

Presidential Engagement of Students at Minority Serving Institutions



Foreword by Walter Kimbrough, President, Dillard University

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Foreword

On August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas, one week after it initially formed. As all hurricanes are unique, this one essentially stalled over one of the largest cities in the nation for a week, causing massive flooding. Soon, colleges and universities began sending out public letters of support for the students impacted by the flooding.

We didn't do that at Dillard. We identified students potentially impacted and made direct contact. When we saw students personally we checked in so we could help direct them to resources. This was not done for show, just to meet the need. Unfortunately, some of our students saw this as a lack of care. Some said that Dillard did not care about the students like those that sent out public statements.

I was baffled. Maybe I had not done a good job being accessible to students, engaging them so that they felt I, and the university, cared. So I decided to create a survey of the top activities I use to intentionally engage students. The goal was to determine if there were some activities I could stop doing and focus more on those that were deemed most effective.

I reached out to small college presidents as well as some Black College presidents to ask them for the strategies they used to engage students, and I asked my students to rate those as well for effectiveness. Finally, I asked students which activity I should not eliminate under any circumstances.

Sixteen percent of our students responded to the survey, which was very useful. Of the 19 strategies I employ, all had an average score of at least 3.7 on a 5.0 point scale, with half above a 4.0. The lowest engagement strategy? Having lunch in the cafeteria (which many cite as a key engagement activity). Ironically, the activity rated second lowest (off-campus lunches with freshmen) was the top activity not to eliminate under any circumstances. When asked to rate my colleagues' activities, none rated higher than a 3.8 on a 5.0 scale, and 13 of the 19 listed were below 3.7.

As an additional activity, I reached out to some HBCU SGA presidents to see what their presidents did and what they saw as effective strategies. Examples of effective strategies included walking around campus, attending evening/student events, visiting the cafeteria, and hosting town hall meetings. The emphasis was on being visible on campus, even in a casual, relaxed form, and willing to engage small groups of students personally.

So what's the takeaway? I have no idea! Clearly, there are mixed messages at least on my campus about how students want to be engaged and what is effective. Some of the most effective engagement activities were really transactional (i.e. providing free tickets to events, e-mails about opportunities). But what I learned is that there really is no research available that seeks to study how presidents can best engage their students.

This presidential engagement report is a first step toward that end. It provides some general ideas, but more importantly, I hope it spurs conversations on campuses about how best presidents should engage their students, for presidents to share best practices with each other, and for researchers to determine if presidential engagement has value on educational outcomes. Hopefully, this is the beginning of a new area of inquiry that may improve overall experiences and outcomes for students.

Walter Kimbrough

PRESIDENT, *Dillard University*

Introduction

College and university presidents in the United States have several responsibilities as leaders of their institutions. They are expected to oversee and implement policies that promote campus community, foster an environment that promotes student learning and achievement, actively engage with students, while also being fundraisers, role models, and change makers.

This report explores the ways that presidents engage with students, using traditional means as well as social media. As the United States becomes more heavily entrenched in social media as a form of open expression and communication, presidents have been tasked with using the various platforms to better engage with their students.



What does past research say about college presidents and the engagement of students?



How do presidents of Minority Serving Institutions engage students?

Background

The role of the university president is highly connected to fundraising and maintaining external relationships. While these efforts are necessary for the sustainability of the institution, little emphasis is placed on the president's role with, arguably, the most important stakeholders—the students. As such, there is a little to no literature on presidential engagement with students.

Of the current literature on student engagement, most research tends to focus on students who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Harper, 2005; Scheumann, 2014; Corder, 2015). Scheumann (2014) conducted a study on how ten students perceived the role of their president and how they understood the position in relation to their college education. Students connected their interaction with the president to their sense of belonging and notion of care for their wellbeing. Harper (2005) also offered a small discussion on the role of the president in his examination of high-achieving African American men. The study highlighted various forms of engagement ranging from having dinner at the president's home to sitting in on meetings with them and noted the connection between presidential engagement and student success.

