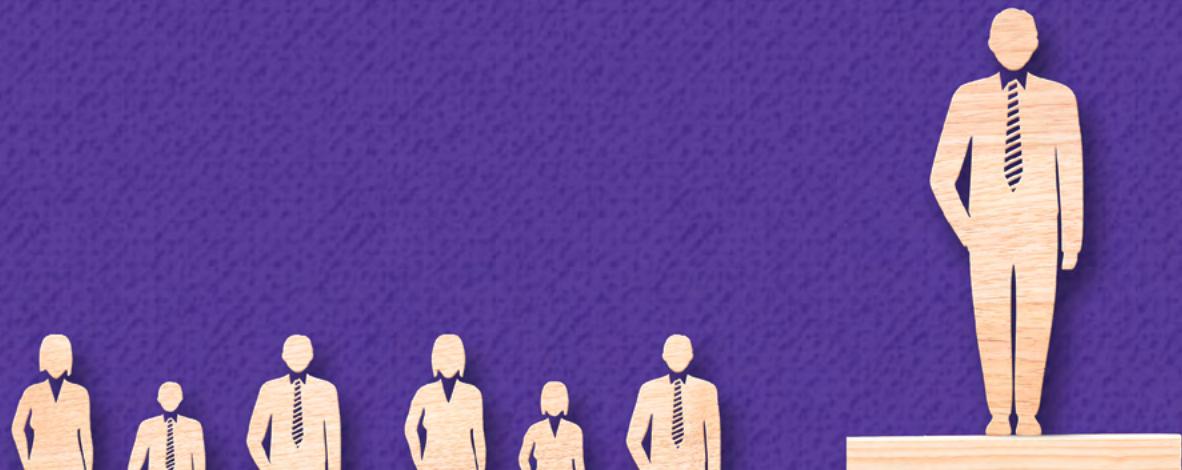


# Who's Next?

## A Model for Developing an Internal Talent Pipeline

By Missy Kline



The higher education workforce is aging. Data from CUPA-HR show that the median age of executive leaders (deans, provosts, presidents, vice presidents) is 60. The majority of faculty are between the ages of 55 and 75. The median age of chief HR officers is 55. About half of higher ed staff are at least 50 years old, and 37 percent are 55 or older.

While succession planning is widely used in the corporate world to ensure a pipeline of internal talent is primed and ready to fill the gaps when they arise, higher education has been slow to adopt this philosophy. But as a large portion of the higher ed workforce creeps ever closer to retirement, institutions would be well served to begin identifying positions that may become vacant in the next five to 10 years and individuals who might be good candidates to fill these vacancies.

University of Tennessee (UT) has recently begun to tackle the challenges related to a looming retirement boom on its seven campuses with a straightforward, simple, low-cost, replicable succession planning and leadership development model.

### The Catalyst: Looming Retirements at the Executive Level

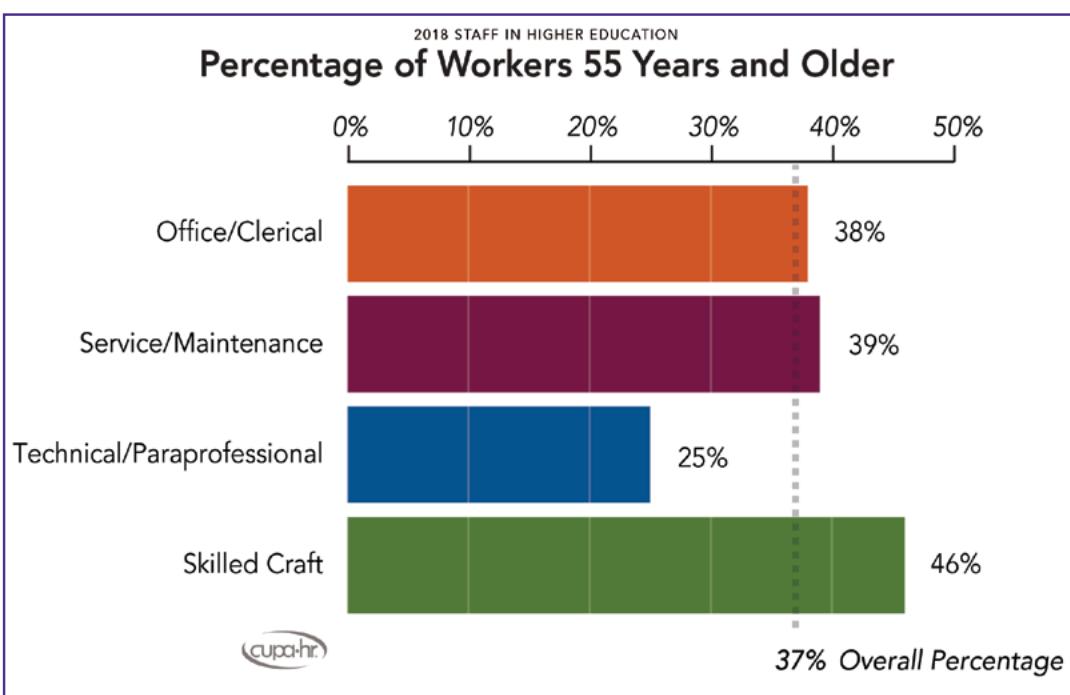
In 2016, the UT System's board of trustees asked the system president and chancellors to create a path forward for potential successors for the 70 percent of the university's executive leaders that are at or near retirement age. While there were some successful pockets of succession planning and leadership development happening in various areas across the institution, there was a lack of consistency across the system as a whole, and there was no plan in place for top-level leadership positions.

