REMOTELY RISKY? An Exploratory Study of COVID-19 Risk-Mitigation Messaging of Female Presidents at Research-Intensive Universities

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Female leaders face numerous challenges and barriers beyond the scope of their position, including biases about their leadership style and personal characteristics, isolation and exclusion, and lack of mentoring, among others. The position of university president has typically been held by White males. The numbers of female university presidents remains disproportionately low, with an even wider gap for Black women and women of color, especially at research-intensive universities. This exploratory study examined statements about key instructional decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic from 9 female presidents of research-intensive universities (Carnegie classification R1 and R2). An emergent methodology incorporating elements of dialogic discourse analysis and comparative case study was used to examine the crisis and emergency risk communication styles of these female leaders in order to explore how they mitigated risk in their communications and the differences in decision-making agency exhibited.

Keywords: female university presidents, risk mitigation, crisis communication, agency

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 offered unparalleled challenges and opportunities for leaders in many types of organizations, in the United States and across the globe. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic itself, and economic hardships and skyrocketing rates of unemployment resulting from the pandemic, are further illuminating long-standing social and economic inequities. Disproportionate rates of poverty, lack of internet access, and food, housing, and fiscal insecurity are becoming increasingly transparent as the pandemic continues to surge. Running parallel to these tragedies are increasingly divisive politics that attempt to privilege White

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male supremacy and patterns of behavior reflective of years past. But there is push back, including organized efforts such as the global outrage after the death of George Floyd, who was murdered by police in Minneapolis, MN. His death became a tipping point for systemic racism, resulting in global support for the Black Lives Matter movement and protests demanding changes in policing practices, access to equitable opportunities, and calling for an end to other discriminatory policies and practices. Strong and compassionate leaders are more essential than ever right now.

The world as we knew it is no longer the same, and this is also true for educational institutions. Educational institutions, K–12 and higher education alike, made a nearly immediate about-face to remote learning when the coronavirus pandemic and resulting stay-at-home orders necessitated everyone adapt to new ways of providing educational experiences and facilitating learning. The roles of educators and educational leaders shifted and nearly all operations of our educational institutions were handled remotely after March 2020 and throughout the summer months. Many universities are still operating remotely or using a hybrid model.

The qualities of what constitutes a good leader are also coming under increasing scrutiny. The importance of clear, decisive, and accurate communications is often key to how a leader is perceived. Just as world leaders are increasingly being compared in respect to their pandemic responses and planning, with female leaders seemingly outperforming their male and authoritative counterparts (Taub, 2020), the leaders of educational institutions are also being judged by their messaging, planning, and actions. Leadership decision-making in these rapidly shifting times feels riskier than before due to the high stakes nature of COVID-19 and its ripple effects, along with the potential for long-term consequences or possibly benefits for society, organizations, and the leaders making those decisions.

Leadership in complex, rapidly changing higher education contexts is challenging for everyone, but especially so for women. Females are underrepresented in leadership roles, especially at research-intensive universities, amplifying the risks they face associated with their leadership roles. Female leaders are under increasing scrutiny in general, but perhaps even more so given the shift toward autocratic, conservative leadership in the United States under the current political administration.

Women are still underrepresented in leadership roles, although progress is being made. But, simply having more women in authority does not mean that there is a more supportive environment for female leaders. As women, we face myriad implicit and explicit expectations and biases. Ely and Rhode (2010) speak to the ways that ambivalence about women in leadership roles emerges in organizational structures and practices, resulting in the double bind that women face in terms of their experiences as leaders and their leadership identities. Experiences related to isolation and exclusion, access to professional and social networks, excessive workloads, and work-life balance are but a few of the ways that women face barriers to leadership progression. Coupled with these barriers are perceptions about how women lead and whether they conform to traditional feminine stereotypes or adopt more masculine traits in alignment with their own leadership identity and the cultural norms and expectations within their organization. "Women who conform to traditional feminine stereotypes are often liked but not respected" but, "women who adopt more masculine traits are often respected but not liked" (Ely & Rhode, 2010, p. 385).

Self-knowledge is key to effective leadership. Who we are is how we lead (Brown, 2019). In order to shift from doing to being, we need to "firmly ground our self-identity in our leadership role" (referencing Lord & Hall, 2005, as cited in Ely & Rhode, 2010, p. 379) and exercise agency. In today's political climate where ideologies are easily weaponized, and the stakes of a leader's decisions are potentially life altering, it is even riskier to

stray from the leadership and cultural norms within an organization. Embracing vulnerability and authenticity as a leader requires risk-taking, and a negotiation of one's position and power within a given situation (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). This creates another double bind: if women are perceived as being too vulnerable, we may be viewed as weak and ineffective. If we do not embrace vulnerability, and therefore authenticity, we cannot lead as effectively. When including the layers and implications of decision-making in the COVID-19 environment and the need to establish calm, trust, and a feeling of security within a leader's community, this double bind becomes even more perplexing and challenging for female leaders and leaders representing minoritized groups. As leaders we have intersecting identities that include our gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Each of these is interdependent and interactive with the others (Bell & Nkomo, 1992). Having a strong sense of agency and a focus on leading authentically helps to generate trust with those we lead, but leading is still a risky proposition in today's high stakes world, and it is especially risky when others perceive our leadership roles through biased lenses, disrespect, or fear.