A small body of literature considers the interactions of students with Minority Serving Institution (MSI) college presidents (Colston, 1993; Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Waring, 2003). While research tells us that one of the advantages of most MSIs is the nurturing and supportive environment (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Conrad & Gasman, 2015), the scholarship is not reflective of such practices on the part of presidents. One study described the engagement of African American women college presidents and how they lead HBCUs in terms of their student interactions. The study participants shared how they've engaged students on an ongoing basis to help them reach a level of excellence and success (Waring, 2003). Another study delved into presidential engagement, particularly with undocumented students, in an effort to foster a better learning environment for these students (Thomason, 2013). Historical research shows the impact of one-on-one presidential engagement. For example, highlighting the influence of Benjamin E. Mays on Martin Luther King Jr. shows that one-on-one engagement was prominent throughout the history of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and continues today (Colston, 1993).

Our Approach

This study began with a literature review to answer the aforementioned research questions. Our goal was to share research on the ways that college presidents interact with students and the benefits of student engagement on student success and overall institutional achievement. We used commonly known search engines such as EBSCO Host, JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar to locate relevant research. Although our research focuses on MSIs, we also reviewed any applicable articles pertaining to PWIs. In reviewing each article, we considered the following:

1

The types of interactions between presidents and students

2

How presidential engagement has been defined by scholars?

To begin our original research for this report, we selected 195 MSIs in the United States, which represent a cross section of the four most common types of MSIs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions). We also considered the type of institution, including whether an institution was public, private, four-year or two-year as well as the functionality of the institution's website.

We defined presidential student engagement as the ways in which college presidents intentionally interact with students to increase opportunities; connectedness to the institution; campus climate; and academic success. We did not consider events in which mandatory presidential engagement was required such as commencement, homecoming, and/or orientation. We also searched institutional websites, Google Scholar, Google News, social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) for evidence of presidential engagement. Of note, although the current tenure of a college president is 6.5 years (Gagliardi et al., 2017), we used a 10-year timeframe for our exploration (2008-2018). We analyzed data from the searches looking for thematic patterns.

We did not contact institutions directly for data relevant to the study; consequently, a limitation of our study is related to the accessibility of information. Our study solely features records and moments of presidents interacting with students that are accessible to the public; it does not take into consideration the private moments (i.e., letter of recommendations, one-on-one meetings with students or student organizations, etc.).

Major Themes

We began our research by investigating the many ways that presidents engage with students. However, our data revealed that public student engagement on the part of presidents is limited and primarily occurred in three main ways. MSI presidents' main method of engaging students, publically, included: photo opportunities, service events, and social events with students.

Photo Opportunities

Despite photographs also taking place at service and social events, we considered photo opportunities as moments when the college presidents photographed themselves at events and shared this with students via Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. For example, if a college president was attending an event on campus and shared a photo of herself via social media, we considered it a photo opportunity.

Service Events

Service events were often used by presidents to engage with students across campuses. These events usually took place from October - December. University presidents typically hosted a holiday food or toy drive for families in the local areas around their institutions. For example, Florida A&M University (FAMU) hosts the President's Holiday Toy Drive Celebration. The Holiday Toy Drive Celebration is designed for FAMU students and community members to come out and celebrate the holiday season while donating gifts for children.

Despite the growing number of political rallies related to social justice on college campuses, college presidents rarely documented their participation with students in these movements publicly. One president who did was Everett B. Ward, president of Saint Augustine University. He walked with students to the polls on election day this past October and posted about it on social media. From our research, the only justice-related activities in which presidents regularly documented their participation with students, to any great extent, were related to health awareness or neighborhood improvement activities. For example, past interim president of Morehouse College, Harold Martin Jr., participated in a breast cancer walk with students and St. Mary's University President Thomas Mengler participated in the STMU 5K Walk with students, which raised money for neighborhood revitalization.

