

The President as Academic Leader



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Leadership has many dimensions, and community college presidents come to their positions with a variety of skills in a variety of areas. Some are highly competent and highly successful as fund raisers; others make their mark by building gymnasiums, libraries, and workforce development centers. Still others are extraordinary politicians, creating productive alliances with their boards, local and state legislators, and even national legislators and policymakers. Some have built creative partnerships with business and industry in their communities and regions. Each president does what he or she does best, and, if what they do best is a good match for what the college needs, it is likely to be a successful presidency.

In the history of the community college, only a few presidents have built their legacy on their academic leadership. These presidents led their faculties into exploring and experimenting with issues of curriculum, instruction, and student services; they are deeply committed to improving teaching and learning; they understand that the purpose of teaching is to improve and expand student learning; and they engage their faculties as peers in transforming their institutions into a more powerful force for change.

These leaders usually express their academic leadership by focusing on key areas they champion, such as general education, developmental education, information technology, seamless systems of education from high school to university, and fine and cultural arts. They do not focus only on one special area of interest to motivate faculty and other staff to create programs and practices to implement change. They are hands-on leaders who get down into the trenches of the college to create their vision of a transformative idea. They do not usually operate as loners; they typically work side by side with faculty and staff to create the environment, framework, policies, and procedures to shape an innovation and embed it into the institution's culture.

Many presidents come to the office well equipped to advocate for and create academic change. No recent data could be found by the author regarding the academic backgrounds of presidents, but in a study by George Vaughan in 1986, 50 percent of presidents came to their posts from positions of Dean of Instruction or Vice President of Academic Affairs. In most cases, their role as an academic leader soon gave way to the role of collegewide leader with a much broader scope of responsibility. Once these new presidents learned the ropes of being a president, some could then explore how their interests and experience in the academic enterprise could be applied.

Outstanding Examples of Presidents as Academic Leaders

The American Association of Community Colleges has been focused on competencies of community college leaders for a number of years. Now in its third edition, *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* (2018) constitutes a well-developed list of generic competencies for faculty, managers, and presidents that has become the standard for the field. It is a valuable resource for short-term leadership institutes, community college leadership programs that grant the doctorate, and individuals who aspire to leadership positions.

In the guide, however, while the leadership competencies are quite comprehensive, there is no mention of opportunities for the president who wants to leave a legacy of specific academic change to illustrate that competency. The author has worked with community colleges for 55 years and has known many presidents who have been academic leaders. In this article he has selected presidents and chancellors who have led substantive academic changes that have had major impact on their institutions. And, most importantly, these changes have continued today, in some cases long after the leaders have passed or retired. The following section provides examples of presidential leadership in the academic arena that are not the norm for most presidents.

Constance M. Carroll, Chancellor of the San Diego Community College District (SDCCD), is well known for her academic interests as a classicist, specializing in ancient Greek and Latin. In all her CEO roles, she has supported the humanities as a key area of instruction, both in program development and in her personal commitment as a guest lecturer in humanities classes. She was also appointed by President Barack Obama, and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, to serve on the National Council on the Humanities, which oversees the work of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

In the past four years, humanities initiatives have resulted in major outcomes in her district. Under Carroll's leadership, two major grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, totaling \$5.22 million, funded a multi-year partnership initiative between the district's three colleges and the University of California San Diego. The program, Preparing Accomplished Transfers to the Humanities (PATH), provides for faculty collaboration among the institutions, student undergraduate research, local conferences, and, most recently, community college teaching internships for Ph.D. candidates at the university. These efforts are designed to strengthen humanities education and to increase student transfers in the humanities to UC San Diego. As a result of this and other programs, SDCCD has become known as a leader in humanities education.

George Boggs, President Emeritus of Palomar College, relied on his previous experience as a faculty member and academic dean to lead several academic changes, including writing and critical thinking across the curriculum, learning communities, and a free drop-in tutor center. However, the most significant academic transition that began at Palomar College and spread to colleges and universities throughout the country was what became known as the Learning Paradigm, or the Learning College. Starting in 1990, Boggs led a collegewide task force comprised of faculty members, administrators, staff members, students, and community members to update Palomar's mission and to define a new vision for its future. The product of that work became a movement that proclaimed that the mission of colleges and universities should be student learning rather than teaching or instruction. In a spring 1991 letter to colleagues and friends, Boggs noted,

Our new vision statement reflects a subtle but nonetheless profound shift in how we think of the college and what we do. We have shifted from an identification with

process to an identification with results. We are no longer content with merely providing quality instruction. We will judge ourselves henceforth on the quality of student learning we produce.