Risk is socially constructed and engaging in risk-taking can be a means to a reward or an end to a career depending upon circumstances and outcomes. University presidents must be ever mindful of the many constituents they serve, who should be involved in what types of decision making, and the types of messaging about the university and university-related decisions that must be broadly shared. Politically charged issues such as governmental initiatives related to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, international students, the Black Lives Matter movement, and pressure from the federal level to reopen schools and university campuses raises the risk level for presidents. How universities respond to the COVID-19 pandemic can literally create a life or death situation for students, faculty and staff, as well as college communities, and for the tenure of university leaders. The additional perceptual and functional constraints often in place for female university presidents increase the stress level and political implications.

The June 2020 American Council on Education (ACE) survey (Soler & Turk, 2020) asked university presidents questions about communication related to fall 2020 plans and fall scenario planning. Noting that planning for the fall 2020 term is "both a complex and massive undertaking," responses to the survey indicate that presidents overwhelmingly sought input and guidance from internal and external stakeholders; and 84% of presidents surveyed reported that they created new advisory groups to help develop or offer input on planning efforts. Sixty-three percent of presidents completing the survey reported that they were overseeing the crafting of multiple scenario plans for the fall semester to allow for flexibility and the ability to respond quickly to changing conditions. Of particular note for this article were the survey responses on communicating fall plans and new policies. Nearly all presidents indicated that their institution is communicating updates through a variety of means, with direct emails and use of the institution's website serving as the top two means of communication. Many institutions also are utilizing social media, virtual town hall meetings, and orientation meetings as well as other means to provide transparent communication over multiple modalities in order to have as far a reach as possible with the university community and other constituents (Soler & Turk, 2020).

Female university presidents, especially those at research-intensive universities which are generally considered to be the premiere positions for university presidents, are in especially vulnerable positions given the high stakes nature of the pandemic. The purpose of our exploratory study was to examine the crisis and emergency risk communication styles of nine female presidents of public research-intensive universities as they publicly communicated messaging about three key decisions related to COVID-19: shifting to remote instruction in March 2020, decisions about

summer instruction and university operations, and decisions about fall semester instruction and operations. Joffe (2003) suggests that risk is not only both material and symbolic, but that risk messages offer insights about one's interpretations of risk and how to mitigate it based on an individual's past experiences, assumptions, preferences and tolerances.

The numbers of female university presidents are disproportionately low compared with those who are White and male. In 2012, women in the United States represented only 26% of college and university presidents (Hannum et al., 2015) and this gap widens for women of color. Townsend (2020) reports that there are even less women in leadership roles in institutions of higher learning globally. And, there are fewer women serving as presidents of public research-intensive universities, arguably the top universities in the United States. Investigating the crisis and emergency risk communication styles of this population of women presidents at public research-intensive universities during the high stakes COVID-19 pandemic and exploring how these female leaders who have earned positions in what are typically male-dominated universities demonstrate agency and voice may offer new insights into how they negotiate their positional power, particularly in times of crisis.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Three broad areas of literature were reviewed for this study: challenges facing university leaders, challenges facing female and/or Black, Indigenous, and people of color leaders (BIPOC), and crisis communication. Each of these is briefly discussed below.

Challenges Currently Facing Today's University Presidents

For decades university presidents have understood that they will likely "play four roles: target, risk taker, connector, and reshaper" (Heady, 1970, p. 119). There are always competing demands and expectations, and presidents are expected to think in terms of balance and perspective. University presidents often come from the academic ranks where there are few risks to one's career as long as professional competence has been established; therefore, higher education leaders must learn to operate within the contexts of their organizations and settings in order to become seasoned risk takers. They must also learn to overcome or compensate for structural and attitudinal biases and barriers. Otherwise there will be individual, organizational, and (potentially) societal consequences.

Public and political perspectives about the value of a college degree have been shifting over the past few decades, as concerns about the cost of a college degree continue to rise. "Higher education is on the brink of crisis, and schools need to sit up and take notice" according to the authors of *The College Stress Test* (Zemsky et al., 2020, p. 10). COVID-19, and how universities respond to this pandemic, is adding another layer of risk for university leaders in an era of public and legislator questioning of the value of a college diploma and concerns that universities are instilling liberal ideologies in young people.

Recent surveys of college and university presidents responding to COVID-19 conducted by the American Council on Education in April and June, 2020, identified concerns about fall or summer enrollment, long-term financial viability, laying off of faculty and/or staff, short-term financial viability, the ability to sustain an online learning environment, mental health of students (and that of faculty and staff), emergency aid for students, food and housing insecure students, and international student enrollment. Many of these issues have been concerns for university presidents prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survival of universities has been a topic of debate for some time (Zemsky et al, 2020) and this concern is especially pertinent given the challenges emerging from COVID-19-related lower enrollments, reduced campus housing and food plan revenues, and the anticipation of

decreased attendance at athletic and other recreational events, assuming those are offered at all. Some policy analysts and economists are suggesting that many colleges and universities will not survive this latest threat. Although all educational institutions seem to be lumped together in conversations about whether or not to reopen this fall, Walsh (2020) reminds us that K–12 and university reopenings are very different, partially because states and the local and federal governments provide some or all funding to support K–12 school operations, even though there are great disparities in that level of funding. Universities, on the other hand, are often largely tuition dependent unless there are additional diversified revenue streams such as technology transfer, teaching hospitals and clinics, and large interest-earning endowments with flexibility to use them for operational costs in a crisis situation.