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Despite the growing number of political rallies related to social justice on college campuses, college presidents rarely documented their participation with students in these movements publicly.

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Social Events

Social events were the most popular events college presidents attended to interact with students; particularly, presidents were often spotted at large sporting events and events held by prominent student organizations on their campuses (e.g. student government). Pamela Luster, president of San Diego Mesa College, actively tweeted her participation at many of the football games on campus. David Wilson, president of Morgan State University, and Michael Sorrell of Paul Quinn College are among several MSI leaders who regularly attend athletic and student-led events, often with their families by their side.

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MSIs tend to cultivate family-oriented communities on their campuses; thus presidents often find themselves at the center of the community.

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In addition to public engagement, MSI presidents also engaged students through both one-on-one interaction as well as family-oriented support provided on campus.

One-On-One Interaction

While many institutions do not have a formal method of engaging students, for many MSIs, authentic student engagement is embedded in their culture. Fayetteville State University Chancellor, James Anderson, provides students the opportunity to become “Chancellor for the Day.” This distinctive program stood out among the other efforts institutions employ to engage students. Many presidents tend to host structured meetings designed specifically to enhance dialogue between administration and the student population. For example, the president of Texas State University, Denise Trauth, has developed a webpage designated for student engagement. The webpage contains the dates and times that she is available to meet with students one-on-one for 15-minutes to discuss any concern they may have; this time is also made available for student group meetings. Likewise, President Thomas Isekenegbe of Bronx Community College hosts one-on-one 25-minute meetings that promote candid conversations. The presidents of both Tougaloo College, Beverly Hogan, and Texas Southern University, Austin Lane, have online portals to collect student complaints. President Judy Sakaki of Sonoma State University has a request form where students can coordinate a “walk and talk” in which they can informally chat with her.

Family-Oriented Support

MSIs tend to cultivate family-oriented communities on their campuses; thus presidents often find themselves at the center of the community. Many of these institutions establish programming and policies that aim to strengthen the familial community on campus. Grambling State University President Rick Gallot organized a peace walk, following the tragic death of two students, inviting the community to come together. Wayne Frederick, the president of Howard University and other administrators joined together to support international students from Nepal after a massive earthquake. The president met with students to comfort them in their time of need.

Social Media

As the student demographics shifts to a more a technologically savvy (and dependent) student population, presidents must also shift in their engagement of social media. As presidents aim to prioritize authentic relationships with students and cultivate communities on their campuses, many presidents have used social media to better engage with their students.

In many cases, this growing form of student engagement has been useful in humanizing presidents and allowing administration to connect with students in an unprecedented way. Of note, some MSI presidents have effectively used their Twitter accounts to show school spirit, share important institutional updates, and engage with students.



TEN MSI PRESIDENTS WITH THE MOST TWITTER FOLLOWERS

1 Renu Khator

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON —
AANAPISI/HSI

 84,000 FOLLOWERS

3 Walter Kimbrough

DILLARD UNIVERSITY —
HBCU

 17,400 FOLLOWERS

2 Wallace D. Loh

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND,
COLLEGE PARK — AANAPISI

 56,600 FOLLOWERS

4 Joseph Castro

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY,
FRESNO — AANAPISI/HSI

 9,160 FOLLOWERS

5 Michael Sorrell

PAUL QUINN COLLEGE — HBCU
5,393 FOLLOWERS

8 Wayne Frederick

HOWARD UNIVERSITY — HBCU
3,579 FOLLOWERS

6 George T. French, Jr.

MILES COLLEGE — HBCU
4,243 FOLLOWERS

9 David Thomas

MOREHOUSE COLLEGE — HBCU
3,283 FOLLOWERS

7 Eduardo J. Padrón

MIAMI DADE COLLEGE — HSI
3,626 FOLLOWERS

10 Elwood Robinson

WINSTON-SALEM STATE UNIVERSITY — HBCU
3,211 FOLLOWERS

MICHAEL SORRELL

Paul Quinn College (HBCU)
[@michaelsorrell](https://twitter.com/michaelsorrell)

President Michael Sorrell leads Paul Quinn College in Dallas, Texas. Under his leadership, Paul Quinn has become renowned for its innovative approach to using higher education to address societal problems. President Sorrell is an active social media user and has more than 5,000 Twitter followers. He also has a popular Instagram account and Facebook profile.



