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Chief Student Affairs Officers: Transforming Pathways to the Presidency

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined a sample of former chief student affairs officers (n=12) who successfully attained a presidency at a four-year institution of higher education. Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and supplemented by the curricula vitae of the participants. Through data analysis, three themes emerged: (1) institutional type and fit, (2) academic profile, and (3) fundraising. Findings from this study indicated the majority of participants were employed at small to medium-size institutions of higher education with preference given to small, private colleges and universities. Faculty skepticism was the most noted obstacle participants encountered. Accordingly, participants advised presidential aspirants to actively maintain an academic profile and credibility with the faculty. Last, fundraising experience was considered a necessary skill that presidential aspirants should have to become serious contenders for a presidential position.

The college or university presidency is a position that requires one to be a visionary leader with exceptional communication abilities (Arman, 1986; Beardsley, 2015; Gardner, 2015; Ross & Green, 2000). The president must demonstrate success as a consensus builder in order to enhance the national impact of various programs at the institution she or he leads while making tough decisions regarding resource allocation (Beardsley, 2017; Gardner, 2015; Rottweiler, 2005). Additionally, the president must be able to inspire faculty and staff and articulate the uniqueness of the institution to various leaders locally, statewide, regionally, and nationally (Beardsley, 2017; Davies, 2005; Fleming, 2007). Considering the significant responsibilities assigned to presidents of institutions of higher education, it is necessary to understand who they are, from where they have come, and how they have prepared themselves for the pivotal role they represent within their institutions, communities, and society.

Though gaining slow traction, little research has been conducted on presidents from nontraditional backgrounds, especially those with experience as chief student affairs officers (Atwell & Wilson, 2003; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Covert, 2004; Delabbio, 2006; Gardner, 2015; Keim, 1994; Noyes, 1994; Risacher, 2004; Ross & Green, 2000). In 2017, the American Council on Education (ACE) provided data indicating that the number of college and university presidents coming to the office from chief administrative positions other than academic vice presidencies slowly, but steadily, increased. However, insufficient data has been gathered to capture exactly how these individuals rose to the presidency and what those aspiring to become presidents could learn from nontraditional careers. Thus, this study was conducted in an effort to contribute to the literature on pathways to the presidency of former chief student affairs officers (CSAOs).

The significance of this study is two-fold. First, there seems to be an unknown rationale that excludes student affairs administrators from considering the presidential track at four-year higher education institutions. As a result, this study could delineate common career approaches presidents with experience as former CSAOs took to move into the presidency and could assist other student affairs professionals who have a desire to become a college president. Second, the study may have significance for presidential hiring bodies (e.g., executive search firms, boards of trustees, and search committees). As the applicant pool for college presidents decreases, presidential hiring bodies are being forced to cast a wider net for presidential applicants (Atwell & Wilson, 2003; Basinger, 2002; Beardsley, 2017; Gardner, 2015). The information obtained from this study could encourage presidential hiring bodies to view CSAOs as strong, viable candidates to their academic counterparts. As a result, this study will provide data on the backgrounds of college presidents who have chief student affairs officer experience and delineate how they have constructed their career paths.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purpose of this study, student affairs is defined as the organizational division or unit that is comprised of numerous services and functions that aid in students' emotional growth while complementing the academic and cognitive growth they experience through out-of-class education. The various areas that make up student affairs include, but are not limited to, campus activities, student unions, orientation, international affairs, financial aid, career services, residence life, food services, counseling, judicial affairs, Greek life, recreation services, legal services, health services, students with disabilities, and learning assistance (Cagle, 1998). Further, chief student affairs officer is defined as an individual holding the highest administrative position in student affairs at a college or university. Most titles for this position may include, but are not limited to, vice chancellor for student affairs, vice president for student affairs, vice president for student life, vice president for student development, or dean of students. Moreover, CSAO president refers to an individuals who has served in a chief student affairs officer position prior to their appointment as president.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

Purposive sampling was used in the study. To achieve initial contact of possible participants, the researcher utilized the expertise of professional colleagues through associations and affiliations in student affairs and higher education (via telephone, e-mail, and face-to-face meeting) who may have had knowledge of university presidents with prior CSAO experience. Twenty-five prospective individuals were sent an invitation; however, only 12 chose to participate.

