Proximity to Power: The Challenges and Strategies of Interviewing Elites in Higher Education Research

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Abstract

Presidents, provosts, deans, and other upper-level administrators in higher education fit common definitions of "elites" in the context of qualitative research. Scholarship on methods specific to the field of higher education has not identified or described the unique challenges of interviewing these and other elites. The purpose of this paper is to examine challenges and share strategies for elite interviewing, with specific application to qualitative research in the field of higher education. We provide three examples of empirical studies involving elite interviewing and, using literature from other fields, highlight challenges and strategies. By anticipating challenges and implementing these strategies, researchers can enhance the data collection experience and quality of data.

Keywords

elite interviewing, power, case study, interviewing strategies, higher education

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Presidents, provosts, deans, and other upper-level administrators in higher education fit common definitions of "elites" in the context of qualitative research. Scholarship on methods specific to the field of higher education has not identified or described the unique challenges of interviewing these and other elites. The purpose of this paper is to examine challenges and share strategies for elite interviewing, with specific application to qualitative research in the field of higher education. We provide three examples of empirical studies involving elite interviewing and, using literature from other fields, highlight challenges and strategies. By anticipating challenges and implementing these strategies, researchers can enhance the data collection experience and quality of data.

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Presidents, provosts, deans, and other upper-level administrators in higher education fit common definitions of "elites" in the context of qualitative research (Morse, 2019). According to one definition, elites are "those with close proximity to power" (Lilleker, 2003, p. 207). Increasingly, researchers in the social sciences have reflected on, and written about, their experiences interviewing elites (e.g., Berry, 2002; Harvey, 2010; Laurila, 1997; Mikecz, 2012; Morris, 2009; Smith, 2006; Undheim, 2003). Many scholars have argued there are nuances by academic field when it comes to contacting and interviewing elites, as well as disseminating findings (Darbi & Hall, 2014; Delaney, 2007; Herzog & Ali, 2015; Lancaster, 2017; Lilleker, 2003). However, scholarship on methods specific to the field of higher education has not identified or described these nuances. In fact, several books dedicated entirely to qualitative research in the field of higher education (e.g., Miles et al., 2019; Pasque & Lechuga, 2017) offer scant guidance for conducting elite interviews.

This omission in the higher education literature is noteworthy for several reasons. First, as we detail below, interviewing elites in higher education presents significant challenges, and specific strategies are often necessary to improve the interview experience and the quality of data (McNaughtan & Hotchkins, 2020). Second, we contend that the lack of discussion in the field increases the likelihood that elite interviewing is excluded from qualitative research methods courses. Third, our review of the literature suggests that emerging scholars in the field of higher education seeking to study elites have few resources to help them make decisions about data collection and analysis (McNaughtan & McNaughtan, 2019). We argue that the combined effect is that researchers in the field of higher education may be ill equipped to navigate the challenges inherent to elite interviewing, which could create unnecessary difficulties, result in less effective data collection, and compromise the quality of findings. This is all the more alarming because there are a number of critical questions involving elites in

higher education research and practice, such as increasing and diversifying the pool of leaders and increasing the effectiveness of governing boards (Burmicky & McClure, in press; Rall et al., 2020). Interviewing elites can provide researchers with crucial insights into leadership, decision-making, management, communication, and equity, which are central lines of inquiry in higher education. If researchers cannot access and speak with elites, it is difficult to understand what they know or why they make particular decisions (McNaughtan & Pal, 2019).

The purpose of this paper is to examine challenges and share strategies for elite interviewing, with specific application to qualitative research in the field of higher education. We begin by reviewing literature on elite interviewing from outside of the field of higher education, which provides useful insights into the challenges and strategies when interviewing elites generally. We then share three examples of studies involving interviews with presidents, provosts, deans, and upper-level administrators in several institutional contexts (i.e., public, private, four-year, and two-year), aiming to offer illustrations of the on-the-ground experiences of conducting elite interviews. In the final section, we analyze these examples, using literature to identify common challenges and strategies to enhance the interview experience and maximize the effectiveness of data collection.

Literature on Elite Interviewing

One area of agreement in the general elite interviewing literature is that there is not a universal understanding of what defines someone as elite (Berry, 2002; Harvey, 2015). Smith (2006) argued that insufficient development of the concept has resulted in researchers largely shaping their definitions of elites to match their respective participants. In her study of *professional elites*, McDowell (1998) defined her participants as "highly skilled, professionally competent, and class-specific" (p. 2135). However, she warned against identifying elites by their professional titles alone. For many researchers, elites are defined relationally, in terms of their social position compared to the researcher or the average person in society (Stephens, 2007). In other words, what makes a participant elite is that they are more powerful or influential than the person interviewing them or the average person in society.

Harvey (2011) acknowledged that leaders of organizations may have elite status, but noted that social capital and positions within organizations that allow for influence can also qualify someone for elite status. Morris (2009) similarly underscored the importance of social networks, claiming that individuals who have close professional relationships with those in power should be considered elite. Wedel (2017) coined the term *influence elites* and posited that the position is much less important than the actual ability for these individuals to influence those in power.

