



Pathways to the University Presidency

By Sonny Chheng and Cole Clark

What trajectory do the career paths of university presidents take? What does it take to excel in the role of college president today? How are the dynamics of higher education in the United States driving a new skill set and needed capabilities for tomorrow's leaders? How can trustees and institution executives better prepare and select the next generation of presidents?

Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence, in partnership with Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities, sought to answer these questions in a recent study, the findings of which provide insight into how university presidents get to the top job on campus, what skills are needed most when they assume the role, what presidents consider to be their most important responsibilities as CEO, and future challenges for campus leaders.

A Quick History of the College Presidency

Today's college presidents are often compared to corporate CEOs; however, in the early years of American higher education, they were often seen as little more than an extension of the faculty. Most presidents were clergymen who regularly taught classes, rarely traveled far from the campus, and even prided themselves on knowing every student by name.

At the turn of the 20th century, the college presidency started to take on an expanded role, as institutions increased their academic offerings. Out went the ministers as presidents, and in came more professional administrators. A 1930s-era book about college presidents described the job as "the business manager of a great plant, a lobbyist often at the general assembly of the state ... and a peripatetic raiser of funds."

The decades after World War II — with the arrival of Baby Boomers to campuses and new federal spending with the onset of the Cold War — marked a new role for presidents as dominant figures in higher education's expansion. The economic slowdown of the mid-1970s, and the resulting cuts in federal and state higher education spending, meant that college governing boards started to look for leaders who could be better fiscal managers and, increasingly, fundraisers. In 1976, former University

of California president Clark Kerr described presidents hired in the 1950s, '60s and '70s as "kind of out of date," adding that the presidential type now needed was a "a kind of super-accountant." It was in these waning years of the 20th century that the college presidency began to turn into more of a profession sought by academics who switched jobs every few years and navigated through campus bureaucracies to better learn how to run complex institutions. Searches for presidents grew longer and more extensive and were managed by executive search firms that increasingly focused solely on higher education.

In 1986, the American Council on Education (ACE) published its first study of the college president. It found that campus leaders were mostly white males in their early 50s. Four in 10 presidents at the time were in their 40s, and most came to the position through the provost's office. In subsequent surveys since then, ACE found that little has changed about the people holding the top job on

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campuses — except that they are graying and not staying in the role as long. Today, nearly six in 10 presidents are in their 60s, and their average tenure in the job is seven years, down from eight-and-a-half years a decade ago.

Study Findings

The Deloitte-Georgia Tech study, *Pathways to the University Presidency: The Future of Higher Education Leadership*, included a survey of more than 150 current four-year college and university presidents, in-depth interviews with two dozen presidents and trustees, and data mined from more than 800 CVs of sitting presidents. Here's what we found:

The Pathway to the Presidency Varies

While the provost's office has long been the most frequent stopover point on the way to the presidency, the paths prospective presidents now take are becoming more complex, fragmented and overlapping. Today's provosts

often have a set of skills that complement the president, rather than replicate them. The shift in responsibilities means that the provost's role might not always be the best preparation for the presidency, especially if the provost is involved primarily with academic affairs and internal issues.

"There is a bit of separation occurring between the provost and the president," a trustee at a large public research university told us. The provost is focused "inward and down," working with faculty and students on the academic experience. Meanwhile, the president is looking "up and out," focused on relations with the governing board, the public, alumni and in many cases, political leaders.

There is increasing pressure on presidents to get quick wins, and as a result, many are looking for the proverbial low-hanging fruit on their campuses where they can show fast results.

Academic deans are increasingly moving right to the top job and bypassing the provost's office altogether. This is particularly the case at small colleges, where leading the institution as a whole is akin to the dean's job at a large university. Deans these days are essentially mini-presidents and are seen as academic entrepreneurs on campuses with decentralized budgeting models.

The president of a small liberal arts college told us in an interview that the route from dean to president is a recognition that higher education's often lengthy and sluggish climb to the top of the organization doesn't work for a new generation of leaders. "Highly creative people need faster paths, or they are going to go elsewhere to find them," the president said. "It is difficult to speed up the traditional route. We need to find ways to promote people more quickly, and we need quicker paths to the presidency than through the provost's office."

Women more than men still come to the presidency from the provost role (82 percent of women presidents came from the provost role, whereas 57 percent of men did). There is also a significant gender gap between the traditional provost pathway and the fast track from dean. It's much more common for women to stop at the provost's

office on their way to the presidency. According to our study, three times as many men as women went right to the presidency from the dean's office.

Strategy and Communication Skills Trump Academic Leadership Skills

In our survey, presidents told us that being an "academic and intellectual leader" ranked last among a set of skills and behaviors most needed when they assumed office. At the top of the list: strategist, communicator and storyteller. Veteran presidents think of higher education as a collegial, intellectual community where they are the academic leader. New presidents see themselves through a financial and operational lens and as a leader who needs to get things

done despite the collaborative nature of campuses. Presidents in the job for more than 15 years value academic and intellectual skills and consider the provost as their likely successor; presidents with less than a decade of experience say

financial and operational acumen is most important, and say the person next in line for the role will most likely come from the private sector.

