Ready or Not, Here I Come; 4) Go Back To Your Country!; and 5) If I Ruled The World. We close with recommendations for practice and future research.

### **Keywords**

foreign-born, immigrants, U.S. college and university presidents, asset-based community development, phenomenology

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# “We Live in Two Worlds”: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of Foreign-Born U.S. College and University Presidents

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Within this phenomenological study, we explored the lived experiences of 15 foreign-born U.S. college and university presidents (USCUP) to determine how their cultural background and traditions may have influenced their leadership and prepared them to lead. We also examined the strategies foreign-born USCUPs, who also self-identified as people of color, utilized to navigate to and through the presidential pipeline. We used asset-based community development to theoretically frame the study. The following research questions shaped this study: 1) What are the experiences of foreign-born USCUPs in their journey to the college presidency, and how do foreign-born USCUPs perceive the influence of their cultural background on their journey to the presidency? 2) What strategies and approaches can be identified from the experiences of foreign-born USCUPs in navigating the presidential pipeline and advancing to the presidency? Five themes emerged: 1) Coming to America; 2) Living in Two Worlds; 3) Ready or Not, Here I Come; 4) Go Back To Your Country!; and 5) If I Ruled The World. We close with recommendations for practice and future research.

*Keywords:* foreign-born, immigrants, U.S. college and university presidents, asset-based community development, phenomenology

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The role of the U.S. college or university president (USCUP) is one of the most influential positions in academia (Cook & Kim, 2012). As higher education demographics become more diverse, interest in foreign-born and immigrant academic leadership and their value to postsecondary institutions in the United States has increased (Skinner, 2018a). This is particularly salient as U.S. higher education enters an era where campus internationalization efforts, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and global partnerships are quickly becoming strategic priorities (Melidona et al., 2023; Selingo et al., 2017).

The 2023 *American Council on Education’s* (ACE) American College President Survey indicates while much of U.S. higher education is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, most USCUPs are predominantly White males in their sixties (Melidona et al., 2023). The survey indicates while the percentage of USCUPs who self-identify as a racial or ethnic minorities slowly increased from ~17% in 2016 to ~20% in 2022, this number does not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of U.S. college students (Hussar & Bailey, 2016; Melidona et al., 2023). The survey results also demonstrate USCUPs who identify as racial and ethnic minorities are overrepresented in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). Consistently selecting racial and ethnic minorities to primarily lead HBCUs and MSIs result in a lack of adequate representation of presidents of color at predominantly White institutions (Duree, 2007; Melidona et al., 2023).

While there is a slight increase in racial and ethnic diversity among USCUPs, extant literature demonstrates a gap regarding USCUPs who identify as foreign-born. More foreign-born USCUPs are represented at institutions than ever before (Marklein, 2016; Skinner, 2018b). Foderaro (2011) notes "the globalization of the college presidency is a natural outgrowth of the steady increase of international students and professors on American campuses over the past four decades. And it will most likely lead to more relationships and exchanges abroad" (para. 5). Similarly, Marklein (2016) notes,

As U.S. universities look increasingly abroad to attract more undergraduate and graduate students, international students increasingly feed the pipeline that leads to top administrative and leadership positions in academia. With few exceptions, foreign-born presidents rose through the ranks of U.S. higher education. (p. 300)

While there are more foreign-born university presidents, research documenting their experiences is scant.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of foreign-born USCUPs; how their cultural background and traditions influenced their leadership; how these experiences have prepared them to lead and impacted their pathways to the presidency; and, to provide an opportunity to discuss challenges they may have encountered. The following research questions shaped this study: (1) What are the experiences of foreign-born USCUPs in their journey to the college presidency, and how do foreign-born USCUPs perceive the influence of their cultural background on their journey to the presidency? (2) What strategies and approaches can be identified from the experiences of foreign-born USCUPs in navigating the presidential pipeline and advancing to the presidency?

## Literature Review

### Limited Data on Foreign-Born USCUPS

While there is no singular organization representing all foreign-born USCUPs, *Inside Higher Ed* publishes a monthly article on new provost and president appointments (Lederman, 2019) and the American Association of Universities (AAU) has a list of its 71 member institutions. In 1992, 18% of the presidents with membership in the AAU were foreign-born (AAU, n.d.). As recent as 2017 that number rose to 23%. However, these data are limited to AAU membership which is not formally tracked. While citizenship and immigration status questions were added to the 2023 ACE American College President Survey, surveys like the Survey of College and University Presidents conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* and Hanover Research and the Council of Independent Colleges' report on presidential career patterns do not include citizenship and immigration data (Hartley & Godin, 2009; Jaschik & Lederman, 2023; Melidona et al., 2023). In addition, limited racial and ethnic categories within these surveys provide limited opportunities to meaningfully explore the experiences immigrants and foreign-born respondents since the lack of disaggregated data makes it challenging to identify foreign-born USCUPs or where they are located. While there is little data and literature concerning foreign-born USCUPs, literature documenting the experiences of other underrepresented USCUPs, particularly women of color, men of color, and out gay and lesbian

college and university presidents provide some insight on the experiences of minoritized<sup>1</sup> USCUPs.

### **Experiences of Minorized USCUPs**

Women of color remain the most underrepresented demographic in higher education presidency in the United States (Melidona et al., 2023; Oikelome, 2017). When they do advance to the presidency, they experience racial-gender discrimination and microaggressions (Jackson & Harris, 2007; Turner, 2007) and often go through the academic ranks to reach their presidency (Oikelome 2017; Turner, 2007). For men of color in USCUPs, their experiences can include racial discrimination, hostility from peers, and their authority being challenged (Castro, 2018; Robinson, 2018; Rodríguez, 2005). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer USCUPs are also underrepresented and experience marginalization. For example, when lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer USCUPs are open about their sexual orientation it can have negative influences on their career paths due to discrimination faced in heteronormative work environments (Bullard, 2013; Englert, 2018). Given the documented experiences of minoritized USCUPs, one can assume foreign-born USCUPs experiences have parallels, especially when they hold multiple, marginalized identities.

