Leadership, Change and the Future of Community Colleges

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The mantra we continuously heard throughout the fall 2008 political campaigns was the need for change, a term that has become synonymous with a better future and the avenue to prosperity. Nowhere does the change narrative ring louder and truer than at the community college. Many of us who have spent our careers in community colleges realize that our institutions, like our local, state and federal governments, must undergo significant change in order to stay viable in the future. However, just like our government and political leaders, there is a very large gap between what community college leaders say they need to do to prepare their colleges for the future, and what actually is done. Clearly, it is time for us to get beyond all the rhetoric and begin to act.

The current way community colleges function, with their roots grounded in outdated Weberian management practices, outmoded instructional delivery systems, and archaic approaches to student and institutional support services, simply will not work for institutions that are charged with serving as major democratizing forces and economic engines for a changing population, a changing world and a rapidly evolving future. As leaders, we need to think differently about our colleges, how they operate, and in general, the whole purpose for their existence. If community colleges don’t start changing soon, they are likely to slide into insignificance.

These changes must be purposeful, well planned, and strongly executed by capable leaders. There are large issues that will require not only new actions and organizations, but also a new way of thinking about how best to lead the community college into the future. But where will the new leadership come from to shepherd this transformation? From all indications, fewer and fewer well prepared individuals are available and willing to enter into community college administration, while seasoned administrators at all levels are retiring and leaving at an alarming rate.

Over the past several years a number of reports have been published addressing the growing shortage of community college leaders. A study published in 2001 by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) indicated that nearly half of the community college presidents at that time planned to be retired by 2007 (Shultz 2001). According to Chris Duree (2008) who led a large study at Iowa State University on the community college presidency this past year, over three quarters of community college presidents surveyed plan to retire by 2012. Vacant president positions are most often filled by either other presidents or those holding chief instructional officers (CIOs) positions. Duree and his research colleagues found that the average age for CIOs is about the same as presidents. CIOs are likely to retire at the same rate as their bosses. With the two pools of applicants that have historically filled most of the vacant president positions shrinking, and the number of president vacancies on the rise, community colleges will have an increasingly difficult time finding well qualified candidates to fill their executive leadership positions. On a national basis, the AACC (n.d), through its Leading Forward Initiative, has been working very hard for years to bring this issue to the forefront.

The problem only gets worse when we look at the front end of the career ladder for community college leaders. It is no secret that the career ladder into community college administration and onto the presidency is a rigid one. Although there are some exceptions, anyone who wants to become a community college president should plan on spending time as a community college faculty member, faculty leader, dean and CIO before they will be considered competitive for a president position. Along the way, they develop a portfolio of important experiences, gain complex leadership and management skills, and establish valuable networks and contacts. Moving on the career path toward a college presidency can take several years and require a great deal of personal sacrifice. On top of all this, a doctorate degree must be earned from a reputable institution, generally while working full-time and raising a family.

A recent study completed by The American Council on Education (2008) reported that community colleges are hiring fewer full-time faculty, and those that are hired are older than their counterparts in the past. The study raises the concern that these new faculty members will not have the time during their shorter careers to move through the traditional leadership ranks. So we have problems at both ends of the leadership continuum, with too few qualified individuals entering onto the community college administrative career ladder, and large numbers at or near the top of the career ladder leaving.

It is difficult to pin down just why fewer people are entering into a career path of community college administration. Because most studies done on community college leadership focus primarily on the college presidency, they fall short of helping us better understand why so few are entering the community college administrative career path, or why many choose to exit this career path early. It cannot simply be that we are hiring fewer young full-time faculty.

There are several important areas that need to be explored regarding how community colleges can improve both the quantity and quality of available leaders at all levels. These include developing a better understanding of ways to support up and coming administrators, as they move through the leadership pipeline; developing alternatives to the traditionally rigid career paths for those who want to become community college administrators or advance as administrators; and improving organizational practices for selecting administrators. We also need to do a better job of inventorying and incorporating best practices that already exist in professional development for new administrators.

I do know that a large (and often unspoken) part of the problem has been caused by an unfair and pervasive devaluing of the important contributions made by mid-level
administrators. Too few people outside of community college administrative circles really understand the enormous contributions outstanding mid-level administrators make to the successful operations of their colleges. While strong presidential leadership is a critical component to the long-term success of a college, the deans, vice presidents and other mid-level administrators are the ones who have the greatest impact on the actual operations, organizational priorities, and how the college really functions. The quality of the academic environment, meaningfulness of services for students, and support for the faculty are all driven by dedicated individuals in mid-level leadership positions and not out of the president’s office. We need to do a better job of supporting our deans, vice presidents and directors if we want to make any progress in transforming our colleges.

