TURNOVER:
SELECTING THE NEXT GENERATION’S PRESIDENTS

By Richard A. Skinner

Odds are good that we will see an increase in the number of college and university presidencies becoming vacant due to retirements over the next several years. Since most of the incumbents, including provosts and presidents (the largest source for new presidents), are Baby Boomers, the pool of potential replacements is likely to include more candidates, such as deans, who have had fewer executive responsibilities and fewer opportunities to work with boards than their predecessors did.
Moreover, leadership changes will take place when higher education’s primary stakeholders are becoming increasingly skeptical (in some cases, cynical), as institutions face increasing competition for resources of all types, and when conventional means of securing new funds—raising tuition and other fees, spending from endowments, and traditional fund-raising—are becoming less tenable. Meanwhile, demographic trends in the age and ethnicity of students, faculty, staff, and ultimately candidates will require boards to change their preconceptions of what a president looks like.

So boards will need to recruit a new generation of presidents with skills and perspectives different from those of their predecessors and more attuned to the demands currently being placed on higher education. Search committees will need to reach beyond conventional modes of communication and invitation if they are to identify candidates who do not look like current higher education executives.

What can and should be expected of the next generation of leaders? What sort of knowledge, background, and capabilities should institutions be looking for?

**WHAT’S NEEDED?**

Each college and university will sort out its leadership needs according to its distinctive aspects of mission and location, as well as its circumstances, when a presidency opens up. But these differences notwithstanding, the following qualities are needed by all institutions:

**Strategic Resource Management**

Resources and their management are, of course, perennial concerns for higher education leaders. But what has been a chronic problem for some colleges and universities has now become ubiquitous and increasingly dire. So campus leaders, regardless of portfolio, will need to be 1) more strategic about finances and budgeting and 2) more engaged in the internal business dynamics of their institutions.

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**Being strategic.** As presidents examine more closely how resources are used, they will need to do so within a strategic framework that extends beyond this and next year’s budget. As the work of Jane Wellman (2008) attests, a strategic approach to finances is less common than might be expected, with fewer than a quarter of finance officers presenting data in a manner that permits a multyear strategic analysis. While no one with experience in higher education finances would contest how painful balancing an annual budget can be, it does not and cannot tell the entire story of how a college will sustain itself as tuition increases become harder to justify and government and philanthropic support remains static or declines.

A president’s strategic understanding of finances and budgeting is increasingly important, not only because resources are becoming scarcer but also because higher education is viewed as “inefficient, overextended in majors and programs, elitist, wasteful, and too expensive” (Chabotar, 2006). A 2009 national survey found “that many Americans are becoming more skeptical about whether colleges and universities are doing all that they can to control costs and keep tuition affordable.” As the report goes on to say, this finding “may also indicate that Americans will be increasingly less receptive to the argument that higher education institutions need more money to continue to provide high-quality services” (Immewahr and Johnson, 2010).

There are models that a new leader can look to for more long-term, strategic approaches to resources. Westminster College in Utah, for example, has undertaken a thoughtful approach to dealing with costs without sacrificing quality as measured by student learning. The effort began with the acknowledgment that the recent history of raising tuition annually and investing in traditional indicators of institutional quality—while successful in attracting more students and moving the institution up in the ratings—was nevertheless unsustainable. In addition, research demonstrated that investment in many of the indicators of quality had little or no impact on student learning.

On the bases of these determinations, the college’s president commissioned a demonstration project to be developed by business faculty, using findings gleaned from a review of instructional designs that require fewer resources and result in higher levels of student learning.

The ones we found shared certain characteristics. They were driven by clear learning goals and involved extensive assessment and feedback to students. They stressed active learning and took maximum advantage of technology. In each design, faculty spent less time lecturing and...
more time coaching, proactively asking and answering questions with groups of students. And faculty were assisted in their coaching role by teaching assistants or peer mentors. Finally, economies of scale helped to produce significant cost savings (Bassis, 2010).

Approaching the demonstration project’s second anniversary, early signs are that students are learning as much as, if not more than, those enrolled in the traditional business program.

Another example: Previously little-known, North Carolina’s Elon College transformed itself into Elon University based on a strategy for change and the careful development of the means for effecting that change—such as countering the prevailing trend of appointing contingent faculty by hiring more full-time faculty who could earn tenure if successful in advancing the broad goal of “engaged learning” and in fostering a “community of learners.”

