

The Leader as Archeologist: Digging into the College Culture



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All community colleges have an established culture, whether they are five years old or seventy-five years old. The culture reflects formal and informal power structures, old-guard and new-guard perspectives, written and unwritten values and practices. No one single person in the institution knows everything about the culture; everyone knows something about it. New leaders who fail to make understanding the established college culture one of their first priorities do so at their own peril. If a new leader, especially a new president, wants to succeed in a new position, he or she should approach the college as an archaeologist to unearth the artifacts, the inscriptions, the monuments, the remains of the college's culture. Digging deeply into the existing college culture will pay dividends to a new leader.

New Leaders and New Cultures

Horror stories abound in the community college world about presidents and other leaders who have violated the established culture in their first week or month on the job. Such leaders, often wanting to make a quick impression, move too fast in staking out their territory. Some leaders have been taught that there will be a brief honeymoon and that they should take bold action early. Some just want to change the environment to accommodate their leadership style.

The situation for a new leader is often complicated by expectations from the trustees and from some faculty and staff that the new leader will bring about much needed change. Community leaders and local media often herald the new leader as someone who will bring fresh ideas and address old problems. And the new leader probably took the job because of the perceived opportunities to do something different in this new environment. Leaders are often motivated to take new jobs because they feel they can perform better in a new position; they want to implement their agendas.

If a new president—or any leader—wants to be successful in a new job, it would be wise for that president to begin his or her tenure by getting to know the established culture of the institution as thoroughly and as quickly as possible—and before any significant decisions are made and significant actions taken. In fact, the decision to dig into the college culture as the new president's first priority will help address the need for visible action for many of the stakeholders, and it will provide a window of time for the president to gather valuable information on the institution before tough decisions have to be made. In some cases, tough decisions may need to be made before the president understands the college's culture, but future decisions based on such understanding are likely to be more grounded and better accepted.

The primary reasons for digging into the college culture as a new president are to become a more effective leader and to help make more informed decisions, but there

are other benefits as well. The new president who takes the time to get acquainted with the culture of the college will begin to know the names and the backgrounds of the stakeholders who operate the enterprise. And, as the process unfolds, the stakeholders will get to know the name and the background of the new president. Additionally, the president who wants to understand the established culture will convey a set of values reflected in such statements as these:

- She cares about and respects who we are and what we have accomplished.
- He isn't going to make any wild decisions without knowing the landscape.
- She values making decisions based on information.

The new leader who takes the time at the beginning of a new job to understand the established culture of a college will reap many benefits. The time it takes will be well worth the time spent to accomplish the job.

Gathering Information on Institutional Culture

There are numerous ways to gather information on institutional culture, and it is rather amazing what can be understood in a brief time—as any member of an accreditation committee will testify. New presidents, of course, should read all key documents available, including histories, accreditation reports, strategic plans, budget and other financial documents, articles in the local media, special reports and studies, and board minutes. Such documents should actually be read before the president signs a contract, but at a minimum in the first few weeks of employment—and as a basis for launching an archaeological dig into the established culture. The institutional documents will provide recorded clues to the culture; a process for interviewing key stakeholders across the institution will provide face-to-face opportunities for interaction which will unearth sociological, psychological, and economic data to round out the picture. Along the way a few skeletons may be unearthed from hidden closets.

A process for interviewing key stakeholders can be daunting, especially in very large multi-college or multicampus districts. The process should be easy in small colleges, often the site of a leader's first presidency and therefore a process that may be particularly relevant. But even in large colleges with units scattered over large areas there are ways to make the approach work. And perhaps the process and the message will be particularly important in larger districts where colleges or outposts sometimes feel neglected and alienated from the center of power, the district office.

A process for interviewing key stakeholders across the institution, if carefully planned, can be enormously productive as a method for gathering information on the culture of the institution. The new president should take charge of this process in consultation with key college players before the first day of his or her term or as soon as it is appropriate to begin working with other college leaders. To avoid questions and concerns that will be rampant regarding how the new president is going to engage the college, the plan should be created and college members informed about it in a general way as one of the president's first acts. The plan could be announced by the president at the first institution-wide meeting if such a meeting is arranged in the first week or so, or through the college newsletter or a special memorandum the president sends as one of his or her first acts. The message, including the rationale, should come from the president and not from some other staff member. This is one of the president's

first acts in staking out a position of leadership in the institution, and very careful thought should be given to every step of the planned activity.

