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Understanding Leadership Strategies for Addressing the Politics of Diversity

A group of students conducts a sit-in because they perceive students of color are getting special advantages.

Members of the African American business community ask to meet with the campus president about the decline in the number of African Americans on campus.

An alumni group calls for a special meeting with the board of trustees to discuss its concerns with the diversity agenda being developed on campus.

A staff member posts a critical letter on a highly visible blog about the diversity initiative.

Each of these scenarios represents the type of politics that campus leaders face as they engage in the work of moving a diversity agenda forward and trying to create an inclusive campus environment. While you see these stories of campus politics commonly reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, little research has examined how leaders address these complicated political situations that arise on campuses across the country. This study endeavored to examine the role of presidents in advancing a diversity agenda and focused on examining the type of political situations that emerge, particularly strategies that college presidents use to negotiate these politics.[1] While higher education leaders have addressed campus climate and concerns about equity for many years, since the 1980s it has become more commonplace

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to speak about campuses having a diversity agenda. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* regularly showcases stories about leaders advancing diversity agendas—for example, the University of Michigan, Penn State University, and the University of California at Los Angeles including ways they are trying to increase the diversity of their students, faculty, and staff and provide a better environment so that they are retained. Diversity initiatives have several broad goals, including developing an understanding of diversity; infusing attention to differences by race, sexual orientations, and gender; and creating greater equity and parity in the experience and outcomes of individuals from diverse backgrounds (Hale, 2004; Hurtado et al., 1999; Musil, Garcia, Hudgins, Nettles, Sedlacek, & Smith, 1999; Smith, 1989). An initiative can emerge from the top down, with the president or other leaders in positions of authority, or it can emerge bottom up from faculty and staff to eventually become integrated into the overall institutional agenda. A brief review of presidential leadership and its role in advancing diversity agendas and politics will help to set the context for this article.

Presidents play many important roles to help advance a diversity agenda—roles that most other leaders cannot play because they do not have the authority or leverage that is critical to institutionalization (Birnbaum, 1992; Fisher, 1984). For example, presidents help to create institutional commitment by relating a diversity agenda to the institutional mission or by including diversity in strategic planning and budget processes or establishing rewards and incentives (Hurtado et al., 1999; McGovern, Foster, & Ward, 2002; Musil et al., 1999; Smith, 1989; Smith & Wolf-Wendel, 2005). Presidents also help to create ownership by obtaining board support, hosting campuswide dialogues, and establishing commissions and committees. They even get involved in specific initiatives such as transforming the curriculum, measuring progress, and evaluating and creating accountability (Hurtado et al., 1999; Smith & Wolf-Wendel, 2005). Some authors, in fact, suggest that leadership is perhaps the most important factor in ensuring institutional transformation and institutionalizing a diversity agenda (Hurtado et al., 1999; Kezar, 2007; Kezar & Eckel, 2005; Tierney, 1991, 1993).

While leadership has been demonstrated to be particularly important, few studies have delved into the challenges that leaders face as they take on what can be perceived, on many campuses, as a controversial topic. Research has provided leaders with a variety of strategies to help move a diversity agenda forward and to overcome common barriers, but there is limited exploration of the politics surrounding the issue (Davis, 2002; Hale, 2004; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Musil et al., 1999; Smith,

1989).[2] Other literature documents the political landscape and dynamics that leaders face but offers no suggestions for addressing the politics (Beckham, 2000; Bensimon, 1992; Humphreys, 1997; Rhoads, 1998). This often leaves leaders in a precarious position: They know strategies that have worked to create change and some strategies for overcoming barriers (such as role modeling or rewards), but they are left helpless when faced with significant political resistance. I was interested in exploring in a systematic and empirical way the politics of diversity and how leaders face trenchant resistance based on differing interests and values.

Politics is typically defined as how people use power within a social setting, gain status, or maintain distinctive interests (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Clark, 1983). The critical elements within this definition are that politics involves the way people define their interests or concerns and that it is natural for different individuals and groups to have different interests. Politics relates to the way that people try to assert their particular interests and the way they use power and strategies to assert their interests. A set of White faculty might write a letter to the academic senate about declining standards in hiring faculty. In this situation, the interest group is a set of White faculty, and the way they are exerting power is through writing down their concerns and sending them to a powerful group on campus with whom they believe they have influence. They have defined their interests as declining standards in hiring faculty.

Given the importance of moving diversity agendas forward nationally and the lack of understanding about how to address the politics that almost always emerge when institutionalizing a diversity initiative, I examined the method by which presidents handled the politics related to moving a diversity agenda forward. I focused on college presidents because they are usually at the center of politics and because they are one of the most important leaders in efforts to institutionalizing diversity initiatives. In this article, I argue that political theories of change are a particularly important but underutilized perspective for understanding change related to diversity within the higher education environment. The overall study explores presidential leadership in moving a diversity agenda forward, including key strategies, presidential leadership style, institutional context and culture, and phases of institutionalization. I focus on the way presidents negotiated "the politics" of diversity and address two research questions: How and in what ways do presidents find that moving a diversity agenda forward is a political process, and what is the nature of the politics? What strategies do presidents use to negotiate a political environment and create change?

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by political theories of change and leadership, which maintain a unique set of assumptions that are helpful for examining the politics that leaders face in implementing a diversity agenda (Baldridge, Curtis, Ecker, & Riley, 1977; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Clark, 1983; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hearn, 1996; Sporn, 1999). Political theories posit that there are different interest groups in organizations that fight over scarce resources and priorities. People do not operate in rational ways and will resist issues about which they have fears. Research in higher education has not focused on political barriers that often take on an irrational character, nor has research examined the ways in which leaders can negotiate these situations. Much of the literature on change focuses on technical strategies such as providing training to help individuals to work in new ways or creating strategic plans to help provide direction and new habits for people (Bauman, Bustillos, Bensimon, Brown, & Bartee, 2005; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Musil et al., 1999; Smith & Associates, 1997). While these are all important strategies for addressing resistance, these technical solutions often do not address the politics that emerge related to change issues such as diversity.[3]

In the next section, I attempt to demonstrate why political theories are a helpful lens for understanding change within the higher education environment regarding diversity initiatives.[4] I then describe the common strategies offered to leaders within political theories for negotiating conflict and resistance and for creating change. This literature was used to analyze and make sense of the data presented later in the article.

Higher Education as a Political Organization and Diversity as a Political Position

Research suggests that higher education is a particularly political environment and that conflict and resistance will be a major problem in creating change. One of the reasons that higher education is open to politics is that hierarchical authority is limited and shared governance is practiced widely (Birnbaum, 1988). Leaders typically do not mandate change, and persuasion and power have emerged in the place of authority (Birnbaum, 1988, 1992; Kezar, 2001). Studies of higher education as an organization demonstrate that it has many different interest groups. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators form separate subcultures with different value systems and often different institutional goals and purposes (Baldridge, 1971; Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2001). Within these various interest groups or subcultures, there are also competing factions. Research has identified a variety of different student (different ethnici-

ties, student organizations, majors), faculty (different disciplines and ranks), staff (support staff and middle-level management), and administrative (student and academic affairs) subcultures (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Because of the multitude of differing subcultures representing varying interests and values, conflict and disagreement is more likely and commonplace. With so many different interest groups, there is no common direction or values. Existing groups defend the resources and power that they have, and new groups emerge trying to obtain resources and power, creating conflict. Clark describes this process in his book about academic institutions:

> The situation is like a seesaw, a long board on which reform supporting and reform opposing groups sit at different points in relation to the center of balance, far out towards the end or close to the center according to the extremity of their views. If all groups were equal in power, the seesaw's direction would depend on how many groups were located on either side of the balance, and particularly the intensity of their commitment. But some groups are genuine heavies in terms of power where others are lightweights. . . . when the heavies assert themselves, they can throw the weaker innovative groups off the seesaw, leaving them dangling uncomfortably in midair, or force them to declare that the game is over. (1983, pp. 225–226)

