

## Excerpt

The role of trustees in preparing community college leaders has become more important in this age of CEO transitions.

## The Role of Trustees in Preparing Leaders



December 2015, Volume 28, Number 12

By Terry O'Banion

According to the American Association of Community College's (AACC) membership database, there have been a total of 703 presidential transitions in community colleges since July 1, 2011. That is more than one-half of all public community colleges in the nation. Transitions included interim appointments, new CEO appointments, and appointments of veteran presidents from another college. From 2011 to 2012 there were 134 transitions, from 2012 to 2013 there were 158 transitions, from 2013 to 2014 there were 178 transitions, and from 2014 to 2015 there were 229 changes which Walter Bumphus, CEO of AACC, referred to as a "tsunami of transitions."

In recent decades there have been a number of announcements about a "crisis in leadership" often related to surveys of retirement plans of sitting presidents. But there has never been such a crisis as a turnover of over 700 presidents in such a short time span—made more critical because of the decline in the number of leaders prepared in existing doctoral programs in the nation's universities. The problem is made worse by the transitions in leadership of vice presidents, deans, division/department chairs, program officers, and faculty leaders. As one example, one-third of the chief instructional officers in California's 112 community colleges are interim appointments.

When the suppliers (mostly university doctoral programs) fail to meet demand, boards of trustees search for alternatives. Suggested alternatives always include tapping into retired military leaders or soliciting applications from business leaders. Frankly, these alternatives have not been productive in the past as a source of new community college presidents and are not likely to be so in the future except in a few special cases. Part of the problem is that the cultures of military and business leadership do not match the culture of educational leadership, especially the culture of community college leadership.

The source, therefore, of most of the new community college presidents will be from the ranks of community college vice presidents, deans, directors, and faculty leaders who are likely to be younger and less experienced than those in past leadership pools. To the extent that is the case, bold new plans are called for to ensure a qualified cadre of community college presidents and other leaders. *One untapped resource is the trustees of community colleges who can play a very important role in preparing future leaders—particularly presidents.*

**Trustees can create and support leadership development programs in their own institutions.** Many community colleges have created in-house leadership programs for

faculty and staff usually led by in-house colleagues, and these are often excellent programs that benefit both participants and the sponsoring college. Many of these programs, however, are not tied to existing doctoral programs that provide the capstone experience for leaders that prepares them for senior leadership positions, including the presidency, for which the doctorate is required.

A new model of leadership development that includes the doctorate, created by National American University's (NAU) Roueche Graduate Center, promises a substantive and innovative approach to the crisis in leadership. Piloted at Johnson County Community College (KS), the model has been adopted at Cuyahoga Community College (OH), Lone Star College (TX), and Bergen Community College (NJ), and is ready for roll out in other community colleges across the country. Trustees will play a key role in adopting this model because it will require a major commitment of resources and a change in institutional culture; to date, the early adopters cite considerable benefits to the following model.

The model is based on a cohort of 20 to 30 aspiring leaders from the sponsoring college who agree to participate in a three-year program leading to the Ed.D. The program is designed around a core of courses focused exclusively on community college culture and issues—the first of its kind in the nation. Many of the courses are tailored to the special needs and culture of the sponsoring college so that students can use their own college and their own departments and divisions as a laboratory for their graduate work.

A special feature of the program is the number and quality of the professors who travel to the college to meet with the cohorts. The great majority of existing community college leadership programs in universities are staffed with only one or very few professors with knowledge of and experience in a community college. The NAU program includes over 60 of the nation's most experienced and well-known community college leaders. Students interact with approximately 20 of these leaders through courses, projects, summer institutes, and dissertations.

NAU staff have created models of "partnership scholarships" in which those who benefit pay. In some cases the college funds the entire costs of the program; in all cases the college provides substantial support because of the benefits to the college which include:

1. Participants learn special leadership skills that can be applied immediately in the college.
2. A cohort of aspiring college leaders work collaboratively within the college and model for other staff the value of collaboration.
3. The program allows for trustees and the president to map out steps in succession planning.
4. Participants expand and improve the goals of the college by creating programs, projects, internships, surveys, practicums, papers, dissertations, etc. as part of class assignments.
5. Colleges can identify special issues and problems in the college to be addressed by participants.
6. The program allows college leaders an opportunity to identify and ensure that the participants will meet the diversity goals of the college.
7. There are opportunities between participants and other faculty and staff in the college to interact with each other on projects and activities; cohort professors can also be involved in these efforts.
8. The program serves as a visible reminder that college leaders care about the people of the college.

9. The program reflects and contributes to a collegewide culture of collaboration, learning, service, and planning for the future.

