The Presidency in Higher Education

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Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive.
Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Building a great university has always been difficult, and it is all the more so today. It requires many things, including, perhaps, *powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men*.

First, there must be an interest in and demand for your academic programs. Then, you must have respected and dedicated faculty; preferably those who are prolific writers, love to teach and engage in cutting-edge research, while actively encouraging students to join them on the journey. Finally, you must have a campus that is handsomely appointed with the latest teaching tools and technology, not to mention residence halls and fitness centers that rival the hottest five-star resorts.

Of course, none of this comes to life without great students; ideally, those who have high grade-point averages and off-the-chart SAT scores, who are at the top of their class and demonstrate leadership in their field of study. If they are Olympic gold medal-winning athletes or if they can play the piano like Lang Lang, so much the better.

Not too difficult so far, you say – but we're not finished yet. The final piece is also the most challenging.

To bring these sometimes combustible elements together and manage them to the desired effect, the institution must have that rare superhuman leader who has a brilliant, compelling vision and who can: attract seven-figure gifts on a regular basis; enlist passionate, generous board members; recruit, motivate, and retain faculty and staff; enroll gifted students; provide insightful editorials on current local, national and international events; and, in his or her spare time, ameliorate neighborhood issues.

For the last 25 years, Chapman University has had such a leader in James (Jim) L. Doti. Thus, it is no surprise that the Chapman College for which he assumed leadership in 1991 has now become thriving Chapman University, one of the leading midsized universities in the nation.

During Doti's storied tenure, Chapman grew from a liberal arts college with

2,200 students to a university with more than 8,000. It launched schools of law, film and pharmacy, as well as Irvine-based Brandman University, which focuses on adult professional education.

To achieve its almost unparalleled success, substantial funds were needed, and Doti delivered. Chapman's endowment grew by 880% as Doti inspired hundreds of millions of dollars in donations, including the five largest gifts in institutional history.

Perhaps the most visible sign of change during Doti's time in office was Chapman's physical plant, which has been completely transformed. It grew from 18 acres to nearly 90 acres, while going through a massive redevelopment that added nearly three million square feet of academic space. Chapman's campus is now the envy of every college administrator who visits it.

Many of Chapman's improvements have been accomplished through thoughtful strategic planning, hard work, careful fiscal management, volunteer support and the immense generosity of alumni, board members and friends. Most of the new facilities constructed during the last three decades were funded primarily through gift income.

In many respects, philanthropy has been the biggest driver of transformational change at Chapman—but this is not uncommon in the world of higher education. Philanthropic support has become the primary source of revenue for most universities, public and private. Yet most new presidents say "fundraising is the area they are least prepared to take on" when they assume their leadership positions (Cook, 2012, p. 2).

Furthermore, many new presidents are lacking in the myriad (and ever-changing) skills now required for institutional leadership. Indeed, the role of college or university president is Herculean by any definition.

As we celebrate and pay tribute to Jim Doti's extraordinary tenure as one of higher education's finest leaders, we also have the opportunity to reflect on the magnitude of what it now takes to fill the top seat at most colleges and universities. This article will highlight key literature on the subject, describing the expectations, requirements and demands of a university president early in the 21st century.

Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures

Powerful social, economic, technological, and political forces are driving change at a daring new pace, and as a result, higher education is at a crossroads. Colleges and universities are expected to do more than ever before—and they have fewer resources with which to do it. Leading these complex organizations is more challenging than ever. Yet, the very conditions that create such challenges also provide a rare opportunity for bold and effective leadership. Who are today's college and university presidents? Where do they come from? What can be learned from the past? Are they tasked with realistic expectations? What will these leaders face in the future? How can they advance their institutions to greatness?