The president tapped the System Office's human resources leaders to head up the project, and Ron Tredway, executive director of employee and organizational development for the UT System, along with the system's vice president of HR served as project co-leads. With the help of a consultant, they were able to build out a simple succession planning model for the president's direct reports — looking at their roles and responsibilities and developing competencies around those as well as identifying some potential successors and putting together a plan to develop those individuals toward those higher-level positions.

With the model having been successfully implemented at the cabinet level, HR began to think about how it could be emulated for other high-turnover and hard-to-fill positions across the institution.

### False Starts and the Need to Reframe

By nature of the industry, succession planning in higher education differs from succession planning in the corporate sector. In the business world, if an individual is tapped to be groomed for a higher-level position, he or she is all but guaranteed the job down the line. However, in higher ed, that guarantee can't exist. And that, says Tredway, is why they encountered resistance when introducing the model to other campus areas. "Some leaders were hesitant to invest the time, resources and emotions into developing successors toward a certain role without assurance that those individuals would be placed in the role when it opened up," he says. "Since we couldn't make those



guarantees, we had to take a step back and look at the way we were framing the notion of ‘succession planning.’” This is where the concept of “developing leaders” came into play. “I actually prefer the term ‘leadership planning’ over ‘succession planning,’ and we use that verbiage as often as we can,” says Tredway. “We want individuals who are identified as potential successors to have the mindset that even if they don’t end up in the role for which they’ve been developed, they have still gained valuable leadership skills — and as an investment by the university.”

The HR team also quickly realized that some campuses and areas of campus were more ready than others to embrace the concept of succession planning, which led them to take another step back and determine who to partner with on a smaller scale. Says Tredway, “We decided that instead of trying to force the matter, we’d start with the campuses and areas on those campuses that were ready and willing to embrace the model and make the commitment and put in the work.”

### A Seven-Step Model

The University of Tennessee’s succession planning model looks like this:

#### Step 1: Confirm Commitment

Once a department or area of campus expresses interest in succession planning/leadership development for their

area, they must complete a commitment confirmation. This consists of the organization leader completing a checklist and answering some questions to check their readiness level for the change upon which they’ll be embarking. They’re also tasked with identifying succession planning focus areas and the responsible leader(s) or manager(s). Says Tredway, “We want to make sure everyone is in the know on what this process will look like, what the expectations are and how they can be successful.”

#### Step 2: Identify Key Positions

In the second step, the area leader identifies the positions most in need of a succession plan — those that are traditionally hard to fill, have the greatest complexity and/or where the incumbent is likely to leave in the next one to three years. Tredway stresses the importance of being selective and strategic about which positions are chosen for succession planning, as some are more critical than others. The area leader then works with HR to prioritize the positions selected based on mission criticality and imminences of loss.

