

Perspectives

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 Community College
Leadership for the
21st Century

A successful leadership transition requires support for new leaders and their followers, along with a focus on trustworthy communication and clear decision-making processes.

- Marilu Goodyear
and Cynthia Golden

While organizations may try to facilitate transitions, navigating transitions is a skill that leaders need to acquire if they do not already possess it.

- Christine M.
Riordan

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Leadership Transition: Challenges and Consequence

Margaret B. Lee, PhD

*President and Professor of English Emerita
Oakton Community College
Des Plaines, Illinois*

Invited to reflect on community college leadership transitions, I agreed, perhaps too readily. I have found myself struggling to respond to a very complex topic. Hardly a month goes by that there is not something in the higher ed press about the challenges posed by leadership changes in community colleges. Among the most recent was an article that lamented a dearth in the presidential pipeline, noting the intention of 75% of all current community college presidents to retire within the next ten years. The author notes also the intent of 75% of senior level administrators to step down in that same timeframe.

The critical issue in community college leadership transition is more than just a supply and demand numbers game.

I am on the leading edge of those statistics. A little less than a year ago, I retired after 30 years at Oakton Community College. I came to the College in 1985 as the academic vice president—what was at that time a significant leadership transition for me and for the institution. I was the first administrator hired by the second president of the College. He succeeded the founding president in a time of turmoil for the young institution and for all of us who were a part of it. Ten years later, after a national search, I was named president and served in that role for 20 years. So, having been in one place for most of my professional life, what equips me to write about leadership transitions?

In this piece, I offer an admittedly idiosyncratic reflection and begin with some upfront disclosures. I did not aspire to be a president. I did not aspire to be a vice president. By both education and practice, I am in my heart and soul an English teacher. I am rooted and grounded in the words and works of literature which I have loved as both learner and teacher. I approach this reflection mindful of the wise words of Jane Austen: "Stick with what you know." I can only write from the perspective of my own experience — what I have lived through and learned from nearly forty years working in community colleges and serving in a number of leadership positions in higher education organizations. I have observed countless leadership transitions, managed many, and lived through a few myself.

Here is a glimpse of what I've learned. The critical issue in community college leadership transition is more than just a supply and demand numbers game. It is true that there are fewer programs focused on preparing prospective administrators and placing them in the pipeline. It is also true that applicant pools are smaller and those

possessing the desired qualifications are fewer. The programs that do exist have arrayed courses on the knowledge and skills expected in a leader's portfolio. I know of no curriculum or course of study that prepares a person to BE a president; I am not sure such a program exists. I learned not through books or courses that the work of administration requires courage, self-understanding, and self-revelation. The word "administrator" at its core means "one who ministers to or serves." As the chief administrator, the president leads with who she is and how she acts even more than with what she knows.

There are many would-be presidents who are in hot pursuit of the title and the job. Some even have skills and abilities that are part of the expected profile qualifications. What so many of these individuals are lacking are the qualities of mind and heart essential to BEING a president. This remains of great concern to me. As important as the skills of planning, managing, budget-building, mediating, negotiating, lobbying, fund raising, and the like are, equally or even more important are the abilities to establish and nurture relationships; build community; collaborate; articulate and embody values; listen and learn; and care for and comfort members of the college community.

Where and how can colleges find leaders who understand how to connect with and build the community and nurture the culture of the organization they will lead, or effect change in the culture should that be what the institution needs? How can search committees evaluate resumes to reach an understanding of the person beyond the profile and the cover letter? How can the members of the college community and of the Boards of Trustees, who are ultimately responsible for hiring the leader, learn about the heart and soul of the person who will become what David Riesman, a scholar of the college presidency, called "the living logo of the institution?"

Where and how can colleges find leaders who understand how to connect with and build the community and nurture the culture of the organization...