### **Diversifying USCUPs**

The office of the college or university president is seen as embodying the “educational philosophy, direction, and culture of their institution” (Oikelome, 2017, p. 24) and should represent the diverse perspectives of the student population as well as represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the academy (Hussar & Bailey, 2016; Melidona et al., 2023). A lack of diversity in the president’s office is a missed opportunity to incorporate differing leadership perspectives as it relates to strategic planning, conflict and negotiation, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives as well as campus internationalization efforts (Cook & Kim, 2012; Marklein, 2016; Melidona et al., 2023). Oikelome (2017) insists “diversification of the college presidency brings a variety of thought, innovation, and divergent perspectives to address the needs of a dynamic student population and helps colleges navigate the various challenges facing higher education” (p. 24). With this diversification and as the number of foreign-born USCUPs increase, it is important to identify their experiences and pathway to the office of the president.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We used an asset-based theoretical framework for the study. Rooted in social activism, social justice, and community development, asset-based community development is described as differing from traditional approaches such as needs-based community development by examining communities as valuable contributors of knowledge, culture, social capital, and creators of “synergistic co-learning opportunities” (Hilburn, 2015, p. 373) for minoritized individuals (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). Most notable about this approach is instead of looking at foreign-born individuals through a deficit framework, where minoritized and marginalized individuals are perceived to have shortcomings and challenges, an asset-based approach recognizes an individual and community’s capacity, talents, gifts, and resources

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<sup>1</sup> The term minoritized is used to represent underrepresented minority groups and to highlight that race is socially constructed in the United States (Harper & Griffin, 2011).

rather than its deficiencies (Haines, 2009; Harper, 2010; Hilburn, 2015; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996).

The grounding principle of an asset-based theoretical approach is to examine the "capacities of its individuals, associations, and institution" (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996, p. 25) and the value they bring to their respective communities. Kretzmann and McKnight (2016) note to adhere to the model's fidelity, one should "begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills, and capacities of the community's residents" (p. 25). Utilizing an asset-based theoretical approach aided us in contextualizing the contributions of foreign-born USCUPs to their campus community.

## **Method**

We conducted the study using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is the only research design that is both a philosophy and a research methodology (Vagle, 2014). Attributed to the works of Husserl, a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, phenomenology is used when researchers seek to understand a phenomenon from an individual's perspective and seek to understand how the same phenomena is experienced, understood, and interpreted across individuals (Maxwell, 2013; Vagle, 2014). As the intent of our study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of foreign-born USCUPs, phenomenology appropriately grounded the research within the framework of being open to "possible understandings and interpretations, not THE understanding" (Vagle, 2014, p. 18) and provided space for multiple interpretations.

### **Role of the Researchers**

Maxwell (2013) notes bracketing is essential to the phenomenological process. Bracketing is the process where researchers suspend or "bracket" their judgment, preconceptions and analysis of the phenomena while allowing it to unfold and be interpreted in different ways (Vagle, 2014). While bracketing is intended to honor the participants' voices, we, as the researchers of the study, served as the instruments of data collection and analysis and brought with us our knowledge, biases, assumptions, and lived experiences. Ultimately, it is important for us to disclose our positionalities in relation to the study to improve its trustworthiness.

### ***Researchers' Positionalities***

KJ: I am a woman of color who identifies with my Caribbean, specifically Jamaican, background. As a woman of color, first-generation American, first-generation college student, and higher education practitioner with experience in fundraising, it was not until working at several academic institutions in institutional advancement that I had any meaningful interactions with the office of the president. It was through these interactions I realized I had never personally encountered a person of color or an immigrant in these high-profile influential positions.

DM: I am an African American man whose scholarship explores race and racism, gender and sexism, and identity intersections and intersectionality in higher education contexts. My doctoral degree is in higher education, so my educational training informs my scholarship exploring and critiquing U.S. higher education. As a senior diversity officer, I have reported to two university presidents. I was also mentored by two university presidents while pursuing my bachelor's and master's degrees.

JM: I am a multigenerational African in the United States, or African American/Black American, scholar, and advocate. I am currently a junior academic interested in the intersections of immigration and education. Although I have not directly worked with or under a university president in a permanent role, I have shadowed one president and worked with a second president in an interim position.

## Sample

We employed purposeful sampling strategies to recruit participants. A particular strategy we used was snowball sampling, which entailed asking participants to recommend peers, friends, or colleagues who fit the research criteria. Purposeful sampling relies on the researcher to intentionally identify and select participants who would make the greatest contribution to the research study (Maxwell, 2013). Since extant research on USCUPs primarily includes White leaders, we intentionally identified foreign-born USCUPs who self-identified as people of color. We used the following criteria to select participants: (1) identify as a foreign-born individual or an immigrant in the United States; (2) currently serving as a foreign-born USCUP (beginning with the last ten years) or former foreign-born USCUP (within the last ten years); (3) attended undergraduate or graduate school in the United States (as we thought it provided them unique perspective of U.S. higher education); and (4) self-identify as a person of color.

KJ monitored *Inside Higher Ed's* bi-monthly column titled "New Presidents or Provosts" by Doug Lederman. Through that strategy, she identified approximately 45 foreign-born/immigrant presidents or chancellors. KJ found an additional 30 names through the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. KJ also reached out directly to a newly appointed foreign-born USCUPs to gather interest in the study and as a method of snowball sampling. Through those three strategies – with some overlap – we identified 75 foreign-born USCUPs and created a spreadsheet with demographic information about each president.