Therefore, it was not surprising that 64% of university presidents expressed concern over long-term financial viability of their universities in the April 2020 ACE survey (Turk et al., 2020). Additional surveys were conducted by ACE in May and early June with many similar results. Fall enrollment and deciding on fall term plans were the top two pressing issues for presidents at public 4-year institutions, private 4-year institutions, and public 2-year institutions. Next on the list in terms of concerns were long-term financial viability of the institution, mental health of students, and furloughing or reducing salaries for faculty and/or staff. The June 2020 ACE survey (Soler & Turk, 2020) included questions about communication related to fall 2020 plans and fall scenario planning. Noting that planning for the fall 2020 term is "both a complex and massive undertaking" responses to the survey indicate that presidents overwhelmingly sought input and guidance from internal and external stakeholders; and 84% of presidents surveyed reported that they created new advisory groups to help develop or offer input on planning efforts (p. 9). Sixty-three percent of presidents completing the survey reported that they were overseeing the crafting of multiple scenario plans for the fall semester to allow for flexibility and the ability to respond quickly to changing conditions.

Female and BIPOC Leadership Challenges

Females are enrolling in degree-granting institutions at higher numbers than before. In 2007, females accounted for 57.2% of total enrollment at degree-granting institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) and in the 2016–2017 academic year, 57% of bachelor's degrees were awarded to women (Fry, 2019). More women are joining the ranks of faculty yet continue to be underrepresented in tenured and full professorships. Women and men representing racial or ethnic minorities have even fewer opportunities in higher education, limiting their opportunities to progress toward leadership roles (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2020). Ely and Rhode (2010) remind us that "leadership is not just what leaders do, but it is also about who the leaders are and the contexts in which they lead" (p. 394). Leadership styles play a role in how university leaders are perceived. Are university leaders more task or relations oriented? Are they autocratic or more democratic in their approaches to leadership? And, especially for females and leaders from underrepresented groups, are they approachable and competent, and do they communicate clearly and effectively?

Alcalde and Subramaniam's opinion piece in *Inside Higher Education* (2020), notes that

> when women leaders receive support and encouragement, too often it is accompanied by praise that refers to women as passionate, nurturing, warm, enthusiastic, articulate, and exotic. While well intentioned, this sort of support and encouragement can, in effect, undermine women leaders' intentional, goal-driven, and research-based strategies and efforts and power.

Socially constructed notions of female leadership and biases continue to frame the types of support and opportunities available.

Clelf (2018) conducted a critical discourse analysis of the portrayals of higher education leaders in a leading publication for higher education. She found that there were still "overt references to gender" that cast male leaders in a positive light while depicting women leaders negatively. Recognizing that "the interpretation of leadership is subjective and value-laden" (p. 28), Clelf makes the claim that "the lack of women in leadership roles, as well as the lack of women researchers, [leads] to bias in both theory and practice" (p. 22). Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory suggests that society attributes social roles to men and women. This means that women leaders experience a double bind by violating both their gender (societal) and leadership constructs when they do not conform to traditional norms. Kezar and Eckel's (2008) study of 27 college presidents found that transactional and transformational leadership styles were used and considered effective, but the perceptions of effectiveness were dependent upon the situation and the audience (p. 398). They emphasize the essentiality of establishing trust, understanding culture, and having effective communication in order to be perceived as an effective leader.

Although the percentage of female university presidents more than doubled from 10% in 1986 to 23% in 2006, women are still less likely to hold the presidency at doctorate-granting institutions (ACE, 2007). While it would be useful to have more research on the lived experiences of female presidents and what they overcame along their path, Fitzgerald (2014) reminds us that women in senior roles are rarely able to openly discuss their own experiences with the structures, attitudes, or practices that facilitated discrimination against them. Being a leader is risky work, especially in the increasingly corporate culture of many universities, and even more so when one is a female university president.

Female university leaders in general are still operating in a traditionally male-dominated world (Parker, 2015; Thompson-Adams, 2012) and face numerous challenges including the lack of women colleagues, sexist attitudes and behaviors, skepticism, lack of female role models, exclusion from formal networks, and lack of mentorship by other female leaders (Fitzgerald, 2014; Thompson-Adams, 2012; Wolverton et al., 2009). Jackson and Harris (2007) offer strategies for overcoming these barriers including exceeding job expectations, being visible and developing leadership skills, and being mentored. Having to constantly exceed expectations and try to be visible when others look beyond you can be exhausting. Wolverton, Bower and Maldonado (2006) state that the three tenets most important to women for breaking barriers and assuming leadership positions are competence, credibility, and communication. Yet, women and particularly Black, Indigenous, and women of color often feel marginalized and/or invisible within their organizations. They are excluded from formal networks, endure gate-keeping with recruitment and hiring, receive little or inconsistent encouragement, and often are not viewed by boards or trustees as being a good "fit."