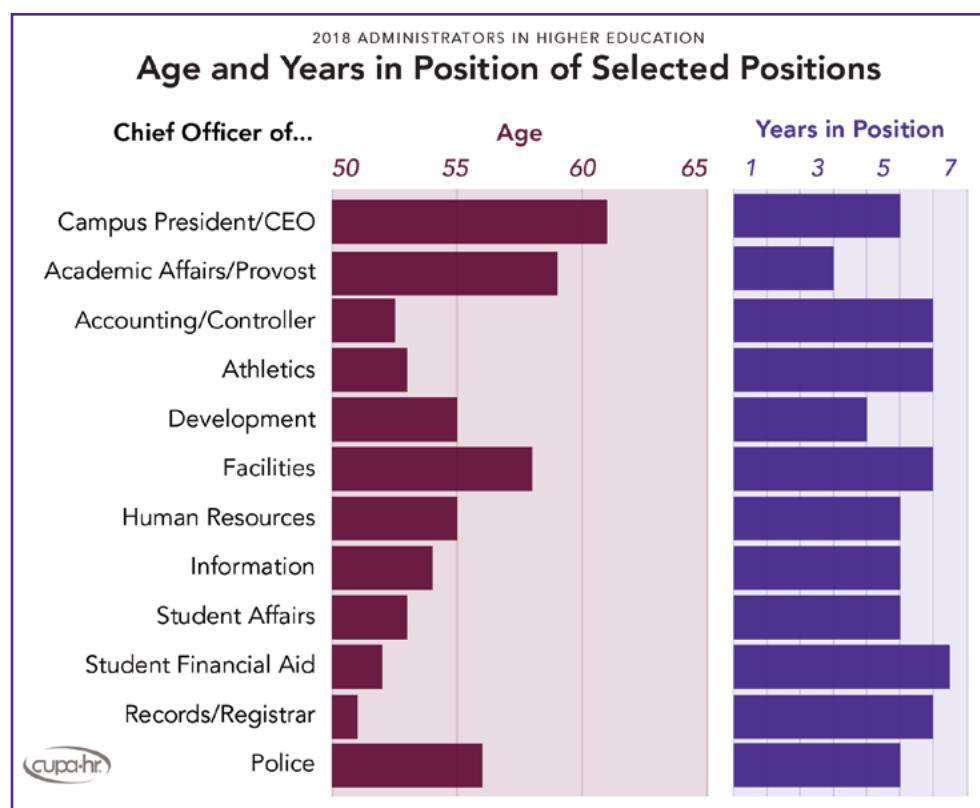
#### Step Three: Develop Position Competencies

Next, the area leader or hiring managers work with HR and the incumbent to develop and confirm the required and desired competencies (including position-type, position-specific, core and technical) and desired proficiency levels for the positions chosen. Says Tredway,

“It’s critical for HR to work in collaboration with the hiring managers in developing these competencies, because not all managers understand what competencies are or how to identify them.”

#### Step Four: Identify Potential Successors

While there are several ways to go about identifying potential successors (self-identification, nomination by a supervisor, nomination by peers, etc.), Tredway says it’s important to establish criteria that will be used consistently to minimize potential bias. It’s also important to make sure the



identified individuals are invested and committed — and understand that they aren't guaranteed a job.

### **Step Five: Assess the Competencies of Potential Successors**

In UT's model, potential successors are assessed on their proficiencies around the competencies identified for the role. Assessments are administered in several ways — by supervisors, by executives the individual may have interacted with, by their peers, and through self-assessment techniques. If there are multiple candidates for the same position, supervisors or area leaders must prioritize the development of the candidates based on available resources.

### **Step Six: Create a Development Plan for the Potential Successor**

The hiring manager or supervisor then works with the identified potential successors to create an individual development plan focusing on the competencies in which they are lacking for the position to which they're aspiring. "We encourage them to keep it simple, with one to three development actions to start, and then add on as needed," says Tredway.

### **Step Seven: Periodically Review the Actions**

Finally, managers and supervisors should develop a plan for reviewing progress on potential successors' individual development plans and the succession planning process outcomes. Says Tredway, "There should be a clear alignment between the potential successor's individual development plan and the individual's annual performance review."

### **Training and Funding**

Before the succession plan model was put in place, System Office HR trained all of the university's HR officers on what succession planning means for the university, what the seven-step model looks, where it requires consistency, where it has flexibility, and on the related documents and processes. "This enabled us all to be on the same page across all of our campuses and paved the way for our HR officers to educate their constituents and help us roll out the model," says Tredway.

As far as funding the development of potential successors, this falls to the department or area in which the position resides. However, says Tredway, the cost is not prohibitive. By using free online resources, existing professional development on campus, mentoring, coaching, committee appointments, shared assignments, dedicated project leadership, cross-functional exchanges and/or job

shadowing, development of key position competencies may be realized with minimal to no additional cost to the department.