After we received Institutional Review Board approval, each potential participant received an email invitation indicating the purpose of the research and participation criteria. We sent the email to approximately 50 participants. The remaining 25 were ineligible because they did not meet the criteria we set for the study. When individuals agreed to participate, they received a letter of consent and a participant information sheet with questions pertaining to the continent where they were born, age range, gender, size of academic institution, languages spoken, how long they had been in the United States, how long they had been a president/chancellor (if they had previously served as a president, how long they were in that role), and religious affiliation, if any. In total, 17 of the 50 eligible presidents agreed to participate. We screened out one participant who did not self-identify as a person of color and another who had been in the office for more than ten years. To protect the identity of the participants and to honor individuals who lost their lives to violence, we used the names of slain international human rights, indigenous rights, and LGBTQ+ rights activists as pseudonyms for the participants.

The participants in this study included five women and ten men. Two of the 15 participants were former college or university presidents and are identified as "Dr." versus "President" throughout the findings. Of the 15 participants, three were chancellors but are addressed as presidents to protect their identities. Nine of the participants came from the continent of Asia, three were from the continent of Africa, and three were from the Americas. The participants' ages ranged from 40-70 and participants have been in the United States between 20 to over 50 years. Geographically, they were located across the United States and represent public four-year not-for-profit institutions, four-year private not-for profit

institutions, and public two-year institutions. Enrollments for the institutions ranged from less than 3,000 students to more than 5,000 students. The timeframes for their presidencies ranged from less than one year to ten years. Table 1 provides demographic information for the 15 participants.

**Table 1**  
*Demographics of Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Continent of Birth</b>
Dr. Omara Benjelloun	Woman	51-60	Asia
President Berta Caceres	Woman	51-60	Asia
President Tahar Djaout	Man	61-70	Asia
Dr. FannyAnn Eddy	Woman	61-70	Asia
President Farag Foda	Woman	61-70	Africa
President Marielle Franco	Woman	41-50	Americas
President Rutilio Grande	Man	61-70	South America
President Victor Jara	Man	61-70	Asia
President Jaswant Singh Khalra	Man	61-70	Asia
President Xulhaz Mannan	Man	61-70	Asia
President Iqbal Masih	Man	61-70	Asia
President Chico Mendes	Man	61-70	South America
President Ruben Um Nyobe	Man	51-60	Africa
President Avijit Roy	Man	51-60	Asia
President Norbert Zongo	Man	51-60	Africa

*Note.* We assigned each participant a pseudonym.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

We collected data primarily through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews to allow for follow-up questions as participants discussed their experiences (see Appendix A). Participant information forms, CVs, biographies, press releases, and institutions' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data also informed our study. Prior to initiating the interviews, our interview questions, participant information form, and interview protocol document went through a peer debriefing process where peers reviewed and provided feedback on the documents prior to finalizing the documents.

After participants agreed to be interviewed, they received a letter of consent as well as the participant information form. KJ conducted the interviews with the participants once they returned their information forms. Interviews ranged from 15 minutes and 67 minutes and were conducted in-person (n=1), via video conference (n=4), or via phone (n=10).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) encourage researchers to begin the data analysis process as soon as data collection begins as collection and analysis should happen simultaneously. Common experiences began to emerge after the first eight interviews. However, there were



several individuals represented from one country and we did not have diverse ethnic and geographic representation from other continents, so we continued the interviews. After reaching the final interviews, we not only had the ethnic and geographic representation, but elements of data saturation emerged, as by the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> interviews, no new ideas emerged from the data. Saturation is described as the effect in which no new information can be gleaned from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

We used four processes to analyze the data: anchor coding, focused coding, thematic analysis, and peer debriefing processes to ensure we were sharing the lived experiences of the participants, which is important in phenomenological explorations (Vagle, 2014). For the first cycle, KJ independently employed anchor coding, reading the transcripts, and noting codes as concepts from words, phrases, and ideas emerged (Saldaña, 2016). DM then supported or rejected (through conversation with KJ) the anchor codes prior to moving to the next phase of coding, by comparing the proposed codes with the data. After the anchor coding process, we used a focus coding process, which allowed us to identify patterns and frequencies across the anchor codes that emerged. KJ independently employed focus coding, then DM either supported or rejected (through conversation with KJ) the focused codes by matching the proposed codes with the research questions. After the focus coding process, KJ clustered the patterns and created themes to connect and describe the data. DM and JM individually supported or rejected (through conversation) the themes by matching the proposed themes with the research questions.

We sought to improve the trustworthiness of the study using the criteria confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, for explanations of each). We used the following measures to improve the trustworthiness of the study: (1) we provided our positionality statements; (2) we layered our analysis and reviewed the data independently of each other as the researchers; (3) we sent the findings to the participants to ensure the themes matched their lived experiences; (4) we triangulated the interview data and biographical information with supporting documents and other forms of data (e.g., CVs, biographies, IPEDS, press releases); and finally, (5) we included rich, thick data in the findings section to provide detail of the themes and subthemes that emerged. Five overarching themes and several subthemes emerged during the study.

## **Findings**

Five overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) Coming to America, (2) Living in Two Worlds, (3) Ready or Not, Here I Come, (4) Go Back To Your Country!, and (5) If I Ruled The World. Each theme is supported by subthemes that help describe the essence of the overarching theme.

### **Coming to America**

The first theme that emerged was “Coming to America.” To understand the participants’ lived experiences, it was important for the participants to discuss their reasons for immigrating to the United States as well as who or what influenced their decision. When President Djaout was asked what influenced his decision to leave his country, he stated, “A revolution was happening in my country. The country was taken over by religious fanatics who are still in charge.” President Jara shared he grew up during a cultural revolution in his country: “My secondary education was disrupted several times because of the chaotic situation in the country and because of the fact the family was being persecuted.” The experiences shared by Presidents Djaout and Jara indicated, at times, decisions to immigrate were not by choice. The

impact of a war or political instability such as revolutions were significant push and pull factors for some of the participants.

