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Higher Education Leaders of the Future: Emerging Issues and Responsibilities

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Every search for new institutional leadership, and especially a search for a new president or chancellor, reflects a vision for the institution's future. In some cases that vision is clearly articulated, as in a position description that states, "The new president will be asked to lead a strategic planning process followed by a capital campaign that attracts the resources necessary to fulfill the goals established during the planning process." In other cases, the vision is broad and almost inchoate, as in the very common formulation, "We are looking for a leader to take us to the next level." In order to be ready to lead institutions toward achieving a vision, however it may be defined, candidates for presidencies and other leadership roles will need to be ready to address some new issues. In this chapter, building on my experience as the consultant to hundreds of senior leadership searches in higher education, I will first explore emerging leadership responsibilities, and then speculate about the experience that leaders of the future will need and how future leaders might be developed. Those who aspire to presidencies in the future would do well to prepare themselves for these responsibilities today, and institutions should share some of the responsibility for developing these leaders.

Leadership Responsibilities: Core Issues and Emerging Issues

There are a few core responsibilities associated with the presidency that are not likely to change; I would describe these as leadership, management and resource development. The president is uniquely responsible for leading, including articulating a shared vision and engaging others in its implementation. The president is the chief manager, putting in motion a strategic planning process, defining an approach to financial management, and establishing a general sense of how the institution is to be run. And the president is ultimately responsible for assembling the resources necessary for the institution to fulfill its mission, whether through public appropriations, tuition, gifts, or grants. Although these

three broad responsibilities may change in detail, and the balance among them may shift, they are unlikely to disappear from the set of presidential responsibilities. Search committees and boards of trustees will evaluate candidates in these areas through the search process, and leaders of the future need to prepare to take on these responsibilities, just as leaders have done in the past.

But having described this constant, what may be areas for change in higher education leadership? Although each institution is in some ways unique, there are national forces at work that will shape a short list of items for every new president's agenda. Search committees and governing boards are likely to focus increasing attention on candidates' ability to analyze and execute on these issues.

High on the list of emerging and important issues are public and legislative concerns about student access and success, affordability, and transparency. These concerns were highlighted in reports formulated under Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, and I believe they will continue to receive extensive public attention. Presidents of the future will lead the way in deciding how their institutions will address these issues. As Doug Lederman says,

There has been widespread agreement about the *nature* of the problems facing higher education and American society and, in the big picture, at least, relative consensus about what needs to be done: Significantly increase the number of young Americans and adults who enter and succeed in college, by strengthening the academic preparation of those emerging from the nation's high schools and expanding the capacity of colleges and universities. Make higher education more affordable, by simplifying the student aid system and making colleges more cost-effective. Improve the transparency of higher education, to help policy makers judge the success of postsecondary institutions.

In the presidential selection process, candidates can expect increasingly to be asked about their familiarity with these issues, their inclination to take a visible public role in responding to the issues, and their experience with developing successful programs to grapple with the underlying problems.

Once appointed, each president and his or her leadership team of vice presidents and deans will face a particular set of circumstances, and thus approaches to these issues will vary. But every president will grapple with the pipeline of students that is rarely as well prepared for college-level academic work as one might hope or expect. This may call for building partnerships with K-12 education, providing remedial education for enrolled students, raising selectivity or reducing total enrollment (or, often the preferred outcome, raising selectivity while simultaneously increasing enrollment), strengthening teacher-preparation programs in order to enhance K-12 education, and so on. Doubtless, new approaches will be devised, but the college-going rate in most states and the graduation rate at most institutions have room for improvement, and public pressures will continue until those improvements have been made.

Affordability is of course a key element of access for students. Presidents are expected to address affordability through controlling price, leading to pressure to reduce costs or, the alternative recently offered by legislators, to increase endowment spending. The debate over endowment spending is likely to be lively, as colleges assert the right to govern financial affairs and reiterate their obligation to preserve the strength of the institution into the future through a strong endowment, and as the public objects to the wealth that some colleges have amassed at the same time as tuition charged to today's students is increased.

Transparency in institutional operations has many forms, but its most visible form pertains to outcomes and effectiveness. The public seeks information about the quality of education that colleges are providing. One of the most popular forms in which this information appears is national institutional rankings, and the rankings provided annually by *U.S. News and World Report* are the most visible of these. Some presidents have defied the effort by *U.S. News* to judge all institutions by the same measuring device and declined to participate in the annual survey, and some college associations have begun to devise alternative metrics that they believe offer more accurate representation. NASULGC (National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges) and AASCU (American Association of State Colleges and Universities) have devised the Voluntary System of Accountability:

The Voluntary System of Accountability is designed to improve public understanding of how public colleges and universities operate. The College Portrait provides consistent, comparable and transparent information on the characteristics of institutions and students, cost of attendance, student engagement with the learning process, and core educational outcomes. The information is intended for students, families, policy-makers, campus faculty and staff, the general public, and other higher education stakeholders. (NASULGC and AASCU)

Private institutions have been led in similar efforts by NAICU (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities):

Focus groups with prospective students and parents over the past year, conversations with Congress, and calls from the U.S. Department of Education leave no doubt that there needs to be better information provided in a consumer-friendly format on colleges and universities.