Boards and search committees can gauge candidates’ strategic orientation to finances by asking what they think the broader fiscal future for colleges and universities will be, how that future influences their thinking about planning, and what types of financial data they rely on. Examples of remarks or presentations the candidates have made relating to finances and long-term trends in higher education can also provide insight into their grasp of finances.

The devilish details. Convention holds that in tough economic times, the academic (and, in some instances, the research) missions of colleges and universities are to be spared cost-cutting to the greatest extent possible. Savings, the argument goes, are to be found in the non-academic activities and units of institutions.

The University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill and its recently appointed chancellor, Holden Thorp, have led an examination of administrative procedures. Carolina Counts (carolinacounts.unc.edu) is using the pro bono consulting services of Bain & Company to identify significant savings to be realized from changing long-established processes in procurement and information technology systems. Chapel Hill has identified potential savings in organization, procurement, and information technology ranging from $55 to $76 million. The University of California, Berkeley, and Cornell have pursued similar initiatives.

But the major drivers of how most of the resources of an institution are used involve the academic side of the house. As Michael Bassis (2010), president of Westminster College, noted recently, “For the vast majority of colleges and universities, public as well as private, the elephant in the room is the cost structure of our academic programs.”

Much of teaching, research, and service is driven by the diverse and sometimes idiosyncratic interests and expertise of those who teach, inquire, and serve. What gets taught, how, when, and by whom is determined by an array of internal interests, as well as informal or formal agreements within and across academic departments, schools, and colleges.

But increasingly, decision-making will take on a zero-sum quality. The imperative to attend to the nitty-gritty of budgeting means that powerful academic precedents will have to be examined with an eye towards effecting maximum savings. Absent infusions of new resources, the future for higher education is likely to be one in which reallocation of existing resources within the academic functions becomes the norm.

Resolved to make increased use of technology for teaching and learning, a college may choose to “streamline” general education requirements by eliminating certain courses and reallocating the savings for equipment, faculty and student training and support, and increased technical assistance. Determined to be more responsive to students’ post-graduate employment and career concerns, a university may eliminate low-enrollment programs in, say, physics or music performance in order to use resources to provide more professional degrees.

Faced with mid-year and continuing reductions in state financial support, for instance, Washington State University announced in 2009 plans to eliminate majors in sports, theater and dance, community and rural sociology, and German in order to balance the budget. President Elson Floyd took these steps instead of the more conventional practice of across-the-board cuts.

Founded on the principle that information technology can and should transform academic practices, particularly in large-enrollment introductory courses, the Program in Course Redesign was funded by the Pew Charitable Trust to support more than 30 institutions’ efforts to save money—and, not incidentally, to improve learning. By 2003, Carol Twigg, the program director, could report that all of the participating institutions had realized cost savings ranging from 20 to 84 per cent, and two-thirds had done so while achieving improvements in learning (Twigg, 2003; see <thencat.org>).

Experience suggests that eliminating degree programs or courses even in the face of bona fide financial exigency is fraught with conflict and controversy, so it will be the wise president who establishes ways of engaging faculty on such issues well in advance of board deliberations and actions.

This, in turn, points up the importance for search committees to learn about candidates’ boldness in making hard decisions and experience in engaging faculty in focused discussion and action that produces timely outcomes without too high a cost in ill will.

In searching for a new president, boards ought to give weight to candidates who have been willing to invite external scrutiny of the units and programs for which they are responsible by involving persons and organizations other than their academic peers. And this strategy should not be reserved for candidates from professional fields but also used for those from arts and sciences programs.

Accountability

Future presidents will have to be much better able to provide responses to increasing demands for accountability from many of higher education’s stakeholders. Defensive reactions to demands for evidence of effectiveness can ring hollow in light of the fact that college tuition and fees have risen more over the past quarter-century than any other household expense, including healthcare costs.

Accountability will require an ability to point to improvements in performance, especially in terms of student learning, that can be attributed to resource allocations. Such degrees of specificity and clarity are not typical of most administrative discussions. Presidents and their staffs will be hard-pressed to substantiate claims that a given investment produced a specific
outcome without trotting out a long list of contingencies that can sound like equivocation.

