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The Aspiring College President: A Critical Review

Quincy Martin, III
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ABSTRACT

This critical literature review will provide an overview of knowledge and necessary strategies for aspirants who wish to advance to a college or university presidency. Some of the significant knowledge areas include formal leadership programs, mentorship, leadership skills and qualities, and discussion on advice to obtain such a pivotal and important role. This review of literature is also especially significant for sitting college and university presidents and governing boards who wish to create professional development opportunities or a pipeline for future presidents.

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In their seminal work on the American college president, Cohen and March (1974) defined the president of a university as a reactive job in the sense that the allocation of attention was primarily governed by the demands of others. The world has evolved. An effective university president no longer has the privilege of presiding over the ‘organized lawlessness’ that Cohen and March (1974) described as the standard for university administration a generation ago. Today, campus leaders who take a reactive posture risk being drowned out by nonstrategic concerns and ignoring early signals about potentially fatal threats. They will also miss out on new possibilities if they are not proactive. Higher education has entered a period of upheaval, aided by new technologies, but hampered by political and cultural shifts. These are only amplified by modern, warp-speed information-sharing practices. All of this has exacerbated the consequences of scandals that threaten the stability of even the most powerful and financially secure institutions. Consider the March 31st, 2019 turbulence at Michigan State University, the 1966-1969 unrest at the University of Rochester, and the University of Southern California 2019 peaceful protest, to mention a few.

Universities are no longer immune to the outside world’s realities and restrictions, such as cost, quality control, competitiveness and consumer expectations, and, of course, growth. There is no way to escape competing pressures (Cooney & Martin, 2021; Romano, 2020). However, the university’s ‘product’ remains unique: education, which includes a component of public service and necessitates a keen ear for the motives, sensitivities, and values of both those who create it (i.e., the faculty) and those who purchase it (the students). New leaders in the field of education, particularly those from the business or political sectors, must learn to work in a tradition-rich environment governed by a shared decision-making process involving many stakeholders and the recursive and often time-consuming process of academic decision-making (Cooney & Martin, 2021; Romano, 2020; Wartell, 2016). In some respects, colleges are intended to aim for different, less quantifiable goals than most organizations. For example, quality control is assessed not in terms of tolerances and dependability but in terms of learning outcomes, alumni

remuneration one or five years after graduation, and that most elusive of all metrics: quality of life (Thomas, 2019). In the current day, leading a university is probably more difficult than managing a Fortune 500 firm. Students, faculty, alumni, parents, boards of trustees, benefactors, politicians (in the case of publicly supported institutions), and local communities are among the other stakeholders to be satisfied (Badillo-Vega & Buendía -Espinosa, 2020). Hot-button political topics like free speech, community engagement, diversity, and inclusion are roiling the atmosphere. The public increasingly expects higher education institutions to serve complicated social and political duties while also setting a better example than the rest of society (Wartell, 2016). The combination of the impending retirements of presidents and the changing landscape of higher education proves the idea that presidential leadership preparation is critical. Such literature will aid aspiring college and university presidents obtain a presidential seat as well as help various institutions and governing boards to prepare future presidents by ensuring a career pipeline or leadership programs to meet the requirements of this century's presidents.

Background of the Study

Over the past years, being a president of an institution has changed significantly due to the technological, political and socio-economic aspects (Cooney & Martin, 2021; Wartell, 2016). Even with the changes and recent challenges with COVID-19 and race relations across the United States, many college presidents have reported leading stable institutions (Jaschik & Lederman, 2020). Whereas many presidents may lead stable institutions, time-consuming work themes usually surface in the data. The time that a president should devote to work is substantial. Enrollment management, budget, and strategic planning are the most time-consuming areas of many college presidents (Cooney & Martin, 2021; Freeman & Palmer, 2020; Wartell, 2016). These vital areas directly influence the ability of the institution to carry out its goals, mission, and strategic plan (Oikelome, 2017). Because of the significance of the presidential role in colleges and universities, having qualified individuals in those positions is vital. Research indicates that there are difficulties in the presidential college position because institutions imply that institutions experience challenges while choosing leaders in higher education when the vacancies of president occur (Thomas, 2019). The significance placed on leadership qualities and shaping a vision by the college or university president necessitates that the position is held by an individual who has succeeded in other leadership roles. Therefore, the importance placed on hiring experienced, qualified leaders for open presidencies might limit opportunities for aspiring individuals. This is especially important, as many presidents will be retiring in the next five years (American Council on Education, 2017; Cooney & Martin, 2021).

