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# Using Rhetoric to Manage Campus Crisis: An Historical Study of College Presidents' Speeches, 1960-1964

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## **Keywords**

college presidents, student protests, communication, challenges, social justice

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# Using Rhetoric to Manage Campus Crisis: An Historical Study of College Presidents' Speeches, 1960-1964

**Eddie R. Cole** Assistant Professor, School of Education, College of William & Mary

## Abstract

*Student protests and other forms of campus conflict are prominent in higher education; however, little is known about the manner in which college presidents have historically responded to these protests and conflicts. Focused on North Carolina in the 1960s, a decade notable for student protests on college campuses, this article identifies three approaches used by college presidents in their public speeches to manage campus conflict. This research examines the speeches of college presidents in North Carolina, where the first mass protests of the decade occurred during the student movement for civil rights starting in 1960 until 1964 when the Civil Rights Act was signed into law.*

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The position of college president is unique. Unlike most academic positions, the president is not selected by “experienced academic leaders, assisted by faculty search committees, and driven by the recognition that the fate of academic programs — not to mention their own careers — rests on the quality of their selection” (Duderstadt, 2007, p. 71). Rather, the president is hired by a governing body; and given the amount of on- and off-campus public interest in who is selected for this position, the hiring process is more similar to a political campaign (Duderstadt, 2007). Due to the unique nature of the presidency, “college presidents face a somewhat precarious task whenever they speak in public given that they have to address a multitude of audiences” (J. Lucaites, personal communication, 2012).

The public’s interest in the college presidency is noteworthy, considering the college campus, for decades, was considered “a free marketplace of ideas” (Paulson, 2014, para. 3). Opposing political and social views frequently met in the form of debate on campuses. As a result, a president’s opinion on social and political issues garnered much attention, particularly during moments of campus conflict. Yet, scholars and practitioners have not explored whether there are common approaches used by presidents in public speech during moments of campus conflict. This study accepts that challenge.

Utilizing archival research and a theoretical framework situated in rhetorical studies, this article examines college presidents’ speeches delivered

during the student protests of the 1960s. Specifically, this article focuses on the speeches of presidents from eight institutions in North Carolina. No different than today, presidents in the 1960s faced many of the usual constituencies: students, faculty members, state and federal legislators, and members of governing bodies, among other groups. This article is an historical analysis of these presidents’ use of public speech in response to the complexities of the region, time, society, and space during one of higher education’s most notable moments of campus conflict.

To do so, this article first critiques the existing literature about college presidents and provides an overview of the theory of the rhetorical situation as the theoretical framework. This is followed by a brief contextual exploration of North Carolina in the 1960s. In closing, subsequent to the methods section, commonalities in presidents’ speeches during this specific moment of campus conflict are presented as findings, followed by a discussion of the elements within the rhetorical situation in 1960s North Carolina and present-day implications for current presidents.

## The College President

A large portion of scholarship on college presidents can be separated into three parts: pathways to the means by which individuals become college presidents, presidential leadership strategy, and post-presidency self-assessments

and reflections on presidential successes and failures. This article, however, explores approaches to managing a specific campus crisis that are detectable in presidents' speeches. Therefore, the emphasis in the critique of the literature is on presidential leadership strategy. Research on the role of presidential speech also is reviewed.

Several studies have examined aspects of college presidents' leadership strategies (e.g., Birnbaum, Bensimon, & Neumann, 1989; Chaffee, 1989; Cohen & March, 1974; Kauffman, 1982). Most presidents with less than three years in office utilize one leadership strategy; for more experienced presidents, approximately half adopt more than one strategy (Neumann, 1989). This suggests that "institutional type and control have little influence on the content and complexity of how presidents see their own early actions in office" (Neumann, 1989, p. 146). Similarly, presidents are more likely to use a single-frame perspective of leadership, rather than a multi-frame perspective earlier in their presidency, with the multi-frame perspective becoming more prominent the longer the presidency (Bensimon, 1989). Birnbaum (1989) noted that, among five implied leadership theories – behavioral, power and influence, trait, contingency, and symbolic – behavioral and power and influence are the most common leadership theories for presidents. As for symbolic leadership, Tierney (1989) found that presidents' perceptions of symbolism in leadership do not vary by institutional type or length of presidential tenure. This is important to note, as this article focuses on North Carolina presidents' use of speech as a strategy to influence behavior. Therefore, this body of work on presidents' leadership strategies aligns with the purpose of this study.