Female, non-White faculty members and leaders often must juggle work-life balance and lower pay, along with expectations for more service and advising. They face additional challenges as institutional practices, policies, values and reward structures continue to privilege White straight males. Townsend (2020) found that identity politics fostered additional layers of complexity that burden African American women with having to prove themselves in comparison to their White female counterparts in order to be viewed as competent. Coupled with this are increased scrutiny, and a need to filter their authentic self to fit in within the cultural and organizational norms, while addressing misconceptions informed by stereotypes about who they are, and the impact of constant microaggressions (Griffin et al., 2011).

Each of us has an intersectional identity comprised of our gender and gender identity, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, and world views. Additionally, our pro-

fession or discipline, age, emotional makeup and physical characteristics contribute to who we are and how we are perceived by others (Bell & Nkomo, 1992). For some leaders, particularly those from "othered" groups, there is an added burden of needing to take more time to consider how one presents themselves and their ideas so that they are less likely to be negatively impacted, silenced, or devalued. Thus, their voice is shaped and constrained by these institutional barriers.

Leadership and the study of leadership is full of complexities, and there is a "cyclical relationship bound by social construction, created and reinforced through social discourse" (Chelf, 2018). It is important to remember that female presidents overcame the odds to earn their role and now operate in privileged positions bounded by societal and institutional norms. Further, Fitzgerald (2014) reminds us that "women do not always exercise leadership in positive and self-affirming ways" (p. 4). There are power dynamics between and among leaders, and these are often amplified and more treacherous for women and BIPOC leaders. Even today, a woman's willingness to adapt to her environment and the pressures within it tends to determine her success as a leader (Waring, 2003). Although a few BIPOC are represented in our study, their responses were not isolated for analysis due to the extremely small sample size.

Crisis Communication

Institutions often face events that threaten their ability to continue functioning and fulfilling their institutional mission. A pandemic such as COVID-19 threatens every institution across the globe raising questions about the literal survival of each stakeholder. Institutions must respond to these stakeholders with messaging designed to mitigate the effects of the threat and must do so in a compressed time frame. As a public health emergency, the pandemic forced institutions of higher education to "communicate effectively within a context of immediacy, threat, and high uncertainty" (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p. 43).

Much has been written about organizational responses to crisis since Seeger (1986) first conceptualized it in relation to the Challenger space-shuttle disaster and NASA's response. While crisis response types and their effects on organizations have been addressed many times over the past decades (Seeger, 2006; Sellnow et al., 1998; Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995) these basic assumptions have been extended, but remain unchallenged. All institutions must be prepared for crisis, follow a crisis communication plan when it occurs, and use crisis communication to protect the solvency and functioning of the organization. Recent crisis research relevant to this study also includes exploring the importance of the message source (Eaddy & Jin, 2018), as a determinant of the effectiveness of crisis messaging. Thus, there is a need to explore the messaging female presidents of research-intensive universities used to calm and direct their stakeholders in the wake of COVID-19.

RESEARCH METHODS

Risk is associated with any communication from university leaders during the best of times. Layer on the social, economic, political and heath ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the social, cultural, political, and emotional ramifications of America's reckoning with White racial privilege and the disgusting dehumanization of our Black and Brown citizens exemplified by the George Floyd murder, and leaders in higher education are being forced to mitigate elements of risk at an unprecedented level of visibility. The authors of this study are former college deans with extensive careers in higher education. Given the current crisis-driven climate, we appreciate the urgency of taking an exploratory look at the external facing communications of select female presidents at research-intensive universities as they announced decisions about three key decision points related to

university operations during the pandemic: the rapid shift to remote instruction in March 2020, instructional options for summer 2020, and plans for fall 2020. This exploratory study attempts to uncover how female presidents at public research-intensive universities are messaging decisions affecting new instructional and operational realities in higher education today.

The abrupt shift to virtual and remote instruction made by colleges and universities across the United States in March of 2020, was a quintessential moment of organizational crisis. "According to Seeger et al. (2003), an organizational crisis is an unexpected, nonroutine organizationally based event that results in uncertainty, threat, or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals" (as cited in Eaddy & Jin, 2018, p. 227). Structural crisis communication theory extends our understanding of crisis by including the perceptual field and response of the receiver.

> Grounded in attribution theory, structural crisis communication theory posits that people look for underlying explanations for occurring events so they can maintain control of their lives (Coombs, 1995; Dean, 2004). The basis of structural crisis communication theory is receivers and their perceptions of crisis and attribution of responsibility to organizations that are experiencing crises. Additionally, the attribution theory suggests that if an organization has a history of crises, then that organization has problems that need to be addressed. (Kelley & Michela, 1980 cited in Eaddy & Jin, 2018, p. 227)

In many ways, this exploratory study is examining an antithesis of the organizational history with crises, as the coronavirus pandemic brings a new, and unfortunately ongoing, threat to university presidents. An invisible enemy that has the potential to kill, a politicizing of mitigation responses, a unique stress on institutional resources such as technology infrastructure and pervasiveness of virtual instruction expertise, and a lack of revenue exacerbated by the need to provide refunds, cut fees and (in some cases) tuition, and invest in further technology to maintain foundational instructional and business practices only begins to touch on the scope of the multifaceted threat these presidents are facing.