Some of the presidents left their countries to pursue a better education. Dr. Benjelloun left her country to secure a Ph.D. in a more structured academic environment and to also live out her individual freedoms:

In my country, a Ph.D. program can take many years. Whereas in the United States, if you do your work, in four to five years, you can complete your Ph.D. That was one of the reasons I left... also, the pressure to get married and start your family at the age of 18, 19, 20 is very high....and I was already 21. If I stayed there, the pressure to marry and start a family would be felt much stronger. I wouldn't have been able to devote the time to my education and the future. So, I decided "out of sight, out of mind" and then I wouldn't feel those pressures as much being in the United States.

President Khalra saw the United States as an opportunity to live out his desire for academic and personal freedom. He noted, "I was more oriented towards the American notion of individual freedom and seeking your own destiny rather than the notion your destiny is predetermined." This philosophy of individual freedom was something that continued to influence the lives of Dr. Benjelloun and President Khalra. They both continued to devote time and contribute to academic scholarship in their respective fields. In addition, all the presidents shared they recognized the tremendous opportunity immigrating to the United States provided them, and how this changed the course of their lives.

### ***Should I Stay or Should I Go?***

For many of the presidents, the United States was known as a land of opportunities; however, strong family ties and obligations made leaving their country of origin challenging. This first subtheme addresses some of the challenges the presidents faced as they decided whether to leave their respective countries. President Masih, whose family was impacted by the British Partition of 1947, wanted to pursue his education, but lamented leaving his small and close family. This decision was also especially difficult for him to leave his father who exhibited signs of trauma from surviving the devastating event:

I had a relatively small family. My two parents, my sister and I. We didn't have anyone from my dad's side except his mother who is my grandmother. Most of his relatives or friends either died when the country split up or stayed on the other side. I think it is still one of the bloodiest types of separation at least in modern history. The reason I mention my dad is because in many ways that did impact me quite a bit.

President Zongo discussed the strong relationship he has with his father and how his understanding of the world continues to influence his life: "My dad has been my hero.... he always told me, son, wherever you go...make sure you make it better than you found it."

The influence of a parent or loved one was a particularly emotional piece for the presidents. While President Masih struggled with leaving his family, especially his father, Presidents Zongo found his greatest influence through the support and encouragement of his father. While some of the presidents immigrated to the United States to begin new lives as adults, there were some who were brought here as adolescents, and still more who had family members and loved encouraging them to immigrate here for a better life.

### ***Remember Who You Are and Whose You Are***

In this subtheme, each president acknowledged the overall importance of their culture and cultural identity. For President Franco, she was very much aware of her identity as a Black woman and immigrant and how her identities were influenced by her cultural background:

I know that my cultural background helped me. Being an immigrant, you have to be very entrepreneurial in many ways. You don't have things handed to you. You have no roots here... whenever times get hard, I remember how hard it was for the people who brought me here.

Dr. Eddy also saw the United States as a place of opportunities but recalled the difficulty she faced in leaving her family. Her mother and grandmother were instrumental in her upbringing and fostered her love of education. When asked to share her experience and she said:

My sister and I were always conscious of the advantages my mother and grandmother didn't have compared to her own brother. I would say that narrative in my family has been very much a part of my upbringing and education... the importance of education in having a successful personal and professional life.

President Franco and Dr. Eddy shared their immigration experiences through a lens of sacrifice. Through the sacrifice of their families who often had to take out loans or had to pool their money together, these presidents immigrated to the United States and changed the trajectories of their lives.

### **We Live in Two Worlds**

The theme of living in two worlds is one that is woven throughout the body of the study. Nearly all the participants mentioned some variation of this phraseology. Most frequently, the term was used to highlight the multiplicity of worlds a foreign-born USCUP resides, such as coming from another country yet now residing in the United States, as well as being an immigrant but also leading an institution. The phrase was presented by President Nyobe who still attends to family, cultural, and political obligations in his home country. To further emphasize the point of living in two worlds, President Nyobe came from Africa where polygamy is still acceptable. His paternal grandfather had three wives and birthed nearly twenty children. While this was not his current practice, he recognized and respected his cultural background and every day he attempts to navigate and negotiate through these worlds.

This cultural duality was experienced by many of the presidents, and they recognized it as valuable trait and a distinction they bring to the field of higher education and their respective institutions. President Mannan noted:

By living in two cultures and across two cultures, is an asset without question. This is why we all strongly advise and should work towards having more diversity on campuses. It does open everyone's eyes and it's not just simply for the people helping international students come here, but our own native students really need that exposure.

Dr. Benjelloun also shared her perception of living in two worlds where there are competing interests and expectations at play. She noted:

I think there's two different things. I think two elements are at play here. One is, you are an outsider coming into higher education in the United States which is a different world, but you are also a woman and a woman of color. You're not just an outsider because you're not from the United States, but you also then have affinity with the minority population which may be very different from your own culture.

The theme of living in different worlds is one that was discussed by all the participants and highlighted the challenge of being an immigrant and negotiating through the nuanced world of academia as well as the racialized, and at times, hostile society in the United States. For many of the presidents, this concept of living in two worlds was even harder as they recalled the loved ones they left in their home country, and at times, not feeling fully embraced by the communities they serve. However, each of the presidents felt as though their institution was a much better place because of the diversity they brought, and they felt they were developing more global citizens.

### ***Straddling Multiple Identities***

This first subtheme that emerged from theme two explains the complex and sometimes competing identities foreign-born USCUPs embody. The phrase "straddling multiple identities," presented by Dr. Benjelloun, was used to highlight the multiple identities she felt she navigated. Some of the identities included being a woman, a woman of color, an immigrant, and a minoritized person. Dr. Benjelloun explained:

I think two elements are at play here. You are an outsider coming into higher education in the United States, but also, when you come in as a woman and a woman of color, you're not just an outsider because you're not from the United States... You also then have affinity with the minority population. So, you sort of straddle multiple identities.