To go a step further than leadership strategy, scholars also have identified the prominent components of effective presidencies. Successful college presidents establish legitimacy among campus constituencies by delegating tasks and demonstrating the ability to reprimand and reward, while maintaining an appropriate distance from issues, but are charismatic enough to maintain a public presence (Fisher & Koch, 1996). Along those same lines, yet considering the nuances of race or ethnicity, Nelson (2000) found that presidents at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) place more emphasis on addressing racial issues beyond their campus and making students aware of racial struggles. This is common, as HBCUs have played a significant role in fighting for social justice in America. "The burden and challenge of the moral leadership of these presidents is to continue the rich tradition of their colleges in helping

to solve the nation's racial problems" (Nelson, 2000, p. 166). Therefore, a successful presidency depends upon a president's "sense of responsibility and proportion that depends on a willingness to listen to others, humility, and a sense of humor" (Keohane, 2006, p. 1).

Research also exists on the role of presidential speech (e.g., Burden & Sanberg, 2003; Cohen & Hamman, 2003; O'Loughlin & Grant, 1990; Zimdahl, 2002). However, similar studies on college presidents' speeches are lacking. The existing literature is about presidents of the United States and focuses on charisma and attitudes and the use of speech for agenda setting. This scholarship informs one that speech cannot be used to create two presidencies, which means a speech about one topic does not provide a president with an advantage on whether a speech on another topic will be effective (Ragsdale, 1987). As for effective speeches, presidents with positive charisma use metaphors twice as often, and it is assumed that metaphor usage serves to inspire constituents and has an impact on audiences in a manner that can enact action (Mio, Riggio, Levin, & Reese, 2005). Also, increased presidential attention on issues heightens the public's concern with those very issues (Cohen, 1995).

Despite the existing knowledge about college presidents' leadership strategies and the separate body of work on U.S. presidents' rhetoric, the gaps in the literature silently impart how much is still unknown. College presidents' speeches are frequently cited as a supplement to an analysis of campus issues or a president's career, but speech has not been examined as its own strategic leadership mechanism. Additionally, much of the existing research does not consider the influences of governing bodies or other societal factors on presidents' public speeches. Last, even with the potential similarities between politicians and college presidents, the studies on U.S. presidents' rhetoric are not suitable for analysis of college presidents' speeches, as the sheer volume of implications for a U.S. president's speech is far greater than those of most college presidents. This study considers these limitations in its analysis of college presidents' speeches during moments of campus conflict.

### **The Rhetorical Situation Theoretical Framework**

The rhetorical situation is "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence, which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about

significant modification of the exigence” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). To simplify this definition, the theory of the rhetorical situation suggests that discourse has the potential to alter human action; however, a real or perceived situation must be present to initiate the discourse. The rhetorical situation is comprised of three components: exigence, audience, and constraints. Without each, a rhetorical situation does not exist. Bitzer (1968) stated that exigence is “an imperfection marked by urgency” (p. 6), audience “consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse” (p. 7), and constraints are all things that “have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (p. 8). In this article, the speeches delivered by college presidents are the “discourse” in the rhetorical situation.

An exigence, which is an issue that causes someone to speak or write, is rarely one particular issue. It is worth noting that an exigence that cannot be modified by speech is not rhetorical, such as the weather. This is still an exigence, but for a rhetorical situation to exist, the issue must be able to be altered with discourse. There is then the audience, comprised of those who can be influenced by this presidential discourse. If the audience is incapable of being influenced, the rhetorical situation does not exist. Last are the constraints that could limit or negate the effectiveness of the discourse in easing or halting the urgency of the exigencies in this rhetorical situation.