The Learning Paradigm proclaimed that institutions should accept responsibility for student learning; supporting and promoting student learning should be everyone's job and guide institutional decisions. A final tenet of the Learning Paradigm held that institutions should judge their effectiveness and be evaluated on student learning outcomes rather than on resources or processes.

During the 1990s, **Byron McClenney** served as President of Community College of Denver (CCD) and led his faculty and staff in the creation of a college with a priority on student success with equity. He focused his colleagues on issues of diversity, equity, and cultural competency, from which emerged the Teaching Learning Center that established a set of values for teaching and learning. The values provided the framework for minigrants for faculty to work on projects that addressed student success and equity. The minigrants averaged 23 a year and were supported by dozens of annual professional development programs to enable achievement of college priorities.

By the end of the decade, there were no gaps in student success outcomes on the basis of race or ethnicity at a college with no majority group. CCD developed the most diverse student population in Colorado served by the most diverse administration, faculty, and staff in the state. Under McClenney's leadership, the college was awarded the 2000 TIAA-CREF Hesburgh Award by the American Council on Education. For this work, CCD was also selected as one of 12 Vanguard Learning Colleges for a major national project coordinated by the League for Innovation. AACC also published *In Pursuit of Excellence: The Community College of Denver* (Roueche, Ely, & Roueche, 2000) to describe CCD's work in the 1990s.

Jerry Sue Thornton, retired President of Cuyahoga Community College, believing that an investment in faculty development would have a direct impact on the quality of teaching, initiated Academic Excellence Centers in 1999 on each of the college's three campuses. This multifaceted support system served over 800 full-time faculty and adjunct faculty. Centralized with a collegewide director and operating under a one college model, each campus had spacious facilities staffed with instructional technologists and instructional support specialists, along with state-of-the-art technology and software. Some of the growth opportunities focused on technology use, pedagogical skill development, shared learning, learning module creation, assessment preparation, visual design modules, tenure orientation, mentoring, classroom management, syllabi design, publishing support, and copyright law. The centers supported a scholar-in-residence program that included international faculty exchange. There was clear evidence through faculty evaluations of improved performance and enhanced student learning and success. The center idea exists today and has morphed into Centers of Learning Excellence that support virtual teaching and learning.

In an effort to radically change strategies and outcomes around developmental education—developmental math in particular—**Richard Rhodes**, President of Austin Community College (ACC), bought a former shopping mall and created one of the largest interactive learning lab environments in the U.S., with more than 600 computers and multiple study rooms. Students who choose the ACCelerator option—which more and more students now do—are guided with interactive software on an individualized math pathway throughout the day. In addition, each student is assigned a faculty member who serves as an academic coach and receives multiple wraparound services to create a comprehensive package of academic support.

Using advanced analytics with more than 5,000 students (i.e., Civitas Learning's Illume Impact, which eliminates selection bias), ACC was able to increase persistence for developmental education students who used the ACCelerator by 12.44 percent compared to those who learned in traditional classroom settings, and almost 15 percent for African American developmental education students. Based on these findings, ACC faculty and staff have since scaled the ACCelerator model throughout the college's traditional campuses.

At Guilford Technical Community College (GTCC) **Don Cameron** left a legacy of innovations, including North Carolina's first early/middle college and a program for Honda Jet, but one of his most innovative projects was creating the Larry Gatlin School of Entertainment Technology. When Cameron met Grammy Award-winner Larry Gatlin, they discussed Cameron's idea of creating a school of country music. After several conversations, they formed a partnership on a handshake and proceeded to design a program that drew on Gatlin's knowledge and experience in the entertainment world.

The two men met with curriculum departments at GTCC to solicit input to expand the program to include such courses as songwriting, business management, and graphic arts and design. The board of trustees, faculty, and community leaders supported the program. Within two years, the Larry Gatlin School of Entertainment Technology grew from 75 students to 300, and the community passed a \$10 million bond referendum for a new facility. Twenty years later, the program is still creating employment opportunities for students.