The authors of this study drew upon their unique disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives throughout this research, adapting methods from education and communication studies to develop an emergent research design. The intent of the study was to examine the public-facing messaging issued by these presidents in response to the coronavirus pandemic at three specific points: the pivot to virtual or remote learning in March, 2020, the decision to remain in the virtual or remote instructional modality through summer, 2020, and the communication of instructional plans for fall, 2020.

We asked two central research questions that guided this exploratory study:

1. How did these female presidents mitigate risk in their communication at each of the decision points?
2. What differences were present in the type of decision-making agency intoned in the messaging?

Our emergent research design drawing from dialogic discourse analysis (Truxaw, 2020) and a qualitative case study framework (Baxter & Jack, 2008) was used to respond to the evolving educational and leadership landscape created by the coronavirus pandemic and allowed the methodology of this initial examination of presidential messaging to naturally evolve. This study attempts to honor the general purpose of discourse analysis by choosing a discourse subject (COVID-19 messaging) that has a social and cultural implication for the participants in the message exchange and undergirds the need to examine specific communication occurrences or "acts," within the relevant situational context (Van Han, 2014). More specifically, this study incorporates the principles of dialogic discourse in the analysis. The basic tenets of dialogic discourse analysis were followed, focusing on the "quality and

type of discourse" emanating from the presidents included in our study. Along with the basic tenets of choosing speech acts for analysis, dialogic discourse examines meaning-making between those individuals involved in the exchange of information and messages.

Each speaker's intentions and insertion of self are important concepts to include when attempting to discern how best to convey information effectively to receivers (Truxaw, 2020, p. 22). Thus, our study includes examination of voice in order to reference the presence (or absence) of self in the presidential messages. It is important to note, however, that the receiver responses to the presidential messaging were not accessible to the researchers. Therefore, only one "side" of the discourse was available for analysis. The complexities of this new crisis-driven leadership environment and the need to be timely in addressing the numerous new constraints found within it, led us to use to a combination of approaches to examine the statements of university presidents which address three specific effects of the pandemic on the operation of their institutions: the abrupt shift to virtual and remote instruction in March, 2020, the continuation of virtual and remote instruction into Summer, 2020, and the plans to welcome new and returning students to their campus in fall, 2020.

We approached this study with several assumptions in mind about the data sources. First, we made an assumption that the university president either wrote or at least approved the content of the messaging. At many universities, there are public relations people who craft or perfect the messages of university leaders. Due to the high-stakes nature of these messages, we assume that the public relations team offered input, but that the presidents had tight control over the messages included and the style of the messaging. Second, crisis communications, such as the ones we analyzed, are produced quickly and with acknowledgment that they will be carefully scrutinized by the targeted populations and possibly others. These are public documents that are written to be read and likely critiqued by many. Third, the crisis messages produced were bounded by time and decision foci. We recognize that there were often multiple communications put forth about key decisions, but for the purposes of this exploratory study and to provide consistency, we used the first public-facing communication authored by each university president for each of the three key decision points.

Universities designated as doctoral universities receiving the ranking of Carnegie R1 (very high research activity) and R2 (high research activity) with female presidents were examined for this study. These institutions must achieve impressive markers to gain these designations. According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education site, the classification for R1 and R2 doctoral institutions "include only institutions that awarded at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees and had at least $5 million in total research expenditures (as reported through the National Science Foundation Higher Education Research & Development Survey)" (Carnegie Classifications, n.d.). If one considers the three pillars of academic life, research and scholarly activity, service, and teaching, the ability for an institution to achieve the metrics used in the Carnegie classifications would indicate a level of achievement few universities attain. Therefore, the R1 and R2 designation creates an element of prestige for an institution and securing the role of president at such university indicates a professionally significant level of achievement.

Female presidents of public and private research-intensive (Carnegie R1 and R2) universities were initially identified using the Carnegie University Classification database. After ensuring there would be an adequate number of female presidents to conduct our study, a decision was made to examine the messaging from public research-intensive universities with female presidents to help minimize influences connected to the vast range of unique characteristics and histories often found at private universities. After the authors ensured that there was representation from each geo-

TABLE 1
General Contextual Information for Each Case Study

Case Study	*Governor's Party*	*Enrollment**	*Location*	*Years in Presidency*
A	Republican	33,391	Midwest	• 3 years
B	Democrat	16,766	Upper Midwest	• 10 years; Puerto Rican
C	Democrat	16,609	Midwest	• 2 years
D	Democrat	19,000+	North Central	• 3 years
E	Democrat	33,870	West	• 2 years; second generation American; her grandparents were born in Mexico
F	Republican	46,000+	Southwest	• 12 years; Indian American; born in India
G	Democrat	11,561	Northeast	• 2 years
H	Democrat	31,455	North Central	• 1 year
I	Republican	25,177	Southwest	• 1 year; second generation American; grandparents born in Scotland

Note: *Numbers as reported on university websites.

graphic region of the country, a range of institutional sizes, and that each president issued messaging from their office addressing the three decision points covered in this study, the final sample of nine female presidents was selected (see Table 1).