With these prior definitions in mind, we view elites in higher education as: *individuals whose social capital, position, and networks grant them the ability to directly exercise power or influence those with power in higher education practice and policy.* This definition recognizes both elite status as a result of positional authority and elite status due to influence. Within higher education there are multiple ways to achieve power without a specific leadership role. For example, a faculty member being granted tenure results in power or an administrative gatekeeper such as the registrar could be considered elite in some contexts. Some individuals, such as a wealthy donor, may not have any position within an institution yet still exercise power or influence policy makers. Said another way, while this definition includes many upper-level administrators, such as presidents, provosts, and deans, it also could encompass other actors in higher education, such as faculty leaders, donors, and trustees.

While the definition of elites has remained somewhat elusive (Lancaster, 2017), research focused on interviewing elites has been developed across multiple fields of study, including political science (Mikecz, 2012), business (Harvey, 2012), and media and

communication studies (Herzog & Ali, 2015). The types of elites (e.g., lobbyists, government officials, corporate executives), research questions, and methodological decisions may differ from those commonly found in higher education research, but extant literature on elite interviewing nonetheless provides useful tips and common pitfalls applicable to higher education research. We focus on three main themes within this literature: accessing elites, preparing for interviews, and conducting the interview.

Power Imbalance and Accessing Elites

Scholars have argued that few studies in the social sciences focus on elites, with most research including interview participants that are easier to access, which can lead to an incomplete picture of organizational culture, processes, and outcomes (Lancaster, 2017; Mason-Bish, 2019; Mikecz, 2012). This lack of research could be tied to a number of challenges, with one being the power imbalance between researchers and their elite participants (Herzog & Ali, 2015). Morris (2009) noted that "elite interviewing is characterized by a situation whereby the balance is in favor of the respondent," which "tends to lead to more interviews with less powerful people" (p. 209) because scholars can feel uncomfortable in settings with elites. According to Herzog and Ali (2015), this imbalance is a function of elites having more cultural, political, social, or economic capital. Despite the challenges, one benefit of elite interviewing is that it reverses the flow of knowledge, meaning non-elites can understand and critically analyze the lives and decision-making processes of individuals ensconced by privilege (Mason-Bish, 2019).

Another reason why qualitative studies of elites are less common is that accessing elites is difficult (McNaughtan & McNaughtan, 2019; Undheim, 2003). Mikecz (2012) discussed how even getting an initial connection can be too great a barrier for many researchers. Furthermore, literature suggests that interviews with elites can be more difficult to request and schedule. Elites often utilize gatekeepers, such as personal assistants or other office administrative staff, and may not provide their contact information publicly (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). The existence of barriers and gatekeepers means elite interviewing can be more costly in terms of time and money (Herzog & Ali, 2015; Laurila, 1997) because it may require multiple rounds of communication and traveling to where elites are located. Researchers must determine how to best contact possible interview participants while being flexible, as elites are unlikely to accommodate the researcher's schedule, and in some cases no amount of effort will result in an interview (Conti & O'Neil, 2007).

Preparing for and Conducting Interviews

Scholars have lamented that, in addition to significant issues with accessing elites, conducting interviews with elites also poses challenges that inhibit researchers' ability to achieve their goals (Kezar, 2003; Mason-Bish, 2019). One challenge is the above-referenced power dynamic that exists between the interviewer and the elite (Boucher, 2017; Lancaster, 2017). Scholars have discussed how differences in power can hinder the ability of the researcher to guide the interview and maintain focus on the topic at hand (Boucher, 2017; Herzog & Ali, 2015; Meyen et al., 2011).

One approach scholars have noted to mediate the challenges produced by this power imbalance centers developing a relationship with the participant. This can be accomplished, in part, through careful preparation. Mikecz (2012) shared, "I cannot overemphasize the significance of thorough preparation. Familiarity with [elites'] background was essential, as some of them asked me in their reply why I had chosen them. Knowing their life history also helped me to spot minor nuances during the interviews" (p. 487). From this perspective,

knowing about an elite's background helps ensure a smooth interview and has the potential to make the researcher more perceptive of what the elite says. Understanding the background of respondent can be especially helpful when conducting phone interviews, which is prevalent when interviewing elites, to ascertain nuances in responses, including aspects of organizational culture and whether they are being fully transparent (Harvey, 2011).

Another proven practice found in elite interviewing is researcher reflexivity (Herzog & Ali, 2015). Specifically, many scholars argue that researchers should reflect on their own perception of the position/power of the person being interviewed (Boucher, 2017; Kezar, 2003) based on their personal experience with the role the elite may be working in to ensure that personal biases are minimized (Lancaster, 2017). For example, in a paper one of us conducted on presidential message crafting, we included a section providing our positionality and how it may be associated with their interpretation of the interviews (McNaughtan & Pal, 2019). This level of reflexivity can help the researchers to develop questions that are more salient to the research topic and better suited for the elite being interviewed. In a similar vein, researchers should prompt their participants to critically analyze how their perspective may be filtered by their position (Mason-Bish, 2019), though this may be difficult with a single interaction. Many researchers argued that elites struggled to get beyond providing an institutional response, as opposed to their personal perception, which likely hindered the authenticity of the data collected (Harvey, 2011).

