

## MANAGEMENT SKILLS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY COLLEGE PRESIDENT: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

*This review of the literature related to the contemporary college president attempted to describe changes to the presidential role during the past 30 years. In addition to describing changes to the role, the review explores the personal, organizational, interpersonal, and leadership skills required for leading a contemporary university. The findings particularly note that with the changing demands for accountability in higher education, presidents are being forced to spend more of their time and be more focused on issues of finance, law, and public interactions. These issues tend to collide in discussions of public policy and within the framework of state legislative proposals. Continued professional development for college presidents is recommended, especially in terms of aligning work place priorities with the institution's mission.*

The college presidency has changed dramatically during the past century. Initially seen as a 'first among equals,' this leadership position has evolved in its relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. The contemporary college president is increasingly business-centered, with a significant amount of time devoted to external fund raising, legislative relationship building, and working with those with a vested interest in higher education and the university in specific (Braswell, 2006).

As the presidency has evolved to meet the current demands of the higher education industry, the leadership attributes of these individuals has become even more critical (Sternberg, Davis, Mason, Smith, Vitter, & Wheatly, 2015). College presidents, often assuming office with little or no training, are called upon to bridge the academic world of inquiry with the public world of accountability and efficiency. Further, current leaders are guiding institutions at a time when technology and knowledge are growing a rapid pace, and institutions join society in struggling how to best adapt technology to their mission.

Changes to the current challenges facing presidents also include those of a changing student population. Students arrive on campus with a heightened sense of career directedness and expectation; college is no longer simply a path to maturity and civic engagement, but has clearly become one of vocational training and career establishment (Cottom, 2017). Students have also changed in how they experience the world; as technology has become a common experiential component of current society, students interact with and through technology in ways that have

fundamentally altered how they process information, how they communicate, and ultimately, how they learn.

College presidents have authority to only their boards of trustees for the welfare of their institutions, and this requires strong interpersonal communication skills and the ability to manage conflicting institutional goals (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). This environment has also been referred to as ‘organized anarchy’ (Manning, 2013), and the position is so critical that presidents must find ways to organize their own response strategies to the stresses of the position. Therefore, the current literature review was constructed to identify the critical skills necessary to be an effective college president. Literature were reviewed broadly to identify key categories of skills, and then each skill areas was explored in greater detail to provide both a discussion of where future research might be headed, along with practical implications for those pursuing the presidency.

### Reviewing Critical Skills

The role of the college president has changed since the time that leaders primarily focused on academics and operational management. Today’s college presidency is a position that has required various skills to effectively manage a higher education institution. Current frameworks of leadership within Higher Education have not discussed all of the behaviors expressed in leadership research and literature, as one may find in professional business manuscripts (Black, 2015). Higher Education leaders need a combination of competencies that will guide them through a public sector that has only gotten more challenging in recent decades.

There are multiple characteristics that presidents should possess in order to fulfill the duties and responsibilities needed to lead post-secondary institutions. A common characteristic among many college presidents has been their acquisition of academic knowledge through their prior formal education experiences, such their doctoral degree programs (Freeman & Kochan, 2012). In addition, four themes have emerged from literature that has attended to characteristics and skills of college and university presidents, including personal characteristics; leadership qualities; interpersonal communication skills; and organizational and strategic management.

Personal characteristics can be easily confused with qualities that an individual may learn through formal education or experience, such as those acquired through leadership programs and courses. Most effective leaders possess character traits that are, as some argue, biologically or socially instilled by interacting with one’s ecological environment (CITE), and thus, are components that contribute to one’s development and identity.

Personal character traits can include, self-confidence, drive vision, and moral competence, such as honesty and integrity (Dawood & Bach, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2013), and are highly sought by college president search committees and firms. Ethical leadership and risk-averse behavior, according to community college trustees, are highly valued personal traits among college presidents (Aspen Institute, 2013), particularly when these character traits can transfer to employees and colleagues (Kim & Kim, 2013). For instance, literature has discussed the ability to show resolve through pressures that come with college leadership (Tekker & Atan, 2014). A

number of presidents have mentioned how having mentors (both good or bad) and watching others have been found to help model behavior for individuals (Eddy, 2012).

Some studies have focused on the particular characteristics of women presidents, such as Extroversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Reis, 2015). For women leaders, learning by experience, determination, and perseverance were found to help sustain the demands of the presidency (Dunn, Gerlach, & Hyle, 2014). Further, research has found that spirituality and religion influenced their roles as college presidents and administrators (Wheat, & Hill, 2016).