Some rhetoricians, however, argued that speakers — in this case, college presidents — determine whether a situation is urgent and, thus, determine the existence of exigence. Those who critique the theory of the rhetorical situation (e.g., Vatz, 1973) contended that the speaker’s interpretations of events characterize the situation, rather than the situation provoking speech, as Bitzer theorized; however, these critiques are not about the three components of this theory. Therefore, using the rhetorical situation as a theoretical framework for understanding college presidents’ speeches adds insight into the way in which speech can be used as a leadership strategy. This theory and its application to presidents’ speeches will be further explored in the discussion section. The next section provides the historical context surrounding North Carolina college presidents’ speeches in the 1960s.

### **College Presidents and Campus Conflict in North Carolina, 1960-1964**

By the winter of 1960, Warmoth T. Gibbs was in the fourth year of his presidency, and 34<sup>th</sup> year as an employee, at

North Carolina A&T State University. That year, Gibbs and other college presidents in the state would face a challenge he termed new and “unusual” (Pfaff, 2011, p. 85). This challenge was the student-led lunch counter sit-in demonstrations.

On February 1, 1960, four North Carolina A&T freshmen — Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr. (now Jibreel Khazan), and David Richmond — walked downtown to the local F. W. Woolworth, a retail store. Upon arrival, the four African American students made small purchases within the store, establishing themselves as good customers and keeping their receipts, before making their way to the racially segregated lunch counter (Pfaff, 2011). As the four students sat at the lunch counter, they requested food service but were denied because of their race. Eventually, the store manager and local law enforcement visited the lunch counter in an effort to make the four students leave the store. Because the students were not making a disturbance, law enforcement officers allowed them to keep their seats. Eventually, the store closed for the day and, peacefully, the students returned to the North Carolina A&T campus (Pfaff, 2011). Although the first Greensboro student sit-in ended without arrests or violence, it garnered the attention of the nation.

Similar student-led demonstrations spread to cities throughout the state and across other southern states within one week. As a result, some studies (e.g., Andrews & Biggs, 2006) credited the February 1, 1960, protest in Greensboro as the starting point to a decade of protests led by college students. Therefore, with the nation’s attention on students in North Carolina, no college president was immune to the pressures of desegregation. Students from each college were involved in this movement, whether they were actively for or against southern states’ legalized racial segregation. On- and off-campus constituents turned to presidents and demanded that they address issues pertaining to the student protests, regardless of the audience, venue, or occasion. Presidents were faced with constituents who were staunchly against desegregation and wanted the chief administrator on campuses to reprimand students for protests, and other consistencies who pushed for presidents to support students’ efforts to desegregate.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to examine the manner in which college presidents used public speech to manage the crisis of the student protests. North Carolina, which was the epicenter of the 1960s college

<sup>1</sup> Nearly two dozen letters and telegrams were recovered in presidential records from college presidents, alumni, students, and faculty, among other internal and external campus constituencies, regarding desegregation and/or the student protests. This supplemental research is evidence of the varying opinions received by presidents during this era.

student protests, is used as a contextual understanding to answer the following: In what ways have college presidents historically used their public speeches as an approach to managing campus crises?

## Methods

### Data Source

The data in this article originates from a larger historical study of approximately 40 college presidents' speeches delivered in North Carolina in the 1960s. The speeches were retrieved from presidential records in archives at eight colleges and universities. A total of 10 speeches were analyzed using the previously mentioned theoretical framework — the theory of the rhetorical situation. Each speech was delivered between the first student protest on February 1, 1960, and July 2, 1964, the date the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law.

Among the institutions explored, five of the eight colleges and universities whose presidents' speeches are examined were public (e.g., University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; North Carolina Central University). Three of the eight were private and religious-affiliated institutions (e.g., Wake Forest University; Elon University). With regard to special mission categorization, three of the eight were HBCUs (e.g., Winston-Salem State University), and one was an all-women's college (e.g., University of North Carolina-Greensboro, which became co-educational in 1964). Of course, some of the eight institutions fit into more than one of the aforementioned categories, which demonstrates the variety of institutions represented in the data. Additionally, in terms of the spectrum of leadership experience in this study, the shortest amount of time a college president had been in office in 1960 was four years. The longest was 22 years.

