A Strategy for Succession Planning
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Many higher education institutions struggle with misperceptions, language and “business sounding” terms when it comes to succession planning. Several years ago, when one university began formulating its long-term plan for filling senior leadership positions, terminology proved to be key. At the first planning meeting, it took more than an hour for the group to even get past the term “succession planning” (which some felt implied some sort of corporate exercise that resulted in a secret book of pre-selected individuals). Once the talent management director suggested the term “leadership pipeline,” all was good and everyone was on board.

Regardless of what you choose to call it — succession planning, leadership pipeline, talent management — the bottom line is this: developing leaders from within may be the single most important exercise for the sustainability and future of your institution.

So let’s look at what succession planning is (and what it isn’t), why it’s important in higher education, how to get started on a succession planning strategy at your institution and what tools you can use to facilitate succession planning.

What Is Succession Planning?
According to Wikipedia, succession planning is “a process for identifying and developing internal people with the potential to fill key business leadership positions in a company [or organization]. Succession planning increases the availability of experienced and capable employees that are prepared to assume these roles as they become available.” It is the focus on leaders that distinguishes succession planning from the more general workforce planning — which is more about identifying overall workforce needs and future gaps.

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Your Own Leadership Development
Succession planning, which typically focuses on the most critical positions in an organization, is a deliberate, proactive approach that leaves little to chance, either due to unforeseen circumstances or expected incidents like retirements. In order for succession planning to work for your institution, you must define it in relation to your institution’s needs, priorities, mission and goals. You can use what others have developed as a place to start, but you must ultimately determine what it means to your college or university and then make it your own.

And succession planning benefits more than just the organization. One of the main reasons individuals leave organizations is to take on jobs with additional responsibility. A well-planned, well-documented succession planning process ensures that key talent, especially individuals aspiring to senior positions, have a clear career path within an organization. This means clearly articulating the competencies required for senior positions, providing ways for individuals to hone these skills, and utilizing appropriate performance evaluations to guide them along their way.

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We are all looking, are there enough “experienced” candidates in the market? Some institutions are looking outside of higher education to fill key roles like chief financial officer, chief HR officer, chief information officer and even president and chancellor. If institutions place a greater emphasis on succession planning, they wouldn’t have to look very far to find their next senior administrator (and the pipeline would be better populated with qualified candidates).

• **Unique positions.** Higher education has a tendency to be very specific in requirements and not always open to transferable skills, which may limit building a deep and diverse pool of candidates. With fewer individuals qualifying for positions, it is even more important to plan and strategize for potential vacancies.

• **Institutional continuity.** If we always look outside our institutions, we create steep and urgent learning curves that can slow momentum. New outside individuals often do not know the institutional/organizational culture which can help leaders as they contemplate new direction and change.

• **Return on investment.** If we have an effective succession planning process, we can reduce the costs of recruitment, external search firms and relocation for some key positions.

• **Employee engagement.** How employees feel about institutional leadership has a direct correlation to their level of engagement. Having a leadership pipeline stocked with individuals already familiar with and committed to the institutional mission, vision, values and culture will help convey a sense of

Making the Case for Succession Planning in Higher Education

Developing internal talent to fill key leadership positions has long been a staple of the corporate business model. Although succession planning has yet to catch on in colleges and universities like it has in the corporate world, there are many reasons it should be utilized in higher education. Here are a few:

• **Aging workforce.** Demographics show that at many institutions, 25 to 35 percent of the workforce is over the age of 55. The percent of institutional leaders in this demographic is even higher. In light of these statistics, and for the sake of business continuity, institutions must identify and begin to prepare their next wave of leaders.

• **Fewer qualified individuals in the pipeline.** There are many open searches for key leadership positions at colleges and universities around the country. If
continuity during times of change. If that continuity is there, a campus community has a greater likelihood of embracing change and remaining committed to the mission.

Where Do We Begin?
If your institution has a strategic plan, diversity and inclusion goals, HR metrics, leadership development programs or resources, and well-established search processes, you already have a good, solid foundation for a succession plan.

The first step in creating a succession planning strategy is to assemble a planning team. This team should include the leaders of the institution along with a human resources leader. The role of the HR leader is key to framing the strategy and keeping it at the forefront of the leadership team’s annual work. The first order of business for this group should be to develop a clear vision of what a succession plan should look like, why it’s needed and desired outcomes. This information will provide the framework for the entire strategy.