President Sorrell was one of the first MSI presidents to create a specific hashtag for his college. Hashtags #NationBuilding or #QuinniteNation can be seen in most of his posts, in an effort to further unite the campus community via social media.



Lyrik @LyrikNation
youtu.be/GP4agFqn5_Q
 ISSA HIT 🙌🔥👏🎤!!!
 "Lyrik | Butterfly Effect Remix(Official Music Video)" Out Now 🌍🔥🌍.
 If You Haven't Seen It Yet? Please Do Me A Favor And Support True Talent 🎤👑💖.
 #Like #Comment #Subscribe #Share



President Sorrell is known for the love and support he gives to his students. He often highlights their unique gifts and artistic talents on his social media pages.

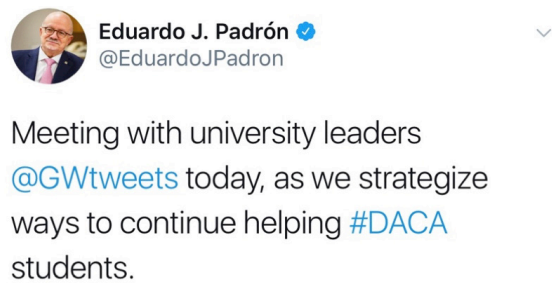
EDUARDO J. PADRÓN

Miami Dade College–(HSI)
@EduardoJPadron

Eduardo J. Padrón is the president of Miami Dade College, an HSI in Miami, Florida. He has served in this capacity for more than twenty years. President Padrón uses social media to engage the campus community and to highlight the many wonderful things happening at the institution.



↑ President Padrón also showcases the intellectual prowess among his students, using social media.



↑ President Padrón uses social media to display a commitment to uplift and support marginalized groups of people.

DAVID THOMAS

Morehouse College (HBCU)
@Morehouseprez

President David Thomas of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia has an active Twitter account with over 3,000 followers. He uses social media to engage the campus community by highlighting special events and significant institutional achievements.



← A strong supporter of students, President Thomas uses social media to highlight student success and inspire his students with words of wisdom.



Outliers

Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are a few social media platforms MSI Presidents use to engage with students. Although 55% of all college and university presidents use social media, only 36% of MSI presidents use social media to engage with their student populations. Of that group, most don't post or tweet regularly. Many presidents miss opportunities to connect with current and prospective students as well as stakeholders and supporters.

There are a few MSI presidents who are outliers; they effectively use social media to connect with their student body and the greater community. Below are examples of how the "outliers" engage with students via social media, garnering a large number of followers.



RENU KHATOR

University of Houston (AANAPISI/HSI)
[@UHpres](#)



WALLACE D. LOH

University of Maryland College Park (AANAPISI)
[@presidentloh](#)



WALTER KIMBROUGH

Dillard University (HBCU)
[@HipHopPrez](#)



JOSEPH CASTRO

California State University, Fresno (AANAPISI/HSI)
[@JosephICastro](#)