### Findings

The analysis of presidents' speeches in North Carolina indicates that presidents across multiple institution types, regardless of their stance on the social justice issues before them, used similar techniques in their speeches. Overall, analysis of the text of the speeches identified three common approaches: establishment of personal connections, allocation of responsibility, and conveyance of a long-term vision.

**Establish personal connection.** During the early 1960s, a time of social unrest and instability, college presidents used speeches as an opportunity to earn credibility with audiences. Several did so by establishing a personal connection with the audience before delving into the content of their speeches. This was clear in the speeches of Gordon W. Blackwell, chancellor of the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina (now UNC-Greensboro). On February 9, 1960, Blackwell spoke before an assembly of the 2,400 women enrolled at the institution. Only nine days after the initial student demonstration by the four North Carolina A&T students, Blackwell instructed the Woman's College students to refrain from participating in future student protests. In conveying his message, he explained the reasons that his views were credible. Blackwell stated, "I have spent most of my life as a social scientist studying human behavior and community processes" (Blackwell, 1960a).

Similarly, the next month, on March 22, 1960, Blackwell delivered another speech for the North Carolina Library-Community Project Institute entitled "Trends and Changes in North Carolina." The location of this speech and the composition of the audience are unknown; however, Blackwell again first established his personal connection to the social disparities related to the ongoing campus conflict over issues of inequality. He explained that he is a "...social scientist, who has lived in North Carolina for two decades, one who has developed a great love for the State, one who is happy to be in its service" (Blackwell, 1960b).

Prior to being named chancellor of the Woman's College in 1957, Blackwell had served as a faculty member at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill since 1941. As a scholar, he published nearly a dozen books related to community life and higher education development in the South (UNC-Greensboro, 2013). Therefore, when addressing campus constituents interested in presidents' views on social changes in southern states, Blackwell used public speeches as an opportunity to make connections to the social matters at the center of the campus conflict.

On June 9, 1960, William B. Aycock, chancellor of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, delivered the commencement address at Greensboro High School. This speech occurred only two weeks after management at the regional office for the F. W. Woolworth retail store expressed an openness to desegregate the lunch counters at their Greensboro location. Considering that many outside of the state were now discussing segregation, Aycock made a local connection with the Greensboro

High audience before speaking. "I have come back home to part of my own family... and my former colleagues on your faculty. They became and still are a part of my life" (Aycock, 1960b). In this case, Aycock established himself as being "home," although he had not taught as history teacher at Greensboro High since 1940, which predated the graduating students' attendance by nearly 20 years. Yet, his approach established a personal connection with the audience not afforded to outsiders who were discussing the ongoing student protests. Using this approach, presidents earned credibility and perhaps brought some stability to the public during this moment of campus conflict.

**Allocate responsibility.** With campus constituents' demands that college presidents address the student protests, speech was frequently used as an opportunity to explain the responsibility of the college during times of campus conflict, particularly when related to social justice issues. The presidents' stance on responsibility differed according to their institutions' core racial or ethnicity community. For instance, in alignment with today's literature on HBCU presidents (e.g., Nelson, 2000), presidents at historically Black colleges in North Carolina recognized students, faculty, and staff members as private citizens and stated that it was not the responsibility of the college to infringe upon their right to protest off campus.

Samuel D. Proctor, who replaced Warmoth T. Gibbs as president of the historically Black North Carolina A&T, used his March 18, 1961, inaugural address to explain the reason that his college did not plan to interfere with student demonstrators. "The faculty and students cannot live segmented, detached lives. They are at one moment scholars and voters, students of the past and interpreters of the present, passive recipients of the cultural bequest of yesterday, and active determiners of the milieu of tomorrow" (Proctor, 1961). Alfonso Elder, president of the historically Black North Carolina Central University in Durham, echoed Proctor's sentiments.

On February 25, 1962, Elder delivered a speech at Duke University during a regional meeting of the National Student Association, an organization Johnston (2014) noted was in support of the student protests. The speech was titled "The Responsibility of the University to Society." During this speech, Elder stated that the college should be hopeful only that its students apply the knowledge acquired in the classroom in a manner that best serves society. In short, the college is responsible only for students' acquisition of knowledge, not how

students apply knowledge. As a result, Elder took a stance to not dictate how students applied their beliefs. "When social action is taken, the school can only hope that a good job of teaching has been done. If the action taken reflects the use of a high level of intelligence and the use of a value system which has been refined through reflection and study of man's noblest aspirations, then the school can take a measure of pride in action" (Elder, 1962). Therefore, Proctor and Elder believed it was not the responsibility of their administration to reprimand or support activities in which students partook when off campus. Gordon W. Blackwell, chancellor of the Woman's College, exhibited the opposite stance.

