Preparation and Job Satisfaction of College and University Presidents

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Abstract

Many colleges and universities are seeking experienced leaders. Research examining the career paths of presidents relative to job satisfaction is lacking. Studies have focused on either the preparation of presidents or their satisfaction, but only three key studies investigated both issues and the relationship between the two. The common career path of presidents, from faculty to administration, does not appear to affect job satisfaction. The authors emphasize that more research is clearly needed.

Leadership in higher education is critical to the effective operation of institutions and the success of faculty and staff. A university president requires leadership skills to be effective. This very important aspect of leadership was beginning to deteriorate over 15 years ago. According to Fisher and Koch (1996), the university presidency in America

> has decayed and all too frequently now is a refuge for ambivalent, risk-averting individuals who seek to offend no one, and as a consequence arouse and motivate no one. The result is a visible lack of academic purpose, declining institutional effectiveness, and (most lamentable) inferior education. (p. viii)

University presidents in the United States have increasingly focused more on management than on educational leadership for at least 30 years (Benezet, Katz, & Magnusson, 1981; Lick, 2002; Wallin, 2010b). For example, concerns for college and university presidents shifted to "accountability, competition, retrenchment, loss of autonomy, increasing governmental regulations, court decisions, limited finances, faculty pessimism and militancy, affirmative

action, collective bargaining, [and] energy conservation" (Walsvick, 1981, p. 1). Hence, the very concept of collegial leadership has been lost on presidents.

According to Lick (2002),

> Leadership and management in higher education are quite different but complementary functions, and both are critical. The key is to have the proper balance between effective management and visionary leadership. Unfortunately, in higher education we often have an imbalance, with too much emphasis on management and not enough on transforming leadership. In simple terms, management is about "doing things right"—that is, working in a given paradigm to make things better. In contrast, leadership is about "doing the right thing—that is, shifting a paradigm from "what is" to "what should be." (p 32)

As noted above, university presidents do not seem to have a problem with the management function. To be effective, university presidents urgently need to exercise better leadership (Fisher & Koch, 1996; Fretwell, 1988).

In addition to the necessary leadership skills, the length of time served in the position can influence the effectiveness of a president. According to Basinger (2002), presidential tenure at a single institution averaged from 5 to 7 years. The Commission on Strengthening Presidential Leadership found the average term of a president, 7 years, was too brief to allow a president to be effective in the position (Glick, 1992). Though length of tenure can influence effectiveness, other behavioral factors have an impact as well (Fisher & Koch, 1996). Based on a study conducted by Fisher, Tack, and Wheeler (1988), Fisher and Koch concluded, "the effective president is a strong, caring, action-oriented visionary who acts out of educated intuition. He or she is transformational rather than transactional and less collegial and more willing to take risks than the usual president" (p. 57). Wallin (2010a) emphasized, "Leadership is about change. In times of rapid change, effective leaders must be able not only to cope with the environment but also to shape it" (p. 1).

To complicate the issue of effective presidential leadership, researchers have noted the prospect of a significant number of presidents who will soon retire is indeed an ominous situation (Cowen, 2008; Hartley & Godin, 2009; King & Gomez, 2008; Price, 2002; Robken, 2007). King and Gomez put this circumstance into perspective when they stated the retirement of half of the presidents who are 61 years old or more would leave 25% of the nation's colleges without a CEO. Where search committees will be able to find new institutional leaders to replace retiring presidents is therefore a critical issue.

A growing concern of many academic stakeholders is the preparation of college and university presidents to be effective leaders. Presidential search committees seek individuals who have the backgrounds and skills the institutions need at the time of the search. Effective presidents also have followed career paths providing some of the essential skills to prepare them for the presidency. Presidents tend to hold positions complimenting the skills and abilities they acquired in their career paths. Whether in a doctoral program designed to prepare college leaders or ascending through the academic ranks, presidents can benefit from each type of unique development (Leist & Travis, 2011). Presidents who have managed to follow both types of career paths are better prepared for their positions (McFarlin, Crittenden, & Ebbers, 1999).

