

Succession Planning Takes Hold in Higher Education: Witt/Kieffer Survey of Presidents/Trustees

Colleges and universities have been slow to embrace corporate America's approach to formal succession planning for their executive leadership. To determine best practices in and barriers to leadership succession planning, Witt/Kieffer recently conducted a survey of college and university presidents and board members. We received 135 responses for an 8.4 percent response rate. Preliminary results were presented at the Association of Governing Board's April 2008 meeting in Boston. The survey's top findings are:

Colleges and universities are becoming aware of the need for succession planning.

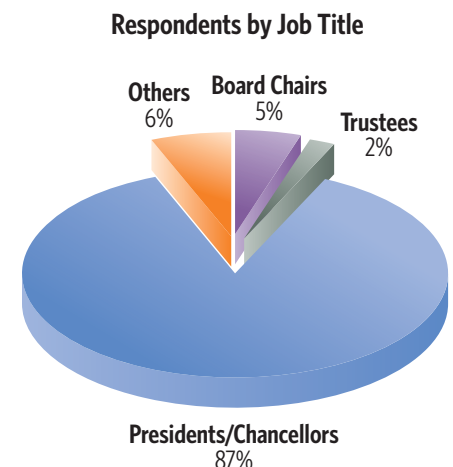
Most survey respondents (74 percent) report their institutions practice succession planning in some capacity. "We discovered about a year ago that in the next five years almost all of our key positions would be eligible for retirement and could walk out on the same day if they chose," according to one college president. "That really alarmed us and started our development of a comprehensive leadership development program across the university."

"We have been studying and planning for leadership succession for two years and I will be chair during the active selection process," one college trustee respondent writes. "I'm glad this topic has arisen at the Association of Governing Boards." Finally, one respondent states, "I succeeded a president who had served for 32 years. The board of trustees had never addressed succession planning until they began planning for a new president. Their level of awareness for the need for succession planning has increased over the last 18 months — but tradition, a stagnant leadership culture and scale of the institution are limiting factors."

Succession planning most often occurs at the board and president/chancellor level.

Among institutions where succession planning may be direct or in-direct, it appears to be focused on turnover at the board member/board leadership level (77 percent reporting). That's followed by succession planning at the senior administration level and president/chancellor level, both at 64 percent reporting. Fifty-nine (59) percent of respondents say their institutions conduct succession planning for chief academic officer and/or dean roles.

Where institutions want to begin succession planning or expand what they're already doing, they are most likely to focus on board members/leaders and/or presidents/chancellors, according to 71 percent of respondents. Furthermore, respondents believe the culture of their institutions is most likely to support succession planning at those levels. Beyond board and presidential/chancellorial succession planning, respondents are most likely to begin expanding succession planning for senior administration positions (55 percent) and chief academic officer and/or deans (49 percent).



Identifying and nurturing internal leaders is the most common succession planning practice.

As respondents anticipate turnover at all levels over the next five years, identifying and nurturing talent within the organization is the most common aspect of succession planning that their institutions would be willing to undertake. That is followed by:

- planning leadership transitions well in advance of the actual event;
- considering methodologies other than open searches (e.g. internal promotions) to fill key leadership positions; and
- creating or further developing a process of orienting and nurturing new leaders (“on boarding” in the acceptance parlance) that plans and executes a smooth and successful transition for the new leader

The negative perception of proactively identifying successors reinforces long-held beliefs that turnover in all positions requires an open, public search.

“National open searches are part of the culture,” states one college president. “This can be a problem where there is an obvious number two who can do the job but doesn’t want to take the risk of applying ... I have been able to manage this and talk persons into applying but I have also lost two really good candidates because of the commitment to open, public searches.” Similarly, a president from a community college responds, “I am not sure that most boards are willing to step out there to change practices and identify individuals who can be publicly identified and groomed to assume specific positions at the college. Some are willing to do this but far too many fear that faculty will not support a selection process in which they may have little if any input.” Finally, according to the president of a doctoral/research university, “There seems to be a cultural bias toward ‘open’ searches for senior leadership positions, and we rarely have the resources to hire and pay a successor before an incumbent is prepared to leave. I was able to do that with my CFO but it was not the norm.”

Balancing succession planning with a commitment to diversity is among the biggest challenges.