A variety of commentators have suggested that in recent years college campuses have become increasingly politicized based on the corporatization and commercialization of the higher education enterprise, resource constraint, and the growing encroachment of outside groups (Hearn, 1996; Kezar, 2001). There is growing separation between administrators and faculty; administrators are increasingly coming from outside academe and have been focused on reorganizing faculty work and roles, creating more tension and deeper divisions among interest groups. Faculty feel that administrators are becoming more managerial and believe that it is important for them to assert an academic perspective in the face of commercialization (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). Faculty groups are also increasingly divided between part-time and contract faculty (nontenured) and tenured faculty. Student groups and associations with distinct interests are rapidly growing on campus, creating even more progressive (environmental or multicultural) and conservative (campus Republicans, David Horowitz–sponsored organizations) subcultures. Boards are increasingly made up of members of the business community, and the number of board members that have an understanding of educational issues is decreasing as politics are instead playing a more prominent role in board appointments (Kezar, 2004). Unions have been growing, and collective bargaining is becoming more prevalent on campuses among graduate students, staff, and part-time

faculty, drawing more politics to campus. Outside groups are also asserting their interests on campus more often. For example, activist trustees and groups/individuals that are critical of campus policies (such as David Horowitz) are growing and trying to assert their interests on campus. Resource constraints also make college campuses more political environments. Public support for higher education has waned in the last 15 years, and resources are limited on most college campuses. These are just a few examples of the types of changes that are creating a more political environment on campus. Each of these leads to trends that can affect diversity agendas. For example, resource constraints can result in disagreement over developing support programs for students of color that may not have occurred in flush financial times.

Colleges and universities are inherently political organizations, and many scholars argue that they are becoming more political over time (Gumport, 2000; Kezar et al., 2005). While this alone might make leaders consider the importance of political approaches for creating and negotiating change, the type of change initiative is also important to examine in evaluating the right framework for understanding how to navigate change (Kezar, 2001). Creating a campus that supports diverse students, faculty, and staff has been identified as a political issue (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Faculty, staff, and students from dominant groups often perceive the development of specific programs for groups that have been traditionally underrepresented on campus as taking away resources and support from dominant groups. Traditionally underrepresented groups often do not have the power base that dominant groups have and need to create coalitions, alliances, and informal-influence processes. As a result, their interests are not represented, and enough resources are often not allocated and programs are not developed so that students, faculty, and staff from traditionally underrepresented groups can be successful. In addition, traditionally underrepresented groups may hold values that dominant groups do not share or understand. For example, traditionally underrepresented groups might want graduation ceremonies to be in two languages to embrace their culture. This clashing of interests and values creates conflict between the groups and resistance by the dominant group to changes suggested by the underrepresented group (Birnbaum, 1988).

Studies of the change process in higher education demonstrate that politics—comprised of conflict, resistance, and competing values—often thwart efforts at change (Kezar, 2001). Examining efforts of institutions to create change on a variety of initiatives, Gioia and Thomas (1996) demonstrated that if an issue is identified as political, then change is often not likely to occur. If leaders believed conflict would

emerge, interest groups and factions were forming, competing interests were prevalent, and fighting over resources was likely on an issue, then they tended to shy away from the issue. Leaders are traditionally not well equipped to address politics, and it often prevents strategic change and subverts change processes. While practitioners shy away from issues that are labeled political, research from political theory suggests that political strategies can be extremely effective for overcoming these barriers to change (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

Strategies for Creating Change from Political Theory

In this section, I review some of the common strategies described in political theories of leadership related to negotiating conflict. These strategies were explored as themes in reviewing data collected from college presidents.[5] Bolman and Deal (1997) suggest that there are four main activities for political leaders: mapping the political terrain, coalition building and developing advocates/allies, persuasion, and bargaining and negotiating. I describe these four as well as two others identified in the literature—mediation and persistence. While these strategies are not used in any strict progression, certain strategies are more helpful at the beginning phase of politics (e.g., mapping the political terrain) and some are better as the politics become more advanced (negotiation).

Mapping the Political Terrain

Political leadership theories suggest that to be successful at change, leaders need to carefully assess the political landscape of their organization (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Bolman and Deal (1997) refer to this as "mapping the political terrain." They suggest that there are four main activities involved in such mapping: determining channels of communication, identifying principal agents of political influence, analyzing trends in mobilization, and anticipating strategies that others are likely to employ. Within a diversity initiative, this might mean identifying different interest groups and their opinions about the diversity initiative, examining whether any of these groups might mobilize based on their collective interests, trying to anticipate how they might resist the diversity initiative, and finding ways to become part of their communication network so that you understand more about their strategies and interest.

Coalition Building and Developing Advocates/Allies

Perhaps the most widely cited strategy for leaders is to create a power base (coalition) by gaining support from various interest groups—for example, African Americans, Hispanics, gays and lesbians (Baldridge, 1971; Baldridge et al., 1977; Bolman & Deal, 1997). Successful leaders

negotiate the political climate by aligning with as many powerful interest groups as possible. Leaders need to speak effectively to individuals representing different interests and help them see commonalities. For example, a president might identify staff, students, administrators, and faculty of color and bring them together into a larger coalition, creating a power base around diversity.

In addition to creating a power base through interest groups' support, leaders are also encouraged to gain support from influential individuals such as a long-time faculty members, dedicated alumni, or local leaders who can become advocates or allies (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 1997). These influential individuals tend to have the trust and attention of a variety of groups on campus, and they are the individuals that people check in with to clarify their own perspective. Usually seen as being fair and not maintaining a particular political position, these individuals vary by campus culture, so it is important for leaders to become familiar with these trusted opinion leaders. A vocal alumnus that supports the hiring of faculty of color and who is willing to bring in outside speakers from industry to discuss the issue can be a strong political tool.

Persuasion

Political leaders need to learn the skills of persuasion, helping people to understand different perspectives and values outside their own narrow interests (Bolman & Deal, 1997). As noted earlier, political processes involve competing values and interests. Successful leaders can reframe issues and help individuals from very different groups and subcultures to see the value of an idea—even one outside their own interests and values. Key persuasion tactics include storytelling, using symbols, appealing to expertise, and connecting the issue to something meaningful to the group (Bolman & Deal, 1997). For example, the leader of a campus might appeal to a campus mission of liberal learning and respect for different perspectives as a way to get dominant groups to engage in discussion about diversity. Obviously, understanding the logic of different interest groups also helps in being persuasive, and these tactics are linked.

Bargaining and Negotiation

Organizations would be deadlocked in interest groups if they did not have leaders who could bargain and negotiate to create compromises (Baldridge et al., 1977; Bolman & Deal, 1997). In recent years, political theories have focused on bargaining that is more principled and that attempts to make all parties feel that their interests are represented in some way in the decision. In addition, they emphasize creating a solution that

is satisfactory for both parties and that usually differs from the solution of all parties involved. Thus, in recent years there has been a greater recognition that interest groups are interdependent—all of these individuals will remain within the organization, and creating decisions with which all parties agree is important to the long-term viability of the organization.

Political theories also highlight the importance of informal processes and behind-the-scenes deal making (Baldridge, 1971; Bolman & Deal, 1997). Often an interest group will not concede publicly to issues that are outside its agenda. However, research demonstrates that savvy political leaders negotiate and make compromises (Conrad, 1978). In behind-the-scenes deal making, the constituents' leaders compromise parts of their agendas in order to advance a mutual interest that they worked to identify. For example, the president, chair of faculty senate, head of the student government, and staff union representative might meet to think about ways to move the diversity agenda forward. The chair of the faculty senate might concede to new hiring processes if the curriculum is left up to the faculty. This would be one among many deals developed at that meeting. Informal processes and behind-the-scenes deal making have proven difficult to study in any detail because few people admit to this behavior (Hearn, 1996)

Mediation

A very different strategy to developing a coalition is to try to be a mediator (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Presidents may negotiate politics best if they try to stay outside of any particular interest groups and instead try to mediate between groups. While it is often difficult to be perceived as being outside of a particular interest, one way to stay more neutral is to understand and surround yourself with the logic of a variety of interest groups (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Savvy political leaders attempt to understand the varying values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality among different groups (Bolman & Deal, 1997). This also provides leaders with the opportunity to negotiate and bargain, which is another important political strategy. Having advocates who support a leader can also help legitimize a leader as a mediator.