Literature Review

Over the years, higher education presidents have been described as influential leaders, and living logos who bring vision and change (Selingo et al., 2017). Their leadership has been described as influential because of the unique shared leadership structure of universities and colleges. College and university presidents function in a far more apparent, democratic, and fewer hierarchical atmosphere of joint governance, separating colleges from corporations with top-down administration (Cooney & Martin, 2021; Selingo et al., 2017). This propensity for governance through management and agreement also imposes a lengthier decision-making timeframe and inhibits their capacity to effect change. College presidents must rely heavily on political talents.

They must recompense for the lack of sheer hierarchical authority by leading with vision, charm, diplomatic abilities, and winning the academic community's confidence and respect (Artis & Bartel, 2020; Ault, 2017; Martin & Cooney, 2020). The capacity of a university's leader to motivate others and establish a comprehensive base of sustenance is critical to its success in evolving.

There is no way to escape competing pressures (Romano, 2020). However, the university's 'product' remains unique: education, which includes a component of public service and necessitates a keen ear for the motives, sensitivities, and values of both those who create it and those who purchase it (Crim, 2021). Today, college and university presidents face more demands than in previous years, including higher competition for learners, resources, and faculty, increased responsibility for retention, success, and graduation of learners (Artis & Bartel, 2020; Ault, 2017; Cooney & Martin, 2021; Crim, 2021; Martin & Cooney, 2020). Additionally, they are further expected to maintain and build close associations with external stakeholders like community members, alumni, and donors alongside maintaining and building close associations with internal stakeholders like staff and faculty (Artis & Bartel, 2020; Ault, 2017; Cooney & Martin, 2021; Crim, 2021; Martin & Cooney, 2020).

Changing Presidency

The setting for college and university presidents is one of uttermost complexity (Selingo et al., 2017). Various conflicting decisions have in the past been made, each with a result not certainly predictable. In spite of all these, the presidents receive wide scrutiny and are required to give the best analyzed choices (Cooney & Martin, 2021; Selingo, et al, 2017). While experiencing the need to overcome these difficulties in a continually changing setting, these items are especially important to note, as presidents are still being held responsible for their decisions by their superiors and constituents. The presidents must evolve institutions by employing strategies and that exemplify institutional policies and values (Freeman and Palmer, 2020). The presidents are further required to show themselves as acquainted with the institution while still upholding internal and external relationships with campus stakeholders. Because the president's position changes so frequently, the long-term excellence of presidents is questionable (Thomas, 2019).

The most notable feat a president can attain in a college has the drapery that constitutes the institution together in spite of the multifaceted nature of choices that should be made regularly (Thomas, 2019). The capability of rallying the staff, learners, and other shareholders together to a common goal irrespective of having different opinions on the vital aspects of the institution is a substantial landmark that forms a prosperous presidential tenure (Commodore et al., 2016; Cooney & Borland, 2018). The fundamental aspect that can solely drive an institution to incredible attainment and future potentials is the ability of the president to regularly question every made decision and control the pathway to make each decision grounded on the greatest interests of the institution (Thomas, 2019). The institution's uppermost goals is mainly shaped by its values, cultures, integrity and ethics of vision, operation, mission and aims that have, in the past years, determined the essential pathway of the institution into the future.