Another important consideration is the satisfaction presidents perceive in their careers. Researchers began studying job satisfaction in the early 1900s (Glick, 1992). According to Glick,

job satisfaction is "an affective response by individuals resulting from an appraisal of their work role in the jobs they presently hold" (1992, p. 626). A slightly different interpretation was offered by Cranny, Smith, and Stone (1992), based on over 5,000 works written about the subject: "an affective (that is, emotional) reaction to a job that results from the incumbent's comparison of actual outcomes with those that are desired (expected, deserved, and so on)" (p. 1). Glick (1992) cited two types of job satisfaction worthy of analysis: a general level of job satisfaction (i.e., global satisfaction) and facets of job satisfaction (i.e., dimensional satisfaction). Among some of the common dimensions Glick itemized are "financial rewards, working conditions, supervisory practices, company policies, co-workers, opportunities for advancement, security, and content of the job" (p. 626). Evans (1998) also noted some key factors influencing one's level of job satisfaction: relationships with supervisors, peers, and subordinates; professional effectiveness; participation in decision-making; salary; benefits; and power.

Given the potential departure of a significant number of presidents and the rapid pace of change in the requirements of the presidency, presidential search committees need information to assist them in selecting qualified presidents who will remain on the job (Simon, 2009). An up-to-date review of research providing insight into presidential career paths and their job satisfaction should be immensely helpful as colleges and universities confront such a considerable turnover in leadership. Because so few studies have examined both career paths and job satisfaction of presidents in higher education, this review will examine each topic separately and then highlight the limited studies combining both investigations.

Presidential Career Paths

As duly noted by Evans (1998), "college presidents [are not] born with innate ability to govern an institution" (p. 4). This assertion by Evans is amplified by the number of studies, some of which are detailed in this article, describing the career pathways followed by college and university presidents (Barry, 2010; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Duree, 2008; Hartley & Godin, 2009; King & Gomez, 2008; Kuharski, 2010; Price, 2002; Sanchez, 2009; Schmitz, 2008; Whittier, 2008). According to a number of sources, the past experiences and the careers of the individuals selected to serve as university presidents vary (Bornstein, 2005; Fisher & Koch, 1996; Lenington, 1996). Invariably, however, many new presidents have found they have not been adequately prepared to assume the role of chief executive officer. For example, university presidents often do not have administrative experience or training before assuming the role (Lenington, 1996). Even so, some "new presidents, many of whom have been departmental heads, deans, and administrative assistants, find themselves totally unprepared for the rude awakening they experience when they are thrust into the presidency" (Robinson, 1988, p. 72). Fisher and Koch (1996) put forth this notion: "virtually all [presidents'] pre-presidential experience is insufficient and most simply [do not] know enough about the nature and uses of tested power and leadership concepts and their value to an effective presidency" (p. 6).

The pathway to a presidency in higher education generally includes an academic background (Corrigan, 2002; Sullivan, 2001). Although presidential vitae often document years of service as a professor, department head, dean, or academic vice president (Cohen & March, 1974; Wessel & Keim, 1994), such a path may no longer be a realistic goal for faculty who "often do not have the time and opportunity to advance up the traditional academic career

ladder" (Nealy, 2009, para. 7). In fact, as Nealy reported, tenure-track faculty aged 34 or less only number 3% of the total 4-year college faculty. Green (1988) noted, given the generally flat structure of a university, no clear set of positions appear to lead upward. "Because of the relative lack of traditional upward mobility, a variety of other forms of administrative career mobility may occur" (Green, p. 160). Green cited increased job responsibility, lateral moves, external moves, and new job titles as ways of moving upward were commonly found at universities. Indeed, career paths leading to the college presidency are not well defined, according to researchers (Fisher & Koch, 1996; Lenington, 1996; Ross, Green, & Henderson, 1998). Besides an early comprehensive study on the career paths of college and university presidents, conducted in 1995 by Ross and Green (Ross et al., 1998), several more recent efforts have been published. Some studies have highlighted the career paths of community college presidents (Barry, 2010; Duree, 2008; Kuharski, 2010; Schmitz, 2008), while a few dealt with specific university settings, such as private universities (Lumsden, Plotts, & Wells, 2000) or black colleges and universities (Mishra, 2007).

