The Professional Development Practices of Community College Presidents: A National Study

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Abstract

The length of a college president's tenure is under six years, meaning that boards and institutions are increasingly grappling with the turnover associated with senior leaders. This turnover is seen in all sectors of higher education, especially in community colleges where the changing roles of these institutions are particularly pronounced. The purpose for conducting the study was to describe the professional development practices of community college presidents in hope of identifying efforts that might help to lengthen presidential tenures. Drawing on a national survey of 500 community college presidents, 159 usable responses were received and point toward the reliance on national conferences and self-direction as the primary methods that presidents use to remain current in their roles.

Keywords

College presidents, professional development, self-direction, community college administration, continuing education, college leadership

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Las Prácticas de Desarrollo Profesional de los Presidentes de Colegios Comunitarios: Un Estudio Nacional

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Resumen

La duración del mandato de un presidente de universidad es inferior a seis años, lo que significa que las juntas y las instituciones están lidiando cada vez más con la rotación asociada con los líderes superiores. Esta rotación se observa en todos los sectores de la educación superior, especialmente en los colegios comunitarios, donde los roles cambiantes de estas instituciones son particularmente pronunciados. El propósito de realizar el estudio fue describir las prácticas de desarrollo profesional de los presidentes de colegios comunitarios con la esperanza de identificar esfuerzos que puedan ayudar a prolongar los mandatos presidenciales. Basándose en una encuesta nacional de 500 presidentes de colegios comunitarios, se recibieron 159 respuestas utilizables que apuntan a la dependencia de conferencias nacionales y la auto-dirección como los métodos principales que los presidentes utilizan para mantenerse actualizados en sus roles.

Palabras clave

Presidentes de universidades, desarrollo profesional, auto-dirección, administración de colegios comunitarios, educación continua, liderazgo universitario

Community colleges are changing rapidly. With the adoption of bachelor's degrees, a growing online presence, and an evolving workforce, community colleges are facing new challenges that extend beyond their campuses. This evolution includes not only the financial pressures of needing to raise external funds, but also new and different types of student recruitment, employee retention efforts, and relationships with employers and other stakeholders. Community colleges require a strong sense of institutional leadership, and this is coming at a time when presidencies tenures are at the shortest in their history (Chen, 2022).

The college presidency has been described as the most difficult job in the United States (Lederman, 2023; Thomason, 2018), and this is one of the factors that has led to the American college presidency tenure being around five years (Melidona et al, 2023). For community colleges, the average length of tenure is 5.3 years (Dembicki, 2023). The combined result is that there is a shortage of highly qualified college presidents, and for those who do assume the role, there is a need to be strategic in addressing institutional issues.

Issues college presidents face include both the internal politics and issues surrounding faculty, staff, and students, as well as the work, beliefs, and priorities of governing boards. As a reflection of much of the political dialogue in the US, governing boards can similarly reflect the polarization of political preferences seen in the major parties. This polarization has been evidenced in situations such as the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill where board members have been in direct conflict with institutional faculty over the placement of Civil War era monuments and markers (Harris, 2019).

One response for college and university governing boards is that they can continue to invest in a new president every five years, or they can focus their attention on helping college presidents be successful. A key part of that effort at being successful has to do with keeping presidents current in their jobs and building a skill set of professional excellence that will enable them to remain in their job longer. Presidents must invest in their own professional development if they are to be able to remain in their positions long enough to make a lasting impression on their institutions and their students.

The purpose for conducting the current study was to begin a description of how community college presidents both use professional development as a technique of remaining current in their jobs and to identify the strategies they perceive to be effective in keeping their skills up to date. Drawing upon a national sample of community college presidents, the study is critically important to presidents, boards, and entire institutions as effective leadership is a key component in organizational success. The study is grounded in adult learning theory, specifically action learning, as these presidents have a high degree of control over what and how they undertake their professional development.

Background of the Study

Community College Presidents

Community college presidents face the unique tasks of having a local board of trustees, serving a community in direct proximity of the college, and a complex set of relationships in offering both workforce and academic education. With such a varied set of challenges, many

community college presidents come from what would be considered 'non-traditional' backgrounds in higher education. For example, with a strong sense of serving a business community through workforce training, a president might be well suited to hold a background in the private sector. Similarly, the managing relationships in close proximity to a college might benefit from an individual who has experience in public school administration. This varied sense of responsibility adds to the overall complexity of managing and leading an institution.

Historically, community college presidents moved into their positions after serving as leaders in public education; a natural extension of the evolution of community colleges emerging from secondary schools. The first generation of these presidents were secondary school leaders and administrators who moved into the roles as a step in their career progression, and a second generation of these leaders maintained a strong sense of this progression. More recently, however, presidents have had their entire careers in the community college sector of education, and they have assumed presidencies as an intentional career objective.