Formal Leadership Programs

A unique challenge for aspiring college and university presidents is preparing for such a pivotal role. Due to the multifaceted nature of a president's role, there is no single defined strategy for preparing to lead an institution; however, there are formal leadership programs to consider. Table 1 highlights a select few of these leadership development programs (Cooney & Martin, 2021).

Table 1.
Formal Leadership Development Programs

Organization	Program	Sector	Intended Audience
American Association of Community Colleges	Presidents Academy Summer Institute	Community Colleges	Current presidents
American Association of State Colleges and Universities	Executive Leadership Academy	State Colleges and Universities	Senior cabinet officers who are interested in becoming university presidents.
American Association of State Colleges and Universities	New Presidents Academy	State Colleges and Universities	New presidents
American Association of State Colleges and Universities	Millennium Leadership Initiative	State Colleges and Universities	Aspiring presidents from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds
American Council on Education	Institute for New Presidents	All sectors	Interim and new presidents with less than two years of experience
American Council on Education	ACE Fellows Program for Rising Administrators	All sectors	Aspiring presidents who currently serve as vice presidents, deans, department chairs
Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities	Institute for New Presidents of Catholic Colleges and Universities	Catholic Colleges and Universities	New and interim presidents
Council for Christian Colleges and Universities	2020 New Presidents Institute	Christian Colleges and Universities	New presidents
Council for Independent Colleges	New Presidents Program	Independent Colleges	Current presidents
Harvard Graduate School of Education	Harvard Seminar for Presidential Leadership	All sectors	Current presidents
Harvard Graduate School of Education	Seminar for New Presidents	All sectors	First-time college and university presidents
Higher Education Leadership Foundation	Leadership Institute	Historically Black Colleges and Universities	Aspiring HBCU presidents
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities	La Academia de Liderazgo	Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Emerging HSIs.	Aspiring presidents
The Aspen Institute	Aspen New Presidents Fellowship	Community Colleges	Community college presidents with no more than five years of experience

Whereas some recognized leadership programs emphasize all presidents irrespective of institutional sector, others emphasize college presidents from particular institutional areas like community colleges, state universities and colleges, Hispanic serving institutions, and faith-

based institutions (Cooney & Martin, 2021). Apart from considering the kind of institution, current and aspiring presidents must consider the format of delivery for the formal leadership programs. Cooney and Martin (2021) indicate that current and aspiring college and university presidents can identify formal leadership programs that best align availability and level of commitment. Thus, presidents should engage with shorter, retreat-style programs that emphasize networking, skill development, and particular trending topic issues. Conversely, some programs last for a year that are created to prepare new and aspiring presidents by project-grounded learning under formalized mentoring and training from experienced presidents. It is not uncommon that the high cost linked with these programs can deter current and aspiring presidents from participating; therefore, participating in informal leadership programs may also be useful (Commodore et al., 2016; Cooney & Borland, 2018; Cooney & Martin, 2021).

Mentorship

Higher education presidents already have a variety of proficient experiences, which they bring by being in that position. These proficient involvements frequently serve as the main source for presidency preparation. Presidents progressively expand their professional collection while undergoing the administrative hierarchy and learn valuable skills like program growth, crisis administration, and other academic processes. Burmicky, Sáenz, and Ryu (2021) conducted a study and found that college presidents had numerous formal titles and positions that permitted them to learn more concerning high education leadership with new perspectives. According to Cooney and Martin (2021), the mentorship role is an invaluable tool for the preparation of college presidents.

Mentors may be assigned to presidents through “participation in a formal leadership development program and include job shadowing, project based learning, and structured opportunities for the mentor and mentee to discuss the role and expectations for the presidency” (Cooney & Martin, 2021, p. 24). Accordingly, a mentoring relationship may also be the result of college or university presidents identifying an aspiring leader and encourages and supports their professional growth and development throughout the aspirant’s career trajectory (Briscoe & Freeman, 2019; Commodore et al, 2016; Freeman et al, 2016).

