

Sue Stuebner Gaylor, HGSE Ed.D. 2003**ABSTRACT**

Private, regional, liberal arts colleges (those that enroll 2,000 or fewer students, offer primarily undergraduate education and graduate the majority of their students in arts and sciences) comprise one of the few sectors of higher education that is declining in number of institutions and total student population (McCormick, 2000). Faced with profound financial and competitive pressures, private, regional, liberal arts college presidents and constituents contend with considerable challenges. Yet these presidents may enjoy substantial influence compared to their counterparts in other sectors of higher education (Howell & Eidson, 1985). Given the urgent circumstances many private, regional, liberal arts colleges encounter, understanding how presidents and their constituents perceive the leader's ability to exercise power within this context is vitally important.

This dissertation examines how presidents and their constituents at three regional private, liberal arts colleges understand presidential influence on critical decisions. The questions guiding this research include: How, by their own accounts, do presidents of three, private, regional, liberal arts colleges of varying financial conditions, influence key institutional decisions? How do other campus constituents at these colleges describe the president's influence in decision-making? How do these descriptions compare with previous studies of presidential power at more elite institutions? Data was gathered through qualitative interviews with fifty-four participants (presidents, faculty, administrators and trustees) at three sites about presidential power, critical decisions and their understanding of their specific institutional context. Data

analysis was informed by the five theoretical perspectives of power and a literature review on the context of private regional liberal arts colleges (Stuebner, 2001).

Study findings confirm the notion that institutional context matters when considering presidential influence in critical decisions. Specifically, stories about how presidents exercise power in self-reported “critical” decisions illustrate a high degree of congruence or fit between the president’s strategies, the constituents’ roles and expectations, and the specific institutional contextual factors. Compared to accounts of presidential influence at other types of institutions, these three stories suggest that the exercise of presidential power is possible, expected, and at least at these three colleges, more dynamic than previously described in literature based on other types of institutions.