There are obviously no easy answers to these questions. Having worked in a variety of capacities with a number of search firms over the last thirty years, I have found that the best firms may be few, but also incredibly helpful and effective, while the worst (and most) range from bad to worse. The best firms establish and sustain effective connections with and support for search leaders. Their
(continued on page 4)

EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

Community college leadership influences, not only the institutional mission and student success, but also the college's overall health and sustainability. Any leadership transition poses risks and challenges for leaders and followers alike, since a leadership transition can prove disruptive for the organization. As college presidents and key leaders approach impending retirement or job change, a certain amount of institutional history, experience, and wisdom will be lost. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below:

Megan Biller, MA

Communications Specialist, DCCL Program
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Big Rapids, Michigan

Transition - noun | "a change from one state or condition to another"

Change is never easy. As humans, we thrive on stability, knowing what to do and how to do it. Therefore, when someone new enters a leadership role, there is sure to be tension and fear.

Within the next few years, there will be a large turnover of leaders in higher education. While future leaders are being prepared for these leadership roles, what are colleges doing to prepare for the transitions ahead? Instead of being fearful, this is an area where colleges can be proactive.

Every college has a mission, and it is imperative that the mission remains steadfast throughout the transition. Not only should the institution's staff, faculty, and students believe in the mission, the new leader should understand its importance to the college and community. Through this mission, leaders and followers can be on the same page as the leadership transition occurs. While procedures or titles may change, a strong mission that everyone believes in will drive the college through the transition period and beyond.

With the large turnover ahead, colleges also need to prepare for new leaders with less experience. While this can bring in new and vibrant ideas, it is also important to have a support system for the new leader in place. This is an opportunity for the college to not only showcase the history of the institution, but encourage the leader to be mentored in a way that will benefit the entire college, as well as the community.

Conquering the challenges that come with leadership transition is not always easy, yet if a college is proactive, the challenges can seem much less daunting.

Most importantly, the staff, faculty, and students need to know that the new leader is one who will guide, model, and practice what is important to the college as a whole. During the time of transition, the leadership will need to listen to the desires of those crucial to the institution's success. Set time aside to host meetings with the staff, faculty, and students, not only during the transition, but throughout the time as a leader of the college. This is where true change can occur, and in a way that will help ease that tension and fear.

Conquering the challenges that come with leadership transition is not always easy, yet if a college is proactive, the challenges can seem much less daunting. Through the mission, mentorship, and meetings, the leaders and followers can come together and focus on what's truly important in the higher education setting.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

What steps can colleges take to increase the rate of success in conquering those challenges associated with leadership transition?

Peggy Heinrich, MA

Dean of Adult/Continuing Education and Workforce Development
Elgin Community College
Elgin, Illinois

When community college leaders exit an institution, they carry with them history, experience, established relationships, and trust. Hiring the right leader following such a transition is key to the success of a community college, while hiring wrong can have a devastating impact. When replacing high-level

leaders within community colleges, the tendency is often to conduct a full external search. Benefits of this include the attraction of a diverse candidate pool and ensuring constituents feel the search process was unbiased. However, it is challenging to determine a cultural fit between an external candidate and an institution, ultimately leaving much unknown until the new leader is in place and true stripes are revealed.

Communication with the college community should not be forgotten during the transition period, and regardless of the search process used, transparency is always key.

To prepare effectively for a change in leadership, community colleges would be wise to invest more heavily in succession planning. Talented and effective middle managers from within benefit from understanding the culture of the institution, have established trust and history, and are positioned to overlap the exiting leader in such a way that the transition is seamless. Likewise, while new candidates may be sought as change agents to modify the culture of a college, there is something to be said for maintaining stability, particularly during a period of change. As such, community colleges might offer leadership development programs on campus, provide incentives for managers to complete higher degrees, and ensure there are opportunities for high performing middle managers to take on new responsibilities.

Favoritism should be avoided, advancement decisions should not be made by one person alone, and individuals selected for promotion should demonstrate the characteristics sought in a leader, such as being effective communicators, displaying integrity in decision-making, and having a history of moving the college toward the achievement of its mission. Additionally, community colleges should develop a succession plan in advance to ensure the transition is smooth and all factors have been addressed.