“The term ‘succession planning’ connotes place-base planning,” one university president observes. “The challenge then, for the university, is to balance succession planning with diversity goals. Many institutions do not have a diverse work force from which to attract diverse leaders, so the open search is their opportunity to attract diverse leaders. Otherwise, the institution just ends up cloning itself.” Another college president responds, “We have created expectations for extensive searches in order to achieve diversity objectives that make it hard to really engage in serious succession planning without making it appear as if a search is wired.”

Shared governance represents a major challenge to succession planning.

“With our system of ‘shared governance,’ in which there are legally prescribed roles for the regents, the system president, the faculty, the non-faculty staff and the students, it’s impossible for any administration to do the sort of succession planning that is common in private organizations,” responds one university president. Another college president indicates that while the institution is making progress to overcome shared governance barriers, the challenges are lack of trust and accountability in the process.

Succession planning must be transparent, participatory and part of overall professional development.

One college president describes stepping into the role as a result of a transparent succession planning process during which his appointment as acting president and a four-month selection process gave the board time to evaluate and prepare the respondent for the permanent position. “The process was extraordinarily transparent and open to all constituencies,” this college president reports. “I have heard nothing but positive feedback about the board’s approach to presidential succession, and as the successor,

I am quite pleased with the legitimacy of the process. I am now preparing the vice presidents for the next level of responsibility as part of their overall professional development.” A college trustee describes a process where the board identified attributes needed in a board chair and then asked board members who among them were most representative. The vice chair role also was used to identify future chairs. “While the final selection was managed mainly by the current chair, members of the Trustee Affairs committee, and the president,” according to the board chair respondent, “the process was more transparent than in the past, and more participatory. I think the outcome was salutary and all board members feel satisfied with the result.”

Succession planning must be intentional in colleges and universities.

Colleges and universities incur a variety of costs by not being intentional about succession planning. “Viable internal candidates for senior leadership positions may be easily lured away by other offers because the institution is incapable of making any type of forward commitment or even giving someone a reasonable assessment of their chances in a full search,” reports one university president/chancellor. According to another president/chancellor, “With a strong academic background in HR, I am committed to succession planning. I have asked each VP to mentor someone within their staffs to take their places. I have talked with board leadership about succession planning for the presidency.”

Succession planning in higher education requires new thinking and cultural change, but is overdue.

“Having come from a background in the for-profit sector where succession planning and implementation was common, it is interesting to experience higher education’s continuing resistance to such initiatives,” comments one president/chancellor. “When attempting to be open about presidential transition at my institution, I was cautioned by executive search firms that such plans would imply that the change was forced and not voluntary which could place me in professional jeopardy for a new position.”

“We tend to believe that every leader should come from far away. Succession planning is long overdue in the academy, but we’ll have to change culture to be fully integrated in a management/leadership strategy,” according to one college president/chancellor.

Open searches remain the norm and continue to bring value if colleges and universities remain open to new ideas, focus on long-term goals and high internal leadership standards.

Despite increasing calls for succession planning, open searches remain a deeply-rooted norm in higher education. Those searches are most valuable when institutions are open to new ideas and tie leadership standards to strategy and culture. “Normally, leadership positions in a national university should be filled by means of a national search which would include any qualified candidates. Not only does that add credibility to the one chosen, but oftentimes the search process exposes the institution to new ideas while at the same time allowing it to evaluate the position itself and its objectives,” states a board chair respondent.

“There are three keys to successful transitions,” responds another university president. “The first is to have strategic plans that are tied to current performance metrics and goals, but focused on long-term objectives that enjoy widespread support throughout the organization and for which there is a sense of common cause and ownership. The second key is to develop internal candidates for leadership roles so that there is always a high standard of capability within the organization against which to measure the qualities of outside candidates. Third, it is important to have a culture that embraces a common sense of purpose and aspirations in which there is not only no cult of personality but a genuine appreciation of people who put the community’s success ahead of their own recognition.”

Respondents by institution type

The chart below illustrates the breakdown of respondents by institution type. A combined 65 percent of survey respondents hail from master's or doctoral/research institutions (includes University I and II and Intensive and Extensive designations).

Doctoral/ Research University — Intensive	Doctoral/ Research University — Extensive	Master's College/ University I	Master's College/ University II	Baccalaureate College — General	Baccalaureate College — Liberal Arts	Associate's Degree Granting Institution	Other
15%	10%	28%	11%	13%	19%	3%	1%

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