Presidents Must Serve as Fundraisers-in-Chief, But Aren't Necessarily Prepared to Do So

Fundraising is essential from a president's first day in office, and only grows in importance over time in the job. According to the presidents who participated in our study, a college president's most important responsibilities are strategic planning (20 percent) and fundraising/alumni/donor relations (20 percent), followed by enrollment management (16 percent), trustee relations (15 percent) and budgeting (12 percent). Sixty-five percent of total respondents believe that fundraising/alumni/donor relations ranks among the top three most important responsibilities in their current role, and 50 percent believe that fundraising has increased in importance since they assumed their role.

Past surveys of presidents dating back more than a decade have diagnosed the gap between the importance of fundraising in the top job and the lack of training for it. The results of our survey show that despite the attention given to this issue over the past several years, preparing presidents to cultivate donors hasn't improved much,

if at all. When asked to gauge their preparedness to provide oversight on a range of campus issues, presidents ranked fundraising/alumni/donor relations sixth out of 10 — below strategic planning, community relations and budgeting.

There's a Need for Leadership Development for Presidents

The presidents we surveyed identified leadership development as the second most important professional training opportunity on the job (after fundraising). “Leadership development is stigmatized in higher education,” the president of a public university told us. “There is knowledge out there that can help people become better leaders, but it’s vilified among faculty members who don’t understand it.”

Unlike chief executives of Fortune 500 companies who tend to go to business school and are groomed by organizations for the top role, being a college president has historically involved mostly on-the-job training. Nearly two-thirds of presidents surveyed said they had coaches or mentors to help them prepare for the role, but only one-third indicated that they still receive coaching to succeed in the job. Investments in leadership often lag behind their importance to presidents.

There's an Emphasis on Short-Term Wins at the Cost of Long-Term Planning

Our survey found that there is increasing pressure on presidents to get quick wins. As a result, many are looking for the proverbial low-hanging fruit on their campuses where they can show fast results, not only for their own boards but also for search committees for their next job. This short-term thinking surfaces in a variety of ways, including academic programming tied to the current job market; technology purchases that simply patch rather than solve problems; enrollment plans that ignore demographic shifts among students; fundraising that focuses on immediate dollars rather than building a pipeline for future commitments; and strategic plans that are completely rewritten each time a new president is installed.

“Presidents approach their job with the expectation that they’ll be judged on what they can finish,” said the president of a private university. “They think, ‘I’ll only be here five years, so I should only focus on what I can do in that time before I move on.’ They run their schools like pseudo-corporations. It’s short-term thinking. You might satisfy the immediate issue of the day, but this is unsustainable as a model.”

Strategies to Address the Challenges

Based on our research, we’ve identified five strategies and approaches higher education can use that can help improve the pipeline to the presidency and can give the next generation of campus leaders the opportunity for effective tenures.

1) Develop intentional training and leadership development opportunities aimed at prospective college presidents. Many leaders in higher education no longer have the time to learn on the job or become adequately trained within the narrow scope of senior-level positions that historically have led to the presidency. Therefore, institutions should consider professional development opportunities for those in the presidency pipeline that give them the big-picture view of the institution and its various functions and academic disciplines, as well as higher education as an industry.

2) Align short-term tactics and long-term strategies. There are few incentives to encourage leaders to experiment with new ideas and models for the future. Too many governing boards and presidents are worried about the near term and thus focus on quick wins that might result in a publicity spike or help in the rankings. Higher education is a long game; the most fundamental role presidents play is unlocking the capacity of the institution to support its mission and the community members engaged in its work. Boards should set clear long-range goals for presidents and evaluate them not only on their annual performance, but also how well they are progressing toward the more distant horizon.

3) Help search committees gain a better understanding of the role of the presidency and set up a transition team to onboard the president. The group responsible for hiring presidents often lacks deep understanding of the job. The search committees should include sitting presidents or former chief executives who can provide the best perspective to committee members on the skills and competencies needed in the role. Search committees should also avoid ending their work once the president is hired. Presidents need assistance in the transition to the role, and search committees should be reconstituted into transition committees, or a transition coach should be hired to help the new president build momentum for the first few months in office.

4) Develop a willingness to look beyond traditional backgrounds. Search committees pay lip service to nontraditional candidates, but rarely take the risk of actually hiring them. What's more, academic leaders typically bristle at the prospect of a new president who comes from a nontraditional background. Given the diverse set of skills needed to run institutions these days and with provosts increasingly saying they don't want to be presidents, search committees may have little choice but to consider candidates from nontraditional backgrounds. Being transparent and following a well-publicized process in the search to gain buy-in from stakeholders can be critical to gaining acceptance of these new leaders.

5) Build relationships with various stakeholders both on- and off-campus. Presidents are hired by a board and report to a board, but when on campus, most of the

interaction presidents have is with faculty and students. The latter group, in particular, is gaining influence on campuses, and presidents would be wise to pay attention to the rising activism among their ranks. The presidency has largely become an external job, and as a result, presidents spend their time increasingly off campus. College leaders should spend more time on campus engaging with faculty members and students and weaving themselves into the fabric of the institution they represent on a daily basis. 

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