University President: A Snapshot

According to the latest presidential survey by the American Council on Education (ACE) (2012), the average campus leader is a white male in his early 60s; married with children; holds a Doctorate in Education; and has served in his position for 6 years. One-third held the position of Chief Academic Officer prior to their current

position. The majority spent their entire careers in higher education, and an even larger percentage served as full-time faculty members at some point in their careers. Only 26% of institutional leaders are women, and just 13% come from diverse backgrounds. Ironically, these leadership characteristics do not reflect current trends in the student body, as women now outnumber men on most college campuses, and the share of diverse students increased from 20% to 34% between 1990 and 2009.

Interestingly, when the study was first conducted in the mid-1980s, presidents were in their early 50s. The ACE survey suggested that the main reason for the increase in age may be the complexity of issues and matters now facing the office: "Governing boards and search committees are likely looking for more experienced leaders" (Cook, 2012, p. 1). This is no surprise, since the number of tasks and constituents to be served has significantly multiplied.

Specifically, the ACE survey showed that most presidents spend the bulk of their time on fundraising, budgets, community relations and strategic planning. Fortunately, it indicated that "(with the exception of budgeting), these are also areas presidents reported enjoying most" (Cook, 2012, p. 2). But the breadth and depth of the skill set makes it hard to believe any candidate could be adequately prepared to fill the presidency. In this somewhat famous quote, former University of California President Clark Kerr attempted to capture the prerequisites for the role:

> The university president in the United States is expected to be a friend of the students, a colleague of the faculty, a good fellow with the alumni, a sound administrator with the trustees, a good speaker with the public, an astute bargainer with the foundations and the federal agencies, a politician with the state legislature, a friend of industry, labor, and agriculture, a persuasive diplomat with donors, a champion of education generally, a supporter of the professions (particularly law and medicine), a spokesman to the press, a scholar in his own right, a public servant at the state and national levels, a devotee of opera and football equally, a decent human being, a good husband and father, an active member of a church. Above all he must like traveling in airplanes, eating his meals in public, and attending public ceremonies. No one can be all of these things. Some succeed at being none (Kerr & Glade, 1986, p. 22).

Given this description, it is no wonder that governing boards and search committees look for experience. There is lot riding on the presidential candidate who will presumably take their institution to new heights of excellence.

An Historical Perspective on the College Presidency

The role of president has changed since the earliest days of the colonial colleges. Back then, the college president was most likely a member of the clergy (Rudolph, 1991). In fact, it may have been a by-product of their duties, as these men served as the teachers/disciplinarians to boys preparing to make a professional contribution to society (Schmidt, 1930). It wasn't until the mid-to-late 1800s that the presidential role evolved, as the Industrial Revolution ushered in a more scientific age. As a result, both the educational process and the college became more complex (Rudolph, 1991; Schmidt, 1930).

Higher education then enjoyed what is commonly considered a 'golden age' of unparalleled academic leadership (Kerr & Glade, 1986; Cowley, 1980; Freeland, 1992), and it is believed that the United States' most respected colleges and universities today stand on the shoulders of the mythic giants that led during this timeframe (Freeland, 1992).

The golden age ran from the early 1940s to the early 1980s and was "the period of largest student growth in American higher education," when the nation experienced a "phenomenal and uninterrupted increase in the number of students attending college" (Cummins, 2013, p. 211). Serving as president during this era were Kingman Brewster at Yale University; Clark Kerr at the University of California; Grayson Kirk at Columbia University; Theodore Hesburgh at the University of Notre Dame; William Bowen at Princeton University; and Derek Bok, who began his 20-year tenure at Harvard in 1970 (Cummins, 2013, p. 211). Adding to the mystique of these "great men" is a story of when Harvard's James Bryant Conant called the White House in the early 1940s and asked the operator to tell Mr. Roosevelt that the President was on the line (Glassner & Schapiro, 2013).