In order to participate in the study, individuals must have met the following criteria: served in the role as CSAO at a four-year institution, have reported directly to a college or university president prior to attaining the presidency, and must currently serve as a president at a four-year institution.

Research Design

Because there is little extant research to document and capture how the career paths of university presidents with chief student affairs officer (CSAO) experience are constructed, a qualitative research design was central to this study.

Delimitations and Limitations

Research was delimited to four-year college and university presidents with prior chief student affairs officer (CSAO) experience. Although community colleges and professional schools yield presidents with vast experiences outside of the normative path, they were not central to this study. Outcomes and results cannot be generalized to presidents at two-year or professional institutions of higher education or to institutions outside of the United States.

Although this study contributes to the body of literature and promotes the career trajectory of CSAOs and student affairs professionals aspiring to the university presidency, it is not without limitations. Through this study, an overwhelming majority of information regarding nontraditional presidents with CSAO experience was attained through individual referrals, of which there is no single source to obtain an accurate and comprehensive list. Although not atypical in qualitative research, the results yielded a small sample size (Creswell, 2008).

In addition to the small sample size, another limiting factor was that participation in the study was voluntary. Furthermore, self-reporting was used to obtain the presidents' thoughts, motivations, attitudes, etc. It is of utmost importance to recognize that self-reported data are subjective and may not be objectively precise or accurate.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Cohen and March (1974) concluded that the traditional route to a college presidency placed a strong emphasis on academia, by which individuals moved through the academic ranks as a full-time faculty member, to department chair, to dean, to academic vice president or provost, and finally ascend to the presidency. Without exception, none of the presidents in this study fit the model of Cohen and March. Moreover, extant literature suggests that nontraditional presidential candidates are being looked at more closely as viable options to lead institutions of higher education (Adams, 2018; Barwick, 2002; Beardsley, 2017; Bullard, 2008; Covert, 2004; Delabbio, 2006; Gardner, 2015; King, 2006). As the 2017 ACE report suggests, institutions are indeed "casting a wider net" as college presidential pools become smaller while the demand for the position becomes increasingly greater. This implies that colleges and universities are becoming more receptive to an alternative set of skills and characteristics as demonstrated by CSAO presidents.

Concurrent with the national demographics of college and university presidents, the sample size of this study broadly reflects similar presidential profiles. While the American Council on Education (2017) reports 79.5% of presidents hold doctorates, all presidents in this study held doctoral degrees. Given the biases often held toward those from student affairs, perhaps a doctoral degree helps demonstrate the academic legitimacy of a CSAO presidential candidate.

Moreover, women comprised 30.1% of the total United States presidential population, yet the women in this study comprised 16.6% (2). Finally, approximately 17% of college presidents in the United States are minorities, but 25% (3) of participants in the study are minorities.

Without exception, all of the participants in this study displayed a high level of intentionality in their professional careers. Regardless of whether they aspired to a university presidency or were simply ambitious to excel in their profession, participants proved very intentional about the type of experiences and positions they engaged in. Each explored career opportunities that provided increasing levels of breadth and depth of campus responsibility. Nevertheless, only 41.6% (5) presidents expressed interest in the presidential role very early in their careers. Conversely, the majority of participants did not begin thinking about a presidency until assuming a CSAO position. While this suggests individuals aspiring to a presidential position do not necessarily need to know early on that they desire to progress to this leadership role, intentional career planning maintains fundamental importance.

Through the participants' lived experiences, three major themes emerged from the interviews and thus helped in understanding the process by which participants attained their presidencies. These themes were institutional type and fit, academic profile, and fundraising.