The information in Table 1 provides a general context for each of the cases in terms of political allegiance at the state level with governor's political party serving as proxy, student enrollment, geographic location and number of years in their current role as president. When known based on presidents' biographical information or other self-reported statement, ethnic/racial designation was also added. Three of the nine presidents self-identified as women of color.

Presidential messages were secured from university websites and the researchers took several steps to analyze each of the messages. First, each president's messages were read closely by each of the researchers in order to get a sense of the voice, language choices, and agency of each president. Next, the messages were reread and coded with the goal of uncovering the following elements:

Expressions of Agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency as

> "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations." (970).

For the purposes of this study, this definition of agency is enacted by focusing on language elements as the tool of structural engagements used by female university presidents. Therefore, agency is operationally defined as: Language indicating who owns or is responsible for decision-making and action. Personal agency was intoned by the use of first-person pronouns. During the initial close read of the statements, it was noted that statement of decisions and actions were not always owned by the president issuing the statement.

Some presidents distributed the agency among groups and partners within the university with statements similar to this one found in one of the presidential messages: "We will continue to share updates as the planning process continues through email and the COVID-19 Fall Planning page." Some presidents deflected their agency by rhetorically diverting agency to others usually outside of the university itself. For example, in one presidential message responsibility was deflected to the University System: "Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the … University System is encouraging all students on all campuses to return to their home of origin to live with their family and loved ones."

Voice. Agency was connected to voice in these statements. Personal, distributive, and deflective voice occurred throughout the messaging and was tracked separately from agency. Where agency was defined by statements connected to decisions and actions, voice was tracked by the use of pronouns. Statements of voice were not necessarily connected to decisions or actions for the purposes of this study. "I have found it uplifting to see the things we are doing as a community and I hope it has the same impact for you" would be an example of voice.

Mitigation of Risk. Little research has been conducted on risk typologies in higher education or K–12 education. After an extensive search, we selected our risk categories and definitions by adapting the definitions from emerging research by Stelmach (in press), whose research looked at community in a K–12 setting, so that our definitions are appropriate for higher education settings. Stelmach's ground-breaking research looks at secondary school parents' sense of community in rural settings, so while there are some education-based similarities, there are also different needs and settings. For our study, the concept of risk was reframed as an examination of language targeting the various constituencies for these research-intensive universities. Therefore, risk mitigation is addressed in the presidential messages by searching for specific language using the categories of Social and Personal Risk, Political Risk, and Moral/Ethical Risk. Our operational definition for each of these categories is defined below:

- Language signifying the mitigation of *social and personal risk* was framed as language intoning community, signaled by the core elements of behavior and values that give a community coherence and identity.
- Language signifying mitigation of *political risk* was framed as language indicating decision-making power and access to information as a form of resource, which gives individuals power. Language which indicated an Individual has a justified voice in the decision-making process was also included as indicative of political risk.
- Language signifying the mitigation of *moral/ethical risk* was framed as language indicating the need to naturalize and moralize ideal citizen behavior. This language pattern included a focus on doing what is right and what is ethical in furthering the greater good for the community.

As the messages from the presidents were analyzed, an additional type of risk emerged, Functional risk. We made the decision to include functional risk in our analyses as it appeared to be connected to a number of objective decisions related to continuing the functioning of the university. Language signifying the mitigation of *functional risk* was defined as language indicating the need to address decisions affecting the normal work of the university and its constituents. These decisions are connected to constraints which may be beyond the control of the president, however the president as leader of the organization will be accountable for the outcomes related to these decisions.

A simple discourse analysis was performed to note the frequency of statements that would be indicative of the voice, agency, and risk types described above. The presidents' statements were also reviewed for personification and tone. This review was emergent in nature,

seeking to capture a holistic rhetorical essence projected by each president through the words used in their messages.

RESULTS

After coding the messages and recording the frequency of statements related to voice, agency, and risk, the following results were identified and are presented in Table 2.

If one examines the total number of statement types listed above, it is clear that distributed agency and distributed voice were dominant in the messages. The reliance on these two types of voice is amplified when we look at these statement types in terms of percentage of total messages coded. Regarding the frequency of statements connected to voice, 15% were personal voice, 78% used distributed voice, and 6% used deflected voice. Not using deflected voice suggests greater ownership and accountability related to the overall message, and focuses the rhetorical power on shared institutional leadership, as evidenced by the preponderance of distributed statements connected to voice. The same can be said when one considers the percentage of all agency related statements in the messaging. When considering statements connected to forms of agency, 16% of decisions and actions were connected to personal agency, 74% were connected to distributed agency, and 11% were coded deflected agency.

Along with the totals included in the table above, 33% of presidents did not exhibit personal agency when discussing the pivot to virtual and remote instruction in March 2020 and 22% did not exhibit personal agency when announcing the instructional modality for Summer. However, 100% used personal agency when discussing plans for Fall 2020. The use of personal agency was often tied to the creation of university committees and task forces to move Fall 2020 planning forward, as well as entreaties to ensure safety and harmony within the university community remained strong.