Finally, research discussing how to prepare for and conduct elite interviews emphasizes the importance of understanding the context of the issue you are asking the elite to discuss (Ali & Herzog, 2015; Lancaster, 2017). Seemingly straightforward, many scholars found that without a clear understanding of the context, they did not know what probing questions to ask, or how to build a meaningful relationship with the elite (More & Stokes, 2012). One approach to this was intentional triangulation of data occurring both prior to, and following, the interview (Natow, 2019). This approach led Natow (2019) to prepare for the interview having read and engaged with the elites' communication and potential perspective before even speaking to the elite. In addition to triangulation, truly understanding the varied context of elites is critical, especially in higher education, where state politics, socioeconomic features, and demographics can lead to significantly different institutional structures (More & Stokes, 2012).

Trust and Maintaining Critical Distance

Another major challenge in elite interviewing is building trust and establishing rapport with participants. The literature provides several suggestions for increasing trust, such as being transparent about the aims of the research (Harvey, 2011), demonstrating expertise about the topic (Mikecz, 2012), and giving careful consideration to question order and design (Morris, 2009). A frequent phrase throughout the literature underscores the need for researchers to do their "homework" prior to interviews to "reduce status imbalance and highlight the seriousness of the interview by projecting a positive image to gain respect" (Mikecz, 2012, p. 483). Building trust and establishing rapport also improve the chances of collecting high quality data because the respondents feel more comfortable with the interviewer (Harvey, 2011). Most articles suggest ordering interview questions so that more challenging or threatening questions are near the middle or end of the interview (Morris, 2009). Additionally, Aberbach and Rockman (2002) recommended open-ended questions because "elites especially—but other highly educated people as well—do not like being put in the straight-jacket of close-ended questions" (p. 674).

Scholars warned that obtaining elites' authentic perceptions, recollections, and narratives can be difficult for several reasons. First, articles note that elites often have experience or training in how to avoid challenging questions (Smith, 2006; Wedel, 2017).

Berry (2002) argued that exaggeration and subtlety were some of the ways that elites avoided directly responding to more challenging questions. In the same vein, Morris (2009) explained that policy elites are especially adept at derailing interviews due to their daily media interactions, which allows them to shut down or deflect questions. In addition, Lancaster (2017) argued that elites often are uncomfortable being vulnerable, which can reduce the authenticity of their responses. Because of the possibility that elites may see interviews as public relations opportunities, Mikecz (2012) emphasized the importance of keeping "critical distance" and not taking everything elites say at face value. We saw many of these themes play out in our own studies involving elite interviewing in higher education.

Studies Involving Elite Interviewing in Higher Education

As a way of illustrating the on-the-ground realities of qualitative research involving elites in the field of higher education, this section provides examples of the data collection processes for three studies that we conducted. We selected these three examples because they reflect challenges we have frequently confronted and strategies we often used over numerous projects involving elites. Each of these studies involved interviewing people who met the definition of elites offered above due to their positional power and/or ability to influence their organizations. Although both of us have conducted multiple studies involving college and university presidents, we included the first example study to include other types of elite participants. Lastly, we selected examples that used different qualitative methodologies that make use of interviews during data collection. Table 1 provides an overview of the three example studies we discuss in more detail below.

Table 1
Overview of Example Studies

Example Study	Institutional Context	Methodology	Number of Interviews	Positions of Elites
University strategic priorities	Public research university	Case study	29	System chancellor, former president, vice presidents, deans, faculty leaders
Communication strategies of university presidents	Public research universities classified as state flagships	Case study	12	Presidents, vice-president of communication
Experiences of presidents of color at community colleges	Community colleges	Narrative inquiry	11	Presidents

To more fully understand our experiences as researchers, it is worth briefly describing our positionality, both at present and during these studies. Author 1 was a doctoral student at the time of data collection for example study 1. He was familiar with the institutional context and had worked for a time in the provost's office at the university. Even though the participants had more power and influence, Author 1 still enjoyed unique access to them by virtue of his knowledge and position within the university. Moreover, Author 1 is a white, cisgender man

conducting research at a predominately white institution, which may have influenced his ability to access and build rapport with participants who shared similar identities. This matters because Author 1's identity likely influenced his perception of challenges and shaped strategies available to him as a researcher.

Author 2 conducted both of these studies as a pre-tenure faculty member at a large research-intensive institution. He had previously served as a special assistant to the president of a regional comprehensive institution. In that role, he had worked closely with all vice-presidents to support them with communication and management of multiple institutional challenges. These experiences were helpful to enhance understanding of the context and language used by presidents. Author 2 also identifies as a white, cisgender male. Similar to Author 1, these identities likely influenced his perceptions and strategies for communicating with presidents.

Example Study 1: University Strategic Priorities

Our first example was a case study of how and why one public research university made innovation and entrepreneurship important parts of its strategic plan (McClure, 2016). For this study, I (Author 1) interviewed a range of stakeholders at the institution, including deans and vice presidents, faculty leaders, one former president of the university, and the chancellor of the state university system. The case study research design called for semi-structured, in-person interviews (Yin, 2014). Participants were selected through purposive sampling based upon knowledge of innovation and entrepreneurship activities and the strategic priorities of the institution. I conducted a total of 29 interviews for this study, which is the point at which I noticed the same themes reoccurring and knew I had reached data saturation.