President Caceres shared her experience as the first immigrant, woman, and woman of color to lead her institution:

As president, I'm the first woman, the first person of color, and the first immigrant. So, they all became blended. And I don't know which one is a bigger challenge at which point. When I first moved here a man said to me, "Why do they call you a woman of color? You're not black." And then calls over a Black woman, an African American and said, "Ask her," "Should she be called that?" We gave each other a hug because we both were like, okay, we get this.

Many of the presidents shared their experiences in straddling multiple identities, the challenge of being identified as a token or model minority, as well as negotiating spaces with other people of color, being especially careful not to villainize other immigrants or communities of color.

### ***To Whom Do You Belong?***

The second subtheme that emerged within theme two was "To Whom Do You Belong?" As foreign-born individuals, the participants had a keen and distinct understanding of the importance of feeling connected, valued, and a sense of belonging. President Jara shared even though he lived in the United States for many decades, because he did not grow up in this

country, he still found he had difficulty fitting in. Dr. Benjelloun shared her identity as a foreigner allowed her to really empathize with international students and students of color who may feel disconnected from higher education:

I understood what it meant to be on the outside. I've always sort of been on the outside. When people talk about a sense of belonging and our students not feeling like they belong in academia, or the institution isn't set up to be welcoming to them, I totally understand that. When you come from a different culture, you sort of notice things in different ways than if you belong to the dominant culture. You're much more sensitive to culture...and to expectations... and to cultural norms... and fitting in and not fitting in.

For Dr. Benjelloun, she recognized the importance of belonging and how a lack of connectedness could adversely influence students of color, immigrant students, and other marginalized populations in higher education. While Dr. Benjelloun did not attend high school or undergraduate in the United States, as an immigrant, she was intimately acquainted with feeling like an outsider and being reminded of her foreignness.

President Franco also recalled how not fitting in had impacted her on a personal and professional level. She recalled, "There've been times when I've lessened myself to make people feel less uncomfortable. But, as I get older, I realize, this is your issue. You figure it out. I'm going to show up as who I am." When asked to elaborate, she added, "I'm going to be empathetic. But it's not my responsibility to make your ego feel better because you haven't done the work and you haven't struggled as I have." Her statement attests to how challenging it can be for immigrants of color when there is a lack of belonging. The participants also often shared in increasingly polarizing times; it was especially important to cultivate belongingness on their campuses. Even as presidents, they could relate to the visceral feeling of not belonging.

### **Ready or Not, Here I Come**

Theme three refers to the realization most of the participants were not seeking their current position. However, in the course of their work as faculty and or mentors to junior faculty and graduate students, they were identified and encouraged by colleagues, administrators, or mentors/mentees to seek leadership positions. Some of these positions included chair, dean, faculty senate, provost, among others. When asked about her journey to the presidency, President Foda remarked, "My path to the presidency was as an accidental tourist. I thought, how can I impact higher education more broadly? So eventually someone asked me to apply for a couple of university presidencies and I did." When asked to discuss his journey to the presidency President Nyobe said, "To tell you the truth, I never really expected to become a college or university president." Likewise, President Franco recalled:

I never aspired to be a college president. People I know, my mentors and folks who've met me said, "You know, this would be a great path for you. You have the skills. You should do that." It took me a while before I developed the confidence and saw that I could actually do it.

President Khalra's story was like Presidents Foda and Franco. He provided further insight into how the role of the president is perceived:

If you had asked me, "Would you ever be the president?", my answer would have been a categorical, "No." Not because I had decided I didn't want to be,

but because it was clear to me there was a certain personality and a persona that you had to be to be in that position.

President Roy acknowledged higher education is still an elitist and privileged enterprise:

There is a bit of tremendous insecurity in the institutional settings. That meant people would often hire people who looked like them and the people who came from similar affiliations and pedigree...other people from privileged backgrounds. And so all of that was also painfully clear in the [hiring] process.

While nearly all the presidents were not seeking their current position, they have embraced their role and are excited for the opportunity to make institutional changes. When asked, President Caceres laughed and said she did not think she wanted to be a leader at a university but after having been provost and then elected to be executive vice chancellor, she stated, "That was a good feeling because all my fellow provosts, my fellow deans asked if I would step up and lead them. And so, then I realized a president really has the power to shape a university."

### ***Leading with Grace***

This subtheme of theme three emerged out of the question, "What is your leadership style?" and provided an opportunity for the participants to discuss their style as well as the expectations they have for the people they lead. Dr. Benjelloun expressed her leadership style was much more situational as it depended on what the team or situation called for:

I adapt to what the needs of the moment are, and the needs of my team are. Of course, everyone aspires to be an inspiring leader, a transformational leader. But, to get to be a transformational leader you must adapt, and you need to know what type of leadership a situation warrants. I've been a coach when the times have warranted that. I have been just a team member where we all brainstorm and we come together and the best idea emerges, and I've had to be a captain where decisions must be made. And as the leader, ultimately after listening to everyone and their positions, the decision is mine. Somebody must make the decision.

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### ***Leading with Culture***

This subtheme emerged after asking the participants how they thought their culture influenced their leadership. While some of the participants initially did not think their culture impacted their leadership, after reflection, they all recognized their culture did influence their leadership style. President Foda initially discussed why she did not think leadership and culture were related but after discussing her rationale out loud she realized they were connected: “These questions are kind of difficult to get your head around.... I guess those are related to my culture because I get them from my family, who are also immigrants.” As President Foda recognized this connection, she shared other aspects of her culture and how it influenced her leadership.

President Grande shared being an immigrant was an asset he brought to his presidency:

Understanding there is this cultural wealth in the communities, and we just must tap into it to understand it. And again, if we want to embrace the students and make them successful when they come to our campus, we should be providing them with support services that reflect where they come from. And I always joke about that...we should have some rice and beans in the cafeteria.

President Grande was referring to the need to meet the students where they are, providing them with the resources to be successful, and recognizing some of the most powerful connections are through food and leveraging cultural wealth.