Unlike personal characteristics, leadership qualities are usually learned through mentoring, self-development, and leadership programs provided by organizations that specialize in the professional development of college leaders. Regarding leadership, competencies can include understanding the mission, vision, and goals; values and morals; ability to transfer model behavior and transform employee behavior; and ability to influence the campus culture (AACC, 2013). Understanding the roles and leadership skills can be particularly important for presidents of schools with unique missions and challenges, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Freeman, Commodore, Gasman, & Carter, 2016).

Additionally, new presidents must better understand and make meaning of their roles and position, the campus culture and climate, and expectations from campus constituents, and what a shared vision may entail by all within a campus community, thus reducing uncertainty among colleagues, employees, and partners (Smerek, 2013). College leaders have also used anticipatory leadership by proactively responding to change by collaborating and engaging with others and analyzing data to make informed decisions, calculate risks, identify trends and gaps, thereby reducing the need for reactionary decision-making (Johnson & Jones, 2017).

Presidents also may frame meaning about their institution by their communications and messages to campus constituents in order to inform the college community of ongoing strategic planning and changes (Eddy, 2010). As the management of higher education institutions has gotten more complex, shared governance by college leaders has been utilized among campus communities (Phillips, Sweet, & Blythe, 2011; Kurland, 2013; Taylor, 2013).

Leadership traits that traditionally have been associated with masculine characteristics, have been researched and has found that female presidents utilized feminine-associated leadership approaches, including the use of emotions; relationship-building; clear, direct, and open communications; processes; and non-leader centric and non-hierarchical approaches to leadership (Wheat & Hill, 2016).

College presidents should develop relationships with internal and external stakeholders in order to gain the necessary support to lead the institution effectively. Respectively, to build successful relationships, leaders need to possess essential skills in interpersonal communication and network development. According to the Aspen Institute (2013), community college governing boards value presidents with exceptional communication skills and who have the ability to develop relationships with employers and workforce organizations, political interests, and local community leaders.

Literature has discussed the importance that college presidents should place on sharpening interpersonal communication skills that are essential when developing relationships and collaborating with key stakeholders, including governing boards and those outside of academia, as gaining confidence and support from stakeholders is critical for achieving goals and objectives (Eddy & Drake, 2008; Eddy, 2012; Teker & Atan, 2014). Perceptions of trust among higher education leaders, particularly influenced by personality, culture, motivation, values, reliability, competence, and intuition, has been found as a key variable that determines successful relationships, as shown in a trust-centered, integrated approach model (Migliore, 2012).

Qualitative studies have found that organizational strategies focused on key areas such as prioritizing goals and objectives; programming; and advocacy of the institutional mission (Eddy & Drake, 2008; Eddy, 2012). Organizational change is inevitable in any organization, as research has found that institutional conflict was common for all presidents that attempted to navigate a change process, however, presidents that possessed data analysis, communication, and transparency leadership skills, were better prepared to impact change efforts and reduce resistance to proposals for change initiatives (Gearin, 2017)

Greater emphasis has been placed on financial analysis, fundraising, and budget management competencies of college leaders, particularly presidents and chancellors (Teker & Atan, 2014). The Aspen Institute (2013) described that fiscal management ability and fundraising capacity were among qualities that community college trustees valued most of presidents. For instance, particular to presidents of small, rural community colleges, that have limited resources, understanding resource management has been key to managing limited assets and capital (Eddy & Drake, 2008; Eddy, 2012), as rural settings can offer unique challenges that differ from urban or suburban settings (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007).

However, political conflict, internal and external pressures, and fiscal stress have been found to effect presidential turnover within community colleges (Tekniepe, 2014). For instance, college leaders may agree that fundraising should also be a governing board's role, but ultimately, institutional leaders may rather have autonomy to make financial decisions (Smith & Miller, 2015), which can create conflicts among key stakeholders. Therefore, it is vital for college presidents to seek opportunities to develop professionally as effective leaders and communicators. This may explain why literature has focused on the nature of effective training programs for university presidents (Teker & Atan, 2014).

The importance of professional development for college presidents can be observed by the number of leadership training programs developed by organizations. For instance, some have argued that community college leadership programs have been well positioned to prepare potential leaders if they engage such training programs (Forthun & Freeman, 2017). Several organizations have provided professional development for college leaders, including presidents. Some offer research on competencies, skills, and qualities that exceptional presidents have possessed during their tenures.