Data collection occurred over six months, primarily due to the schedules of the elite participants. Finding time for an interview was challenging, but I was usually able to identify an hour if the interview was scheduled a month or two in advance. I directly emailed participants to ask about their willingness to sit for an interview, but I quickly learned that most communication happened through an administrative assistant. In many instances, the administrative assistant managed email requests or reminded the potential participant about the request. I learned it was advantageous to call and speak directly to the administrative assistant, which helped to establish rapport with these individuals and clarify the purposes of the study. Because of this effort, many administrative assistants worked hard to squeeze me into the busy calendars of the elites. It is worth noting that two individuals who were important to the study— the current provost and president of the institution—declined to participate. The administrative assistant explained that the provost's travel schedule was too demanding, and the president declined because they had received too many requests to participate in research projects.

All interviews took place in participants' offices, which were generally on campus. However, two interviews (with the former president and system chancellor) took place in other locations, which required gaining special permission to park and security clearance to enter the building. Even with interviews occurring in more familiar on-campus spaces, entering elites' offices was an intimidating experience. In most cases, I was asked by an administrative assistant to sit in a waiting area until the participant was ready. Many offices were decorated to convey the importance of the people who occupied them. This was particularly true of the "main administration" building, which included marble floors and columns, dark wood paneling, and painted portraits of former leaders. Although many people had sitting areas in their offices, in some cases interviews happened with the elite sitting behind their desk, creating physical and symbolic barrier between us.

I prepared for each interview by learning as much as I could about participants through publicly available information. For many participants, it was possible to find announcements

of their appointments with background information and even resumes/curricula vitae by searching their names in Google. This preparation was useful during the early part of interviews to establish rapport. I would often ask about something I saw in their background before jumping into more substantive questions. This might mean trying to connect to something on a personal level, like having lived in the same city, or even asking them about prior accomplishments. I also explained my connection to the institution I was studying and re-explained the purpose of the study. Despite agreeing to participate, some of the people I interviewed did not remember who I was. Being able to succinctly explain the purpose of the study was essential. One of the more universal questions I received centered on confidentiality and how the findings of the study would be shared. This required reassuring participants, sometimes multiple times, how confidentiality would be protected through use of pseudonyms. Additionally, participants often wanted to know who else I interviewed or planned to interview—information that I did not divulge due to IRB protocol.

Interviews with elites could be demanding in several ways. First, participants frequently reframed questions or even pivoted from the topic at hand. For example, during several interviews, I asked about a particular initiative to promote innovation and the participant began listing the university's various accomplishments in fundraising and rankings. Pushing participants to answer the question at hand depended on the importance of the question to the interview and also careful time management. Second, many participants assumed that I had in-depth knowledge of the institution, including key statistics about students, acronyms for organizational units, and leaders from the past. Third, although I requested an hour, most participants were only able to give 30 to 45 minutes, and I sometimes learned this when I arrived at the interview. This required being judicious with which questions I asked and to make certain that I knew the key questions to pose for each participant in advance. I had to become comfortable with the idea that it was not participants' responsibility to answer every question. Lastly, participants often had their own questions about the topic and often wanted me to share information or insights with them. I tried to answer their questions, while tactfully bringing the conversation back to my questions. Thus, in addition to participating in the research, the elites I interviewed often wanted to learn from it or hear my perspective on related issues.

Example Study 2: Communication Strategies of University Presidents

The second example of interviewing elites was a study focused on presidential communication decision making around contentious issues that originated outside of the college's campus (McNaughtan & McNaughtan, 2019). In this two-part study, I (Author 2) completed a quantitative content analysis of presidential communications in response to the presidential election of Donald Trump and then interviewed a national sample of university presidents to discuss the process of deciding whether to produce a public communication or remain silent. The study focused on the 50 state flagship institutions in the United States identified by Gerald and Haycock (2006) as the most prestigious and resourced institutions in their state. I utilized IPEDS to collect the name of the president/chancellor for each institution, and I obtained the email address for each president by manually visiting each of the respective institutional websites to retrieve the required information. In some cases, there was no email address provided for the president, which necessitated that I call the president's office to ask for the president's email.

I invited 50 presidents to be interviewed and 12 elected to participate. However, four of the 12 presidents asked that their vice president for institutional communication speak on their behalf. Given the high-profile nature of the vice president for institutional communication as the person responsible for communicating externally on behalf of the university, all 12 of

the participants are considered elite. Each of the 50 presidents received a maximum of three follow-up emails inviting them to participate in the study. After the initial email, 7 presidents volunteered to participate and an additional 5 responded affirmatively following the second email. I did not receive any interest following the third email outreach. I limited our outreach attempts to three knowing that many elites do not respond to research requests.

The data collection phase of this project lasted eight months, which included three months for the quantitative content analysis to be conducted in preparation for the interviews. The time from the initial invitation to presidents to participate in the interview to the first interview was a little over one month, and all interviews were completed five months after the initial invitation. Similar to the first example study, identifying a time to meet was challenging and four of the 12 presidents rescheduled their interview less than 24 hours before the interview was to occur. In addition, after sending the first email directly to the president with little response, the researcher elected to copy the administrative assistant to the president in all subsequent follow-up emails. In some cases, interviews were conducted while the president was traveling to, or from, another meeting.

