

Identity perspectives of California community colleges professionals managing government and
community relations

by

John O. White

B.A., University of California, San Diego, 1983
M.H.S.A., University of Michigan, 1985

AN ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Community College Leadership Program
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

The findings of this narrative inquiry indicate government and community relations professionals in California community colleges function as boundary-spanning leaders whose effectiveness is shaped by professional identity, relational credibility, and organizational placement. Participants' narratives revealed leadership competencies are enacted as identity-based practices rather than discrete technical skills, with legitimacy and executive access playing a critical role in role effectiveness. By integrating identity theory with the American Association of Community Colleges leadership competencies, this study highlights the importance of aligning leadership structure, identity, and institutional mission to strengthen government and community relations practice in public higher education.

Identity perspectives of government and community college professionals in California
community colleges

by

John O. White

B.A., University of California, San Diego (UCSD), La Jolla, 1983
M.H.S.A., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1985

A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Community College Leadership Program
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Cindy L. Miles

Copyright

© John O. White 2026.

Abstract

The findings of this narrative inquiry indicate government and community relations professionals in California community colleges function as boundary-spanning leaders whose effectiveness is shaped by professional identity, relational credibility, and organizational placement. Participants' narratives revealed leadership competencies are enacted as identity-based practices rather than discrete technical skills, with legitimacy and executive access playing a critical role in role effectiveness. By integrating identity theory with the American Association of Community Colleges leadership competencies, this study highlights the importance of aligning leadership structure, identity, and institutional mission to strengthen government and community relations practice in public higher education.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	xiii
List of Tables	xiv
Acknowledgments.....	xv
Dedication	xvi
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Community College Workforce.....	4
Statement of the Problem.....	7
Background of the Problem	8
Rising Pressure on Colleges.....	10
History of Government and Community Relations in Higher Education.....	12
Government and Community Relations in 4-Year Institutions	13
Government and Community Relations in Community Colleges	14
California Community Colleges	15
Purpose of the Study	17
Research Questions.....	18
Theoretical Framework.....	19
Identity Theory.....	20
Conceptual Framework.....	21
AACC Leadership Competencies	23
Methodology	25
Narrative Inquiry.....	26
Data Collection and Interview Development.....	27
Participants and Sampling.....	28
Methodology Alignment Table.....	29
Delimitations and Assumptions	30
Significance of Study	31
Contribution to Theory	32
Contribution to the Body of Knowledge.....	32
Implications for Practice	33

Implications for Future Research.....	33
Definition of Terms	34
Boundary-Spanning Role.....	34
Community Relations	34
Community Relations Professional.....	34
Government and Community Relations (GCR) Professional.....	35
Government Relations Professional.....	35
Institutional Advancement	35
Leadership	35
Leadership Roles.....	36
Public Information Officer.....	36
Public Relations	36
Summary	36
Organization of the Study	37
Chapter 2 - Literature Review.....	39
History of Government and Community Relations in Higher Education.....	41
Federal Higher Education Policy	41
Higher Education Policy Post-World War II	42
Higher Education and State Government.....	43
Roles of GCR Professionals in Higher Education	44
Government and Community Relations as a Profession	47
Competencies of Government and Community Relations Professionals	50
Leadership Competencies and Practices.....	51
Leadership Competencies	53
AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders	55
College and University Partnerships.....	56
Stakeholders.....	59
Public Information and Public Relations Networks.....	60
Theories and Frameworks.....	61
Narrative Inquiry.....	62
Identity Theory.....	63

Sociological and Collective Identity	65
The AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders.....	66
Summary	68
Chapter 3 - Methodology	71
Purpose of the Study	71
Research Questions	72
Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry	73
Theoretical and Conceptual Lenses	73
Theoretical Framework	74
Identity Theory.....	74
Conceptual Framework	75
AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders	76
Research Design	77
Narrative Research.....	78
Study Setting.....	80
Instrumentation	81
Data Collection and Data Sources	83
Data Analysis	85
Limitations	88
Ethical Considerations	90
Positionality	91
Study Quality	92
Worthy Topic	93
Rich Rigor	94
Sincerity	94
Credibility	94
Resonance	94
Significant Contribution.....	94
Ethical Practice	94
Meaningful Coherence.....	95
Summary	95

Chapter 4 – Research Results and Analysis.....	96
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions.....	96
Method of Data Collection and Validation.....	97
Research Context and Participants	98
Participant Overview	98
Participant Summary.....	100
Narrative Profiles of Participants.....	101
Narrative of P1	102
Narrative of P2	102
Narrative of P3	103
Narrative of P4	104
Narrative of P5	105
Narrative of P6	106
Narrative of P7	106
Narrative of P8	107
Narrative of P9	108
Narrative of P10.....	109
Narrative of P11	110
Narrative of P12	110
Narrative of P13	111
Narrative of P14.....	112
Narrative of P15	113
Narrative of P16.....	113
Narrative Inquiry’s Contribution to Understanding GCR Work	114
Findings Related to AACC Leadership Competencies.....	114
1. Organizational Strategy	115
2. Resource Management.....	115
3. Communication.....	116
4. Collaboration.....	116
5. Community College Advocacy	117
6. Professionalism	117

Emergent Themes by Research Question	118
Research Question 1	118
Theme 1: Relationship-Building as Core Professional Identity.....	118
Theme 2: Strategic Sensemaking and Political Navigation.....	119
Theme 3: Internal Influence and Institutional Legitimacy.....	119
Research Question 2	119
Theme 1: Political Acumen and Contextual Intelligence	120
Theme 2: Communication, Translation, and Storytelling.....	120
Theme 3: Emotional Intelligence and Ethical Judgment	120
Research Question 3	121
Theme 1: Proximity to Executive Leadership.....	121
Theme 2: Centralization Versus Decentralization	121
Theme 3: Structural Marginalization and Identity Strain	121
Summary.....	123
Chapter 5 – Interpretations, Resonance, and Implications	127
Problem Overview	128
Purpose of the Study	128
Research Questions.....	129
Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks	129
Methodology.....	130
Data Collection and Analysis	130
Analysis of Findings Tied to Research Questions	131
Research Question 1	131
Finding 1: Relationship Building as Core Role Identity.....	131
Finding 2: Strategic Sensemaking and Political Navigation.....	132
Finding 3: Internal Influence and Institutional Legitimacy	133
Research Question 2	134
Finding 1: Political Acumen and Contextual Intelligence.....	134
Finding 2: Communication, Translation, and Storytelling	136
Finding 3: Emotional Intelligence and Ethical Judgement	139
Research Question 3	139

Finding 1: Proximity to Executive Leadership	139
Finding 2: Centralization versus Decentralization.....	140
Finding 3: Structural Marginalization and Identity Strain.....	141
Interpretive Framing of the Findings	143
Two Major Integrative Themes	144
Interpretation Through Identity Theory	145
Boundary Spanning Leadership as Identity-Enacted Practice	146
Relational Bridging.....	148
Translation and Sensemaking	149
Navigating Ambiguity and Role Conflict.....	150
Operating Without Direct Authority	151
Identity Enacted Leadership	152
Relationships as the Core of Effectiveness.....	152
Identity Work Within Organizational Structures.....	153
Learning Through Experience Rather Than Formal Instruction.....	153
Advocacy as Storytelling	154
Resonant Threads Across Participant Narratives.....	155
Interpretation of Major Integrative Themes.....	155
Integrated Conceptual Model.....	156
Interpretive Analysis of the Figure	157
Implications for Practice.....	159
Implications for Community College Presidents and Chancellors	159
Implications for Boards of Trustees.....	160
Implications for Government and Community Relations Professionals.....	161
Implications for Leadership Development and Professional Preparation.....	161
Implications for Policy and Governance.....	162
Contribution to the Academic Literature	162
Limitations of the Study	163
Recommendations for Future Research.....	164
Conclusion	165
References.....	168

Appendix A - Interview Questions	203
Appendix B - Alignment Table.....	205
Appendix C - Participation Recruitment Letter	207
Appendix D - Preinterview Intake Form	210
Appendix E - IRB Approval	211
Appendix F - Participant Informed Consent Form	212

List of Figures

Figure 5.1. Integrated Conceptual Model of Boundary-Spanning and Identity-Enacted Leadership in Government and Community Relations	157
---	-----

List of Tables

Table 1.1. Methodology Alignment Table.....	30
Table 3.1. The Iterative Nature of Analyzing Interview Data	88
Table 4.1. Participant Demographics ($N = 16$)	99
Table 4.2. Professional Characteristics of Participants ($N = 16$)	100
Table 4.3. Mapping Research Questions to Emergent Themes and AACC Leadership Competencies.....	123
Table A.1. Interview Questions for GCR Professionals in California Community Colleges.....	203
Table B.1. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework	205
Table B.2. Data Analysis Method.....	205
Table B.3. Design of the Study.....	206

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Cindy L. Miles and the other members of my dissertation committee for their guidance, encouragement, and thoughtful feedback throughout this research process. Their expertise, insight, and commitment to scholarly inquiry provided invaluable support as I developed and completed this study. I am especially grateful for their patience, mentorship, and willingness to share their knowledge, which helped strengthen both the quality of this work and my development as a scholar-practitioner.

I also wish to acknowledge the many government and community relations practitioners who generously shared their time and experiences as participants in this study. Their openness and willingness to reflect on their professional journeys made this research possible and provided rich insights that form the foundation of this dissertation.

I am deeply appreciative of my colleagues, mentors, and friends who offered encouragement throughout this process. Their support and belief in the value of this work sustained me during the long and challenging journey of doctoral study.

Finally, I also extend my appreciation to the faculty and staff of the Kansas State University Community College Leadership Program for their commitment to developing community college leaders and scholars. The knowledge and experience gained through the program have had a lasting impact on my professional and academic growth.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Irene Wallace, and to my parents, Jack and Irene White, whose unwavering support and sacrifices made it possible for me to pursue a lifetime of higher education. Their encouragement, values, and belief in the power of education have shaped my journey in ways that words cannot fully express.

I also acknowledge the enduring support of my Kansas State University doctoral program cohort, whose shared commitment to scholarship and professional growth provided encouragement and camaraderie throughout this journey.

Finally, this study is completed with deep appreciation for the support and inspiration of my former colleague Kathlyn Enciso, Academic Emeritus Professor of English. Her indomitable spirit, generosity, unwavering dedication to her students, and quest for continuous learning and social change were a constant source of inspiration and a reminder of the transformative power of education.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the context, rationale, and structure of the study. The chapter begins by examining the evolving role of community colleges and the increasing external demands placed upon these institutions. It then introduces the staff who manage relationships between colleges and their external environments, particularly those responsible for government and community relations functions. The chapter next presents the problem statement, followed by the purpose of the study and the research questions guiding the inquiry. The chapter also outlines the theoretical framework, grounded in identity theory, and the conceptual framework, informed by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) leadership competencies. The chapter concludes with definitions of key terms, a discussion of the significance of the study, and an overview of the organization of the dissertation.

Community colleges occupy a unique position in the American higher education landscape. Designed to provide broad access to postsecondary education, workforce preparation, and community engagement, these institutions must continuously respond to shifting economic, political, and social expectations. Over time, the external environment surrounding community colleges has become increasingly complex. Policymakers demand improved student outcomes and accountability, employers expect institutions to produce a skilled workforce, and communities look to their local colleges as engines of economic mobility and regional development. Navigating these expectations requires community colleges to maintain strong relationships with government agencies, community stakeholders, and industry partners while simultaneously advancing their academic mission.

Since their inception, community colleges have been called upon to respond to a wide range of external forces and pressures while maintaining their commitment to serving students

and communities effectively. In recent decades, the pace and complexity of these demands have intensified (Alfred & Seybert, 2007). Colleges must respond to multiple stakeholders—including students, employers, policymakers, and community leaders—whose needs vary considerably and evolve frequently (Alves et al., 2010). As Boggs and McPhail (2016) observed, “Today’s community colleges are complex institutions with a broad range of educational, social, and economic functions” that “face challenges of economic and financial forces, declining government support, and an increasing demand for accountability” (p. 15).

At the same time, expectations from industry and workforce sectors have reshaped public discourse regarding the purpose of contemporary community colleges. Increasingly, these institutions are expected to prepare students for rapidly changing labor markets while supporting regional economic development (Levin & Kater, 2012; Osterman & Weaver, 2016). As a result, the administrative work required to sustain community college operations has become more complex. Higher education institutions must navigate expanding expectations for access, declining public funding, increasing accountability measures, and heightened competition within an increasingly globalized educational environment (Rees-Johnstone, 2020). These conditions have transformed not only institutional priorities but also the roles required to manage relationships between colleges and the external environments in which they operate.

Community colleges play a central role in expanding access to higher education across the United States. They offer associate degrees, occupational certificates, and, increasingly, baccalaureate degrees within the communities they serve (Young & Cutright, 2012). During the 2020–2021 academic year, approximately 8.9 million students were enrolled in community colleges nationwide (Community College Research Center, n.d.). Nearly 1,000 community colleges operate across the United States, ranging in size from fewer than 100 students to more

than 60,000, with approximately 90% of these institutions publicly funded (Kisker et al., 2023). Every state in the country maintains at least one community college, underscoring the sector's importance in promoting educational access and social mobility (Bastedo et al., 2023).

California operates the largest community college system in the United States and serves one of the most diverse populations in the nation. With a population of approximately 39.5 million residents, California is frequently ranked among the most diverse states in terms of race, culture, language, and socioeconomic composition (Johnson & Mejia, 2026). No single racial or ethnic group constitutes a majority of the state's population; approximately 41% of Californians identify as Latino, 34% as White, 17% as Asian American or Pacific Islander, 5% as Black, 3% as multiracial, and less than 1% as Native American or Alaska Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026). This demographic diversity shapes both the mission and operational environment of California's community colleges, which must respond to the educational needs of an increasingly complex and heterogeneous student population.

The California Community Colleges system is overseen by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO). During the 2022–2023 academic year, more than 1.9 million students were enrolled across the system (CCCCO, n.d.-a). System leadership has articulated ambitious goals through strategic planning initiatives designed to improve student outcomes and institutional performance. The most recent strategic framework, Vision 2030, identifies three major priorities: (a) equitable baccalaureate attainment, (b) equitable workforce and economic development, and (c) generative artificial intelligence and the future of learning (CCCCO, n.d.-b). Vision 2030 builds upon the earlier Vision for Success initiative, which established system-wide goals focused on increasing degree and certificate completion, strengthening transfer pathways to the University of California and California State University

systems, improving employment outcomes for Career and Technical Education students, and reducing equity gaps across demographic groups. These strategic priorities underscore the increasing expectations placed on community colleges to produce measurable educational, economic, and social outcomes (Rothstein et al., 2024).

Community College Workforce

To address these expanding expectations, community colleges rely on a diverse group of administrative staff responsible for managing institutional operations and relationships with external stakeholders (Gibson-Harman et al., 2002). These roles include individuals whose responsibilities involve government relations, community engagement, public affairs, communications, and institutional advocacy. These roles frequently involve interacting with elected officials, community leaders, public agencies, industry partners, and the media, while also advising institutional leadership on political, regulatory, and public perception issues.

The titles for these roles vary across institutions. In community colleges, the terms government relations, community relations, external affairs, public relations, and strategic communications are often used interchangeably (Bowles, 2022). Such variation reflects the historical development and evolving nature of work that connects institutions to their external environments (Glass et al., 1998). For the purposes of this study, the term government and community relations (GCR) is used to describe the intersection of several related functional areas, including government relations, public relations, community engagement, marketing, and institutional communications.

Understanding GCR work is complicated by the fact that the competencies associated with these roles span multiple leadership domains. These include communication, political analysis, strategic planning, policy interpretation, and relationship development (Government

Relations Executives Council, n.d.). Donahue (2022) identified a range of leadership competencies relevant to professionals operating in complex organizational environments, including maintaining awareness of laws and regulatory developments, anticipating the external impact of institutional decisions, and considering political, economic, and media dynamics in decision making. As Donahue concluded, “Dynamic leadership requires an awareness of factors outside of the organization that may impinge upon what happens within the organization” (p. 233).

Individuals in GCR roles frequently work closely with institutional chief executive officers and senior leadership teams to manage relationships with external constituencies (Mayfield et al., 2022). Their responsibilities may include interacting with elected officials and government staff, monitoring legislative developments, interpreting policy implications for institutional operations, coordinating institutional advocacy, and cultivating partnerships with community organizations and industry partners (DiConsiglio, 2011; McMillen, 2010). They also contribute to shape the public image of the institution through outreach, communications, and engagement strategies (Association of Government Relations Professionals, n.d.; Edmonds & Cabrales, 2021).

Despite the growing importance of these roles, little research has examined how individuals responsible for government and community relations understand their work within community colleges. While community college leaders are often recognized for their ability to recruit talented and adaptable staff, the scholarly literature provides limited insight into which professional competencies, leadership structures, or organizational placements best support effective external engagement. Chelf (2018) emphasized the complexity involved in studying leadership, noting that both the definition of leadership and the ways it is enacted continue to

evolve. Similarly, Ooro (2013) argued higher education institutions increasingly require interdisciplinary professionals capable of performing roles that transcend traditional academic and administrative boundaries.

Community college leaders operate within a policy environment shaped by numerous external forces, including workforce demands, student outcomes and return on investment, regulatory oversight, public accountability, and civic expectations (Baime, 2022). Professionals responsible for government and community relations play a central role in navigating these pressures by coordinating relationships with external stakeholders and managing issues related to legislation, policy development, community partnerships, and public communication (Association of Government Relations Professionals, n.d.). In this capacity, they serve as institutional intermediaries who connect colleges with the broader political and social environments in which they operate (McMillen, 2010).

However, despite the growing importance of these functions, the literature provides limited insight into the specific responsibilities, professional competencies, and organizational positioning of individuals performing government and community relations work within community colleges. Understanding how these professionals perceive their roles and responsibilities is essential for clarifying how institutions can more effectively structure these functions to support institutional leadership, community engagement, and policy navigation.

This study sought to address this gap by examining the perspectives of government and community relations staff working within California community colleges. Drawing on identity theory, the study explores how these professionals understand their roles, how they interpret the competencies necessary for effective performance, and how they perceive their organizational placement within institutional leadership structures.

Despite the increasing strategic importance of government and community relations functions in higher education, the roles, and professional identities of individuals responsible for this work remain underexamined in scholarly literature. While studies have explored leadership competencies in community colleges and the institutional challenges facing higher education, little attention has been given to the professionals who manage relationships between colleges and their external environments. In particular, there has been limited research examining how these professionals understand their roles, what competencies they consider most essential for their work, and how their organizational placement within institutional leadership structures affects their effectiveness. This lack of research leaves community college leaders with limited empirical guidance for structuring and supporting these roles. Consequently, a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of government and community relations staff is necessary to better inform leadership practice and organizational design within community colleges.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education institutions have experienced significant expansion in recent decades, accompanied by increased competition for students and heightened expectations for institutional accountability and performance. As these pressures have intensified, colleges and universities have increasingly required “more professional management structures and more entrepreneurial types of organization” (Alves et al., 2010, p. 160). For community colleges in particular, pressures from local, state, and federal stakeholders have converged to elevate the importance of engaging effectively with policymakers, community leaders, industry partners, and the broader public. These dynamics have placed growing responsibility on those who manage government and community relations functions within institutions. Yet, despite the strategic significance of

these roles, the professional identities, competencies, and organizational positioning of individuals performing this work remain absent from the scholarly literature, particularly within the two-year college sector. As a result, community college leaders may lack a clear understanding of how these roles contribute to institutional leadership, advocacy, and external engagement. This gap in the literature limits the ability of institutions to intentionally structure and support these functions as they navigate the increasingly complex political, economic, and social environments shaping the future of community colleges (Farmer-Hanson et al., 2019).

Background of the Problem

The emergence of an administrative workforce within community colleges has developed gradually over the past several decades, although this evolution has received limited scholarly attention (Gibson-Harman, 2001). As community college priorities have shifted in response to changing educational demands, economic conditions, and public policy expectations, senior institutional leaders have increasingly relied on the expertise and contributions of staff to support strategic decision making and institutional operations (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Many community college professionals—particularly those with advanced degrees—hold strong beliefs about their roles within institutional structures and their capacity to influence organizational outcomes. These professionals often view their positions as long-term careers within the community college sector and are attentive to issues of professional identity, status, and mobility within their institutions (Gibson-Harman, 2001).

Scholars have long recognized the importance of specialized roles within higher education institutions. More than four decades ago, Kopecek (1980) argued the professionalization of the public information function was essential to the maintenance and growth of colleges and universities. Kopecek asserted, “Public information personnel (should) be

recognized as professionals whose particular expertise is required on the management team of colleges and universities” (p. 5). During this period, organizations such as the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education began identifying public information officers as a distinct class of professionals whose work contributed to institutional effectiveness and program development. These early observations reflected the growing recognition that colleges require dedicated professionals to manage communication, public engagement, and relationships with external stakeholders.

Subsequent research has continued to highlight the expanding role of professional staff in supporting community college leadership. Alves et al. (2010) examined the work of “professional staff who assist community college leadership in executing district priorities” (p. 160), including those responsible for public information, government and community relations, and partnership development. Their review of the literature suggested these professionals increasingly perform functions comparable to those of managerial leaders in other sectors. However, Alves et al. also observed that research examining how higher education institutions manage relationships with external stakeholders remains limited. They concluded that colleges would benefit from “carefully rethinking their relations with various stakeholders and the communities” to strengthen planning and decision-making processes and to ensure institutional relevance within the modern knowledge economy (Alves et al., 2010, p. 162).

Within contemporary community colleges, senior leadership teams typically include positions such as chancellor, executive vice chancellor, and vice chancellor in multi-college districts, or superintendent/president, vice presidents, and executive directors in single-college districts (Ayalew, 2023). These leaders are responsible for guiding institutional strategy, managing public accountability, and responding to the external policy and economic

environments shaping higher education. Despite increasing recognition of the value of professionals who manage government and community relations functions, their roles, influence, and connections to institutional decision-making processes remain insufficiently understood within the scholarly literature. As a result, there is limited empirical understanding of how these professionals contribute to institutional leadership, strategic planning, and stakeholder engagement within community colleges.

Rising Pressure on Colleges

Public demand for greater accountability and transparency has reshaped expectations for higher education institutions, placing new emphasis on student outcomes, resource management, equity, and institutional performance (Kisker et al., 2023; Willis, 2010). External forces—including federal funding policies, state legislative priorities, and accreditation requirements—have increasingly influenced institutional priorities and decision-making processes. Beginning in the early 2000s, policymakers and higher education leaders intensified their focus on educational attainment, student completion, and measurable indicators of student success (Bastedo et al., 2023; Boggs & McPhail, 2016). Willis (2010) argued helping external stakeholders better understand the complexities of higher education finance and budgeting—while simultaneously promoting transparency and accountability—can improve the effective use of educational resources and strengthen public trust in educational institutions.

Concerns about the sustainability and future role of community colleges are not new. For more than four decades, scholars and policymakers have examined community college functions and raised questions about their long-term viability within the broader higher education landscape (Boone, 1997; Lane, 1978; Ramirez, 1989; Weerts, 2007). These concerns have intensified as higher education institutions confront global economic competition, rapid

technological change, and fiscal constraints. The U.S. Department of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education identified “global competitive pressures, powerful technological developments, restraints on public finance, and serious structural limitations” as major challenges facing American colleges and universities (Miller et al., 2006, p. 27).

Policy leaders have repeatedly called for community colleges to transform their institutional practices to better meet these challenges. For example, the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges recommended institutions shift their focus from simply expanding student access to ensuring student success through clear educational pathways and evidence-based decision making. This recommendation reflected a broader shift in higher education policy from a “culture of anecdote” to a “culture of evidence,” emphasizing the use of data to guide institutional improvement and accountability.

In recent years, public scrutiny of higher education has intensified. Media outlets, policymakers, and members of the public increasingly question the social and economic value of higher education and the return on investment associated with college attendance (Kisker et al., 2023). Community colleges, which were originally designed to respond to the needs of local communities, now operate within a far more complex policy and economic environment. Their missions have expanded significantly, yet many institutions continue to operate with limited financial resources and growing expectations for measurable outcomes (Bastedo et al., 2023). These conditions have created substantial operational challenges and increased pressure on institutional leaders to demonstrate effectiveness and responsiveness to external stakeholders.

As a result, community college administrators have had to expand their leadership capabilities and rely more heavily on an evolved workforce to help navigate the increasingly complex policy, political, and community environments surrounding higher education

institutions (Kozobarich, 2000). Scholars examining the future of higher education leadership have similarly emphasized the evolving challenges facing colleges require novel approaches to leadership and organizational management (Clark, 2017). Kozobarich (2000) concluded, “The dynamics of higher education in America today are driving the demand for a new set of skills and capabilities for tomorrow’s leaders” (p. 1). Consistent with this observation, researchers have suggested administrative structures and leadership roles within higher education will continue to evolve as institutions respond to increasingly complex external demands (Kisker et al., 2023).

History of Government and Community Relations in Higher Education

Government and community relations (GCR) professionals play an increasingly vital role in helping higher education institutions navigate complex political, regulatory, and community environments. These professionals support institutional leadership by interpreting legislative developments, identifying policy risks and opportunities, and cultivating relationships that can strengthen institutional capacity and financial resources (Mayfield, 2022). They frequently educate policymakers about the mission and operations of colleges and universities, alert institutional leaders to emerging legislative issues, and advocate on behalf of their institutions (Platt, 2022). Through these activities, GCR professionals contribute to shaping institutional strategy while also helping institutions respond effectively to external demands.

Despite the strategic importance of these roles, the profession itself has not been extensively documented within higher education scholarship. The historical origins of government and community relations as a distinct professional field within higher education remain difficult to trace, and little research has examined how these functions developed within institutional administrative structures. As McMillen (2010) observed, offices responsible for

government relations “are among the least understood of all administrative offices” within colleges and universities (p. 6). Similarly, Waddock and Boyle (1995) traced the evolution of community relations activities and noted many practices associated with these functions originated in other sectors, particularly business and government, where organizations cultivated relationships with local communities to support organizational goals. Although these roles have become more common within higher education institutions, their responsibilities and organizational influence remain comparatively underexamined in the literature.

Government and Community Relations in 4-Year Institutions

The presence of government relations staff in organizational leadership structures has a long history across multiple sectors. The National Government Relations Executives Council, founded in 1916, reflects the longstanding role of individuals who manage external relationships between organizations and public institutions (Government Relations Executives Council, 2024). The organization conducts research and supports professional networks that focus on areas such as economic development, public policy, communications, strategic planning, and organizational leadership. Within many organizations, including higher education institutions, government relations functions are integrated with broader responsibilities related to communications, community relations, and strategic engagement. However, the full range of these functions is rarely consolidated within a single administrative portfolio (Government Relations Executives Council, n.d.).

In higher education institutions, government relations staff often rely on the relationships they cultivate with officials at local, state, and federal levels to effectively perform their work (McMillen, 2010). These professionals operate within complex political environments that include elected officials, government agencies, community organizations, and advocacy groups.

Their responsibilities frequently involve monitoring legislative activity, facilitating communication between institutional leaders and policymakers, and coordinating advocacy efforts.

Community engagement and public communication have also been recognized as important aspects of institutional relationships with external stakeholders. For example, GCR professionals often provide community leaders and local media with information and narratives that highlight institutional achievements and community partnerships, helping position college leadership as active participants in local and regional initiatives (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Despite these contributions, public relations and community engagement functions were historically undervalued within higher education administrative structures. Robinson (2014) observed, until the late twentieth century, many institutions viewed public relations as peripheral to institutional leadership and often assigned these responsibilities to lower levels within the administrative hierarchy.

Over time, scholars and practitioners have worked to elevate the perceived value of these functions. Keen and Greenall (1987) noted the gradual effort to “raise the consciousness about the (great) value of public relations among senior college leadership” (p. 131). Similarly, Lang’at (1997) argued earlier institutional complacency regarding public communication contributed to public misunderstanding about the role and value of higher education institutions. These observations reinforced the need for dedicated professionals capable of managing relationships between institutions and the communities they serve.

Government and Community Relations in Community Colleges

Within community colleges, the need for professionals who manage external relationships has become increasingly apparent as institutions respond to changing public

expectations and evolving policy environments. Community colleges maintain strong connections with their local communities and frequently collaborate with government agencies, workforce organizations, and civic partners to support regional development and educational access. As a result, professionals responsible for government and community relations often play a key role in maintaining these partnerships and facilitating communication between institutional leaders and external stakeholders.

During a leadership workshop for the Kansas State University Community College Leadership Program, philanthropy consultant and former California community college administrator G. Boodrookas observed the leadership competencies required for external relations and fundraising professionals—including stakeholder engagement, partnership development, authenticity, and emotional intelligence—closely overlap with those required of community college presidents (personal communication, October 25, 2023). Boodrookas emphasized the importance of maintaining close alignment between professionals responsible for external relations and executive leadership teams to strengthen community partnerships, support institutional fundraising efforts, and sustain a positive institutional reputation within the colleges served.

California Community Colleges

The California Community Colleges system represents the largest system of higher education in the United States and is overseen by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO). The system's strategic direction is guided by Vision 2030, which emphasizes priorities such as equitable baccalaureate attainment and workforce and economic development (Owens et al., 2024). In preparation for earlier strategic planning efforts, the CCCCCO identified several major trends shaping the higher education environment in California,

including demographic shifts, economic changes, sociocultural developments, political dynamics, and advances in science and technology (Hom, 2001). These trends reflect broader national patterns affecting community colleges and other higher education institutions.

Across the United States, community colleges have increasingly adopted performance reporting systems and accountability measures designed to track student outcomes and institutional effectiveness (Bastedo et al., 2023). As these expectations have intensified, college administrators, including senior leaders, managers, and new chief executive officers—have been required to respond to emerging trends and policy developments affecting their institutions and communities (Whissemore, 2022).

Within the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, responsibilities associated with government and community relations include legislative and policy analysis, strategic communication and messaging, relationship building with government and community stakeholders, resource development, and collaboration across multiple sectors (Salenik et al., n.d.). However, beyond job descriptions and administrative assignments, little documentation exists regarding the day-to-day work, professional perspectives, or institutional influence of individuals who perform these functions within California community colleges. As a result, an understanding of how these professionals experience their roles and contribute to institutional leadership remains largely absent from the literature.

Developing a clearer understanding of the work and perspectives of government and community relations practitioners within California community colleges may help illuminate how these roles contribute to institutional leadership, stakeholder engagement, and strategic decision making. Such insights may also inform the development of more effective

organizational structures and leadership practices that support community colleges in navigating increasingly complex external environments.

These historical developments also raise important questions about how professionals responsible for government and community relations understand and enact their roles within higher education institutions. As responsibilities related to policy navigation, stakeholder engagement, and public communication have expanded, the work of GCR professionals increasingly involves interpreting expectations from multiple audiences and aligning those expectations with institutional priorities. From the perspective of identity theory, roles are not defined solely by formal job descriptions but are constructed and reinforced through ongoing interaction with organizational leaders, external stakeholders, and institutional structures (Burke & Stets, 2009). Examining how GCR professionals perceive their responsibilities, competencies, and organizational positioning may therefore provide insight into how these roles are enacted within community college leadership systems. Understanding these perspectives is particularly important within the community college sector, where institutional missions are closely tied to community engagement and responsiveness to public policy environments.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of government and community relations (GCR) professionals regarding their roles within California community colleges. Through a narrative inquiry approach, the study sought to capture the experiences and professional perspectives of individuals responsible for managing relationships between their institutions and external stakeholders. In addition, the study aimed to identify the competencies that GCR professionals consider most essential for effectively fulfilling their responsibilities.

By documenting how these professionals understand their roles, responsibilities, and contributions to institutional leadership and external engagement, the study sought to provide insight into how government and community relations functions support the strategic mission of community colleges. The findings may also offer guidance to institutional leaders and practitioners by identifying competencies, leadership practices, and organizational structures that can strengthen government and community relations efforts within the California community college system. The study was guided by identity theory, which provided a framework for understanding how professionals interpret and enact their roles within organizational settings.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was explored through the following research questions, which guided the investigation into the perspectives of government and community relations professionals working within California community colleges.

RQ1. What do California community college professionals tasked with managing government and community relations perceive as the most effective ways to perform their roles?

RQ2. What professional competencies do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges consider most important for successfully managing government and community relations functions?

RQ3. To best advance the strategic mission of the institution, what organizational placement and reporting structures do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges perceive as most effective?