Several commentators have noted that few college presidents today "enjoy the reputation of the giants a century ago" (Birnbaum, 1992, p. xii-xiii) or have "the backbone to take on the pressing issues facing our campuses and society" (Glassner & Schapiro, 2013). They say that most find themselves reduced to "obscure bureaucrats, little known on or off campus; their jobs reduced to groveling for gifts and answering angry emails" (Glassner & Schapiro, 2013). Fisher and Koch (1996) lamented that some of higher education's most preeminent leaders have been replaced with less than impressive successors:

> The college presidency, once the situs of powerful, effective, and inspirational leaders, has decayed and all too frequently now is a refuge for ambivalent, risk-averting individuals who seek to offend no one, and as a consequence arouse and motivate no one. The result is a visible lack of academic purpose, declining institutional effectiveness, and (most lamentable) inferior education (p. 421).

But is this assessment accurate? Or, as so often occurs, does the memory become more perfect with time? Is it really fair or wise to make comparisons, given the vast challenges university presidents face in today's educational environment?

Several authors (Birnbaum, 1992; Green, 1997) have argued that institutions are falsely bewitched by the "Great Man Theory of Leadership." As Green (1997) pondered,

> Where, we ask, are the great leaders of yesteryear? Our lament goes unheeded because, I suggest, we are asking the wrong question. The world has changed and so have organizations. We need to ask different questions and seek different answers about leadership (p. 138).

While the environmental factors may be new, the problems and challenges of the presidency are fundamentally the same, especially when it comes to consensus on what the position actually entails. One researcher asked, "Are university presidents

academic leaders or risk managers or fund-raisers?" (Reut, 2013). Should their focus be on "modernization amid a revolution in online learning, information technology, and global education" or should they "hold fast to the longstanding practices of a traditional liberal arts education?" (Glassner & Schapiro, 2013). Most would probably say all of the above.

Today's presidents may not be mere mortals after all. In fact, in some ways they may be more superhuman than the "great men" of the past.

Current Trends and Expectations

It is enormously challenging to guide higher education in the 21st century. The number and complexity of issues is dizzying, if not overwhelming. At the nexus of these challenges is the institutional leader. And unfortunately for him or her, it is nearly impossible to open *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, or one's daily newspaper, without finding a college or university in crisis. This increased scrutiny and public attention makes the "college presidency much more contentious than in the past. There is no place to hide from the 24/7 news cycle" (Nelson, 2008, p. A37). As a result, presidents run

> the continual risk of being whipsawed by an ever-expanding list of concerns and interests. Instead of a leader, the president has gradually become juggler-in-chief, expected to meet an endless stream of individual needs and special demands within and outside the institution (Association of Governing Boards, n.d.).

The accountabilities of the modern university presidency seem endless. With the number of balls a president must keep in the air, Bornstein (2004) believed "the role is becoming an increasingly untenable position, mutating beyond the ability of any one person's capabilities" (p. 18). Moore (2001) viewed the job of a university president:

> As one of attempting to put a triangle, square and circle in the same space at the same time - it is difficult, if not impossible. Presidents remain quite cognizant of the reality that they must accommodate all three dimensions of their complex role, credibility among their multiple stakeholders depends on it (p. 5-11).

Adding further pressures to the role, is the unrelenting pursuit of financial support. As one author noted, there are two constants in higher education: First, that there always has been and there always will be a need for strong leadership; and second, there will always be a near insatiable need for resources (Cook, 1994).

Ongoing drops in state and federal resources have left universities of all sizes struggling for new sources of revenue. Philanthropic support is the most obvious alternative, so today's institutional leaders are expected to serve as chief fundraiser and friend-raiser. In addition to engaging donors, presidents are expected to bring focus to any fundraising effort (Setterwhite & Cedaja, 2005, p. 336); provide overall guidance to campaigns (Weingartner, 1996); identify within the university the most significant financing needs for which private funds should be sought (Essex & Ansbach, 1993); set realistic expectations as to what can be funded through institutional advancement, and

ensure that all these things support the overall mission of the university (Willmer, 1993).

Indeed, "as the essence of the institution, the president inspires donor confidence and creates the climate in which fund-raising takes place" (Fisher, 1984, p. 165). Therefore "the fund-raising process cannot be separated from the fundamental roles and responsibilities of the president" (Setterwhite & Cedja, 2005, p. 341).