Blackwell stated that the college was responsible for protecting students from the violence that may have occurred during protests. As a result, he told students in his February 9, 1960 speech to the student assembly to stop participating in lunch counter sit-ins. Blackwell used this address to explain the responsibility of the college:

At the beginning of the sit-down demonstration just a week ago, the question which must have occurred to each of you, and it certainly did to me, was whether a college student has the right to participate in a passive resistance movement to achieve a lawful end. A college must consider the matter of academic freedom of students as well as faculty. However, this concern quickly gave way to the question of the wisdom of students becoming involved in a situation which, if unchecked, would surely result in violence and bloodshed. (Blackwell, 1960a)

For Blackwell, regardless of whether the protests were on or off campus, the college held a responsibility to protect students. Although his opinion differed from those of his colleagues at other HBCUs, his approach was the same. Across multiple institutions during the student protests, presidents used this technique of allocating responsibility to manage pressure from their campus constituents.

**Convey a long-term vision.** In the midst of the early 1960s and the student-led protests, college presidents used their public speeches to explain that the conflict at the root of the demonstrations was merely a segment of a larger issue. What the presidents attempted to do was to make students realize that, although the racial segregation in public spaces is the obvious issue before them, the protests were a short-term solution. The question remained: What would students need to do to ensure that larger issues of inequality would not



continue? Again, the views varied among the presidents, but they used the same approach.

On April 24, 1960, Francis Atkins, president of historically Black Winston-Salem State University, delivered the Founders' Day Program at Fayetteville State Teachers College (now Fayetteville State University), an historically Black college. He charged the audience with having "vision and foresight to define what is best for the people and the courage and determination to execute it according to the changing times" (Atkins, 1960). Alfonso Elder, president of historically Black North Carolina Central, echoed Atkins' sentiments in his 1960 speech at Hillside High School in Durham. Archival research does not indicate the occasion for this address; however, Elder encouraged the audience at the all-Black high school that education was the key to solving the larger social ills that permeated the smaller social issues under protest at the time. He stated that the African American "must by his own effort develop and maintain in his mind, as well as in the minds of others, new standards of performance, new attitudes regarding his ability to do a job as well as any other person, and a new sense of his responsibility as a worker" (Elder, 1960). For Elder, education would provide long-term economic power, which would help to combat social inequality.

On May 30, 1960, William B. Aycock, chancellor of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, delivered the commencement address at Elon University. In his assessment, everything one does "transcends the geographical boundaries in which we work and live and become a part of the life of the world" (Aycock, 1960a). Therefore, Aycock told Elon graduates to not be selfish: "Too often young people become so absorbed in making a living that this essential endeavor constitutes their entire world." Yet, similar to what Elder stated, Aycock felt education was key to addressing long-term, big-picture social issues. He stated, "...education has become our first line of defense in the economic, political, and military races for survival" (Aycock, 1960a).

Three years later on May 27, 1963, James E. Danieley, president of Elon University, advised his graduates to leave a heritage greater than their own. "As benefactors of such a heritage, as those who have 'entered into' the labor of others, you have at least three responsibilities" (Danieley, 1963). The three responsibilities were to continue their education, provide leadership to improve the educational system in their community, and support and encourage the pursuit of excellence. He added: "... it is your responsibility to strive to create for generations to come an inheritance of greater value than the heritage

which was yours" (Danieley, 1963). Danieley, as well as his other presidential colleagues across the state, each used public speech as a way to convey a long-term vision toward the future.