After times were selected for the 12 presidents who elected to participate, I conducted the interviews over the phone. In all cases, I called the president's office and an executive assistant either connected me to the president or in some cases the president was unable to take the call at that time and the executive assistant took my number and then called back at a later time. This mirrored the experience of Author 1, who was asked to wait in a waiting area as I was not ever given the presidents direct line but asked to wait for the president to contact me if they were still in another meeting. As mentioned previously, this illustrated the need for flexibility in all aspects of scheduling the interviews, as even at the moment of the interview, the time could be changed.

I chose to be fairly informal initially to build a positive relationship with the president. In addition, I disclosed my professional background as a former special assistant to the president and member of an institutional board of trustees as a way to help the president feel more open, knowing that I had worked closely with another university president. Unlike most qualitative studies, in this research the institutional IRB stipulated that verbal consent was appropriate as opposed to a signed consent form as the process for collecting the consent form would be too tedious for the participant. In addition, to prepare for the interview most presidents requested that the questions be sent in advance, which I obliged. However, even when a president asked for the questions in advance, it was clear in most cases they had been unable to review them prior to the interview.

During the interviews, three experiences consistently occurred. First, I asked each question related to a past event on their campus and when appropriate a follow-up question was also asked of the president, but many times the president would reframe the question to a more current issue. Specifically, the interview focused on each president's decision to publicly communicate on the election of Donald Trump, for most presidents who participated in the interviews more current events were referenced. Some remembered their message following the election and some did not, as it had been three to six months prior to the interview and, given the complexity of their role as president, other issues were more salient at the time of the interview. For example, some of the presidents were interviewed following the March for Science in March 2017 and though they did have thoughts on their public communication regarding the election, they had more current perspectives on the March for Science, which led to more in-depth conversations.

Second, all presidents discussed their obligation to key stakeholders, which can be seen as understanding their role as an elite. From this perspective, it is clear that the interviews would have been incomplete if our interview protocol and subsequent follow-up questions did not focus on the elites' context and personal experiences in power. This was especially critical

in the follow-up questions, which were typically focused on the people involved in the experiences of the president and the considerations of the president when making decisions. Furthermore, the presidents who participated sometimes referenced legal or moral reasons for being unable to discuss a question further.

Finally, during the interview process, I chose to end the interview to respect the time of the president. In almost every interview, the president was willing to continue speaking past the 30 or 45-minute time slot allotted in their calendar, but out of respect for the presidents' time, the interview sometimes concluded before the final question was asked. In turn, 10 out of the 12 presidents expressed interest in being interviewed in further research and to be informed when the studies were published. Following the interview, I emailed each president to thank them for their time and to share pertinent scholarship related to the topic discussed when presidents requested it. In addition, after each interview the transcript of the conversation was sent to the president, but no corrections were ever requested from the presidents. This is likely due to the complexity of the president's schedule and their lack of ability to review transcripts. However, I continued this practice as a way to demonstrate respect for the president and to maintain the relationship for future studies.

Example Study 3: Experiences of Presidents of Color at Community Colleges

The two previous examples used case study approaches. The third example focuses on a narrative study that sought to understand the experiences of presidents of color at community colleges (McNaughtan & Hotchkins, 2020). In this study, I (Author 2) used web sources and national association contacts to identify and invite twenty presidents of color to participate in the study. The focus of this research was to better understand how presidents' identities (i.e., race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation) influenced presidential decision making. Specifically, I focused on how identities influenced whether a president chose to communicate with their campuses about internal and external crises.

Developing the sample for this study was difficult, and the majority of the presidents originally contacted did not respond or declined the invitation. It is likely that the controversial nature of the topic, and the current fervor around issues of race and gender (e.g., Black Lives Matter, an increase in the number of campus hate crimes, and the #metoo movement), may have led many presidents to decline my invitation. In addition, many community colleges are short staffed which could also lead presidents to decline the interview request. After three months of reaching out to potential participants, only two interviews had been completed and a third interview was scheduled. During the third interview, the president volunteered to reach out to his network. An additional 10 presidents volunteered to be interviewed in connection with the invitation from that one president. We later found out that many of these presidents were members of the same national association. This snowball technique led to both more interviews and an additional level of trust with future participants.

The data collection phase for this project included two waves. The first wave involved interviews with 11 presidents and took approximately five months. During this phase I interviewed each participant for 30-60 minutes over the phone using a previously developed interview protocol. Each of the questions centered on how identities influenced their decision making. While each president interviewed during this wave identified as a person of color, for many of them it was their sexual orientation or gender identity that was most salient in their decision making as a president.