While leaders might sometimes be mediators, other times they need to know when to rely on other professional facilitators (Bolman & Deal, 1997). In order break a deadlock that can occur when competing interests clash, outside facilitators or individuals who are considered unbiased are often needed. Leaders need to know when they need to step back and allow other people to lead discussions, bring groups together, and help facilitate decision-making. This strategy needs to be used spar-

ingly or groups will perceive that leaders have limited or no authority or are not willing to make a commitment, which can end up compromising their long-term legitimacy (Kezar, 2001).

Persistence

Because many interest groups are changing and shifting (for example, students are graduating, staff turnover can be relatively high, etc.), an important political strategy can be persistence. Studies in higher education have shown that groups that advocate for change over the long run tend to get results (Baldridge et al., 1977; Cohen & March, 1974). Being willing to attend regular meetings, meet with administrative leaders, and be vocal on a regular basis are likely to create change. Persistence is marked by repetitively bringing up an idea and providing ways to implement it in all settings. In this way, the idea is just waiting for an opportunity to present itself.

In conclusion, political theories identify strategies that can be used by leaders to confront conflict and resistance. However, there is a limitation in this theory that this study hoped to overcome. The techniques offered by researchers using political theory are overly broad and do not provide the type of advice leaders need to negotiate a specific conflict—for example, implementing a diversity initiative. This study aimed to uncover specific strategies and examples to help presidents move diversity agendas forward.

Methodology

In order to understand the politics that leaders face in advancing their diversity agendas, the research team conducted "elite interviews" with 27 college presidents (Dexter, 1970; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Merton et al., 1990) because doing so enabled us to obtain information about a phenomenon that had not been pursued in earlier research.[6] Elite interviewing is a specific research methodology that evolved in disciplines such as sociology and political science (Dexter, 1970; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Based on the assumption that access to elites is often difficult and therefore key people that participate in a process are often not interviewed, it is characterized by the following qualities: Researchers conduct extensive analysis of documents and background work before conducting interviews; developing rapport is critical to obtaining information; the interview protocol is based on a combination of background research and literature; the interviewees are allowed more freedom to shape the direction of the interview because they are chosen for their expertise on the issues; and the interview sample selection is

particularly important for ensuring that the phenomenon of interest is elucidated. This section focuses on sampling strategy, background research for the interviews, and strategy around access and rapport. The theoretical framework provided in the article is important to the methodology, and it informed the interview protocol and analysis.

Sample

Selection of interviewees is a particularly important part of the elite interviewing method, as the trustworthiness of the results is based on identifying individuals with significant experience and expertise (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The choice of interviewees was driven by three primary criteria related to expertise: (1) presidents who had significant presidential experience as defined above and who made significant progress advancing a diversity agenda (as identified by national experts on diversity in higher education); (2) presidents who represented different institutional types or sectors in a variety of settings (rural, urban, and suburban) and at different phases within their diversity agenda (early, middle, and late); and (3) presidents who had a reputation for being reflective about their leadership strategies.[7] To develop an initial list of participants, we asked organizations that are familiar with issues of diversity (such as the American Council on Education's Center for Advancement of Racial and Ethnic Equity and Office of Women in Higher Education) to nominate individuals based on these criteria and asked presidents to provide names of peers whom they respected on diversity-related issues. We allowed nominees and presidents to define diversity and a diversity agenda. Most embraced a broad definition of diversity that included race and ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, and the like. Both objective and subjective data (reputation) were used to identify presidents who had been successful advancing a diversity agenda. Objective criteria related to advancing the diversity agenda included but were not limited to the following (institutions did not have to meet all of these criteria): change in the mission of the institution to include diversity, a strategic plan focused on diversity, increase in the amount of funding for diversity related activities, increase in the number of programs related to diversity, hiring of key staff to support diversity, climate studies that suggested change in the campus environment, and so forth. Over 50 individuals were nominated, but only 32 presidents met our criteria of experience and having made progress. Five presidents declined to be interviewed because of a policy of not conducting interviews, in general, or because they felt they did not have time.

The final list of potential participants included individuals from every region of the country and from all higher education sectors. Many had

held presidencies in different geographic regions and some at different types of institutions. Age, gender, race/ethnicity, and other criteria were not purposefully sampled, but an effort was made to ensure that a diverse set of individuals was included. It should be noted that the sample had close to 50% presidents of color. In addition, over one third of the presidents were women, so both the number of women presidents and presidents of color are in greater proportion to presidential demographics (Corrigan, 2003). Fourteen presidents were at predominantly White institutions, while eight were at institutions with a predominant number of minority students but a mix of various groups, as three were at Hispanic-serving institutions, one was at an HBCU, one was at a tribal-serving institution. Because the institutions sampled are so diverse, the nature of the politics was also wide-ranging. The nature of these politics are described at the beginning of the Results section.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was phone interviews because the individuals were geographically dispersed and extremely busy, making visits difficult. Ensuring rapport was extremely important because we wanted to create an environment in which individuals would share information about ways they have been successful in advancing a diversity agenda and strategies that failed, both of which might challenge traditional opinions (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1991). Elites have limited time for interviews; therefore, it was critical to provide information and data to their staff up front so that the presidents could be briefed on the study and questions. Background information about the interviewees was gathered from Web sites, press releases, and through personal contacts. We conducted detailed analyses of institutional Web sites to identify information related to campus diversity agendas and requested documents from institutions. We conducted pre-interviews with key members of the presidents' staff and with informants on campus to garner information about the campuses, presidential leadership to advance diversity, and politics on campus (these interviews were not directly used as a source of data but to shape questions and provide contextual sensitivity for the interviewer). The interviewers attempted to establish an immediate connection with each interviewee, using the information gathered from Web sites and staff in order to garner their trust and interest in the study as quickly as possible before beginning the formal interview process. It should be noted that both researchers have done previous research on college presidents and were known by many of the presidents interviewed, helping with the development of rapport and increasing trustworthiness. Interviews averaged two

hours in length and were tape-recorded. Presidents are usually unlikely to provide this amount of time to interviewers, but our interviewees were willing to based on the personal relationships with the researchers and their dedication to the topic of advancing diversity agendas. Extensive notes were also taken, and the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

An interview protocol was developed from the literature on diversity, organizational politics, and presidential leadership. The interview protocol focused on examining the main strategies and activities that presidents believed helped to advance their diversity agenda, the specific role of the presidents in advancing diversity on campus, the leadership style or approach they used, lessons they learned about leadership in advancing institutional diversity, how they handled situations of conflict and controversy, and how the campus context (region, student body, institutional phase, institutional demographic, institutional type, funding, mission) shaped the advancement of the diversity agenda and the politics they faced. Because this article is part of a larger study, the questions addressed are broader than only politics the leader faced, but this was a specific set of questions within the interviews. Questions related to politics included items such as: Did conflict emerge as you made progress on your diversity agenda? What kind of politics emerged? What strategies did you use to negotiate politics? Which strategies seem to work best? Why do you think they worked? Two researchers conducted the interviews using a common protocol, but the interviews would vary as elites were allowed to move the conversation in directions they felt were important.

Analysis

The interview data and documents were analyzed using Boyatzis's (1998) thematic analysis, a helpful technique that provides particular emphasis on how to identify codes and themes, how to carefully define codes/themes using examples, ways to use theory to create code definitions, and ways to use both deductive and inductive coding simultaneously. It differs from grounded theory analysis, for example, in emphasizing the importance of deductive and inductive codes (grounded theory focuses on inductive coding) and how to examine them at the same time. Essentially, with thematic analysis, the researcher begins with deductive codes from the theory to begin analysis, but the researcher remains open to other codes (inductive codes) that emerge while analyzing data. This approach to data analysis is helpful for studies that are deductive in nature—where prior or related research exists and where an existing theoretical framework is being used to analyze data.