While the presidents were in the United States between 20 to over 50 years, they all relied on their culture to help them lead. Some presidents relied on verses and prayers they recited as children, others recalled how their culture influenced their communicative and negotiation styles, while others reflected their whole essence is a result of their cultural identity. In discussing the influence a president has in shaping a university, many of them noted it came with challenges.

### ***A Bumpy Path***

We were interested in some of the challenges they encountered on their path to the presidency. This subtheme addresses some of those challenges. Dr. Benjelloun noted:

Once one finds their voice and you find people who are champions, who are mentors, who help you along your way, I think the challenge became on a much larger context to be taken seriously. Both as a woman, as a woman of color and as an immigrant woman. It became a matter of “Well, you don't fully understand higher education because your higher education experience was in another country, right?”

Dr. Eddy reflected it was her experiences as a foreigner that provided her with the insight to connect with the students on a deep level:

Well, I do understand the challenges because I see my students go through some of those challenges and I went through some of those challenges in my own country. So, I think those are some of the barriers...to be taken seriously. But “Will there be more questions asked? Will she get us? Will she understand us? Will she be able to stand up to us, especially being a woman? Will she be able

to stand up to the bullies in academia?" and so on. So, those were the challenges on my path.

Drs. Benjelloun and Eddy were transparent in discussing their roles as former presidents. In addition to the lack of feeling connected to their institutions, they also shared the importance of institutional fit and how that could make or break a presidency.

President Franco recalled, as a Black woman immigrant, to be successful in higher education, she had to become more unassuming to get things done:

One of the things I've found as a Black woman and as a high achieving, powerful Black woman, and an immigrant woman...it has helped me to be unassuming, right? If people know your full power, they're going to come at you all guns blazing. But if they underestimate you, they don't come all guns blazing and you can read them.

President Franco shared she is often the most educated person at the table, has the most experience, and often the youngest, and that comes with challenges. President Franco said she had to lessen herself to make other people comfortable and to not be perceived as a threat. Many of the other presidents shared a similar sentiment of being highly educated as well as being perceived as a threat.

### *Crises Management*

This subtheme emerged because of the participants indicating they were hired to fix, clean-up, address or mitigate issues on their campus. Some of the presidents also shared what was disclosed to them during the interview or contract negotiation phases were far worse than they realized. President Franco noted how she saw her role:

The institution where I was, there was quite a bit of tumult at different times and every time those things happened, somebody got fired, somebody left. It was always like, "Can you take this on?" And I never said no. And I always excelled, and people knew. ...So, I would clean things up, get them on the right track and I did that all the way to the top. When the last president left, we had a state investigation on several things that were going on. And I was the person who got things done.

President Franco was identified as someone who was a problem solver, but this was not exclusive to her; all the other presidents were identified as problem solvers with innovative solutions.

Dr. Eddy discussed her presidency and the fact that the issues she inherited were a great burden:

When I went to the college, there were a lot of issues. There were accreditation issues, we were in trouble with state department of education, and the U.S. Department of Education. There was an NCAA investigation and violation regarding scholarships, and it ended as the board of trustees were actually fighting each other. There were two groups fighting for control of the board and who served as a governance committee. I didn't know all this. I was nominated for the presidency. I knew about the accreditation issues, and I knew they could



tell that I'm an academic. So, I went in with the mission and didn't realize that there were a lot of challenges.

While many of the presidents felt like the crises they were hired to clean up were achievable, the two former presidents shared how the issues resulted in their stepping down from their presidencies. Dr. Eddy recalled her painful time:

I think they saw me as an Asian woman, likely to not, be assertive in any way. One of the guys on the board on the first day said, "Look, you don't need to pay any attention to any of the financial parts of things. I will sign off on them if the CFO would sign off. You don't need to sign any of the papers." And I said, "As president I'm responsible and I absolutely must sign off as the CEO of the institution. I must sign off on them." So, things like that. They just assumed they were getting someone who was going to be a sort of "yes" person...not a real president.

Dr. Eddy shared while it was a very difficult time for her, she felt like she made incremental changes.

### **Go Back to Your Country!**

The fourth theme is a result of difficult discussions pertaining to their identities as immigrants in a racialized society. They shared the reality of the bias, discrimination, stereotyping or microaggressions they encountered. As contributors to their communities and educators, the presidents shared this difficult aspect of being a foreigner. They reflected even after being in the United States for more than 20 years or more, they were still seen as outsiders.

### ***Accents, Biases, and Microaggressions***

This subtheme emerged from asking the presidents, "What are some of the challenges you have encountered on your pathway to the presidency?" Most spoke about the challenge of speaking with an accent, but others addressed what they identified as unconscious bias, microaggressions, and stereotyping. President Franco recalled the challenges she encountered in learning English:

English is not my first language. So, there were people who were clearly racist. So, going back to microaggressions. They would use these idiomatic expressions and say, "Oh, well I'm going to say this because she doesn't know what this means, or you know, it may be difficult for you to understand this" and then they still go on and say it anyway and don't try to explain it.

Not only did President Franco feel this was disrespectful, but she also reiterated an accent is a sign of multilingualism which is considered an asset across the world.

President Mannan shared while his English was better than it was previously, regardless of anyone's language ability, everyone has something to contribute. He stated, "Don't be intimidated or annoyed by somebody with an accent. Pretty soon you get used to the accent and then you can see beyond that. And you'll say, 'Oh gee, there's so much to learn from this person.'" President Mannan recalled the value in speaking multiple languages and how it contributes to his concept of global citizenship.

### ***Working Harder***

This subtheme is a result of presidents indicating that as immigrants of color, they felt they always had to work harder just to be considered equal. Both Presidents Foda and Khalra indicated while they had to work harder than their peers, they do feel as though it is connected to their upbringing as immigrants. President Foda stated:

I would say that for the immigrant community, one of the messages I think most immigrant communities get is, is, you must be better than everyone else to be viewed as equal. I think we got that message growing up.

