AT ISSUE

BUILDING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE: PRIORITIZING SUCCESSION PLANNING

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INTRODUCTION

Comprehensive community colleges currently face a considerable range of challenges stemming from unprecedented change related to such issues as wide legislative and demographic shifts, fluctuations in the economy, and expensive technological advancements (Morris, 2017). The confluence of these factors may lead one to wonder if the most significant challenge will be filling leadership positions within these institutions with individuals who possess the necessary skills and traits to be successful.

As baby boomers leave the workforce, there are generally fewer replacement workers available to assume their posts, which leads to a significant knowledge gap. In 2001, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) predicted a potential crisis threatening the future of community colleges in the form of a leadership void (Shults, 2001). Not only did researchers identify a trend of community college presidents retiring at a significant rate, but the pipeline for potential leaders was also experiencing higher than normal projected retirements. Given the departure of the baby boomer generation in higher education, specifically in community colleges, this situation is predictive of an alarming leadership gap (Morris, 2017).

Research studies (Royal, 2014; Smith, 2016) attest to noteworthy turnover at the CEO level as well as substantial shifts in the leadership of vice presidents, deans, and senior faculty members across two-year institutions. In 2015, nearly one in every four community colleges experienced turnover at the presidency position (Smith, 2016). A recent 2018 survey indicates 47% of community college presidents, up from 40% in 2017, believe clear paths do not exist to prepare new leaders for the community college presidency (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). Many community college leaders are especially concerned about the lack of female and minority candidates being prepared for presidencies (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018).

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Moreover, scholars have recognized several factors contributing to the potentially perilous situation of emerging leaders entering roles without the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully navigate the complexities of the present-day community college (Brown, 2002; Royal, 2014). Today's leaders face challenges that are different and more complex than those in the past: preparing graduates to compete in a global economy, employing an increasing number of and variety of instructional methods, utilizing distance education effectively, defining programs in terms of competencies and skills rather than length of instruction, preparing for multifaceted mission boundaries, and facing new funding and resource allocation challenges. As a result, current college leaders do not project optimism about future prospects.

Furthermore, reports point to community college presidencies in upheaval following the ousting of presidents, launching of investigations following terminations, and fundamental errors in decision making (Smith, 2016). With the turmoil of continuous leadership shuffling, the need for leadership training, and cultural clashes between college communities and presidents, it leaves many wondering, "Who will lead?" This perpetual leadership gap begs the question of why higher education has significantly trailed the corporate world in valuing and addressing succession planning (Cavanaugh, 2017).

SUCCESSION PLANNING—A POSSIBLE SOLUTION?

Cavanaugh (2017) notes, "Leadership transitions are inevitable and disruptive. When leaders change, there is always a disturbance in the force that, at the very least, is displayed in terms of style and at worst in terms of chaos" (p. 22). Succession planning involves implementing smooth transitions for leadership positions. This includes recruiting new talent, searching for executives, selecting assessments, onboarding the new leader, and successfully transitioning between exiting and incoming leaders. Succession planning is vital to identifying and mapping ways to ensure an organization has the right people with the right skills, capabilities, and experiences, in the right place at the right time (HR Insights Blog, 2018). As numerous community college senior administrators approach retirement, it is imperative that talented, qualified, mid-level professionals are identified, mentored, and developed to fill these positions (Sanders, 2011). Looking outside of higher education, the average CEO's tenure is a mere five years. DeRosa (2018) offers the following reasons for companies to have a succession plan:

- Costs are reduced by identifying and preparing internal candidates to fill positions as they become available. Companies that plan for leadership succession avoid spending money on recruiting and onboarding, as internal candidates are familiar with company policies and culture, thus reducing or eliminating the costs associated with training.
- Continuity means less chance of workplace disruption. Extended transition periods can significantly damage relationships and undermine trust. Succession planning ensures potential candidates are prepared to step into new roles with minimal adjustments.
- Improved employee engagement leads to greater productivity. People are more committed to a company when they have a clearly defined future.
- Better organizational results may be achieved when companies develop formalized succession strategies. The process of planning for future leadership forces organizations to consider what competencies are required for critical positions.In

the average tenure of a sitting college president was 6.5 years, down from seven years in 2011 and 8.5 years in 2006 (Seltzer, 2017b). Seltzer (2017b) reported that 54% of higher education presidents indicated a plan to leave their current presidency within five years, but only 24% said their institution had a presidential succession plan. In the world of academia, succession planning tends to receive attention merely when a need or vacancy occurs.