Based on the research questions, analysis focused on strategies that leaders used to move the diversity agenda forward and to navigate poli-

tics. The political theoretical framework provided a variety of deductive themes to explore. Examples of deductive codes extrapolated from political theory include competing interest groups, competing goals, competing value systems, vying for resources, mapping the political terrain, persuasion, allies, persistence, coalitions, and mediators. Boyatzis's framework begins by using deductive analysis but also instructs the researcher to examine data for inductive or emerging themes, so the researcher read through the transcribed interviews for inductive themes. A variety of inductive codes emerged, including using data, learning from controversy, and public relations and showcasing success. Three different individuals coded the data and compared the strategies identified. The criteria used to identify themes/subcategories related to politics focused on (1) the number of different individuals who brought up the code/theme and (2) the amount of time they discussed the concept and level of significance they placed on a code/theme.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

With elite interviewing, some of the primary methods for trustworthiness include amount of background research, careful sampling procedures, and obtaining access to elites and building rapport—all of which were critical components of the study design. In addition to these techniques, member checks were conducted by sending summaries of key points, preliminary analysis, and possible quotations from the transcripts to each president. We provided them the opportunity to ensure that our interpretations matched what they had intended and said in interviews. We additionally ensured trustworthiness by having three different researchers review the interview transcripts for themes related to politics.

In terms of limitations, the data focused on the perceptions of college presidents about what political strategies are important to advancing a diversity agenda and helping diverse students succeed on their campuses. However, we do not know the extent to which these perceptions were shared with other key campus stakeholders, and perceptions of complex organizational phenomena may vary within the same organization (Pettigrew, 1995; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). However, the focus of the study was on gaining insight into a particular set of influential individuals who, although widely acknowledged as essential to advancing meaningful change on campus, have not been examined empirically. Because the actions of leaders are difficult to link with organizational outcomes in higher education (Birnbaum, 1988), we speculate that the data obtained from diverse individuals leading different types of institutions would yield adequate confirming and disconfirming data to uncover

important and common perceptions. What we offer are words of wisdom through experienced individuals who have worked hard for many years to create a successful environment for students from diverse backgrounds. We elected not to conduct case studies of each campus to explore the themes that presidents described in more detail because the focus was on presidential leadership, not on organizations and their change. Doing so would have added important depth and richness to this study, but traveling to 27 institutions was cost prohibitive. There is one caveat in terms of the implications of the research: Presidents typically yield more power than many other leaders on campus, and the results of the study are likely not generalizable to other leaders or at least need further study.

Results

Every president noted that they faced politics and that it was an inevitable part of this process, reinforcing the importance of the theoretical framework used to shape study. Presidents also revealed a set of approaches for negotiating the difficult politics that emerge while trying to create a more inclusive environment and institutionalize a diversity agenda. They describe how the strategies helped them maintain resilience in the face of significant challenges and that without using these strategies they certainly doubted whether presidents could be successful in moving diversity agendas forward. The six strategies mentioned by presidents as most important are (1) develop coalitions and advocates, (2) take the political pulse regularly, (3) anticipate resistance, (4) use data to neutralize politics and rationalize the process, (5) create public relations campaigns and showcase success, and (6) capitalize on controversy for learning and unearth interest groups. While distinctive campus cultures certainly affected the political climate and presidents noted that they had to carefully assess the unique political climate on campus, similar strategies emerged across campuses. Three strategies that emerged—creating coalitions, taking the political pulse, and anticipating resistance (both similar to mapping the political terrain)—were described in the Theoretical Framework section under political theories. However, three new strategies were identified: using data, creating public relations campaigns, and capitalizing on controversy for learning. The results are summarized in the Appendix. Before describing the focus of the results—the six strategies that emerged—I briefly describe the nature of politics that presidents faced, as this sets the stage for the strategies they used.

The Nature of Politics

Before describing the way that presidents negotiated politics, it is important to understand the range of politics they needed to negotiate. There were three main types of politics: (1) dominant groups resistant to a diversity agenda; (2) one traditionally underrepresented group questioning the diversity agenda or trying to narrow the scope of the diversity initiative; (3) conflict between two or more traditionally underrepresented groups.[8]

By far the most common politics that presidents had to negotiate was resistance by dominant groups to a diversity agenda (only five campuses did not describe this issue, usually based on being a single-serving institution—an HBCU or a predominantly minority-serving school). This involved alumni, students, faculty, administrators, and staff that questioned the need for a diversity agenda and that often actively mounted resistance to the change initiative. Sometimes the conflict and controversy did not emerge at the beginning of the diversity agenda, but the presidents encountered a backlash when students of color became successful or gays and lesbians were successful in obtaining health care. At the beginning, some dominant groups did not think the initiative would make a difference and did not actively fight the diversity initiative, but they became active later. This type of politics was more common on predominantly White campuses.

While the most common politics that presidents faced was resistance by dominant groups to the idea of changing the institution to embrace a diversity agenda, this is not the only type of politics they encountered. Presidents at nine institutions noted that from time to time faculty, students, and staff from a traditionally underrepresented group, for example Asians or Hispanics, will question what they think is favoring of another underrepresented group, such as African Americans, or a minority religious group might question gay and lesbian rights. In addition, presidents of color describe pressure from communities of color both on and off campus to promote their interests and agenda. For example, an Hispanic president is pressured by Hispanic parents to focus the diversity agenda only on that group or more heavily on that group. This type of politics occurred on both predominantly White campuses and at predominantly minority campuses.

Lastly, 14 presidents described conflict between two traditionally underrepresented groups on campus. They noted that this was more common on campuses that were farther along in their diversity agendas. On campuses that have more advanced diversity agendas, differing values and interests have often become more open, and often-overlooked in-

equities become visible. This created conflict between groups particularly among competing Asian groups and Hispanic groups and between African Americans and Africans. This was more likely to occur on campuses that had large compositions of individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and religions.

Almost all of the presidents noted that it is important for leaders to be aware that politics take on a variety of forms. Most described that they were prepared for politics between dominant and nondominant groups but were more surprised by politics between and among underrepresented groups. While the strategies used did not differ significantly to address each of these sets of politics, some strategies described below are particularly important for certain types of politics. Differences in addressing different types of politics are highlighted in the discussion of strategies. I now turn to the various strategies that were used by presidents to navigate politics on their campus in service of advancing a diversity agenda.

Develop Coalitions and Advocates

Perhaps the most important strategy mentioned by presidents was developing an extensive network of supporters. Several groups were particularly critical, including the governing board, external community, legislators, and student groups. Most presidents suggested that it would not be wise to move forward with a diversity agenda if the board had not been cultivated first. While this can take time, the board is one of the only groups that can take on significant faculty resistance (including votes of no confidence) and can respond to parent or alumni complaints. Presidents often began by working with the board chair and using the chair to leverage support among the rest of the board. However, other presidents faced the dilemma that the board chair was not supportive of the diversity initiative, and so they approached other board members whom they were able to identify as sympathetic to such a cause. One president told the story of how important it is to get your board to advocate for the diversity agenda:

> I started with the board. I knew the campus was not particularly open to changing; I wasn't sure if they would be resistant. I sensed that if diversity was a priority for the board it would certainly make change easier. The board chair wasn't a particular advocate so I met with a couple of the other board members. Pretty soon, I was having one-on-ones with them, saying, "You know everybody else on the board seems to be really supportive of the initiative; I hope you are." And by the power of peer pressure, shortly the whole board was passing a resolution of the importance of diversity for the campus. But that took some time to make happen. But it became really important later on. As the initiative unrolled several faculty and alumni got together and

> started to mobilize against the initiative. The board took them on and diffused them immediately. I'm pretty sure I would not have been able to do it.