President Khalra concurred immigrants work hard and due to their limited social capital networks, they must find creative ways to succeed:

I came on a one-year visa. I had no idea if my stipend would be renewed. So, there's a whole lot of uncertainty you live with when you come here. And, when you're working hard you must work a little bit harder than others.

All the presidents shared they felt they had to work harder than their peers from the dominant culture. This was especially true in areas of professional development opportunities, mentoring, and developing social and professional networks.

President Masih reflected on whether the same would be true of a U.S. citizen going to his country and believed they would encounter the same challenge:

It appears to me I had to work a lot harder than perhaps someone who was from this culture. Particularly a white male competing for the same point. I never thought about it when I was going through it, and I just thought that was the normal thing to do. But to be fair about it, you know, I am not using it as a justification, but I've reflected what if someone were to come to my country, would they have to work twice as hard. And, I always come back to the same answer, "Yes."

For President Masih, he was certain this was not exclusively because he was a U.S. immigrant. He felt everyone would have to struggle harder if they immigrated to another country and tried to make a living.

Many of the presidents shared while they recognized they worked harder than many of their peers, they expected to. Where they found their greatest challenge was not being recognized for their educational attainments, language abilities, and academic/scholarship achievements when colleagues with lesser accomplishments and credentials often received promotions and recognition.

### ***If I Ruled the World***

The fifth, and final, theme emerged as the presidents discussed what they had or would like to accomplish during their tenures. This theme is based on the wishes, dreams, goals, and aspirations the presidents shared about how they would like to transform their campus and how they felt they are living out their purpose.

In discussing his vision for the campus, President Khalra shared while he cannot make huge political changes in the United States, he could change his world (his campus). He shared

although the previous president was a woman, his institution had never had a woman dean until he arrived. He noted, “Today five out of 10 deans are women, and my cabinet was all White people. Even though we've had a woman president before me. Today, more than 50% of my cabinet are women and LGBTQ.”

President Djaout shared he worked hard to bring positive change to his campus and was honored with a national award. The award he received recognizes immigrants who have contributed to their communities in significant and powerful ways. He decided instead of sharing what he had accomplished, he used the platform as an opportunity to share what he still hoped to achieve while president:

I ask myself, “Am I contributing to our country here in the United States?” My diversity, as a person of Color was significant because people look at me—students, faculty, and staff—and they say, “Hey, if he made it, I'm sure I can make it.” And it's true. If an immigrant can make it, you're the president of the university, a lot of other students and faculty and others feel inspired to do that too.

As a positive role model, President Djaout was demonstrating his students could achieve this success as well. In fact, all the presidents referenced some aspect of mentoring or being a role model for students of color and immigrants.

### *Assets*

After describing asset-based community development and inquiring what assets the presidents felt they contribute to their campus and surrounding community, the subtheme “Assets” developed. The responses described are accomplishments, gifts, skills, and talents the participants contribute as it relates to their identity as a foreign-born USCUP. Dr. Benjelloun recalled during her tenure, her international connections were valuable and resulted in strategic partnerships her institution would not have been able to secure without her facilitating that relationship:

I was connecting with the community, bringing in global opportunities, I think adding to the mission, understanding what it truly means to be global citizens, exposure for our students to become global citizens, diversifying the academy, with both international students and a more diverse student body.

President Jara discussed contributing ethnic diversity to his institutions as well as a diverse way of thinking about complex issues:

We all carry our biases because of the way we were brought up. As a result, we all think differently, and we all see the same objects from different angles and draw different conclusions. I think my contribution really is talking to my cabinet. They would provide an observation and the conclusions from their angle. And many of them are from the majority culture and many grew up here and having been here for several generations. While I bring the viewpoint and the angle and the conclusion from someone who has not had the privilege of growing up here. So, I think diverse viewpoint is perhaps the biggest asset I would bring to a discussion.

His viewpoints have served President Jara well and he believed has contributed to his success in academia and life in the United States. He shared he was often the only person of color at the table and could bring a perspective that set him apart from peers in the dominant culture.

As faculty, deans, provosts, department chairs, leaders in academic affairs, student affairs, and advisors to student groups, the participants had tremendous reach and influence in higher education through their connections and affiliations with nearly 60 academic institutions.

### **Legacy**

This subtheme emerged when participants were asked what they would want their legacy to be. President Foda said what she wanted to be remembered for and what she will be remembered for might be two different things:

I'd like to think they'll remember me for the work on driving equity, social and economic equity for underserved students...but it'll probably be for saving the institution and making sure it continued to exist for another day.

President Grande shared he would like to be remembered "for being somebody who treated people with dignity and respect." President Zongo stated he wanted to be missed and,

to leave when the time is right and make things better than I found it. The last one always matters to me. When I've made a place better than I found it, then I know my time is up to go.

President Franco said:

I want to be remembered as someone who really transformed the communities, transformed individual lives, and someone who empowered people. Someone who helped people imagine something that is way bigger than what they could have ever hoped to be. I just want to leave the world a better place. And because we are in education, I get an opportunity to multiply that exponentially because we're educating people who are going to make the world a better place. I have a very strong sense of what kind of world I want to live in. It's one that is more socially, environmentally, racially, and economically just and equitable. And that's why I want to be known as someone who works for those ideals and helped to shape how we can magnify the impact... more than me as a single person could do.

President Franco's response reiterated many of the thoughts the other fourteen participants discussed. While the presidents shared different immigration journeys, different countries of origin, and different cultural backgrounds, the findings indicate there were common threads woven throughout their experiences.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations to the current study. The first limitation is the lack of representation of people of color from all continents, as the study lacked representation of people of color from Europe and Australia. The study also does not include individuals who self-identified as being from Indigenous or Aboriginal communities. Further, the study lacked

representation from U.S. Minority-Serving Institutions, which could have provided different contexts in understanding the presidents' experiences. Finally, while this study explored leadership, leadership styles, and the impact of culture on leadership, traditional leadership theory was excluded due to its primary use to describe and assess the leadership effectiveness of White males from the dominant culture.