Organizational Change

Community colleges are relatively unburdened by external regulations and oversight, when compared to our public school colleagues who face layers of mandates and political interference. Community colleges have considerable freedom regarding what programs to offer, how to offer the programs, how they organize themselves, and how they measure success. So why haven’t community colleges taken control of their future, and transformed their organizations?

Richard Alfred (2003a, 2003b) from the Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan addressed this question in a series of articles a few years ago. He stated that the community colleges have a wolf at their door, and that wolf is the college themselves, with their current organizational structures, outdated systems of delivery and cultures of entitlement. He also pointed out that our colleges resist change in many ways, looking to small solutions to try and solve large problems, choosing to muddle through tough times and using tactics that only get them through from one crisis to the next. We have allowed our colleges to develop into institutions of complacency that reward status quo thinking, where stability, organizational homeostasis and self-limiting bureaucracy are clearly valued over risk taking and transformational change.

One of the ways that community colleges can breakout of this dilemma is to place a greater emphasis on the critical role and responsibility leaders have in strengthening the academic culture of the college. If advancing a strong academic culture is to happen in any meaningful way, it will need to be at the core of every leadership action. Too often administrators find themselves bogged down in operational minutiae, where it is easy to lose sight of the real purpose and goals for the community college. Allocating resources and balancing budgets, resolving personnel and student problems, shepherding paperwork through the system, and preparing reports are part of the daily life for administrators. These important functions need to be viewed not as distractions but as essential actions in advancing the academic culture. Too many leaders, new and experienced, miss this important connection. Creating a strong academic culture and maintaining a strong operational and fiscal environment are not mutually exclusive activities; they are absolutely mutually inclusive and mutually supporting. On a sustainable basis, one cannot successfully happen without the other.

Who Is Getting Hired?

If there is a shortage of strongly qualified applicants, then how are community colleges filling critical leadership positions? Will there be individuals willing to take on leadership roles at the community college? The short answer is yes. Are these individuals ready to deal with the complexities of leadership during this time of organizational transformation and change? Too often the short and long answer is no.

In response to the lack of capable and qualified candidates, community colleges have increasingly resorted to a number of problematical hiring practices, too often hiring for the here and now, and not for the future. Change is threatening and there are many veto points within the organization where forces for change can be effectively halted. Too often, our hiring practices allow for potential new leaders who are change agents to be devalued and passed over, under the guise of “not being a good fit.”

Below are a few traps that colleges can find themselves in when filling vacant administrative positions.

The Interim Appointment

An alarming trend over the past decade has been to replace administrative vacancies with a succession of interim appointments. Individuals who take these interim appointments range from well-meaning retired administrators, to faculty who want to “tryout” being a dean, or deans who want to “tryout” being a vice president, and so on. Unfortunately, this approach to filling administrative vacancies has caused what many faculty members and others inside the college cynically label as the “dean or vice president for a semester” syndrome. While this method of filling vacancies can help an interim administrator to earn a little more money, or get a respite from a burnout teaching position, it too often allows for a foot in the door for under prepared and weak leaders. There are numerous examples where hiring committees, vice presidents and presidents have permitted a weak interim administrator to move into the permanent position, to the detriment of the institution.

Interim administrators are generally reluctant to take the bold actions necessary to move the organization forward, causing critical projects to be placed on hold. Those in interim positions who wish to obtain the position on a permanent basis may try to please everyone, which means maintaining the status quo and creating a pile of clean up work for the persons who follow them.

The Job Hopper

We all know them. They have flashy academic credentials, excellent interview skills and a real knack for convincing interviewing committees that this is the college where they really want to work. But a review of their job history shows a pattern of hopping from job to job every year or two, often into lateral positions. These individuals rarely relocate to the college service area, or at best, only live there on an itinerant basis, and almost always fail to integrate into the community.

There are clear stages of maturation leaders go through in new positions, and even the brightest administrator is likely to take two or three years to become fully productive. It takes time to establish a level of trust between a new administrator and the rest of the college community before they can work together to effectively move the organization forward. Networking with local school districts and establishing relationships with community leaders does not happen when someone stays in a position for a short period of time. Hiring individuals who have a track record of moving from job to job too often leads to departmental stagnation, frustration among the faculty and staff, and distrust from key community partners.

The Internal “Safe” Candidate

These people are usually dedicated employees but unfortunately lack the real qualifications and skills for the position. They are non-threatening and considered a safe hire because “they know how we do things around here.” They represent the antithesis to change and transformation and once they get into their new leadership positions, they rarely leave.
Pressure to hire the safe internal candidate can come from several different places in the organization. As a board member once told me while lobbying for an internal candidate, “it is better for us to hire the devil we know than the devil we don’t know.” I just remarked that we are in the process of hiring leaders not devils. Certainly, internal candidates need to be given full consideration as all candidates must. The point is, only the best and fully qualified candidate should be hired, not the least threatening.