Another president describes the importance of the board:

> If I were to give advice to any new president, it would be, get your board to understand the importance of the agenda and your vision. And make sure that they can defend it on their own. Spend time really educating them about diversity. They are your best advocates and you don't have to be there and they can defend the campus perspective on diversity. And in my experience, you'll likely need that support at some point in time.

While presidents described the board as the most important ally, they also noted the significance of external supporters and the local community. Some institutions are located in urban areas or diverse environments where the community can be a rich source of support. However, in instances where the community is not particularly diverse, presidents sought other types of external support, such as business and industry, that are particularly interested in creating a more diverse work force. Sometimes presidents looked to government agencies at the local, regional, state, or even federal level (National Science Foundation, for example). Various government agencies are often advocates for diversity, as certain parts of the government have supported equity and civil rights. Leaders note that accreditation agencies and other voluntary groups can also provide a source of external support since some have included diversity in the accreditation standards. These are some of the external groups that presidents used to leverage support and that they would consult for support when resistance emerged. As with the board, presidents did not wait until a problem occurred to create these coalitions; instead, they began building the network of support as they began their diversity agenda. One president even created a formal advisory board or commission related to diversity that included a variety of external groups to connect these groups to the campus diversity agenda. Several presidents expressed how this external network was helpful for negotiating politics:

> I was having no luck getting the various schools and colleges to meet their goals—hiring faculty of color and changing the curriculum. In fact, I began to hear stories about resistance emerging. So things were going from bad to worse. That's when I decided I needed to bring in leaders from business and industry. When engineering companies tell the school of engineering that their faculty is too white, that their graduates are not diverse enough, and that their curriculum is outdated, that really makes a difference. After that, things started to change and the resistance subsided.

Another president explains how the community supported the institution's diversity agenda:

> There are a lot of faculty that were beginning to question our separate graduation ceremonies for different ethnic groups. They kept asking me why we needed this and saying it was a waste of money. They kept pressing how we were under a tight budget crunch, which we were. So rather than try to argue with them, I invited them to the graduation ceremony and asked them to meet with members of the African American and Hispanic communities. I told a couple of the community members about the resistance I was facing from faculty. Well, needless to say, after they attended the ceremony and talked to these community members, they changed their minds. People in the community can be really convincing.

Presidents also suggested that students can be among the greatest supporters. While students do not have to kind of power that the board of trustees or external groups such as business and industry have, students have the "special power of being what the institution is all about." Sometimes faculty and staff that resist a diversity initiative believe it is being foisted on the campus by overzealous administrators. When they see that students support the initiative and it has a broad base of support across students, this can counter resistance. Several presidents told stories of how their strongest supporters and allies were students:

> There was a conservative group of faculty and staff on campus that was mounting a defense against the diversity initiative. They started to question the programs and scholarships. They were getting more and more vocal. There were also a group of students that felt I wasn't supporting them enough. Even though they were not resistant to the diversity initiative, they were challenging my legitimacy, which didn't help. Well, a group of students from my prior institution, without my knowledge, came to campus and defended me to students and argued in support of me to the campus community. It was just amazing and it worked.

Presidents suggested that it is important for leaders to meet with the student leaders of Black, Latino, and Hillel student associations. By having ongoing communication with these groups, they can be helpful when politics emerge.

Presidents also noted that it is important to keep local and regional legislators informed of campus activities and to continually advocate for the campus. Many different presidents had leveraged significant resources or political support needed to advance their diversity agendas through the support of legislators. A president sums up the lessons learned from this study about the importance of building coalitions and advocates:

> I have worked to build trust with different groups—African Americans, Hispanics, various religious groups, gays and lesbians. When I have been challenged by a particular group of students or faculty, others have emerged to defend me. You want others defending you. Ideally, the lesson is to build

> alliances and trust up front. Students can often be your best defenders, as they are considered legitimate by legislatures, alumni, and the community and do not seem self-interested.

This quotation also illustrates a key theme across the interviews; savvy presidents described how they needed to know when to step aside and allow a member of the campus community to support or advocate for the diversity initiative. It is not always best for the president to be the primary advocate and to confront conflict, resistance, and politics.

Take the Political Pulse Regularly (Mapping the Political Terrain)

In addition to creating allies and coalitions, presidents described the way that they needed to regularly assess the political environment. Presidents need to have informants throughout the campus to help them know how faculty, staff, and students are feeling about the diversity agenda. In addition, they needed informants off campus in the community. Several presidents talked about the importance of assessing the political climate:

> While I'm not really a political animal, I do recognize that I need to be aware of people who resist the direction we are going. Every couple months, I have a group of people that I talk with and get a sense for what the vibe is out there. Usually I don't learn a lot that's new; however, a couple times it's really helped me avoid being sideswiped.

A variety of presidents also described how they had forgotten to take the political pulse or stopped taking it as the agenda progressed. The story of one president who stopped taking the political pulse demonstrates some of the problems that emerge:

> I thought it was time that we start to examine some of the values held on campus. The campus was moving at such a slow pace and I thought that if I could get people to fundamentally rethink their values, we could start to change the curriculum and programming and hiring and admissions. So I issued some challenging concept papers and asked some campus groups to make some deep fundamental changes. A few people pulled me aside and said, "I'm really excited about the direction you're taking, but if I make changes you are asking for now there's going to be a serious backlash and were just not ready yet. Several people I have talked to will mount a resistance if you go forward with this." I really appreciated these insightful people telling me that I needed to get broader ownership first and mak[ing] me aware of the politics related to the actions I was taking.

Taking the political pulse was important for several reasons. First, presidents needed to know when it was time to tap allies for support. Allies are much more powerful when used at times of resistance; having

allies talk all the time decreases their power and effectiveness. Second, presidents were able to identify if they were pushing the agenda too hard and too fast. By taking the pulse, they can see where they need to slow down again and gain more support. One president aptly captures this idea:

> You can't do good things if you're not there. Be careful about understanding the politics of the campus as you move forward. Look at your timing of things, your pacing of things, how people are reacting to your strategies. Make sure you're not running into a brick wall. This is a long-distance race. How can you put into play strategies that will, over the long haul, result in change? If you go head-on, and the environment is not ready for it and there's a pushback, you only serve to remove yourself from the environment you are trying to change.

Third, this approach also anticipates forms of resistance and facilitates developing an effective strategy to address resistance in a proactive rather than a reactive manner. A president describes how taking the political pulse helped anticipate resistance:

> We realized some members the African American community were upset because the number of Hispanic faculty, students, and staff was expanding and the African American presence shrinking. There were accusations we were not being supportive of African Americans. There could have been mounting disapproval of our diversity agenda. Right away, I set up a dialogue between African American students and community members and my administration. We sat down and looked at the data and realized it was due to demographic trends. But I took this as an opportunity to try to talk about ways we could ensure that African American students maintained a presence on campus. That could have exploded down the line.

Several presidents had established a human relations commission or presidential diversity task force that had the charge to assess the campus climate and monitor for politics. This group can take the political pulse of the campus in a systematic way and on an ongoing basis. The president from a campus that experienced a lot of conflict and politics describes how the human relations committee helped the campus move forward on its diversity initiative: "We found that we needed a group that was really monitoring how things were going related to diversity. If you don't have a group that is devoted to this, there's a good chance that you will miss something and the politics might spin out-of-control."

An important time for taking the political pulse is at the beginning of the presidency or the beginning of the diversity of agenda. Many presidents made a point to either have focus groups with people across campus to understand the various views about diversity or to host a retreat with leaders across campus. The president has an opportunity to identify people that might be allies as well as individuals who might set up countercoali-

tions or be barriers in the future. Outside facilitators were often brought to initial retreats or meetings to assist in getting more honest responses:

> That's where facilitation has become really important in our process. A facilitator asks questions that no one else can. You have to get people to speak their minds. You can't be politically naïve in any of this and believe people will be up front without some prodding. A skilled facilitator can get people to share things they normally would not.

In sum, taking the political pulse allows presidents to pace the initiative and defuse some of the politics; it also helps them develop a proactive strategy to address the inevitable politics.