Doctoral Degree

Thomas (2019) utilized mixed methods to explore presidents’ perceptions of their doctoral program because it aided in preparing them for the position and impacted their leadership style. Presidents who had attained doctorates in higher education or a related field were more ready than presidents who obtained doctorates in other fields. Chang, Longman, and Franco (2014) propose that doctoral programs provide college and university presidents with a foundational knowledge, skill attainment, and multifaceted cognitive skills. Research indicates that the doctoral program reinforced presidents’ interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and public speaking skills, which assisted them to associate and create relationships with fundamental constituent groups like major donors and faculty (ACE, 2017; Andrews, 2020; Artis & Bartel, 2020; Dunn & Kniess, 2019).

Leadership Skills and Qualities

Selingo et al. (2017) highlighted that the skills needed most for the modern day college president include serving as an academic and intellectual leader, storyteller, strategists, and communicator. Other skills included being a collaborator, fundraiser, and possessing operational and financial acumen. Contrarily, the tenure of a president impacts the perception of individuals of the required skills. This implies that presidents should perceive themselves through the financial and operational lens and as a leader looking to complete duties with a skilled executive team (Selingo et al. 2017). Successful presidents owe many activities to consecutive leadership development through various administrative management levels and control (Cooney & Martin, 2021). Many presidents who created prosperous regime change, management impact, and contributed hugely to the achievement of the institution have cultivated their leadership abilities through various leadership hierarchies over the years. Further, successful presidencies include understanding wide factors of structural and organizational composition. These arrangements include diversity amongst learners, staff, and the financial structure of the institution, economic well-being and performance, and investment structures (Cooney & Martin, 2021).

Because of the constantly changing contemporary setting for leadership in universities and colleges, the question of the qualities required for an successful president is a recognizable approach. As it is anticipated that there will be many openings in the coming years (American Council on Education, 2017; Cooney & Martin, 2021), vital skills will be required by those in places of leadership for the best possible outcome; therefore, presidential search committees and governing boards must identify and include a variety of essential qualities and skills. Notably, college and university presidents need to be firm, assertive, and compassionate, while possessing emotional dominance, which assists them to lead courteously, thoughtfully, insightfully, and supportively to other cultures and people (Cooney & Martin, 2021). Additionally, they are required to have excellent communication skills with a variety of campus stakeholders while being observant to meeting their needs. Exceptional styles and skills to blend critical decision-making that needs decisiveness and toughness, and consequently, show approachable and compassionate leadership frames successful institutional leadership. Further, superior judgement and a strategic use of data is a vital leadership trait required for a college or university president. Presidents that can make good, sound decisions grounded in data usually succeed.

Discussion

Most higher education governing boards recognize that higher education will never be the same; colleges and universities that do not discover new operating methods will either struggle or collapse (Badillo-Vega & Buendía -Espinosa, 2020). Consider student debt, which has grown out of proportion to compensation. Colleges recognize that there is a problem, but they struggle to rectify this issue in a meaningful way. Board members seek presidents who understand how to effect change in the academy while also determining how the academy can organize itself to be financially viable in the future. They recognize that doing so will necessitate extraordinary creativity, stamina, and a great deal of fortitude and resilience (Thomas, 2019).

Aspiring college and university presidents should recognize that they do not have to go it alone. Presidents are increasingly seeking alliances and joint ventures with other institutions in order to

utilize resources, avoid redundancy, and reduce vulnerability (Howell, 2020). Focusing on the larger good necessitates trust, teamwork, and compromise. Candidates must tread lightly when it comes to specific ideas and proposals for institutions they are only learning about. Rather, applicants should exhibit the ability to see the big picture, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a willingness to think outside the box concerning the institution's conventional operations and reputation (Howell, 2020). Astute committees and governing boards seek individuals who are intelligent, clever, innovative, and self-assured leaders capable of overcoming the needless competition and redundancy that may undermine an otherwise successful institution's economic basis.