The research questions in this study were designed to examine government and community relations (GCR) professionals' experiences from multiple but interconnected

perspectives. The first research question focused on how these professionals define and enact effectiveness in their roles, providing insight into the day-to-day practices and relational strategies they use to manage external stakeholder engagement. The second research question examined the competencies that GCR professionals perceive as most essential to performing their responsibilities successfully, connecting their experiences to broader discussions of leadership and professional practice within community colleges. The third research question explored how these professionals understand the organizational placement and reporting structures that best support their work and enable them to contribute to institutional strategy and decision making. Together, these questions provided a comprehensive framework for examining how GCR professionals interpret their roles, develop professional competencies, and position their work within institutional leadership structures. Guided by identity theory, the study sought to understand how these professionals construct and verify their professional identities through interactions with institutional leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation that guides a study's research design, data interpretation, and analysis of key variables (Creswell, 2014). In qualitative research, the theoretical framework helps researchers identify central themes, interpret participant experiences, and analyze core concerns that emerge from the data (Almeida et al., 2017). As Almeida et al. noted, "Good qualitative research requires purpose, skill, and concentration," and the identification of an appropriate theoretical framework strengthens the rigor and coherence of the research process (p. 374). In this study, identity theory served as the primary theoretical framework because it provided a lens for understanding how individuals interpret, enact, and evaluate their roles within organizational settings.

Identity Theory

Identity theory focuses on how individuals develop meanings associated with the roles they occupy and how those meanings are shaped through interaction with others (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Rather than emphasizing group identity alone, identity theory examines how individuals understand themselves within specific social roles and how those roles are reinforced through interpersonal interaction (Hogg et al., 1995). Within organizational environments, individuals hold internal identity standards that represent their expectations for how they should perform within a particular role. Through ongoing interaction with colleagues, leaders, and external stakeholders, individuals compare feedback from their environment with these internal standards in a process often described as identity verification (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Identity verification occurs when others respond to an individual in ways that confirm the individual's understanding of their role and responsibilities. When feedback from others aligns with an individual's role expectations, the identity is reinforced; when it does not, individuals may adjust their behavior or reinterpret their role to restore alignment between their identity standards and their social environment (Stryker & Burke, 2000). This process highlights the relational and dynamic nature of professional identity development within organizations.

Identity theory was particularly well suited for this study because it allowed the experiences of individuals in government and community relations to be examined through the lens of self-identification and role enactment. Through narrative inquiry, participants describe their experiences, responsibilities, and interactions with institutional leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders. This process allows participants to articulate how they understand their roles and how they evaluate their effectiveness within their professional environments. As Stets and Burke (2014) explained, identity theory offers a framework for understanding individuals as

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral agents who both influence and are influenced by the social structures in which they operate. In this way, the theory provided a useful framework for examining how government and individuals in community relations construct and verify their professional identities within the organizational structures of California community colleges.

Conceptual Framework

This section introduces the conceptual framework that guided the design and analysis of this study. Conceptual frameworks help organize the key ideas, relationships, and concepts that inform a research investigation and provide a structure for interpreting findings. In this study, leadership competencies served as the conceptual framework for examining how government and community relations (GCR) professionals understand and enact their roles within California community colleges.

A conceptual framework illustrates the expected relationships among the variables, characteristics, or concepts being examined in a study and helps guide the organization and interpretation of the research (Swaen & George, 2022). In qualitative research, conceptual frameworks provide a systematic structure that assists researchers in organizing ideas, identifying relationships among concepts, and clarifying the focus of the investigation (Hassan, 2022). By outlining the key concepts that inform a study, the conceptual framework helps ensure coherence between the research problem, research questions, data collection methods, and analysis.

Conceptual frameworks also play a key role in connecting theoretical perspectives to research practice. As Leshem and Trafford (2007) explained, conceptual frameworks provide a scaffold within which research design strategies can be developed and fieldwork conducted. They noted conceptual frameworks help shape how research findings are interpreted and

presented by emphasizing the relationship between theoretical foundations, research strategies, data collection, and the conceptual significance of the evidence generated. In this sense, the conceptual framework functions as a bridge between the theoretical paradigms that explain a research problem and the practical methods used to investigate that problem.

In this study, leadership competencies served as the conceptual framework used to guide the development of the research design, interview questions, and analysis of participant narratives. Specifically, the study drew upon leadership competencies relevant to community college leadership and organizational effectiveness to examine how government and community relations (GCR) professionals understand their roles, responsibilities, and contributions to institutional leadership. These competencies provided a lens through which the perspectives and experiences of participants can be interpreted, helping to identify the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that GCR professionals perceive as most critical to their work within California community colleges.

A conceptual framework represents the expected relationship between the variables, characteristics, or properties to be studied (Swaen & George, 2022). It is a systematic research approach that helps organize thoughts and ideas relevant to the study (Hassan, 2022). Leshem and Trafford (2007) noted:

Conceptual frameworks provide a scaffold within which strategies for the research design can be determined and fieldwork can be undertaken. This approach offers the potential for conceptual frameworks to shape how research conclusions are presented by emphasizing conceptualizing those conclusions within their respective theoretical context. This view of the conceptual framework locates it as giving coherence to the research act by providing traceable connections between theoretical perspectives,

research strategy and design, fieldwork, and the conceptual significance of the evidence.

Thus, the conceptual framework is a bridge between paradigms that explain the research issue and the practice of investigating that issue. (p. 99)

Leadership competencies are introduced as the conceptual framework used to guide research and interview questions and analysis of the interview data in this study.

AACC Leadership Competencies

Leadership competencies provide a framework for understanding the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required for effective leadership within community colleges. Administrators across a range of organizational roles often rely on leadership competency frameworks to guide professional development and to inform how they contribute to institutional leadership and decision making (Royal et al., 2022). One widely used framework is the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders, which provides guidance for developing leadership capacity across multiple levels of community college organizations.

The AACC leadership competencies are organized around leadership roles within the institutional hierarchy, including (a) faculty, (b) entry-level professional staff, (c) managers, (d) executives, and (e) chief executive officers. Within this framework, a manager typically refers to individuals holding positions such as dean, director, or executive director, while executives include roles such as assistant vice president, associate vice president, or vice president. The framework is intended to support leadership development by delineating competencies that individuals can cultivate as they progress through careers in the community college system. Because authority, influence, and decision-making responsibilities vary across organizational

levels, the competencies provide a structured pathway for individuals seeking to strengthen their leadership capabilities and prepare for future professional advancement (Yukl, 2013).

In 2022, the AACC released the fourth edition of the Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders, reflecting lessons learned from recent challenges facing higher education, including the COVID-19 pandemic and broader societal changes. The updated framework emphasizes the importance of adaptability and the need for leaders to remain responsive to rapidly changing environments. As Royal et al. (2022) noted, contemporary community college leaders must be able to “engage in continual and intentional redesign to meet the needs of a rapidly changing environment” (p. 8). The revised competencies highlight the increasing importance of collaboration, strategic thinking, communication, and stakeholder engagement in advancing institutional missions.

Although job titles vary across institutions, government and community relations (GCR) professionals within California community colleges often function at the managerial level within institutional leadership structures. Based on preliminary reviews of institutional organizational charts and discussions with professionals in the field, many GCR professionals hold titles such as director, executive director, or similar administrative roles that align with the managerial category described in the AACC framework (J. Beresford, personal communication, April 11, 2025). However, some GCR professionals may hold titles that fall outside the AACC’s formal role categories while still performing comparable leadership functions related to external engagement and stakeholder relations.

In this study, the AACC Leadership Competencies served as the conceptual framework guiding the development of interview questions and the analysis of participant narratives. The competencies provided a lens through which the knowledge, skills, and leadership behaviors

described by participants could be interpreted. When used alongside identity theory, the competencies helped illuminate the relationship between professional identity and leadership practice. Identity theory focused on how individuals understand and enact their roles within organizational contexts, while the AACC competencies provided a structured framework for examining the leadership capabilities associated with those roles. Together, these frameworks allowed the study to explore how individuals in government and community relations interpret their responsibilities, develop leadership competencies, and contribute to institutional leadership within California community colleges. The AACC competencies emphasize leadership capabilities in areas including organizational strategy, communication, collaboration, professionalism, and community engagement.

Methodology

Qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, perspectives, values, and ways of thinking within specific contexts (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). This methodological approach was appropriate for the present study because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of government and community relations (GCR) professionals working within California community colleges. By examining how these professionals describe their roles, responsibilities, and competencies, the study aimed to capture the meanings participants attribute to their experiences. Guided by identity theory as the theoretical framework and informed by the AACC leadership competencies as the conceptual framework, this qualitative study explored how GCR professionals understand and enact their roles within institutional leadership structures.

As Creswell and Poth (2018) explained, qualitative research is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” and consists of interpretive practices that help make social

experiences visible and understandable (p. 7). Consistent with this perspective, the present study focused on understanding participants lived experiences and professional interpretations of their work in government and community relations. The study sought to explore how GCR professionals perceive their influence, leadership responsibilities, and the competencies necessary for effective practice within California community colleges.

Narrative Inquiry

This study used narrative inquiry as the primary research approach. Narrative inquiry focuses on the stories individuals tell about their experiences and provides a means of understanding how people construct meaning from those experiences (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). Through in-depth interviews, participants were invited to share narratives about their roles, interactions with institutional leaders and external stakeholders, and the competencies they consider most important to their work. Narrative inquiry was particularly appropriate for this study because it allowed participants to describe their professional identities and role experiences in their own words.

Data were collected through individual semistructured interviews that encouraged participants to recount their experiences working in government and community relations within the California community college system. Interviews were recorded and later analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights related to participants' perceptions of effectiveness, competencies, and organizational placement. Narrative analysis involves reorganizing participants' stories into broader conceptual categories that reflect shared experiences while preserving the contextual meaning of individual narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection and Interview Development

One challenge associated with narrative research is collecting sufficiently rich and detailed information to support meaningful analysis and interpretation. Smith and Sparkes (2006) noted researchers must carefully determine the depth of inquiry required when examining both the content of participants' narratives (what is said) and the structure of those narratives (how individuals tell their stories). To support this process, participants were asked to complete an initial intake form after agreeing to participate in the study. The form gathered background information such as institutional type, geographic location, job title, and years of experience in government and community relations.

Prior to beginning the interview phase, several subject matter experts were consulted to provide feedback on the structure and design of the study. A pilot interview process was conducted with three experienced professionals to refine the final set of interview questions. The resulting interview protocol consisted of semistructured questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' experiences and leadership perspectives.

Interviews were conducted during the workday and focused on participants' experiences managing relationships with government officials, community stakeholders, and institutional leaders. Following each interview, participants received a summary transcript for review and were invited to clarify language or expand on their responses if necessary. This process, often referred to as member checking, is commonly used in qualitative and narrative research to enhance credibility and ensure that participants' perspectives are accurately represented (Queirós et al., 2017).

Participants and Sampling

Participants in this study were individuals in government and community relations employed within California community colleges who had at least 2 years of relevant work experience in the field. The researcher established a target sample size of 15 to 20 participants to capture a range of professional perspectives while maintaining the depth of analysis appropriate for narrative inquiry. Ultimately, 16 interviews were completed with professionals representing colleges across the state's 116 public community colleges.

Participants were selected to reflect diversity across several institutional characteristics, including geographic location, institutional size, and organizational structure (e.g., single-college districts and multi-college districts, as well as rural, suburban, and urban settings). Interview questions (see Appendix A) were developed using constructs from identity theory and informed by the AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders (Royal, 2022).

The research approach was primarily inductive, moving from individual narratives toward broader thematic interpretations. The design of the methodology and data collection process was aligned with the study's research questions, which focus on participants' perceptions of role effectiveness, leadership competencies, and organizational placement.

Because government and community relations staff represent a specialized population within community colleges, the study also employed a snowball sampling technique to identify additional participants. Snowball sampling is commonly used in research involving specialized populations where potential participants may be difficult to identify through conventional sampling methods (Goodman, 1961, 2011). Initial participants were invited to suggest additional professionals who might be willing to participate in the study, thereby expanding the participant pool and strengthening the diversity of perspectives represented in the research.

Methodology Alignment Table

A well-designed research study demonstrates clear alignment among its core components, including the problem statement, research questions, methodology, and research design. Ensuring such alignment helps establish coherence and methodological rigor throughout the study. As Booton (2019) explained, effective dissertation design reflects “a progression of ideas between the structural elements of the dissertation” (p. 4). Consistent with this principle, alignment refers to the logical progression and coherence among the structural elements of a dissertation, including the problem statement, purpose, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodology (Booton, 2019). An alignment table is included in this study to illustrate how the research questions connect to the relevant literature and to demonstrate the applicability of the study to the field of education. Table 1.1 presents the alignment among the study’s purpose, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodological approach. Additional details regarding the alignment of the study design are provided in Appendix B.

Table 1.1. Methodology Alignment Table

Research questions	Theoretical/conceptual framework	Methods
RQ1: What do California community college professionals tasked with managing government and community relations perceive as the most effective ways to perform their roles?	Identity theory/AACC leadership competencies	Narrative inquiry Intake form and recorded interviews
RQ2: What professional competencies do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges consider most important for successfully managing government and community relations functions?	Identity theory/AACC leadership competencies	Narrative inquiry Intake form and recorded interviews
RQ3: To best advance the strategic mission of the institution, what organizational placement and reporting structures do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges perceive as most effective?	Identity theory/AACC leadership competencies	Narrative inquiry Intake form and recorded interviews

The table demonstrates how the identified research problem, informed by the literature, is logically connected to the purpose of the study, the guiding research questions, the theoretical and conceptual lenses, and the research methodology used to investigate the phenomenon.

Delimitations and Assumptions

Delimitations refer to the boundaries intentionally established by the researcher to define the scope of the study (Lang'at, 1997). This study focused specifically on government and

community relations (GCR) professionals working within the California Community Colleges system, thereby limiting the scope of the research to a single state higher education system. Because institutional structures, governance practices, and political environments vary across states, the findings of this study are situated within the context of California community colleges.

Another delimitation involved the selection criteria for participants. Individuals were required to have a minimum of 2 years of professional experience in government and community relations work within a community college. This requirement was established to ensure that participants had sufficient experience and familiarity with the institutional structure, governance environment, and stakeholder relationships associated with government and community relations work in community colleges. Professionals in these roles frequently interact with college leadership, governing boards, elected officials, donors, community leaders, and media representatives as part of their responsibilities (Sewell, 2019).

Several assumptions also guided this study. First, it was assumed that participants would provide honest and accurate responses when discussing their experiences and perspectives. Second, the study assumed that participants would reflect on authentic experiences when describing their roles, competencies, and organizational interactions. Finally, consistent with qualitative narrative inquiry, it was assumed that participants' stories and reflections would provide meaningful insight into how government and community relations practitioners understand and interpret their work within the community college environment.

Significance of Study

This study examined and documented the experiences and perspectives of government and community relations (GCR) professionals working within California community colleges. By exploring how these professionals interpret their roles, competencies, and organizational

contributions, the study sought to establish a foundation for understanding the work and influence of an understudied group of administrative staff within community colleges. The study is intended to contribute to the advancement of theory, the expansion of the scholarly body of knowledge, the improvement of professional practice, and the development of future research related to government and community relations in higher education.

Contribution to Theory

This study contributes to theory by applying identity theory to examine how individuals in government and community relations understand and enact their roles within community college organizations. Narrative inquiry was used to capture participants' experiences and insights regarding leadership competencies, organizational structures, and communication practices that shape their work. Participants described how they navigate relationships with institutional leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders while supporting institutional missions.

The study also drew upon the 2022 AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders (Royal et al., 2022) as a conceptual framework. By examining how participants describe the competencies required for effectiveness in GCR roles, the study provided an opportunity to explore how these competencies align with or extend existing leadership competency models within community colleges.

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

Limited scholarly research has examined the roles and experiences of government and community relations staff within community colleges. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by documenting the responsibilities, experiences, and perspectives of GCR professionals working in California community colleges. By examining their day-to-day work

and organizational responsibilities, the study helps illuminate the range and scope of activities associated with government and community relations functions and highlights the ways in which these professionals support institutional leadership and external engagement.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study may provide practical insights for community college leaders seeking to strengthen institutional relationships with government entities, community organizations, and external stakeholders. By identifying patterns in GCR professionals' experiences, leadership competencies, and organizational positioning, the study may help institutional leaders better understand how government and community relations functions contribute to strategic planning, public engagement, and resource development.

Documenting the perspectives of GCR professionals may also assist colleges in improving organizational structures, leadership practices, and professional development opportunities related to external relations work. In addition, the findings may provide guidance for current and aspiring GCR professionals regarding the competencies and practices that support effectiveness in these roles.

Implications for Future Research

This study also provides a foundation for future research examining government and community relations work within higher education institutions. By identifying themes related to professional identity, leadership competencies, and organizational placement, the study may encourage further investigation into how external relations functions operate within different institutional contexts.

The insights and recommendations provided by participants may also inform the development of models or frameworks for organizing government and community relations

functions within community colleges. Such models could be explored and evaluated through future research examining their effectiveness in supporting institutional leadership, stakeholder engagement, and community partnerships.

Definition of Terms

Defining key terms is a critical component of scholarly research because it establishes conceptual clarity and ensures that readers interpret terminology consistently within the context of the study. Because certain terms used in this research may have multiple meanings in higher education and organizational literature, the following definitions are provided to clarify how these concepts were used in this dissertation.

Boundary-Spanning Role

A role in which professionals facilitate communication and collaboration between an organization and external stakeholders, often translating information, expectations, and priorities across organizational and environmental boundaries.

Community Relations

Community relations refers to activities related to outreach, engagement, and collaboration between educational institutions and the communities they serve. These activities include efforts to gather community input, communicate institutional priorities, and respond to local values, cultures, and political environments. Community relations also encompass strategies used by institutional personnel to strengthen community partnerships and support student success (Crowson & Bower, 2011).

Community Relations Professional

A community relations professional is responsible for developing and managing programs that foster positive relationships between an organization and the communities it

serves. Responsibilities often include coordinating outreach initiatives, organizing public events, communicating with stakeholders, and promoting a positive public image of the organization (Edmonds & Cabrales, 2021).

Government and Community Relations (GCR) Professional

For the purposes of this study, a government and community relations practitioner is an individual whose work operates at the intersection of public relations, community and external relations, government relations, marketing, and communications within a community college setting.

Government Relations Professional

A government relations professional, sometimes referred to as a government affairs representative, works to facilitate communication and collaboration between an organization and government officials. Responsibilities may include interpreting public policies, monitoring legislative developments, and advocating on behalf of the organization in matters related to policymaking and regulation (Association of Government Relations Professionals [AGRP], n.d.).

Institutional Advancement

Institutional advancement refers to activities related to fundraising, public engagement, and relationship building with institutional stakeholders. It includes programs and initiatives designed to generate understanding and support for institutional goals and to secure resources such as students, faculty, and financial contributions (Carbone, 1987).

Leadership

Leadership was defined in this study using Yukl's (2013) description as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 23).

Leadership Roles

Leadership roles refer to positions in which individuals are responsible for guiding, influencing, or coordinating the work of others within an organization. Individuals in leadership roles contribute to decision-making processes, promote collaboration, and help align organizational activities with institutional goals (Yukl, 2013).

Public Information Officer

A public information officer is typically a professional responsible for managing public relations and media communications for an organization. Duties often include coordinating media relations, preparing public communications, managing publications, and ensuring the timely and accurate dissemination of information to the public (Clah, n.d.).

Public Relations

Public relations refers to the strategies and communication practices used to manage how information about an organization is shared with the public, particularly through media channels. These practices may include press releases, media interviews, public announcements, and digital communications designed to promote a positive institutional image and effectively communicate organizational messages (Hayes, n.d.).

Summary

This study was conducted to document GCR professionals' experiences, perspectives, and recommendations for the optimal deployment of GCRs in California community colleges. The purpose of the study was to document the perceptions of California community college GCR professionals about their experiences in their roles and their views on leadership competencies as professionals. The research questions focused on role perspectives in the context of identity theory, AACC Competencies for College Leadership and recommendations for best practices.

The data gathered in this study provide insights for college leadership as they consider whether and to what degree to resource a GCR professional function at their institution. Theoretical framework (i.e., identity theory), conceptual framework (i.e., AAAC Competencies for Community College Leaders), and methodology (i.e., qualitative analysis) using narrative inquiry as the research design were introduced along with an alignment table, delimitations and assumptions, and the significance of the study.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study by presenting the background and context of the research, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. The chapter also described the theoretical framework of identity theory and the conceptual framework based on the AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders. In addition, Chapter 1 outlined the significance of the study, provided definitions of key terms, and introduced the methodological approach used to examine the perspectives of individuals in government and community relations working in California community colleges.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the relevant literature related to the study. The chapter examines scholarship concerning community college leadership, the evolving role of administrative staff within higher education institutions, and the functions of government and community relations in higher education. The chapter also reviews literature on stakeholder engagement, leadership competencies, and boundary-spanning roles in organizational contexts. The theoretical framework of identity theory and the conceptual framework of the AACC Leadership Competencies are further explored and situated within the existing body of research.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used to conduct the study. The chapter outlines the qualitative research design, including the use of narrative inquiry to explore participants' experiences. It also explains the study setting, participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis process. In addition, Chapter 3 addresses ethical considerations, researcher positionality, and strategies used to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 4 presents the findings derived from the analysis of participant interviews. The chapter describes the study participants and organizes the findings according to the research questions. Themes that emerged from the narrative data are presented and supported with illustrative quotations from participants.

Chapter 5 provides an interpretation and discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the conceptual framework guiding the study. The chapter also discusses implications for leadership practice within community colleges, recommendations for future research, and concluding reflections on the role of government and community relations practitioners in higher education institutions.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature related to government and community relations (GCR) professionals in higher education, with particular attention to their roles within community colleges. The review examines the historical development of government and community engagement in higher education, the increasing complexity of the external environment facing colleges, and the leadership demands created by these conditions. It also explores professional competencies, organizational roles, and stakeholder responsibilities associated with GCR work in higher education settings.

The literature suggests higher education institutions operate within increasingly complex political, economic, and social environments that require sustained engagement with external stakeholders. Within this context, government and community relations functions have become increasingly important to institutional leadership, strategic communication, advocacy, and partnership development. Accordingly, this chapter examines scholarship related to public policy, higher education governance, external relations, leadership competencies, stakeholder engagement, and college partnerships to situate GCR professionals within the broader literature on community college leadership and administration.

This review is organized around major themes relevant to the study. First, it examines the historical development of government engagement in higher education and the policy context that has shaped institutional relationships with government actors. Next, it reviews literature related to the roles and functions of GCR professionals in higher education, including their professionalization, competencies, and organizational placement. The chapter then considers leadership competencies and practices in community colleges, including the AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders as a conceptual framework for understanding

leadership effectiveness. Finally, the review examines partnerships, stakeholder relationships, and public communication networks that influence the work of GCR professionals in higher education.

The sources included in this chapter were drawn from a range of scholarly and professional materials, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, policy reports, white papers, legislation, and publications from government agencies and professional associations. These sources include both historical and contemporary materials, with particular attention to scholarship published from the 1960s to the present. Research databases used to identify relevant literature included ERIC, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, ProQuest Central, Professional Development Collection, Google Scholar, and SAGE Research Methods. Additional sources included publications from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) and professional organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP), and the Public Affairs Council.

In addition to synthesizing relevant scholarship, this chapter helps establish the conceptual and theoretical foundations for the study. As Efron and Ravid (2019) noted, a literature review should identify the frameworks and lines of inquiry most appropriate for organizing, interpreting, and analyzing the research problem. Consistent with that purpose, this chapter lays the groundwork for the study's use of identity theory and the AACC Leadership Competencies to examine how government and community relations professionals in California community colleges understand their roles, competencies, and organizational positioning.

History of Government and Community Relations in Higher Education

Government involvement in higher education has expanded over time in response to changing public expectations, policy priorities, and accountability demands. As Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2015) argued, sustainable accountability systems often emerge through continued interaction between public institutions and government actors, creating conditions for both capacity building and institutional learning. These dynamics have shaped the evolving relationship between higher education institutions and the public policy environment.

Federal Higher Education Policy

In the United States, significant federal involvement in higher education began in the late 19th century with legislation designed to expand educational access and support national development. Key examples include the Morrill Act of 1862, the Hatch Act of 1887, the Evans–Allen Act, and later provisions in the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 (Johnson, 2022). According to the Congressional Research Service (2022), these policies established a national system of land-grant institutions recognized for their broad contributions to teaching, research, and public service.

The land-grant model created an enduring foundation for coordination between colleges and the federal government, establishing formal and informal channels for communication, advocacy, and policy alignment. During the mid-twentieth century, access to higher education expanded substantially as new institutions were established and existing colleges adapted their missions to serve changing societal needs (Thelin, 2019). Professional organizations such as the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, and the American Association of Community Colleges

also played important roles in promoting civic engagement and public service within higher education.

Higher Education Policy Post-World War II

The decades following World War II marked a period of significant growth and transformation in higher education. Two forces were especially influential during this era: expanding enrollment and sustained economic growth (Bastedo et al., 2023). The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) dramatically increased college access for returning veterans and contributed to a major expansion in postsecondary participation. As Bastedo et al. (2023) noted, the proportion of young people attending college rose from approximately 15% in 1940 to 45% by 1970.

Federal engagement continued to grow during the 1960s and 1970s through the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Education Amendments of 1972, which expanded federal support for institutions and student financial aid (Lane, 1978). These policies coincided with rapid enrollment growth and the large-scale expansion of public community colleges. In response to increasing demand, community colleges experienced substantial construction and institutional growth between 1965 and 1972 (Bastedo et al., 2023). Additional policy changes later expanded Pell Grants and student loan programs, further broadening access to higher education (Thelin, 2019).

By the 1990s, however, major federal policy reform had slowed. The Higher Education Amendments of 1992 demonstrated how policy outcomes are shaped by political environments, institutional interests, and constraints on government action (Hannah, 1996). Scholars have described federal higher education policymaking as incremental, reflecting gradual adaptation rather than sweeping reform (Gladieux & Wolanin, 1976). At the same time, the growth of

federal funding and regulation increased demands for institutional accountability and compliance, raising concerns about the balance between institutional autonomy and governmental oversight (Corson, 1973).

Higher Education and State Government

Although federal policy remains influential, state governments continue to serve as primary funders of most public colleges and universities. As a result, higher education institutions must engage actively with state policymakers to secure funding and advance policy priorities aligned with their missions (Brumfield & Miller, 2008). Colleges and universities often establish government relations offices specifically to communicate institutional needs and priorities to legislators and executive branch officials (Murphy, 2001).

State investment in higher education remains substantial. Bowles (2022) noted, in 2019, state and local governments spent approximately \$311 billion on higher education. Research on state-level higher education lobbying suggests that while the goals of institutional advocacy are often clear, the tactics used vary according to political context and institutional circumstances (Burkam, 2009). These findings underscore the need for institutions to maintain strategic communication and advocacy within increasingly competitive policy environments.

Public expectations of higher education have also evolved. The Public Affairs Council (2022) reported growing expectations that colleges and universities should address major social and political issues, including racial equity, immigration, sustainability, and public health. Community colleges are especially affected by these expectations because of their public missions, local responsiveness, and reliance on state funding. White (2022) argued community colleges must therefore engage in advocacy and public policy dialogue in order to secure the resources necessary to fulfill their missions. Consistent with this perspective, the AACC

Leadership Competencies identify advocacy and stakeholder mobilization as essential leadership capacities for community college leaders (AACC, 2018, 2022).

As public funding declined during the 1980s and 1990s, advocacy and external relations became increasingly important institutional functions (Bowles, 2022; Choo, 2018). Public colleges and universities must compete with other government priorities for limited resources, which heightens the importance of strategic messaging, stakeholder engagement, and political awareness (Watts & Hammond, 2002). Brumfield and Miller (2008) concluded higher education leaders must adopt organizational approaches that allow them to communicate institutional value effectively to policymakers and the public. In this way, government and community relations functions have become increasingly central to how colleges and universities navigate political environments and sustain public support.

Roles of GCR Professionals in Higher Education

Within higher education institutions, individuals in government and community relations occupy a range of administrative roles and reporting relationships. Despite the recognized importance of these functions, the literature reflects a lack of standardization in how government and community relations roles are defined and structured across institutions. Titles, responsibilities, and reporting relationships vary widely, often blending public information, government relations, and community engagement functions. This variability contributes to differences in role expectations, organizational placement, and professional identity, and suggests that GCR work is shaped as much by institutional context as by formal role definition.

Depending on institutional structure, these professionals may serve on executive leadership teams or work within divisions such as communications, institutional advancement, external affairs, or government affairs. Regardless of formal title or location in the organizational

chart, GCR professionals typically support institutional engagement with external stakeholders through activities related to advocacy, policy interpretation, strategic communication, public relations, and partnership development (Association of Government Relations Professionals, n.d.). Baker (1992) noted such professionals often advise presidents and executive leaders on matters related to government, community relations, and public policy.

Research on higher education governance has emphasized the interdependence between institutions and the policy environments in which they operate. Kivistö (2005) argued higher education institutions are increasingly shaped by government expectations concerning quality, accountability, and performance, especially in relation to funding. These conditions require institutions to develop specialized expertise in policy monitoring, external communication, and public engagement.

Studies of public relations in higher education also point to the strategic significance of these roles. Lang'at (1997), in a qualitative case study of public relations officers at a Canadian university, found that practitioners viewed their work as central to institutional priorities such as student recruitment, faculty recruitment, and resource development. Participants also described public relations work as highly responsive to changing social, political, and economic conditions. These findings suggest communication and external relations professionals operate not only as technical communicators but also as strategic actors within higher education institutions.

The literature has further suggested competencies associated with GCR work include expertise in communication, stakeholder engagement, policy interpretation, and advocacy. Davis (2018) reported that trustees viewed community outreach and public relations expertise as highly valued leadership competencies. Professionals often enter GCR work through diverse career pathways, including public information, fundraising, academic administration, communications,

and chief-of-staff roles (Whissemore, 2022). McMillen (2010) observed higher education staff frequently develop specialized policy knowledge and professional networks that enable them to function as subject matter experts in government and public affairs.

Community colleges provide a particularly important context for GCR work because of their strong local orientation and close ties to workforce development, technical education, and community needs (Thelin, 2019). Baime (2022) noted professionals in these roles must navigate issues such as student aid, workforce policy, institutional accountability, innovation, and civic engagement. Durham (2019) similarly emphasized the importance of political awareness, stakeholder analysis, and strategic communication when institutions engage in public debates or policy advocacy. In times of crisis or controversy, GCR professionals also frequently work alongside presidents and senior leaders to coordinate institutional messaging and maintain public credibility (Freeman et al., 2013).

Early scholarship on public information work in community colleges reinforced the importance of these roles within institutional leadership structures. Kopecek (1980) argued public information officers should understand community dynamics, serve as institutional spokespersons when appropriate, and maintain strong, trusted relationships with presidents and senior administrators. Keener (1989) likewise suggested the effectiveness of development and community relations offices depends on organizational resources, institutional structure, staff capacity, and internal systems. Collectively, this literature indicates that GCR professionals contribute not only to communication and outreach, but also to institutional leadership, strategy, and external responsiveness.

Government and Community Relations as a Profession

Government and community relations (GCR) has emerged as a multidisciplinary professional field shaped by changes in higher education governance, public policy, stakeholder expectations, and institutional communication. Professionals working in this area are supported by a range of national, regional, and state-level associations that provide professional development, ethical guidance, networking, and practical strategies for navigating increasingly complex institutional environments. These environments are influenced by demographic change, federal and state mandates, public accountability expectations, economic cycles, labor concerns, governance dynamics, and stakeholder pressures (Boggs & McPhail, 2016).

A profession is understood as a field of work requiring specialized knowledge, formal preparation, and recognized expertise (McIntosh, 2024). Within higher education, leaders increasingly value professionals who can communicate institutional priorities, engage diverse constituencies, and represent institutions effectively in policy and public settings in ways that align with the broader public good (Kezar et al., 2005). At the same time, scholars have noted professional work itself is changing as organizations respond to modern technologies, social expectations, and evolving institutional demands (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016).