Anticipate Resistance

Taking the political pulse assists presidents in anticipating resistance. However, presidents noted that there are some types of resistance that you can anticipate without taking a political pulse. Because the alumni of most institutions are predominantly White (even of the Hispanic-serving institutions, for example), they often see the changes happening on campus as no longer serving their interests and values. Many express concern that the institution is changing from the way it was when these alumni were students. Presidents noted that it is imperative to contact alumni at the beginning of the diversity initiative and to try to help them understand the changes taking place rather than ignore them or hope they support the new values. When possible, it is important to invite influential alumni to campus conversations, and it is certainly important to communicate to alumni through newsletters and other communication vehicles. The more informed the alumni are, the less likely they are to mount a resistance (in most cases). One president describes interaction with alumni and the problems of not anticipating resistance:

> When we began our diversity initiative, I started to get a lot of calls from angry alumni. I should have anticipated this. I tried to explain to them why we are moving in the direction that we are; some got it and some didn't. I would suggest that presidents anticipate this type of resistance and be more proactive. You can mount a better campaign up front.

While alumni were mentioned by almost all the presidents, the group that was mentioned next as resistant is the faculty, particularly regarding hiring faculty of color and curriculum revision. In fact, presidents noted that faculty seemed quite supportive of the diversity initiative as long as it related to students, but as soon as it began to focus on the issues closer to their identity, then they became increasingly resistant. Therefore, many presidents were surprised when the faculty who were initially supportive became resistant. In the words of one president:

> What's important is to remember that just because people are supportive at one point in time doesn't mean they'll always be supportive. In particular, faculty appeared to do a 180 once we began to talk about hiring faculty of color and the curriculum. That really slowed things down for a while, and in fact we haven't made much progress since.

Most presidents mentioned that they experienced difficulty in having faculty think about hiring practices in new ways. There are strong disciplinary norms about the definition of a "quality" faculty member that typically favor White male candidates. Presidents need to consider becoming more knowledgeable about strategies for diversifying the faculty and need to be ready to present data and evidence to combat typical criteria that often prohibit faculty from diverse backgrounds from being hired.

Presidents mentioned students as one of their greatest allies, but students can also be one of their greatest sources of resistance. In recent years, students have become much more powerful in their abilities to organize resistance. Several presidents mentioned student blogs and Web sites where student groups mounted campaigns against the diversity initiative. The power of e-mail makes it easy to contact people and create a network. A president describes how technology is used by students, in particular, to create resistance:

> One of the things I had to learn was the way that new technology changes the rules of the game. You need to be aware of student Web sites and blogs and how they're using them to stir things up. And the newspapers have taken hold of these as well for a source of information. Leaders need to be aware of these new information sources and realize that you have to respond to things quickly. You have to use your own technology and Web sites to provide counterperspectives and share information and you have to do this on a timely basis. Information is less under control than ever. This makes politics even more challenging.

Technology has emerged as a public forum to organize resistance to organizational change efforts among all the groups mentioned above. Staff, faculty, and alumni also use technology to personally attack members of the institutional advocates of diversity. The Internet has provided resisting groups with an instrument of empowerment that can be used to thwart change efforts.

Use Data to Neutralize Politics and Rationalize the Process (Persuasion)

Most presidents described how data can be used to diffuse harmful politics that can thwart diversity efforts. People often feel passionately about issues of diversity, and an emotional climate is created. While pas-

sion can to facilitate change, it can also subvert transformation. The presidents described how they used data to neutralize politics and rationalize the process of change. They noted the importance of having an excellent institutional research (IR) director and examining the IR infrastructure to ensure that you are getting quality data. There are several different ways that presidents use data. First, they describe the importance of creating a culture of evidence for decision-making. One president describes his efforts to diffuse politics by creating a culture based on evidence:

> One day I literally stopped making decisions and refused to until data was presented. I said: "That is an urgent issue, but until I see data to support the issue, I cannot make a decision." They finally realized I was serious even though I had been saying this for a year. I just stopped making decisions.

This helps move people from basing decisions on assumptions, anecdotal evidence, and stereotypes to database decision-making practices. Presidents noted that "Politics are much more likely to thrive in a culture of stereotypes and misinformation than one based on data."

Many presidents described how their campuses operated from false assumptions or outdated notions about the campus. For example, some people believed a diversity agenda was not needed because the campuses were already diverse. One president showed faculty and staff that students of color were not succeeding and not graduating compared to their White counterparts, and the campus realized a diversity agenda was needed.

> I kept sitting faculty and staff groups down, and saying, look at this data. You don't think we have any problems, but our retention and graduation rates are horrible. Faculty of color keep leaving here. Then I ask them a set of questions and said, "I want you to be part of the solution." Faculty, in particular, really like this approach. Every time I've done that we've moved the campus farther ahead.

On another campus, faculty were unaware of the ways students had diversified and the range of backgrounds they came from. Once data were presented about the true range of backgrounds and ethnicities of students, the faculty and staff were much more open to programs and interventions aimed at these diverse groups. Presidents described that, before data was presented at these campuses, they were teeming with conflict and resistance.

As mentioned in this section on the nature of politics, some of the politics related to perceived inequities were between underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Several presidents were pressured to support particular racial or ethnic groups that felt their needs were more important than those of other groups. Presidents were able to successfully

defuse claims for favoring a particular ethnic group by providing data about the needs of other racial and ethnic groups. For example, presidents described pressures from the African American or Hispanic communities to focus on the needs of their particular groups, especially if the president was a member of that group. Presidents recounted that the challenge of diversity is typically conceptualized as a Black-White issue on most campuses. Providing data about the lack of success of other racial and ethnic groups is extremely important to supporting a broad diversity agenda. African American presidents were able to offer data about the low graduation rates of Hispanic students to African American communities and help them understand the necessity of programs for these students. In particular, there are many Asian groups that have experienced inequities and that are often overlooked in terms of their success. Campuses that had collected more detailed data on student backgrounds and had conducted qualitative research about the experience of Asians students, for example, had data to show that many Asian groups were struggling to be successful and could present the data to support programs aimed at these students.

In addition to data, presidents described the importance of "rationale" or logic to defuse politics. Presidents need to carefully think through the logic that supports diversity and make sure that it is communicated to all campus constituents as often as possible. Some leaders noted how having a clear and simple explanation about the importance of diversity makes it easier for supporters to advocate the message and more difficult for political adversaries to topple the diversity agenda. In the words of one president, "I've learned one powerful lesson in my three presidencies, the value of a simple idea or message and to repeat it consistently. They did that at the University of Michigan. And they've done it at other places." Presidents use different logic—from the benefits of diversity to learning, to the connection of diversity to a liberal arts education, to the importance of diversity for a global economy and multicultural work force. Presidents also described the power of asking questions and having people examine their own rationale. One of the presidents described the story of using questions to redirect conflict on his campus:

> Some White students came to my office and said they were really upset that Black students are doing so well academically in science. I said, "Well, our Asian students have always been at the top. Why is it that you've never been bothered by the fact that they do so well?" They sat there and they were really taken aback and it made them think.

By helping people to critically analyze the situation, many presidents moved past difficult political situations. They stressed the importance of

not becoming defensive and instead emphasized the importance of a repeated simple message and humbly questioning other people's rationales.

Public Relations: Showcasing Success

Presidents mentioned the power of creating events, publications, and other avenues that helped demonstrate and make visible the success of diversity efforts on campus. It was noted as particularly important to include various constituent groups or stakeholders in the creation of such events and publications. One president described an event that he hosted to demonstrate the success of a Hispanic and African American leadership project and how it helped to subvert politics that were emerging on campus:

> I noticed there were groups on campus that were upset that funds were being set aside for our Hispanic and African-American leadership program. I decided to host this event and invited foundation officers and members of our corporate community as well as key constituents across campus. I demonstrated how students from our program were going on to be leaders in the local community and some of the changes they had made. We also showed the community service they had done. Not only did these groups praise us for the work we've done, but they provided us funding for more programs. That really stopped the grumbling on campus. If external groups think what you're doing is good, more people on campus are likely to think so too. But if it's not showcased, they often miss it.