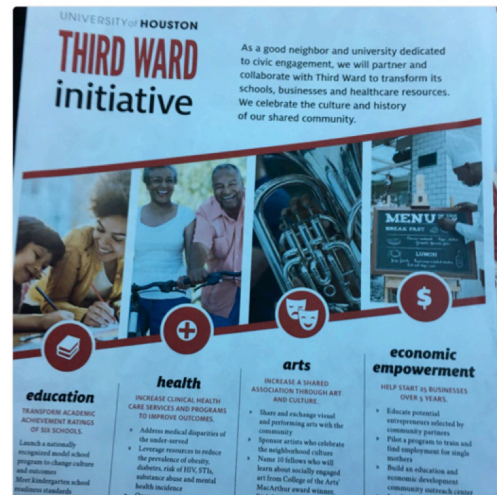
RENU KHATOR

University of Houston (AANAPISI/HSI)
@UHpres

With over 85,000 followers, President Khator is the most followed MSI president on Twitter. Her followers include –but are not limited to– students, faculty, staff, and members of the community. President Khator tweets almost every day and averages about 600 likes on her most popular posts. She uses this powerful platform to showcase everything from day-to-day family life to administrative duties on campus. President Khator’s Twitter page offers a level of transparency that allows her followers, students included, to personally connect with her. Below are some examples of President Khator’s student engagement via social media:



↑ President Khator often tweets moments with students at social events. She also strongly supports the various sports at the University of Houston, and can be found tweeting play-by-play scores and moments with her family at the games.



↑ President Khator often retweets and comments on student posts. She also makes a point to post student and university-wide activities – whether present or not – showing her followers’ personal investment in university life.

← President Khator’s tweets about her day-to-day life. Her posts share pieces of personal happiness that garner hundreds of likes and retweets from her students.

WALLACE D. LOH

University of Maryland College Park (AANAPISI)
[@presidentloh](#)

Wallace Loh, president of the University of Maryland, College Park, has over 56,000 followers on Twitter. President Loh often uses his platform to highlight social justice issues. Below are examples of President Loh's student engagement via social media:



↑ President Loh's opinion pieces on topics around social justice are often posted and circulated on social media. These posts allow for students and community members to learn more about his personal values and his commitment to fighting against certain inequities and injustices that affect his student body.



↑ President Loh uses his Twitter account to show support for the immense diversity on campus.



↑ President Loh often posts about his attendance at student social events.

WALTER KIMBROUGH

Dillard University (HBCU)
 @HipHopPrez

While Walter Kimbrough is president of one of the smallest HBCUs in the country, Dillard University, he has the largest social media presence of any HBCU president. At over 17,000 Twitter followers and a comparable amount of friends on Facebook and Instagram, President Kimbrough uses his powerful social media platform to discuss a diverse range of topics connected to his students. These topics include, but are not limited to, sports, student social events, Black history, HBCU awareness and uplift, alumni giving, and academics. His active social media presence helps broaden students' knowledge about topics of which they may not have been aware. President Kimbrough's daily tweets, Facebook posts, comments, and retweets with students are a consistent way to keep conversations and excitement among the student body around the events occurring at Dillard University. Below are examples of President Kimbrough's student engagement via social media:

Walter M. Kimbrough added a new photo.
 December 29, 2017 · 🌐

Brielle, Jilyani, Rodney



↑ President Kimbrough often takes pictures with his students and puts their names in the comment section of the post. This is a simple, yet powerful, way to connect with students.

Walter M. Kimbrough
 November 28, 2017 · Network For Good · 🌐

Made my first donation of the day- \$500 to Dillard University. Asking all DU Alums to match me with a gift of any amount. Asking HBCU friends and advocates to support our work as well. Asking United Methodists and United Church of Christ members to support your institution.



#DUGivingTuesday 2017
 Giving Tuesday is a movement to celebrate and provide incentives to give to the cause YOU care most about. Now more than ever, our students need YOUR help and support to continue their dreams of acquiring an education on a higher level and...

↑ Giving to his institution is just one of the ways President Kimbrough engages both current students and alumni via social media. In doing so, he invites alumni to connect with the university and raises awareness on the value of giving back.

Walter M. Kimbrough @HipHopPrez · Apr 6
 Scenes from last night's opening of the student art exhibition. #myDU



🗨️ 4 🌟 18 📧

← President Kimbrough also supports students of varying majors and interests, by attending sports games, art exhibitions, and tweeting about their unique talent.