Alvesson (2013) identified several characteristics associated with professions, including specialized knowledge, formal education and training, professional associations, occupational autonomy, ethical standards, a distinct professional culture, client orientation, social legitimacy, and mechanisms for certification and self-regulation. Although GCR work may not always fit every traditional criterion of a profession, the field increasingly reflects many of these characteristics through its specialized competencies, professional organizations, shared standards, and emerging expectations regarding expertise and practice.

Within higher education, nonacademic administrators are often described as professional managers, a category that includes both generalists and specialists in areas such as student services, finance, communications, and external relations (Bacon, 2009). Bacon noted the responsibilities of these professionals often vary according to institutional size and structure, with smaller institutions requiring administrators to oversee multiple functions. Bacon also observed the literature has historically focused more heavily on academic leadership than on nonacademic administrative staff, leaving gaps in understanding the roles and contributions of these staff members.

Professional associations play a key role in shaping standards, strengthening identity, and supporting career development in external relations fields. Higher education organizations frequently provide leadership development, networking opportunities, policy guidance, and best practices that help practitioners navigate evolving institutional and policy contexts (Mayfield et al., 2022). Powell and Pieczka (2016) argued such associations are especially important in emerging professional fields because they help define standards of practice and support professional learning.

A number of professional organizations are associated with GCR work in higher education, including the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), the Association of Government Relations Professionals (AGRP), the Community College League of California, the Community College Public Relations Organization (CCPRO), the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), the National Information Officers Association, the Public Affairs Council, and the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP). These organizations provide

venues for collaboration, professional learning, and the advancement of practice in government relations, public affairs, planning, and institutional communications.

Among the most prominent of these organizations is the Public Affairs Council, founded in 1954, which serves professionals working in public affairs, communications, government relations, and policy. Its programs address issues management, public policy advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and communication strategy, all of which are central to GCR work (Public Affairs Council, 2022b). Similarly, the Association of Government Relations Professionals (AGRP) emphasizes that successful government relations practitioners must be able to educate policymakers, identify legislative opportunities and risks, and advocate effectively for institutional interests (AGRP, 2022). AGRP also highlights ethical conduct, transparency, and public service as core professional values.

Professional associations have also adapted to changing communication environments. Since approximately 2010, many public affairs and public relations organizations have broadened their focus to address technological change, multicultural communication, and global stakeholder engagement (Valentini et al., 2012). Within California, CCPRO has served professionals working in public relations, marketing, government relations, and communications across the community college system by offering professional development, information sharing, and peer support (Meier, 2023).

Additional organizations contribute to professionalization in related areas such as planning and institutional effectiveness. For example, SCUP promotes integrated planning and publishes Planning for Higher Education, while broader recognition programs such as the Baldrige Excellence Framework and AACC Awards for Excellence reinforce the value of

leadership, planning, and stakeholder engagement in higher education institutions (Bell, 2024; Parham, 2019; Rubin & Gigliotti, 2019).

Taken together, this literature has suggested GCR work in higher education has become increasingly recognized as a distinct professional field. At the same time, the field lacks consistent role definitions and standardized organizational structures across institutions, which further complicates efforts to define shared professional expectations and identity. The growth of professional organizations, specialized knowledge, and leadership expectations reflects the field's multidisciplinary character and its growing importance to institutional strategy, advocacy, and stakeholder engagement.

Competencies of Government and Community Relations Professionals

The literature has suggested professional competencies, work experience, and organizational placement all contribute to the development of professional identity and role effectiveness within higher education institutions. Gibson-Harman (2001), for example, identified themes such as voice, status, mobility, professional development, and sense of importance in examining how community college staff understood their place within institutional structures. Participants in that study viewed their work as a career and expressed concern for their future advancement and professional standing within their institutions.

Perceptions of role and status have also been shown to influence leadership dynamics within higher education. Studies examining executive and administrative teams have found that professionals perceive their institutions, colleagues, and authority within organizational hierarchies can shape collaboration, role clarity, and decision-making effectiveness (Royal et al., 2022; Sturgis, 2006; Yukl & Chavez, 2002). Sturgis (2006) argued greater awareness of differing

perceptions among institutional leaders may support stronger collaboration and a better understanding of roles and responsibilities.

Research focused more specifically on public relations and government affairs reinforces the importance of both professional competencies and organizational integration. In a study examining public relations practitioners in government settings, Richard L. Hasen (2022) found that these professionals are most effective when they are not only well organized in their practice but also structurally embedded within strategic planning, decision-making, and implementation processes. This insight is particularly relevant to government and community relations (GCR) work in higher education, where practitioners operate at the intersection of communication, public policy, institutional planning, and executive leadership.

Collectively, this literature suggests that competencies associated with GCR work extend beyond technical communication skills. Effective practice also requires organizational awareness, strategic judgment, policy fluency, and the ability to navigate relationships across internal and external environments. These competencies support not only successful task performance but also the development of a professional identity grounded in influence, trust, and institutional contribution.

Leadership Competencies and Practices

The literature presents a wide range of perspectives regarding leadership competencies and leadership practices within higher education institutions. Community colleges in particular face ongoing organizational change driven by shifting public expectations, technological developments, policy environments, and workforce demand. As a result, effective leadership is increasingly required to respond to these complex conditions while meeting the needs of institutional stakeholders and supporting institutional transformation (Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

Scholars have emphasized that leadership in community colleges must be responsive to both internal institutional priorities and external environmental pressures.

Research examining leadership in higher education has highlighted the importance of strategic vision, collaboration, and ethical leadership. Hockaday and Puyear (2000) and Weerts (2007) suggested emerging community college leaders should develop a clear understanding of institutional missions and vision while demonstrating qualities such as integrity, confidence, and courage. These authors also emphasized the importance of building partnerships with community stakeholders and external organizations. Similarly, Boggs and McPhail (2016) emphasized that leadership preparation and institutional capacity building are critical for improving institutional performance and achieving positive outcomes for stakeholders.

The dynamic communication environment surrounding higher education has also influenced leadership practices. Kruckeberg and Starck (1988), drawing on community-building theory, described how communication networks and community engagement shape relationships between institutions and their external audiences. Although interpersonal and group communication have long been essential components of government and community relations work, the expansion of digital communication platforms has significantly increased both the opportunities and challenges associated with institutional communication. Scholars have noted technological change and the proliferation of communication channels have transformed the roles and responsibilities of higher education professionals involved in communications and external engagement (Duderstadt et al., 2002; Hanna, 2002). Within this context, strategic communication and strategic planning have become increasingly important leadership competencies for higher education administrators.

Leadership Competencies

Several theoretical traditions have informed the study of leadership competencies. Gutierrez (2018), drawing on social exchange theory, trait theory, and situational leadership theory, found that leadership fairness was positively associated with perceived effectiveness. Leaders who were viewed as fair in outcomes, procedures, and interpersonal treatment were more likely to be viewed as effective. These findings suggest relational trust and fairness are important components of leadership practice.

Other scholars have similarly emphasized the role of communication and reciprocity in leadership processes. Emerson (1976) and Thibaut and Kelley (2008) highlighted how exchange relationships shape behavior in groups and organizations. Research on team leadership has also shown that leadership structures often adapt to assignments, contexts, and institutional needs (Baker, 1992). In higher education, Eckel and Kezar (2011) found that presidential effectiveness frequently depends on a complex web of leadership relationships involving cabinet members, faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders.

Alternative leadership frameworks have emphasized reflection, collaboration, and wisdom. Schulenburg (2017), using Ludden's wisdom-based leadership model, identified knowledge, experience, reflection, collaboration, and community orientation as essential leadership outcomes. In a study of corporate leaders, participants affirmed that wisdom development was central to leadership effectiveness (Ludden, 2009, 2015).

Yukl's (2013) work on power and influence further contributed to the understanding of leadership competencies by identifying the influence tactics most associated with effectiveness. Rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, and consultation were found to be among the most effective tactics, while pressure and coalition tactics were less effective. These findings suggest

collaborative and persuasive forms of influence may be especially important in complex organizations.

Contingency-based leadership theories, including path–goal theory, also emphasize the need for leadership flexibility. Evans (1970, 2002) argued leaders improve team performance when they adapt their style to the needs of followers and organizational circumstances. Yukl (2013) reviewed several contingency models and concluded leadership effectiveness is shaped by a combination of situational conditions, interpersonal relationships, and influence strategies, even when individual traits are not the central focus of the theory.

Another important framework is leader–member exchange theory, which focuses on the quality of relationships between leaders and followers. Studies using this perspective have shown that when leaders are perceived as fair, supportive, and trustworthy, they are more likely to be judged effective (Gutierrez, 2018; Yukl, 2013).

Scholars have also examined how organizational structures influence leadership and employee engagement. Rees-Johnstone (2020) argued universities sometimes marginalize nonacademic staff by privileging academic roles over other forms of institutional expertise. Such marginalization can contribute to disengagement, talent attrition, and reduced productivity. These findings are relevant to the study of GCR professionals because they suggest leadership effectiveness is shaped not only by individual skill, but also by whether institutions value and integrate professional expertise.

Although the literature on leadership competencies in higher education is extensive, relatively little research has examined how such competencies are understood and enacted by professionals responsible for government and community relations within community colleges.

AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders

Leadership in community colleges has often been described as collaborative, relational, and multidimensional. Roueche and Jones (2005) suggested community college leaders function less as solitary decision makers than as facilitators, collaborators, consensus builders, and motivators. Eddy and Boggs (2010) likewise argued community college leadership requires a combination of technical knowledge, interpersonal skills, professional experience, and personal attributes.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has played a significant role in defining leadership competencies for the field. Its competency framework, first introduced in 2005 and later revised, has been used to guide leadership preparation and professional development programs across community colleges. The framework reflects the view that effective leadership requires multiple forms of competence rather than reliance on a single leadership style or trait.

Across the literature on community college leadership, several competencies consistently emerge as important, including trust building, emotional intelligence, strong interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and the ability to meet stakeholder expectations (Davis, 2018; Gutierrez, 2018; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Davis (2018), in a study of trustees and presidents, found differences in how leaders and governing board members prioritized certain competencies, especially in relation to technical skill and succession planning.

Earlier scholarship also laid important groundwork for competency-based leadership models. Katz's (1955) skill-based framework identified technical, human, and conceptual skills as central to leadership effectiveness. These categories continue to influence higher education

leadership research and remain relevant to discussions of administrative work and institutional effectiveness.

The literature has also indicated leadership competencies are shaped by context. Garavalia and Miller (1996), Farson and Keyes (2002), and Bushe and Nagaishi (2018) argued effective leadership competencies are not fixed but evolve in response to changing conditions and organizational demands. Other scholars have emphasized the value of leadership styles while also acknowledging the importance of adaptability and situational responsiveness (Greeley & Myers, 2016; Schulenburg, 2017; Smith-Jones, 2022). Boggs and McPhail (2016) similarly argued community college leaders must draw upon both skill-based and personality-based competencies to respond to reduced public funding, heightened accountability, and changing stakeholder expectations.

Empirical studies have reinforced the usefulness of the AACC framework. Artis and Bartel (2021), in a phenomenological study of community college presidents in Illinois, used the AACC competencies to examine how presidents prepared for leadership and addressed contemporary challenges. Participants identified finances, enrollment, governing board relationships, unions, and legislative mandates as significant challenges, while also emphasizing the importance of professional development, awareness of current trends, and formidable team building. These findings support the value of the AACC framework as a practical and conceptual tool for understanding leadership within community colleges.

College and University Partnerships

Higher education institutions have continuously adapted to changing social, economic, and political environments while remaining guided by institutional mission and public purpose (Cohen et al., 2014). Community college leaders, in particular, must anticipate changing

educational and workforce needs while developing strategies that allow their institutions to remain responsive and competitive (Mathis & Roueche, 2019). As a result, colleges and universities frequently engage with elected officials, business leaders, and community stakeholders through outreach, planning, and collaboration (Cox, 2000).

Partnerships can generate multiple institutional benefits. Thomson (2010) noted effective collaborations may improve governance, increase visibility, expand enrollment opportunities, strengthen internship and employment pathways for students, and create research opportunities for faculty. Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2015) described these relationships as expressions of mutual accountability between institutions and government actors. Simonich (1999) similarly noted collaborations may take the form of public–government, public–public, or public–private initiatives.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that universities and colleges increasingly operate in knowledge-intensive, innovation-driven economies that require new forms of engagement with stakeholders and end users (Gutierrez et al., 2024). Alves et al. (2010) argued institutions must cultivate productive relationships with stakeholders and incorporate their perspectives into management and planning processes. This requires not only identifying stakeholders but also understanding their interests before defining institutional priorities and relational strategies.

Community colleges have a long history of partnership. DeCastro and Karp (2008) noted these institutions have routinely collaborated with employers, four-year colleges, and community organizations to deliver services, support workforce development, and expand educational access. Partnerships with the private sector have become especially important as institutions respond to labor market change, limited state funding, and the need to align curriculum with community needs (Kisker & Carducci, 2003). Research has also documented the value of

corporate–education partnerships. Studies by Andriushchenko et al. (2022), Casey (1998), Grubb (1999), and Smith (1999) found that such collaborations can support workforce development, professional growth, and educational attainment. Smith (1999), in a multi-case study, found that partnerships between corporations and higher education institutions enhanced opportunities for employee education, planning, workforce research, and data sharing.

Partnerships also involve strategic communication and political engagement. Sunderman (2007) and Durham (2019) found that institutions often secure resources more effectively when they cultivate political relationships and use their political capital strategically. Lawrence-Hughes (2014) similarly showed collaborative engagement with regulatory agencies and community stakeholders can help institutions advance development projects and address environmental concerns. Grunig and Huang (2000) further emphasized that trust, control mutuality, relational satisfaction, and commitment are central to effective organization–public relationships.

Technological and economic change have only heightened the importance of these partnerships. Baime (2022) argued community colleges play a vital role in workforce development and economic health, positioning them as essential partners for industry and government. Harvey (2021) also noted although access to information is now easier, colleges and universities remain central to helping individuals synthesize and apply knowledge. Valentini (2012) added that digital communication has transformed the nature of community and partnership building, requiring institutions to engage stakeholders in increasingly networked environments. Overall, the literature suggests that partnerships are essential to advancing the missions of colleges and universities. At the same time, there remains limited research

examining the specific organizational roles and practices that make these partnerships successful, particularly the contribution of GCR professionals to partnership development and maintenance.

Stakeholders

Stakeholder relationships are central to the functioning and public mission of higher education institutions. Kantanen (2007) suggested the quality of these relationships may be understood through trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction, with satisfaction representing an especially important outcome of effective relationship maintenance. In higher education, stakeholder engagement is critical because institutions must sustain relationships with multiple internal and external groups whose interests affect public perception, decision making, and institutional legitimacy.

Zoglin (1976) observed, although community colleges vary in structure, they all share a close relationship with their constituencies. Influence within these institutions may come not only from formal decision makers, but also from ad hoc groups and strong individuals in the broader community. This dynamic underscores the importance of relationship-building and communication as institutional leadership practices.

Subsequent studies have emphasized the importance of strategic communication with stakeholders. Sunderman (2007) argued leaders and senior advisors must be thoughtful in how they frame messages around regional and state issues, while Durham (2019) called attention to the need for strong relationships with civic organizations and government actors. Jongbloed et al. (2008) further suggested institutions must rethink their societal role by identifying and prioritizing stakeholders and assessing stakeholder salience in institutional planning.

Research in corporate community relations offers parallel insights. Googins (1997) described community relations as a strategic imperative in business, arguing that organizations

become “neighbors of choice” by building trust and investing in programs that improve community life while supporting organizational goals. Higher education institutions have increasingly adopted similar approaches. Alves et al. (2010), Eckel and Kezar (2011), and Pereira and Da Silva (2003) described how colleges maintain relationships with internal stakeholders such as students, faculty, staff, and trustees, as well as external stakeholders such as donors, alumni, elected officials, accrediting agencies, government agencies, industry partners, media, and community leaders. Each group brings distinct interests and expectations to the institution (Durham, 2019).

Public Information and Public Relations Networks

At the national level, higher education institutions also depend on professional associations and communication networks that help coordinate responses to policy issues, share information, and advocate for common interests. Levin (2023) reported more than 800 government-related professional associations operate nationally, with roughly 200 focused specifically on higher education and government-related matters (Bowles, 2022). Kopecek (1980) argued public information officers are valuable because they help institutions analyze public reaction, interpret public issues, and manage communication programs effectively. Thompson (2018) likewise found that public relations skills are essential to roles involving collaboration with stakeholders, fundraising, volunteer coordination, and institutional advocacy. These studies suggest communication professionals often function as relationship builders and institutional ambassadors.

Kantanen (2007) emphasized that social interaction and communication strategies are necessary for building and maintaining community relationships. Lawrence-Hughes and Lynelle (2014) documented how stakeholder participation can influence campus expansion and public

approval processes. Similarly, Steinbach (2023), in a phenomenological study of town–gown relations, found that trust, flexibility, time, autonomy, and closeness to senior leadership were especially important for professionals managing relationships between institutions and host communities. Taken together, this literature suggests that two-way communication, accountability, partnership, and professionalism are central to effective stakeholder engagement in higher education (Dahlinger, 1981; Gibson-Harman, 2001; Jeandron, 2006). It also reinforces the importance of GCR-related professionals in sustaining the relationships that support institutional mission and public trust.

Theories and Frameworks

Several theoretical and conceptual approaches were considered in the design of this study, including perspectives drawn from education, management, sociology, and political science. After reviewing the relevant literature, narrative inquiry, identity theory, and the AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders were selected to guide the study. Together, these approaches provide a coherent structure for examining how government and community relations (GCR) professionals in California community colleges understand their roles, interpret their experiences, and describe the competencies and organizational conditions that support their effectiveness.

This study was grounded primarily in identity theory, a sociological framework that explains how individuals internalize, enact, and negotiate role-based meanings within structured social settings (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity theory proposes that role identities are organized hierarchically in terms of salience and are reinforced through processes of social validation and identity verification (Burke & Stets, 2022). Within organizational contexts, this framework is useful for examining how roles become part of an individual’s self-

concept and how organizational structures either support or constrain the enactment of those roles. Applied to government and community relations work in California community colleges, identity theory offers a lens for understanding how professionals construct and sustain identities as trusted advisors, institutional ambassadors, and strategic interpreters of policy and stakeholder expectations. The framework helped explain how relational credibility, executive access, and organizational placement influence the salience, enactment, and validation of these professional identities.

To situate these identity processes within a framework of leadership practice, this study drew upon the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders (AACC, 2018, 2022). The AACC framework provides a nationally recognized articulation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with effective leadership in community colleges. When considered alongside identity theory, these competencies offered a structured way to examine how professional expectations are internalized and enacted within boundary-spanning leadership roles. Together, identity theory and the AACC Leadership Competencies provided the conceptual structure for interpreting the findings of this study. This integrated framework supported examination of how professional identity, leadership competencies, and organizational placement interact to shape government and community relations practice in California community colleges.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was selected as the methodological approach because it provides a means of examining how individuals make meaning of their experiences through storytelling. Narrative approaches are particularly useful in studies that seek to understand how professionals interpret their work, describe their roles, and reflect upon the context in which those roles are

enacted. Stivers (1993) argued personal narrative, while contextual and subjective, is grounded in the shared understandings of relevant knowledge communities rather than in abstract or transcendent standards. She suggested, when researchers recognize that human beings and social structures mutually shape one another, the experiences of individuals become appropriate and meaningful material for social science inquiry. This perspective aligns closely with the purposes of the present study. Individuals in government and community relations work within complex social and organizational environments in which meaning is constantly shaped through relationships, expectations, and institutional contexts. Narrative inquiry allowed participants to describe these experiences in their own words and to explain how they understand their work, their roles, and their contributions.

Lang'at (1997) also used a narrative approach in research involving university staff who discussed the influence of environmental conditions, external publics, institutional resources, and organizational expectations on their work. That study incorporated a psychological framework and used interviews to elicit information from a professional group about its identity within higher education. Similarly, the present study used narrative inquiry to examine how GCR professionals interpret their experiences and construct meaning around effectiveness, competencies, and organizational placement.

Identity Theory

Identity theory offered an especially useful framework for examining the experiences of GCR professionals because it focuses on the relationship between social roles and self-concept. Stets and Burke (2014) explained the theory provides a way of understanding individuals as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral agents who both influence and are influenced by social structure. Identity theory has been applied across a range of social contexts, including education,

family life, crime, race and ethnicity, and environmental behavior (Brenner et al., 2018; Burke, 1980, 2004; Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

Rooted in sociology and role theory, identity theory examines how individuals occupy positions within social structures and develop identities associated with those positions. Central concepts include role identity, salience, commitment, and identity verification (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). The theory assumes that the roles individuals occupy shape their behavior and influence how they perceive their own contributions to organizations and professions. Lindesmith and Strauss (1956) suggested one's position within a social structure provides meaning, while Hogg et al. (1995) argued the salience of an identity depends in part on the degree of commitment a person has to that role.

Identity theorists conceptualize the self as composed of multiple role identities, each associated with behavioral expectations and social meanings (Hogg et al., 1995). In this view, behavior is organized around roles and the expectations attached to them. Identity theory therefore focuses on how individuals label themselves within particular role categories and how those labels are reinforced or challenged through interaction with others. In organizational life, this process is especially important because professional identities are continually shaped through relationships with colleagues, leaders, and external stakeholders.

Identity theory is also distinct from social identity theory. Whereas identity theory emphasizes role-based identities and interpersonal interaction, social identity theory emphasizes group membership, norms, stereotypes, and intergroup comparison (Hogg et al., 1995). For the purposes of this study, identity theory was more appropriate because the focus was on how individuals understand and enact their roles within community college organizations rather than on how they identify with broader social groups.

Sociological and Collective Identity

Broader sociological perspectives on identity also helped contextualize this study. Lawler (2015) noted identity can become an especially important subject of inquiry when it is difficult to define, taken for granted, or insufficiently visible. In such cases, identity may appear “slippery” or underexamined, making it particularly worthy of study. This insight is relevant to government and community relations practitioners in community colleges, whose work is increasingly important yet remains underexplored in the scholarly literature.

Bauman (2004) similarly argued identities are shaped and constrained by broader systems of power and by unequal access to economic, social, cultural, and political resources. Best (2016), interpreting Bauman’s work, suggested questions of inclusion and exclusion are especially relevant in higher education because institutions are characterized by differentiated roles, statuses, and forms of authority. These perspectives helped underscore why organizational placement, role legitimacy, and access to leadership structures are important considerations in understanding the experiences of GCR professionals.

Since the 1960s, sociology has increasingly incorporated research in social psychology, professions and professionalism, and organizational studies (Clark, 2007). The development of these areas coincided with growing interest in identity as a concept for understanding social behavior and institutional life. Although some theories of identity focus on collective belonging and intergroup comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the present study is primarily concerned with how individuals interpret and enact roles within organizational settings. For that reason, identity theory provided the most appropriate primary framework for examining the experiences of GCR professionals in California community colleges.

The AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders

In the early 2000s, national leaders in the community college sector began expressing concern about an impending leadership shortage resulting from the anticipated retirement of many senior administrators. In response to this challenge, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation awarded a grant in 2003 to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) to support the *Leading Forward* initiative, a national effort designed to strengthen leadership development within community colleges (AACC, 2002, 2003). The initiative sought to identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for effective leadership within two-year institutions and to guide the preparation of future community college leaders.

Following an extensive national data collection process and two leadership summits, AACC introduced the Competencies for Community College Leaders in April 2005 (Eddy, 2012). The framework identified six core competencies intended to guide leadership development programs and support the preparation of emerging administrators who might eventually serve as chief executive officers of community colleges: organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, community college advocacy, and professionalism (AACC, 2018). The competencies reflected growing recognition that community colleges were facing expanding responsibilities related to workforce development, student access, and community engagement, and that leaders would need a broad range of skills to navigate these challenges (Martin, 2021).

Since their introduction, the competencies have been widely used in leadership development initiatives and graduate preparation programs focused on community college administration. Eddy (2012) observed that the framework has played a key role in shaping leadership training by identifying the skills and knowledge areas that emerging leaders should

develop. However, Eddy also noted limited research has examined how the competencies are applied in practice or how they evolve in response to changing conditions in higher education.

The AACC competencies have been periodically updated to reflect emerging leadership challenges within the community college sector. The fourth edition, released in 2022, was developed in response to significant social, political, and institutional changes affecting higher education. Royal (2022) noted the revision process was shaped in part by two major events: the COVID-19 global pandemic, which disrupted institutional operations and student access nationwide, and widespread social unrest related to racial injustice and rising hate crimes against Asian Americans. These developments highlighted the need for leaders who possess not only technical expertise but also cultural awareness, adaptability, and a strong commitment to equity.

Between 2021 and 2022, AACC staff engaged in a six-month consultation process with community college presidents from 45 states to assess how institutions were responding to these challenges and to identify leadership competencies that required revision or expansion. In addition to these discussions with presidents, the revision process incorporated insights from more than 100 participants representing diverse backgrounds, positions, and perspectives across the community college sector. Participants took part in 17 leadership dialogues designed to examine emerging leadership needs and identify competencies that would help leaders address evolving institutional and societal expectations (Royal, 2022).

According to Royal (2022), updating the competencies was essential for ensuring that community college leaders remain responsive to the rapidly changing environments in which their institutions operate. Without periodic revision, leadership frameworks risk becoming outdated and less relevant to the challenges facing higher education organizations. The fourth edition of the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders identifies nine competency

domains that are intended to guide leadership practice and professional development across community college administrative roles:

1. Institutional and Cultural Awareness
2. Governance, Local, State, and Federal Policy
3. Student Success
4. Leadership
5. Institutional Transformation
6. Fiscal Planning and Resource Development
7. Advocacy
8. Partnerships and Collaboration
9. Communication (Royal, 2022)

These competencies provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the expectations placed on contemporary community college leaders. In the present study, the AACC Leadership Competencies (4th ed.) serve as a conceptual framework for examining how government and community relations professionals interpret their leadership roles, competencies, and contributions to the strategic mission of California community colleges.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter has suggested the roles and influence of government and community relations (GCR) professionals within higher education institutions have expanded as colleges and universities have become more complex and increasingly dependent on external relationships. As Powell and Pieczka (2016) noted, “Over the last 50 years, the social legitimacy of public relations has improved by standardizing and monitoring the education and training of its practitioners” (p. 312). Similarly, Davis (2018) reported that

community college trustees and presidents ranked expertise in state and federal relations among the most important leadership competencies. Research has also recognized the value of public relations and external relations professionals in supporting institutional leaders through strategic communication and stakeholder engagement, which contribute to informed decision making and effective institutional messaging (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Scholarly research has increasingly documented the growing influence of external political, economic, and social forces on colleges and universities in the evolving higher education landscape. At the same time, substantial literature has examined the leadership roles of college presidents, chancellors, and governing boards, particularly regarding their relationships with government agencies, community stakeholders, and external partners. Within this context, GCR professionals have emerged as important contributors to institutional efforts related to public engagement, policy awareness, and partnership development. As Maurrasse (2002) suggested, institutions lacking strong external relationships may struggle to advance their strategic vision and institutional priorities.

Despite this recognition, the literature revealed several important gaps. Existing scholarship has focused on institutional leaders and governance structures rather than on the professionals responsible for managing government and community relations activities. As a result, limited research has examined how GCR professionals contribute to institutional decision making, influence strategic priorities, or support the implementation of institutional goals. Furthermore, there has been little empirical research exploring the organizational placement of these professionals within higher education institutions or how their roles are structured within institutional leadership systems.

In addition, the literature revealed an absence of research examining the identity perspectives of government and community relations practitioners within community colleges. Understanding how these professionals interpret their roles, competencies, and organizational positioning may provide valuable insights into how institutions manage relationships with external stakeholders and navigate the increasingly complex political and policy environments affecting higher education.

This study sought to address these gaps by examining the perspectives of individuals in government and community relations working within California community colleges, exploring their experiences, leadership competencies, and perceptions of organizational structure in relation to institutional effectiveness.

In addition, the literature suggested a lack of standardization in how government and community relations functions are defined and structured across higher education institutions. Variability in titles, responsibilities, and reporting relationships indicates that these roles are not consistently conceptualized or operationalized, contributing to limited clarity regarding professional expectations, organizational placement, and role effectiveness.

In response to the gaps identified in the literature, the following chapter presents the qualitative research design and narrative inquiry methodology used to examine how individuals in government and community relations in California community colleges understand their roles, leadership competencies, and organizational placement within institutional leadership structures.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology used to conduct the study. It begins by restating the purpose of the study and the research questions that guide the investigation. The chapter then presents the rationale for employing a qualitative research approach and introduces the theoretical and conceptual lenses informing the study, including identity theory and the AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders. Next, the chapter explains the research design, including the use of narrative inquiry as the primary methodological approach. Subsequent sections describe the study setting, participant selection, instrumentation, and data collection procedures. The chapter also outlines the data analysis process used to identify themes and interpret participant narratives. Finally, the chapter addresses study limitations, ethical considerations, researcher positionality, and strategies used to ensure study quality, followed by a summary of the methodological approach.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of government and community relations (GCR) professionals regarding their roles within California community colleges by documenting their experiences, professional insights, and interpretations of their work. Specifically, the study sought to understand how these professionals perceive their effectiveness, the competencies they consider essential to their roles, and the organizational conditions that support successful government and community relations practice.

By capturing the narratives of professionals responsible for managing government and community relations functions, this study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how these roles contribute to advancing the strategic mission of community colleges. The findings are intended to illuminate the competencies, practices, and organizational structures that support

effective external engagement with policymakers, community stakeholders, and institutional partners.

Guided by identity theory and informed by the AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders, this study examined how GCR professionals interpret and enact their roles within institutional leadership structures. By exploring how these professionals construct meaning around their responsibilities, competencies, and organizational placement, the study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of government and community relations leadership within the California community college system. The findings may provide insights that community college leaders and practitioners can use to strengthen government and community relations practice and enhance institutional engagement with external stakeholders.

Research Questions

To examine how government and community relations professionals interpret their roles, competencies, and organizational placement within California community colleges, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What do California community college professionals tasked with managing government and community relations perceive as the most effective ways to perform their roles?

RQ2. What professional competencies do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges consider most important for successfully managing government and community relations functions?

RQ3. To best advance the strategic mission of the institution, what organizational placement and reporting structures do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges perceive as most effective?

Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine how government and community relations (GCR) professionals interpret and describe their roles, competencies, and organizational placement within community college institutions. Qualitative inquiry provides an effective approach for exploring participants' perspectives, meanings, and experiences within their social and organizational contexts (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Instead of measuring predefined variables, qualitative research examines how individuals construct meaning through interaction and reflection on their lived experiences.

Within qualitative traditions, narrative inquiry provides an especially appropriate methodological approach for this study because it focuses on the stories individuals tell about their experiences and how those stories reveal patterns of meaning and professional identity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Government and community relations practitioners frequently operate in relational and context-dependent environments where communication, interpretation, and stakeholder engagement shape their work. Narrative inquiry allowed participants to describe these experiences in their own words, providing insight into how they understand their roles, the competencies required for their work, and the organizational structures that support their effectiveness. By examining these narratives through the lens of identity theory and the AACC Leadership Competencies, the study sought to interpret how professional identities and leadership practices emerge within the organizational context of California community colleges.

Theoretical and Conceptual Lenses

Theories or theoretical orientations provide a general explanation as to what the researcher hopes to study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Identity theory was the chosen theoretical lens for this study. A conceptual framework provides an interpretive approach to a setting. The

conceptual framework used for this study was the 2022 AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders (Royal, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guides the study by providing a structure that supports the underlying theory and connects the researcher to existing knowledge. This qualitative study focused on understanding the perspectives of a particular group of constituents (i.e., GCR professionals) in the context of their experiences working in California community colleges. Qualitative research typically focuses on the meaning of real-life events. Yin (2016) indicated, “The search for meaning is a search for concepts—ideas that are more abstract than data in an empirical study” (p. 99). Individuals construct their self-concept through beliefs about themselves and convey meaning by sharing their personal histories and experiences. According to Yin (2011), “Concepts consolidate and lead to the formation of a theory about the events studied” (p. 93).