During the past decade there has been a noted labor demand for college presidents for several reasons. First and foremost, the generational shift in presidencies has resulted in what has been referred to as 'the greying' of the profession, resulting in more hiring for these roles. Second, the college presidency has been described as "the most difficult job in America" and that has often discouraged highly qualified candidates from pursuing the position (Harris, 2019). And third, the career pathway to the presidency is often unpredictable and non-linear, meaning that finding the right candidates to lead an institution at that particular point in time can be problematic. For example, a dynamic, charismatic leader might be an ideal president, but if there are hard managerial issues to deal with, there might be a lack of alignment of skills and challenges.

There is a significant body of literature exploring, reporting, and researching the community college presidential role. These range from broad descriptions of the state of the presidency (Brunen, 2012) to more specific activities and attributes of the presidency, such as the Aspen Institutes (2013) report on president's working for student success, the preparation for the presidential role (McNair, 2015; Association of Community College Trustees, 2012), competencies needed for the presidency (Hassan et al, 2010), and even career transitions out of the presidency (Maslin-Ostrowski & Flord, 2012; Floyd & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2013). Recurring themes throughout these studies is that the modern presidency is changing and evolving, and that the unique mission of the community college warrants special attention and consideration.

Morris (2017) identified the contemporary challenges and opportunities facing community college presidents. His research stressed the financial commitments of institutions, changing technology, and the initial enrollment and recruitment as well as the retention and persistence students. In each of these areas, he focused on the need for presidents to have strong institutional leadership as well as technical knowledge about each functional area that needs attention. To respond to these challenges, he indicated the need for presidents to be entrepreneurial, adaptive, and committed to the teaching mission of community colleges. Ultimately, he highlighted the need for presidents to evolve and change with society and that the response strategies used the past will not be effective in resolving the issues and problems of the future.

Similarly, Martin et al (2018) focused primarily on the characteristics of potential community college presidents and noted that there is a strong pipeline of future presidents and that they hold the academic credentials to assume the roles. They also highlighted the need for strong leadership training, and they reported that many of those aspiring to the presidency role have completed presidential preparation programs such as those offered by professional associations, and that they typically view transformational leadership as a necessity to be successful in their presidential roles.

Professional Development

Society, and the context of higher education, have and continue to change at a rapid pace. Based on changes to technological capacity along with societal expectations, some driven by the recent Covid-19 pandemic, have resulted in a perspective on change and adaptation that occurs at a rapid pace and intersects all aspects of society. This means that for leaders to provide the guidance, support, and vision for the future, they must be willing to embrace this change, continuously enhancing and modifying their skills and abilities (Kezar, 2023). To do this, they must embrace the concept of self-improvement through whatever activities or processes that best align with their personalities and professional dispositions.

Continuing professional education has been a common element of professional development, with the term often based in regulated professions that have specific content knowledge modifications that require mandated updates (Coady, 2021). The fields of law and medicine, for example, have required professional continuing education hours to assure that these professionals have the technical expertise to continue their operations and services.

Professional development activities can include multiple activities, ranging from the highly formal to the entirely self-directed (Coady, 2021). Formal professional development activities can include attending conferences or meetings, enrolling in a formal degree or further education, and testing for specific credentials, such as those offered in fundraising and accounting. Self-directed activities are typically more informal but can be equally effective. These might include subscribing to and reading certain materials, conducting informational interviews or visits to colleagues or other institutions, and conducting observations. The type of activities engaged in are often a reflection of the needs and learning style of the individual (Coady, 2021; Magwenya et al, 2022).

Professional development activities can empower and strengthen the work of individuals in a wide spectrum of professions, ranging from teachers to lawyers, but can also be a challenge to work into busy professional lives. In addition to concerns about time commitment to remain relevant in a profession, individuals can struggle to find immediate relevance in the professional development opportunity along with understanding the immediate return on the commitment of participation (Cervero & Daley, 2016).

A critical component of continuing professional development education is the conceptual framework of self-direction. The notion of self-direction has been characterized as either a personal attribute or a dimension of the learning process (Cafferella, 1993). The concept stresses the self-determination of an adult to identify needs, wants, desires, and deficiencies and to chart a method of addressing these learning needs. The practice has been common in

leisure learning as well as in professional continuing education (Brockett, 1983; Grover, Miller, & Porter, 2017; Knowles, 1975).

Research Methods

Using several public online directories of community colleges, a sample of 500 institutions was developed. These 500 institutions all had independent college presidents, although some institutions were part of larger state or regional systems. Each of the 500 colleges were reviewed online to identify the senior campus administrator, typically termed 'president' or 'chancellor.' The email contact information for these 500 individuals was collected and used in data collection. As a note, several email addresses were for a general "president" and not the individual's name. Where possible, the individual administrator's name was used instead of the non-specific email address.