In 2008, King and Gomez conducted a study of "senior campus leaders other than presidents" (p. 15), using data from the 20th anniversary edition of *The American College President: 2007 Edition* (American Council on Education [ACE]). The American Council on Education and the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) collected data from 852 institutions about more than 9000 senior leaders in regard to their current and previous positions. The findings related to career paths of presidents showed the largest group (61%) had previously served in higher education in other senior administrative positions. The next largest group (21%) had been presidents at another college or university, and only 13% were not employed in higher education before becoming presidents. King and Gomez observed women presidents were most common at community colleges, with the smallest number leading research universities. They also noted women comprising almost half (45%) of the senior administrators studied and 38% of top academic leaders. Because most of the "senior campus leaders are not yet near retirement age, and may entertain the ambition to lead a campus," institutions are wise to consider preparing these leaders for presidencies.

Reiterating Bornstein's (2005) assertion, college presidents do not follow one particular career path. Whittier (2008) conducted a qualitative case study of presidents in the Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges. She interviewed 12 of these presidents to gain insight into the influences, both career and personal, causing individuals who did not plan initially to become presidents in higher education to adjust their career paths. Three critical components of the presidents' career paths stood out in Whittier's findings: educational preparation, higher education careers, and a sequence of positions of responsibility. Although the participants seemed split on the ultimate value of administrative versus academic experience, they tended to agree on the importance of fundraising for presidents. Whittier also emphasized the importance of the president's ability to serve a wide array of constituents.

Hartley and Godin (2009) conducted a more comprehensive study of presidents in independent colleges and universities. They applied data from the ACE (2007) study as well and found the largest group of presidents (35%) had previously been chief academic officers, although an almost equal group (33%) had not been academic leaders (p. 1). Hartley and Godin examined feedback from presidents on the responsibilities for which they felt inadequate from their preparation and found the following categories as top weaknesses: fundraising (19.9%), law and liability (18.3%), infrastructure (17.9%), finance (17.6%), and innovative endeavors (16.3%)

(p. 2). Because they perceived the value of chief academic officers as potential presidents to be high, Hartley and Godin expressed concern over so few of them not being groomed for the presidency. They recommended institutions make a greater commitment to preparing chief academic officers in the five areas noted in their study as weaknesses in career preparation. This concern is further amplified, considering a large number of active chief academic officers do not contemplate being a president (Berliner, Lorden, Palm, Smyer, & Yakoboski, 2009). Reiterating this observation, Ekman (2010) expressed his concern: "the declining appeal of the college presidency is an urgent issue" (p. 63).

Job Satisfaction of Presidents

Once university presidents attain the position, many factors beyond their preparation affect their levels of job satisfaction. Evans (1998) defined job satisfaction as "a person's attitude toward his or her workplace" (p. 4) and cited the six key factors listed above as a significant influence on a person's satisfaction. Glick (1992) noted managers and administrators have a higher level of job satisfaction when they are allowed to be involved in decision-making and to control their own work. According to Glick's research, college presidents were more satisfied than chief academic officers and deans and, overall, fell within a normative range established by the researcher for the survey. Presidents usually must accept some apparently negative aspects of the position: a routinely long work week, extensive travel, family life somewhat on display, and a litany of after-hours events (Ekman, 2010).

Generally, presidents draw satisfaction from three positive influences, according to Ekman, (2010): commitment to helping people improve their lives, the opportunity to develop and to operationalize their institutional vision, and being in a position of authority. In addition to the previous research regarding career pathways to the presidency, a few studies have also examined presidential job satisfaction. Some of the more recent studies of presidential job satisfaction include two focusing on community college leaders (Fuerst, 2007; Sawyer, 2009) and one on university and community college presidents (Perrakis, Galloway, Hayes, & Robinson-Galdo, 2011).

After various reports predicted numerous retirements among community college administrators, Sawyer (2009) recognized the potential impact these retirements might have on the succession of administrators to the presidency. Seeking to examine the effect of job satisfaction on college leaders' intent to seek further advancement, Sawyer surveyed 354 midlevel administrators in Michigan. His findings indicated most of the administrators appear satisfied in their work and willing to further their careers. Although he recognized the optimistic outcome of his research, Sawyer was wary of the state's challenges, which may have an impact on administrators' satisfaction. He recommended efforts on the part of existing administrators to ensure sufficient succession plans are in effect to prepare future leaders.

