

ORIENTATION EXPERIENCES OF
TEXAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

by

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Orientation Experiences of Texas Community College Presidents

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
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ORIENTATION EXPERIENCES OF
TEXAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

Bradley W. Johnson, Ed.D.
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2004

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Using a multiple case study approach, the practices of six relatively new Texas community college presidents were studied to determine how they approached their succession processes. The intent was to identify actions and strategies so others could follow in their footsteps and presumably experience similar successes. Additionally, at each institution interviews were conducted with three or more colleagues, working directly above or below the new president.

The findings supported some, but not all, of previously reported observations on how newly-appointed community college presidents approached their responsibilities. Also there were some notable divergences from earlier publications. The most important behaviors reported were: copious reading of

current and earlier reports; carefully listening to all interested parties without becoming judgmental, attending and participating in transition meetings and organizational planning activities, and not becoming a micromanager.

Unanticipated was learning governing board members and senior administrators often had little understanding of the orientation process. They relied extensively upon guidance from a new president. Some were reluctant to venture forth ideas while others were not knowledgeable about the process of presidential succession.

The data analysis allowed for conceptualizing a 3 x 3 matrix to aid in understanding the phenomenon of community college presidential orientation. The matrix revealed how the three phases of orientation (Pre Appointment, Pre Arrival, and Post Arrival) juxtaposed with the Tasks, Methods and Critical Factors reportedly associated with a successful presidential orientation.

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Chapter I

Introduction to the Study

Preface

Interest in the orientation of new community college presidents can be found in the professional literature as far back as 1970, when Don Morgan acknowledged as a new community college CEO, "(I) really didn't know enough about that office, though I would not have admitted it at the time." (Morgan, 1970, p. 11) Presumably Morgan's attitude was not unique, nor was his subsequent revelation about being inadequately prepared for the immediate challenges.

Personal interest in the subject of community college presidential succession grew from interest, to curiosity, to preoccupation, to research idea during a period of three years. That was how long it took my institution to go from inauguration to resignation of a new college president. At the time and even retrospectively it was apparent he was a capable and sincere person - quiet, thoughtful, and when necessary decisive. Yet he made major decisions I believed, at the time, he likely would regret.

What most disturbed me about those decisions was they were widely understood as errors of judgment, by most of the college community, because he did not fully understand

the environment dynamics. People, who understood the community, the governing board, and the culture of the institution, acknowledged those decisions were not in the best interests of the institution. Apparently nobody stepped forward to offer a rationale for alternative thinking or to explain why the decisions made were apt to have deleterious ramifications. The absence of consultation was striking. The president apparently came to terms with issues and events on the basis of his cognitive structures and prior experiences, both having been influenced by circumstances in other locales.

Reflecting upon what transpired when those decisions were made and the number of people at the College who reportedly claimed to have held reservations about their outcome; it was puzzling why the President either failed to recognize, or possibly deliberately ignored, the fact that the outcomes from his decisions were apt to have marked repercussions. It was almost bewildering to accept that a person with his professional experience, having so much relevant information at his fingertips, an experienced and supportive senior administrative team, and an approving and reasonably sophisticated board of trustees, could quickly lose the confidence of the college and the community.

Conceivably the president did not totally understand the importance of those decisions. Perhaps he did but elected to disregard obvious facts or proffered advice. If any or some combination of such events occurred it would have implied poor judgment, and thus the responsibility for the faulty decision-making justifiably should have been laid squarely on the president's shoulders.

My impression was the president's actions did not reflect brazen disregard for conventions or facts. Instead, at least in some cases, I believed he had not understood the environment into which he had stepped. I had not articulated to him my concerns pertaining to the course his decisions would lead, and I could find no one who had, including some administrators who reported directly to him. They all shared my astonishment at the decisions the president made, but nobody confessed to being overt about expressing misgivings.

Indicative of some critical issues was the president's use of outside consultants to address selected issues while incurring considerable expense to the institution in so doing. One mid-level administrator surfaced the topic and pointed out it was widely-understood among the Board and college personnel that such expenditures were frowned upon. Presumably the president knew the college was reluctant to

use consultants, or if he did not know then a subordinate should have enlightened him. Retrospectively it was unclear whether the decisions were made with an attitude of arrogance or from a position of ignorance. If the former was the impetus it was regrettable such a personality characteristic was not discovered previously. If the latter was the culprit it was regrettable nobody was secure enough to step forward and shed light upon the decisions. Reasons for apparent insecurity are not an interest of this research.