As a result, the average president spends more than 60% of his or her time meeting with outside constituents, prospective donors and/or engaging in fundraising-related matters (American Council on Education, 2012). Kerr (1993) noted that attracting financial resources, allocating the resources, and formulating the vision for the university are among the most significant roles of the college president.

Best Approach to the Job

There is no lack of advice for a new president. The laundry list of why presidents fail and how they can succeed is never-ending. Some practical input from one former president recommended that new leaders avoid the urge to: make decisions without knowledge of the organization; blame others; over-promise; talk only to those who agree; give a soundbite to the media without careful thought; assume critics are few; and treat everything as a matter of principle (Peterson, 2008). How can anyone keep all of those things at the forefront of their mind?

Popular opinion advocates for individuals who can immediately transform their organization, but there is a growing trend toward leaders who possess a strong combination of systems and vision. A five-year longitudinal study of college and university presidents concluded that:

> In today's world of greater participation, shared influence, conflicting constituencies and assorted other complexities, heeding the calls for charismatic presidents who can transform their institutions would be more likely to lead to campus disruption than to constructive change (Birnbaum, 1992, p. xii-xiii).

Other research is predisposed to a blend of transactional and transformational leadership; in essence, a leader who can balance the paradoxical demands of the college presidency: visionary and steward; active and reflective; consistent and creative (Guskin & Marcy, 2002). If we want our presidents to reflect a new model of dynamic, collaborative, engaged and visionary leadership, then we need to support them in navigating the paradoxes of modern presidential leadership and help them "develop a more complex understanding of the characteristics of leadership" (Guskin & Marcy, 2002, p. 12).

This is consistent with a more integral approach to leadership. As Bornstein (2008) wrote, college leaders are best to "view their responsibilities as a coherent whole" (p. A38). It can be easy for a president's job to get segmented — some focus more externally, and others more internally — but the "bifurcation makes the presidency less successful" — rather than changing hats, the president should be wearing "one big all-purpose hat" (Bornstein, 2008, p. A38).

Even more fundamental, Hoppe (2003) recommended that aspiring academic leaders demonstrate fortitude: the will to make the right decision for the right reasons.

Similarly, Nelson (2008) argued that a president is best to act "as architect of a middle ground, shaping a center that holds the driving force encouraging discourse and debate" (p. A37). These approaches do not rely on either a transformational or transactional leadership style, but rather "profound courage, intellectual insight, persuasive powers, and educationally well-grounded thinking" (Nelson, 2008, p. A38).

Whatever the skills, new presidents are expected to hit the ground running (Martin & Samels, 2004). "We believe presidents not only need to learn all of these (requisite) skills, but they also need to learn them rapidly. The traditional one-year honeymoon appears to have shrunk to a matter of months" (Martin & Samels, 2004, p. 12). Do it all and do it now.

Our Collective Responsibility

> In describing today's university — "the multiversity" — Kerr (1997) reflected on how it is an inconsistent institution. It is not one community but several — the community of the undergraduate … the graduate … the humanist … the social scientist … the scientist … the professional schools … the nonacademic personnel … the administrators. Its edges are fuzzy — it reaches out to alumni, legislators, farmers, businessmen, who are all related to one or more of the internal communities. As an institution, it looks far into the past and far into the future, and is often at odds with the present (p. 14).

For a president to be successful in this complex environment, Hahn (1995) argued that institutions must get more serious about their collective role in the leadership process. He said, "there will be more successful presidents when we are able to think more seriously about what we need from them and about the conditions that enable their success" (Hahn, 1995, p. 13-20). Hahn (1995) continued:

> For every President Old and New, there is a President Other who is an instant hit just by contrast with a predecessor. President Other wows them with a few quick, no-nonsense decisions, a breath of fresh air after years of a CEO whose door was always closed. There is a problem here, but it is not Presidents Old, New, and Other. The problem is us (p. 15).