Robert H. McCabe was a leader at Miami Dade College for 35 years and President for 16, retiring in 1995. In 1992, he was honored as a recipient of the MacArthur Genius Prize. During his tenure, he led many important initiatives with national implications. He led the college in groundbreaking efforts in remedial education as well as key initiatives in general education reform and the use of technology in instruction. He was among the first in the nation to embrace distance learning.

One of his most ambitious and enduring initiatives is the Teaching and Learning Project, which established the connection between teaching standards and student performance. From this initiative, a unique program evolved: Endowed Teaching Chairs. For almost thirty years, the college has annually selected and honored outstanding faculty—master teachers who inspire and motivate their students.

Since its inception, more than 300 faculty have received this honor. Every Endowed Teaching Chair receives a \$7,500 award for each of three years. These honored faculty are encouraged to utilize their three-year distinction to explore new teaching methods and enhance their technological expertise. It is considered the most prestigious recognition among the 750 full-time faculty members at the eight-campus college.

Under the leadership of **Dawn Lindsay**, Anne Arundel Community College has implemented bold strategic plans focused on equity. One of the most transformative programs is the engagement coaching program for faculty and staff. According to Lindsay, Anne Arundel is the only community college in the nation with an International Coach Federation accredited coach training program. Coaching leads to enhanced communication and listening skills, more effective relationships, and greater work/life fulfillment.

Over 135 faculty and staff at the college have been trained as coaches. After training, faculty report they are more present in the classroom and provide more meaningful feedback to students. Engagement coaching supports students through their educational

journey, encouraging self-awareness through meaningful, guided dialogue. Staff members are also encouraged to participate in engagement coaching for their own professional development. This effort is transforming the culture of the workplace and classrooms at Anne Arundel Community College.

Steve Mittelstet, Richland College President Emeritus in the Dallas County Community College District, championed numerous academic experiments during his 30-year tenure, including interdisciplinary learning communities, global peace studies, ethnic studies, and intercultural competence. One of his most engaging projects involved creating a learning culture that encouraged collaboration and the sharing of ideas through collegewide book readings. He established the first small reading group, titled Uncommittee, as a model. With Mittelstet as the discussion leader, Uncommittee rapidly expanded to 100+ full-time and adjunct faculty, administrators, and professional support staff employees self-selecting into small discussion groups each month. Participating employees contributed a \$25 membership fee to help defray the cost of the eight books read and discussed each year. Uncommittee members were encouraged to recommend books for consideration by a member-led Book Selection Committee, which chose a wonderful array of fiction, nonfiction, and ethnically diverse readings to experience and contemplate each year. Authors were invited on occasion to discuss their books in interactive discussions at Uncommittee gatherings. The collective reading discussions of numerous genres across diverse disciplines helped launch Richland College into the learning community it is today. Many participating faculty introduced the book readings into their classroom discussions.

Academic Leaders Make Excellent Presidents

These are just a few examples of the academic programs community college presidents have created to better serve their students and their communities. All these presidents will insist they did not create these programs by themselves. And, of course, that is true; however, without the president's vision and ability to collaborate with and motivate colleagues at the college and in the community, these programs might not have come to fruition.

Community college presidents are a special breed of leaders. They hold deep values about helping the underdog, the disenfranchised, the underserved, and the at-risk students in our society. They believe in second chances, third chances, and more for students who never thought they had a chance. Theirs is one of the toughest jobs in all of higher education: managing and leading trustees; navigating issues with a variety of unions; forging alliances with community leaders; working with foundations, community philanthropists, and legislators to secure resources; serving as a spokesperson for the college in the community, the state, and the nation, in good times and bad; trying to meet the needs of a very diverse constituency that is ever changing; and simply managing the day-to-day issues related to student parking, homeless campers behind the gym, and multiple phone messages from that one trustee.

Despite this scope of responsibilities, there is joy in being a community college president. A president who reviews the big picture of his or her long tenure can easily catalog the great successes and the lesser successes of a professional and personal life well lived. What is likely to stand out in such a review are one or two special programs or practices deeply embedded in the culture of the college, sculpted by the president's own creative hand. Buildings often stand as lasting monuments to presidential leadership, some even with a president's name carved in stone, but an academic legacy that makes a difference in the lives of students is a legacy to celebrate and long cherish.

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