One senior administrator mentioned questioning the President's decision to demote another administrator without informing the Board ahead of time. "Doesn't he know the Board wants to be informed of these decisions before they happen? (Personal communication, 2002)" That statement reinforced the controversy presented in the previous paragraph; were the president's problems due to arrogance or ignorance? Also, why was there an apparent reluctance on the part of many to speak out and offer advice?

Regardless of the fault, it was clear specific intervention efforts should have been initiated. Whether they would have yielded different results is a question never to be answered because the time has passed. Yet it was possible that both the president and institution could

have been spared awkward and even difficult times, if viable options had been available and exercised.

The circumstances surrounding the unsuccessful presidential succession reminded me of what had transpired after I had become a mid-level administrator. I reflected upon how I learned my job and the unwritten rules and expectations accompanying it. My recollection was I had a job description, somewhat standard but seemingly sufficiently focused, and a brief period of time when my predecessor and I worked together. The overlap with my predecessor was of considerable assistance because my duties were detailed, personnel and internal politics discussed, and in general I was made comfortable with the new position and associated responsibilities.

My favorable experience with a predecessor provoked consideration regarding the availability of such a bridge for a new community college president. Neither I nor colleagues could discern if the chairman of the board provided such guidance, nor if board members even knew enough about the internal details of institutional operations to be helpful. College staff members seemed to hold the new president in high regard, and not unexpectedly, they waited for the president to initiate activity. In particular they waited, almost with baited

breath, for indications of a vision and expectations regarding the institution's mission.

Faculty and staff apparently were reluctant to risk creating an unfavorable impression upon the new president, by appearing to be presumptuous with suggestions or too eager and ingratiating. Furthermore, by delaying input they were able to assess whether their idea(s) might be cogent, relevant, or possibly abrasive. Nobody was interested in appearing to be excessively forward or overly confident until there was evidence of the president's agenda. Retrospectively, it seemed faculty, staff, and even the board members were unduly cautious with the new president.

Those attitudes and the eventual outcome of the unsuccessful marriage between the new president and the institution led to considering the orientation process for new community college CEOs. Emery (1984, p. 48) noted the orientation processes could, "be beneficially affected by forethought and strategy planning of the new CEO", and Woodroof (1993, p. 6) reported, "...a deeper base of knowledge about the internal dynamics and problems of the institution seem to be keys...." leading to a successful presidency.

Both authors (Emery, 1984; Woodroof, 1993) addressed issues surrounding the incipient stages of familiarity between an individual and an institution. Emery's remark pointed at the responsibility of the person moving into a new position. He believed it was a responsibility to dig for uncommon facts and learn the unwritten rules. It was a responsibility to display leadership by admitting ignorance and seeking advice. Woodroof's comments emphasized the need for a CEO to dig deeper than the obvious. If the president had dug below the surface perhaps he would have discovered the nuggets needed to avoid the pitfalls.

It seemed the barriers and traps encountered by the new president were issues potentially facing most newly appointed community college CEOs. If so then conceivably there were a relatively common set of issues to be expected and individuals embarking upon such journeys needed to be aware of them. Perhaps most such individuals approached their new tasks with a belief they knew what was important and could adjust to unexpected events. Retrospectively it seemed they needed to display understanding in a manner that was demonstrable to parties invested. Essentially, it seemed of paramount importance for new presidents to have a fair opportunity for applying their hard and soft skills to the new job.

New community college CEOs (presidents) typically present impressive credentials in areas of analysis, strategic planning, technology, entrepreneurial planning and organization, and written communication. But, circumstances might surface testing their proficiency in domains involving team building, oral communication, conflict resolution, interpersonal relations, decision making, and even customer orientation (including students, community, and institutional faculty and staff).

Leadership is a multi-dimensional concept (Cole, 2002; Fisher, 1984; Piland, 2003). It requires individuals placed into such positions be able to display behaviors reflective of competence with the hard/analytical skills but also to be exemplary with soft skills. The latter tend to be how a new president recognizes previously unmentioned critical issues, how a person adapts and/or accommodates to new demands while conveying the impression of leading, and how to identify pivotal support personnel and solicit requisite information at the appropriate time(s).