No group of stakeholders is more important for presidents to communicate with and be accountable to than that (admittedly) amorphous “public” whose confidence and trust are essential to a healthy higher-education sector. Rare is the president who cannot make the case for additional resources, and evidence suggests that at least with respect to private and foundation philanthropy, the cases made have been persuasive. But rarer still is the president who can point with clarity and specificity to how undergraduate learning is affected by investments in certain types of activities rather than in others.

But it can be done. Beginning in 2005 under the leadership of Brit Kirwan, the University of Maryland System launched the Effectiveness and Efficiency Initiative to look systematically at academic and administrative processes and see how they could be re-engineered to hold down cost increases and sustain or even elevate quality. As reported in a previous issue of Change, the results were significant: “On the academic side, we reduced students’ time to degree, increased faculty members’ teaching commitments, and mandated out-of-classroom learning to free classroom space for additional students” (Kirwan, 2007).

As search committees seek out candidates, they would do well to look for those who have had the courage and tenacity to assert priorities and make choices among competing goods and then to report on the results of those choices.

**Entrepreneurship**

Public and private colleges and universities have demonstrated remarkable abilities to attract private, corporate, and foundation philanthropy in recent years. That said, future presidents will be tasked to be even more entrepreneurial in resource development. This entails fund-raising, of course, but these leaders will also need to capitalize more on the economic and business value of what are, after all, the primary drivers of “knowledge industries and workers,” the bases of a global economy.

Research universities are practiced in the art of making money from a variety of enterprises—ranging from privately financed and managed facilities to incubator industries with direct ties to campus to the licensure of sports teams’ logos. But the next generation of higher education leaders, regardless of institutional type, will be expected to engage as much as possible in identifying new sources of revenue in the face of lower-yielding endowments, pressures against tuition increases, and reduced state support.

Lasell College, located just outside of Boston, includes a retirement home whose residents can take courses from the college; revenues in the form of room and board supplement the college’s tuition and fees and traditional fund-raising. Continuing education, long the red-headed stepchild of most institutions, generates as much as a quarter of the revenues at Florida International University. Middlebury College, long known for its strength in offering traditional foreign-language programs, has contracted with a for-private company to provide online courses to middle- and high-school students and has been straightforward in describing this as a means for strengthening the college’s finances.

As search committees go about their work of seeking out and hiring the “right” candidate, they will need to ask questions about the fund-raising record and skill of prospects but also probe for whether and how a candidate has displayed ingenuity and inventiveness to attract resources to support existing or new activities. Deans generally have somewhat less license to raise money than do presidents and vice presidents, so those who have demonstrated a capacity to improvise using existing funds or a talent for attracting philanthropy for ideas and projects deserve special scrutiny as potential successors to incumbents.

**Collaboration**

**Working systemically.** At least some of the public concern about higher education stems from a not-unreasonable expectation that colleges and universities will act as if they are part of an educational system that includes other higher education institutions, primary and secondary schools, and the sectors for which a college degree is at least partially a preparation. When student movement within that system is difficult, when high-school graduates and newly admitted college students lack basic skills in writing and mathematics, when colleges and universities are seen to compete by duplicating one another’s programs and facilities, or when employers voice doubts about the ability of recent graduates to perform the work expected of them, then critics question whether efforts have been made to ensure that the system actually works.

These concerns require that the next generation of college and university leaders be much more ecumenical in identifying and maintaining relationships with other organizations with which they need to collaborate in order to find efficiencies.

GALILEO (Georgia Library Learning Online; see www.galileo.usg.edu/welcome/) was a 1995 initiative of the University System of Georgia to build on a tradition of cooperation among institutional librarians. This Internet-based system has grown to
more than 100 searchable data bases; 2000 journals available in full text; and a welter of encyclopedia, government documents, and directories. GALILEO extends to all public and private libraries within the state and has contributed to a 1,600 percent increase in usage since its inception, or more than one billion user experiences.