### **Implementation at UT Health Sciences Center**

Three campuses across the UT System agreed to pilot the model in various areas, and the Health Sciences Center (UTHSC) was one of these campuses. UTHSC's associate vice chancellor of human resources, Chandra Alston, found a champion for succession planning in executive vice chancellor and chief operations officer Kennard Brown. In fact, he agreed to pilot the program on some of his 14 direct-report positions. The pilot just recently got underway.

### ***A Focus on High-Risk, Hard-to-Fill Positions***

While several positions under Brown's leadership are included in UTHSC's succession planning initiative, three are especially hard-to-fill, high-risk positions — facilities director, police captain and death investigator. Brown and Alston are hoping to see the fruits of their succession planning labor with these positions especially.

**Director of Facilities:** UTHSC's current facilities director has been in that role for 44 years and will be retiring in the next couple of years. According to Alston, the level of specialized knowledge (on everything from HVAC to construction to contracting work and more) and the range of competencies required of a facilities director make this position tough to fill. Add to that the fact that the Health Sciences Center has not had to look for new talent for this role in nearly half a century, says Alston, and it made perfect sense to include it in the succession planning pilot.

**Police Captain:** The police captain role at UTHSC has been unfilled for the past five years. According to Alston, several internal employees have shown interest in the position throughout the years, but because the department was without leadership (a police chief) for a while as well, those employees had not had the opportunity to be developed for that role.

**Death Investigators:** UTHSC manages the county's medical examiner's office, and with the high murder rate in Memphis (where the Health Sciences Center is located) death investigators work 24/7/365. These less-than-ideal working hours and the grim nature of the job make these positions hard to fill. But UTHSC has several autopsy technicians on its payroll, and through the succession planning program, some are now being developed for death investigator roles. "Our autopsy techs have much of the

same skill set, the same dedication, the same work ethic and strong stomach that our death investigators have, so it makes perfect sense to enable them to progress into that next role if they so choose.”

Alston says the pilot has thus far been well received at UTHSC. “Our employees are grateful for the opportunity to develop their skill sets and competencies, and can’t believe the university is footing the bill,” she says. “We’re confident we’ll realize the ROI down the road.”

### **UT Executive Leadership Institute**

Another realization from early implementation efforts of the leadership/succession planning model was the need for development of enterprise leaders — those with multifunctional, cross-campus responsibilities and accountability. Following the same seven-step model of succession planning and leadership development, the UT Executive Leadership Institute was initiated.

This 12-month program for executive leaders links the individual development plan (step 6) with dedicated investment of resources to develop competencies for aspiration positions at the enterprise level among nominated and selected potential successors. These individuals receive 360 feedback, leadership development training, executive coaching by external coaches and mentoring related to key position competencies. According to Tredway, this program helps connect the succession planning vision of the UT System board of trustees to the practical need of the university.

### **But What If They Leave?**

One of the reasons higher education has been slow to embrace succession planning is the fear that good employees might gain valuable leadership skills, not progress as quickly as they’d like (or at all) into the higher-level role, and subsequently take their newly-honed skills elsewhere. Tredway says this is an understandable concern, but not a good reason to not prepare your talent pool for the future. And, he counters, “What if you don’t provide development opportunities, and they stay? That puts us at a disadvantage when it comes to our talent management strategies. Our philosophy is, ‘We’d much rather invest in our people and then they leave than experience a talent shortage and not have internal talent developed to help address it.’”

While Tredway knows that the HR team will continue to see ongoing pockets of resistance around succession planning at the university, he’s also seeing more enthusiasm and interest in the concept as it continues to be introduced across the institution. “It’s all about investing in and developing the talent you have in order to meet the workforce demands of the next few years,” he says. “If you do it the right way and for the right reasons, it’s worth the time, energy and investment.” 

*The data graphs in this article represent findings from CUPA-HR's 2018 surveys of colleges and universities across the nation.*

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## **CUPA-HR Resources Related to Succession Planning and Workforce Continuity**

In CUPA-HR's Knowledge Center, you'll find toolkits on succession planning, workforce planning, mentoring and more ([www.cupahr.org/knowledge-center/toolkits](http://www.cupahr.org/knowledge-center/toolkits)).

On The Higher Ed Workplace blog ([www.cupahr.org/blog](http://www.cupahr.org/blog)), you can read about:

- Skilled Crafts: The Next Job Boom in Higher Ed?
- Short Tenure for Higher Ed's Top Leaders
- The Faculty Workforce Is Aging ... Is the Pipeline More Diverse?