Trustees should encourage their leaders to explore the value of this new model of leadership development and work with the president to find the necessary funds to support such programs. Alex Johnson, President of Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio, is a strong supporter:

As part of our succession planning, Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) has made a significant commitment to developing a cadre of faculty and staff who are educated, experienced, and prepared for leadership positions that become available at the college. For example, we are already reaping the rewards of our partnership with the CCLP through the increased knowledge and skill levels of our participating employees, and their close examination of Tri-C student success data and issues in their coursework. With the college's focus on closing achievement gaps, persistence, and completion, this program is bringing significant benefits and dividends to the institution. (personal communication)

Kaye Walter, President of Bergen Community College in Paramus, New Jersey, also cites the advantages of bringing such a program to the campus:

We are delighted to bring the Roueche Graduate Center's Ed. D. in Community College Leadership (CCLP) to Bergen Community College in 2015 as a strategic initiative for leadership development and succession planning for our college. The contemporary community college curriculum incorporates Bergen's college data and issues across the doctoral curriculum. This will provide significant opportunities to take what is learned in the program and incorporate current insights and projects that are relevant to evolving needs at the college. (personal communication)

**Trustees can become more involved in leadership development by serving as a resource to these programs.** In recent years, trustees have become much more active in the governance of community colleges and play increasingly important roles. An effective and efficient board of trustees is one of the hallmarks of excellent colleges, and every leader must understand the role of trustees and how they function in the institution.

Trustees bring a special perspective to many of the issues challenging community colleges and should participate directly as guest consultants in leadership programs. They can participate as guest lecturers and as panel members; they can serve as mentors; they can be interviewed by phone; they can prepare case studies; and they can participate as members of dissertation committees. They can also recommend and share resources from their state and national associations.

**Trustees can encourage and provide support for new presidents and other leaders to benefit from executive coaching.** With all the turnover in new presidents—and with less-experienced presidents available—trustees should consider an emerging model in which a new president is employed with the understanding that the president will work with an executive coach on issues that have been identified as institutional challenges. Such a program would be helpful in every situation involving a new president regardless of the experience level of the new president, but it is a particularly important model for new presidents.

Don Cameron, President Emeritus of Guilford Technical Community College in North Carolina, is a seasoned president who led one of the most successful colleges in the nation. He is a certified executive coach and has worked with numerous presidents and trustee boards to help them create in-house leadership development programs; in addition he provides an executive coaching service for trustees, presidents, and selected leaders—a one-on-one personal interaction tailored to the special needs of the client. Issues in such sessions include building trust, board relationships, team building, fundraising, budget reductions, reorganization, reductions in force, and strategic planning. In one case, Cameron worked with a president who had been terminated to coach him through the transition; the president's board viewed this action as highly professional and useful.

Russell Lowery-Hart, President of Amarillo College in Texas and a client of Cameron and Associates, had this to say about his experience with executive coaching:

During my interview, the Board of Regents asked me who I would turn to for guidance as a first-time president. I had mentors; yet, I needed guidance that was more intentional and formal than simply calling on trusted friends. During the negotiations for the job, we discussed my desire to hire an executive coach for the entirety of my first year. It was the best decision the Board of Regents and I could have made together. The Board had peace of mind that a seasoned coach would help ensure my first year was thoughtful and purposeful. I had a sounding board, guide, counselor, coach, and eventual friend to help me frame my priorities, unify my new team, and develop an understanding of areas with which I had less experience. I think an Executive Coach should be required for every new president. It has given me the support, confidence, and critical ear necessary to effectively learn my new role. (personal communication)

Other leaders in the institution can, of course, benefit from executive coaching. Anyone new to a role or to a college can benefit from such coaching. Historically, new appointments are left on their own to define their new role or to figure out the culture of a new college. Vice presidents, deans, division/department chairs, program officers, and faculty leaders of the academic senate and of unions could improve their performance with coaching. When there is considerable turnover in leadership in a college, experienced coaches could work with teams of new leaders to help create trust and collaboration and to help integrate the work of those who have been at the college for some time and those who are new.

**Trustees can participate with the president in a collaborative model of executive coaching.** In the collaborative coaching model the trustees recognize they have a responsibility to the new president to help him or her become the best president possible. And presidents are much more likely to become an effective president when the trustees are engaged with the president as full partners in such a goal.

All community colleges face enormous challenges. New presidents face a formidable challenge in just figuring out the culture of a new college. Even presidents promoted from within the college face a new role with a totally different set of expectations than they have experienced in past roles. Trustees will be challenged to figure out how to relate to and work with a new president. A collaborative model of executive coaching provides an opportunity for all key players to create a climate of trust as a major priority—just agreeing to participate in such an enterprise reflects a measure of trust.

A goal of collaborative coaching involves trustees and the president agreeing on a set of goals for the college and the president which set the parameters for their joint work in the first year. One outcome of the collaborative coaching model is that the president and the

trustees can create performance goals and expectations for the president (and maybe for trustees) based on their increased understanding of each other; and these goals and expectations can become the base on which the president is evaluated.

An executive coach acts as an external anchor for trustees and the new president, helping them to build a solid base of trust and agreement on goals that will best serve the long-term interests of the college. The coach can serve as a neutral guide on issues, provide training in special skills, arbitrate disagreements, help build consensus, and provide support and encouragement for both the trustees and the president to perform at their best.

In conclusion, although trustees have an overall governing responsibility as trustees, they are, nevertheless, just human beings like all the other stakeholders in the college. In these times of increasing friction between some boards and college leaders, we need to increase opportunities where trustees and leaders, especially presidents, can work together for the betterment of the college. Leadership development programs provide an ideal venue for trustees to play a substantive role in helping our leaders become better leaders. In the process, trustees are likely to become better trustees.

*Terry O'Banion is President Emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College, a Senior League Fellow, and Chair of the Graduate Faculty at National American University.*

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