Promotion from within poses its own challenges and may require an overall culture shift in the college if succession planning is a foreign concept. However, it can also ensure effective middle managers are retained within the community college versus exiting for advancement opportunities elsewhere, serving to motivate employees to perform at the highest level. Communication with the college community should not be forgotten during the transition period, and regardless of the search process used, transparency is always key.

Megan Biller, MA, is the Communications Specialist for the Doctorate in Community College Leadership program at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan. Megan previously taught mathematics in an accelerated high school program, located on Ferris' campus, and has a passion for women in STEM programs. She earned her Master's in Educational Technology from Central Michigan University, and continually keeps up on the latest trends in technology and social media.



Peggy Heinrich is the Dean of Adult/Continuing Education and Workforce Development at Elgin Community College in Elgin, Illinois. She has worked in the field of adult education for nineteen years at both local program and state system levels. Peggy holds a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics with a TESL concentration and is currently pursuing her doctorate in the Community College Leadership program at Ferris State University.



NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Community college leadership influences, not only the institutional mission and student success, but also the college's overall health and sustainability. Any leadership transition poses risks and challenges for leaders and followers alike, since a leadership transition can prove disruptive for the organization. As college presidents and key leaders approach impending retirement or job change, a certain amount of institutional history, experience, and wisdom will be lost. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below:

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

What steps can colleges take to increase the rate of success in conquering those challenges associated with leadership transition?

Leaders in Transition: A Precarious Path

Evan Sinar, PhD

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Seven years after our first study, *Leaders in Transition: Stepping Up, Not Off*, organizations are still botching transitions—but with greater bottom-line repercussions (DDI's Global Leadership Forecast 2013|2014 found that companies' facilitation of transitions positively correlated with financial performance—in a significant way). Leaders, facing added uncertainty associated with moves of greater complexity (e.g., geographical relocation) and an absence of prescribed career paths, have greater (unmet) personal and practical needs. As a result, engagement, productivity, and retention suffer, impacting not only leaders and those they lead, but also entire enterprises.

So what can be done to shift the transition paradigm from a precarious passage to a smooth sail? Here's what the data have to say.

Sounds Like a Plan. The research once again emphasizes the criticality of the development plan. Rather than an improvement plan, leaders-in-transition need and want a survival plan. They want to know what is expected of them and receive a blueprint for success. A formal plan establishes ownership and accountability for development, and works to reduce leader anxiety and build rapport. The more complex the transition, the more important the plan becomes in securing managerial responsibility for the new leader. Traditional support structures—including formal plans—ensure leaders won't fall through the cracks...and between managers.

Talk To Me. Additionally, the importance of high-fidelity communication between the manager and the newly placed leader cannot be overstated. In order to alleviate much of the stress-generating, productivity-killing ambiguity, managers need to initiate clarifying conversations about expectations, access to resources, and performance measures. At the same time, new leaders must also engage their managers. Our data show that 64 percent of transitioners regret their reticence to ask questions.

Organizations have a real opportunity to force discussion of important, unaddressed issues — early in the transition process — to ensure incoming leaders have a realistic view of the new job. To do this, they must assign clear accountability to managers (be they former, acting, or both) for transitioning leaders. Pre-transition mentoring and peer coaching can also go a long way to allay fears and lift the clouds of uncertainty. And, when there's less separation between leadership levels, collaboration and cooperation can thrive. A corporate culture that encourages open dialogue is especially beneficial for those in new positions.

Eyes Wide Open. Nothing is more daunting to leaders (and damaging to transition success) than walking into a new position and realizing they don't have the skills necessary to execute. Past performance is not a predictor of future performance if the on-deck scenario requires a new skill set. Our research shows that at each level of leadership a vastly different mix of skills facilitates the ease of the transition for the new leader.