The Atlanta Regional Council for Higher Education (ARCHE) includes major research universities (Georgia Tech, Emory, and the University of Georgia), private/independent institutions (Agnes Scott College and Morehouse College), specialized organizations (the Savannah College of Art & Design-Atlanta and the Interdenominational Theological Center), and state-supported institutions (Kennesaw State University and Georgia Gwinnett College). Using members’ collective purchasing power, ARCHE has negotiated significant cost savings for parcel delivery and made it possible for a student in one member institution to take courses from another without paying fees.

Good indicators of a candidate’s propensity to cooperate beyond her or his own campus are not often read to hand. *Vitae* and résumés tend to report on individual accomplishments, not collaboration. At the same time, candidates who emerge from the professoriate often make note of research and scholarship they have undertaken involving faculty members from other institutions, which can suggest a capacity for working with others beyond institutional boundaries.

*Connections to K-12* Cooperation and collaboration are all the more important in light of the national and international stakes involved. The United States is no longer the world’s leader in access to and success in tertiary education. If there is to be improvement, it will require that all parts of the American educational system work together much better than is now the case.

That, in turn, will call on college and university presidents to pay more than lip service to having faculty work with their counterparts in primary, secondary, and higher education. And since the largest pools of potential college students are persons of color and from low-income households, presidents will need to be seen and known to engage in substantive ways with those communities, ideally by having roots in them.

Activities such as volunteering outside of the academy can suggest something about candidates’ personal commitments and the likelihood that they are prepared to engage with the full spectrum of a community the institution already serves or seeks to serve. Of special value would be a candidate’s having been in elementary and secondary schools enough times and in ways that have led to an understanding of what will be, after all, the next generation of students who may (or may not) be entering the institution.

**Change Management**

*Communication.* The sheer size of some institutions makes communication among senior administrators and between them and the rest of the campus a persistent challenge. None of the conditions contributing to this problem—part-time attendance by students, adjunct and part-time faculty, the flood of information besieging most people—is likely to change, so search committees will want to explore with candidates how they are able to engage with and manage a much more complex, contingent, and fluid workforce and student body.

The challenge for campus leaders is not a lack of information to be shared. Any college’s website can drown one in a deluge of digital prose, sound, and images, static and moving. The inbox of a student, staff, or professor is typically full of e-mail, while print materials flow unabated. At the same time, Kezar (2009) has observed that “on any given campus—particularly the large ones—there may be no individual who knows about all of the change initiatives that are underway,” especially at one seeking to cope as positively as possible with higher education’s changing landscape.

The ability to convey a simple (not simplistic) institutional narrative that relates to the lives of the audience; is not unduly nuanced or hedged; and provides details of time, date, and place goes a long way in presidential communication. Committees would do well to look at candidates’ records and means of communicating with colleagues, students, and others, since the world in which higher education finds itself requires high-quality communications as never before.

What should presidents and other campus executives be communicating about? For certain, about plans oriented to a near-term horizon of not more than three years. Strategic goals are apt to be longer term, but the environment of higher education is no longer a stable one, so plans are likely to require change and adaptation.

Colleges and universities must have strategic plans, if only because accrediting agencies and state governments require them. The plan as such is not the problem. What’s needed are the timely and effective engagement with the plan by key stakeholders (in particular, faculty), indicators of performance that are tied to both annual and strategic financial plans and budgets and for which senior executives are responsible and accountable, and regular reporting. In addition, the inevitable adjustments to plans and budgets need to be explained.
Stewardship. Kezar (2009) notes that “incoming presidents feel pressure to create new initiatives rather than implement existing ones, since campus stakeholders and trustees frequently regard innovation as the sign of an effective and dynamic leader. So rather than continuing the work of their predecessors, they generally launch new programs.” But there is a case to be made for new presidents’ revisiting existing strategic plans and not embarking too quickly on new ones. Boards and search committees would do well, then, to look for a measure of modesty in new presidents.

In this instance, boards may actually give preference to candidates whose current or previous administrative posts involved implementing institutional plans not of their making. If the times ahead for higher education are as daunting as they appear today, then resources and the attention and energy of campus constituencies will not be as available as they were previously to take on new directions. It may well be that attending to existing conditions such as aging facilities should have a higher priority.

Such stewardship does not lend itself to ribbon-cuttings. Instead, it may involve loud complaints over a prolonged period of dislocation and disruption when, for instance, buildings are renovated. A record of bringing together plans and resources to fix existing problems in a way that is transparent and accountable should be looked for in identifying strong candidates.