Identity Theory

Identity theory presumes one’s role significantly influences behavior and self-perceptions of contributions to the organization and the profession. People use role identity to help understand themselves (Lindesmith & Straus, 1956). Identity theory explains how individuals connect self-attitudes, or identities, to role relationships, and researchers can explore these connections through participant interviews. Study participants’ discussion of their roles, literature on the relevant dimensions of the roles, and observation techniques have all been used as part of identity research (Burke & Tully, 1977; Côté, J. (2006). Additionally, identity theory concerns individual behavior rather than group behavior (Stets & Burke, 2000). Lindesmith and Straus (1956) stated identity theory uses characteristics such as salience and commitment to

consider what one's role and how their role contrasts with others. Studies adopting an identity theory framework have found that when people identify with a role, they tend to behave in accordance with their perceptions of the meaning of that role.

Identity theory examines how individual behavior and intra- and interpersonal relationships develop within cultural and contextual influences (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). Identity theory can use life history in reviewing the significance of understanding of one's own practice and that of others (Inman, 2014). Identity theory links self-attitude (i.e., an aspect of identity) to behavior roles. For this aspect of the study, the behavioral roles explored included the leadership competencies defined in the AACCC Competencies for Community College Leaders (Royal, 2022). Identity theory complemented the research design of this study. Greco and Kraimer (2020), for example, studied individual perspectives of career goals, goal setting, and professional identity using identity theory as a theoretical framework for their study on goal setting in the career management process. Similarly, this study used identity theory to explore GCR professionals' perceptions of their profession, institutions, and leadership competencies as an organizing lens.

Conceptual Framework

Researchers use conceptual frameworks to bridge theory and practice by organizing how a study interprets and analyzes information (Hills & Gibson, 1992). These frameworks provide structure and focus for collected data and may range from broad perspectives to narrowly defined analytical lenses. By offering an organizing structure, a conceptual framework helps researchers break down complex social systems, such as leadership, bureaucracy, politics, and organizational culture into more understandable components (Hills & Gibson, 1992, p. 6). In doing so, conceptual frameworks enhance the interpretive value of collected information and support

systematic problem analysis. Conceptual frameworks may also function as interpretive lenses that guide researchers in identifying patterns, relationships, and meanings within the data. In this study, the conceptual framework integrated identity theory with the leadership competencies identified by the American Association of Community Colleges to examine how individuals in government and community relations interpret their roles, enact leadership competencies, and navigate their organizational placement within California community college institutions. This study integrated identity theory with the leadership competencies identified by the American Association of Community Colleges to examine how government and community relations professionals understand and enact their roles within California community colleges. Identity theory provided a lens for analyzing how professionals construct and verify role identities through interaction with institutional leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders. The AACC leadership competencies offered a practical framework for understanding the leadership behaviors and capacities associated with effective practice in community college environments. Together, these frameworks allowed the study to examine not only what competencies participants identify as important, but also how those competencies are interpreted, enacted, and reinforced through professional identity and organizational context.

AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders

The researcher considered several leadership competency models as potential conceptual frameworks for this study and selected the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders developed by the American Association of Community Colleges as the most appropriate model. This framework was chosen because it is grounded in the professional practice of two-year college leadership and has been widely used in research examining leaders at multiple levels within the community college sector. The AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders

(Royal, 2022) guided both data collection—including the development of the initial survey and interview protocols—and the analysis of findings.

Together, these frameworks supported the study's research questions by illuminating how participants describe effective role performance, identify essential competencies, and perceive organizational structures that best support government and community relations functions. For this study, these competencies informed the development of interview questions and provided an analytical structure for interpreting participants' perspectives on leadership practice.

Research Design

Research design provides the methodological structure that guides a study and determines how data will be collected, analyzed, and interpreted. As Lochmiller and Lester (2017) explain, research methods enable researchers to conduct systematic investigations aligned with the selected methodological approach. Because research questions vary in purpose and scope, selecting an appropriate research design is essential to ensuring that the study effectively examines the phenomenon under investigation.

Qualitative research encompasses a range of methodological approaches used to explore and understand social phenomena within their natural settings (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Rather than measuring predefined variables, qualitative research focuses on interpreting how individuals experience, understand, and construct meaning within their social and professional environments. This approach allows researchers to examine complex human interactions and perspectives that are often not captured through quantitative methods.

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the career experiences and professional perspectives of government and community relations (GCR) professionals working within California community colleges. The approach enabled the researcher to examine

participants' perceptions, values, and interpretations of their roles within institutional leadership structures and external stakeholder environments. Qualitative methods are particularly well suited for studies that seek to understand participants' viewpoints and generate insight into experiences and organizational contexts (Yin, 2011).

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews to collect data for this study, during which participants shared narratives describing their roles, leadership responsibilities, and interactions with institutional leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders. The researcher invited participants to reflect on their contributions to strategic decision making, institutional leadership, and the effectiveness of their colleges or districts. The analysis of these narratives emphasizes participant voice, perspective, and reflexivity, enabling the researcher to interpret participants' experiences while acknowledging the broader organizational and political contexts in which their work occurs (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Among qualitative approaches, narrative inquiry is particularly well suited for examining how individuals construct meaning from experiences and communicate those experiences through stories.

Narrative Research

Qualitative narrative methodology uses clearly defined research purposes, guiding research questions, and rich data sources often collected through interviews to explore participants' lived experiences (Queirós et al., 2017). In this study, the researcher selected narrative inquiry because it allowed participants to describe and interpret their experiences through stories and reflections. Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited for examining how individuals construct meaning from their experiences and how those experiences shape their understanding of roles and identities.

Craig (2005) explained that narrative researchers seek to understand how individuals make sense of experiences unfolding in the present or occurring in the recent past, often with implications for the future (p. 217). Researchers have widely used narrative inquiry to examine professional and social experiences within real-world settings and to capture the contextual richness of those experiences (Chase, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Murray, 2009; Riessman, 1993, 2008). Through narrative methods, researchers explore how individuals organize events, interpret experiences, and communicate meaning through storytelling.

Narrative research focuses on how individuals construct meaning through stories that describe their lived experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). As Riessman (1993) noted, “Narrative research takes as its object of investigation the story itself” (p. 1). Rather than reproducing events exactly as they occurred, narrative approaches recognize that individuals interpret past experiences and connect events in ways that give them meaning. Narratives therefore reflect how individuals interpret experiences and shape those experiences into meaningful stories for others.

Riessman’s (1993) work frequently employed thematic narrative analysis to organize and interpret participant narratives, an approach that informs the analytic strategy used in this study. Through thematic analysis, the researcher examines participant narratives for patterns and themes that reveal shared experiences, perspectives, and interpretations. This approach was particularly appropriate for exploring how government and community relations (GCR) professionals understand their roles, competencies, and contributions within California community colleges.

In this study, the researcher conducted in-depth semistructured interviews to collect detailed narratives from participants about their experiences. These interviews allowed participants to reflect on their roles, values, and perspectives related to their work in government

and community relations. By collecting and analyzing these narratives, the researcher sought to better understand how GCR professionals interpret their responsibilities and perceive their influence within institutional leadership and stakeholder engagement processes. Narrative inquiry also aligned with identity theory because individuals construct and verify their professional identities through the stories they tell about their experiences and interactions within organizational contexts.

Study Setting

This study included government and community relations (GCR) professionals employed within the California Community Colleges system. Given the lack of standardized role definitions and organizational structures for government and community relations functions across institutions, participants in this study held a range of titles and responsibilities, reflecting the diverse and context-dependent ways these roles are structured within the California community college system. To participate, individuals had to be working in a government or community relations role and have at least 2 years of professional experience in the field. The researcher used purposeful sampling to identify participants with relevant expertise and knowledge of government and community relations work within community college institutions (Lochmiller & Lester, 2016).

To recruit participants, the researcher collaborated with two professional organizations representing government and community relations practitioners in the California community college system: the Community College League of California and the Community College Public Relations Organization (CCPRO) of California. These organizations distributed email invitations to their professional networks, reaching more than 150 individuals working in government and community relations roles across community colleges and districts throughout the state.

The researcher also contacted presidents and chancellors of California community colleges to inform them about the study and request permission to invite their government and community relations staff to participate (see Appendix C). In addition, the researcher conducted outreach through professional relationships developed through participation in CCPRO meetings and conferences, which helped identify additional professionals with relevant experience.

The study aimed to interview 15 to 20 GCR professionals representing a range of institutional contexts within the California Community Colleges system. To capture diverse perspectives on government and community relations practice, the researcher sought participants from large and small institutions, single-college and multi-college districts, and colleges located in rural, suburban, and urban regions of the state. Ultimately, 16 government and community relations practitioners agreed to participate and completed interviews.

Instrumentation

The researcher distributed an initial intake form to individuals who volunteered to participate in the study to collect basic background information about each participant. The form requested information about the size and organizational structure of the participant's institution, the participant's job title, and the length of time the participant had worked at their current institution (see Appendix D). This information provided contextual background and helped the researcher understand the diversity of institutional settings represented in the study. The study considered this information particularly important because institutions define and organize government and community relations roles in varied ways.

The researcher collected data through semistructured interviews consisting of open-ended questions informed by identity theory and the leadership competencies developed by the American Association of Community Colleges. Semistructured interviews allow researchers to

clarify questions and probe for additional details, reducing the risk of misinterpretation and encouraging deeper reflection among participants (Almeida et al., 2017). As Knott et al. (2022) observed, this approach “allows individuals to explain, in their own words, how they understand and interpret the world around them,” and represents “a very particular type of conversation, guided by the researcher and used for specific ends” (p. 1). The researcher designed the interview protocol to encourage participants to share narratives about their experiences, leadership roles, and interactions with institutional leaders and external stakeholders.

The researcher developed interview questions to elicit responses related to the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders and included prompts encouraging participants to reflect on their experiences and leadership practices. To improve the clarity and relevance of the interview questions, the researcher shared the proposed interview protocol with three California community college administrative experts familiar with government and community relations roles, including professionals with experience in fundraising and marketing, public information, and external relations and advocacy. Their feedback helped refine the interview questions and strengthen alignment with the experiences of government and community relations staff.

The researcher also conducted a pilot study with three government and community relations practitioners who were current or former members of the Community College Public Relations Organization (CCPRO). The pilot interviews tested the interview protocol and generated feedback on question clarity, sequencing, and relevance. The researcher excluded pilot participants from the formal study sample. Feedback from the pilot study informed revisions to the interview protocol, including the addition of a question addressing the potential influence of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, on daily professional practice.

The researcher organized the final interview protocol around participants' perceptions of their roles and experiences in government and community relations within California community colleges. The questions explored three thematic areas aligned with the study's research questions: (a) participants' perceptions of effectiveness in their roles, (b) leadership competencies considered essential to their work, and (c) perspectives regarding the organizational placement of government and community relations functions within community college leadership structures. These themes reflected the 2022 AACC Leadership Competencies for Community College Leaders, which emphasize leadership capabilities related to strategic thinking, professionalism, communication, collaboration, and community engagement.

A total of 16 participants completed interviews. The data collected provided sufficient depth and detail to address the research questions guiding the study. Because the initial interviews generated adequate information for analysis, the researcher did not conduct follow-up interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 70 minutes, and the researcher conducted all interviews virtually using video-conferencing technology.

Data Collection and Data Sources

Before initiating data collection, the researcher obtained approval from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and followed required protocols for protecting human subjects, including informed consent procedures. The researcher completed several pre-approval steps, including obtaining IRB authorization, notifying institutional leaders before contacting potential participants, and securing signed informed consent forms from all participants (see Appendices E, F, and G). After receiving IRB approval, the researcher began recruiting participants through professional networks representing government and community relations practitioners within the California Community Colleges system.

Initial recruitment efforts included announcements distributed through the Community College Public Relations Organization (CCPRO) and the Community College League of California, which invited eligible professionals to participate in the study. The researcher also used a snowball sampling technique by asking early participants to identify additional professionals who met the study's participation criteria.

Participants who agreed to participate completed an intake form prior to the interview to provide background information about their institutional setting, department, job title, and years of professional experience. This information helped the researcher ensure representation from a range of institutional contexts, including variation in geographic location, institutional environment (e.g., urban, suburban, or rural), and organizational structure (e.g., single-college and multi-college districts).

After obtaining informed consent and permission to record the interview, the researcher conducted semistructured interviews using Google video conferencing technology. Participants could choose to participate using audio only or both audio and video; however, the researcher retained only audio recordings for research purposes. The researcher scheduled interviews in ways that minimized disruption to participants' work responsibilities and allowed them to speak freely about their experiences and perspectives.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 70 minutes and followed a semistructured protocol designed to explore participants' perceptions of their roles, leadership responsibilities, and contributions to institutional effectiveness. The researcher asked all participants a consistent set of opening questions and then used additional prompts to explore themes related to the leadership competencies developed by the American Association of Community Colleges. The researcher used probing questions to encourage participants to provide detailed examples and

reflections related to their experiences (Knott et al., 2022). Participants were given sufficient time to reflect before responding to each question.

The researcher completed interviews with 16 government and community relations practitioners representing institutions across California's 116 public community colleges. Audio recordings captured participants' responses verbatim and were later transcribed to support the analysis process. The researcher reviewed and summarized transcripts to identify key themes and concepts related to the study's research questions.

To support the analytic process, the researcher prepared a one-page interview memo shortly after each interview, typically within one to four days. These memos documented initial reflections, observations about participant perspectives, and preliminary comparisons with themes emerging from other interviews. This process helped the researcher record early analytical insights and maintain familiarity with the evolving dataset.

The researcher securely maintained all research data. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored in a secure location throughout the dissertation process, and the researcher protected participant identities using unique identifiers and pseudonyms. The researcher destroyed any documentation linking participant names with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Audio recordings will be permanently destroyed upon completion of the dissertation.

Data Analysis

This study used interview audio recordings, interview transcripts, participant intake forms, and researcher analytic memos as data sources. These materials provided the basis for identifying patterns, themes, and insights related to participants' experiences as government and community relations (GCR) professionals within California community colleges.

The researcher conducted qualitative data analysis using Taguette and Microsoft Excel to organize and code interview data. Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis tool, was used to highlight segments of interview transcripts and assign codes representing emerging concepts and themes. The researcher used Excel to organize and track codes across participants and to identify patterns and relationships among themes within the dataset.

The researcher followed an iterative coding process during analysis. The researcher reviewed interview transcripts multiple times to identify meaningful text segments related to the study's research questions. Initial open coding involved labeling key ideas and concepts within participant narratives. The researcher then grouped these codes into broader categories and themes through comparative analysis to examine similarities and differences across participant responses (Kawulich, 2017; Knott et al., 2022). As analysis progressed, the researcher refined codes and organized them into a coherent coding framework that captured the most significant patterns within the data.

During interpretation and synthesis, the researcher compared the emergent themes with the leadership competencies developed by the American Association of Community Colleges to determine the extent to which these competencies were reflected in participants' descriptions of their roles and responsibilities. Not all competencies identified in the AACC framework were directly relevant to the work of GCR professionals. The researcher therefore focused the analysis on competencies that aligned most closely with the experiences and responsibilities described by participants. The researcher identified relevant competencies by examining the relationship between the AACC competency framework and the competencies most frequently referenced by participants as essential to their work.

The researcher developed themes by examining patterns across participant narratives in three primary areas corresponding to the study's research questions:

RQ1. Participants' perceptions of the most effective ways to perform their roles.

RQ2. Leadership competencies participants considered most important for effectiveness in government and community relations positions.

RQ3. Organizational structures and reporting relationships, particularly in the context of varied and nonstandardized role configurations.

The researcher then used narrative analysis to interpret these themes by examining how participants described their experiences and how their narratives reflected broader patterns related to professional identity, leadership competencies, and organizational placement. This interpretive process enabled the researcher to identify narrative threads that connected participants' experiences across institutional contexts. Table 3.1 illustrates the iterative analytical process used in this study to design, track, code, analyze, and report interview data. The analysis progressed through a systematic sequence in which initial coding identified key concepts emerging from participant interviews. The researcher then organized these codes into broader themes aligned with the study's research questions. Finally, the researcher applied narrative analysis to interpret these themes and identify narrative threads that reflected how participants described their roles, competencies, and organizational positioning within community college leadership structures.

Table 3.1. The Iterative Nature of Analyzing Interview Data

Step	Key Actions / Guiding Questions
1. Recalling Research Questions	• What might you code for? • What might you be looking for in the data?
2. Immersing	• Re-read the interview several times
3. Coding	• Develop codes/labels for data • Consider how codes are organized (e.g., hierarchies, groups, flat structure)
4. Interpreting	• How do the codes help unpack the data? • What do the codes mean? • What supporting evidence can be used? • How will supporting evidence be interpreted?
5. Synthesizing and Documenting	• How will you draw the data together? • What is cohering? • What differences appear? • Write analytic memos
6. Writing	• Present findings and narrative threads

Note. From “Interviews in the Social Sciences,” by E. Knott, A. H. Rao, K. Summers, and C. Teeger, 2022, *Nature Reviews Methods Primers Series: Interviews in the Social Sciences*, 2(73), p. 8. (<https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6>). Copyright 2022 by Nature Reviews.

The themes that emerged from this analysis provide insights into how individuals in government and community relations understand their roles, competencies, and organizational positioning within community colleges. These findings may inform institutional practice, leadership development, and future research related to government and community relations functions within the community college sector.

Limitations

Limitations refer to factors that may affect the interpretation of study findings but are beyond the control of the researcher (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). In qualitative research, limitations often relate to issues such as sample size, context, and the interpretive nature of data analysis. These factors may influence the extent to which study findings can be generalized to other settings or populations.

This study employed in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method within a narrative inquiry research design. While in-depth interviews are widely used in social science research to explore participants' perspectives and lived experiences, they rely heavily on participants' willingness and ability to reflect on and articulate their experiences. As a result, responses are based on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' personal interpretations, selective recall, or the desire to present experiences in a particular way.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of participants, which is typical in qualitative narrative research but may limit the ability to generalize findings beyond the specific context of the study. Second, the research focused exclusively on government and community relations practitioners within California community colleges, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other states or higher education systems. As Lincoln and Guba (1995) noted, qualitative studies are not intended to produce statistically generalizable results; rather, their value lies in the depth and contextual richness of the insights they provide.

Additional limitations include the potential for researcher bias and participant bias, both of which can influence the interpretation of qualitative data. Because narrative inquiry relies on participants' personal stories, the analysis may also be influenced by selective storytelling or the ways participants interpret and frame their experiences. Furthermore, qualitative findings are interpretive and are not tested for statistical significance, meaning that conclusions are based on thematic interpretation rather than statistical analysis (Atieno, 2009).

Finally, narrative research can require a lengthy and careful verification process to compare and interpret participant narratives effectively. Almeida et al. (2017) noted narrative data often require extensive analysis to identify patterns and extract meaningful comparisons

across participants, making careful participant selection and systematic analysis particularly important in qualitative studies.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of government and community relations staff working within California community colleges. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how these professionals interpret their roles, competencies, and organizational placement within institutional leadership structures.

Ethical Considerations

In-depth interviews raise ethical considerations related to participant privacy, consent, and the responsible handling of personal narratives (Knott et al., 2022). In designing and conducting this study, the researcher considered key ethical principles, including harm minimization, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and reflexivity.

Before beginning data collection, the researcher obtained approval from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher provided all participants with information about the study's purpose and procedures and obtained informed consent before conducting interviews. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate and to have their interviews recorded. As part of the consent process, the researcher informed participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the interview or within one month after the interview without penalty.

The researcher also informed participants they could indicate when they shared information "off the record," and the researcher would exclude such information from research analysis and dissemination of findings. To protect confidentiality, the researcher used unique identifiers so that participant identities and institutional affiliations were not disclosed in the

study. These procedures protected participant privacy and supported the ethical treatment of all individuals involved in the research.

Positionality

Positionality refers to the practice of researchers reflecting on their personal and professional backgrounds and acknowledging how these experiences may influence the research process, including data collection and interpretation (Qin, 2016). Transparency regarding researcher positionality is particularly important in qualitative research, where the researcher plays an active role in interpreting participant narratives.

The researcher has had 6 years of professional experience as an administrator within the California community college system, although in a functional area different from government and community relations. In this role, the researcher regularly communicated with internal and external stakeholders, including district leadership and governing boards. The researcher also participated in institutional planning processes that involved collaboration with units responsible for government relations, public relations, and institutional advancement.

Because of this professional background, the researcher occupied a partial insider position when examining the experiences of individuals in government and community relations. Although familiarity with the community college environment provided contextual understanding, the researcher remained mindful of the need to maintain reflexivity and minimize bias throughout the research process. The researcher acknowledged firsthand experiences as potential influences on the research perspective and made efforts to remain open to participants' interpretations and experiences.

The researcher maintained reflexivity through ongoing reflection during the research process. Recognizing the researcher serves as an instrument in qualitative interviews, the

researcher remained attentive to potential bias and maintained a commitment to neutrality and openness when engaging with participants. The researcher made no preconceived assumptions about the outcomes of the study and designed interview questions to encourage participants to describe their experiences in their own words.

Study Quality

The researcher used several strategies to enhance the trustworthiness and quality of this qualitative study. These strategies addressed commonly accepted criteria for evaluating qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Shenton, 2004). The researcher strengthened credibility through respondent validation, triangulation of data sources, and the use of direct participant quotations. Participants reviewed interview summaries to confirm that the summaries accurately represented their perspectives. The researcher achieved triangulation by comparing information across participant interviews, intake forms, and researcher analytic memos.

The researcher supported transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and study procedures. These descriptions allow readers to assess whether the findings apply to similar institutional contexts (Shenton, 2004). The researcher supported dependability by documenting the procedures used throughout the study, including participant recruitment, interview protocols, and data analysis procedures. This documentation provides transparency and enables future researchers to understand how the study was conducted.

The researcher addressed confirmability by using systematic coding procedures and grounding interpretations in participant narratives rather than researcher assumptions. Expert review of interview questions and a pilot interview phase further supported the credibility of the study design (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). The researcher also used several strategies to minimize

threats to validity. These strategies included (a) respondent validation to reduce misinterpretation of participants' perceptions, (b) triangulation to collect converging evidence from multiple sources, (c) comparison of responses across participants, and (d) a pilot study with three GCR professionals outside the study sample prior to the formal semistructured interviews.

The researcher promoted transparency by explaining research procedures and data sources. Prior to interviews, the researcher informed participants about the researcher's professional background as a community college administrator and explained the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the study. To support transferability, the researcher provided sufficient detail about the research context and instrumentation so readers could determine whether the findings may apply to other settings (Shenton, 2004). To support dependability, the researcher documented procedures so that future investigators could replicate the study. To support confirmability, the researcher used expert review of interview questions and a pilot interview phase to ensure that findings emerged from participant data rather than researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). In addition to these trustworthiness criteria, this study reflects the eight "big tent" markers of quality in qualitative research proposed by Sarah J. Tracy (2010).

Worthy Topic

The study examined an underexplored topic involving individuals in government and community relations in community colleges. Although existing literature has identified increasing political complexity affecting community college leadership, limited scholarship has examined the professional identities and experiences of GCR professionals.

Rich Rigor

The study demonstrated methodological rigor through detailed documentation of research design, participant recruitment, interview procedures, and data analysis. Narrative inquiry, systematic coding, and iterative theme development supported analytical depth and transparency.

Sincerity

The researcher acknowledged positionality and professional background to provide transparency regarding the researcher's relationship to the study context.

Credibility

Credibility was supported through thick description, direct participant quotations, triangulation of data sources, and alignment among research questions, data collection, and analytical findings.

Resonance

Participant narratives illustrated challenges and opportunities associated with government and community relations work in community colleges and highlight implications for leadership practice and institutional strategy.

Significant Contribution.

The study extended identity theory to public-sector boundary-spanning roles in higher education and provides insights into leadership competencies and organizational structures that support government and community relations functions.

Ethical Practice

The researcher followed ethical procedures including IRB approval, informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, and secure data storage while ensuring respectful representation of participants.

Meaningful Coherence

The study maintained alignment among research questions, theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and methodology. Identity theory guided interpretation of participant narratives, while leadership competencies identified by the American Association of Community Colleges provided a conceptual structure for examining leadership practice. Together, these criteria support the quality and integrity of this qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

Summary

This chapter described the research methodology used to examine the experiences and perspectives of government and community relations professionals working within the California Community Colleges system. The chapter outlined the qualitative research design and explained the use of narrative inquiry to explore how participants interpret their roles, leadership competencies, and organizational placement within their institutions. The chapter also described the empirical setting, participant selection and recruitment procedures, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures used to interpret participant narratives. In addition, the chapter addressed ethical considerations, researcher positionality, and strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness and quality of the study. Together, these methodological approaches provided a systematic framework for examining how individuals in government and community relations understand and enact their roles within the complex organizational and political environments of California community colleges. Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged from the analysis of participant interviews.

Chapter 4 – Research Results and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of the study. It begins with a review of the purpose of the study and lists the research questions, followed by research context and study design. The next section provides a narrative profile for each participant situating their experiences within institutional and professional contexts. The findings are organized by the three research questions guiding the study. The chapter concludes with an integrative synthesis that maps participant findings to the AACC Leadership Competencies, which served as the Conceptual Framework for the study.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of government and community relations (GCR) professionals regarding their roles within California community colleges. Through the collection and analysis of participant narratives, the study sought to capture the lived experiences of these professionals and to identify the competencies they perceive as essential for effectively carrying out their responsibilities. The study also explored how GCR professionals understand their roles within institutional structures and how their work contributes to advancing the mission of the community college.

By examining the insights of professionals responsible for managing government and community relations functions, this study aimed to deepen understanding of how these roles are enacted in practice and how GCR professionals interpret their effectiveness, professional competencies, and organizational positioning within their institutions. The findings may provide insight into community college leaders and practitioners seeking to strengthen government and community relations practices in support of institutional goals.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1. What do California community college professionals tasked with managing government and community relations perceive as the most effective ways to perform their roles?

RQ2. What professional competencies do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges consider most important for successfully managing government and community relations functions?

RQ3. To best advance the strategic mission of the institution, what organizational placement and reporting structures do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges perceive as most effective?

Method of Data Collection and Validation

This study employed qualitative research design. Qualitative inquiry provides an opportunity to explore participants' perceptions, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking within their natural professional contexts (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). As a broad methodological approach used across disciplines, qualitative research enables scholars to investigate complex social phenomena that are difficult to measure through quantitative methods alone (Yin, 2011). Given the relational and interpretive nature of government and community relations work, a qualitative approach was well suited to understanding how professionals in these roles make meaning of their experiences and enact leadership within institutional and political environments.

Data for this study were analyzed using narrative inquiry techniques, including iterative reading, narrative structuring, and thematic coding. Initial codes emerged inductively from participant narratives. Subsequent cycles of analysis incorporated identity theory constructs and

AACC leadership competencies as interpretive lenses to better understand how participants' experiences reflect broader patterns of leadership practice within the community college context.

Research Context and Participants

Participant Overview

The population included California community college professionals managing government and community relations. Interview questions focused on lived professional experience, meaning making, and identity of the participants told through their own point of view. Participation was representative such that individuals represented rural, suburban, and urban areas, both single college districts and multi-college districts and a variety of titles and placements with organizations, but all with similar GCR professional responsibilities. Sixteen distinct California community colleges were represented in the research.

A total of 16 professionals responsible for government and community relations (GCR) functions within California community colleges participated in this study. Participants represented a range of institutional contexts, roles, and organizational structures across the state. Collectively, the participants provided perspectives from urban, suburban, and rural community college districts, as well as from both single-college and multi-college district systems.

The participants also reflected a variety of professional leadership roles associated with government and community relations work, including vice chancellors, vice presidents, executive directors, directors, and public information officers. While participants' formal titles varied, all held responsibilities related to government relations, community engagement, public information, or communications functions within their institutions. Many participants described responsibilities that span multiple areas of external relations, reflecting the integrated nature of

government and community engagement functions within community college organizational structures.

Participants also varied in their organizational reporting structures and leadership roles within their institutions. Several reported directly to the chancellor or president, while others maintained dotted-line relationships with executive leadership. Many participants served as members of their institution's executive cabinet or leadership team, indicating the strategic importance of government and community relations functions within institutional leadership structures. Table 4.1 presents participant demographic characteristics, including gender, institutional geography, and college district type. Table 4.2 summarizes professional characteristics, including job titles, scope of duties, reporting structures, leadership roles, and years of professional experience in government and community relations.

Table 4.1. Participant Demographics ($N = 16$)

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Female	6	37
Gender	Male	10	63
Geography	Urban	3	19
Geography	Suburban	10	63
Geography	Rural	3	19
College type	Multi-college district	6	37
College type	Single college district	10	63

Note. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Table 4.2. Professional Characteristics of Participants ($N = 16$)

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Title	Assistant superintendent/vice chancellor/vice president	2	13
Title	Executive director or director	12	74
Title	Public information officer	2	13
Primary duties	Public information/communications/marketing	6	38
Primary duties	Government Relations	2	13
Primary duties	Community Relations	3	19
Primary duties	Comprehensive (all areas)	5	31
Reporting structure	Reports directly to chancellor/president	11	69
Reporting structure	Dotted line to chancellor/president	4	25
Institutional role	Executive cabinet member	7	44
Scope of work	College level: Multi college district	2	13
Scope of work	District level: Single college district	11	68
Scope of work	District level: Multi college district	3	19
Institutional role	Leadership team member	14	93
Experience	Average years in GCR at institution	—	9.8 years
Experience	Average years in GCR field	—	21.2 years

Note. GCR = government and community relations. Percentages rounded.

Participant Summary

As shown in Tables 4.1 and 4.2, participants in this study represented a diverse range of institutional contexts and roles within California community colleges. Most participants were male (63%), while 37% were female, and most worked in suburban districts (63%), with additional representation from urban and rural institutions. Participants were more frequently employed within single-college districts (63%) than multi-college district systems. In terms of roles, the majority held director or executive director positions (74%), while others served in senior executive roles such as vice chancellor, vice president, or assistant superintendent, or as public information officers.

Participants' responsibilities often spanned multiple external relations functions, with several describing comprehensive roles that included public information, communications, government relations, and community engagement. Organizational placement also reflected the

strategic nature of these roles, as many participants reported directly to the chancellor or president or served as members of their institution's leadership team. Collectively, participants reported substantial professional experience, averaging 9.8 years in government and community relations at their current institution and more than 21 years in the broader field, suggesting a highly experienced group of professionals whose narratives provide informed perspectives on the practice of government and community relations within California community colleges.

Following the overview of participant characteristics, the findings of this study are presented according to the three research questions guiding the inquiry. Using a narrative inquiry approach, participants shared stories and reflections describing their experiences managing government and community relations functions within California community colleges. These narratives were analyzed through an iterative coding and thematic development process to identify patterns, shared meanings, and recurring ideas across participant experiences. The findings presented in this chapter therefore reflect both individual narratives and cross-participant thematic insights that emerged during data analysis.

Narrative Profiles of Participants

This section provides an overview of the participants included in the study and the context in which their narratives are situated. Participant characteristics relevant to the study are described, along with the social, institutional, and temporal contexts that shape their experiences. Identifiers (P1, P2, etc.) are used to protect participant confidentiality. Each narrative is presented as a brief profile. Interviews, audio transcripts, and post interview notes were used to construct the profiles.

Narrative of P1

P1 worked as a government and community relations practitioner in a suburban single college district with responsibility for marketing, communications, and public engagement serving in his position for more than 2 years. He previously worked at another California community college and as a media relations consultant with 20 years' experience in the field. Reporting directly to the college president, P1 played a leading role in building reciprocal relationships with local elected officials, community partners, faculty, and staff to advance institutional goals and student success. His approach emphasized personal engagement, consistent communication, and mutual benefit, including hosting campus events for elected officials and supporting community initiatives. P1 was recognized for versatile communication skills across writing, graphic design, social media, video production, and crisis communication. He leveraged storytelling, particularly student success narratives—to reduce barriers to college participation and connect with diverse audiences. Working within limited budgets, he applied data-informed marketing strategies and ethically integrates AI tools to enhance efficiency while preserving institutional voice and originality. His work highlighted the importance of adaptability, interpersonal confidence, and strategic alignment in effective government and community relations leadership. Regarding government relations, P1 emphasized starting out with local elected officials by inviting them and their staff to campus events and offering support, fostering mutual benefit through a reciprocal approach: “What can I do for you? Here’s what you can do for us.”

Narrative of P2

P2 worked as a senior government and community relations practitioner with 12 years of experience in his role at an urban multi-college district, bringing extensive experience in

legislative advocacy, executive leadership collaboration, and external stakeholder engagement. With 24 years' experience in the field, P2 previously worked for a California State University campus in a similar role and has served in various leadership roles for California public relations societies. P2 emphasized relationship building, trustworthiness, and strategic communication as foundational to effective government and community relations work, particularly in complex, multi-college environments. He stated, "my strongest tool or asset is the relationship I have with the chancellor . . . coming back and figuring out how we can support each other and where our common ground is."