The use of distributed voice and agency dominated the messages we analyzed. Personal voice and agency were a distant second, and deflected voice and agency the least employed statement type. Comparing agency and voice, we found that roughly half of the statements using the personal and distributed voice were statements of agency. In some ways this balance could allow for a consistent mental image of responsibility and concern in the minds of the audiences receiving these messages.

TABLE 2
Voice and Agency

Message Type	*Total number of Statements Including Elements of Personal Agency*	*Total Number of Statements Including Elements of Distributed Agency*	*Total Number of Statements Including Elements of Deflected Agency*	*Total Number of Statements Using Personal Voice*	*Total Number of Statements Using Distributed Voice*	*Total Number of Statements Using Deflected Voice*
Initial flip to remote learning	12	77	17	17	127	17
Summer plans	12	62	5	25	149	5
Fall plans	31	119	15	55	211	16
Total	55	258	37	97	487	38

TABLE 3
Risk Types and Agency

Message Type	*Soc Risk – Pers Agency*	*Soc Risk – Distributed Agency*	*Soc Risk – Deflected Agency*	*Polit Risk – Personal Agency*	*Polit Risk – Distributed Agency*	*Polit Risk – Deflected Agency*	*Mora Risk – Personal Agency*	*Mora Risk – Distributed Agency*	*Mora Risk – Deflected Agency*	*Func Risk – Personal Agency*	*Func Risk – Distributed Agency*	*Func Risk – Deflected Agency*
Initial flip	3	12	0	4	13	0	5	24	4	1	25	11
Sum plans	7	20	1	1	10	0	3	20	1	1	14	3
Fall plans	14	19	1	9	22	0	2	38	3	3	37	11
Total	24	51	2	14	45	0	10	82	8	5	76	25

Agency and Risk

Finally, results reported in Table 3 illustrate the distribution of agency statements across risk types. As stated earlier, distributed agency was the dominant form of agency demonstrated for each category of risk. When looking at the totals for statements related to risk type, regardless of agency, 22% of statements were connected to ensuring a sense of community and shared purpose thereby mitigating social risk. Seventeen percent of statements were explicitly connected to the audience's ability to make decisions and access information in a timely manner, thereby mitigating political risk. Thirty percent of statements were connected to the commitment to safety and offers of support, thereby mitigating moral and ethical risk. And 31% of statements were tied to decisions that allowed the university to continue operation, thereby addressing functional risk for the institutions (see Table 3 for total number of statements falling into these categories).

Even though the dominant forms of risk addressed in these presidential messages were moral or functional in nature, it is important to note that the external exigency of public safety (moral risk) and the need to direct processes to continue operations of the university (functional risk) required some presidential response or direction. In some ways, the statements tied to political risk (decision-making power and access to information) could also be tied to functional risk, as they support the need for universities to maintain a strong enrollment base in order to generate revenue for current and future operation. It may be the case that presidents did not have much freedom when deciding on message content due to strong external constraints.

Given the numerous inequities that were made increasingly transparent due to COVID-19 and activism sweeping the country during the time of this study, we were also interested in exploring the use of explicit and implicit references to social justice issues in the presidents' messaging. Only a few of the presidents used COVID-19 related messages to incorporate statements reflecting social justice concerns even though these concerns were prevalent in the media and impacting lives at their institutions. Statements referencing respect, equal access to resources, and the need to be cognizant of emotional burdens on students and colleagues were included as social justice statements.

The actual number of statements referencing social justice concerns was far lower than the number of other types of statements examined in this study. A total of 11 statements were found in the crisis communications we examined. Three occurred in the initial announcement of the shift to online instruction and eight in announcement of fall 2020 plans. Of note, the presidents used either personal agency or distributed agency and included these comments and there were no such messages included in announcements about summer plans.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are several limitations to this exploratory study. Readers should use their professional judgment while reading and interpreting our findings. In this study we examined the crisis communications of nine arguably high achieving female university presidents, each of whom is leading a public research-intensive university. Our data were bound by the number of presidents and the three reference points for communication to allow for consistency in the research design. While our findings may be transferrable, they are not generalizable and readers should exercise caution when interpreting the findings.

Standard discourse analyses, and especially dialogic discourse analyses, allow for an examination of communication effects and take into account receiver reactions to the message. While this study begins to explore the elements of discourse generated by the president, we are unable to assess the impact and effectiveness of the messaging. It is impossible to ascertain if receivers notice the collective

voice and agency, or that there is deflection of agency. Nor can the evaluative reaction to these messages be explored.

We were only able to examine the public facing communication provided by the institution via their websites. Therefore, a definitive assessment of risk mitigation, voice, and agency is far beyond the scope of this study. It is possible that there was further communication accessible solely by the members of the institution that took a different tone or voice and provided a different perception of agency.

