

Are College Trustees Hiring Effective Presidents?

Strategies to help college boards select exceptional leaders.

By Joshua Wyner



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OUR NATION IS EXPERIENCING A GENERATIONAL SHIFT in the college presidency. Before the pandemic, presidential tenure was rapidly decreasing, from an average of 8.5 years in 2016 to 6.5 years in 2016, a trend echoed in research specifically on turnover at community colleges. And late last year, researchers reported that increasing numbers of presidents across higher education are leaving during their first term, including many in their first year.

I worry that trustees — who select the majority of community college presidents nationally — may not be ready to pick the right leaders. Today's presidents face challenges far more consuming than those of even five or ten years ago: campuses increasingly threatened by uncivil political strife, dangerously low public support for higher education, steadily declining enrollments, and of course, the fallout from COVID-19.

Incoming presidents — hundreds of them every year — will enter stormy seas, trying to stay afloat while at the same time fulfilling their colleges' critical mission of developing the talented students their communities need to fuel a fast-changing workplace and solve increasingly complex problems.

At a time when the community college presidency is increasingly difficult — suggesting that expertise may require more time on the job — presidencies are getting shorter. What can be done to reverse this trend? How can our nation ensure that boards are prepared to hire excellent presidents with whom they can effectively collaborate over the long term? Here are a few ideas:

Strengthen trustee selection. Too often, trustees are appointed — or encouraged to run for elected office — because of their generalized commitment to a college or to the person who selected them. Governors, local officials, and others selecting trustees should focus on appointing trustees with relevant knowledge and attributes. Here are a few to prioritize:

- A genuine belief in community colleges (and higher education) as essential to the future strength of our country
- An understanding of coming changes in the workplace, demography, and enrollment patterns
- A healthy skepticism as to whether the educational experiences their college offered in the past are adequate to develop the talents of an increasingly diverse populace for a rapidly changing world.

When boards are made up of trustees who have those attributes when they begin their service, they will be more likely to select and support effective presidents.

Engage boards deeply. Too many boards spend inadequate time on issues related to core mission — including excellence and equity in student success — and too much on everything else, including budgets, buildings, and operations. That means that trustees may not understand fully strategic matters when, often suddenly, they must pick a new president. Every sitting president should increase their efforts to engage the board on strategic matters such as:

- Why the college's mission is so important to students, the community, and the nation
- What core reforms the college is pursuing to attain better and more equitable student outcomes
- What metrics will be monitored to assess progress and to hold the president accountable

By helping focus board meeting agendas, committee structures, and deliberations on answering those questions, sitting presidents can ensure that trustees know what they must when the time comes to pick and support a strong successor.

Train boards on presidential hiring. In most cases, a president's resignation is soon followed by appointment of a search committee and retention of a search firm. But too few boards provide either the committee or firm with clear direction on what they're looking for in the next president. In a changing world, this may be very different from the one that just left. Not surprisingly, boards are often dissatisfied with the candidates that emerge from the search process. The Aspen Institute has conducted research on how to hire an effective community college president, and (for the reasons mentioned above) it starts with trustees understanding the college's strategic direction and reform strategies. Only then can boards gain clarity on the specific qualities needed in a future president and then inform everyone involved in recruiting and interviewing candidates what to prioritize. States should invest in training boards on effective presidential hiring and how to work effectively with new presidents.

Over the past 20 years, many community college leaders have done impressive work increasing college graduation rates. They have been supported and critiqued by talented higher education reformers — within and outside government — in ways that have advanced needed reforms. It is time for them — and everyone in our country working to improve community college education — to lean into the critical need to strengthen board appointments, engagement, and professional development.

This sounds like inside baseball, but it isn't. The next wave of presidential retirements is starting now. Whether trustees hire exceptional leaders will dictate no less than the capacity of community colleges to develop the talent needed to drive our nation's economic future and help solve the complex challenges of our time.



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