To meet this challenge, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) has developed U-CAN (the University and College Accountability Network), a free, consumer-informed college information Web site. For the first time, institutions of higher education have come together to develop and deliver key college information directly to consumers. With U-CAN, we will take an important step toward better educating consumers, and fostering student satisfaction and success.

The individual college president will need to determine in what ways his or her institution should provide accountability and transparency for students, parents, trustees, elected officials and others who are eager to know more about how colleges work.

Diversity has long been a prominent theme on college campuses. It takes on new significance as census projections show that “So-called minorities [Americans who identify themselves as Hispanic, black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander], the Census Bureau projects, will constitute a majority of the nation’s children under 18 by 2023. . . . [By] the 2028 presidential election, racial and ethnic minorities will constitute a majority of adults between the ages of 18 and 29 for the first time” (Roberts). Presidents must lead the effort to make institutions welcoming to students of all ethnicities if their institutions and their communities and regional economies are to flourish; some institutions are fully prepared, but others have a long way to go.

Globalization is another theme that has long received attention at the level of rhetoric. But the concrete choices now available are far more varied than in the days when study abroad and perhaps a course in the core curriculum were the primary programmatic tools available for achieving the goal. International study and curriculum are still important approaches, but the president of the future will face more opportunities and difficult decisions, more emerging regions to consider, and more pressure for creative approaches. The global reach of the economic crisis of 2008 is but one example of the forces that make some form of global education essential, but what form should that take at your institution? There are many paths to take: faculty development will help to prepare the faculty of the future to fully address this pressing theme; new resources will be needed; partnerships with overseas institutions may be developed. If overseas partnerships are used, what form should they take; they could vary from a small-scale student or faculty exchange, to the establishment of an overseas campus, as NYU is doing in Abu Dhabi. Should programs focus on Europe, China, India, the Middle East, or elsewhere? Presidents will have to lead their institutions in determining how and how fully to engage in globalization, and will need to assemble the resources necessary to achieve the goals.

Institutional issues come and go, and sustainability is certainly a critical emerging issue. Not long ago, technology would have been on this list of key issues for presidents, but sustainability would not. Today, the situation is reversed. Technology is understood to be an integral part of all institutions and may not rise to the level of presidential attention, but sustainability has taken its place as an issue that demands our attention. At the national level, associations provide information and advocacy. As of September 2008, close to 600 presidents had signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment, focused on global warming. But other organizations see a much broader definition of sustainability. One organization (the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education) defines its mission as promoting “sustainability in all sectors of higher education—from governance

and operations to curriculum and outreach.” Candidates for college presidencies are expected to have a perspective on these issues, and a track record of success.

Dealing with external issues and constituents increasingly dominates the time of college presidents. As we think about the nature of the presidency of the future, we have a valuable source of information, assembled in the American Council on Education (ACE) report, *The American College President*. The report compares survey responses from presidents in 1986 and 2006. Few presidents in the more recent survey (14 percent) say that they spend the majority of their time with internal constituents; while this may be a cause for alarm among faculty and students, it is likely to lead to greater involvement of and presidential delegation to the chief academic affairs officer and deans, and the chief student affairs officer. In public institutions, declining state funding leads to more active work on legislative relations as well as intensified private fund raising. These trends suggest that the ability to work effectively with powerful external constituents, both elected officials and donors, will be increasingly important for presidents of both public and private institutions. For a presidency dominated by external activities, external experience is likely to be increasingly valued by search committees and boards.

Apart from the specific demands on their time, there has been a proliferation of presidential responsibilities. In the ACE survey, almost one-third of long-serving presidents report 16 issues or activities that take more of their time today than when they began their presidencies and only one activity (academic issues) that requires less time. This simply quantifies what many presidents have observed—the relentless demands on their time. Undoubtedly some presidents are better delegators than others, and some have more effective leadership teams than others, but the proliferation of responsibilities suggests that there may be some pressure to restructure the presidency of the future. We may see more executive vice president or chief-of-staff positions heading up the internal workings of the institution or the president’s office, and we may see more chief academic officers or chief financial officers functioning as the internal president while the president focuses on external audiences.