The first phase was also crucial to develop relationships with the presidents, especially since the topic of this study was potentially controversial and personal. I began each interview by trying to find common administrative and personal experiences. For example, I used language and shared experiences that are typically used by elites as they lead their complex

college such as jargon like FTE (full-time equivalent), experiences with legislators, and the role of presidential cabinet members. The purpose of this approach was to develop a stronger relationship and to demonstrate for the president that they did not have to explain basic job functions or aspects of their work but could focus on more abstract issues related to the topic of interest. This was evident in one interview where I disclosed my previous position on a president's cabinet, and the president being interviewed often referred to their cabinet and made comments about I had likely seen a specific issue during my time in the role. One of the researchers on this project was also a scholar of color and was able to speak to some of their experiences that aligned with that of the president. During the interview, all presidents were open about their experiences and in some cases described the opportunity to discuss difficult topics in confidence as therapeutic. I found that discussing the response after each answer lead to additional insights and helped strengthen the relationship with the president as they expressed validation in their perspective.

The second wave of data collection came four months later when the research team recognized a need for follow-up questions. I contacted by email six of the 12 presidents and all six responded within 24 hours accepting the request for a follow-up conversation. The ease of reconnecting with the president was likely facilitated by the positive experience of the first interview, thus illustrating the importance of developing relationships and trust with elites. In both interviews, I found it helpful to ask for specific scenarios associated with the questions being asked. For example, presidents were asked if their identities influenced when they communicated publicly about an external crisis such as the #metoo movement or racial violence. I would then ask if they could think of a specific incident when their identity had or had not influenced their communication decision making. Given the sensitivity and historical oppression of the focal population of this study, presidents were also reminded that it would be completely understandable if they did not want to address the specific question.

Overcoming Challenges and Applying Strategies in Practice

The three examples presented above illustrate the unique challenges of interviewing elites in higher education, as well as how we navigated challenges related to gaining access, preparing for and conducting interviews, and establishing trust and maintaining critical distance. In this section, we analyze the examples, elaborating on them through connections to the literature with the goal of revealing practical strategies for other researchers. Our aim is to help researchers anticipate challenges and consider strategies to enhance both the interview experience and the quality of data they collect.

Gaining Access

Table 2 summarizes the challenges and strategies for gaining access to elite participants in the context of higher education.

Table 2

Summary of Challenges and Strategies Associated with Gaining Access

Theme	Challenges	Strategies
Gaining Access	● Trouble contacting the elite when little public contact information is available.	● Calling and speaking directly to the executive or administrative assistant
	● Gaining access to secure buildings and parking challenges when interviewing face-to-face	● Adding extra time for travel and gaining entry to offices
	● Easy to get "bumped" when crises or important meetings suddenly occurred	● Scheduling flexibility, willingness to be available and reschedule frequently
	● Communicating through an executive assistant potentially shielding the elite, or not responding to requests	● Partnering with national organizations or associations to meet potential participants and increase likelihood of a response
	● Busy travel schedule limiting participant availability	● Setting aside a long time period for data collection
	● Elites received too many requests to participate in research projects	● Only requesting a short amount of time for the interview (30-45 minutes)

Challenges. Consistent with the literature, gaining access to elites in higher education is no simple undertaking (Laurila, 1997; Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016; Mikecz, 2012). Elites in higher education do not always have publicly available contact information, or they may only list a generic email address, such as "president@school.edu." Locating contact information sometimes requires asking others who work closely with the elite, such as administrative assistants, to connect you. Additionally, elites in higher education typically have incredibly busy schedules and travel frequently. It is not uncommon for a major issue or even crisis to require alterations to the daily schedule at a moment's notice. For presidents, in particular, the demands of fundraising and presenting in front of state legislators or boards of trustees often means there are large segments of time during which meetings cannot be scheduled. Some elites are in positions where they are asked for interviews frequently, whether by researchers, student journalists, or reporters. They may place restrictions on how many interviews they agree to do. Researchers can rarely expect their study to be as salient to elites as more current institutional initiatives, obligations, and concerns. Although an elite may agree to an interview, the actual process of scheduling the interview requires prolonged coordination with administrative assistants and chiefs of staff (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). Once an interview is scheduled, researchers may encounter additional challenges with accessing certain spaces due to limited parking or the need for special approvals.

Strategies. What can a researcher do to successfully get their foot in the door with higher education elites? As the examples above show, the first strategy is to lay a foundation prior to requesting an interview. This means emailing or calling an administrative assistant to explain the study and build a relationship. Although the literature would likely call them gatekeepers (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016), executive administrators and similar staff people can be allies, not adversaries, in the scheduling process. Being professional, organized, gracious, and accommodating when communicating with administrative assistants can make a significant difference in gaining access (Harvey, 2011).

Another way to lay a foundation is to use a network to connect with elites, such as a national organization or colleagues who have a personal relationship with potential participants (Hertz & Imber, 1995; McNaughtan & Hotchkins, 2020). Having an "introduction," such as when a president reached out to fellow presidents in the third example, can dramatically increase the likelihood that an elite will a) respond to the request and b) agree to participate. An introduction can also help to provide researchers with credibility and increase trust. In one interview scheduled this way, the elite indicated that they agreed to the interview only because a colleague vouched for us. Laying a foundation is a more effective strategy for accessing elites than cold emailing or sending a request without establishing prior connections (Stephens, 2007). In the absence of connections to make an introduction, we sought out opportunities to meet elites and build relationships. For instance, one of us received permission to attend an event solely for college presidents, during which I was able to meet presidents and explain my study.