Key staff members—e.g., vice presidents, faculty senate and union presidents, classified staff union presidents, the former president’s secretary, leaders of the part-time staff, faculty with emeritus status—should be invited, perhaps individually, to review and critique the plan. Student representatives and the trustees must be included. All groups in the institution should be represented in this consultation process to convey the message of inclusiveness—which should be the message of a leader in the 21st century. No one should have veto power over any part of the plan because the president is beginning to put in place a new set of values and behaviors that will undergird the new leadership style. These reviews will begin to provide the president with important information on the consultation style of these key players as well as information on how they view the college, and their review should result in a plan that is tailored to the culture and the operating style of the institution. Most importantly, if the new president or leader seeks consultation in one of her or his first initiatives, it communicates and models a value. If consultation and collaboration are not highly valued, then it probably will not be important to understand the existing culture.

Organizing Focus Group Sessions

There are many ways to organize and conduct focus group sessions for the new president to meet the members of the college community. The following is only one approach. Ultimately, each plan will reflect the style of the president and the perceptions of key staff members invited to provide reviews and suggestions.

1. Identify a key staff member who is trusted in the institution—perhaps the president’s secretary or assistant—and appoint that person to arrange group sessions of all employees in the institution to meet with the president in the first few weeks and months of his or her tenure. In very large institutions with thousands of employees, such an approach will have to be modified for the president to meet with representative groups, but every effort should be made for the president to meet with as many employees as is possible. The great majority of community colleges in the U.S. are quite small so meeting with all members of the college community is quite possible. These group meetings should almost be the president’s full-time job in the first few weeks or month of appointment.
2. Schedule group meetings for one-hour sessions limited to 6 to 8 members each and, ideally, with cross-functional representation. If scheduling and geographic locations allow only for meetings by units or departments, then classified staff and a representative from the part-time faculty should be included. Again, in very large institutions special arrangements may have to be made for interviewing representative groups.
3. Give careful thought to an interview protocol and the key questions that will be asked in every group. These group meetings are much more than casual, get-acquainted sessions; they lay the groundwork for how the president will operate in the college, and they provide the major mechanism by which the president will begin to understand the culture of the college. The selected stakeholders invited

to review the process will have some good suggestions for questions. Examples of key questions that should be considered include:

- What are the greatest strengths of this institution?
 - What are the five most important innovations for which this college is known?
 - How does this college best express its commitment to improving and expanding learning for students? For faculty and staff?
 - What are the three most important challenges you think we should address in the coming year?
 - What are the key problems we will encounter in addressing these challenges?
 - What major resources do we already have on hand that will help us meet these challenges?
4. Ensure that responses are recorded by a trusted secretary or aide for later analysis. Individuals should not be identified in the recorded responses, and the president will need to reiterate the purpose and process at the beginning of each meeting. If there is resistance or an indication of concern regarding trust about sharing information in some groups, then the president has already uncovered an important artifact in the archaeological dig into the college culture, an artifact that can be commented on at the time.
 5. Consider returning to some groups for follow-up discussions if particular confusion or stress dominated the sessions and continuing discussion might help.
 6. Make sure there is a plan for organizing and summarizing the recorded responses as soon as possible following the completion of the focus group sessions. The president should also record his or her own responses and summary observations following each meeting. Based on this information the president must create a report to the college community. This is the first and last opportunity the president will have to make observations about the culture of the college that he or she has not influenced and for which he or she has not been responsible. The report can be viewed as similar to the exit interview an accreditation committee makes—or if the president is creative enough it might be reported as the findings of an archaeological dig. It is an opportunity for the president to hold up a mirror to the college, reflecting how its members see it and, more importantly, reflecting what these views mean for the college's future and the president's role in that future.
 7. Ideally, this report would take place in an all-college meeting and would be the prelude to a plan for launching an initiative to move the college further along on its journey to improve and expand student learning. In some institutions, it would be ideal to follow the report by a series of planned exercises involving all members of the college in creating a common core of values or an updated vision or mission statement. In other institutions, more preliminary work is required before this step can take place. In any case, the report should include indications of action the president will plan to take as a result of the information in the report. The indications may be presented as issues that will be addressed in strategic planning, principles that will guide the president's leadership behavior, or ideas that will be referred to appropriate committees for review and implementation.

Digging Into the College Culture

These seven steps for creating an institution-wide process for interviewing college stakeholders reflect only one approach new presidents or other new leaders might use to better understand the culture of the college. The approach is easily applied by presidents of small colleges and by leaders of units such as departments or divisions. But it can also work in very large institutions with some modifications to account for time and size. Such modifications may include interviews with representative groups, written surveys, environmental scanning practices, and interactions using technology. The goal is to include as many of the employees from every group as possible to ensure that the picture of the college culture that emerges is as accurate as possible. The more stakeholders involved, the more credible that picture will be and the more useful it will be in guiding the new president to a successful and productive tenure.

Presidents and other key leaders always influence the culture of their workplace. If they will approach their new roles as archeologists digging into the existing college culture as one of their first tasks, they are much more likely to avoid early mistakes, and they are much more likely to leave a positive legacy in the college long after they move on to dig in new territory.