Who Will Be the Presidents of the Future?

Significant turnover is likely in the American college and university presidency in the coming decade. One of the ACE report’s most striking findings is that a wave of presidential retirements is likely, as the average age of college and university presidents has risen and “the proportion of presidents who were aged 61 or older grew from 14 percent in 1986 to 49 percent in 2006.”

What kinds of presidents will fill the vacancies left behind in the anticipated wave of retirements? ACE’s Spectrum Initiative is intended to identify future presidents from a broader spectrum of potential leaders, drawing more women

and people of color into a group that has previously been dominated by men (77 percent) and whites (86 percent). Efforts to increase the number of women and people of color in the presidency may or may not be successful, but as these numbers show, there is a long way to go. As highly visible institutions, such as Brown, Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania in the Ivy League, select presidents who bring diversity to leadership ranks, other institutions may find it easier to take this step. My experience as a search consultant suggests that the boards of trustees who control presidential appointments are more comfortable with candidates who are similar to them in age, gender and ethnicity, and thus I would speculate that diversification of boards will be the driving force toward change in the presidency. This is not to say that white male boards always select white male presidents, or vice versa; but it appears to me that diverse boards are more likely to be comfortable with diverse candidates—surely not a startling observation, but one that underlines the importance of diversifying boards as a step toward diversifying the presidency.

Beyond the demographics, what career paths do boards seek in the presidents they select? The ACE survey shows that most presidents in 2006 were previously either presidents elsewhere (21 percent) or provosts (31 percent)—a traditional career path for candidates and, one might say, a conservative choice for the board. But on the other hand, 60 percent of presidents today have had at least some experience outside of higher education, suggesting that breadth is valued and perhaps will be increasingly seen as valuable. It is also noteworthy that almost a third of presidents do not have traditional full-time faculty experience—31 percent of presidents in 2006, up from 25 percent in 1986 (American ix). Perhaps a new type of president will emerge in the future: the external-facing president whose background is, correspondingly, outside of higher education. I doubt that this kind of leader will replace the one who moves from faculty member to chair to dean to provost to president, but I can imagine an emerging alternative: the person who knows the corporate or governmental worlds that will increasingly be the world in which the president must move easily in order to do the evolving job most effectively.

Leadership Development and Selection

In institutions dedicated to education, one would expect a substantial commitment to educating its own future leaders. And indeed there has been extensive professional development at the national and state levels. At the national level, I have identified 17 presidential leadership development programs designed to prepare people who may move to presidencies and to enhance the effectiveness of new presidents (see Dowdall). Many state higher education systems offer professional development programs for emerging leaders at various organizational levels, and some individual institutions have developed their own programs for cultivating leadership skills.

But even though they may sponsor or support leadership development programs for their emerging leaders, virtually all institutions hold open searches for presidential vacancies, even when there is a successful interim president or very effective dean or vice president. Should there be closer attention to preparing candidates specifically for higher levels of leadership within a particular institution? Or should there be expanded nationwide efforts to prepare future leaders, whichever institution might appoint them? This question of the nature and value of succession planning in turn raises several critical issues:

- Value of an open search: What is the value of a fully open search, by contrast with a search in which there is a favored internal candidate who has been developed and even groomed for the position, sometimes including the opportunity to serve in the interim position and experience a mutual try-out? And, if there is an internal candidate-in-waiting, can there really be an open search, or will others, aware of the internal person, be reluctant to enter the search process? I am certain that the answer to the latter question is yes—but does that matter?
- Advantages and disadvantages of an internal appointment: If institutions increasingly appoint presidents internally, will there be a decline in the new blood and fresh ideas that can keep an institution vibrant? Or, if internal appointments of familiar and tested candidates increase, will there be enhanced transitions and better working relations resulting from years of working together and the appointee's familiarity with institutional culture?
- Leadership development: institutional or national? Leadership development within a single institution suggests that one or more people are groomed and given opportunities to gain leadership skills over a period of years and that one of these people has an enhanced chance of being selected in a search process. Leadership development at the national level suggests that many people are given learning opportunities, providing an expanded pool within which many institutions may find future leaders.
- Potential for diversity: If the process of grooming an institution's next president increases, will opportunities for diversity in the presidency be reduced? Or, if women and people of color are selected for grooming, might diversity increase?

Some college and university trustees whose backgrounds are in the corporate world are familiar with the kind of succession planning that grooms and then selects an internal candidate. Higher education's tradition is to have an open search process. How these two traditions can be brought together into a potentially new form of presidential search is a fascinating question that we will all eagerly observe unfolding.

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