Institutional Type and Fit

In the context of the literature on institutional type and fit (Beardsley, 2017; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Bowman, 2011; Covert, 2004; Delabbio, 2006), this study suggests that CSAO presidents possess certain skills and characteristics that are desirable to the institutions where they are employed. During their preparation for a presidency, participants expressed the variety of skills and breadth of knowledge they attained in their role as a CSAO. Participants indicated that their past experiences with decision making and problem solving, crisis management, and relationship building prepared them for the unique challenges of leading an institution. CSAO presidents emphasize that prior experiences prepared them well for the presidency. Moreover, their commitment to the institutional mission—which is typically student centered—could make presidential applicants with student affairs experience in this study attractive to a specific institutional type.

The CSAO presidents in the study were employed primarily at small to medium-sized bachelor's or master's granting institutions. In accordance with the literature, CSAOs moving into presidencies were least likely to be found at doctoral-granting institutions (Bullard, 2008; Corrigan, 2002, Gardner, 2015). As the findings suggest, perhaps this is the result of participants maintaining a preference for being “partial to student issues,” a teaching institution, or simply preferring a stronger linkage with the community.

According to the literature, chief student affairs officers spend their time and effort working primarily to develop the whole student through various approaches of student development, beginning with students' entry into an institution (Bullard, 2008; Gardner, 2015; Nuss, 2001; Rhatigan, 2000; Sandeen, 2004). Thus, it is likely that CSAOs would be more likely to pursue presidencies at institutions with a focus on undergraduate education and the importance of students at the core of the institution. Moreover, the majority of the participants are presidents at

liberal arts colleges which have a primary mission of fostering the development of the “whole student.”

Academic Profile

Early studies on the selection of college and university presidents concluded that academicians were the preferred fit (Bolman, 1965; Cohen & March, 1974). Moreover, a plethora of studies maintain that college and university presidents rise through the academic ranks (American Council on Education, 2017; Bornstein, 2003; Cohen & March, 1974; Corrigan, 2002; McLaughlin, 1996; Moore et al., 1983; Wessel & Keim, 1994). Conversely, this study provides current data that proves presidents can, and indeed do, attain their positions bypassing the traditional academic route.

Literature suggests that maintaining an academic profile consists of teaching, conducting research, and publishing (Bolman, 1965; Bornstein, 2003; Fleming, 2007; Glover, 2005). While participants in the study were intentional about aspiring to the presidency at various points in their careers, each of them acquired the requisites for an academic profile to enhance their scholarly record, “experience what faculty experience,” and increase their marketability.

Although none of the presidents rose completely through the academic ranks to attain their presidencies, it appears that each president had some depth of knowledge and savvy to understand the importance of fulfilling at least some variation of an academic profile. For example, not all participants dedicated their time to full-time teaching, research or publishing. Instead, each participant fulfilled at least minimal experience in each of the aforementioned areas to gain exposure and enhance their academic credentials. Though their academic profiles and level of experience varied, all of the participants agreed that faculty viewed it as an essential skill needed to lead an institution of higher education.

While attaining an academic profile seems to be the preferred skill set for aspirants to acquire a presidency, experiences of participants in the study correlate with extant literature that some faculty may remain skeptical and suspicious of nontraditional presidents (Beardsley, 2015; Bornstein, 2003; Delabbio, 2006; Gardner, 2015; Glover, 2005; Fleming, 2007). Participants asserted that faculty desired a president who rose through the academy. As a result of participants lacking this experience, it was necessary to devise strategies to “prove” themselves through listening, learning, and supporting academic values.

Fundraising

Undoubtedly, every college and university president should be concerned about resource acquisition. Findings in this study indicate that both the evolution of the presidential position and trends in higher education can be cited as reasons why fundraising has become increasingly important. More specifically, higher education institutions have a continual need to acquire more resources to perform and achieve their goals (Adams, 2018; Beardsley, 2015; Bornstein, 2003; Bowman, 2011). Accordingly, college and university presidents play a vital role in raising institutional funds.