Bringing back successful alumni was used as a strategy to showcase how the diversity agenda had successfully assisted certain students. Faculty and staff often forget the students after they leave, and the institutional impact is often forgotten or missed. One president comments on the strategy, "We bring back alumni, very intentionally, to give a talk, to celebrate their successes, to show how our institution has made a difference. I have received notes from faculty and staff who changed their perspective after hearing these talks."

Another president describes her work to obtain support for the diversity agenda by focusing on celebrating the institution's successes. In particular, this president describes the importance of data to demonstrating progress on a diversity initiative and for combating politics and dissent:

> I think we've gotten through politics by demonstrating results. When I've experienced flak from the state, I go up and show them how the programs have substantially changed our success with students of color. If alumni or faculty are concerned, I set up a meeting or event and present our positive results. So that's how I handle politics, by demonstrating results.

Other presidents experienced pressure from students and faculty of color for not doing enough to support them and for not moving fast enough on the agenda. A strategy for handling this political situation is that presidents recommended an honest review and presentation of data related to results and efforts. Presidents cautioned that unless the data shows that progress is not being made, it is important that they not change the pace of their diversity agenda to meet certain interest group needs, since doing so might compromise achieving the overall agenda. In most cases, data supported that campuses were moving forward and helped to answer questions and decrease conflict between the administration and these various racial and ethnic groups that hoped the agenda would move more quickly. One president describes this dilemma:

> We were getting a lot of heat from students of color that we weren't doing enough to support them. So we took this as an opportunity to look at what we were doing—maybe we weren't doing as much as we needed to do. We went to the students and showed them all that we were doing and the data on progress we had, and they were really impressed. They had no idea all the efforts going on and the progress. So this actually helped to get them more supportive of our agenda and allowed us to maintain the pace we thought made sense.

Capitalize on Controversy for Learning and Unearthing Interest Groups

While most presidents felt frustrated by the politics that emerged as they tried to support and/or implement a diversity initiative, they also recognized that some of the greatest progress on the diversity initiative was made by engaging the politics head on and by understanding different interest groups. Presidents described how they capitalized on the controversy (such as conflicting claims about the success or failure of certain groups, beliefs that certain groups were favored and given undue advantage, or differing values among groups) to create learning for the campus. They used situations of conflict that arose to engage people on campus in conversations. It is at times of great controversy that people tend to become more aware and break out of their routines, and it is at these times that they might be open to learning. Presidents recognized this potential and used the politics to create organizational learning.

Many presidents noted that the human relations commission or presidential diversity task force (noted earlier) was often the group that helped create dialogues or conversations that helped move from politics and conflict to learning for individuals and groups. These groups would create campuswide conversations where learning could occur. The overarching philosophy of these groups was to humanize the conflict and to

get people to talk and to learn from one another. The strategy is particularly important for combating politics between different underrepresented groups. Student protests and demonstrations are key opportunities for helping the campus to learn and grow. In the words of one president:

> The students are protesting; they have taken over the president's office. I realize this is a great opportunity for us to challenge the campus to rethink what's going on. They believe that affirmative action is lowering standards on campus. I invite them as well as the rest of the campus community to dialogue about this issue. Sure, there were some hard moments and one of the faculty presented a pretty racist paper that really angered a lot of groups on campus. But you can't shy away from these conversations. There is some real learning that occurred in the end, and it turned out to be a phenomenal success.

One of the presidents described the ways she used conflict between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish students and faculty to try to advance the campus understanding of diversity:

> Our Christian and Muslim student clubs were holding prayer services and advertising them across campus. A group of Jewish faculty became really concerned about the visibility of their advertising and were starting to question the line between church and state. Also, the gay and lesbian students were upset because the Christians and Muslims were praying for them to change their lifestyles. The faculty wanted me to set up some policy against what the Christian and Muslim students were doing. Instead, I said let's have a dialogue about religion on campus. This accomplished two important things. First, the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and gay and lesbian groups began to get to know each other, which is very powerful. It is easy for one group to—from a distant place—to critique the other group. When they really get to know each other, then they have to think about their actions more. They also became much more respectful of each other's positions.

Controversy allows constituents to also see the common ground, which can help move a diversity agenda forward. By actively engaging the conflict, rather than ignoring it as leaders are often apt to do, presidents can use controversy as a teachable moment that helps build respect and understanding among different groups and that often creates greater commitment to the diversity initiatives. Presidents noted that campuses that have the most conflict are often the campuses that have made the most progress on their diversity agendas and that engagement of controversy was one of the issues that helped them progress.

By actively engaging conflict, leaders are also able to identify other interest groups and possible areas of conflict to anticipate for the future. One president who was on a campus that had been working on a diver-

sity initiative for over 30 years describes the issue of conflict becoming more visible when you have been successful at moving at diversity agenda forward:

> One of the recent controversies helped us to identify some other groups on campus that are in conflict with each other. It used to be the Hispanic and Asian groups had competing interests, but now it's the native Mexicans versus the Spanish Mexicans. Controversy helps you to see what might be issues coming down the road and groups that are not included on campus.

By creatively engaging controversy, leaders also were able to effectively take the political pulse since these conversations often unearth differing interests of which they were unaware.

Personally Surviving Politics

Politics do not always stay focused on the campus and often turn inward on the presidents themselves. Several presidents mentioned that it is important for them to survive the politics, because "if you don't make it through and initiate these changes, then the important path that you came to the campus for will fall apart. And this will keep delaying the change; you have to survive." Some of the strategies described above help to defuse some of the personal focus of politics (particularly, having board support, establishing a human relations council, or creating coalitions and networks), but presidents also described the importance of developing internal strategies for navigating politics. Perhaps the most important strategy was keeping focused on their goal—their passion for helping students succeed. In fact, talking to students on an ongoing basis was one of the best ways to help presidents survive the difficult politics associated with moving a diversity agenda forward. One president's comments reflected what many said: "It's the students—they are what help me survive. When I hear their stories, when I see the changes we have made, I know I can take on the next battle. Presidents need to stay close to students; it really keeps you sane."

Many presidents also mention the importance of having a network outside of the institution. Moving a diversity agenda forward often alienates various groups on campus. A few presidents had trusted people on campus and been burned by sharing information with people whom they thought they could trust. Instead, presidents need a trusted set of individuals off campus to share information and to "blow off steam" from time to time. It is not wise for the president to share information with people on campus, and they need to identify people in their broader professional or personal network. In the words of one president, "I can pick up the phone and talk to whole series of people across the country. And

they are there for me 24/7. That really helps. Presidents and other leaders need this type of support if they want to make it through the politics. Politics defeats people who do not sustain themselves." In general, presidents noted the importance of identifying strategies that made them resilient in the face of difficult politics.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This study offers several theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, presidents agreed that a political framework for understanding change related to diversity is particularly important, mirroring earlier studies by Baldridge et al. (1977), Bolman and Deal, (1997), Clark (1983), Gioia and Thomas (1996), Hearn (1996), and Sporn (1999). While many leadership studies of diversity have examined the issue from scientific management or human relations/resource theories, this study supports the importance of conceptualizing this issue as a political one. This study also highlights the nature of politics that have not been previously described. For example, it highlights an often overlooked aspect of campus politics—the political relationship between underrepresented groups.