Aspiring college presidents should possess the ability to speed up and then pivot. Colleges have been meticulously constructed to prevent anything from moving too rapidly or without debate and, eventually, consensus (Trent & Pollard, 2019). For instance, in some cases, in order to make a decision, a meeting that meets once a month may be required. For an issue to be discussed, it may be necessary to place it on the agenda a month in advance. If a decision is not reached by May, it is unlikely to be reached until September. Higher education has a well-deserved reputation for being resistant to change (Howell, 2020). Contrast this with the current world's pace: worldwide access, 24-hour news cycles, same-day delivery, Snapchat photos that disappear in seconds, and individuals who are constantly connected to many technological gadgets. Nimble leaders patiently explain that some issues may be too time-sensitive to conform to traditional governance structures and that the institution cannot wait for everyone before acting. Astute leaders skillfully point out the opportunity costs of delayed decisions and expect the community to give them the right to lead as they see fit.

Aspiring college presidents should possess soft skills that are not so soft. There was a time when soft skills were regarded common sense practices with little value proposition (Romano, 2020). While soft skills were critical to an organization's and its workers' performance, they were frequently overlooked despite their importance. However, we are now in the era of 'high EQ' as a valued executive competence. Emotional intelligence, which permits empathy, respect, and cross-cultural competency in leadership, is a must-have talent for prospective higher-education leaders. Presidents who speak well, enjoy casual banter with students, faculty, and staff, and are deliberate in their interaction with groups new to higher education foster an environment of goodwill, openness, and accessibility (Howell, 2020). A newly empowered generation of students, faculty, parents, and alumni expects leaders to be sensitive to their wants and needs when defining institutional objectives. This is especially true when it comes to issues of inclusiveness and campus environment.

Aspiring college presidents must know their appetite for data and analytics. The age of the college-educated 'thinker' has given the leader with a deep understanding of data and analytics (Wyner, 2020). For many years, institutional leaders began programs in areas and disciplines meaningful to the particular leader. However, the capacity to conduct extensive market research and obtain data on market share, discount rate, demographic predictions, employment demand, and population movements now gives institutional leaders unparalleled access to information. Presidents are substantially disadvantaged if they habitually operate without a thorough knowledge of the facts that underpin the majority of choices. Candidates should have a well-developed narrative that explains their proficiency in three of the American Council on

Education (2017) report's top areas: budget and financial management, fund-raising, and managing senior employees.

Most leaders in senior management positions can probably make a good case for competence and expertise in managing employees as well as a significant budget, but the absence of experience in fundraising might be regarded as a vacuum in senior leaders' portfolios (Wyner, 2020).

Nonetheless, a candidate who is a quick learner, willing to learn, highly coachable, and wants to be more active in fundraising can overcome a lack of direct experience; a love for education and the belief that it transforms individuals and society, and that serving is a privilege. This is what ultimately assists in one persisting through days of student sit-ins, faculty groups that work on problems for years, tense budget choices, and the job's 24/7 public aspect (Thomas, 2019). Education is important because it is the key to access, mobility, success, literacy, well-being, and knowledge and culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, higher education institutions in the United States have reached a critical moment where understanding challenges and opportunities in leadership is essential than ever. The higher education environment has increasingly become complex, continually changing, and full of competition. Furthermore, the constant ongoing changes in the colleges' and universities' environment have prompted extensive pressure on these institutions to redesign and transform inadvertently, making the presidents' work harder. Accordingly, there is a plethora of information that a presidential aspirant may desire to learn about the changing landscape of higher education and leading a college or university. As such, presidential aspirants should aspire to prepare themselves through leadership development opportunities and aspire to embrace change and the skills necessary to succeed in a highly prestigious role.

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