Institutions can address the issue of leadership shortage through the intentional development of potential leaders and a clear path for employees to advance to leadership positions. The implementation of a succession plan ensures qualified prospects will be available for unanticipated job openings and promotes the stability of the institution.

"Succession planning allows the College to maintain direction on current initiatives without losing ground. It ensures that institutional knowledge is retained and acts as encouragement for current employees. Succession planning often means promoting from within, which gives employees something to strive toward."

— Lori Gonko, Ed.D., Vice President of Strategy and Human Resources, Henry Ford College

2016, Succession planning also has the benefit of helping to diversify the pipeline of candidates as they prepare for feeder or presidency positions. Higher education needs and is seeking diversity within leadership. The role of college and university presidents remains dominated by white men (Seltzer, 2017a), with less than a third of the positions occupied by women and less than a fifth by members of a racial or ethnic minority group. Seltzer (2017b) suggests that when seeking to fill president positions, colleges and universities are looking for external experience, which sometimes has the unintended consequence of working against diversifying the pipeline.

"I think it's important to plan for the future by creating opportunities for the next generation of leadership to get involved . . . No matter what, you need to give the right people the right exposure and experience whenever possible so they are ready for the responsibility if the time should come."

— Dr. John Selmon, Executive Vice President and Provost, Muskegon Community College

DIVERSITY AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

With anticipated baby boomer retirements on the horizon, it would seem that promising opportunities for women and minorities might be more readily available (Bataille, 2014; Santovec, 2010). However, race and gender are still obstacles for many professionals (Macias & Stephens, 2019; Seltzer, 2017a; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Barriers such as ongoing institutional discrimination; disciplinary preferences for leadership posts; the lack of transparency in recruitment; promotion and retention practices; and issues in mobility, location, and salary differences persist. At the same time, the racial and ethnic makeup of the country is expected to become increasingly more diverse, in effect making the United States a "minority majority" by 2050 (Besel & Williams, 2016). Consequently, if leadership is to be more representative of the population it serves, the subject of succession planning potentially takes on even more complexity.

Based on past growth, gender parity in the college presidency is not expected to occur until the year 2030, not until 2050 for African Americans, and 2060 for Hispanics (American Council on Education, n.d.). Consequently, the ethnic and racial makeup of administrators and faculty in community colleges is not changing quickly enough to keep pace with the country's increasing minority population. Although the for-profit sector has been forging strategies for intentional succession planning for decades, both the public and nonprofit sectors have lagged in this area (Besel & Williams, 2016). As more vacancies and opportunities approach, succession plans that include looking within may indeed help create a more diverse leadership landscape in higher education (Brantly, 2019; Eddy, 2017). Notably, as organizations work to identify potential future leaders, experts suggest taking deliberate steps to consider the women and people of color who should be mentored, sponsored, and encouraged to seek positions with greater levels of responsibility (Brantly, 2019).

"It is incumbent upon College members to personally encourage others to apply for positions who are qualified and who are persons of color."

— J. Michael Meade, Ph.D., Member of the Henry Ford College Board of Trustees

COSTS AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

Higher education professionals understand the greater costs associated with recruiting a new student compared to retaining a current student. Analogously, similar calculations can be applied to employee retention. High employee turnover leads to increased costs as a result of separation and search expenses, damaged morale, and productivity losses associated with onboarding new employees (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019). To be clear, there is certainly a benefit to seeking the diversity borne from external searches, and this should be an integral part of any comprehensive personnel management plan. However, current institutional leadership teams must also actively support professional training and employee development as part of orderly succession planning. Many colleges and universities provide some form of tuition reimbursement for employees to earn advanced degrees and certifications. Faculty, staff, and administrators are often encouraged to participate in conferences and seminars. However, a leadership development program that fuels a comprehensive succession plan is more than disparate, unrelated professional development activities. Employees must know the potential exists for advancement within their organization, otherwise little incentive exists for them to take advantage of leadership development opportunities.