Responding to a report by the American Council on Education (ACE), Fuerst (2007) was concerned the ACE study attributed a significant departure of senior administrators to stress and job satisfaction (Evans, 1998). The ACE report did not link the lack of presidents' satisfaction to college classification, years of experience, gender, or ethnicity. Fuerst conducted a secondary analysis of data collected by Weisman and Vaughan (2002) to examine college presidents' perceptions of stress and the relationship of these perceptions to their inclinations to leave the

position. Weisman and Vaughan collected data from 661 community college presidents with Vaughan's Career and Lifestyle Survey, which he had also administered in 1984, 1991, and 1996. Fuerst reported nearly all of the presidents in her study (93%) admitted to stress levels ranging from moderate to high, and the majority (78.7%) stated they were considering leaving the presidency (p. 75). Clearly, Fuerst's study suggests stress may be a significant factor in the projected turnover of college presidents. Hence, efforts to reduce presidential stress are certainly needed.

Perrakis et al. (2011) also conducted a study of presidential satisfaction out of concern many leaders may leave their positions. They noted the United States lacks "enough qualified, interested, and prepared individuals to assume the number of presidential positions that will open once the current generation of college and university presidents retire" (p. 57). Using a 56-item survey, Perrakis et al. gathered data from 96 presidents and CEOs from 2-year and 4-year institutions in New York, Florida, Hawaii, and California. One of the most striking of their results suggested presidents expected conditions to improve, an optimistic expectation, but also an indication conditions were not as good as presidents may have wished. Perrakis et al. also observed some of the presidents' demographic factors; such as shorter service, terminal degrees in the humanities, 2-year colleges, the lack of a governing board, and marriage; contributed to less satisfaction. They recognized the need for more research to expand the perspective of presidential satisfaction they obtained from their study.

Although the literature does examine satisfaction among college and university presidents, the studies described do not compare the satisfaction of male and female university presidents. The literature also appears to be lacking an extensive examination of the comparison of pathways to the presidency and job satisfaction of university presidents. As demands upon the presidency continue to increase, more insight into presidents' career paths, satisfaction, and the relationship between the two can be helpful in the preparation and selection of future presidents.

Preparation and Job Satisfaction

A few studies have examined both the preparation and the job satisfaction of college and university presidents (Oglesby, 1993; Price, 2002; Schmitz, 2008). Oglesby and Schmitz focused their research on community college presidents, and Price examined university presidents specifically. All three authors recognized the dilemma posed by the prospect of numerous retirements among presidents coupled with the reluctance of qualified individuals to fill these vacancies.

Oglesby (1993) sampled all female community college presidents found in the 1992 membership directory of the American Association of Community Colleges and an equal number of male community college presidents. She developed her own instrument, based upon previous surveys of college presidents as well as information gleaned from the literature, to obtain data on pathways pertinent to females and to community college presidents. After receiving survey responses from her sample, Oglesby found job satisfaction was high for both males and females. Although some differences existed between males and females in terms of preparation, the differences "do not suggest a more successful or more satisfying presidency for either gender" (p. 121). One important difference between males and females emerging from this study is the longer time females spend in faculty and lower-level administrative positions, indicating a need

for more campus support for females who may be open to upper-level administrative posts. Oglesby also indicated, as more women entered into academic presidencies, additional research comparing male and female job satisfaction would be necessary.

In another study of preparation and satisfaction of community college presidents, Schmitz (2008) analyzed data collected by Iowa State University's Office of Community College Research and Policy (OCCRP). The OCCRP prepared a survey designed to gather presidents' perceptions of their preparation, as related to competencies developed by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). Specifically, the survey sought information on community college presidents' career pathways; educational background; leadership preparation; scholarship; interaction with faculty, staff, and the public; and perceptions about their preparation in light of the AACC competencies as well as their job satisfaction. After sending the survey link to more than 1000 community college presidents, the OCCRP received 415 responses (p. 54). Of the responding presidents, 68% were male and 32% were female, with 87% holding an earned doctoral degree (p. 59). Over two thirds of the respondents (83.5%) held degrees in an educational field, and more than half (63.8%) had served in the presidency for 10 years or less (pp. 59, 64). In terms of previous positions, over half (58%) were either presidents, provosts, or academic administrators (p. 67).