All too often new community college CEOs assume the mantle of leadership for an institution but do not have the benefit of working with someone designated to assist with the bridging process from the prior president. Application of quantitative skills obviously can enable a president to

cope with many situations, and even to formulate a vision. But knowing where or how to make subtle changes and/or improvements can be challenging. Oftentimes such knowledge is covert and too well camouflaged to be discovered readily. Unwritten rules or protocols are examples, as are conventions related to operations. Yet, there does not appear to be evidence supporting the idea of new CEOs having someone, either from the governing board, support staff, senior level administration, faculty, or even prior administrators to serve as a platform in the all-important role of enhancing the passage between presidents.

Several realities of the modern community college presidency argue for the importance of effective orientations. These include the short duration of most presidencies, complexity of today's community college, steep learning curve upon arrival, reluctance to hire internal candidates, and the often inability to bring allies with them. Interestingly, even if allies could be brought along it likely would require a period of time for them to become acclimated to the new environment. Thus their presence could be considered an unnecessary buffer separating the newly appointed president from constituents or perhaps they would simply delay the processing of important information. Lastly, there would be no assurance

such allies could enlist the requisite cooperation from the indigenous personnel to help a new president avoid potentially damaging actions.

Short Tenure

During a collegial visit with a faculty member who had been at my institution for many years, the focus of conversation turned to recent decisions made by senior administrators. My colleague laughed aloud when I asked if he was worried about the future. "Just hold your breath," he told me. "Presidents don't stay long and soon there will be a whole new regime in place. (personal communication from colleague, 2001)" Surprisingly, evidence supported his claim because it seems the tenure of community college presidents has been decreasing (Emery, 1984; Kirkland & Ratcliff, 1994; Vaughn, 1990; Weisman & Vaughan, 2002; Woodroof, 1993) to almost 7.2 years.

In both 1996 and 2001, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reported 27% of community college presidents had tenure in their positions of less than two-years. When extrapolated to the 936 community colleges in the United States that belonged to the AACC, it meant more than 250 institutions, at any given time, would be in some

part of an administrative transition and learning process for new presidents.

Complex Job

The Chief Executive's role is important to the life of a community college (Kerr, 1995; Moore, 1983) and the job is dauntingly complex (Hahn, 1995; Pierce & Pedersen, 1997). Bensimon (1984) and Murphree (1996) pointed out, decision-making in community colleges was highly centralized and bureaucratic, and made the role of the president highly significant in the life of these organizations. Apparently everything flowed through a president's office and almost everything was handled personally. Thus a community college CEO was seen as an initiator, procrastinator, obstacle, facilitator, and motivator depending upon a person's perspective. With such characteristics in mind, Levin (1996, p.31) said, "Presidential succession is a significant contributor to perceived organizational change in the community college, specifically in the areas of organizational processes and organizational change." Change involved disruption to a status quo for involved individuals. Some embraced change while others hesitated. Ultimately it was the prerogative

of a president to effect change, but how and when it was done impacted both the institution and community.

The exercise of power is a fundamental responsibility of a president. While some inexperienced persons might believe it was bestowed upon a person by the office, experience and research have shown it to vary depending on the person holding office; some seem to wield power effectively while others fail miserably. James Fisher (1984, p.12), after discussing the importance of exercising power as a president noted, "How presidential power is employed remains a personal matter that can be determined only by an incumbent president. The key is to make the most of it."

The modern community college organization is a complex organization, rivaling in many ways a large corporation. A community college president typically manages multi-million dollar budgets, oversees hundreds of employees ranging from manual laborers to doctoral-level faculty and staff, and is responsible for distinctly unique programs ranging from job-training to minority outreach. A president increasingly is expected to raise substantial amounts of philanthropic support, develop partnerships with businesses and private foundations, and effectively lobby local, state and national political leaders. The institution might have its

own athletic teams, police or security departments, and even radio and TV stations. The physical plant operations may be among the largest belonging to a single organization in the entire community, and the purchasing power of such an institution can bolster or amputate local businesses.

A community college provides career training for a broad spectrum of programs, each having substantial infrastructure and maintenance requirements. All these complications converge to make the modern community college president's job a substantial challenge (Rocklin, 1999). While many may aspire to be CEO, the job carries an unenviable price of living in a transparent world, where most viewers claim equal competence and question actions. As with other public supported positions, the monetary compensation usually does not equate to the responsibility and risk.

Steep Learning Curve

Absorbing such complexity and making sense of so many diverse areas is a critical and immediate challenge for a new president. As Mowbray (2000, p. 2) put it, "Arriving on a new campus, the president literally must wade into the ocean of events that surround the organization and actively try to make sense of them." The person must determine what