



Executive Leadership Research: Presidential Pathways

Research Team

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INTRODUCTION

The presidential pathways study is one of three studies that support the Executive Leadership Program at the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. The purpose of this study is two-fold: first to provide a set of baseline data of the current presidents in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) as of January 2020 in order to track changes in the leadership over the next several years; second, to analyze the data and identify the educational, experiential and leadership pathways of current presidents. The outcomes of this work will offer insights into professional development programs for both doctoral students and presidents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature demonstrates that community college leadership is experiencing a high degree of turnover and there are opportunities for a more diverse leadership cohort (AACC, 2006; Eddy, Liu, & Hartmann, 2019; Gagliardi et al., 2017). Just over half of sitting presidents are 61 or older, and 56% of current presidents indicate plans to step

down in the next five years (Gagliardi et al., 2017). The 2017 American College President Study (Gagliardi et al., 2017) paints a portrait of Community College leadership poised for change. Currently, 36% of community college presidents are women, and 20% are minority leaders, which represents a more diverse leadership rank compared to other institutional types. For almost 20 years, the number of presidents of color in community colleges hovered around 13-14%, and the most recent data from 2016 showing a jump to 20% marks a new trend (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Boards of trustees must look beyond “well worn paths of the past” and instead focus on a mix of credentialing and a passion for student success when seeking the next generation of leaders (Finkel, 2019, p. 15). While most rural institutions have male presidents, females make up the majority of mid-level positions, again, signaling opportunity in a time of great transition and potential along the career pipeline (Eddy et al., 2019). Developing leaders for the future is critical. Eddy (2018) argued for options to create racial equity in community college leadership development, namely, building the base, expanding the middle, and restructuring leadership development.

The career pathway to community college presidencies historically involved a progression from faculty member, to chair, to dean, to chief academic officer, to the presidency (Amey et al., 2002). Obtaining a doctorate is a common prerequisite prior to seeking a presidency. Nationally, 37% of community college presidents hold an Ed.D. (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Community college presidents who focus on students and a learning-centered approach are also those found to be most valued in their organizations (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; The Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream, 2013; Weisman & Vaughan, 2006). The American Association for Community Colleges (AACC) first identified a set of leadership competencies needed to meet the needs of students, institutions, and the labor market in 2004, and recently updated these in 2018 to include a wider expanse of leadership throughout the institution and in various career stages. The competencies argue that the most successful presidents are those who create urgency and take substantial risks to improve student success. In addition, successful presidents aim for lasting change, leverage their external partnerships in an all-encompassing strategic vision, and align their resources to drive student success (Weisman & Vaughan, 2006).

NORTH CAROLINA CONTEXT

The North Carolina Community College System, comprised of 58 colleges enrolling more than 700,000 students annually, is the third largest system in the country. The comprehensive education program offerings of the colleges include college-transfer, career and technical education, basic skills, short-term workforce training, dual enrollment for high school students, and customized job training programs for business and industry. Each autonomously operating college is led by a president and

governed by appointed boards of trustees. The NCCCS is led by a president and governed by an appointed state board. The NCCCS and state board provide system-level policy oversight and accountability, budget management, and legislative advocacy for the colleges.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The presidential pathways research team collected publicly available information about each president through a web search. The data were collected through curriculum vitae, college websites, announcements in local papers, and LinkedIn profiles. While the information across all sources was not consistent (a study limitation), there was sufficient documentation for data analysis.

The research team developed six provisional coding categories based on the literature about community college presidents, primarily around career pathways (Saldaña, 2016). Each team member reviewed a subset of the data collected and coded to the six categories. The coding choices were discussed during team meetings for clarification and agreement on coding and additional codes were added to the categories based on the data (Glaser, 2016). The data categories were then analyzed and coding refined as the findings were developed. Despite an incomplete data set, several interesting findings emerged.

KEY FINDINGS

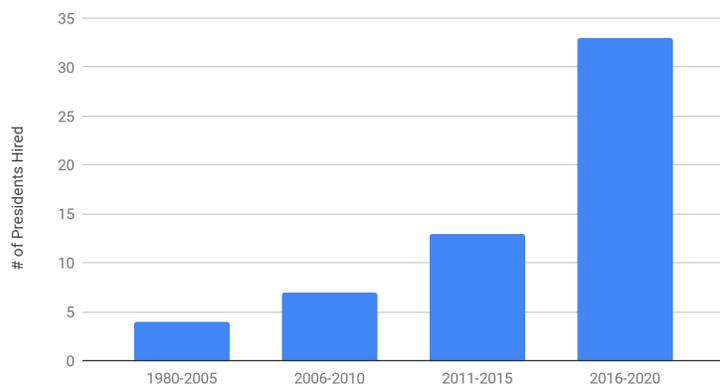
The key findings are organized by the six coding categories that are described below. Not all information was available for every president and we counted some interim and new hires, therefore the data are presented as numbers rather than

percentages of the entire 58. The totals do not always add up to 58 and the numbers may not reflect the full scope of education or experience of the presidents.