Orderly succession planning requires a commitment by the organization to recognize and support the development of talented employees towards positions with increasing responsibilities and exposure, mitigating their desire to find employment with other institutions (Joynton, 2014). Any institution can survive the loss of a person leaving for another place of employment. But, if thriving and not merely surviving is the goal, thoughtful leadership development will keep vital pers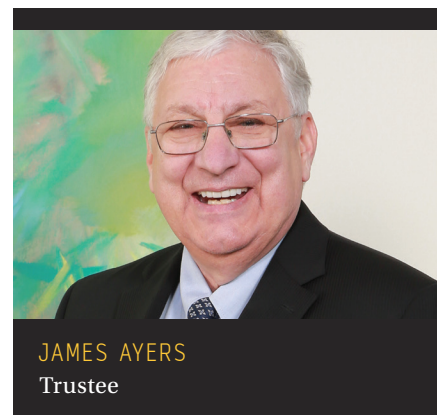onnel in place, inhibiting brain drain and the most debilitating aspects of the losses of institutional memory. Not only can the loss of potential leaders be detrimental to the health of an institution, so can retaining skillful personnel who are not elevated and offered opportunities to take on additional challenges. Catherine Clifford (as cited in Chamorro-Premuzi, 2019) notes, "In the United States alone, lower disengagement translates into an annual productivity loss of around $500 billion" (p. 8). No organization can reach its true productivity with a glut of disinterested personnel. Hence, a dedicated budget is a requisite component to internal leadership and career development (Hanover Research Council, 2010).

> "I don't believe that there is a plan in place for orderly, expected succession planning. We tend to keep moving forward as if everyone is going to be here forever, and then panic when someone retires or quits. . . . We seem to suffer from having too many initiatives/jobs/tasks assigned to each administrator, and so planning for the future gets shuffled to the back burner."
>
> — Lori Gonko, Ed.D., Vice President of Strategy and Human Resources, Henry Ford College

PARKLAND COLLEGE

DR. TOM RAMAGE
President

DR. PAMELA LAU
Executive Vice President

JAMES AYERS
Trustee

Parkland College is a public community college in Champaign, Illinois, serving twelve local counties with an annual enrollment of approximately 6,000 students. It is a small college serving a large area, and it is leading the charge on presidential succession planning.

In 2018, Parkland College President Tom Ramage announced his plan to step down from the presidency in December 2022, leading trustees to begin planning for the impending transition. On September 18, 2019, Parkland College trustees announced the unanimous decision to present Dr. Pam Lau as both executive vice president and the designee to succeed Ramage as president in 2023.

Dr. Lau began her career at Parkland College in 1995 as a part-time faculty member teaching developmental reading and writing courses to at-risk students, and she is now in line to become the sixth president of the Champaign-based community college.

The following is an interview of President Ramage, President-designee Lau, and Trustee James Ayers regarding Parkland's vision and implementation of succession planning.

Does your leadership believe there is a recognized need to pursue leadership succession planning?

Ramage: There is definitely a need to pursue leadership succession planning. We see on average five to seven retirements per year from faculty ranks and equal or slightly higher numbers from staff and administration due to the fact that they exist in larger numbers overall. For reference, we employ 188 full-time tenured faculty, 250 staff, and 29 administrators.

We begin the succession planning conversation with an annual leadership conference aimed at newer staff and faculty, discussing leadership at all levels and illustrating successful pathways of internal promotion. We have historically and successfully promoted from within. All four of our vice presidents and 20 or so of the 29 administrators have been promoted from within. Succession planning is always on our mind. It has historically and currently proven to be both effective and good for morale.

Two of our administrators have moved on to presidencies and another two have accepted CAO roles at other institutions. Clearly, something good is happening to prepare leaders.

How have the trustees at Parkland utilized succession planning to prepare for or resolve issues in leadership? What was the process of ensuring that succession planning was a tool for continuity of operations?