Once you’ve determined the “what” and “why,” the next step is to identify the key leadership positions that are critical to the success of your college or university. Here’s where your institution’s strategic plan will come into play — it dictates where you are headed, so use it to also determine who needs to lead you there. For example, if student recruitment is key to the plan, then your senior student recruitment positions need to be part of your succession planning strategy. If your institution needs to dramatically reduce expenses or administrative overhead, then the chief financial officer and other similar positions need to be included. If your institution is considering massive changes to academic programs, the provost will be a key position in your succession planning strategy.

As part of the process of identifying these positions, you will also want to determine when they are likely to become vacant due to retirements or other known circumstances (HR metrics or planning reports can provide demographic data and can help you determine who might be leaving when).

After you’ve identified the key positions that will be included in your succession plan (and know that these may be fluid and may well change down the line, reflecting shifting institutional priorities and/or goals), it’s time to identify desired leadership competencies, both general competencies and skill sets and position-specific competencies. Once you’ve fleshed out these core competencies, the next step is to begin identifying individuals that would be a good fit for each position (your institution’s diversity and inclusion plan should guide your efforts here).

Remember, you’re not yet assigning specific individuals to specific roles, you’re simply identifying individuals with leadership potential. And take care not to fall into the “silo” mentality (thinking that only those with detailed experience in defined areas can be considered). You should be considering individuals who may not have specific experience in certain areas but who demonstrate a readiness in terms of leadership potential, vision and strategy.

After you’ve identified potential successors for your key positions, you’ll need to evaluate individuals’ readiness for these positions, identify any skills gaps and create or adjust development plans accordingly. The planning team should discuss readiness at length — what “ready” looks like in terms of actions, behaviors, success, etc. for positions and for individuals. A good guideline for readiness can be in terms of time, such as being ready to step into a role now, ready in one to three years, ready in three to five years, and so on.

The performance evaluation process is critical to succession planning and should be tied to the competencies for leadership. All good evaluations focus on individual development. It is a best practice to require all individuals to have an individual development plan (IDP) as an extension of the review/evaluation process. Effective evaluations and a comprehensive IDP are key to building a pathway to leadership development.

Succession Planning Tools
There are several strategies, tools and techniques that you can use to facilitate succession planning at your institution. Here are a few:

- **Structured leadership development programs.**
  A good leadership development program includes opportunities for self-reflection and feedback. Both of these elements along with development activities can add to an individual development plan.

- **Developing replacement strategies.**
  Your institution should identify and develop a “balanced” look at succession planning. Although it’s ideal to promote from within, sometimes circumstances or situations dictate that successors come from outside
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**Inside Track**

Succession planning is proving to be a key emerging issue for higher education. Based on economics alone, the higher ed model will require transformational change over the next several years in order to remain sustainable and viable. And who better to lead this change for your college or university than your own people — those who are already familiar with all the nuances and anomalies that make your institution unique; those who know inside and out the culture and climate of your campus; those who live the school’s mission day in and day out?

True transformative change requires dynamic and talented leadership, and succession planning can help you cultivate these types of leaders on your campus.

**Diversity goals/plans.** It is a must to mesh your institution’s overall goals for diversity and inclusion with your succession planning process.

**Workforce plans.** Metrics analysis (especially of retirements, turnover and general workforce needs) will help provide key information for your succession planning strategy.

**Formal and informal mentoring programs.** All high-potential individuals should be encouraged to seek out mentorship opportunities, and all institutions should have a mentoring program.

**Leadership feedback (360s).** Multi-source feedback is how an individual will progress through his or her individual development plan and display readiness for leadership opportunities.

**Identification of developing managers.** Part of the succession planning process is developing and maintaining a list of individuals with leadership potential. New managers will be great candidates for this list. This is where your institution can begin to build bench strength.

**System tools (online profile management and performance tracking).** There are many online tools available to facilitate your performance evaluation process. Competency libraries, tracking mechanisms and position maps can add a sense of value and depth to performance evaluations.

**Third-party executive assessments.** External coaching and development processes can often be a great option for identifying your current situations and possible opportunities for development for individuals and your process.

**Engagement surveys.** The campus community will feel more involved and engaged if you ask them about your institution’s current leadership actions and direction. These types of surveys can also help you develop a better overall plan and approach for succession planning.