In addition, this study adds needed detail about the types of strategies that presidents can use to negotiate politics, which has both theoretical and practical insights. Political theories suggested the importance of creating coalitions; mapping the political terrain; bargaining, informal processes, and behind-the-scenes deal making; persuasion; the role of mediators; and the importance of persistence (Baldridge et al., 1977; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Clark, 1983; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hearn, 1996; Sporn, 1999). While many of these strategies proved important to presidents, other strategies were discovered that are not typically described in political theory, such as using data to neutralize politics, showcasing success, or capitalizing on controversy for learning and unearthing interest groups. These new strategies represent important new insights for leaders: data, learning, and demonstrating success are techniques that engage the conflict but also help overcome divisive politics related to diversity. Presidents noted that a typical problem in advancing a diversity agenda is for presidents to ignore conflict and to stay safely in the realm of vision and strategic planning. As long as leaders see politics and power as negative and try to ignore it, they prevent themselves from engaging in the creative aspect of politics and conflict that can help to create a new future on campus. While most of the presidents expressed that they did not enjoy politics and conflict, the successful leaders acknowledge that they needed to engage it.

In addition, the data provided detailed examples and stories for leaders to use rather than the generic advice of being persuasive or develop-

ing coalitions described in the Theoretical Framework section (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Instead, the study describes who are the important groups to develop coalitions with, how they can be used best, and why they are important—thus building on the work by Baldridge et al. (1977), Bolman and Deal (1997), and Hearn (1996). In particular, understanding the political terrain surrounding diversity issues is an important insight from the study which is only hinted at in Bolman and Deal (1997), for example. Being proactive in contacting alumni and knowing to watch student Web sites provides leaders with specific advice about how to tackle resistance against a diversity initiative. While a general set of strategies was identified across different institutional contexts, demographics, and types, the reader is cautioned that politics varied by campus culture—which is why taking the political pulse is such a critical finding and was reiterated by most presidents we spoke with.

Another important finding is that leaders need to be proactive in identifying ways to maintain resilience in the face of politics that threaten their survival. These presidents had witnessed other leaders who had not been successful negotiating the politics, and they were each particularly thoughtful about developing a strategy for personally surviving the politics. Over time they learned the importance of board support, campus coalitions, and keeping close to students.

Two interesting relationships that appear to emerge in the data should be the focus of future study. This study has identified a preliminary connection between the nature of the politics encountered and the type of political strategy used by leaders. In general, each strategy was used for all three types of politics (resistance by the dominant group, resistance by a traditionally underrepresented group, conflict between traditionally underrepresented groups), but leaders noted that certain strategies had more salience for certain forms of conflict. Each strategy reviewed was successful in negotiating resistance by dominant groups to a diversity agenda. Using data to neutralize politics, taking the political pulse, and developing coalitions and advocates were helpful when traditionally underrepresented groups questioned the diversity agenda or tried to narrow the scope of the initiative. Capitalizing on controversy for learning was noted as a particularly important strategy when conflict between two or more traditionally underrepresented groups emerged. In addition, there may be a relationship between the phase of the institution's initiative and the strategies used to negotiate politics. Institutions that are early in their diversity initiatives tend to focus more on developing coalitions, anticipating resistance, and using data and logic to rationalize the process, which mirrors the progression of political strategies described in the Theoretical Framework section (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Kezar,

2001). As institutions progress, they tend to use public relations and showcasing success as well as capitalizing on controversy for learning more often. With progress, leaders can shift to other strategies that they found "easier" to use to address politics and can use fewer strategies. This finding suggests that leaders at early-phase institutions face an additional burden, meaning that they need to take greater care to personally sustain themselves and to be cognizant of the need to invoke a variety of strategies. Future studies should examine these issues in greater detail. In addition, presidents of different races likely face distinctive challenges related to politics. It appears, for example, that leaders of color may use data more often because it detracts from naysayers who believe that their commitment to diversity is personal rather than an institutional imperative. Leaders of color may also need to rely even more heavily on powerful external coalitions. While some of these issues emerged in the data, there was not enough detail and future research is necessary. These emergent findings about the impact of the race of the president are reviewed in Kezar and Eckel (2005).

Future studies should also examine the nature of politics in more detail, following up on trends identified in the study. The major focus of this study was on strategies that presidents used to negotiate politics. Detailed case studies related to the nature of politics around diversity initiatives would be extremely helpful. Often researchers focus on success stories and facilitators of change, neglecting barriers and politics. Case study research of problems encountered and a more detailed account of the nature of these problems would be an important next step in the search.

This study highlights the importance of making politics related to advancing a diversity agenda more visible so that the politics can be addressed by leaders on campus. By beginning to examine the nature of politics and the strategies that college presidents use to negotiate them, advocates for diversity initiatives can be better prepared to move their causes forward.

APPENDIX

Type of Political Strategy Used by Presidents and Cited as Important Including Frequency

Type of strategy	Number of presidents describing strategy as important
Develop coalitions	22
Take political pulse/anticipate resistance	17/14
Use data/rationalize process	15/12
Initiate public relations campaigns and showcase results	13
Capitalize on controversy for learning	14

Notes

[1]A diversity agenda or initiative as I am defining it and as defined by the presidents is multifaceted and attempts to integrate diversity into the structure, culture, and fabric of the institution—so that it is truly institutionalized (Curry, 1992). While I did not impose a definition of diversity, almost all presidents defined it broadly to include race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and the government-designated protected classes and beyond. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine how diversity and multiculturalism have evolved historically on college campuses, but it should be noted that campuses have wrestled with different definitions and approaches to diversity initiatives over the last 40 years. Definitions have expanded from focusing mostly on race to include broader definitions as different disenfranchised groups wanted to be recognized. Multiculturalism (a broader term that moved beyond race to gender, sexual orientation, etc.) rather than diversity was adopted by many campuses in the 1990s as a way of embracing a variety of oppressed groups. However, it should be noted that there is much disagreement over these terms and their precise definitions, particularly as they are used in practice.

[2]In particular, the American Association of Colleges and Universities has developed a set of publications over the last 15 years that have attempted to help campuses advance diversity agendas. See Bauman et al. (2005), Milem et al. (2005), Musil et al. (1999), and Smith and Associates (1997). But these publications have focused less on leaders and their role in overcoming politics. This current article provides data to complement these important resources.

[3]Two theories are typically used to understand the change process and barriers/resistance: human relations or resources theory and scientific management (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Human relations theory suggests that people resist change because they do not understand the issues properly and that, once trained, they will alter their behaviors. Scientific management theories indicate that people resist change because they are entrenched in certain routines. By providing strategic plans, a vision, and new ideas outside of their routines, employees will begin work differently. Within these theories, common strategies for addressing barriers to change include training, providing rewards, and restructuring. While these theories help understand resistance, they ignore politics—different interests and values that often underpin issues of diversity.

[4]Politics and power are related concepts but are distinct phenomena. I chose to focus on politics since power has been examined in other studies of diversity—particularly from a critical theory perspective. Please see these publications for an understanding of the relationship of power to diversity initiatives (Astin & Leland, 1991; Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006; Safarik, 2003; Tierney, 1991, 1993; Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, Tuttle, Ward, & Gaston-Gayles, 2004). I chose not to review the literature on power because it is so expansive, and I could not do justice to the concepts within the space of this article. However, it is important to note the relationship of these concepts and provide the reader with additional resources to follow up on this relationship.

[5]I acknowledge that political issues need not only be handled through political strategies and leadership approaches. In fact, in other articles, I have discussed the importance of human relations strategies (Kezar & Eckel, forthcoming), in particular, for helping to prevent political issues from emerging at all. However, once political issues have emerged, I wondered whether political theories could help in providing guidance for leaders in how to negotiate these issues. In addition, since political strategies tend to be underconceptualized in relation to moving diversity agendas forward, I felt it particularly important to investigate this issue within the study.

[6]In this section, I refer to a research team because the data was collected by two individuals and because my analysis was confirmed by the research team. However, in other sections I refer only to myself as author of this article. This methodology is also referenced in other papers related to this study.

[7]An article focused on leadership strategies and phases is published separately (Kezar, 2007; see also Kezar et al., forthcoming).

[8]While presidents described a variety of differing interest groups from different races, genders, religions, and sexual orientations, by far the most frequently mentioned differing interest related to race. This was followed by examples of sexual orientation and religion. It should also be noted that presidents described a broad diversity agenda that included race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ability status, and the like. However, gender, for example, was almost never brought up in relation to politics.

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