## **Discussion**

Across all college presidents' speeches in North Carolina during this era of campus conflict, three approaches were prominent: establishment of personal connections, allocation of responsibility, and conveyance of a long-term vision. Each of these university leaders spoke with the awareness that multiple campus constituencies awaited their stance on the social unrest that originated on college campuses. As stated earlier, archival evidence reveals that several presidents during this era were under pressure to either publicly reprimand or support student protestors. Yet, regardless of the differences in external pressures for presidents of private or public institutions alongside differences between predominately White or historically Black colleges, the previously highlighted strategies appeared across institution type. Furthermore, the same consistencies were present in the means by which college presidents negotiated the complexities of these pressures within the context of the rhetorical situation.

The elements of the rhetorical situation – exigence, audience, and constraints – are prominent in this article's examination of presidents' speeches in North Carolina during the 1960s. The student sit-ins to desegregate public amenities are the main exigence. Other exigencies are campus administrators' concerns of student safety, legislators' pressure to control student demonstrations, and alumni and local business owners' threats to stop supporting institutions with protesting students. These differed among presidents depending upon individuals' race, gender, and other dominant social privileges during the 1960s; however, each of these exigencies is dependent upon the sit-ins faced by each president. For instance, if the exigence of the sit-ins was altered and protests ended, the exigencies of local residents and lawmakers would end as well.

As for the audience, on the surface level the audience included students, faculty, and staff; local business owners; law enforcement; members of the local community; state and local officials; other area college presidents; and others who could be influenced into action by the speeches. On a more in-depth level, audience members' identities caused this aspect of the rhetorical situation to be more complex. For example, the

intersectionality of students' racial and gender identities can further complicate addressing the moments of student unrest in the 1960s, considering the social ethos of that era in North Carolina.

Last, the constraints varied among the college presidents, particularly considering differences in institutional control (e.g., public) or campus demographics (e.g., historically Black college). On one hand, constraints were external, such as governing bodies attempting to dictate what a president could say or hecklers disrupting a president's speech. On the other hand, constraints could be internal, such as a president's own personal bias. Both external and internal constraints were present and influenced the effectiveness of presidents' speeches. In totality, these strategies and the subsequent analysis of the rhetorical context are insightful and, in closing, offer connections between presidents' historical speeches and potential considerations for contemporary college presidents.

## Conclusion

This historical analysis of college presidents' speeches demonstrates the variety of views that can be held by higher education leaders on the same issue. Some felt the off-campus involvement of students demonstrating against social issues was within students' rights. Therefore, the college had no responsibility in supporting or halting student participation. One president, on the other hand, said the college had a responsibility to protect students from danger and, as a result, instructed students to cease participation in the sit-ins. Other presidents said nothing publicly about the students' protests. These historical speeches in North Carolina are a mere snapshot of the complexities faced by presidents during moments of campus crisis; and, for decades, students have continued to rally on and off college campuses around matters of social justice.

The student-led protests against racial segregation in the early 1960s soon shifted to rallies against U.S. military presence in Vietnam by the end of that decade and early 1970s. Notably, in May 1970, students at Kent State University in Ohio rallied for days against the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia. Following the burning of a campus building, the governor dispatched Ohio's National Guard to the campus to control students. On May 4, guardsmen fired on students, killing four (Kifner, 1970). This authoritative approach to managing student protest continues today. In 2011, the Occupy Movement against social inequality made its

way to college campuses as students organized sit-ins on campuses to fight against a number of issues, including tuition increases. At the University of California, Davis, police officers used pepper spray on a group of seated protesters. Calls for the resignation of the chancellor soon followed (Medina, 2011). These are simply two incidents in a sea of institutional responses to campus conflict over the last 50 years. What is clear is that a diversity of views and approaches exists to address crisis in higher education. Yet, what remains unclear is the approaches used by presidents when publicly speaking during moments of conflict. This article addresses this gap in the literature.

Several historical accounts credited the student protests in North Carolina as the initial surge that led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (e.g., Gibbs, 1966). Therefore, the college presidents in North Carolina led during one of history's most notable moments of conflict. As a result, their actions are worth assessment. This work on North Carolina presidents, not only examines these leaders' perspectives, but also it situates their views in the ongoing conversation about the way in which colleges should respond during moments of conflict, particularly when rooted in issues of inequality. Hence, this study invites college presidents and other academic leaders into a discussion about effective approaches to communication.

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