Ayers: Parkland College Trustees historically have not had a succession plan for the presidency, which led to problems when our founding president, Dr. Starkel, had a disabling stroke. The Board was not prepared. After a couple of years of turmoil, the Board brought someone in to be president who came from a 4-year institution and turned out not to be a good fit. After that we had a national search and hired Dr. Harris. Sixteen years later we did another national search and our results were not as good. Dr. Ramage, who was the academic vice president, was selected as interim president and later confirmed as president. He has done an exceptional job.

When Dr. Ramage announced that he was retiring, we had to give some thought to what that meant going forward. Most Boards wait until the president retires and then start a search. We were not initially thinking about doing an internal hire but as we reflected on what others were doing, I think the Board felt comfortable with the idea of hiring internally. Now that we are in that process we are even more comfortable with our decision, and our role is to help the new president (in waiting) to be successful even before she moves up. We know that our support helps the president be successful.

What strategies are used to develop potential leaders at Parkland?

Lau: Formal strategies include institutionalizing structures and programming to encourage the development of potential leaders. Professional development includes an annual Leadership Retreat as well as the year-long Leadership Academy.

- Leadership Retreat is a three-day, two-night off-campus retreat for 25 participants selected from across the college to spend intensive time with the president and the vice presidents.
- Leadership Academy also includes participants from across the college in monthly leadership seminars integrated with small group discussions led by the vice presidents.
- Leadership 2.0 was recently launched to reach out to leaders who attended Leadership Retreat some years ago.

Informal strategies include leaders in positions identifying and encouraging potential. I myself have benefitted from this time and again. At so many points in my professional journey over the past two decades at Parkland, someone has come alongside to encourage, to point to opportunities, to say, "You can do it!"

Ayers: By modeling professional behavior and valuing our employees, we create the environment where our employees want to stay with us for the long term. Some of that is due to our commitment to leadership development and professional development.

I feel like this decision shows the maturity of our College, where we know we got a good thing going that benefits the students and helps them be successful. There is value in having stability at the College that benefits our students and our community. The stability of Parkland College is enhanced because it is not how the president is doing, but how well our faculty and staff are doing and how well prepared our students are.

What was your level of awareness that leadership at Parkland was committed to succession planning?

Lau: Parkland has a history of identifying leaders from within and encouraging the development of leadership skills to prepare for leadership positions within the college. Leaders, especially those in strategic positions, are mindful of the question: Is there someone at the college who can take my place if I am no longer at the college (regardless of reason)?

In my specific situation as the president-designee for the college, the current president had identified his retirement date early and explored with the Board the feasibility of naming a successor while he is still three years away from retirement. He also discussed with his vice presidents this exploration. I was one of the vice presidents, so I was aware.

What organizational factors influence how institutions develop future leaders?

Lau: Nurturing people, "bubble-up" cultural orientation, supporting innovative failures, and looking within. Leadership that recognizes that the strength of the organization rests in the quality of the people they hire and the opportunities offered to help each one do their work effectively and grow professionally.

Allow employees to initiate and innovate. This creates pride in work and a sense of belonging. Opportunities with smaller initiatives allow people to stretch and grow and learn the demands of leadership. Moving forward on a college's mission must not depend on top-down direction alone. You need a mixture of strategic direction from the top and tactical creativity at the grassroots. Learning together from mistakes and owning the lessons learned to do better is key to encouraging professional growth.

Hire well, especially when people come into the organization. Allow for growth, seed opportunities to test leadership, and promote those with talents and experience for upper administration positions. This of course has to be balanced with bringing in talent from the outside.

How does succession planning benefit the internal and external college community at your college? Nationally?

Lau: If by succession planning you mean identifying the next generation of leadership from within, I would say that it provides the college with a good measure of stability. This is particularly the case

when replacing a sitting president. Finding a new president is always a challenge. There is some measure of disruption and discomfort from the unknown. When a new president is selected, there is often a temporary halt in planning and innovation while everyone awaits the new direction that new leader wants the institution to take. Planning for a successor helps to eliminate some of the uncertainty. If the successor is from within and accepted by the college community, the change in top leadership is not disruptive. Stability is maintained. The fear of the unknown, while not eliminated, is reduced.