A central focus of P2's approach was aligning government relations efforts with institutional priorities such as student success, enrollment growth, and program expansion, including baccalaureate and dual enrollment initiatives. P2 relied heavily on institutional research and data to support advocacy and budget requests, while also working closely with development and fundraising leadership to advance shared goals. Organizationally, P2 strongly advocated for government and community relations functions to report directly to the Chancellor and hold Cabinet-level status, viewing this placement as critical for influence, effectiveness, and professional credibility. P2 also highlighted ethical considerations in communications, particularly regarding the cautious and transparent use of artificial intelligence to maintain authenticity and public trust. He stated, "Government relations advocacy has become a bigger role . . . marketing executives may not be given the same opportunities to sit at the table with Chancellor's Cabinet as if they have those other skill sets."

Narrative of P3

P3's work service included 8 years as a senior marketing and communications leader in an urban single college district, overseeing integrated marketing, public relations, and

community engagement efforts. P3 demonstrated 14 years' total work experience, including considerable time working in journalism. Reporting directly to the college president, P3 acted as the institution's chief storyteller—translating complex academic and operational work into clear, compelling narratives for students, media, elected officials, and community partners. His work emphasized data-driven digital marketing, student-centered storytelling, and proactive relationship building to support enrollment, retention, and public trust. Known for his adaptability and political savvy, P3 navigated resource constraints, media relations, and organizational dynamics while advocating for marketing as a strategic partner in advancing the college's mission. P3 stressed nimbleness and adaptability in his role. He stated, "You got to be nimble . . . every day there is something that tests your boundaries . . . I try to show myself grace when frustrated." P3 was not a regular member of the executive cabinet, which he saw as a limitation for aligning marketing and communications with institutional priorities.

Narrative of P4

P4's work experience included 10 years in a senior government and community relations role for a suburban multi-college district, with primary responsibility for legislative advocacy at the state level. Previously, he was a journalist and communications professional with a total of 16 years in the field. His work included identifying annual legislative priorities, monitoring, and analyzing proposed legislation, coordinating positions with district leadership, and engaging directly with legislators and their staff through letters, meetings, and testimony. He also worked closely with a contracted legislative consultant to track bills and advance institutional priorities. P4 staffed the Board of Trustees' External Affairs Committee and participates as a member of the Chancellor's Executive Cabinet, providing regular legislative updates and strategic guidance. He emphasized coalition-building with other community colleges, statewide associations, and

community partners as a key strategy for effective advocacy. Data-informed messaging, clear communication, and strong relationships with legislative staff were central to his approach.

Organizationally, P4 believed government relations functions should report directly to the chief executive officer to ensure effectiveness and alignment with institutional goals. He stated even if combined with marketing and public relations, the office should maintain direct access to top leadership. His experience highlighted both the complexity of legislative advocacy and the need for stronger professional development pathways, particularly for new trustees and staff involved in government relations.

Narrative of P5

P5 served as a seasoned government and community relations practitioner with more than 6 years of work experience at her suburban multi-college district and 23 years in the field. Her educational background included journalism and public administration. Her role evolved to focus on building and sustaining relationships with community organizations, legislative staff, and internal stakeholders, while supporting media relations and institutional visibility. Reporting directly to the college president, she served as a key representative of the institution, emphasizing trust, presence, and credibility through consistent engagement. P5's strengths included effective communication, relationship-building, and translating complex institutional priorities for external audiences. She valued visibility and "showing up" as essential to effective government and community relations, even when outcomes are difficult to quantify. Working as a one-person operation, she navigated limited resources, board dynamics, and the absence of formal strategic metrics, while maintaining confidence that the relational aspects of her work are central to institutional reputation and success. P5 stated, "You can't do anything if you don't have people that are willing to work together that respect you."

Narrative of P6

P6's service record included 18 years as a director at a rural single district college, where he oversaw enrollment marketing, public relations and crisis communications, event marketing, and internal communications. Previous experience included marketing and communications in the private sector. Reporting to the office of instruction with a strong dotted-line relationship to the college president, he played a vital role in shaping both the institution's public image and its internal messaging. His work integrated strategic marketing with public relations to support enrollment growth, reinforced brand consistency, and advanced the college's instructional mission. P6 collaborated closely with senior leadership, faculty, and staff, and served as a primary liaison to local media and elected officials, helping position the college as a trusted community partner. A strong advocate for storytelling, P6 highlighted student success—particularly among adult learners and justice-impacted students—to demonstrate the transformative impact of community college education. He emphasized relationship-building, clear communication, and calm leadership as essential competencies for effective marketing and public relations in higher education. P6 identified interpersonal relationships, storytelling ability, and stress management as the most essential competencies for success in marketing and public relations within a community college. He emphasized the importance of building positive internal and external networks, effectively communicating the college's story, and maintaining composure during crises. These soft skills outweighed technical expertise in his view.

Narrative of P7

P7 worked as a senior communications and government relations professional with 17 years' experience in a suburban single college district and 30 years' work experience in the field. Previously, P7 worked in higher education communications and marketing services in the private

and public sectors. She led integrated communications, marketing, and government relations functions aligned with institutional strategic plans, with a strong emphasis on autonomy, accountability, and measurable outcomes. Her work included auditing and cultivating relationships with elected officials, community organizations, media, and internal campus stakeholders. P7 played a key role in regional and statewide government relations efforts, collaborating closely with organizations such as the Community College League of California and regional government relations groups. She has been recognized for her expertise in crisis communications, having served as the primary spokesperson during major campus incidents and for providing ongoing crisis communications training for communications staff, campus leadership, and police departments. She identified core professional strengths to include strategic communication, storytelling, negotiation with elected officials, effective media relations, and executive-level advising. P7 emphasized the importance of strong internal relationships, clear organizational placement of government and community relations reporting directly to the CEO, and rigorous professional preparation, including advanced education and extensive leadership experience. She advised other community colleges numerous times, developing communications plans, conducting audits, and consulting on best practices in government and community relations. P7 stated, “Storytelling and writing skills are critical for shaping image and message.”

Narrative of P8

P8 brought 12 years’ work experience in government and community relations within a suburban multi-college district. He has previous marketing and public relations experience working at other California community colleges with 21 total work experience in the field. His work centered on building long-term, trust-based relationships through consistent visibility, responsiveness, and a strong focus on mutual benefit. He reported directly to the college

president and served on the president's cabinet, playing a key strategic role in crisis communication, legislative outreach, and institutional messaging. P8 measured success by the depth of community partnerships and engagement rather than transactional outcomes, and he viewed marketing and communications as essential tools for advancing student success by increasing awareness of college services and opportunities. He valued humility, strategic agility, and clear communication, while navigating challenges such as limited funding, evolving digital trends, and the demanding, always-on nature of the PIO role.

Narrative of P9

P9 served as an executive at a suburban single college district, where he worked for 25 years and oversaw an integrated portfolio including marketing, public relations, government relations, crisis communications, and select internal communications. Previous experience included major work in legislative affairs and cultivating government and higher education relations with more than 30 years in the field. P9 reported directly to the CEO and was part of the executive cabinet. This direct access was seen as a "huge advantage" and "a tremendous vote of confidence" in the importance of communications. He stated being in the room where decisions were made allowed better context, messaging, and strategic alignment. P9 played a strategic role in aligning communications and advocacy efforts with institutional priorities. His government relations work focused primarily on federal advocacy, including securing earmarked funding through close collaboration with congressional representatives, their staff, the college CEO, and a contracted federal lobbyist.

In community relations, P9 emphasized sustained, face-to-face relationship building with local leaders, agencies, and media to reinforce institutional trust, particularly during periods of leadership transition or heightened public scrutiny. P9 also led crisis communications as the

district spokesperson and heads an Incident Command Team trained to manage emergencies and media response. Known for a pragmatic and relationship-driven leadership style, he highlighted adaptability, credibility, and consistent communication as essential competencies in higher education government and community relations. In addition, P9 actively promoted responsible use of artificial intelligence within his department, encouraging staff to apply AI tools to improve marketing analytics and communication effectiveness.

Narrative of P10

P10 worked as an executive director at a suburban single college district, where she had worked for 9 years. Previous experience included communications, public affairs, and campaign work, with a total of 19 years in the field. She led institutional messaging, government relations, and community engagement in support of the college's mission. Her role integrated public information, marketing, and political advocacy to strengthen enrollment efforts, secure public funding, and build sustained relationships with elected officials, industry partners, and the broader community. She emphasized the importance of informing the public about college services, engaging industry partners, and celebrating institutional achievements with elected officials. Working within the office of advancement, P10 collaborated across all major college divisions to ensure consistent, mission-aligned communication and strategic storytelling. She played a key role in securing grants and public appropriations, supporting board and executive leadership, and guiding communication during both planned initiatives and unexpected events. She also leveraged emerging tools such as artificial intelligence to enhance creativity, consistency, and efficiency while maintaining institutional voice and data protection standards.

Narrative of P11

P11 served as a senior marketing and communications leader with district-wide responsibility for government, community, and public relations within urban multi-college community college system where he has worked for 7 years. Previously P11 worked for a California State University campus and city government. P11 also had prior experience in publishing with a total of 20 years' work experience in the field. Reporting directly to the Chancellor, he oversaw integrated marketing campaigns that position multiple colleges as a unified district, with a primary focus on increasing student enrollment and strengthening community awareness. His work emphasized data-driven decision making, student-centered messaging, and strategic partnerships with elected officials and community organizations. P11 reported he "acts as a gatekeeper for community partnership requests, assessing benefits to students and proactively engaging local elected officials to maintain strong ties." Known for building trust across institutions, P11 transformed the district marketing function into a collaborative service organization while leveraging emerging technologies, including AI tools, to expand communication capacity, improve efficiency, and support institutional transformation initiatives.

Narrative of P12

P12 served as a senior leader in government and community relations at her suburban single college district for 3 years. Her work centered on protecting and advancing institutional reputation through coordinated messaging, storytelling, and relationship-building with media, elected officials, and community partners. P12 stated, "I look very carefully at how we are portrayed, whether that's in the news media or how we portray ourselves on our websites . . . how we communicate our brand . . . whether that's crisis communication or government

relations.” She emphasized face-to-face engagement, collaborative problem-solving, and data-informed communications to maximize limited resources and demonstrate institutional impact. P12 also used artificial intelligence for communications and operations and prioritized mentorship and leadership development to strengthen the future of the profession. She had 30 years’ work experience in strategic communications, branding, and external engagement for community colleges over her career.

Narrative of P13

P13 worked as an experienced leader in government and community relations with a strong background in strategic communications, advocacy, and crisis management within a suburban large multi-college district for 15 years. Serving as director, he oversaw communications, community relations, and governmental affairs, acting as the institution’s primary “reputation defender” during high-stakes situations. P13 described himself as the “reputation defender” responsible for managing reputational risks during crises such as campus shootings and faculty misconduct. His work emphasized relationship-building with media, government, business, and nonprofit leaders, as well as maintaining trust through transparency, accountability, and integrity. P13 played a key role in supporting major initiatives such as large bond measures and provided strategic counsel to senior leadership, trustees, and chancellors. His approach highlighted the importance of integrity, trust, and respect, along with the need for adequate resources and professional development to sustain effective government and community relations functions.

P13’s indicated his diverse background in television, corporate communications, and governmental relations before higher education were invaluable. He noted many peers lacked this breadth of experience, which gave him an advantage in relationship-building and navigating

complex environments. He stated, “While multiple pathways exist to the role, finding the right person with the right skills and willingness to learn the community college context is crucial.”

He had 36 years’ work experience in the field.

Narrative of P14

P14 worked as a director at a rural multi-college district for 8 years (11 years’ work experience in the field), where she led institutional messaging, branding, crisis communications, and community engagement. Her role emphasized strategic communication rather than proactive legislative advocacy, with government relations primarily directed by senior leadership. P14’s managed extensive community partnerships, oversaw digital and social media outreach, and supported major initiatives such as bond measures through coordinated messaging, presentations, and public-facing resources. A strong advocate for data-driven decision making, she used intake tracking, social media analytics, and reputation surveys to measure effectiveness and justify resources. P14 played a leading role in crisis communications as part of the college’s emergency operations center and prioritized regular training and preparedness. Organizationally, she reported to the executive director for college advancement with a dotted line to the Superintendent/President and served on the executive cabinet, positioning her as a key strategic advisor on external communications and institutional reputation. She held that data-driven marketing, strong media and community relationships, and crisis communication preparedness are effective practices. She identified communication, creativity, adaptability, and trust-building as key competencies. She stated that challenges included resource constraints and managing diverse stakeholder expectations. She commented that she embraced AI cautiously as a tool to enhance efficiency and creativity. When it came to adaptability, she stated that in her role it was

necessary to manage multiple priorities and requests simultaneously. She stated her position required “always being able to pivot at a moment's notice.”

Narrative of P15

P15 serves as a senior communications and government and community relations practitioner with 2 years’ experience in her rural single college district. She had responsibilities in public information/strategic communications, marketing, and government relations. Reporting directly to the college president and working from the president’s office, P15 played a leading role in shaping strategic messaging, ensuring institutional alignment, and maintaining credibility with internal and external stakeholders. She had 18 years in the field and previously worked in similar roles within the kindergarten through Grade 12 sector in California. P15 stated, when it came to relationship building and collaboration, she took a “one person at a time” approach through lunches, coffees, and intentional human connection. She further stated, “Relationships were key if you want to succeed in any job.” She had 18 years related work experience across her career advancing institutional mission, public trust, and student success in education.

Narrative of P16

P16 brought 3 years’ work experience as a GCR administrator for a suburban multi-college district while housed within institutional advancement and reporting to a vice chancellor. She worked closely with the chancellor and executive leadership. Her role included advocating for the district’s legislative priorities at the federal, state, and local levels; securing external funding; and building relationships with elected officials, government agencies, and community partners. P16 emphasized strategic alignment with institutional priorities, effective communication across internal and external stakeholders, and collaboration with public information officers, faculty, staff, and student leadership. She had prior government experience

with knowledge of legislative processes spanning her career. In her role, P16 emphasized the critical importance of having worked for elected officials or in government to understand how distinct levels of government operate and interact. She indicated:

Having a background working for a legislator is very crucial . . . I got to learn how they work together and how they don't work together and what they all do so that we're putting the right energy into the right spaces.

She relied on her effective communication skills and relationship management, which she considered as “core competencies.” As a one-person office, P16 leveraged AI tools to support writing, scheduling, and research while navigating the demands of serving multiple campuses. She has 10 years’ work experience in higher education.

Narrative Inquiry’s Contribution to Understanding GCR Work

The individual stories of the participants stood on their own as accounts of lived experience. Their narratives did not converge into a single pattern; instead, they formed a collection of experiences that illuminated the complexity of the role. By choosing narratives, this study focused on experience, meaning, and personal stories. The narratives answered the research questions not through lists or models but through lived moments:

- Effectiveness emerged through trust, timing, presence, and relational intuition.
- Competencies developed through experience, crisis, mentorship, and reflective practice.
- Placement shaped identity, access, credibility, and strategic influence.

Findings Related to AACC Leadership Competencies

This section presents the most prominent findings related to the leadership competencies identified by the American Association of Community Colleges and their application by

government and community relations (GCR) professionals. Participant narratives indicate GCR professionals do not enact leadership competencies as abstract or purely technical skills. Instead, participants described how institutional context, organizational placement, and relational legitimacy shape how they perform and apply these competencies in practice. These findings suggest leadership competencies function as identity-based practices that develop through professional relationships, institutional expectations, and interactions with external stakeholders.

1. Organizational Strategy

Participants consistently described their effectiveness as dependent on their ability to align institutional priorities with external political and policy environments. Narratives emphasized advising presidents and chancellors on legislative timing, political feasibility, and reputational risk—often before decisions were finalized. Several participants noted, when they were included early in strategic conversations, they were able to help shape institutional direction in ways that accounted for external constraints. Conversely, exclusion from executive planning led to reactive rather than strategic engagement with policymakers. P3 was not a regular member of the executive cabinet, which he saw as a limitation for aligning marketing and communications with institutional priorities. P3 noted missed opportunities for timely information sharing and strategic alignment. He shared, “I am not routinely part of those meetings, and I think that hurts us . . . we found out about a major promotional priority months after the decision was made.”

2. Resource Management

Participants framed resource management primarily through advocacy, protection, and stabilization of public funding rather than internal budget administration. Narratives highlighted sustained relationship-building with legislators as essential to securing funding over time,

particularly during fiscal uncertainty. Several participants emphasized that their influence over resources was indirect, relying on credibility and long-term trust rather than formal decision-making authority. P1 stated, “Budget constraints require creativity and prioritization.” P3 spoke of improved efforts in identifying innovative marketing funding streams for adult learners and career technical education programs in an era of decreased funding, particularly post COVID. P8 noted, “Funding constraints limit experimentation and innovation” and “funding is always an issue.”

3. Communication

Communication emerged as one of the most prominent subject matters across participant narratives. Participants described acting as translators between policymakers and campus leaders, adapting language, framing issues strategically, and managing expectations on both sides. Many participants emphasized that misalignment in communication—particularly when institutional leaders underestimated political complexity—reduced effectiveness and strained relationships. P5 stated, “You need to be able to communicate, you know in writing and verbally” and P7 commented, “The most essential skill is communication in its broadest sense, written, oral, and auditory.”

4. Collaboration

Participants described collaboration as occurring outside formal institutional structures. Their narratives emphasized cross-sector engagement with legislators, staff, community organizations, and internal campus leaders, often without shared authority or clear lines of accountability. P7 commented, “You must have a strong tribe both with your team and with the campus community and the outlying community.” Several participants noted collaboration was

most effective when relationships were sustained over time and grounded in mutual trust rather than transactional goals.

5. Community College Advocacy

Advocacy was consistently described by participants as a balancing act between advancing institutional interests and maintaining public-sector credibility. Participants described navigating ethical boundaries, political neutrality, and long-term reputation management. Several narratives revealed participants relied heavily on the CEO and their own personal core values to back them up and get through politically charged situations. Some participants pointed out that a clear sense or priority makes it easier to do one's work. Student success was referenced as a clear institution wide goal, for example. P2 stated, "We benefit from a shared vision of what we need to do to support our students . . . that we're not having to fight ourselves to make things happen."

6. Professionalism

Professionalism emerged as a cross-cutting theme across participants' narratives, reflected in their emphasis on discretion, emotional regulation, and ethical judgment. Many participants described routinely absorbing political pressure on behalf of the institution and managing confidential or sensitive information, often without formal recognition. Participants also noted professionalism was frequently tested when organizational placement limited their authority or visibility, creating conditions that contributed to identity strain. In addition to their institutional roles, many participants demonstrated strong engagement in the broader profession, with most belonging to professional associations and several serving as officers within organizations related to public affairs and government relations. Participants P1, P2, and P7 emphasized that reliability and trustworthiness are highly valued within the profession, alongside a commitment to pragmatism and objectivity.

Across participant narratives, role variability was consistently described as a defining feature of government and community relations work. Participants frequently noted responsibilities, reporting relationships, and expectations differed significantly across institutions, requiring them to interpret and adapt their roles within locally defined organizational contexts.

Emergent Themes by Research Question

The results are organized by research question to maintain alignment with the study's design. Three themes emerged in findings for each of the three research questions, which are introduced and illustrated through representative excerpts from participant narratives. These emergent themes provide insight into how individuals in government and community relations perceived effective strategies for performing their roles, the competencies they believe are most important for success, and their perspectives on the organizational placement of these functions within community college leadership structures.

Research Question 1

What do California community college professionals tasked with managing government and community relations perceive as the most effective way to do their jobs?

Theme 1: Relationship-Building as Core Professional Identity

- Half of all participants emphasized the importance of building long-term trust with legislators, staff, and community leaders (P1, P2, P7, P8, P11, P12, P14, P16).
- Several participants described themselves as a “bridge-builder,” “translator,” or “institutional ambassador.” (P1, P2, P11).
- Nearly all participants emphasized communication and collaboration as mandatory competencies for the field.

Theme 2: Strategic Sensemaking and Political Navigation

- Numerous participants shared stories of needing to be able to read political environments (P4, P5, P9, P11).
- Numerous participants stated their ability to adapt institutional messaging for various audiences without compromising mission was complicated and sensitive (P1, P5, P7, P8, P16).
- Several participants described situations revealing identity tension between their advocate role and their role in serving as a neutral public servant (P2, P3, P7).

Theme 3: Internal Influence and Institutional Legitimacy

- Nearly all participants commented effectiveness was tied to internal access and credibility.
- Numerous participants told stories of the importance of possessing an appointment on key decision-making groups, such as an executive cabinet (P2, P3, P9, P15).
- Several participants emphasized that their roles carried significant institutional influence despite often operating with limited staff, constrained resources, and, in some cases, without formal inclusion on executive leadership teams. Their effectiveness depended on their ability to build relationships, shape institutional messaging, and influence decision making without relying on positional authority.

Research Question 2

What competencies do California community college GCR professionals consider most important for managing government and community relations?

Theme 1: Political Acumen and Contextual Intelligence

- Numerous participants stated that understanding legislative processes and political culture was a key to success (P2, P4, P5, P13, P16).
- Several participants indicated their experience as an “insider-outsider” navigating multiple worlds (P5, P7, P10, P13).

Theme 2: Communication, Translation, and Storytelling

- All participants indicated that among their primary duties was the framing institutional needs for external audiences.
- All participants said their responsibilities included translating political realities back to campus leadership.
- Many participants identified themselves as a narrator of the college mission (P2, P9, P11, P13, P14, P16).

Theme 3: Emotional Intelligence and Ethical Judgment

- Most participants indicated they were often managing conflict, ambiguity, and competing loyalties.
- One participant indicated they adhere to ethical boundaries in advocacy work as professionals and shape their professional identity through values, integrity, and public accountability (P1).
- Numerous participants stated crisis communication and disaster response planning were essential components of their jobs, requiring rapid decision making, careful messaging, and coordination with both internal leadership and external stakeholders (P1, P3, P6, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13, P14).

Research Question 3

To best advance the strategic mission of the institution, what do California GCR professionals consider to be the best placement and reporting lines for this group?

Theme 1: Proximity to Executive Leadership

- Most participants indicated reporting to presidents, chancellors, or executive cabinets was key to their success.
- Most participants expressed their belief that their role (identity) validation was often judged by others in their institution according to how closely they maintained access to executive leadership and possessed an ability to influence decision making.
- Some participants noted, even without consistent placement on executive cabinets, they were expected to influence institutional decisions and represent the college externally.

Theme 2: Centralization Versus Decentralization

- Participants from multi-college districts emphasized different GCR operational models existed in larger systems, often resulting in increased resources, staffing, and access to executive leadership.
- Several participants described tensions between consistency and responsiveness, especially regarding internal communications, marketing and promotions, and branding (P1, P3, P8).

Theme 3: Structural Marginalization and Identity Strain

- One participant spoke of potential isolation when GMC professionals were placed in advancement or auxiliary units (P16).

- Some participants indicated their self-concept and well-being was influenced in a significant way according to their placement within the organization and inclusion early in the process of strategic decisions making.

Consistent with the variability in role definitions and organizational structures described in Chapter 3, taken together, the emergent themes suggest participants described effectiveness not as adherence to a standardized set of responsibilities, but as the ability to navigate and respond to institution-specific expectations and external conditions. The competencies identified by participants often reflected the need to operate across fluid and variably defined roles, reinforcing the importance of adaptability, sensemaking, and relational engagement. Participants emphasized the lack of standardized organizational placement and role definition contributed to differences in access, influence, and role clarity across institutions. Participants also described their roles as highly influential, despite often lacking large teams, dedicated resources, or formal executive authority, highlighting the importance of relational credibility and strategic access in shaping institutional outcomes.

Table 4.3 summarizes the emergent themes and their relationship to the AACC leadership competencies related to the three research questions.

Table 4.3. Mapping Research Questions to Emergent Themes and AACC Leadership

Competencies

Research question	Key emergent themes	Connection to leadership competencies
RQ1: Perceived effectiveness	Relationship-building; trust and credibility; strategic translation between internal and external stakeholders	Organizational strategy; communication; collaboration
RQ2: Leadership competencies	Political acumen; ethical judgment; emotional regulation; storytelling and sensemaking	Communication; professionalism; community college advocacy
RQ3: Organizational placement	Executive proximity; access as symbolic authority; marginalization when structurally distant from leadership	Organizational strategy; professionalism; resource management

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of a narrative inquiry examining how government and community relations (GCR) professionals in California community colleges understand their roles, leadership competencies, and organizational placement. The chapter began with a description of the research context, study design, and participant characteristics, followed by narrative profiles that situated each participant's experiences within their institutional and professional environments. These profiles provided contextual grounding for understanding how participants' perspectives were shaped by their roles, institutional structures, and regional settings across the California Community College system.

The findings were organized according to the three research questions guiding the study. Through analysis of participant narratives, several consistent patterns emerged regarding how GCR professionals understand their work and the conditions that shape their effectiveness. Participants described their roles as inherently relational and strategic, requiring continuous engagement with both internal campus stakeholders and external audiences such as legislators, community leaders, media representatives, and public agencies. Across narratives, effectiveness

was rarely framed in terms of isolated technical tasks. Instead, participants emphasized trust-building, credibility, and strategic communication as the foundation of effective government and community relations practice.

In response to the first research question, participants consistently identified relationship-building, strategic sensemaking, and institutional legitimacy as central elements of effectiveness. Long-term relationships with elected officials, legislative staff, and community partners were described as essential for advancing institutional priorities. Participants frequently portrayed themselves as bridge-builders or translators who connect the internal mission of the college with the external expectations of policymakers and community stakeholders. Importantly, participants also emphasized that their external influence depended significantly on their internal standing within the institution. Access to executive leadership, participation in strategic discussions, and institutional trust were repeatedly described as conditions that enabled more effective engagement with external partners.

Findings related to the second research question revealed participants viewed professional competencies as deeply intertwined with the relational and interpretive nature of the role. Political acumen, communication, storytelling, emotional intelligence, and ethical judgment emerged as particularly significant. Participants described the need to understand legislative systems, interpret political environments, and communicate institutional priorities in ways that resonate with diverse audiences. Storytelling, particularly narratives highlighting student success and community impact, was frequently identified as an effective strategy for demonstrating the value of community colleges. Participants also emphasized the importance of ethical conduct, discretion, and emotional regulation when navigating politically sensitive issues or crisis situations.

In response to the third research question, participants highlighted organizational placement as a critical factor influencing their ability to perform their roles effectively. Direct reporting relationships with the president or chancellor, as well as participation in executive cabinet discussions, were widely perceived as enhancing strategic alignment and institutional influence. Participants explained that proximity to executive leadership provided not only access to information but also symbolic authority that strengthened their credibility with external stakeholders. Conversely, participants whose roles were positioned further from executive leadership often described challenges related to visibility, influence, and access to timely institutional information.

Participant narratives also demonstrated strong alignment with the domains of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Leadership Competencies. Organizational strategy was evident in participants' efforts to align institutional priorities with legislative and community environments. Resource management appeared through advocacy for public funding and responsible stewardship of institutional reputation and resources. Communication and collaboration were central to participants' descriptions of their daily work with internal leaders and external partners. Community College Advocacy was reflected in participants' efforts to represent institutional interests while maintaining ethical integrity and public trust. Professionalism emerged as a cross-cutting theme encompassing discretion, reliability, ethical judgment, and emotional regulation.

Taken together, the findings presented in this chapter indicate individuals in government and community relations perceive their roles as strategic leaders within community colleges. They consistently described their work extending beyond communication and advocacy functions to include institutional advising, political navigation, and relationship management and

adding critical support for the mission of the college. In sum, the narratives presented in this chapter illustrate how professional identity, organizational placement, and relational credibility shape the practice of government and community relations within the California Community College system.

While Chapter 4 presented the research findings through participant narratives and thematic analysis, the next chapter interprets these findings within the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the study. Chapter 5 further provides an interpretive analysis of how GCR professionals construct and enact their professional identities, how leadership competencies emerge through practice, and what these findings suggest for organizational design, leadership development, and the advancement of government and community relations practice within California community colleges.

Chapter 5 – Interpretations, Resonance, and Implications

This study examined the perspectives of individuals working in government and community relations (GCR) roles within California community colleges, with particular attention to how they understand their work, identify essential competencies, and perceive the organizational conditions that support effectiveness. As established in Chapter 2, the literature has highlighted the growing importance of external engagement, advocacy, and stakeholder relationships in higher education, while also revealing limited research focused specifically on those responsible for managing these functions. In addition, the literature has suggested a lack of consistency in how GCR roles are defined and structured across institutions, contributing to variation in responsibilities, reporting relationships, and role expectations.

Guided by this gap, the purpose of this study was to explore how individuals in GCR roles interpret their work and enact their responsibilities within the organizational and political environments of California community colleges. The study was informed by three research questions addressing perceived effectiveness, leadership competencies, and organizational placement.

Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, data were collected through semistructured interviews with 16 participants representing a range of institutional contexts. Analysis involved iterative coding supported by Taguette and Excel, followed by thematic and narrative interpretation to identify patterns across participant experiences. The findings, presented in Chapter 4, were organized into emergent themes aligned with each research question.

Problem Overview

Higher education institutions have undergone significant expansion in recent decades, accompanied by increased challenges including economic, political, and social pressures (Alves, 2010). Community colleges increasingly depend on effective government and community engagement to support public funding, legislative advocacy, community partnerships, and institutional reputation. However, the specific roles and contributions of individuals in these positions have remained underexamined, particularly within the community college sector (McMillen, 2010).

Despite research conducted on certain community colleges' administrative groups, there has been a paucity of research and exploration of identity, competencies, and leadership characteristics of GCR professionals within their institutions and their connection to mission achievement. In addition, there has been little consistency in how government and community relations roles are defined, structured, or positioned across institutions, contributing to variability in responsibilities, reporting relationships, and role expectations.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how individuals responsible for government and community relations (GCR) understand their roles, competencies, and organizational placement within their institutions. Specifically, the study explored how these professionals construct and enact their professional identities within institutional leadership contexts and how they perceive their work as contributing to the advancement of the community college mission. By examining the experiences and perspectives of GCR professionals, the study sought to provide greater insight into how government and community relations functions support institutional engagement with policymakers, community stakeholders, and external partners.

Research Questions

Three primary research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What do California community college professionals tasked with managing government and community relations perceive as the most effective ways to perform their roles?

RQ2. What professional competencies do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges consider most important for successfully managing government and community relations functions?

RQ3. To best advance the strategic mission of the institution, what organizational placement and reporting structures do government and community relations professionals in California community colleges perceive as most effective?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study drew on identity theory to interpret how California community college professionals responsible for government and community relations understand and enact their roles. Identity theory explains how individuals construct and verify role identities through ongoing interaction with organizational and social environments (Burke & Stets, 2009). In the context of this study, the framework illuminates how practitioners develop credibility, authority, and influence while operating in boundary-spanning roles between their institutions and external stakeholders. Applying this theoretical lens allowed the findings to be interpreted as identity-based leadership practices rather than solely as technical job functions.

This study drew on the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Leadership Competencies as a conceptual framework for examining effective community college leadership. Key domains included:

- Organizational Strategy
- Resource Management
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Community College Advocacy
- Professionalism

This conceptual framework provided a lens for examining leadership competencies enacted by GCR professionals.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to examine the career experiences of government and community relations (GCR) professionals in California community colleges. Through narrative interviews, the study collected participants' career stories and reflections on their perceptions, values, and attitudes regarding their roles within institutional settings. This approach enabled the study to capture participants' perspectives and generate insight into their work. In particular, the study explored the lived experiences and career identities of individuals responsible for managing relationships between their institutions and external stakeholders, including government officials, community organizations, and regional partners.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study collected data through semistructured interviews that generated narrative accounts of participants' work practice. During these interviews, participants reflected on their leadership roles and responsibilities within government and community relations. The interview protocol focused on experiences, leadership competencies, and organizational positioning within

California community colleges. The analysis organized participant responses into major themes and subthemes that illustrate how GCR professionals describe their roles, the competencies they view as essential for effective practice, and the organizational placement they believe best supports the advancement of institutional goals.