Schmitz (2008) also reported the responding presidents predominantly gave three reasons for seeking a presidency: making a difference, professional challenge, and personal satisfaction. Most of these presidents (56.9%) took advantage of a formalized leadership program before assuming a presidency, but less than half (38.6%) were involved in a similar program after becoming presidents (p. 70). The respondents rated their preparation as moderate (45.8%) or high (38.6%) for the most part (p. 85). Among the issues these presidents considered most challenging were fundraising, enrollment, and legislative advocacy. In terms of their satisfaction on the job, the responding presidents were generally very satisfied (79.3%) or at least somewhat satisfied (13.5%) (p. 85). Although Schmitz reiterated a common statement in the literature as a result of his analysis, no single career path is helpful to all presidents. He included a very important conclusion: "While formal education does play an important role, leadership development should be viewed as a lifelong process" (p. 127).

A much less common study of presidential career paths and job satisfaction focuses on university presidents. Price (2002) sought to identify the most common career paths of university male and female presidents as well as differences between their career paths and levels of satisfaction. In addition, she compared the levels of job satisfaction of male and female university presidents and the levels of job satisfaction by their age, ethnicity, number of years in office, and institution's size. Price gathered her data using the instrument developed by Oglesby (1993), adapting it to apply to university presidents. The updated instrument included seven categories of questions for university presidents: education, previous experience, current position, academic rank, civic and community activity, personal information, and level of job satisfaction. The information sought relative to the presidents' perception of job satisfaction addressed eight different criteria—participation in decision-making; power; salary; benefits; professional effectiveness; and relationships with peers, subordinates, and supervisors—as identified by Evans (1998), as well as an overall satisfaction question.

Price (2002) sent the survey instrument to each of the 61 female, public university presidents listed in the 2001 Council for the Advancement and Support of Higher Education (CASE) directory. An equal number of male, public university presidents listed in the CASE

directory and the *1998 Higher Education Directory* were selected, based on comparable criteria such as size, type, and location of the university. The majority of the participating presidents (82.2%) followed a career path including faculty and administrative experience prior to assuming the role of president (p. 64). The second most common career path among the participants (15.5%) included administrative experience, but no faculty experience, prior to serving as president (p. 64). No respondents indicated moving to a university presidency directly from a faculty position, the public or private sectors, an education agency, a community college, or a K-12 school position.

Price (2002) also found no particular career path was statistically related to the level of job satisfaction of university presidents. Similarly, male and female presidents showed no significant difference in levels of job satisfaction. In regard to influences on the level of job satisfaction, the length of service in the presidency was not a factor. Likewise, the president's age and ethnicity and the size of the institution had no significant relationship to the level of job satisfaction. Among the supplemental data obtained from the survey, Price (2002) noted the enrollment at female presidents' institutions tended to be significantly smaller than the enrollment at male presidents' institutions. Additionally, among presidents in the top quartile of job satisfaction, women presidents were significantly more satisfied than their male counterparts.

One clear indication from the research on presidential career path is too few presidents represent ethnic minorities, and even female presidents are not yet as common as white male presidents (Cowen, 2008; Ekman, 2010; King & Gomez, 2008; Nealy, 2009). Given the typical career path for some presidents includes faculty and administrative experience prior to assuming the presidency (Corrigan, 2002; Sullivan, 2001; Wessel & Keim, 1994), following a particular career path will not affect the level of job satisfaction of a college or university president. Clearly, much has been written about presidents in higher education, yet little is known about the relationship of their career paths and job satisfaction. Although three studies have provided a better understanding of the relationship between the career paths and job satisfaction levels of college and university presidents, more research in this area is needed. In addition, the comparison of male and female university presidents' career paths and job satisfaction levels can provide definitive data on the differences these two populations experience.

Concluding Remarks

Some of the recommendations for colleges and universities presented in these studies are worth emphasizing. Perhaps the most critical consideration for institutions seeking new presidents is the preparation of senior administrators, especially academic leaders, for the presidency. As Hartley and Godin (2009) noted, this preparation needs to focus on fundraising, law and liability, infrastructure, finance, and innovative endeavors. Perhaps with better preparation, more of these administrators will seriously consider seeking a presidency. Sawyer (2009) offered a sound recommendation for existing administrators to take greater responsibility for succession plans ensuring such training. In addition, if current presidents take a more proactive role in preparing their successors, the impact could be very positive for potential female leaders who typically remain in faculty or lower-level administrative positions longer. Understandably, a better process of preparing college and university presidents could be extremely beneficial in reducing presidential stress and subsequent turnover. Any such

preparation should not be seen as a destination, however, as Schmitz (2008) emphasized the need for a continuous process of leadership development.

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