The community benefits from knowing who the next president will be. The sitting president can introduce the incoming president, helping him or her maintain existing, and build new, relationships with community stakeholders. Again, this allows for continuity in relationships with the college's supporters in the college's district.

The reality is that every college has a unique set of circumstances. In some areas, stability and continuity is not desirable. Disruptive innovation might be what is needed. Fresh eyes and new ideas and different perspectives are needed to take an institution in a better direction. Bringing in a successor to craft a new direction while a sitting CEO is still at the helm may be awkward, to say the least! So the answer to the question is, it all depends.

What influences the ability for Parkland to sustain and continue succession planning efforts over an extended period of time?

Ayers: Our leadership style is one of collaboration and cooperation, where the roles of the president and the Board are essentially one. You might say that we work for the common good and are not worrying about where our boundaries are between president and Board. We are willing to invest in the institution. The advice that I give is that you have to work to continuously improve and associate yourself with the best and do your best. You need to be willing to move in order to advance yourself if there is no room for internal development. Every chance we get, we are presenters at conferences and participating in organizational activities and networking. We develop our trustees and encourage participation. We rotate our Board chair so that we have a depth of experience.

Describe the leadership style of the Board and sitting president that enable implementation of successful succession planning.

Lau: These are not leadership styles so much as a confluence of factors that have to be in place.

- The Board and the sitting president have to be confident that there is an internal candidate who can ably assume responsibilities at the presidential level.
- The Board has to be ready not to conduct a national search and defend its decision to stakeholders. It can face criticism for not having the leadership to seek out the best set of talents from a national search, rather than belief that the best candidate is internal.
- The sitting president has to be willing to announce a termination date in advance. He or she will also have to be willing to face the challenge of being viewed as a lame duck while gradually passing the baton. Not everyone is willing and able to do this.

What advice would you give to someone who may be interested in leadership or becoming a president of a community college?

Lau: For each person, the path will be different. But for everyone who aspires to be a leader, the path forward professionally begins with doing the best work you can wherever you are, doing more than what your job description states, working with people in and outside your department, and demonstrating that you can influence, initiate, collaborate, and bring projects to completion. All with grace and civility and joy.

Look not to the prestige of being a president, but focus on doing the work that is before you with excellence and on developing positive effective leadership traits. Learn to value people. Know from real experience that success as a leader comes from building a good team and effective teamwork. Convey hope anchored in reality with a vision for what is possible. Make sure people can trust you. Walk the talk.

EXAMPLES OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

For its leadership development program, Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan received the 2019 Excellence and Innovation Award for Leadership Development and Diversity by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Every year this program accepts 16 university employees to participate in a cohort, designed to develop and strengthen their leadership skills. Impressively, "Of the three previous cohorts, 47 participants have completed the program. Ten of those have been promoted within Oakland University and/or assigned to different initiatives on campus" ("OU's Leadership Academy," 2019, para. 4). This is exactly the type of program that encompasses a best practice in creating a stable link between leadership development and succession planning. The correlation between participation in the OU Leadership Program and chances for increased professional opportunities is visible and obvious.

Ivy Tech Community College's (n.d.) office of Talent Development offers four leadership training programs for employees at all levels of the college (Figure 1). The Master Teacher Seminar brings together 24 faculty members from across the state to develop key strategies and focus. The Supervisor Education program, offered at campuses across Indiana, provides new supervisors with foundational skills in building and managing teams, strengths-based leadership, policy and procedure, and conflict resolution. Ivy Tech's Leadership Academy creates an internal pipeline of qualified talent for future mid-level leadership roles. Participants develop a leadership philosophy and an individual development plan. Pathways to Peak Leadership develops senior and executive-level leaders, providing a custom experience with one-to-one coaching that enables participants to focus on their area of interest. Participants choose four workshops to attend and complete at least two customized learning experiences that may include job shadowing or attending statewide council meetings. The enrollment process for these leadership programs has recently evolved from a nomination model to one of open applications, allowing for a more diverse group of potential candidates.