Analysis of Findings Tied to Research Questions

Consistent with the variability in role definitions and organizational structures described in earlier chapters, participants' narratives reflected an environment characterized by fluid responsibilities, context-dependent expectations, and limited standardization across institutions.

Research Question 1

What do California community college professionals tasked with managing government and community relations perceive as the most effective way to do their jobs?

Finding 1: Relationship Building as Core Role Identity

The findings indicate participants overwhelmingly perceived effectiveness as the ability to align their enacted role identity with the expectations of both internal and external stakeholders. Participants consistently emphasized that their ability to successfully engage external stakeholders—such as legislators, community leaders, public agencies, and the media—was closely tied to the credibility and authority they possessed within their own institutions. In this sense, external influence was frequently described as dependent upon internal legitimacy. Participants consistently emphasized relationship-building, trust, and long-term credibility as the most effective aspects of their work. These activities were not framed as transactional strategies, but as expressions of identity. Many participants described themselves as “translators,” “bridge-builders,” or “ambassadors,” language that signals a role identity rooted in mediation and sensemaking.

These narratives align closely with identity theory's emphasis on role-based identities that are activated and reinforced through social interaction. From an identity theory perspective, effectiveness emerged when participants experienced identity verification, which is when others responded to them in ways that confirmed their self-meanings as credible institutional representatives.

Finding 2: Strategic Sensemaking and Political Navigation

A central interpretive thread emerging from participants' narratives was the importance of strategic sensemaking and political navigation in the daily practice of government and community relations work. They described their roles not simply as communication or advocacy functions, but as positions requiring the continuous interpretation of complex political environments and the translation of those dynamics into actionable strategies that advance institutional priorities.

Participants frequently described monitoring legislative developments, interpreting policy proposals, and assessing how emerging issues might affect their institutions. This process often involved synthesizing information from multiple sources including legislative staff, statewide associations, local elected officials, and institutional leadership. Through these activities, participants engaged in ongoing sensemaking that informed how they advised presidents, chancellors, and executive teams. Their effectiveness therefore depended not only on technical policy knowledge but also on the ability to interpret the broader political landscape and anticipate potential implications for the college.

Connected to sensemaking was the theme of political navigation. Accounts highlighted the importance of maintaining credibility with external stakeholders while simultaneously representing institutional interests. P8 stated, "If you lose the trust of your CEO, then you are

gone.” Careful management of relationships with elected officials, community leaders, advocacy groups, and internal campus constituencies became mandatory. P13 stated, “If I don’t have integrity, trust, and respect, I cannot do what it is that I need to do.” Most participants emphasized that their effectiveness depended on building trust-based relationships that allowed them to engage in candid conversations with policymakers and community partners.

Finding 3: Internal Influence and Institutional Legitimacy

Importantly, participants described moments of identity disruption, particularly when internal leadership failed to include them in strategic decision making or when external stakeholders questioned their authority to speak on behalf of the institution. In such cases, participants reported diminished effectiveness—not because their skills were lacking, but because their role identity was not being validated. This finding suggests that effectiveness in GCR work is contingent upon institutional recognition of the role as legitimate and strategically essential.

Individuals in government and community relations have often operated in positions that require them to interpret and represent institutional priorities to external audiences. However, this work can only be performed effectively when those individuals possess a clear understanding of institutional goals and are perceived internally as trusted representatives of the executive leadership. Many participants described the importance of being integrated into the senior leadership structure of the college or district, noting that direct reporting relationships to the president or chancellor often enhanced both access to strategic information and credibility with external stakeholders.

Internal influence was frequently expressed through participants’ roles as strategic advisors to executive leadership. Rather than functioning solely as communicators or advocates,

participants described contributing to institutional decision making by providing insights regarding political dynamics, legislative priorities, and community expectations. Through this advisory role, individuals in government and community relations help institutional leaders anticipate potential policy developments, understand the implications of legislative proposals, and align institutional strategies with broader public policy trends. Participants suggested this advisory capacity strengthened their institutional legitimacy by positioning them as integral contributors to institutional strategy rather than peripheral support staff. These findings suggest effectiveness in government and community relations work is achieved through relational credibility and strategic sensemaking across institutional and political environments.

Research Question 2

What competencies do California community college GCR professionals consider most important for managing government and community relations?

Finding 1: Political Acumen and Contextual Intelligence

Political acumen and contextual intelligence emerged from participant narratives as foundational capabilities for individuals working in government and community relations within California community colleges. These competencies enabled practitioners to navigate complex institutional environments, interpret external policy landscapes, and strategically position their institutions within networks of influence that extend beyond the campus. Rather than operating solely as technical communicators or advocates, participants described their work as requiring sophisticated interpretation of political signals, institutional priorities, and stakeholder expectations.

Political acumen, for example, was frequently described not simply as knowing “how campus or community politics work,” but as understanding how to position oneself appropriately

within shifting political contexts. Participants' narratives reflected an ongoing negotiation between being an institutional advocate and maintaining credibility as a trustworthy public-sector professional. This tension illustrates identity theory's concept of identity salience, as participants prioritized behaviors that preserved their most valued identity meanings under conditions of ambiguity or conflict/stress.

Closely related is contextual intelligence, which refers to the ability to interpret complex environments and adapt strategies to shifting institutional and political circumstances. Contextual intelligence allows individuals to situate their work within broader social, economic, and policy environments affecting higher education. In California community colleges, this includes understanding state funding formulas, legislative priorities, workforce development initiatives, regional economic conditions, and demographic trends shaping student access and success. Participants indicated the most effective practitioners possess the capacity to synthesize these contextual factors and translate them into actionable strategies for institutional leaders.

The interaction between political acumen and contextual intelligence is particularly important in boundary-spanning roles such as government and community relations. Boundary spanners operate at the intersection of institutional leadership and external stakeholders, often translating institutional priorities into policy conversations while simultaneously interpreting external developments for internal audiences. Participants frequently described their work as involving constant sensemaking—interpreting legislative developments, community expectations, and organizational priorities to advise presidents and chancellors on appropriate responses.

Participants also highlighted that political acumen requires ethical judgment and commitment to institutional mission. Navigating political environments often involved balancing

competing interests among stakeholders, including legislators, community organizations, faculty groups, and students in the routine conduct of GCR work. Effective practitioners were challenged to interpret political realities while maintaining alignment with institutional values and public service responsibilities. In this sense, political acumen was not simply tactical maneuvering but a form of strategic stewardship that protected institutional credibility while advancing community college priorities. P13 described himself as the “reputation defender” responsible for managing reputational risks during crises such as campus shootings or faculty misconduct.

From the perspective of identity theory, these competencies also contributed to the formation and verification of role identity. Practitioners described gaining credibility and legitimacy through their ability to accurately interpret political environments and provide reliable strategic guidance to institutional leaders. When their interpretations proved accurate or useful in advancing institutional goals, their identity as trusted advisors and strategic leaders was reinforced. Conversely, misreading political dynamics could undermine perceived legitimacy and reduce executive trust. Thus, political acumen became not only a skill but also an identity-affirming practice within the role.

Finding 2: Communication, Translation, and Storytelling

Communication, translation, and storytelling emerged in participant narratives as central mechanisms through which government and community relations practitioners enacted their roles within California community colleges. While communication is often viewed as a technical function within organizations, participants described their work as involving a far more complex process of interpretation and narrative construction. In this context, communication functioned

not merely as information dissemination but as a strategic leadership practice that enabled institutions to connect internal priorities with external audiences.

Participants consistently emphasized that effective communication within the government and community relations role required the ability to translate institutional goals, policies, and outcomes into language that resonated with diverse stakeholders. The stakeholders included legislators, community leaders, local government officials, business partners, media representatives, and members of the public. Each stakeholder group operates with its own priorities, vocabulary, and expectations, requiring practitioners to adapt their messaging in ways that remain accurate while also accessible and persuasive.

Translation in this context refers to the ability to interpret complex institutional activities and transform them into narratives that external audiences can understand and support. Community colleges operate within intricate systems involving funding mechanisms, regulatory requirements, workforce development partnerships, and student success initiatives. Participants described their role as helping external stakeholders understand how these activities contribute to community development, economic mobility, and regional workforce needs. In doing so, practitioners served as intermediaries bridging the language and expectations of California community colleges with those of the broader civic and policy environment.

Storytelling represented an extension of the translational work. Participants frequently described the importance of framing institutional achievements and student outcomes through compelling narratives that illustrated the value of community colleges to the public and to policymakers. Stories about individual student success, workforce training partnerships, or community impact served as powerful tools for illustrating the practical significance of institutional initiatives. The narratives helped transform abstract policy discussions into relatable

human experiences, strengthening support for community college programs and funding priorities according to P1, P3, P10, and P13. P3 stated, “We try to depict our diversity . . . trying to create a sort of digital sense of community . . . student storytelling . . . reinforces . . . there’s nothing more impactful than students saying how great this place is.”

From a leadership perspective, storytelling functioned as a strategic tool that aligned institutional identity with community expectations. By highlighting the ways in which community colleges contributed to economic development, social mobility, and regional well-being, individuals in government and community relations helped shape public perceptions of their institutions, whom P4, P5, P13, and P14 considered paramount. Participants indicated narrative framing was particularly important in legislative and community settings where policymakers made decisions among competing funding priorities. Clear and compelling stories help demonstrate the tangible benefits of community college investment (Willis, 2010). This assertion was backed up by most participants interviewed.

Within the framework of identity theory, communication and storytelling also served as mechanisms through which role identity was enacted and verified. Participants described gaining credibility and influence when their messaging effectively represented institutional priorities and resonated with external audiences. Successful communication reinforced GCR staff’s identity as trusted representatives of the institution, while ineffective communication could undermine confidence in their role. Through repeated interaction with stakeholders, practitioners reported they developed a role identity centered on their ability to articulate institutional value and maintain relational trust.

Communication and storytelling emerged as particularly salient competencies. Participants described the need to translate complex institutional realities into compelling

narratives for legislators and community partners, while simultaneously translating political constraints back to campus leadership. This two-way communication reinforced their identity as intermediaries and aligns strongly with the AACC competencies of communication and organizational strategy. P3 indicated one's "ability to communicate clearly, avoid jargon, and tell compelling stories is the most critical competency" for a GCR professional.

Finding 3: Emotional Intelligence and Ethical Judgement

Ethical judgment and emotional intelligence were also central to participants' competency narratives. Many described navigating competing leadership styles/loyalties, managing frustration, and absorbing political pressures on their institutions. These accounts highlight the emotional labor embedded in GCR work and suggest identity maintenance requires not only external skills but internal regulation and values-based decision making.

Collectively, participants identified political acumen, strategic communication, and emotional intelligence as essential competencies for government and community relations work, emphasizing that these capabilities enable practitioners to interpret complex political environments, build stakeholder trust, and represent institutional priorities with credibility.

Research Question 3

To best advance the strategic mission of the institution, what do California GCR professionals consider to be the best placement and reporting lines for this group?

Finding 1: Proximity to Executive Leadership

The findings related to organizational placement revealed that structure functions as a powerful signal of identity legitimacy. While one participant appreciated reporting to an intermediary (vice president for advancement), all other participants indicated, when GCR roles were structurally distant from executive leadership, it was difficult for others to verify their

identity as strategic leaders, which in turn affected their perceived effectiveness. A large majority of participants indicated reporting directly to executive leadership (e.g., a president, chancellor, executive cabinet member)—enhanced both their effectiveness and their sense of professional validation.

From an identity theory perspective, reporting lines influence the extent to which a role identity is socially recognized and reinforced. Participants who reported to senior leadership described greater access, clearer authority, and stronger alignment between their self-perceived identity and how others perceived their role. Conversely, most participants placed within advancement, marketing, or auxiliary units described identity strain, marginalization, and diminished influence, even when their formal responsibilities remained unchanged.

Interpreted through the AACC leadership competencies, these findings underscore the importance of organizational strategy and institutional governance in supporting leadership roles that operate at the intersection of policy, community, and mission.

Finding 2: Centralization versus Decentralization

The findings suggest resource management in government and community relations (GCR) roles is frequently enacted through influence rather than formal authority, reflecting the boundary-spanning nature of the work. Participants described their ability to shape institutional resources not through direct control of internal budgets, but through their capacity to influence external policy environments, legislative outcomes, and community partnerships. In this sense, participants' identities as trusted institutional representatives enabled them to indirectly affect resource flows by advocating for funding, shaping public perception, and aligning institutional priorities with political opportunities.

Differences in organizational structure also appeared to affect participants' perceived ability to influence institutional strategy and resource development. Participants working within large districts—particularly those employed in multi-college systems and reporting directly to the chancellor—described greater opportunities to shape institutional priorities and influence organizational design within their divisions. P2, P9, and P13 indicated their proximity to executive leadership provided earlier access to strategic discussions and increased their capacity to connect external political developments with internal decision-making processes.

Participants' narratives further indicated that boundary-spanning advocacy required maintaining credibility across multiple institutional and political contexts. GCR staff described balancing the expectations of institutional leadership, elected officials, community partners, and the public while preserving trust in each environment. As a result, their effectiveness was linked to organizational conditions that supported their leadership role. Specifically, participants emphasized that their ability to influence resources and policy environments was strengthened when three conditions were present: (a) direct access to executive leadership, (b) organizational placement that signaled authority and legitimacy within the institution, and (c) institutional recognition of government and community relations as a strategic leadership function rather than solely a communications or support role.

Finding 3: Structural Marginalization and Identity Strain

Participants' narratives also revealed structural marginalization within institutional hierarchies can generate identity strain for individuals in government and community relations. Several participants described situations in which their formal responsibilities required them to represent institutional priorities to legislators, community leaders, and external partners, yet their organizational placement limited their access to executive leadership or excluded them from

strategic decision-making processes. When GCR professionals were positioned within advancement, marketing, or auxiliary administrative units rather than within the president's or chancellor's executive leadership structure, participants reported experiencing diminished authority and reduced visibility within the institution. This structural distance often created tension between the expectations placed upon them externally and the level of institutional recognition afforded to their role internally. From the perspective of identity theory, such conditions can disrupt identity verification, as the role identity of the GCR practitioner as a strategic institutional representative is not consistently affirmed by internal organizational structures. Participants described this experience as creating identity strain, particularly when they were expected to advocate for institutional priorities in external political environments without having been included in the internal conversations where those priorities were determined. In these circumstances, practitioners reported relying heavily on personal credibility, relationship-building, and professional judgment to sustain their legitimacy with external stakeholders. These findings suggest organizational structures that marginalize GCR functions can inadvertently undermine both the effectiveness of the role and the role identity of those responsible for representing the institution in complex political and community environments.

Interpreted through the AACC Leadership Competencies, these findings suggest organizational structures that marginalize government and community relations roles may limit the institution's capacity to effectively enact competencies related to organizational strategy, communication, collaboration, and community college advocacy, as the professionals responsible for these functions are structurally distanced from the leadership environments where strategic decisions are made. Taken together, these findings indicate organizational placement is not merely an administrative arrangement but a structural condition that shapes professional

identity, strategic influence, and the institution's ability to engage effectively with external political and community environments.

Participants indicated government and community relations roles are most effective when positioned within executive leadership structures, where proximity to presidents or chancellors strengthens role legitimacy, strategic influence, and the ability to connect institutional priorities with external policy environments.

Interpretive Framing of the Findings

Consistent with the variability in role definitions and organizational structures described in earlier chapters, the findings suggest the absence of standardized expectations is not simply a background condition, but a defining feature of government and community relations work in California community colleges. Participants did not describe effectiveness in terms of adherence to fixed job descriptions or clearly bounded responsibilities. Instead, they emphasized the ability to navigate institution-specific expectations, respond to shifting political environments, and engage diverse stakeholders.

This variability was evident across all three research questions. Participants described effectiveness as relational and context-dependent, grounded in trust-building, communication, and strategic interpretation rather than procedural consistency. The competencies identified as most important (e.g., political awareness, storytelling, emotional intelligence, ethical judgment) further reflect the need to operate across fluid and evolving roles. Participants also emphasized that organizational placement significantly influences access, credibility, and the ability to contribute to institutional decision making, with reporting structures shaping both role clarity and perceived legitimacy.

Taken together, these findings position variability in role definition and organizational structure as central rather than incidental. In this context, individuals must actively interpret, construct, and negotiate their responsibilities within locally defined institutional environments. As a result, effectiveness emerges not from uniformity, but from adaptability, relational credibility, and strategic sensemaking.

Building on this pattern, participants' descriptions of influence without formal authority point to a distinct form of leadership within government and community relations roles. Individuals often operated with limited staff, constrained resources, and, at times, without consistent representation on executive leadership teams. Despite these structural limitations, they exerted meaningful influence over institutional decision making, external engagement, and public narrative. This finding suggests effectiveness in these roles derives less from hierarchical position and more from relational credibility, strategic access, and the ability to shape understanding across organizational boundaries.

Two Major Integrative Themes

Across the findings, a consistent underlying condition shaping participants' experiences was the lack of standardized role definitions and structures for government and community relations functions. Participants did not describe this variability as incidental; rather, they characterized it as a defining feature of the role. As a result, individuals were required to interpret, construct, and adapt their responsibilities within locally determined institutional contexts.

Within this environment, two major integrative themes emerged. First, GCR roles are inherently politically situated, requiring continuous engagement with evolving policy environments and public expectations. Second, these roles are fundamentally boundary-

spanning, operating across institutional leadership, external stakeholders, and community contexts.

The findings further suggest the competencies associated with effectiveness are best understood as identity-enacted practices rather than static skill sets. Rather than being applied uniformly, these capabilities are interpreted and performed in response to shifting institutional and political conditions. Taken together, these themes indicate GCR work operates at the intersection of institutional leadership, public policy, and community engagement, requiring leadership grounded in relational credibility, interpretive capacity, and adaptive identity.

Interpretation Through Identity Theory

These findings can be understood more fully through the lens of identity theory, which emphasizes the relationship between social roles, self-concept, and behavior. Identity theory suggests individuals internalize expectations associated with their roles and seek to verify those identities through interaction and feedback. In structured environments where roles are clearly defined, identity verification is supported by stable expectations and organizational cues. In contrast, environments characterized by ambiguity require individuals to play a more active role in shaping and maintaining their identities.

The experiences described in this study reflect this dynamic. Lack of standardized role definitions and structures requires GCR staff to define their responsibilities differently, often drawing on relationships, experience, and contextual awareness. Descriptions such as “bridge-builder,” “translator,” and “institutional ambassador” illustrate how identity is constructed through interaction with both internal and external stakeholders rather than derived solely from formal job descriptions.

From this perspective, identity verification becomes closely tied to access and recognition within the organization. Inclusion in executive discussions, proximity to decision making, and acknowledgment by institutional leaders serve as mechanisms through which individuals validate their roles and establish legitimacy. Conversely, limited access or structural marginalization may disrupt this process, contributing to ambiguity and tension in role enactment.

From an identity theory perspective, this dynamic reflects a form of identity-enacted leadership in which influence is constructed through interaction, recognition, and trust rather than formal authority. Participants' ability to influence outcomes depended on how effectively they established and maintained their roles as credible translators, advisors, and institutional representatives within both internal and external environments. This form of influence aligns closely with the concept of boundary-spanning leadership, in which individuals operate across organizational and environmental boundaries to connect institutional priorities with external conditions.

Boundary Spanning Leadership as Identity-Enacted Practice

The findings reinforce the understanding of GCR roles as boundary-spanning positions operating at the intersection of institutional governance, public policy, and community engagement. Participants consistently described work that required translating institutional priorities for external audiences while interpreting political and community dynamics for internal stakeholders. This dual orientation situates these roles within a central, yet often loosely defined, organizational space.

Importantly, the findings suggest boundary-spanning leadership is not simply a set of tasks, but an identity-enacted practice. Participants did not describe their work in purely technical terms; instead, they framed their responsibilities in relational and interpretive ways that

reflect how they understand their position within the institution and its broader environment. Communication, collaboration, and advocacy were described not only as competencies, but as expressions of how individuals make sense of and perform their roles. This interpretation aligns with existing literature emphasizing trust, relationship-building, and sensemaking across organizational boundaries. However, the findings extend this work by showing how these practices are experienced and enacted within community college contexts, highlighting the central role of identity in shaping leadership behavior.

Boundary-spanning leadership refers to roles that operate across organizational, institutional, political, and social boundaries rather than within a single, clearly defined internal unit (Burkhardt, 2002). Boundary spanners facilitate the flow of information, relationships, resources, and meaning between groups that possess different priorities, languages, and power structures. Individuals in government and community relations exemplify this form of leadership because their work requires continuous interaction with both internal institutional leaders and external stakeholders whose interests may not always align with institutional priorities.

Boundary-spanning leadership involves connecting organizations with external stakeholders and facilitating the flow of information across institutional and environmental boundaries (Williams, 2002). Participants frequently described themselves “in-between,” or operating at the intersection of campus leadership and external political systems. Their work required translating institutional priorities to policymakers while simultaneously communicating political realities back to institutional leaders.

Within California community colleges, boundary-spanning leadership operates at several key intersections: between the institution and external stakeholders such as legislators, government agencies, and community partners; between internal leadership teams and broader

political or regulatory environments; and between institutional mission and public policy realities. Unlike traditional administrative leadership roles that emphasize internal management or academic oversight, boundary-spanning roles are characterized by relational engagement, interpretive work, and strategic mediation (Nazarzadeh & Ghoraishi Khorasgani, 2022). Participants' narratives consistently referred to how these dimensions shape the everyday practice of government and community relations.

Relational Bridging

One of the most prominent dimensions of boundary-spanning leadership identified in the data was relational bridging. Participants emphasized that long-term relationships form the foundation of effective government and community relations work. Their influence often depended less on formal authority and more on sustained credibility, personal trust, and consistent engagement across sectors. Through these relationships, GCR staff act as connectors linking the stated institutional priorities with the vital interests of policymakers, community leaders, and advocacy organizations.

Relational bridging involved several recurring practices. Participants described building trust with legislators and legislative staff across multiple election cycles, maintaining credibility with community organizations and advocacy groups, and consistently representing institutional values in public and political environments. These relationships often extended beyond transactional interactions, developing through repeated engagement and mutual understanding over time. As a result, the relational dimension of the work frequently occurred outside formal organizational structures, making it both essential to institutional success and difficult to quantify within traditional administrative metrics.

Participant narratives illustrate how relational bridging functions in practice. For example, P3 described engaging internal stakeholders such as faculty, classified staff, and governance groups to ensure alignment around communications and advocacy strategies. As P3 explained, meetings with groups such as the Academic Senate and employee associations were conducted to ensure that stakeholders felt informed and included in institutional processes. P3 stated, “We met with the Academic Senate, CTA, classified . . . so that they feel included in the process . . . everyone should know what’s going on.” These interactions highlight how relational bridging occurs both externally and internally, strengthening institutional cohesion and shared understanding.

Translation and Sensemaking

Another important dimension of boundary-spanning leadership evident in participant narratives was translation and sensemaking. Boundary-spanning leaders frequently serve as translators between groups that operate with different assumptions, vocabularies, and incentives. For individuals in government and community relations, this translation work occurs in two primary directions: externally and internally.

Externally, GCR professionals frame institutional priorities in ways that resonate with policymakers’ political, fiscal, and ideological contexts. Participants described adapting institutional messaging to reflect legislative priorities, economic development goals, and community needs to make community college initiatives more understandable and compelling to external audiences. This work requires the ability to interpret complex institutional processes and communicate them in language that policymakers and community stakeholders can readily understand.

Internally, GCR professionals translate political realities back to campus leadership and governing boards. Participants described interpreting legislative timelines, policy proposals, and regulatory developments so that institutional leaders can anticipate potential implications for college operations and strategy. Through this process of sensemaking, GCR practitioners help leaders understand how external developments may affect funding, program initiatives, or institutional reputation. Although translation and sensemaking were widely recognized as essential components of the role, these activities are rarely reflected explicitly in formal job descriptions or organizational charts. Instead, they function as informal leadership practices that bridge institutional decision making and external policy environments.

Navigating Ambiguity and Role Conflict

Boundary-spanning roles inherently involve ambiguity because GCR staff must balance competing expectations across multiple environments. Participants described navigating tensions between advocacy and neutrality as public-sector representatives, between institutional loyalty and political pragmatism, and between transparency and strategic discretion in communications and policy discussions. These tensions require practitioners to exercise ongoing judgment, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision making. Participants frequently described situations in which they needed to represent institutional interests while maintaining credibility with policymakers whose priorities differed from those of the institution. In other cases, they navigated sensitive internal discussions about political strategy or public messaging that required careful management of confidentiality and organizational trust.

From an identity theory perspective, these tensions reflect the ongoing negotiation of role expectations associated with boundary-spanning identities. GCR practitioners must continually adjust their behavior to maintain alignment between their professional identity as institutional

representatives and the expectations of diverse stakeholders. Successfully navigating these tensions reinforces identity verification, while unresolved conflicts may produce identity strain.

Operating Without Direct Authority

A final dimension of boundary-spanning leadership highlighted in participant narratives was the ability to operate effectively without direct authority. Unlike traditional hierarchical leaders who exercise influence through formal supervisory roles, boundary spanners often rely on informal mechanisms of influence. Participants described leveraging personal credibility, trusted relationships, access to executive leadership, and persuasive communication to achieve institutional goals.

For individuals in government and community relations, influence frequently depends on recognition as legitimate institutional representatives despite lacking formal authority over policymakers, community partners, or many internal campus stakeholders. Participants emphasized that credibility with both internal and external audiences is essential for effective advocacy and strategic advising. P3 explained trust with executive leadership enabled candid conversations and effective representation of institutional interests, noting, “We should be the wingman or wing woman for the CEO . . . we should be watching their back . . . you have to have a good relationship to have those conversations.”

Participants described having significant influence without formal authority, which this study interprets as a form of identity-enacted, boundary-spanning leadership. These findings reinforce the conclusion that GCR work represents a form of leadership grounded in influence rather than formal authority. The effectiveness of practitioners therefore depends heavily on their ability to cultivate relationships, interpret complex environments, and enact professional identities that are recognized as credible by both institutional leaders and external stakeholders.

Identity Enacted Leadership

Participants' narratives revealed effectiveness in government and community relations work is not defined primarily by technical tasks or procedural responsibilities. Instead, effectiveness emerged through identity-enacted leadership practices grounded in relationships, experiential learning, and narrative communication. Through interviews, participants consistently described their work as relational, interpretive, and identity-driven, reinforcing the idea that GCR competencies develop through lived experience rather than formal training.

Relationships as the Core of Effectiveness

Participants consistently framed relationships as the foundation of effective government and community relations practice. Rather than viewing advocacy as episodic engagement around specific legislative issues, participants described their work as involving the continuous cultivation of relationships with legislators, trustees, presidents, community partners, and internal stakeholders. One participant, P2, explained that effective relationship-building involved:

being visible and supportive to elected officials, cultivating relationships by providing value, helping without always asking for something, leveraging local ties as a constituent, collaborating with other divisions, and engaging elected officials, media, business, and community leaders as core to the work.

These narratives collectively suggest GCR work is fundamentally relational. Success depends not on transactional exchanges but on long-term credibility and trust built through repeated interaction. This relational dimension reflects the boundary-spanning nature of the role, as professionals must maintain relationships across institutional and political environments simultaneously.

Identity Work Within Organizational Structures

Participants' stories also highlighted the ways in which role identity is shaped by institutional structures and organizational placement. Many participants described navigating tensions between how they understood their role and how the institution positioned that role within administrative hierarchies. Organizational placement influenced both their access to leadership and the degree to which their professional identity as strategic advisors was recognized by others within the institution.

For example, one participant emphasized the importance of face-to-face engagement in cultivating trust and managing sensitive situations with both media and internal stakeholders. P3 said, "I value human relationships . . . I like to talk to people face to face . . . I like to ask questions . . . I find out all sorts of interesting stuff I would never know otherwise." These accounts demonstrate that organizational structures do more than define reporting lines; they shape how professionals see themselves and how their role is perceived by others.

From the perspective of identity theory, these dynamics illustrate the importance of identity verification. When GCR staff are structurally positioned close to executive leadership, their identity as trusted institutional representatives is reinforced. Conversely, when organizational structures limit access or authority, participants reported experiencing identity strain as their professional role was not consistently validated by institutional structures.

Learning Through Experience Rather Than Formal Instruction

Another notable pattern emerging from participant narratives was the role of experiential learning in developing competencies. None of the participants described formal training or academic preparation as the primary pathway through which they developed the competencies required for government and community relations work. Instead, they emphasized learning

through experience, mentorship, crisis situations, and reflective practice. For example, P5, who entered the role without prior community college experience, explained communication and relationship-building skills were more important than prior system knowledge, which could be learned on the job. Across narratives, participants described professional development occurring through trial and error, observation of experienced practitioners, and navigating complex political and institutional environments.

These findings suggest many of the competencies associated with government and community relations work are tacit rather than explicitly taught. Skills such as political awareness, relational judgment, and strategic communication develop through practice within real-world contexts rather than through formal instruction alone.

Advocacy as Storytelling

A final dimension emerging from participant narratives was the vital role of storytelling in advocacy and institutional representation. Participants frequently described their work as translating complex institutional processes into narratives that policymakers, media representatives, and community stakeholders could understand. One participant characterized this responsibility by stating that the ability to communicate clearly, avoid jargon, and tell compelling stories was the most important competency for the role. P3 described himself as the institution's "chief storyteller," explaining, "Being a clear communicator is really important . . . a lot of smart people here but not many good communicators . . . I translate what we are doing into layperson's terms . . . storytelling is the most important." He further noted, "You are the chief storyteller of the college because no one else is going to do it."

These accounts position advocacy not as transactional persuasion but as narrative construction. Through storytelling, GCR staff shape how institutional priorities are understood

by external audiences and how the institution understands its own mission and impact. In this sense, storytelling becomes a leadership practice that connects institutional identity with public perception.

Resonant Threads Across Participant Narratives

Several resonant threads emerged across participant narratives that further illuminate the lived experience of GCR work. First, participants consistently emphasized the importance of relational credibility, describing trust as foundational to effectiveness. Second, many highlighted the need for strategic sensemaking, particularly when navigating complex and often ambiguous policy environments. Third, participants underscored the significance of organizational placement, noting that proximity to executive leadership enhanced both influence and the ability to contribute meaningfully to institutional strategy. These threads reinforce the interpretation that GCR work is inherently relational, context-dependent, and shaped by organizational structure. They also illustrate how individuals respond to the variability identified throughout the study, offering insight into the conditions under which government and community relations functions operate within community colleges.

Interpretation of Major Integrative Themes

Taken together, these two integrative themes suggest individuals in government and community relations function as boundary-spanning leaders whose effectiveness depends on the successful enactment of professional identity within complex institutional and political environments. Participants' narratives demonstrated the competencies identified by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), including organizational strategy, communication, collaboration, community college advocacy, professionalism, and resource management—are

not practiced as isolated technical skills. Rather, they are enacted through relational interaction, strategic interpretation, and credibility-building across multiple stakeholder environments.

From the perspective of identity theory, these competencies function as mechanisms through which practitioners verify and sustain their identity as legitimate institutional representatives. When organizational structures provide executive access, role clarity, and institutional trust, GCR staff are better positioned to enact these competencies and reinforce their identity as strategic leaders. Conversely, when organizational placement limits visibility or authority, identity verification becomes more difficult, creating strain that can reduce perceived effectiveness.

These findings suggest government and community relations work should be understood not merely as a support function within institutional communications or advancement, but as a strategic leadership role operating at the intersection of institutional governance, public policy, and community engagement.

Integrated Conceptual Model

Taken together, the findings across the three research questions reveal a coherent pattern that explains how individuals in government and community relations function within California community colleges. Participants' narratives demonstrate that effectiveness in the role is shaped by the interaction of professional identity, leadership competencies, and organizational placement within institutional leadership structures. These factors collectively influence how GCR practitioners navigate political environments, represent institutional priorities, and support strategic decision making. Figure 5.1 presents an integrated conceptual model of these findings, illustrating how the themes emerging from the study converge to explain the boundary-spanning role of government and community relations practitioners.

Figure 5.1. Integrated Conceptual Model of Boundary-Spanning and Identity-Enacted Leadership in Government and Community Relations

Note. Model shows how variability in roles and structure shapes GCR practice; leadership is enacted through boundary-spanning and identity processes to produce strategic influence, policy alignment, and mission advancement. Source: Developed by the researcher.