The American Association for Community Colleges (AACC) have developed the Competencies for Community College Leaders, and are categorized along a leadership continuum that progresses through three stages: emerging leaders, newly established leaders, and leaders with

three or more years of experience in their positions (AACC, 2013). Competencies were in areas of organizational Strategy; institutional finance, research, fundraising and resource management; communication; collaboration; and community college advocacy. Research has documented the application of the AACC competencies and how presidents have utilized such skills in their positions (Eddy & Drake, 2008; McNair, Eddy 2010; Eddy 2012a; Eddy 2012b; Duree, & Ebbers, 2011; Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Ceida & Jolly, 2012/2013; Ottenritter, 2012; Wallin, 2012). Other research, however, has challenged the works of researchers that solely identify certain leadership competencies, rather than focus on activities, such as professional development and community activities that have helped presidents learn the skills perceived to be important when developing the AACC leadership competencies (Ceida & Jolly, 2013).

The Aspen Institute has conducted qualitative research and gathered data from college presidents and higher education experts, and found qualities of exceptional community college presidents such as, commitment to student access; willingness to take risks to improve student outcomes; collaboration; communication skills, such as interpersonal; data and analytical skills; planning; strategic vision; relationship; fundraising and allocating resources. Additionally, they interviewed search consultants to understand the qualities that governing boards value and prioritize when they interview and hire new presidents or chancellors. They include fiscal management ability, fundraising capacity, external relationship-building skills, communication skills, and ethical and risk-averse behavior (Aspen Institute, 2013).

The American Council on Education (ACE), since 1988, has published the American College President Study 2017, a source of information about the college presidency and higher education leadership, including duties and responsibilities. The perceptions of college presidents described the top five areas that occupy a president's time, including budget and financial management, fundraising (65% presidents reporting), managing a senior-level team, governing board relations, and enrollment management (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017).

Further college presidents perceived the top five frustrations about their position, included never having enough funds; faculty's resistance to change; and a lack of time to think and reflect (44% of presidents reporting); problems inherited from the previous leadership; and the belief by others that presidents are infinitely accessible. Finally, college presidents' perceptions of internal and external constituents, such as the most and least supportive constituents, 55% of presidents reported that the provost was the most supportive internal constituent and the least supportive were students, followed by faculty. Respectively, the most supportive external constituent was the Board of Regents and the least supportive being state legislatures.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) developed the State College/University Presidential Competency Model that have provided higher education leaders with competencies that involve management, interpersonal communication, personal characteristics, and leadership. Management competencies included the knowledge of the academic enterprise, business enterprise management, and resource development and stewardship. Interpersonal competencies that were critical for presidents included formal and informal communication, positive engagement, relationship development and maintenance, and climate creation and maintenance. Personal characteristics, included integrity, servant leadership, and continuous self-development. Finally, leadership competencies, included problem-solving,

people and team development, strategic visioning, and adversity leadership management (American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU], 2016).

Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence and Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities ranked six skills that presidents possessed when they assumed office, including, strategic leadership, communication and storytelling, fundraising, collaboration, financial and operational knowledge, and academic leadership (Selingo, Chheng, & Clark, (2017).

### Discussion

As the academy has changed, so has the leadership necessary for guiding and stewarding these institutions into the future. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, changes in how students regard a 'college education,' what they expect from the experience, what faculty members expect and require to conduct their work in a meaningful way, and of course, what the public and external stakeholders expect from their respective institutions. All of these forces collide around the leader at the helm of an institution.

The literature reviewed in this critical analysis highlights the need for leaders to have strong, effective, and clear communication skills. Communication skills range from speaking to listening, and do not necessarily simply mean that a president (or chancellor) simply needs to increase the quantity of communication episodes. Perhaps the opposite is somewhat true; presidential leaders need to be intentional in how they communicate, and the use of social media may indeed heighten visibility, but might actually damage the communication process. Communication means that leaders listen to those around them and actually hear and understand the concerns, ideas, and thoughts of those working in the academy. This very process of hearing and responding and communicating ideas may actually be at the root of so much of the difficulty that college presidents experience.

Future research into the presidency, based on the research that has been conducted to date, needs to continue to focus on the skills, characteristics, and experiences necessary for a president to be effective. These studies should also focus on how presidents and other leaders interpret their charge to lead an institution and how this interpretation intersects with personal and professional ambition, institutional capacity, competing stakeholder demands, and even the politics of state legislatures.

The future of higher education is only as strong as the leadership in which institutions invest, and with so little investment to date, the entire higher education industry should be concerned. Only through thoughtful, deliberate work studying the presidency and coaching new presidents can the future of the academy be assured.

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