Other notable leadership development opportunities include university seminars and programs offered by the American Council on Education, the ASPEN Institute, the AACC, and AACC-affiliated organizations (Shults, 2001). The Michigan Community College Association (MCCA), having acknowledged the large number of community college leaders retiring within the next decade, created the MCCA Leadership Academy, which is designed to provide strong leadership training, mentoring, and coaching for emerging leaders (Dautt, 2019). Dautt suggests the Leadership Academy provides an avenue through which community colleges can prepare their future leaders while supporting existing talent.

Figure 1

"Pathways is a little bit more streamlined, more personalized for higher-level positions than the Leadership Institute was. We determined that this would be the most effective because we realize that our faculty and staff are very busy on the campuses."

— Rachel Williams, Executive Director of Talent Development, Ivy Tech Community College

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSION PLANNING

The development of any succession plan initiative at an institution must align with its strategic plan and take into account the current governance structures and systems (Hanover Research Council, 2010). An effective succession plan requires proper preparation and the development of a long-term framework. Fucci and Murrell (2017) suggest that a successful leadership development plan can take five to ten years to come to fruition. This process must begin with broad conversations regarding the importance of succession planning, a survey of the institutional needs that must be addressed, and an internal evaluation of current processes for filling vacancies. An effective succession plan must reflect the institutional characteristics and a deep understanding of the competencies and professional development needs that address the preparation of prospective leaders (Sanders, 2011). To incorporate the evolution of strategies or unforeseen changes in the institution's goals, it is critical that the plan remains flexible for purposes of adaptability (Hanover Research Council, 2010).

The succession process must also be transparent and allow for full participation of institutional leadership. Colleges ought to consider building the pipeline of leadership among staff at all levels to transition into different roles and take on additional responsibilities. The focus of succession planning must not always be on senior-level leadership but can help all employees develop the necessary skills— through expanded job roles, further education or training—to allow them to rise effectively and intentionally throughout the institution (Hanover Research Council, 2010). Moreover, the plan must develop talent, anticipate vacancies at all levels of the institution, and establish a process for finding replacements. It must consist of a framework for recruitment, selection, assessment, and succession that addresses the institution's current and future leadership needs. The creation of a committee that is devoted to succession planning may reinforce the importance an institution places on future leadership as well as the value of its current employees (Fucci & Murrell, 2017). Once an institution's succession plan has been established, regular assessment is crucial. To ensure accountability and effectiveness, outcomes must be measured to identify successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

A broad but comprehensive succession plan expands the pool of competent candidates by establishing customized leadership and professional development as well as innovative training programs. Developing a strong and talented leadership bench can encourage innovative thinking and ideas to further grow an institution (Fucci & Murrell, 2017). Training, mentoring, and coaching for the development of college staff are valuable tools and should represent the diverse perspectives of all participants (Sanders, 2011). While not all institutions have the resources to create a fully formed and self-contained leadership program on their campuses, every institution can identify the next wave of leadership and create support systems to help them in their development.

An effective succession plan utilizes broad definitions of talent in order to attract and cultivate a deep and diverse pool of leaders within the institution (Hanover Research Council, 2010). This is especially important given the increased globalization of community colleges. Institutions must balance succession planning with diversity-related initiatives to improve the quality and selection of candidates. As colleges become more diverse, so should the professional talent pool, and institutions' succession criteria should reflect the changing demographics of community colleges.

CONCLUSION

Though the benefits are many, few institutions have implemented a formal succession planning program to address the community college leadership void. Prioritizing succession planning can effectively position institutions for greater and broader leadership continuity. As community college leaders continue to retire, proactive institutions will consider developing or expanding succession planning programs to identify and promote qualified internal candidates for senior-level, mid-level, and other key leadership positions. The development of a pipeline to cultivate internal talent for academia counteracts the disruption associated with loss of leadership. Succession planning provides for a viable mix of talent, expertise, perspectives, and experience to meet the leadership goals of institutions. Succession planning is a key for shaping emerging leaders and appropriately addressing the community college leadership gap.

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