As an example, consider the transition to a strategic-level role. As leaders get closer to the top and more exposed, the pull of political forces intensifies. Once comfortable with managing "down," these newly placed leaders must start looking "up." They must now influence the influencers, build credibility, and compete for limited organizational resources—while they are still acclimating AND attempting to make (inspirational) sense of the world for others.

How can this insight be applied? Consider the requirements of the job from the employee's

perspective—before they step into the new role. After ensuring they have the technical knowledge and experience needed, assess how strong or weak they are on the level-specific behavioral skills that will streamline their transition process. With targeted assessment to evaluate—and personalized development to hone—leadership skills, organizations have an often-unrealized opportunity to mitigate transition-related anxiety, facilitate acclimation, and accelerate new leaders' abilities to contribute. A few words of caution: Assessment without actionable feedback is worse than no assessment at all. And, poorly executed development can do more harm (satisfaction-wise) than good.

Organizations have a real opportunity to force discussion of important, unaddressed issues—early in the transition process—to ensure incoming leaders have a realistic view of the new job.

Say It's OK. Finally, the most important thing a manager (present or past) can offer a new report is acknowledgement. Let newbies know that it's okay—and expected—for them to be nervous or even terrified. Don't let their anxiety remain the elephant in the room: give voice to it and let it roar. Empathy also goes a long way and shouldn't be hard to muster; there isn't a manager who hasn't tackled their own newbie insecurity at some point. Collaboratively demystifying the new leader's role and openly acknowledging the emotions involved is a failsafe recipe for transition success.

(Excerpted with permission from the authors' 2014 work, Leaders in Transition: Progressing Along a Precarious Path.)

Evan Sinar, PhD, serves as DDI's Chief Scientist and Vice President, Center for Analytics and Behavioral Research (CABER). Dr. Sinar and his team conduct comprehensive analytical evaluations of talent management programs to gauge their impact and to forecast opportunities to better align with business strategy. He received his Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Bowling Green State University and serves on the Executive Board of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology.



Matthew J. Paese, Ph.D., is Vice President of Succession and C-Suite Services for Development Dimensions International (DDI). He has focused on the application of succession, assessment, and development approaches as they apply to boards, CEOs, senior management teams, and leaders across the pipeline. He received his Ph.D. and M.A. in industrial/organizational psychology from the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where he also taught courses in industrial and organizational psychology and organizational behavior.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

Community College Leadership Transition Through the Framework of Appreciative Inquiry

by Dan W. Royer and Amanda O. Latz

This work considers community college leadership transitions during a period when many leaders are approaching retirement and suggests that while inescapable, these transitions impact the entire institution. The authors view leadership transitions through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and investigate how AI might be utilized to successfully navigate community college leadership transitions, proposing that AI has the potential to address multiple facets of leadership transition and facilitate the development of contextual competency.

Access this work here:
<http://bit.ly/1UjB08D>

Presidential Transitions

by Patrick Sanaghan

Based upon his book, Presidential Transitions: It's Not Just the Position, It's the Transition, the author of this article reveals insights gleaned from interviews of scores of presidents and trustees. During a presidential transition, campus stakeholders are both anxious and hopeful as they experience the passage between the outgoing and incoming leaders. Results of the interviews indicated that certain elements associated with both the selection and the departure processes can either help – or hinder – the transition.

Access this work here:
<http://bit.ly/1PMEdJ9>



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Leadership Transition: Challenges and Consequence (continued from page 1)

consultants work to understand the culture and needs of the institution; create a profile that faithfully reflects the institution; help in recruitment of qualified individuals; support the search, screening, and interview process; and assist with reference checking. They understand that one size never fits all and they do not rely on canned templates and recycled rolodexes. The worst—often hired because they are most familiar and/or most affordable – appear to use a cookie-cutter approach. I have observed at least one of these firms work with an institution to hire a president and then, not three years later, recruit that president away to another position. One of the most egregious examples of search firms in the worst category is reflected in my conversation with a consultant who was reference-checking a candidate. When I expressed serious reservations about the readiness and capacity of the individual, the consultant suggested that I probably had a personality conflict—so different were my comments from other references provided by the candidate.