Globalization

How does globalization affect searches for presidents and other senior leaders? First, boards need to be aware that their successful incumbent president could be a prospective candidate for searches underway not only within the US but also abroad. This recruitment of US presidents is likely to increase as other countries begin to expect university presidents to raise private funds, an area in which Americans enjoy substantially more experience than those of other nationalities.

In addition, many senior administrators in the US are natives of other countries and may be disposed or persuaded to return home to take on new posts. Or US academic administrators may be recruited to head up the continuing series of “the American University of ________” being established throughout the world. Recruiting senior leaders with substantial international experience also assumes importance in light of the number of students from elsewhere who enroll in and complete doctoral studies in areas of critical need for America.

An early example of the prodigy returning home is Yuan Lee. Born in Taiwan, Lee immigrated to America and earned his master’s and doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley. After a career that included stints at Harvard and the University of Chicago, Lee returned to Berkeley where he shared the 1986 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. In 1994, Professor Lee was recruited to be the president of Academia Sinica, the preeminent academic institution in Taiwan. Similarly, Yale’s former provost, Andrew Hamilton, returned to England in 2009 and became vice chancellor of Oxford after 30 years in America.

But going home need not be the reason for an American to take on a presidency abroad. Harvard saw the head of its Radcliffe Institute move to St. Andrew’s, Scotland’s oldest university, and institutions in France, Egypt, Singapore, and elsewhere have recently made top-level hires from abroad. A tour of colleges and universities in the Middle East reveals a sizeable contingent of Canadian academicians holding high-ranking posts in the region.

Boards and committees should examine closely candidates’ portfolios and vitae for substantive and extended international professional involvement. In cases where a candidate has developed international initiatives, close attention ought to be paid to how the various risks associated with such ventures were assessed and managed. Just as important is how ventures abroad were integrated into the institution and not tacked on as a novelty.

Board Relations

What to do about a pool of candidates in which few have much experience working with boards? What provides some indication of a candidate’s way of and capacity for dealing effectively with boards? On this point, we go back to basics. Nothing has been or will be more important for a president than the integrity and the honesty that ensure frank, candid, and clear communication between a president and the board. Lapses of integrity or inconsistencies in statements are indicators that a candidate may not be forthcoming with his or her board, particularly when the news is not pleasant.

By contrast, candidates who in the past have invested time and resources in seeing to it that advisory boards, faculty, and staff have had the opportunity to examine the data that influence their thinking on important matters is more likely to be transparent with and accountable to a governing board. What’s more, the data upon which leaders base important decisions are seldom clear-cut and usually require interpretation, with the attendant risk of being wrong. A demonstrated willingness to share both data and the president’s interpretation of them suggests a leader who is able to live with ambiguity and is open to debate. Past decisions and the methods by which candidates choose to make those decisions, then, are important topics for exploration by boards and search committees.

But the committee should be prepared for a reciprocal questioning. Presidents should require of boards an acceptance of or at least tolerance for controversy and a commitment to stand firm when unpopular decisions are made. Such decisions are apt to be more frequent in the years ahead, so candidates would be well served in asking trustees to recount prior occasions when individually and collectively they have supported difficult decisions bearing on the institution.

Looking for Leadership in a Time of Change

Colleges and universities now confront a complex future. It requires, on one hand, what Buckminster Fuller called “ephemeralization”—“progressively accomplishing more with less”—while also maintaining higher education’s relevance and traditions. Moreover, the pressure for change is both greater and global in scope.

Higher education has not been regarded as a particularly adaptive and flexible sector of society; indeed, many within higher education argue that it is the persistence of traditional academic values in the face of demands for change and increased accountability that ensures the long-term legitimacy
of colleges and universities and the work they perform. But institutions do change, albeit gradually. As novelist Robert Penn Warren observed once about change,

Gradualism is all you’ll get. History, like nature, knows no jumps. Except the jump backward, maybe.

Taken as a whole, then, we need a special sort of leader and a distinctive kind of leadership to steer a course through currents that will tug and pull in many directions. We can begin by being clearer about what qualities those leaders and that leadership need to have. We may find both by asking different sorts of questions than we have in the past.

Resources