A third strategy to gain access is to create a timeline that is flexible and sufficiently long. As the literature notes (Laurila, 1997), researchers should expect that the scheduling process may take longer, and in many cases, meetings are scheduled several weeks or even months in the future. Lastly, we recommend being open to doing interviews in multiple ways, including by phone and for short time periods (Stephens, 2007). This strategy certainly carries costs, but as Harvey (2011) correctly explained, elites appreciate the flexibility of interviewing by phone, and "in many instances, the alternative to a phone interview is no interview" (p. 435). Additionally, some elites only have a small amount of time for a conversation, but a 30-minute conversation can still yield rich insights.

Preparing for and Conducting Interviews

Table 3 summarizes the challenges and strategies we identified with respect to preparing for and conducting interviews with elites in higher education.

Challenges. One thing that the literature does not extensively discuss is the experience of entering elites' offices. The physical space in which interviews occur can contribute to the power imbalance and discomfort described in the literature (Boucher, 2017; Lancaster, 2017; Morris, 2009), as researchers may be asked to sit in a waiting room or may have to conduct interviews from behind a desk. A similar challenge related to "distance" applies to being placed on hold until the administrative assistant patches you through to the elite's direct line. As is true of the elites described in the literature (Ali & Herzog, 2015; Morris, 2009), elites in higher education can be difficult to interview and expect a knowledgeable or expert-level interviewer. During interviews for the example studies presented above, it was not uncommon for a president or dean to ask if we have seen a strategic planning document, if we know the institution's graduation rate, or if we have read an influential higher education book. Many elites in higher education talk about internal business processes and utilize acronyms, often assuming that we were fluent language they were speaking. During several interviews, we

experienced presidents who could expertly reword or dodge difficult questions. Though rare, in some of our interviews, elites had little patience or energy to answer our questions.

Table 3
Summary of Challenges and Strategies Associated with Conducting Interviews

Theme	Challenges	Strategies
Preparing for and Conducting Interviews	● Entering elites' offices can be an intimidating experience	● Visiting location of offices in advance to get a sense of location and feel more comfortable on the day of the interview
	● Elites are often expert interviewees that are comfortable with institutional data and acronyms	● Learning as much as possible about participants through publicly available information ● Downloading basic institutional data from IPEDS and reading institutional "about us" and "FAQ" websites
	● Elites often did not remember who I was or why I was there	● Being prepared to succinctly describe the study and reason for interview
	● Some presidents had a difficult time providing their own perspective during the interview as they felt their voice was always akin to speaking for the institution.	● Probing when a president gives a stock or institutional response
	● Sometimes limited time on the president's schedule led to short interviews ● The president may be significantly behind and your interview starts late while you still have to end on time.	● Having a set of "must ask" questions ● Sending questions ahead of the interview, but not expecting the president to have read them ● Scheduling an hour for a half hour interview
	● The speed of presidential issues can lead to the topic of your interview being stale and the president reframing your questions to more current issues (i.e., interviewing presidents about events that occurred a month ago and they are already on to a new challenge).	● Focusing on broad research questions and not specific topical issues

This lack of patience was sometimes due to the demanding schedules of elites in higher education. Some interviews with presidents started late because an elite was coming from another meeting, or the interview was cut short because a pressing issue needed immediate attention. It was clear to us during interviews that elites in higher education are managing such pressing issues on a regular basis and sometimes juggling multiple at the same time. Even when we were asking about relatively current events, some elites had already moved on to a more immediate issue. The combination of attending to these "daily fires" and navigating busy schedules resulted in occasional confusion on the part of elites about who we were and what the purpose of our research was. A final challenge, which is also noted in the literature, deals with the inability of some elites to be vulnerable or deviate from institutional narratives (Lancaster, 2017).

Strategies. Navigating many of these challenges during the interview process starts with careful preparation (Mikecz, 2012). This preparation includes anticipating where the interview will take place and, if possible, identifying the location of offices and ensuring access in advance. A second strategy to enhance the experience and improve the effectiveness of the interview is to learn as much as possible about elites and their organization prior to the interview. For example, we looked for publicly available information about elites, including their biographies and curricula vitae. Knowing a few facts about a participant's background can help to develop rapport at the outset of interviews. Like Natow (2019), we found it useful to conduct basic research on elites' institutions by visiting their websites, reading strategic plans, speeches, and reports, and examining profiles available through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Although it is impossible to be an expert in everything that may arise during an interview, this preparation helped us to establish credibility by posing questions like: "I see that your retention rate has improved over the past few years, what initiatives have contributed to that improvement?" Any time an elite participant spends "teaching" basic points of practice or policy at their institution reduces time for more important responses and also harms the interviewer's credibility. In keeping with the literature (Harvey, 2011; Mikecz, 2012), we have found that by doing this "homework," the questions and responses are higher quality and rapport is developed more quickly with participants.