## **Discussion**

Scholars acknowledge that since 1965, when revisions were made to U.S. immigration laws, the United States has seen a steady rise in the immigrant population (Bausum, 2014; Kennedy, 1964; Skinner, 2018a). Skinner (2018b) further notes while many industries such as technology and business have benefitted from immigrants, academic institutions currently house the largest numbers of immigrants when compared to other industries. Within the present study, we documented the lived experiences of foreign-born USCUPs and the reasons why they immigrated to the United States. They came to the United States to pursue education, to escape political oppression, economic instability, civil war, and arranged marriages, or because they were brought to the United States as children. While more than half of the participants felt war, oppression, and instability were out of their control, what they did with their opportunity while in the United States was an aspect they felt they could control. Many of the participants believed this positive and resilient perspective had guided their personal and professional pathways.

The presidents shared the complexity of living in the United States while still having deep connections to their home country. The presidents also shared the difficulty of living in the United States for over 20 years, yet still being viewed as other, outsider, or different while simultaneously having to contend with feelings of loneliness and disconnectedness. Their experiences parallel Collins's (2008) findings for foreign-born faculty. Collins acknowledged foreign-born faculty encounter unique challenges such as dealing with the loneliness and isolation of being in a foreign country.

Out of the 15 participants, only one indicated they were actively seeking a presidential position prior to becoming president. Most of the participants held positions as faculty and ascended the academic leadership ladder making their way through the ranks of chair, dean, provost/chief academic officer up to the presidency. Most of the foreign-born USCUPs indicated while they never aspired to be a leader at an academic institution, they have fully embraced their role and feel as though they can truly impact change on their campus.

Several of the presidents shared their current leadership style can be attributed to their cultural upbringing. The findings in this research also demonstrate how important individual and institutional match are to a successful presidency. Several of the presidents shared they have been successful not only due to the assets they bring, but in identifying a good institutional fit. Similarly, for participants who were former presidents the importance of institutional fit was echoed and challenges they encountered were discussed.

An additional finding encountered by all 15 of the participants was the fact they were all hired to fix, clean up, or address an issue or several issues on their campus. Some of the issues the individuals were hired to address were not disclosed during the on-campus interviews nor during their contract negotiations. This finding seems to go against the grain, as a great deal of the literature seems to indicate during times of crises, institutions tend to be more conservative in their hiring practices and would rather court White males in their 60s as a safe, strategic bet (Crandall et al., 2017).

This study established new, but consistent, findings regarding the discrimination of people of color (Castro, 2018; Rodriguez 2005; Turner, 2007), and, in this case, foreign-born USCUPs who identify as people of color. In addition to the racial and ethnic discrimination

they encounter, foreign-born USCUPs, also feel like they must work harder than their peers to compete for the same position.

Finally, guided by an asset-based theoretical framework, our research challenges the dominant discourse on immigrants by examining the lived experiences of foreign-born USCUPs and the ways in which they negotiate their space in the office of the president, negotiate their identities, and are leading change on their campus as well as demonstrating resiliency. Kretzmann and McKnight's (1996) research on asset-based community development is predicated on the principles of removing deficit and needs-based rhetoric and instead changing the narrative to one that encompasses positive, affirming language. Specifically, Kretzmann and McKnight posit when affirming language is used with traditionally marginalized communities versus a needs-based framework, communities of color and immigrant communities have better outcomes and more inclined to identify with the positive attributes (gifts, skills, talents) and to believe they embody these positive attributes.

### **Implications for Practice**

We offer three suggestions for practice. First, the data from this research can help inform and prepare executive search committees on the experiences of diverse, foreign-born university leaders as they embark on sifting through applications from a global pool.

Second, this study can help inform initiatives within national organizations. The ACE Fellows professional leadership development program may consider including a track specifically created for foreign-born USCUPs designed to outline opportunities and challenges aspiring presidents may encounter and ways to mitigate them. The track could be used as an opportunity for camaraderie and support for one another. Additionally, this research can be used by organizations such as the Council of Independent Colleges, which would benefit from providing professional development opportunities to current and aspiring foreign-born USCUPs.

Finally, foreign-born USCUPs may want to create an alliance for themselves as a way of developing camaraderie, but also as a means of cultivating valuable networks, building social capital, and fostering formal and informal mentoring opportunities.

### **Future Research**

The focus of the research was designed specifically for foreign-born USCUPs who self-identified as people of color (POC) and who have been in office for ten years or less. Future research can explore, more broadly, all foreign-born USCUPs without limitation to racial identity. Expanding this study beyond individuals who would be categorized as minoritized in the U.S. would allow scholars to offer a broader scope and determine how factors such as U.S. racialized category, country of birth, and other identities intersect and impact participants' experiences.

Researchers can also conduct multigenerational studies and include retired participants or individuals who have been in the presidential role for longer than ten years. This would help shed light on how past and present sociopolitical cultures and everchanging higher educational trends impact foreign-born presidents. Finally, scholars might apply different theories or models to a similar study if they are interested in understanding the experiences of foreign-born USCUPs from different perspectives.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. How has your cultural background and traditions prepared you to lead an institution of higher education?
2. How has your cultural background and traditions influenced your leadership of this academic institution?
3. Please share your journey/pipeline to your current position of president?
4. What were some challenges you encountered on your path to the presidency?
5. What were some opportunities you encountered on your path to the presidency?
6. An asset-based community development framework will be applied to this research (explain what that is). After hearing about the asset-based community development framework, what assets do you feel you bring to the office of the president? The larger academic community? And, the community in which you are located in the United States?
7. How do you think these assets are unique compared to native born college or university presidents?

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