In his research, Green (1997) recommended that institutions "untie presidents' hands so they can lead" (p. 7). Green (1997) continued, saying that:

> It's not surprising that many campuses succumb to the temptation to seek a president who can fix things and absolve others of the responsibility of undertaking the perilous and often unpleasant journey of change. We need all members of the campus community to invest themselves willingly in designing a common future (p. 11).

> As Birnbaum (1992) stated:

> Leadership is defined not only by what leaders do but also and even more

> importantly by the ways in which potential followers think about leadership, interpret a leader's behavior, and come over time to develop shared explanations for the causes and outcomes of events (p. 3).

Effective leadership is cultural (Kempner, 2003). By understanding that the purpose of leadership is not self-aggrandizement but to reveal the spirit of the institution and its participants, colleges and universities can better define the type of leader they need. Kempner (2003) believed that:

> Educational organizations cannot effectively hire a leader until they define what leadership means to their institution ... If leaders wish to transform an organization, they cannot hope to be successful by operating only in a classical, top-down manner, fomenting democracy may be a more appropriate vehicle to effect change than fiats issued from on high (p. 383).

As citizens of our institutions, we can make the future of presidential leadership more hopeful by assuming greater collective responsibility for success. This will require more realistic goal-setting for leaders, and working toward conditions that allow leaders to succeed (Bornstein, 2004). The demands of leadership will always be formidable. To be realistic about these demands does not minimize or lower our expectations; it simply focuses those expectancies in a more thoughtful way.

A Higher Calling

Perhaps the vision for presidential leadership should be refocused on a higher purpose, one that embraces the unique influence that presidents can have on the future development of our communities. The college presidency is one of the most influential and important of all professions. As Rhodes (1998) described it:

> The future leaders of the world sit in our classrooms. The academic presidency is important because the university is the creator, conservator, and mediator of knowledge. The first and greatest task of a president is to articulate the vision, champion the goals, and enunciate the objectives. The president should employ his or her best skills to dream the institution into something new, to challenge it to greatness, to elevate its hopes and extend its reach, and to energize it to new levels of success and galvanize it to higher levels of achievement in every area of its institutional life (p. 14-18).

Presidents become the gatekeepers to educational freedom; they open the doorway to one's future. College and university presidents help those in and around an organization make sense out of the circumstances that confront them, particularly during changing and uncertain times.

> Knowing that meaning is taken from all forms of communication, college presidents need to carefully consider what messages they are sending when they talk, when they walk, when they write, and when they symbolize change. In doing

so, they are wielding a symbolic sense of power" (Rhodes, 1998, p. 14-18).

Though a bit dated, Fisher and Tack's (1985) description of an effective college president is still relevant today:

> (Someone) completely committed to what they do; genuinely respects others; and believes in themselves and others. They are action oriented; they accept authority and responsibility in governance; they have a penchant for work, work, and more work (come prepared); and they see the lighter side of things (levity, sense of humor). They are warm, outgoing people; they maintain self-control (never get upset or euphoric in public); use power with finesse; and they are visible, but they share the credit (p. 84-89).

Conclusion

After reading this paper, some might wonder why anyone pursues the role of college or university president. To say the least, it is a tough job. A series of daunting tasks, seemingly impossible to manage. Who would aspire to this?

However, when asked how they felt about their service, most former presidents described it as incredibly rewarding and that the benefits far outweighed the negatives (Pierce, 2015). Others said,

> A university president's day is never the same twice, so no tired bureaucrats need apply. The problems are frequently unique and call for an agile mind and a responsive personality to be effective, a president must want to solve problems, like people and love the university (Trachtenberg, 2008, p. A38).

Pretty simple. Pretty clear.

> The college presidency is the job of a lifetime, for reasons well beyond the perks and the privileges. We get to create and sustain campuses where the learning and maturation of young people is paramount, where great teaching and path-breaking research can occur. What drives us is the chance to do something meaningful, for our society and the world (Glassner & Shapiro, 2013).

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