Data were collected using a research-team developed 20-item survey instrument that was developed based primarily on the research literature about professional development practices. The first section of the survey included four background variables about the respondent and the respondent's institution. The second section included eight items on professional development practices, and the third section included eight items related to the challenges of professional enhancement participation.

Prior to the administration of the survey, it was pilot tested with a group of community college administrators who were not part of the study. First, a panel of four presidents were provided the survey to comment on the content, wording, and format of the instrument. Several modifications were made from this feedback, and then the revised survey was administered to 20 college presidents who were also not included in the study. These presidents completed the survey and a form asking about the clarity and comprehensiveness of the instrument. Again, several modifications were made to the instrument to assure its face validity. A Cronbach alpha was computed on the survey data that were returned from the pilot administration of the instrument, identifying an alpha level of .8730.

Findings

Of the 500 surveys that were electronically administered, 31 were returned (6%) were returned as 'non-deliverable.' These email addresses were re-checked against the college websites and no technical errors were identified. At seven institutions, there had been a presidency change noted on the website, and the interim or acting presidents were not included in the study. This resulted in a usable sample of *N*=469.

The survey was redistributed three times after the initial deployment of the instrument, with the following number of responses per administration: 1=73, 2=47, 3=28, and 4=11. This resulted in a total of 159 responses. All 159 of the responses were fully complete, meaning that the usable response rate for the study was *n*=159, 32%.

Background Variables

Four questions were included on the survey to get an understanding of the background of the participating presidents and their institutions. As shown in Table 1, of the 159 respondents, the majority had served in their roles 6-15 years (n=96; 60%), nearly as many reported an institutional enrollment of 3,001-7,000 students (n=96; 59%), and over half indicated that they had an independent college that was not part of a larger system (n=82; 52%). There was, however, no majority of surveyed presidents in terms of their experience immediately prior to assuming the presidency. Just under half (n=78; 49%) had worked in a community college, just over a quarter (n=42; 27%) worked in public service, nearly a quarter (n=36; 23%) worked in the private sector, and three (2%) presidents indicated that they had "other" types of experience.

Table 1
President's Responses to Background Variables

Characteristic	*n*	%
Position prior to presidency		
Work in a community college	78	49%
In private industry	36	23
In public service	42	27
Other	3	2
Length of time in the presidency		
5 years or less	44	27
6-15 years	96	60
Over 15 years	19	12
Student size of institution (headcount)		
Under 1,000	4	2
1,001-3,000	43	27
3,001-7,000	94	59
Over 7,000	7	4
Campus governance		
Independent campus	83	52
Part of a larger system	68	43
Other	8	5

Primary Professional Development Practices

In the first part of this section of the survey, presidents were asked to identify which primary professional development activities they participated in. Responding presidents identified attending one or more national professional conferences (n=39; 24%), subscribing to relevant magazines and journals (n=34; 23%), and non-formal, self-directed activities (n=25; 16%) as

the most common practices (see Table 2). In the second part of this question, respondents were then asked to rate, on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale how effective they perceived each of the practices to be (1=Highly Ineffective progressing to 5=Highly Effective). Presidents indicated that they perceived subscribing to relevant journals, magazines, and websites as the most effective ($\bar{x}$=4.71; SD .4430), followed by attending national conferences ($\bar{x}$=4.68; SD .4255), and non-formal, self-directed activities ($\bar{x}$=4.53; SD .3892). In contrast, the perceived least effective professional development practices were mandated institutional trainings ($\bar{x}$=3.48; SD .7001) and participation in formal/structured professional development programs ($\bar{x}$=3.79; SD .5912; see Table 3).

Table 2
Presidents' Self-Report of Professional Development Primary Practice

Characteristic	*n*	%
Further formal education	8	5%
Attend one or more national professional conference(s)	39	24
Participate in national focused training program	10	6
Attend one or more state/regional professional conference(s)	22	14
Participate in formal/structured professional development program	17	11
Subscribe to and read relevant professional journals, websites, magazines, etc.	34	21
Mandated institutional training	4	2
Non-formal, self-directed activities	25	16

Table 3
Presidents' Perceived Effectiveness of Professional Development Practices

Characteristic	$\bar{x}$	SD
Further formal education	4.11	.6382
Attend one or more national professional conference(s)	4.68	.4255
Participate in national focused training program	3.86	.8291
Attend one or more state/regional professional conference(s)	4.35	.6618
Participate in formal/structured	3.79	.5912

Characteristic	$\bar{x}$	SD
professional development program		
Subscribe to and read relevant professional journals, websites, magazines, etc.	4.71	.4430
Mandated institutional training	3.48	.7001
Non-formal, self-directed activities	4.53	.3892