While the messaging came from the office of the president, and was delivered under the president's name, in most cases we cannot be certain of the author. Even in the case of video messaging that we observed on some websites, it is unclear who drafted the key elements of the message, although using video does assign a closer relationship between the actual words used and the on-camera source who delivers them. Using additional communication that is more spontaneous in nature, such as town hall meetings, would help to establish clearer communication patterns across contexts.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A satisfying goal of our research would be to encourage others to explore elements of voice, agency, and risk in female public university presidential crisis and emergency risk communication. There are many avenues for this exploration. While this manuscript could not address the formation of a coherent leadership narrative, the exploration of these three presidential communications may be tied to the creation of a crisis narrative, or even extend a narrative which exists based on presidential communications prior to March 2020. Narrative analysis offers insight to the rhetorical characters which can develop in the minds of the audience. Walter Fisher theorized that storytelling is an integral part of the human experience, that communication is an inherently narrative phenomenon. Fisher argued that we evaluate the stories of protagonists, antagonists, conflict and resolutions along two dimensions: narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Narrative probability, the degree to which a story is consistent with itself, asks us to consider whether the characters behave in predictable ways. Narrative fidelity is the degree to which the story fits with what we know about stories of this type (Peterson & Garner, 2019, p. 4). It would be interesting to discover if the narratives created by these female presidents are received as high in narrative probability and fidelity by the university communities they serve. Each president represented in this article is creating a connected set of messages to support their response to COVID-19, which, one assumes, is designed to inspire confidence in the ability of the institution to respond successfully to the novel environmental constraints and effects of the pandemic. Exploring how these messages were received could offer powerful new insights.

Statements related to the initial pivot to virtual and remote instruction in March 2020, the announcement of plans to continue online instruction in summer 2020 and plans for fall 2020 instruction and campus life could be examined in connection to further communication related to pandemic responses. What will the communication from female presidents look like in response to an outbreak at their university? What will the risk mitigation and voice appear to be if announced plans change or an abrupt disruption to the university's function occurs? It would be fascinating to ascertain patterns of communication which signify a president's risk response profile in this unprecedented situation, possibly comprising a typology of female president crisis and emergency risk communication.

Further research could also explore any differences between R1 and R2 presidents, including a comparison of male and female presidents and their crisis communication. Clearly there are gender-based behavioral expectations and biases which may or may not be reflected in the agency and voice associated with such messages.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As we write this manuscript, COVID-19 continues to tighten its grip on an increasing number of states with growing numbers of positive cases and death rates. Some of the states with these growing numbers are included in our study, creating a fluid crisis communication situation for university presidents and their leadership teams. However, referencing the points of communication included in the study, we found that distributed voice and agency statements dominated the messages we collected, prompting us to consider the ways in which this type of voice and agency not only suggests a respect for shared governance and collaboration, but may also serve to distribute responsibility and accountability, thereby offering indemnity for the presidents. As we consider the expressions of agency, voice, and mitigation of risk to the university and possibly to the presidents as well, the role of context including location of the university, political environment, cultural norms at the university and in the region, and gendered expectations likely played a role in the crafting of the various messages.

As mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic is still underway so we do not know the comprehensive impact of the messages that we captured earlier this spring and summer. What we can offer, though, is that trust in one's university president is needed now perhaps more than ever amidst increasing uncertainty in higher education as institutions downsize, merge, and restructure to increase efficiency and address budget shortfalls. Trust in one's president and leadership team are essential as important decisions are made regarding future plans. Vulnerability and authenticity, typically considered to be feminine qualities, are important characteristics in leaders, especially when working to develop and sustain trust within an organization (Brown, 2019). These plans have the potential to directly impact the lives and livelihoods of students, staff, faculty, and the communities in which the universities are located. These plans may well play a key role in the very survival of some universities and perhaps even the tenure of the current president.

The messaging used to relay information about each of the three key events related to instruction and operations (flip to remote, summer, and fall) must also instill confidence in the safety and rationality of planning or there will be direct and tangible outcomes related to enrollment, morale, health, and university finances. How risk is mitigated through these messages has very high stakes, far beyond typical messages from university leaders. Intentional choices to deflect agency through reliance on expert opinion or state level decisions, offer messages reflecting collective voice, decision making, and agency that imply many voices contributed to the final decision, or referencing the university's spirit, motto, and/or past resiliency all could be reflective of the university presidents' in-depth knowledge of her key constituents and the university community as much as or more than her own leadership style due to the high stakes nature of this crisis. A clear understanding of the impact of COVID-19 in their own location, the politics in their state and region, cultural norms, and gendered expectations and biases could all have played a key role in the crafting of these messages.

As former deans, we are each familiar with the types of messaging typically used to relay information and the importance of carefully crafting messages to take into account how they will be received. And we have both experienced gender-based bias. Although we have not been university presidents, we can relate to the dilemma they are currently experiencing. Given the highly politically charged nature of the pandemic and the social justice milieu of the United States in 2020, crisis communication and risk response is perhaps more important than ever for these female university presidents. The COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to be the last crisis we face in the next few years. Alcalde and Subramaniam (2020) remind us that "It is time we do more to support and recognize women leaders as inten-

tional, strategic, intelligent, deliberate, goal-driven, focused, accomplished, successful, ambitious, and visionary." Our study offers a beginning point for further discussion about how female university presidents mitigate risk in these types of high stakes situations and considerations they face as leaders during highly political and complex times.

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