Hiring a president is not something that occurs on anything like a regular cycle. (If it does, there are much greater problems.)

Because the most important work of the Board is to hire, support, and, when necessary, terminate a president, it is understandable that responsible Board members seek assistance in the process. Hiring a president is not something that occurs on anything like a regular cycle. (If it does, there are much greater problems.) It is likely that an entire Board might never have been through the process. Let me use my own institution as an example.

When I met with the Board in November of 2013 in our annual retreat, I wanted to give them plenty of notice that I planned to retire at the end of my contract. The Board was committed to sustaining and nurturing the organizational culture and later meetings with the college community also affirmed this goal. Equally important was finding an individual who, while valuing the people and the past, could move the healthy institution forward. We discussed process, timeline, and college-wide representation on the search committee.

Having heard about searches that had been less than satisfactory, the Board was reluctant to invest in a search firm. Wise enough to know they needed some hand-holding through the process, they invited the recently retired chief human resource officer to serve as their search consultant. He understood and loved the College and was able to organize the national search; identify and recruit applicants; and skillfully assist the Board and the search committee to read between the lines of the resumes.

The search process resulted in the Board's unanimously affirming the recommendation of the overwhelming majority of the search committee. The vice president for student affairs was named the fourth president of the College. She is precisely the person I would have chosen had that been given to me to do. (It wasn't, but I expressed my confidence in her to the Board and urged them to take her candidacy seriously.) She possesses the qualities of mind and heart which equip her for the role that is more than a job, but rather a calling. Her appointment makes my heart glad and made my leaving the college after thirty years an easier transition. As her first year ends, she has indeed moved the College forward

and begun to make the presidency her own. She loves and respects the people and they have returned the same love and respect to her.

While Boards bear a heavy burden in effecting leadership transitions, the rest of us also have important roles to play...

In contrast to this leadership transition, I offer another less promising example. Soon after retiring, I was contacted by the chairman of another community college who asked if I would meet with representatives of their Board to talk about the Oakton search. I agreed. That college had been mired in conflict and controversy for several years. The president who was brought in by a compromised search had been removed amid a great deal of dispute, leaving the college community bruised and the Board irreconcilably divided. I was astonished to be asked to share the resumes of Oakton's candidates. I explained that I did not have access to those resumes and if I did I would decline, explaining why it would be inappropriate. At the chair's request, I described the Oakton search process and suggested that I felt it would be in that college's best interest to work with a reputable search firm. I asked the principal of the practice to contact the board chair who was dismissive of the need for such a meeting. What followed was a process that included only two representatives from the college community. The individual selected was appointed on a 4-3 vote.

While Boards bear a heavy burden in effecting leadership transitions, the rest of us also have important roles to play—especially those of us preparing new leaders; those of us assuming positions of institutional leadership; and those of us leaving positions that we have helped to shape and have shaped us. For me, the words of Robert Frost speak volumes about how to lead and how to live:

*Yield who will to their separation
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and the need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and the future's sakes.*



Margaret B. Lee, President and Professor of English Emerita, began her service at Oakton Community College in 1985 as Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of English, then served for twenty years as the third president of Oakton. Her prior administrative positions in Michigan include dean of instruction at Kalamazoo Valley Community College (1982-85) and dean of liberal arts at Alpena Community College (1980-82). She received her Master of Arts and doctoral degrees in English Language and Literature from the University of Chicago. She also earned certificates from Harvard University's Institute for Educational Management and the Seminar for New Presidents. Dr. Lee was long involved with the Higher Learning Commission, serving as a consultant/evaluator; member of the Accreditation Review Council; member, vice-chair, and chair of the Board of Trustees of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education. In addition, she has served as president of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. She has also been a member of the Board of Directors of the American Association of Community Colleges and has served on a number of educational and civic boards and commissions.