Interpretive Analysis of the Figure

The conceptual model presented in Figure 5.1 synthesizes the study's findings by illustrating how the three research questions converge to reveal two primary leadership mechanisms: boundary-spanning leadership and identity-enacted leadership. Together, these mechanisms explain how government and community relations practitioners translate

institutional priorities across political and community environments and influence institutional outcomes.

Participants' narratives indicate GCR professionals perform roles that extend beyond traditional communication or advocacy functions. Their work requires the continuous interpretation of political developments, the translation of institutional priorities for external stakeholders, and the cultivation of trust across diverse groups including legislators, community leaders, and campus stakeholders. These activities position GCR staff at the intersection of institutional leadership and external policy environments, reinforcing their role as boundary-spanning leaders.

From the perspective of identity theory, the model illustrates how professional identity shapes the effectiveness of GCR professionals. Participants reported their ability to influence policy discussions and represent institutional priorities depended on whether their role identity was recognized and validated within institutional leadership structures. When organizational placement provided direct access to executive leadership and participation in strategic decision making, participants experienced greater legitimacy and influence. Conversely, when the role was structurally marginalized or positioned outside executive leadership environments, participants described experiencing identity strain and diminished effectiveness.

The model also demonstrates how the AACC Leadership Competencies are enacted in practice within government and community relations work. Rather than functioning as discrete technical skills, these competencies emerged as relational and interpretive leadership practices embedded within professional identity. Competencies such as communication, collaboration, and community college advocacy were enacted through storytelling, strategic messaging, and sustained relationship-building with policymakers and community partners. Organizational

strategy and resource management were expressed through practitioners' ability to interpret political environments and strategically position institutional priorities within broader policy discussions.

Overall, the model illustrates that the effectiveness of individuals in government and community relations is shaped by the alignment between professional identity, leadership competencies, and organizational structure. When these elements align, GCR practitioners are able to function as strategic advisors who translate institutional priorities across political environments and strengthen connections between community colleges and the communities they serve. In this way, government and community relations staff contribute not only to institutional advocacy but also to the broader public mission of community colleges.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for leadership practice, organizational design, and professional development within California community colleges. Because government and community relations (GCR) work is deeply identity-driven, institutional leaders must attend not only to the functional responsibilities associated with the role but also to how these positions are structurally positioned, symbolically supported, and legitimized within the organization.

Implications for Community College Presidents and Chancellors

Presidents and chancellors play a vital role in shaping the effectiveness of government and community relations senior staff through structural placement, access to leadership, and role clarity. The findings suggest, when senior GCR staff report directly to executive leadership and are included in strategic decision-making processes, their professional identities are more easily verified, resulting in greater effectiveness and stronger institutional alignment.

Executive leaders can strengthen the effectiveness of GCR roles by:

- Positioning government and community relations functions within executive leadership structures rather than within auxiliary or purely operational units.
- Including GCR professionals early in strategic discussions related to legislative priorities, funding strategies, and public messaging.
- Explicitly communicating the authority and strategic role of individuals in government and community relations to both internal and external stakeholders.

By doing so, presidents and chancellors reinforce the legitimacy of these roles and position GCR professionals as strategic institutional leaders rather than transactional intermediaries.

Implications for Boards of Trustees

Although boards of trustees often interact with government and community relations staff indirectly, their expectations and governance structures significantly influence the effectiveness of these roles. The findings suggest boards should recognize government and community relations work as a mission-critical leadership function rather than episodic advocacy activity.

Boards can support effective GCR leadership by:

- Supporting reporting structures that provide GCR professionals with direct access to executive leadership.
- Recognizing relationship-building with policymakers and community leaders as a long-term institutional investment.
- Encouraging ethical, transparent engagement with policymakers and community partners.

Approximately half of the GCR staff interviewed had regular access to board members in coordination with the president or chancellor. Board recognition of GCR work as leadership-centered reinforces institutional legitimacy and strengthens external engagement.

Implications for Government and Community Relations Professionals

For practitioners themselves, the findings highlight the importance of intentional role development. Participants' narratives suggest effectiveness increases when individuals clearly understand and articulate their role as boundary-spanning institutional leaders.

Individuals in these roles may benefit from:

- Actively shaping how their role is understood within the institution.
- Seeking proximity to executive decision-making spaces.
- Engaging in reflective practice to manage tensions between advocacy responsibilities and public accountability.

Developing clarity around professional identity enables GCR practitioners to navigate political and organizational ambiguity while maintaining credibility and ethical alignment.

Implications for Leadership Development and Professional Preparation

Traditional leadership development models often emphasize technical competencies without addressing professional identity formation. This study suggests that leadership preparation for government and community relations roles should integrate identity-based learning with competency development.

Leadership development programs should:

- Incorporate identity theory perspectives into training for external relations roles.
- Frame AACC leadership competencies as context-dependent practices rather than static skills.

- Prepare staff for the emotional and relational labor associated with boundary-spanning leadership.

Such approaches better prepare practitioners for the complex realities of public-sector higher education environments.

Implications for Policy and Governance

At the system level, the findings suggest the need for greater clarity and consistency in how government and community relations roles are structured across California community colleges. Variability in organizational placement and authority contributes to uneven effectiveness and identity strain among practitioners.

Policy considerations include:

- Developing system-level guidance on best practices for GCR role placement.
- Recognizing government and community relations leadership as a distinct functional domain within community college governance.
- Encouraging alignment between institutional mission, political engagement, and leadership structure.

Clearer governance frameworks may reduce ambiguity and strengthen the capacity of community colleges to engage effectively with policymakers and communities.

Contribution to the Academic Literature

This study contributes to academic literature in four specific ways. First, it extends identity theory into the relatively understudied context of government and community relations work in community colleges. While identity-based leadership research has often focused on presidents, faculty members, or student affairs staff, this study illuminates how professional identity operates within a boundary-spanning, politically situated leadership role. Second, the

study reframes the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Leadership Competencies as identity-enacted practices rather than static skill sets. By demonstrating how competencies are experienced and enacted through narrative and role identity, the findings offer a more dynamic understanding of leadership development in community college settings.

Third, this research addresses a gap in scholarship related to nonacademic leadership roles in higher education. Individuals in government and community relations are rarely examined in academic literature despite their strategic importance in navigating political environments, securing public support, and advancing institutional missions. Finally, the use of narrative inquiry provides rich contextual insight into how leadership identity is constructed, challenged, and sustained within complex institutional and political environments. This methodological contribution demonstrates the value of narrative approaches for understanding leadership practice in public-sector higher education. The integrated conceptual model (Figure 5.1) developed for this study might be useful to share among California community colleges in the context of staff professional development and organizational design.

Limitations of the Study

As with all qualitative research, this study has several limitations. The narrative inquiry design prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth, which may limit the transferability of findings beyond the California community college system. Participant narratives also rely on self-reported experiences, which may reflect retrospective interpretation rather than objective measurement. Additionally, this study captures professional identity at a particular moment in time and does not examine how identity develops longitudinally across professional careers. Despite these limitations, the narrative approach provides meaningful insight into how

individuals in government and community relations experience and interpret their roles within complex institutional environments.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can extend the findings of this study in several important ways. First, longitudinal studies could examine how government and community relations (GCR) role identity evolves over time as individuals gain experience and navigate changing political and institutional environments. Such research would provide insight into how identity development, role adaptation, and leadership capacity unfold across career trajectories.

Second, comparative studies across different state systems could explore how governance structures, policy environments, and funding models influence role identity, organizational placement, and effectiveness. Because this study focused specifically on California community colleges, cross-state analyses would help determine the extent to which these findings are transferable to other institutional contexts.

Third, future research could examine variation in the scope and structure of GCR roles. This study did not systematically differentiate among positions such as public information officers, government relations administrators, community relations practitioners, or hybrid roles that combine these functions. Additional research could explore how differences in role scope, title, and functional responsibilities shape identity, competencies, and perceived effectiveness.

Fourth, research should examine how the influence of GCR roles may be shaped by increased organizational visibility and more formalized placement within institutional leadership and governance structures. Understanding how structural positioning affects influence would provide important insight into how these roles contribute to institutional strategy and external engagement.

Fifth, future research should examine how role identity intersects with race, gender, and political context in shaping leadership experiences within GCR roles. Such inquiry would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how identity is constructed and enacted across diverse institutional settings.

Finally, studies incorporating the perspectives of presidents, trustees, legislators, and community partners would provide a more comprehensive view of how GCR roles are understood within broader institutional and political ecosystems. Including these perspectives would deepen understanding of role legitimacy, influence, and the relational dynamics that characterize boundary-spanning leadership in public higher education. Taken together, research in these areas would build on the findings of this study by further illuminating how identity, organizational structure, and external context interact to shape the practice of government and community relations leadership.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that individuals working in GCR roles within California community colleges function as boundary-spanning leaders whose effectiveness is shaped by identity, relational credibility, and organizational placement. By integrating identity theory with the AACC Leadership Competencies, the findings show effectiveness in these roles emerges not from adherence to standardized responsibilities, but from the ability to interpret complex policy environments, build trusted relationships across institutional and political contexts, and maintain legitimacy with both internal leadership and external stakeholders.

Leadership competencies in these roles are not simply technical skills, but identity-enacted practices expressed through relationships, strategic interpretation, and institutional representation. When organizational structures provide legitimacy, executive access, and

opportunities for strategic engagement, individuals in these roles are better positioned to translate institutional priorities across political and community environments and to strengthen connections between community colleges and the broader policy and civic systems in which they operate.

Participants consistently described their work as occurring “in-between” institutional leadership and external political systems. In this intermediary space, they communicate institutional priorities to policymakers and community stakeholders while interpreting legislative developments and political realities for campus leaders. By moving across organizational and political boundaries, these roles connect internal decision making with the external policy and community contexts that shape institutional resources, reputation, and mission advancement. Although much of this work occurs outside formal administrative structures, its influence on institutional strategy and public engagement is substantial. Notably, this influence often occurs without extensive staff, dedicated resources, or formal authority, underscoring the importance of relational credibility and strategic access in shaping institutional outcomes.

The findings also reinforce the AACC Leadership Competencies as a useful framework for understanding leadership in government and community relations roles. Participants’ experiences aligned closely with competencies related to communication, collaboration, advocacy, and organizational strategy. However, these competencies emerged not as isolated technical abilities but as relational and interpretive practices through which individuals establish credibility, build trust, and maintain legitimacy across institutional and political environments.

Organizational placement further shapes the effectiveness of these roles. When institutional leaders position government and community relations functions within executive leadership structures and include them in strategic decision making, they reinforce these roles as

integral to institutional leadership and strengthen their influence. When these functions are structurally distant from executive leadership, individuals may experience identity strain, representing institutional priorities externally without full participation in internal strategy. These findings suggest reporting structures and organizational design are critical conditions influencing leadership effectiveness and institutional engagement with external stakeholders.

This research contributes to understanding leadership within community colleges by illuminating a role that has received limited attention in academic scholarship. Although individuals in these roles often operate behind the scenes, their responsibilities are central to maintaining relationships with policymakers, advocating for institutional resources, and communicating the value of community colleges to the public.

As community colleges navigate increasingly complex public environments, recognizing and strategically supporting government and community relations functions will be essential for strengthening public trust, advancing institutional priorities, and sustaining the commitment to educational access and opportunity. Operating in the “in-between” space where institutional leadership, public policy, and community engagement intersect, these roles translate institutional priorities across political environments and enable community colleges to advance their public mission. In doing so, this study reframes government and community relations not as a support function, but as a distinct form of leadership essential to institutional strategy and public engagement.

References

- 21st-Century Commission Report on the Future of Community Colleges. (2012). *Reclaiming the American Dream: Community colleges and the nation's future* American Association of Community Colleges (ED535906). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED535906>
- Aldrich, H., & Herker, D. (1977). Boundary spanning roles and organization structure. *Academy of Management Review*, 2(2), 217–230. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1977.4409044>
- Alfred, R., Shults, C., & Seybert, J. (2007). *Core indicators of effectiveness for community colleges*. American Association of Community Colleges.
- Almeida, F., Faria, D., & Queirós, A. (2017). Strengths and limitations of qualitative and quantitative research methods. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 3, 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.887089>
- Alves, H., Mainardes, E., & Raposo, M. (2010). A relationship approach to higher education institution stakeholder management. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 16(3), 159–181. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2010.497314>
- American Association of Community Colleges. (n.d.). *About us*. AACC. Retrieved April 15, 2023, from <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/about-us/>
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2018). *AACC competencies for community college leaders* (3rd ed.). https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/AACC2018Competencies_111618_FINAL.pdf
- American Association of State Colleges and Universities. (n.d.). *2020–2025 strategic plan*. <https://aascu.org/our-organization/2020-2025-strategic-plan/>

- Anggreni, P. (2018, January 29). *The role of public relations as a management function in higher education*. University of Mahendradatta. SHS Web Conference. Global Conference on Teaching, Assessment, and Learning in Education. Virtual.
<https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20184200031>
- Artis, L., & Bartel, S. (2021). Filling the leadership pipeline: A qualitative study examining leadership development practices and challenges facing community college presidents in Illinois. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 45(9), 674–686.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1771476>
- Association of Government Relations Professionals. (n.d.). *What is government relations?*
<https://grprofessionals.org/resources/what-is-government-relations>
- Atieno, O. P. (2009). An analysis of the strengths and limitations of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 13(1), 13–18.
https://www.scientiasocialis.lt/pec/node/files/pdf/Atieno_Vol.13.pdf
- Ayalew, S. (2023). *Community college executive leaders and emotional intelligence: A phenomenological study exploring how they utilize emotional intelligence (E.I.) to lead their organizations* (Publication No. 30318884) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Global]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/9ff04c467884403978075cbb1d4e5f4e/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>
- Bacon, E. (2009). Do professional managers have a profession? The specialist/generic distinction amongst higher education professional services staff. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 13(1), 11–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603100802597007>

- Baime, D. (2022). Building community college federal advocacy. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 197, 175–181. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20505>
- Baker, G. (1992). *Cultural leadership: Inside America's community colleges*. American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. Community College Press.
- Balzer, W. K. (2020). *Lean higher education: Increasing the value and performance of university processes* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Barker Caza, B., & Creary, S. (2016). Chapter 13: The construction of professional identity. In A. Wilkinson, D. Hislop, C. Coupland (Eds.), *Perspectives on contemporary professional work*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783475582.00022>
- Bastedo, M., Altbach, P., & Gumport, P. (Eds.). (2023). *American higher education in the 21st century: Social, political, and economic changes* (5th ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2004). *Wasted lives: Modernity and its outcasts*. Polity.
- Bell, M. (Ed.). (2024, July 7). *Planning for higher education*. The Society for College and University Planning. <https://www.scup.org/learning-resources/journal/>
- Best, S. (2016). Zygmunt Bauman: On what it means to be included. *Power and Education*, 8(2), 124–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743816649197>
- Boggs, G. R., & Galizio, L. A. (Eds.). (2021). *A college for all Californians*. Teachers College Press.
- Boggs, G. R., & McPhail, C. J. (2016). *Practical leadership in community colleges: Navigating today's challenges*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dch.30152>
- Boone, E. J. (1997). National perspective of community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 21(1), 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1066892970210101>

- Booton, C. M. (2019). *Aligning the elements*. Crossline Press.
- Bosley, A. (2016). Collaboration design. Leadership. *Journal for Post-Secondary Leaders*, 22(1), 22–25.
- Bowen, H. (Ed.). (2018). *Investment in learning: The individual and social value of American higher education* (pp. 431–448). Routledge.
- Bowles, K. J. (2022, May 2). Higher Ed’s relationship with the government: It could be more straightforward. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-explain-it-me/higher-ed%E2%80%99s-relationship-government-it%E2%80%99s-complicated>
- Brinkerhoff, D. W., & Wetterberg, A. (2015). Gauging the effects of social accountability on services, governance, and citizen empowerment. *Public Administration Review*, 76(2), 274–286. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12399>
- Brumfield, R., & Miller, M. T. (2008). *A review of the literature related to government relations in higher education* (ED503753). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED503753>
- Burkam, K. R. (2009, December). *The role of state higher education governance structures in state-level higher education lobbying*. The Pennsylvania State University: The Graduate School Department of Education Policy Studies.
- Burke, P. J. (1980). The self: Measurement requirements from an interactionist perspective. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 43(1), 18–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3033745>
- Burke, P. J. (2004). Extending identity control theory. *Sociological Theory*, 22(4), 574–594. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2004.00234.x>
- Burke, P. J., & Reitzes, D. C. (1991). An identity theory approach to commitment. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 54, 239–251. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2786653>

- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2022). *Identity theory* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197617182.001.0001>
- Burke, P. J., & Tully, J. C. (1977). The measurement of role identity. *Social Forces*, 55(4), 881–897. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2577560>
- Burkhardt, J. C. (2002). Boundary-spanning leadership in higher education. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 8(3), 145-150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107179190200800312>
- Bushe, G. R. (1998). Power and the empowered organization: Power design in highly adaptive organizations. *Organization Development Practitioner*, 30(4), 31–43.
- Bushe, G. R. & Nagaishi, M. (2018). Imagining the future through the past: Organization development isn't (just) about change. *Organization Development Journal*, 36(3), 23–36.
- California Community Colleges. (n.d.-a). *About California community colleges*. Chancellor's Office. <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us>
- California Community Colleges. (n.d.-b). *District public information officers*.
<https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/News-and-Media/College-and-District-Public-Information-Officers>
- California Community Colleges. (n.d.-c). *Government relations*. Chancellor's Office.
<https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Governmental-Relations>
- California Community Colleges. (n.d.-d). *Key facts*. Chancellor's Office.
<https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Key-Facts>
- California Community Colleges. (n.d.-e). *Student enrollment and demographics*. Chancellor's Office. <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Digital-Innovation-and-Infrastructure/research-data-analytics/data-snapshot/student-demographics>

- California Community Colleges. (2022, January). *The economic value of the California community colleges system* [Main report]. Chancellor's Office. <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/ccc-1819-mainreport-final-al1y.pdf?la=en&hash=CFE9AEF8BA1DC503BD7647BEEEEE37BD62365E64F>
- California Community Colleges. (2024, February 21). *The 2024-25 Budget: California Community Colleges*. <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4853>
- California Department of Human Services. (n.d.). Information officer III, CEA (5597). <https://www.calhr.ca.gov/state-hr-professionals/Pages/5597.aspx>
- Campbell, J. Y., & Fealing, K. H. (2024). *Introduction to "Financing Institutions of Higher Education."* National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/books-and-chapters/financing-institutions-higher-education/introduction-financing-institutions-higher-education>
- Canada Archives. (2022, September 1). *Government of Canada*. Library and Archives Canada. <https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/services/services-libraries/theses/Pages/item.aspx?idNumber=46554934>
- Carbone, R. F. (1987). Handbook of institutional advancement. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 58(5), 606–608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1987.11778289>
- Casey, J. C., & O'Leary, S. M. (1998). *The corporate imperative: A business guide for implementing strategic education partnerships*. ED Publications.
- CCPRO California. (n.d.). *About CCPRO*. <https://ccproca.org/about-ccpro/>
- Chase, S. E., (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 651–679). SAGE Publications.

- Chelf, C. A. (2018). *A critical discourse analysis of higher education leaders* (Publication No. 10826206) [Doctoral dissertation, Western Kentucky University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/critical-discourse-analysis-higher-education/docview/2050757266/se-2>
- Choo, F. (2018, July 16). Constantly learning is key to staying competitive: Workers who do not adopt growth mindset will be left behind, says LinkedIn top exec. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/constantly-learning-is-key-staying-competitive/docview/2070175626/se-2>
- Clark, B. R. (2007). The development of the sociology of higher education. In P. J. Gumport (Ed.), *Sociology of higher education: Contributions and their contexts* (pp. 3–16). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Clark, C. (2017, April 18). Pathways to the University Presidency. *Deloitte Insights*. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/college-presidency-higher-education-leadership.html>
- Clarke, M., Hyde, A., Drennan, J. (2013). Professional identity in higher education. In B. Kehm, & U. Teichler (Eds), *The academic profession in Europe: New tasks and new challenges. The Changing Academic Researcher: The Changing Academic Profession in International Comparative Perspective* (Vol. 5, pp. 7–22). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4614-5_2
- Cohen, A. M., Brawer, F. B., & Kisker, C. B. (2014). *The American community college* (6th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Community College League of California. (n.d.-a). *Advocacy*. Retrieved March 12, 2024, from <https://ccleague.org/advocacy>

- Community College League of California. (n.d.-b). *Amplify your voice for California's community colleges*. <https://ccleague.org/>
- Community College Research Center. (n.d.). *About us*. Teachers College, Columbia University, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/>
- Community Relations. (n.d.). *Benefits, types of community relations programs*. The Encyclopedia of American Industries. <https://www.referenceforbusiness.com/small/Bo-Co/Community-Relations.html#ixzz7tF951Pr8>
- The Conference Board. (n.d.). *Government Relations Executives Council*. Our Councils. <https://www.conference-board.org/councils/government-relations-executives>
- The Conference Board. (2024, March 10). *Government Relations Executives Council*. <https://www.conference-board.org/councils/government-relations-executives>
- Congressional Research Service. (August 19, 2022). *The U.S. Land-Grant University System: Overview and role in agricultural research*. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45897>
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 477–487). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Cook, B. J. (2012). *The American college president study: Key findings and takeaways*. American Council on Education. <http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/The-American-College-President-Study>
- Cook, C. E. (1998). *Lobbying for higher education: How colleges and universities influence federal policy*. *Vanderbilt issues in higher education*. Vanderbilt University Press.
- Cooper, M. (1983). Public affairs. *The Public Relations Journal*, 39(3), 28.

- Corbin, J. J. (1976). Institutional governance within a system. *Education Record*, 54(2), 107–114.
- Cox, D. N. (2000). Developing a framework for understanding university-community partnerships. *Cityscape*, 5(1), 9–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20868491>
- Craig, C. J. (2005). *Historical research and narrative inquiry: Striking similarities, notable differences* (EJ844445). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ844445>
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Cross, J. F. (2004). *The impact of college and university faculty collective bargaining on state appropriations to public higher education* (Publication No. AAT 3130904) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/ffee4c8fe4cacfc8e1e2bc4b762a0ee6/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>
- Crowson, R. L., & Bower, C. B. (2011). *Community relations*. Oxford Bibliographies. <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199756810-0007>
- Dahlinger, P. J. (1981). *Community relations in small school districts* (ED224677). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED224677>
- Daiute, C., & Lightfoot, C. (Eds.). (2004). *Narrative analysis: Studying the development of individuals in society*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412985246>

- D'Amico, M. M., Katsinas, S. G., & Friedel, J. N., (2012). The new norm: Community colleges to deal with recessionary fallout. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(8), 626–631. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2012.676506>
- Davis, C. (2018). *Perceptions of trustees and presidents of the competencies essential for successful 21st-century community college leadership* (Publication No. 10841145) [Doctoral dissertation, Lindenwood University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2085961153?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>
- Day, D. V., Fleenor, J. W., Atwater, L. E., Sturm, R. E., & McKee, R. A. (2014). Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(1), 63–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.004>
- Deaux, K., & Burke, P. (2010). Bridging identities. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 73(4), 315–320. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272510388996>
- DeCastro, B. S., & Karp, M. J. M. (2008). *A typology of community college-based partnership activities*. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8TT4P10>
- DiConsiglio, J. (2011). Sticking together. *Currents*, 37(2), 26–31. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/sticking-together/docview/889927636/se-2>
- Donahue, W. (2022). *Building leadership competence: A competency-based approach to building leadership ability* (2nd ed). Centrestrar Learning.
- Dougherty, K. J., & Natow, R. S. (2015). *The politics of performance funding for higher education: Origins, discontinuations, and transformations*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Douglas, J. A. (2000). *The California idea and American higher education: 1850 to the 1960 master plan*. Stanford University Press.
- Duderstadt, J. J., Atkins, D. E., & Van Houweling, D. E. (2002). *Higher education in the digital age: Technology issues and strategies for American colleges and universities*. Greenwood Publishing Group
- Duffin, E. (Ed.). (2022, November 3). Community colleges in the United States—Statistics & facts. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/topics/3468/community-colleges-in-the-united-states/>
- Durham, L. M. (2019). *Stakeholders and political capital: Influences on presidential communication in higher education* (Publication No. 27544100) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2356799230?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>
- Eckel, P. D. & Kezar, A. (2011). Presidents leading: The dynamics and complexities of campus leadership. In P. G. Altbach, R. O. Berdahl, & P. J. Gumport, (Eds.), *American higher education in the twenty-first century* (3rd edition, pp. 279-311). Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved from University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons [Penn Libraries] https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/455
- Eckel, P. D., & Kezar, A. (2011). *Taking the reins: Institutional transformation in higher education. The ACE series on higher education*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Eddy, P. L. (2012a). *Alignment of AACC competencies with practice: New directions for community college* (No. 159). Jossey-Bass. <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781118567548>

- Eddy, P. L. (Ed.). (2012b). *Leading for the future: Alignment of AACC Competencies with Practice: New Directions for Community College* (No. 159, Vol. 231). John Wiley & Sons.
- Eddy, P. L., & Boggs, G. R. (2010). *Community college leadership: A multidimensional model for leading change*. Routledge.
- Edmonds, K., & Cabrales, J. A. (2021, December 21). *Strategic plan FY 2020–2021*. AASCU. <https://aascu.org/strategic-plan/VisionandMission/>
- Efron, S. E., & Ravid, R. (2019). *Writing the literature review: A practical guide*. The Guilford Press.
- Ehrlich, T. (2000). *Civic responsibility and higher education*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Emerson, R. E. (1976). Social exchange theory. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2, 335–362. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.02.080176.002003>
- Evans, M. G. (1970). The effects of supervisory behavior on the path-goal relationship. *Organizational Behavior & Human Performance*, 5(3), 277–298. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073\(70\)90021-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(70)90021-8)
- Evans, M. G. (2002). Path-goal theory of leadership. In L. L. Neider & C. A. Schrireshelm (Eds.), *Leadership* (pp. 115–138). Information Age Publishing.
- Farmer-Hanson, A., Gassman, J., & Shields, E. (2019). *Strategic action: Community engagement professionals as institutional change leaders* (EJ1212513). ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1212513.pdf>
- Forsyth, T. M. (1991). *The culture of governance: A study of organizational culture and congruence in six California community colleges* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles]. eLibrary. <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=5868464>

- Freeman, S., & Kochan, F. K. (2013). University presidents' perspectives of the knowledge and competencies needed in 21st century higher education leadership. *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*, 1(1), 3. <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/ela/vol1/iss1/3>
- Gafner, J. (Ed.). (2023, February 24). The path goal theory of leadership: Meaning and strategies. *Indeed*. <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/path-goal-theory>
- Garavalia, B. J., & Miller, M. T. (1996). *Administrative perspectives on community college leadership*. Department of Vocational Education, Valdosta State University. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED400869.pdf>
- Gibson-Harman, K. (2001). *The specialists: Understanding the work lives of master's prepared professional staff in community colleges* (Publication No. 3001605) [Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University Chicago]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/6b56b01f65f59be10f6536efcecf501/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>
- Gibson-Harman, K., Rodriguez, S., & Haworth, J. G. (2002). Community college faculty and professional staff: The human resource challenge. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2002(117), 77–90. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.55>
- Gladieux, L. E., & Wolanin, T. R. (1976). *Congress and the colleges: The national politics of higher education*. Lexington Books.
- Glass, J. C., & Jackson, K. L. (1998). Integrating resource development and institutional planning. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 22(8), 715–739. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1066892980220802>

- Gleazer, E. J. (1979). *The community college: Values, vision & vitality* (ED187364). ERIC.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED187364>
- Goodman, L. A. (1961), Snowball sampling. *The Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 32(1), 148–170. <https://doi.org/10.1214/aoms/177705148>
- Goodman, L. A. (2011) Comment: On respondent-driven sampling and snowball sampling in hard-to-reach populations and snowball sampling not in hard-to-reach populations. *Sociological Methodology*, 41(1), 347–353. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9531.2011.01242.x>
- Googins, B. K. (1997, July 1). Why community relations is a strategic imperative. *Strategy and Business*. <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/17964>
- Greco, L. M., & Kraimer, M. L. (2020). Goal setting in the career management process: An identity theory perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(1), 40–57.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000424>
- Greeley, R. M. (2016). *University presidents and the role of fundraising at private liberal arts universities*. ScholarWorks.
<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3471&context=dissertations>
- Gregory, B. T., Harris, S. G., Amenakis, A. A., & Shook, C. L. (2009). Organizational culture and effectiveness: A study of values, attitudes, and organizational outcomes. *Journal of Business Research*, 62, 673–679. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.05.021>
- Grubb, G. C. (1999). *Corporate/college partnerships and their impact on corporations and institutions of higher education: A corporate perspective*. Johnson & Wales University.

- Grunig, J. E., & Huang, Y. H. (2000). From organizational effectiveness to relationship indicators: Antecedents of relationships, public relations strategies, and relationship outcomes. In J. A. Ledingham & S. D. Bruning (Eds.), *Public relations as relationship management* (pp. 23–53). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Grunig, L. A. (1990). Power in the public relations department. In J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig (Eds.), *Public relations research annual* (Vol. 1, p. 42). Routledge.
- Gutierrez, A. S., Fox, J., & Clifton, J. (2024). The significance of partnerships to future university missions: A systematic literature review. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2024.2377127>
- Gutierrez, S. (2018). *The mediational roles of engagement and LMX in the relationship between leadership fairness and leadership effectiveness* (ED584001). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED584001>
- Hall, M. M. (2018). *Community engagement: A case study of partnerships between one community college and three community organizations* (Publication No. 10638088) [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1978512368?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>
- Hanson, M. E. (2003). *Educational administration and organizational behavior* (5th ed.). Allyn and Bacon.