Findings in this study reveal the presidents' responsibility to their institutions to produce results in the area of fundraising, as this has become a focal point for board members seeking the best candidates during the search process. Furthermore, while in their role as a CSAO and due to their intentionality of aspiring to a presidency, the participants viewed fundraising as an essential role of the president. Admittedly, participants disclosed the difficulties in fundraising and therefore identified opportunities for further development. Accordingly, they acquired various levels of experience through CSAO opportunities either as a part of their job responsibilities or additional tasks granted to them by their presidents.

As extant literature suggests, student affairs professionals are ideally suited to be involved in fundraising due to their variety of skills applicable to development work (Cockriel & Kellogg, 1994; Grund, 2003; Risacher, 2004). As a result of the findings, this study implies that through their relational abilities and various experiences in student affairs, CSAO presidents are committed to fundraising efforts and initiatives.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focused on how chief student affairs officers create their pathways to a college or university presidency. Considering the limitations and findings in the study, there are implications for future research that could be considered by other higher education scholars. Accordingly, obtaining further knowledge of these implications would help to contribute to the literature regarding a nontraditional path for those who aspire to serve as a college or university president. Furthermore, the implications for future research would aid presidential hiring bodies (e.g., executive search firms, boards of trustees, and search committees) in their quest for qualified applicants. While this study identified emerging themes of the career trajectory of CSAOs to their presidential posts, there remain a number of opportunities for future research.

First, this study yielded the results of CSAOs at four-year institutions who then became presidents at four-year institutions. It would be interesting to incorporate the presidents at two year institutions (i.e., community college, vocational/technical college, etc.) to discern if there are differences. This concept could be taken from several perspectives:

1. The experiences and career paths of CSAOs at two-year colleges who attain presidencies at two-year colleges remain relatively unexplored. This study could be replicated to focus on this specific population of individuals.
2. Research could be conducted to compare the presidential career paths of CSAOs from two-year institutions to those of four-year institutions. Some of the questions for consideration could be: Would the population of candidates significantly increase? Would the kind of educational requirements differ (i.e., master's degree, terminal degree, etc.)? Would the type of presidential characteristics differ from one type of institution (two-year) to another (four-year)? Would there be an increased number of aspirants who are women and people of color?
3. Very little information exists on how chief higher education officers construct their presidencies from a two-year institution to a four-year institution and vice versa. This study could be replicated to include CSAOs at two-year institutions who then become presidents at four-year institutions and/or CSAOs at four-year institutions who then

become presidents at two-year institutions. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the skill sets, characteristics, competencies, challenges, and advice of the participants from one type of institution to the other.

Second, this study identified that most CSAO presidents serve at primarily small to medium-size, private, liberal arts colleges. It would be interesting to conduct research specifically on CSAO presidents at large universities to compare and contrast their experiences and skill sets of CSAO presidents at smaller institutions. Furthermore, it would be interesting to determine if a pattern or trend will emerge with an increased number of CSAOs attaining presidencies at larger institutions, both public and private, and doctorate-granting and master's colleges and universities.

Third, there is little in the way of qualitative research related to understanding the underrepresentation of presidents who are female or people of color. It would be interesting to gain insight from these individuals who have previously held CSAO positions. Moreover, understanding their experiences, motivations, and challenges could provide other women and people of color who aspire to become a college or university president the tools and skills needed to succeed.

Last, it would be interesting to conduct a study to distinguish if the performance and leadership style of nontraditional presidents differ from those individuals who come from a traditional background. More specifically, although not limited, the study could be conducted to discern the performance and leadership style of CSAO presidents from their academic counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Historically, college and university presidential candidates have traditionally risen through the academic ranks to attain their presidencies. Findings from this study revealed data on the backgrounds of college presidents who have chief student affairs officer experience and delineated how they have constructed their career paths. This study suggests that CSAOs are indeed strong, viable presidential candidates and bring forth skill sets that their academic counterparts do not typically acquire. Moreover, this study provides information that will hopefully encourage more presidential hiring bodies to consider the unique skills CSAOs have acquired that are beneficial to leading a higher education institution.

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