Hiring Dates and Demographics

- 33 hired in the last 4 years (2016-2019/2020)
24 of whom were first-time presidents
- 13 hired between 2011 and 2015
- 7 hired between 2006 and 2010
- 4 hire between 1980 and 2005

Hiring Trend for NC Community College Presidents



- 6 internal hires spent 3-10 years at institution prior to presidency
- 3 internal hires spent 25-28 years at institution prior to presidency
- 37 spent their entire work career in North Carolina
- 19 were considered NC natives while other presidents were from the southeast (VA, SC, FL, AL, TX, TN)
- 13 are women; of those 10 hired were hired in the last 4 years

Educational Degrees

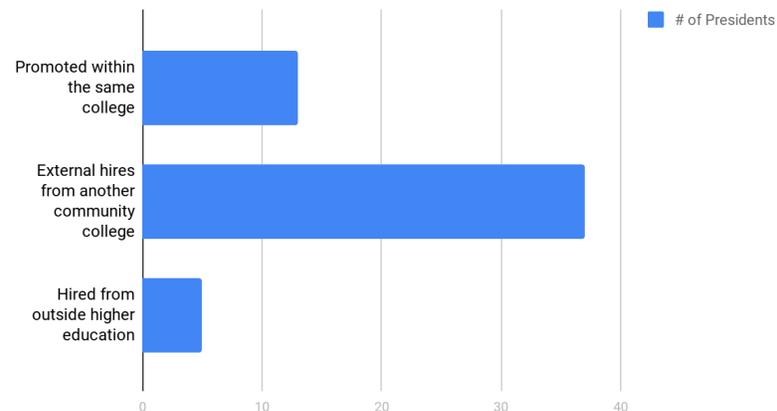
- 53 presidents have a doctoral degree
- 43 out of 53 have a doctorate in education (Ed.D.)
- 22 out of all 58 have a master's degree in education

Experiential Pathway

Move into the presidency through a specific community college (intra-institutional), multiple community colleges (inter-institutional), or from outside the community college system such as another sector (extra-institutional)

- 39 were new to the president role when hired
- 13 were promoted within the same college (intra-institutional)
- 37 were external hires from another community college (inter-institutional)
- 5 were hired from outside higher education (extra-institutional)
- Of the 30 presidents hired in the last 4 years, 19 were first-time presidents (meaning, 1 in 3 of the recently hired presidents were new to the role).

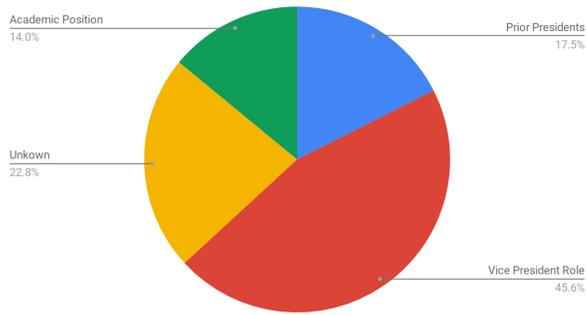
Experiential Pathways



Prior Role and Institutions Along Pathways

- 2 first-time presidents moved from a position in a smaller college to a presidency of a larger college
- 28 first-time presidents moved from a position in a larger college to the presidency of a smaller college
- 4 second-time (or more) presidents transitioned from a smaller college to larger college
- 9 second-time (or more) presidents transitioned from a larger college to a smaller college
- Prior to this presidency, 10 individuals were presidents, 26 were in a VP role, 13 were unknown, 8 remaining held other, academic positions.

Where were the presidents prior to their current presidency?



Leadership Pathway

Completion of leadership programs and fellowships, appointments to boards and commissions, and engagement with professional associations and/or voluntary organizations³⁹ were new to the president role when hired

- 11 participated in leadership programs and/or fellowships. (Of those, most were national programs like AACC, Aspen, and The League and a few others were local like chamber-led leadership programs.)
- 22 had appointments and/or served on advisory boards and/or commissions. (Of those, most were state-level educational associations but several were local and regional economic development, chamber, and nonprofit boards, too.)
- 23 were a part of a professional association, fraternity/sorority, and/or voluntary /community-based organizations. None listed past varsity athletic experience.
- Information across all leadership categories was missing/not available for 24 of the presidents.

Presidential Pathway Archetype

Traditional (Scholar, has faculty experience and last two positions in a community college or Steward, has no faculty experience and last two positions in a community college) or Nontraditional (Spanner, has considerable experience in both community colleges and other venues or Stranger, has no prior experience in community colleges) (see Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001)

- 46 had a traditional path (either steward--24; scholar--20; faculty role was underdetermined--2)
- 4 had recent substantial positions outside of higher education (spanner)
- 2 had no prior experience in higher education (stranger)

- Of the 14 women, 8 followed the steward path, 5 followed the scholar path, 1 not known (includes 1 interim in the steward count)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The implications for policy and practice reflect the Belk Center's focus on professional development and the data collected for this study.

- This holistic view of the pathways to the presidency can help aspirants know what experiences and competencies are currently aligned with successfully attaining the role and inform presidential hiring committees.
- There is an opportunity to increase the emphasis on leadership roles outside of the institution as part of the professional development journey for future presidents. (Fewer than half of current presidents had a documented leadership pathway.)
- There is an opportunity to develop mid-career administrators or academics as future presidents, as an interesting gap showed up in internal hires (missing any with 10-25 years at the institution).
- While a traditional pathway to the presidency is now documented (male, doctoral degree, traditional scholar), a new pathway seems to be emerging in the last four years. There are 33 new presidents in the last four years, one-third (10) of whom are women.
- The trend is to hire external candidates (37, inter-institutional), however, there were 13 promoted within the same college (intra-institutional). It appears that a variety of experiences (multiple institutional) is important to the hiring group.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The next steps for this research team are interviews with North Carolina presidents and trustees. While the team would work with the other research projects to develop a full interview protocol to include questions across the projects, there are four main areas of interest. First, we have questions related to institutional characteristics and processes: for example does the size of the college influence the hiring of presidents

and what is the hiring process at each college? Second, what was the motivation to attain a presidency and what were the influences? Third, what experiences have been valuable in doing the work of a president, both prior to attaining the role and during presidency? Fourth, we want to explore the relationship and influence between presidents and the leadership team. In addition, this demographic analysis should be replicated at Years 2 and 4 to assess changes in hiring and professional development outcomes using complete information (survey or CV).

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