- Harvey, E. C. (2021). *Innovation in higher education: Understanding higher education professionals' experiences through a futurist lens* (Publication No. 2591026296) [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. ProQuest Central.
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/3f4ba1a5718ee48a6a76fdf62a659cb2/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>
- Hasen, H. (2022). Exploring employees' perception towards the public relation practitioner's practice: Jimma Zonal Government Offices in focus. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 982–1001. <https://journalppw.com/index.php/jpsp/article/view/14814>
- Hassan, M. (2023, June 28). Conceptual framework—Types, methodology and examples. *Research Method*. <https://researchmethod.net/conceptual-framework/>
- Hastings, J. H. (2000). Using demographics and statistics to inform target audiences. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 110, 51–57. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.11007>
- Hayes, A. (n.d.). *Public relations (PR) meaning, types, and practical examples*. Investopedia. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/public-relations-pr.asp>
- Hidayat, S., Affandi, N., Eryanto, H., & Hidayat, D. R. (2023). Higher education governance and lecturer performance: The role of leadership, commitment, and culture. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 23(6), 185–195. [https://repository.lib-binabangsa.ac.id/id/eprint/104/1/Artikel - Higher Education Governance.pdf](https://repository.lib-binabangsa.ac.id/id/eprint/104/1/Artikel%20-%20Higher%20Education%20Governance.pdf)
- Higgs, R. (1990, August 1). The growth of government in the United States. *Fee.org*. <https://fee.org/articles/the-growth-of-government-in-the-united-states/>
- Hills, J. & Gibson, C., 1992. A conceptual framework for thinking about conceptual frameworks: bridging the theory practice gap. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 30(4). <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578239210020453>

- Hockaday, J., & Puyear, D. E. (2000). *Community college leadership in the new millennium. New expeditions: Charting the second century of community colleges* (ED439741). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED439741>
- Hodge, K. O. (2002). *Perceptions of California community college chief executive officers on institutional changes that resulted from specific pieces of landmark legislation* (Publication No. 305508326) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/e26700742b2806a29e2de626f68218e3/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>
- Hogan, S. J., & Coote, L. V. (2014). Organizational culture, innovation, and performance: A test of Schein's model. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(8), 1609–1621. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2013.09.007>
- Hogg, M. A., Terry, D. J., & White, K. M. (1995). A tale of two theories: A critical comparison of identity theory with social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 58(4), 255–269. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787127>
- Hom, W. (2001). *The environmental scan component of the strategic plan for California community colleges* (ED459904). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED459904>
- Hon, L. C., & Grunig, J. E. (1999). *Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations*. Commission on Public Relations Measurement & Evaluation. https://www.painepublishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Guidelines_Measuring_Relationships.pdf

- Hoover, R. S., & Koerber, A. L. (2011). Using NVivo to answer the challenges of qualitative research in professional communication: Benefits and best practices tutorial. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 54(1), 68–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1109/TPC.2009.2036896>
- Inman, M. (2014). Bringing life to leadership: The significance of life history in reviewing leadership learning within higher education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 17(2), 237–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2013.867076>
- Jacobs, K. (2009). *The high cost of furloughs* [Policy brief]. UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education.
<https://aaar.assembly.ca.gov/sites/aaar.assembly.ca.gov/files/furloughs09.pdf>
- Jeandron, C. A. (2006). *Growing your own leaders: Community colleges step up*. A Leading Forward Report. American Association of Community Colleges.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED499835>
- Johnson, C. M. (2022). [Book review of *A history of American higher education* by J. R. Thelin]. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 76(2), 483–485. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12344>
- Johnson, H., & Mehia, M. C. (2025, February 7). *California's population*. California Public Policy Institute. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-population/>
- Johnson, H., & Mejia, M. C. (2019). *California's higher education system* (ED603856). ERIC.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED603856>
- Jongbloed, B., Enders, J. & Salerno, C. (2008). Higher education and its communities: Interconnections, interdependencies, and a research agenda. *Higher Education*, 56, 303–324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9128-2>

- Kantanen, H. (2007). Community relationships and the practice of public relations in higher education. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 13(1), 47–59.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13583880601151254>
- Kaplan, A., & Garner, J. K. (2027). A complex dynamics systems perspective of identity and its development: The dynamic systems model of role identity. *Developmental Psychology*, 53(11), 2036–2051. American Psychological Association.
- Katz, R. L., (1955). *Skills of an effective administrator* (EJ104214). ERIC.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ104214>
- Kawulich, B. B. (2017). Coding and analyzing qualitative data. In D. Wyse, N. Selwyn, E. Smith, & L. E. Suter. *The BERA/SAGE handbook of educational research* (Vol. 2, pp. 769–790). SAGE Publications.
- Keen, C., & Greenall, J. (1987, November 1). *Public relations management in colleges, polytechnics, and universities*. Heist Publications.
- Keener, B. J. (1989). The development plan. Marketing and development for community colleges, 149–157. In G. J. Ryan & N. J. Smith (Eds.), *Marketing and development for community colleges*. CASE Publication.
- Keener, B. J., Carrier, S. M., & Meaders, S. J. (2002). Resource development in community colleges: a national overview. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 26(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/106689202753364972>
- Keller, G. (1997). *The best of planning for higher education*. Society for College and University Planning.
- Kemball, M. (2009). Community connections. *Currents*, 35(7), 24–27.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ927346>

- Kisker, C. B., & Carducci, R. (2003). Community college partnerships with the private sector-organizational contexts and models for successful collaboration. *UCLA Community College Review*, 31(3), 55–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009155210303100304>
- Kisker, C. B., Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (2023). *The American community college* (7th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Kivistö, J. (2005). The government-higher education institution relationship: Theoretical considerations from the perspective of agency theory. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 11(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2005.9967136>
- Knott, E., Rao, A. H., & Summers, K. (2022). Interviews in the social sciences. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, 2(73), Article 73. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6>
- Kopecek, R. (1980). *The role of the collegiate office of public information in the 1980's* (ED253258). ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED253258.pdf>
- Kotler, P., & Goldgehn, L. A. (1981). Marketing: A definition for community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 36, 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.36819813603>
- Kowalski, T. J. (1996). *Public relations in educational organizations: Practice in an age of information and reform* [Paper 53]. Educational Leadership Faculty Publications. http://ecommons.udayton.edu/eda_fac_pub/53
- Kowalski, T. J. (2006). *The school superintendent: Theory, practice and cases* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Kozobarich, J. L. (2000). Institutional Advancement. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2000(111), 25–34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.11103>
- Kruckeberg, V. D., & Starck, K. (2012). Public relations and community: A persistent covenant. *Public Relations Review*, 38(5), 873. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.06.001>

- Lane, F. S. (1978). Government in higher education. *Proceedings of the Acaderesearcher of Political Science*, 33(2), 136–145. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1173924>
- Lang’at, N. K. (1997). *University public relations strategies: A case study* (Publication No. 304396487) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/university-public-relations-strategies-case-study/docview/304396487/se-2>
- Lawler, S. (2015). *Identity: Sociological perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Lawrence-Hughes, D. (2014). *Negotiated communities: A stakeholder approach to understanding town-gown relations during periods of campus expansion* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles]. eScholarship. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8dj58618>
- Leshem, S., & Trafford, V. (2007). Overlooking the conceptual framework. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44(1), 93–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290601081407>
- Levin, D. (2023, November 28). *Government professional associations & organizations*. JobStars. <https://jobstars.com/government-professional-associations-organizations/>
- Levin, J. S., & Kater, S. T. (Eds.). (2012). *Understanding community colleges*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203118931>
- Levin, J. S., & Kater, S. T. (Eds.). (2018). *Understanding community colleges* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315268071>
- Lewis, D. K. (1966). An argument for the identity theory. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 63(1), 17–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024524>

- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1982, March 19–22). *Establishing dependability and confirmability in naturalistic inquiry through an audit* [Conference paper]. American Educational Research Association, 66th.
- Lindesmith, A., & Strauss, A. (1956). *Social psychology*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Lochmiller, C. R., & Lester, J. N. (2017). *An introduction to educational research: Connecting methods to practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Lord, R. G., & Hall, R. J. (2005). Identity, deep structure, and the development of leadership skills. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(4), 591–615.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.06.003>
- Ludden, V. (2009). *Wisdom model for leaders* [Unpublished manuscript]. Department of Organizational Leadership, Indiana Wesleyan University.
- Ludden, V. (2015, February 23). *Wisdom-based leadership: A model for leadership training and development* [Paper presentation]. Acaderesearcher of Human Resource Development International Research Conference in the Americas, St. Louis, MO, United States.
- Marginson, S. (2018). And the sky is grey: The ambivalent outcomes of the California master plan for higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 72(1), 51–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12140>
- Marlowe, H. (2015). The role of education in advancing the lobbying profession. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 4, 65–75. <https://doi.org/10.1057/iga.2014.23>
- Martorana, S. V. (1986). *Community colleges: How to develop a positive liaison with state lawmakers* (ED269117). ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED269117.pdf>

- Mathis M. B., & Roueche J. E. (2019). Transformative leadership wanted. In T. U. O'Banion (Ed.), *13 ideas that are changing the community college world* (pp. 249–270). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Maurrasse, D. J. (2002). *Beyond the campus: How colleges and universities form partnerships with their communities*. Routledge.
- Mayfield, A., White, C., Downs, T., & Erlandson, D. (2022). Expanding advocacy for community college success. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2022(197), 13–28.
<https://doi-org.er.lib.k-state.edu/10.1002/cc.20494>
- McIntosh, C. (2024, January 17). Profession. In *Cambridge Dictionary*.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
- McMillen, W. (2010). *From campus to capitol: The role of government relations in higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
<https://doi-org.er.lib.k-state.edu/10.1002/cc.20494>
- Meier, J. (2023, July 17). *About CCPRO*. CCPRO California. <https://ccproca.org/about-ccpro/>
- Meznar, M. B., & Johnson, J. H. (2005). Business-government relations within a contingency theory framework: Strategy, structure, fit, and performance. *Business & Society*, 44(2), 119–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650305275305>
- Miller, C., Hunt, J. B., Jr., Stephens, R., Donofrio, N., Madrid, A., Sullivan, L. W., Duderstadt, J. J., Mendenhall, R., Tucker, S. M., Elliot G., Nunley, C. R., Vedder, R., Grayer, J. N., Reynolds, C. B., Vest, C. M., Haycock, K., Rothkopf, A. J., Zemsky, R. M. (2006). *A test of leadership: Charting the course of U. S. higher education*. U. S. Department of Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED493504.pdf>
- Mintzberg, H. (1983). *Power in and around organizations*. Prentice Hall.

- Miron, E., Erez, M., & Naveh, E. (2004, February 2). Do personal characteristics and cultural values that promote innovation, quality, and efficiency compete or complement each other? *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25(2), 175–199.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/job.237>
- Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Morgan, G. (2011). Reflections on images of organization and its implications for organization and environment. *Organization & Environment*, 24(4), 459–478.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026611434274>
- Murdock, S., White, S., Hoque, N., Pecotte, B., You, X., & Balkan, J. (2003). *The new Texas challenge: Population change and the future of Texas*. Texas A&M University Press.
- Murphy, E. P. (2001). *Effective lobbying strategies for higher education in state legislatures as perceived by government relations officers* (Publication No. AAT 3223322) [Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/b04dc42579f5d2bb58f67e1cd559b472/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>
- Murray, G. (2009). Narrative psychology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 11–132). SAGE Publications.
- Myers, C. (2021). *Public relations history: Theory, practice, and profession*. Routledge.
- Nager, N. R & Allen, T. H. (1984). *Public relations management by objectives*. Longman.
- Naib, S. (2012, September 20). *The Right to Information Act 2005. A handbook*. Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198067474.003.0005>

- Nazarzadeh Zare, M., & Ghoraishi Khorasgani, M. S. (2022). Boundary-spanning leadership as a necessity for academic administrators. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 36(4), 527–540. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1337856>
- Nelson, M. (1992). An organizational culture consciously shaped to foster creativity and innovation. In G. A. Baker, III. (Ed.), *Cultural leadership: Inside America's community colleges*. Community College Press.
- Nevarez, C., & Wood, J. L., (2010). *Community college leadership and administration: Theory, practice, and change*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- O'Brien, P., C. (1993). Changing expectations of community relations. *Executive Speeches*, 8(2), Article 33. <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/changing-expectations-community-relations/docview/214782796/se-2>
- Oceguera, G. (2014). *Leadership styles of California community college presidents: A four-frame model analysis* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California]. STARS Electronic Theses and Dissertations. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4575&context=etd>
- Osterman, P., & Weaver, A. (2016). Community colleges and employers: How can we understand their connection? *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Econoresearcher and Society*, 55(4), 523–545. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irel.12150>
- Parham, M. (2019, April 16). Five innovative community colleges take home top honors: American Association of Community Colleges honors visionary work of community colleges. *PR Newswire*. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/five-innovative-community-colleges-take-home-top-honors-300832507.html>

- Pereira, M. A. C., & DiSilva, M. T. (2003, April 8–12). *A key question for higher education: Who are the customers?* [Paper presentation]. 31st Annual Conference of the Production and Operations Management Society, Atlanta, GA, United States.
<http://www.poms.org/archive/conferences/Meeting2003/2003A/Papers/SOM-19.3.pdf>
- Pfeffer, J. (1981). *Power in organizations*. Pittman.
- Pfeffer, J. (1992). *Managing the power: Politics and influence in organizations*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Platt, A. (2022, December 12). *Government relations—Public affairs professionals worldwide*. Public Affairs Council. https://pac.org/government_relations
- Polkinghorne, D. (1989) Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valley & S. Hallings (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 41–60). Plenum Publications. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-6989-3_3
- Powell, M., & Pieczka, M. (2016). Understanding learning in senior public relations practices: From boundary spanning to boundary dwelling. *Journal of Communication Management*, 20(4), 312–327. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-11-2015-0093>
- Pryor, D. & Henley, A. (2018) Boundary spanning in higher education leadership: identifying boundaries and practices in a British university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(12), 2210–2225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1318364>
- Public Affairs Council. (2021, October 12). *Benchmarking and comparative analysis*. <https://pac.org/benchmarking-comparative-analysis>
- Public Affairs Council. (2022a, September 29). *Benchmarking and public affairs*. <https://pac.org/?s=Public+Affairs+Pulse+Survey%2C+2022>

- Public Affairs Council. (2022b, December 12). *Government relations*.
https://pac.org/government_relations
- Qin, D. (2016). Positionality. In A. Wong, M. Wickramasinghe, R. Hoogland, & N. A. Naples (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of gender and sexuality studies*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss619>
- Ramirez, K. M. (1989). Economic development and the role of community colleges: Contract education in review. *Community College Issues*, 2(1), Article 1.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED326277>
- Rees-Johnstone, E. (2020). *Increasing non-academic employee engagement. The organizational improvement plan at Western University* [Doctoral dissertation, Western University].
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/oip/173>
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. SAGE Publications.
- Roberts, C. & Hyatt, L. (2019). *The dissertation journey: A practical and comprehensive guide to planning, writing, and defending your dissertation* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Robison, G. E. (2014). *The utilization of the American Association of Community Colleges leadership competencies in public community college leadership development programs in the southern United States* (Publication No. 3624927) [Doctoral dissertation, East Carolina University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1554346627>
- Roggow, M. J. (Ed.). (2014). *Strengthening community colleges through institutional collaborations: New directions for community colleges*. John Wiley & Sons.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2131265835/bookReader?accountid=11789>

- Rothstein, J., Dizon-Ross, E., & Lacoe, J. (2024). *Regional variation in community college student outcomes in California*. California Policy Lab.
- Roueche, J. E., & Jones, B. R. (Eds.). (2005). *The entrepreneurial community college*. American Association of Community Colleges.
- Roueche, J. E., & Roueche, S. D. (Eds.). (2000). *Rising to the challenge: Lessons learned from Guilford Technical Community College*. American Association of Community Colleges.
- Royal, A. M. (2022). *Competencies for community college leaders* (4th ed.). American Association of Community Colleges.
- Royal, A. (2022, September). Updated competencies for a changing world. *Community College Journal*. <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/publications-news/community-college-journal/>
- Royal, A. (2023). *AACC competencies for community college leaders*. AACC.
<https://www.aacc.nche.edu/publications-news/aacc-competencies-for-community-college-leaders/>
- Rubin B. D., & Gigliotti R. A. (2019). The excellence in higher education model: A Baldrige-based tool for organizational assessment and improvement for colleges and universities. *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*, 38(4), 26–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/joe.21932>
- Ruderman, M. & Munusaresearcher, V. (2007). Know thyself. *Concepts & connections: A publication for leadership educators*, 15(2), 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.53841/bpstcp.2011.7.1.5>
- Ryan, G. J., & Smith, N. J. (1989). *Marketing and development for community colleges*. CASE Publications.

- Ryan, J. G., & Palmer J. C. (2005). Leading the fundraising effort. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 32, 43–48. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.214>
- Salenik, J., Majid, I., Brown, T., & Nelson, M. (n.d.). *Government relations division staff assignments 2023*. Retrieved March 11, 2024, from <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/About-Us/Divisions/Governmental-Relations-Policy-in-Action/Policy-in-action/Policy-and-Advocacy/2023-Quick-Snapshot-GR-Staff-Policy-Areas.pdf>
- Sara, E. E., & Ruth, R. (2019). *Writing the literature review: A practical guide*. The Guilford Press.
- The Saylor Foundation. (2012). *Mastering public relations*.
https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_mastering-public-relations/index.html
- Schulenburg, C. A. (2017). *Perceptions of wisdom by organizational leaders* (Publication No. 10642871) [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana Wesleyan University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/perceptions-wisdom-organizational-leaders/docview/1972562183/se-2>
- Schwartz, S., Luyckx, K., & Vignoles, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook of identity research*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9>
- Schulenburg, C. A. (2017). *Perceptions of wisdom by organizational leaders* (Publication No. 1972562183) [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana Wesleyan University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/perceptions-wisdom-organizational-leaders/docview/1972562183/se-2>
- Seidman, I. (2019). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

- Shenton, A. K. (2004, July 19) Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Shils, E. A. (1949). Social science and social policy. *Philosophy of Science*, 16(3), 219–242. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/185517>
- Shils, E. A. (1959). Social inquiry and the autonoresearcher of the individual. In D. Learner (Ed.), *The human meaning of the social sciences* (pp. 114–157). Meridian Books.
- Simkins, T. (2000). Education reform and managerialism: Comparing the experience of schools and colleges. *Journal of Education Policy*, 15(3), 317–332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026809300500304>
- Simonich, M. (1999, March 31). Colleges planning to join forces: six community colleges aim to share resources. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. <https://archives.post-gazette.com/search/?query=colleges+planning+to+join+forces%3A+6+community+colleges+aim+to+share+resources&ymd=1999-03-31>
- Sipe, B. S. (2020). Embedding design thinking in a culture of innovation at two community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 44(9), 657–676. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2019.1631230>
- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2006). Narrative inquiry in psychology: Exploring the tensions within. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(3), 169–192. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qrp068oa>

- Smith, H. C. (1999). *Corporate/college partnerships and their impact on corporations and institutions of higher education: A higher education perspective* (Publication No. 9999558) [Doctoral dissertation, Johnson & Wales University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/corporate-college-partnerships-their-impact-on/docview/304578227/se-2>
- Smith-Jones, M. (2022). *The perceptions and shared experiences of female leaders at community colleges* (ED622286). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED622286>
- Steinbach, H. (2023). From conflict to cooperation to collaboration: Perceptions of effective town-gown relationship management (Publication No. 2896726890) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Springfield]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/conflict-cooperation-collaboration-perceptions/docview/2896726890/se-2>
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224–237. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870>
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2014). *The development of identity theory*. Emerald Group Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0882-614520140000031002>
- Stets, J. E., & Serpe, R.T. (2013). Identity theory. In J. DeLamater & A. Ward (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 284–297). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6772-0_2
- Stivers, C. (1993, Winter). Reflections on the role of personal narrative in social science. *Signs*, 18(2). <https://doi.org/10.1086/494800>
- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version*. Benjamin Cummings.

- Stryker, S., & Burke, P. J. (2000). The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(4), 284–297. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695840>
- Stryker, S., & Serpe, R. T. (1982). Commitment, identity salience, and role behavior: Theory and research example. In W. Ickes & E. S. Knowles (Eds.), *Personality, roles, and social behavior* (pp. 199–218). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-9469-3_7
- Sturgis, R. (2006). Presidential leadership in institutional advancement: From the perspective of the president and vice president of institutional advancement. *International Journal of Education Advancement*, 6, 221–231. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150019>
- Sunderman, J. A. (2007, February 28). *A broad mission, clear public image, and private funding: Can Community Colleges have it all? In brief*. Office of Community College Research and Leadership. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED500961>
- Swaen, B., & George, T. (2022, November 15). Constructing a conceptual framework. *Scribbr*. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/conceptual-framework/>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. August & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- Tendler, M. (1970). *Case for the public information officer*. Junior College Journal.
- Theaker, A. (2012). *The public relations handbook* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Thelin, J. R. (2019). *A history of American higher education* (3rd ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421428826>
- Thibaut, J. & Kelley, H. (2008). Social exchange theory. In E. Griffin (Ed.), *A first look at communication theory* (6th ed., pp. 196–205). McGraw Hill.

- Thomson, D. E. (2010). The evolving role of universities in expanding knowledge among local elected officials. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 16(3), 421–450.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2010.12001607>
- Thompson, J. (2018, June 29). *The job description of a community relations specialist*. Work.
<https://work.chron.com/job-description-community-relations-specialist-15718.html>
- Tierney, P., Farmer, S. M., & Graen, G. B. (1999). An examination of leadership and employee creativity: The relevance of traits and relationships. *Personnel Psychology*, 52, 591–620.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.1999.52.issue-3>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Trow, Martin (1983) Defining the issues in university-government relations: An international perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 8(2), 115–128,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075078312331378984>
- U. S. Census Bureau. (2026, February 6). *U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: California*. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CA/PST045225>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2017, February 10). *Community college facts at a glance*.
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cclo/ccfacts.html>
- University of Cambridge Libraries. (2019). *What is reflective practice?*
<https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit/whatisreflectivepractice>
- Valentini, C., Kruckeberg, D. & Starck, K. (2012). Public relations and community: A persistent covenant. *Public Relations Review*, 38, (5), 873–879.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.06.001>

- Verick, S., & Islam, I., (2010, May). *The great recession of 2008–2009: Causes, consequences, and policy responses* [Discussion paper]. Institute for the Study of Labor.
<http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1631069>
- Vinney, C. (2024, September 3). Social identity theory and its impact on behavior. *ThoughtCo*.
<https://www.thoughtco.com/social-identity-theory-4174315>
- Waddock, S. A., & Boyle, E. (1995). The dynamics of change in corporate community relations. *California Management Review*, 37(4). <https://doi.org/10.2307/41165814>
- Watts, G. E., & Hammons, J. O. (2002). Leadership development for the next generation. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 120, 59–66. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ663239>
- Weerts, D. J. (2007). Toward an engagement model of institutional advancement at public colleges and universities. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 7(2), 79–103. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150055>
- Weerts, D. J., & Sandmann, L. R. (2010). Community engagement and boundary-spanning roles at research universities, *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81(6), 632–657.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2010.11779075>
- White, C. C. (2022). Advocating for community colleges in the college completion agenda. In C. C. White (Ed.), *Advocacy for change: Positioning community colleges for the next 75 years*. *New Directions for Community Colleges* (Vol. 197, pp. 157–173). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20504>
- Whissemore, T. (2022, September 6). Q&A: Updated competencies for a changing world. *Community College Daily*. <https://www.ccdaily.com/2022/09/qa-updated-competencies-for-a-changing-world/>

- Williams, P. (2002). The competent boundary spanner. *Public Administration*, 80(1), 103–124.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9299.00296>
- Willis, J. (2010). Seeing public engagement differently. *School Business Affairs*, 76(10), 16–18.
<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/seeing-public-engagement-differently/docview/860369657/se-2>
- Wright, S. (1991). *A capitol idea! Effective community college relations with state government: A review of the literature* (ED336148). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED336148>
- Yin, R. K. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2016). *Qualitative research from start to finish* (2nd ed.). Guilford Publications.
- Young, T., & Cutright, M. (2012). Community college leadership and administration: Theory, practice, and change. *Review of Higher Education*, 35(2), 351–353.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0008>
- Yukl, G. A. (2013). *Leadership in organizations* (8th ed.). Prentice-Hall.
- Yukl, G., & Chavez, C. (2002). Influence tactics and leader effectiveness. In L. Neider & C. Schriesheim (Eds.), *Leadership: Research in management* (Vol. 2, pp. 139–165). Information Age Publishing.
- Zeidenberg, M. (2008). Community colleges under stress. *Issues in Science and Technology*, 24(4), 53–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43314686>
- Zoglin, M. (1976). *Power and politics in the community college* (ED138322). ERIC.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED138322>

Appendix A - Interview Questions

Table A.1. Interview Questions for GCR Professionals in California Community Colleges

Research question	Interview questions	Theory
What do California community college professionals tasked with managing government and community relations perceive as the most effective ways to do their jobs?	1) Would you please describe your role as (title/GCR professional) within your institution?	Identity theory
	2) What are the primary responsibilities and objectives of your position?	Identity theory
	3) How do you measure the effectiveness of your government and community relations efforts?	Identity theory AACC competencies
	4) How do you align your work with the strategic mission of your college?	Identity theory
	5) What role does your position play in advancing student success and institutional goals?	Identity theory
What competencies do California community college professionals consider most important for their managing government and community relations?	6) How do you cultivate relationships with government agencies, community organizations, and other external partners?	AACC competencies
	7) What are the most significant challenges you face in your role, and how do you navigate them?	Identity theory AACC competencies
	8) What competencies or skills do you consider most essential for success in government and community relations within a community college setting?	AACC competencies

To best advance the strategic mission of the institution, what do California GCR professionals consider to be the best placement and reporting lines for this group?	9) How does your position intersect with other institutional leadership roles, such as the president, board of trustees, or faculty leadership? 10) What institutional resources and structures have helped, or hindered your ability to fulfill your responsibilities effectively? 11) In your opinion, what is the ideal placement of the GCR function within the institution's organizational structure? Who should GCR professionals report to for maximum effectiveness? What departments or services should have close adjacency or connections to optimize your work and effectiveness?	AACC competencies Identity theory AACC competencies
Closing (broad questions)	12) How is A.I. affecting your work environment? 13) Is there any another aspect of serving as a GCR professional you would like to add?	

Appendix B - Alignment Table

Table B.1. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual and theoretical framework	Application
AACC competencies for community college leaders (2022)	Research question design
Identity theory	Researcher lens
Narrative research	Interview structure

Table B.2. Data Analysis Method

Research question	Who/what	Data to be collected	Source	Framework
What are the perspectives of California community college GCR professionals about their role in their organizations?	Study participants	Personal responses	Initial questionnaire and personal interviews	2022 AACC leadership competencies and professional societies
What recommendations do California community college government and community relations (GCR) professionals have for their peers seeking best practices in the field for their District or College?	Study participants	Personal responses	Initial questionnaire and personal interviews	2022 AACC leadership competencies and professional societies

Table B.3. Design of the Study

Section	Details
Research agent	John O. White
Timeframe of study	April 2025 – December 2025
Unit of analysis	Work values and leadership competencies of participants
Methodology	Qualitative, narrative inquiry, pre-interview survey, interviews
Type of research design	Narrative inquiry
Site selection	California community college districts with GCR professionals (approximately 15)
Population	GCR professionals (at least 2 years' experience in the field)
Sample selection	116 California Community Colleges - intake form followed by at least 15 diverse interviews
Researcher's role	Design a study that permits participation, personal story, data collection (coding), documentation, and analysis.
Instrumentation used	Interview questions informed by 2022 AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders. Semi structured open-ended questions.
Interview Protocol	Follow K.S.U. interview protocols
Data collection strategies	Interview sheets, summaries after each interview
Data analysis methods	Taguette and Excel
Confidentiality	Standard research protocols and K.S.U. requirements
Verification/trustworthiness	Pilot and Peer review
Estimated budget	Less than \$100

Appendix C - Participation Recruitment Letter

Version 1

Invitation to Participate in Dissertation Study on California Community College Government and Community Relations Professionals

Dear [Recipient's Name],

Researcher name is John O. White, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Kansas State University. I am conducting a research study titled "Identity perspectives of California community colleges professionals managing government and community relations" and I am writing to invite you to participate in this important study.

Study Objectives:

This research project aims to explore the perspectives of **government and community relations (GCR) professionals** regarding their roles within California community colleges, capturing their stories and experiences. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the professional competencies that professionals who work in government/community/external/public relations areas consider essential to their success in fulfilling their responsibilities.

By documenting the insights of these professionals regarding their functions, effectiveness, and competencies in advancing their institutions' missions, the study may offer valuable understanding and models that college leaders and GCR professionals can use to enhance their government and community relations practices.

Who can Participate?

Participants will be GCR professionals (anyone working in government relations, public relations, external relations) in California community colleges with at least 2 years of related work experience. Outreach to public affairs/communications, government affairs and community affairs professionals at all California community colleges will take place via email with follow-up as needed. 15 - 20 are expected to be interviewed from among the 116 public community colleges in the state. Participants will be selected to reflect diversity in terms of their institutional roles as well as the size, location, type of institutions in which they serve (e.g., rural/urban, single campus/multicampus, large/small)

Participation Details:

- **Pre-Interview Communication:** Interested participants are invited to complete a short intake form to collect basic information on the type of college they serve (i.e., single or

multi-college district), location of college (i.e., urban, rural, suburban), their work title, number of years in the field, and number of years with current college and department.

- Interview: You will have the opportunity to opt-in for an interview, to be scheduled on Google Meet for approximately 60 minutes, which will allow for a deeper explanation of your experiences and perspectives.

Your participation is voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential. The findings from this study will be used to inform strategies for potential best practices and to help inform community colleges regarding organizational design and reporting for GCR professionals.

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your input is crucial to the success of this research, which I also hope will provide insights to support your field of work in government/community/public relations for community colleges. I deeply appreciate your time and effort. If you have any questions or need more information, contact me at the email address below.

If you would like to participate in this study, please click on the link below to indicate your interest and answer the brief Questionnaire.

[Questionnaire Link]

Sincerely,

John O. White

Doctoral Candidate, Community College Leadership Program

Kansas State University

xxxx@ksu.edu

Version 2

Title: Identity Perspectives of California Community College Professionals Managing Government and Community Relations

This message serves as an invitation to California community college professionals who are responsible for government and community relations, public information, or similar roles, to participate in an academic research study conducted through the Kansas State University Community College Leadership Program. The primary objective of this study is to examine the roles, experiences, and leadership competencies of individuals in these positions, with the goal of improving practices within higher education institutions.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligible participants for this study are professionals who are currently employed by a California community college and have a minimum of 2 years of experience in government and community relations or related work. The study aims to involve a diverse sample of 15 to 20 participants.

How to Participate

If you are interested in participating, please contact John O. White at Kansas State University by emailing xxxxx@ksu.edu. Participation in this study is voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential. Your involvement is valued and will contribute to advancing knowledge in higher education leadership.

Interviews are about to begin. Please respond no later than _____. Upon receiving your response, you will be sent confirmation along with a consent form and a brief pre-research intake form. After completing the intake form, you will receive an invitation to schedule a one-hour interview, which will be conducted via Google Meet.

Contact Information

John O. White

Doctoral Candidate, Kansas State University/College of the Desert, Cohort 2

Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX

Email: xxxxx@ksu.edu

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Cindy Miles

Appendix D - Preinterview Intake Form

Intake Form for Study of Community College Government and Community Relations Professionals

- Type of college (i.e., single-college, or multi-college district)
- Location of college (i.e., urban, rural, suburban)
- Title
- Division or department
- Number of years in current role at current college
- Number of years in the field

[Questionnaire Link]

John O. White
Doctoral Candidate, Community College Leadership Program
Kansas State University
xxxxx@k-state.edu

Appendix E - IRB Approval

Appendix F - Participant Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent: Informed consent is the process by means of which a research participant agrees to be the subject of research study with sufficient information and understanding before making decisions about accepting risk. Informed consent is a requirement by Kansas State University for all research projects. Please read this document carefully and feel free to ask any questions.

Institution: Kansas State University, School of Education, Community College Leadership Program, Manhattan, Kansas, 66506. URL: www.k-state.edu

Title of the Study: Identity perspectives of California community colleges professionals managing government and community relations

Researcher/Graduate Student: John O. White, xxxxx@ksu.edu

Principal Investigator: Dr. Cindy Miles, KSU CCLC Professor of Practice, xxxxx@ksu.edu

Institutional Research Board Chair: Lisa Rubin, xxxxx@ksu.edu

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this KSU CCLP research study. This document communicates the nature of the study, your role as a participant, and the measures in place to protect your privacy and confidentiality. Identifiers will be removed from identifiable private information you provide. Your information collected as part of the research (even with identifiers removed) will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Study Objectives: This research study aims to explore the perceptions of California community college professionals whose responsibilities involve government and community relations to capture their stories and experiences. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the professional leadership competencies that GCR professionals consider essential to their success in fulfilling their responsibilities.

Participant's Role: Your participation will involve engaging in a virtual interview where you will be asked to share your experiences, opinions, and perspectives on the topic. Your input is

crucial to gain insight into the effectiveness of GRC practitioners from their own point of view and based on their experience working for a California community college.

Data Collection: The interviews will be conducted via Google video conferencing. Prior to the interview, you will be reminded of the opportunity to opt-out if you choose. Audio recordings will be made to ensure accuracy in capturing your responses. Please be assured that your identity will be protected throughout the research process.

Confidentiality Measures:

- No names or institutions will be disclosed during data analysis.
- Specific departments will not be disclosed during data analysis.
- Each participant will be assigned a numerical identifier to further anonymize the data.
- No personal identifiers will appear in the research publication (i.e., dissertation).
- Participant information will not be used for future research.
- Data will be securely stored on a dedicated external storage device by the researcher, for which the data will be destroyed by the researcher at the end of dissertation process to prevent unauthorized access.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The researcher is using an AI powered meeting assistant tool designed to help capture, transcribe, and organize the audio portion of the Google Meeting interview for this KSU research project. Use is private by design with recordings and transcripts stored securely in the researcher's connected workspace. Others cannot view or search the meeting data. Information collected is not made public or searchable on-line. All relevant laws and regulations regarding privacy and compliance will strictly be followed.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Your decision will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the institution. There is no compensation for participation.

Questions and Concerns: There should be minimal or no risk of participating in the study as the likelihood of harm or discomfort during the data collection process would not worse than anything one would typically experience in daily life. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, your participation, or your rights as a participant, please do not hesitate to contact me at

Resources:

Institutional Research Board Chair: Lisa Rubin, xxxxx@ksu.edu

KSU Office of Research Integrity, XXX-XXX-XXXX | xxxxx@k-state.edu

KSU School of Education, XXX-XXX-XXXX | xxxxx@k-state.edu

Signatures: By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided in this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in the research study.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

PLEASE PRINT, SIGN AND RETURN TO: xxxxx@ksu.edu