Elites in higher education respond positively to well-constructed questions that reflect expertise, making it easier for them to think of the interview as a conversation among colleagues and less likely to lose patience with the process (Mikecz, 2012). This underscores the literature's point about careful design of interview protocol (Morris, 2009). As a way of strengthening the questions that we ask, one of us has tested interview questions with someone outside the sample but in a similar position to solicit feedback. Because of elites' ability to deviate from questions and, in some cases, provide long responses, we found it helpful to identify certain "must ask" questions in the interview protocol. These are questions central to answering the research questions in the study, even if limited time prevents us from getting to other questions. Carefully monitoring time and being strategic with the questions we posed was essential because scheduling a follow-up interview was not always possible. It was not uncommon for elites to request the interview protocol in advance, and we generally complied with this response in the interest of scheduling the interview and relationship-building. As Harvey (2011) noted, being transparent about the research aims and process increases elites' willingness to participate. Indeed, some elites agreed to participate only after seeing the interview protocol. However, not all elites actually read the interview questions in advance. As discussed above, elites did not always remember the purpose of the study, which required being ready to succinctly describe the study. A final strategy is to be prepared to be flexible with respect to time—even with busy schedules, some elites enjoy the interview process and appreciate the chance to pause and reflect on their experiences. This can result in interviews

running over the allotted time, especially since many elites prefer broad and open-ended questions (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002).

Trust and Maintaining Critical Distance

Table 4 captures the main challenges and strategies related to navigating trust and critical distance during interviews with elites in higher education.

Table 4

Summary of Challenges and Strategies Associated with Trust and Critical Distance

Theme	Challenges	Strategies
Trust and Maintaining Critical Distance	● Elites tend to reframe questions or even pivot from the topic at hand to more benign topics.	● Re-asking questions or returning to questions later in the interview while also paying attention to time
	● Participants often had their own questions about the topic and wanted us to share information or insights with them	● Being willing to engage in some conversation, even if it's seemingly unconnected to the research
	● Elites were concerned with confidentiality and how the findings of the study would be disseminated	● Being ready to explain to participant how confidentiality would be protected through use of pseudonyms
	● Elites in higher education often have a distrust of faculty and the research process	● Providing examples similar administrative experiences and being transparent about your purpose and positionality ● Using background information about the participant to help establish rapport
	● Elites provided insufficient detail, or too much detail on topics that could make the vignette hard to understand.	● Seeking ways of triangulating data

Challenges. Our research experiences confirm that there are challenges related to trust and maintaining critical distance while interviewing elites in higher education. We often questioned whether elites were speaking as representatives of the institution or conveying their true perspectives on issues. In two interviews, presidents were joined by staff members from their universities' communications or public relations offices, signaling the difficulty of separating institutional and personal accounts for many elites. One of us had interview requests rejected when an elite learned that their institution would not be named or positively highlighted through the research. Some presidents were clearly hesitant to say something that might damage the reputation of their institutions. During interviews, elites often reframed or reworded questions, which allowed them to answer the question in a slightly different way. In some interviews, elites would pose their own questions or ask for our perspectives on the questions we asked. This was sometimes out of a genuine desire to learn, but it also underscores that elites sometimes have their own motives for participating in an interview, including wanting us to explain or share insights on a topic. Many elites expressed concerns with how the research would be used and sought assurances related to confidentiality, indicating that some were prepared to provide critical and honest answers to questions. These concerns were also due to some elites distrusting faculty and academic research more generally (Bess & Dee, 2014).

Strategies. One strategy to increase an elite participant's comfort and trust is to emphasize confidentiality and explain in specific terms how their identity will be concealed through pseudonyms when reporting findings. We learned to prioritize building rapport with participants, even if it meant spending some time initially in conversation unrelated to the research. We would try to connect with participants on a personal level by asking about something we learned about their backgrounds, sometimes even using flattery to help facilitate conversation. These strategies increased trust and made it easier for participants to open up as the interview progressed. Another strategy we used to build relationships and establish rapport was to describe our own administrative experiences, illustrating that though we were faculty members and researchers, we understood their roles and challenges. Maintaining critical distance for us meant paying close attention to instances when elites dodged questions or when their responses seemed overly positive. This sometimes meant re-asking or re-wording challenging questions in an effort to elicit a response or a different response. However, in most cases, we avoided challenging elites too forcefully during the interview process and instead gave them space to tell their story as they experienced it or wished to report it. This does not mean we completely abandon skepticism or doubt about some responses, but rather means that we applied a critical lens after interviews, while making meaning of the data through analysis. Similar to Natow (2019), we also used triangulation of data to check key facts discussed during interviews. In some cases, we were not interested in ascertaining the veracity of elites' claims, as our studies were interested in their perceptions and experiences. Nevertheless, some information like events on campus, statistics, or personnel changes could be verified through other data sources, and we used these data sources in such instances.

Conclusion

There are significant questions related to higher education whose answers depend on conducting interviews with elites, such as presidents, provosts, deans, and trustees. For example, individuals in these roles have a disproportionate amount of power and influence on institutional policy and actions. Their perspective on motivation behind policy formation, institutional strategy, communication, hiring, and a host of other topics is incredibly valuable. In this article insights from multiple fields are provided and connected to our varied experiences in an effort to produce insights for future researchers. Recognizing possible pitfalls

and enacting some the strategies discussed in this paper can help researchers avoid issues and result in more successful studies. Similar to other fields, our goal is that this article provides a starting place for further discussion on the complex process of conducting studies on elites which can enhance methodological training in graduate courses and empower a new generation to feel confident researching in proximity to power.

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