JOSEPH CASTRO

California State University, Fresno (AANAPISI/HSI)
[@JosephICastro](#)

Joseph Castro, president of California State University, Fresno, currently has over 9,000 followers on Twitter, many of whom are students, faculty, staff, and community supporters. President Castro tends to tweet about campus sports, community service, and student life. President Castro marks most of his tweets with **#BeBold** to remind student followers of the culture his social media presence fosters. His **#BeBold** phrase often comes after posts on university issues, community service, and infamous “**DYK?**” tweets, where he lists fun facts about the institution. Below are examples of President Castro’s student engagement via social media:



Joseph I. Castro @JosephICastro · Feb 28
 Nice to see you today! You are cool! **#BeBold**

Lety @lety_u96

Fresno State president, Mr. Castro just walked past me eating lunch, looked straight at me and said Hi... I feel cool



↑ His timely and genuine responses exemplify a connection with students that are most definitely worth noting—he assures them that their voices are heard and considered.



Joseph I. Castro @JosephICastro · Feb 16
 DYK? Employment growth in the Central Valley is 100% higher than employment growth in the nation. It is no coincidence that this is happening during academic rise of [@Fresno_State](#). **#BeBold**



↑ The example above shows how President Castro uses **#BeBold** and **DYK?** These are subtle, yet key ways, that students can search and easily connect with President Castro via social media. Many of these posts are also promoting community advocacy and service work.

Recommendations for Social Media Usage

We offer six recommendations for MSI Presidents to increase student engagement via social media:

1. CREATE A SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT

Presidents benefit from creating social media accounts to communicate with students on campus. Using social media platforms to communicate and engage with students provides a unique avenue to share important updates, spread school spirit, and highlight student achievement all while “humanizing” the president among the student population.

2. PRIORITIZE SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

It is not enough for MSI presidents to simply create social media accounts. To engage with students consistently through this medium, presidents must prioritize being active on their accounts and posting or tweeting multiple days each week.

3. DIVERSIFY CONTENT

Presidents benefit from posting a range of content on their platforms that allows them to connect with students, the university community, and the larger local community. Examples of what presidents have posted about include:

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1 Student activities | 4 University sports | 8 Essential dates and reminders |
| 2 Commenting/responding to student posts | 5 Personal time with students at events | 9 Scholarship information and job opportunities |
| 3 Academic achievement or institutional success | 6 Speaking engagements | 10 Any traditions or cultures related to the institution |
| | 7 Community service | |

Such public awareness could increase recruitment efforts as students can see early on that their campus president is invested in student success.

4. HAVE A SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM

While a president’s social media accounts should be used consistently, busy schedules may prohibit them from being as active as they should. As such, “social media personnel” should share responsibility with presidents for sharing information on these platforms.

5. FOLLOW YOUR STUDENTS BACK

As students follow presidents on social media, they should follow them back! Doing so is a simple way to acknowledge students’ presence and can show that presidents care about seeing their success.

6. GET PERSONAL

While it is important to keep one’s work and personal life separate, presidents should not be afraid to post moments of living life outside of the “presidential” role. Doing so could help students connect, as a president’s day-to-day activities and interests could align with theirs.

Recommendations for Presidential Engagement

We offer five recommendations for MSI Presidents wanting to further engage students on their campuses:

1

Institutions should consider creating a space on their website to allow students to make suggestions to the president and regularly monitor it.

2

Presidents can further engage students by listening—either through one-on-ones with students or by attending student events—to their passions and those causes that are important to them.

3

Few presidents are offering public support to students as these students champion social justice-related activities. Although presidents need to make individual choices about what to support, presidential engagement around issues such as DACA, voting rights, and racial discrimination are essential.

4

Engagement of students around tragedy is vital to creating a family-like community—one in which students trust the president and the administration to a greater extent.

5

Presidents should consider being more transparent with students around the role presidents play within the institution, inviting students to shadow them and communicate the experiences to other students.

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