These data on professional development practices were also sorted based on the position the presidents held prior to their current role. As shown in Table 4, presidents who had prior community college experience perceived the professional development practices of attending national conferences ($\bar{x}$ =4.91) and subscribing to appropriate relevant journals and magazines ($\bar{x}$ =4.79) as the most effective. Those presidents with backgrounds in public service had similar perceptions of which professional development practices were effective ($\bar{x}$ =4.85 and $\bar{x}$ =4.82 respectively). Presidents coming from private industry similarly perceived the effectiveness of journals and magazines ($\bar{x}$ =4.47), but also had a positive perception of the effectiveness of non-formal, self-directed activities ($\bar{x}$ =4.50). And, those presidents who identified that they had "other" previous experience perceived the effectiveness of the non-formal, self-directed activities ($\bar{x}$ =4.66), and also had agreement ($\bar{x}$ =4.0) with the activities of national training programs, state and regional conferences, and subscribing to magazines, journals, websites, etc.

Table 4

Role Prior to Presidency and Professional Development Practice

	CC Work *n*=78	Private Industry n=36	Public Service n=42	Other n=3
Further formal education	4.00	4.44	4.04	3.66
Attend one or more national professional conference(s)	4.91	4.11	4.85	3.33
Participate in national focused training program	3.98	3.55	3.85	4.00
Attend one or more state/regional professional conference(s)	4.40	4.11	4.47	4.00

	CC Work *n*=78	Private Industry n=36	Public Service n=42	Other n=3
Participate in formal/structured professional development program	3.97	3.80	3.45	3.33
Subscribe to and read relevant professional journals, websites, magazines, etc.	4.79	4.47	4.82	4.0
Mandated institutional training	3.66	3.30	3.33	3.0
Non-formal, self-directed activities	4.57	4.50	4.47	4.66

Challenges to Professional Development Participation

Presidents were provided a list of eight challenges to participating in professional development activities and were asked to select the one primary challenge that they faced. Nearly a third of the participants indicated that time commitments (n=46; 29%) were the primary challenge to professional development, followed by prioritizing development needs (n=33; 21%), and support from the supervising board (n=21; 13%). The least identified challenges were knowing what to focus on (n=7; 4%) and the internal infrastructure supporting the president's absence (n=5; 3%; see Table 5).

Table 5
Challenges to Professional Development Participation

Characteristic	n	%
Funding	14	9
Time commitment	46	29
Timing of opportunities	15	9
Support of supervising board	21	13
Prioritizing development needs	33	21
Finding effective PD providers	18	11
Internal infrastructure of the institution supporting your absence	5	3
Not knowing what to focus on	7	4

Discussion and Conclusion

In the first part of the survey, responses were consistent among what community college presidents were doing for their professional development and what they perceived to be effective. They attend national conferences, they read appropriate websites, journals, and magazines, and they engage in non-formal, self-directed activities. All three of these practices rely on a self-determination and direction by the president, suggesting that the idea of professional development is important, but is perhaps somewhat fluid. This might mean that it is less of a constant state of reflection and practice, and more of a practice that might be highly intense and might ebb and flow as demands and challenges arise. Similarly, the high rating of participating in national conferences and meetings suggests that presidents find value in communicating with and learning from others who they might consider their peers. Additionally, these presidents might find that relying on a national network of peers provides them with a perspective that they might not find at a local level of interaction.

When presidential professional development was categorized by prior professional experience, national conferences and self-directed activities were noted as being the most effective. The practice of further formal education, perhaps suggestive of earning an advanced degree, was strongly agreed to by those entering the community college presidency from private industry. This might be a reflection of these practitioners having a strong professional body of experience, but perhaps lacking a terminal degree. There was also a consistent indication that participating in a formal professional development program was perhaps a 'neutral' proposition for being effective. This might be due to the nature of formal programs that are often targeted at some specific issue, such as Title IV training, college human resource training modules, etc.

The greatest challenge to participating in professional development identified was the time commitment to participate, meaning that presidents are cautious about how they use their time and most likely are exploring options that make the most of their time away from their presidential duties. As respondents were only allowed to identify one of the challenges in the survey, there was some possible overlap of responses with the characteristic of the institution not having an appropriate infrastructure to deal with the president's absence from the workplace. Were these two characteristics to be combined, then it would reflect over a third of the college presidents seemed to have problems with being out of the office or deferring their duties. This concern was consistent with current reflections on the extreme difficulty of the college president role.

The findings of the survey reinforced the power of self-direction as the guiding framework of professional development for community college presidents. Further research should explore the intersection of this self-direction with board involvement in determining presidential performance, and subsequently, should offer perspectives on how to align board expectations with the professional needs of college leaders. Additional research should also seek to explore and describe in depth the professional development needs of presidents in an effort to help understand why presidential tenures have become so short and what mechanisms might be used to help lengthen them and create a more stable leadership cohort guiding America's community colleges.

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