Leadership Transition: Challenges and Consequence

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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?”

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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)
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?

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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.

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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.

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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.
Leaders in Transition: A Precarious Path

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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.

Assessment without actionable feedback is worse than no assessment at all. Organizations have a real 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. 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 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. OK—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.)

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.

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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.)

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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.