The Retirement Spiker
As the growing numbers of college leaders reach the end of their long careers in education, they naturally begin to plan for retirement. A few of them choose to look for positions where they can substantially increase their annual income for a couple of years, which in turn substantially increases their retirement earnings. This is usually done by moving from small or medium sized colleges into executive positions in larger college districts. Since the retirement spiker only plans to be in the position for a short period of time, they focus mostly on short-term strategies that can get them through a couple of years, effectively placing their institutions in holding patterns. When executive leaders fail to become personally vested in the long-term future of their college, employees become disconnected, the institution declines and valuable opportunities are missed.

Setting the Agenda for Change
Dramatic changes for community colleges are inevitable. If community colleges don't take charge of their own futures and reinvent themselves, they will become shaped and reinvented by strong external social, political and economic forces. State legislatures, accreditation committees, state and federal education officials, four year institutions, local business leaders, and voters are strong forces that are on the verge of taking control of the future of community colleges, just as they have done with the public schools. We need to stop blaming the lack of funding, lack of qualified applicants, board members, unions, state education offices, past practices and so on. Most importantly, we cannot afford another decade of rhetoric and finger pointing when it comes to developing new dynamic leaders who will lead the transformation of our community colleges.

Addressing the Leadership Challenges
While there aren't any quick fixes or one-time solutions for solving the growing deficit of qualified administrators, there are several steps colleges can take to address the problem.

Below are a few suggestions.

• Create a year-long administrator internship program. This will give new and prospective college leaders an opportunity to develop important administrative skills before they take on full blown administrative assignments.

• Develop and implement a meaningful professional development program for all leaders at the college. This should be a personalized and ongoing program which focuses on the long-term development of each leader.

• Provide financial support and release time for current and future college leaders to complete a doctorate in educational leadership or comparable program. A growing number of educational doctorate programs are available at public and private universities throughout the country. In California, several of the California State University campuses have begun offering Ed.D. programs with community college leadership specializations.

• Encourage and assist all college leaders to keep abreast of important trends, research and best practices in community college education. This can be done in a number of different ways including making journal articles and books on community college leadership readily available, and allowing time to read and discuss the articles and books. Also encourage college leaders to become actively engaged in scholarly activities including research, publishing, and making conference presentations.

• Hold regularly scheduled roundtable discussions for all college leaders on a wide variety of leadership topics. Several important issues should be covered including effective leadership skills development, important trends affecting community colleges, and promising practices in teaching and learning. The use of case studies, a series of guest speakers, and participant led discussions are just a few of the ways this could be approached.

• Provide financial support for memberships in professional associations and attendance at regional and state meetings. Leaders at all levels need to be involved in professional associations and attend conferences, not just the senior administration.

• Avoid the use of interim appointments for administrative vacancies except under specific circumstances and only for short periods of time. Colleges need to have a clear policy that prohibits any person serving in an interim position from being considered for the position on a permanent basis. Colleges should also avoid using their own employees in interim positions. This can cause a number of problems including an unwanted domino effect of other leadership vacancies, as colleges scramble to fill the temporary vacancies initially caused by the first interim appointment.

• Develop clear plans for the succession of college leaders and how the college will replace them. College leaders generally know who is likely to be retiring or who may be looking for another position. While turnover in administration cannot be fully predicted, colleges must do a better job anticipating vacancies and filling vacancies in a shorter period of time. Even though it may be a bit sensitive with some administrators, colleges should not wait until a person leaves before starting the replacement process.

• Insist on commitments from finalists for all leadership positions, that they will become actively involved in the community. Even though public community colleges are generally prohibited from mandating that employees live within the college district, colleges can insist that all their leaders become involved in the local community. This means being available to represent the college at evening and weekend events. If the college is located in a rural area, it is very important that all senior administrators make their full-time residence in the local community. I have seen numerous administrators falter because they failed to gain the trust of the area residents and the college staff, simply because they were not willing to become full-time members of the community.

• Contract with a reputable firm that specializes in community college administrative searches to help recruit qualified candidates, and conduct thorough background and reference checks on finalists. While this is commonly done for president and chancellor positions, it also needs to be done for dean and vice president level positions. Even though this service is costly, it actually can save thousands of dollars in lost productivity and missed opportunities, potential legal expenses and other problems associated
with poor and uninformed hiring decisions and poor leadership.

• Reorganize the college structure to create greater interaction and responsibility among administrators across the organization. Restructuring the organization where all administrators have some responsibility for some aspects of instructional, student services and administrative services will create more diverse career paths and more opportunities for a greater number of administrators to move into high levels of leadership.

Most important of all, create an institutional culture that values innovation and transformation, where every college employee knows that she or he has a responsibility to be a leader of change. Strong leadership and transformational change cannot be voluntary or optional; it is a necessity for the survival of tomorrow’s community colleges.

References


