



Top 10 list for aspiring community college CEOs

By Joe Schaffer

History has shown, repeatedly, that some of the greatest leaders find opportunity in times of crisis. Right now, we face a crisis in the leadership of our community colleges. Far too many of our leaders are leaving and, unfortunately, far too few stand ready to take their place. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), there have been approximately 1,200 CEO transitions in the nation's two-year institutions over the past five years, about a quarter of those because of retirements. While the number of transitions has been declining over the last year, qualified CEO candidate pools have shriveled and show signs of greater atrophy to come. Similar trends exist among other leadership positions in our community colleges.

Regrettably, this crisis exists not only as a matter of numbers. Those few who stand ready to ascend to leadership positions, especially that of community college CEO, often lack any practical awareness of what they will face in a leadership role, let alone any formal preparation. While AACC, along with

numerous other organizations and universities, have been addressing this issue, some simple guidance exists right now that would benefit first-time and aspiring CEOs. We can call this the "Top 10 List for Aspiring Community College CEOs."

1. Get intimate with the budget. Few college CEOs have been fired for not effectively assessing student learning outcomes; many have for issues related to the budget. Like it or not, managing the fiscal resources of the institution is one of the most critical aspects of the CEO's job. This requires a broad understanding of resource allocation models, basic understanding of financial operations, and most importantly, an aptitude for translating what you hear from the financial officers into language you can convey to the broader campus community. If you do not have strong financial skills or are somewhat unaware of resource allocation models, now is a good time to build them. They will be foundational to your success as a CEO.

2. Leadership preferred, diplomacy required. The position of a CEO is a political one. A new CEO will find himself/herself in an environment where diplomacy is necessary 24/7. There are internal and external cultures and politics constantly at play. You must communicate and act with surgical precision. Too direct and you are seen as an autocrat, too hands-off and you will be targeted as a patsy. It takes

an astute pupil of diplomacy to navigate these choppy waters. Now is the time to start practicing.

3. In God we trust. Everyone else, bring data. We live in an era of accountability and a deepening need for continuous improvement and increased student success. Surprisingly though, many leaders in higher education still make decisions and give direction based on emotion and anecdote. We need to build cultures of evidence in our institutions. To do that, CEOs must have a basic understanding of institutional research, and more importantly, know how to access your data and/or the individuals who do. Get familiar with where your data reside. Even better, become a student of statistics and analysis of institutional data. These tools will be invaluable for supporting your agenda.

4. Generational differences do matter. At colleges across the nation, four or perhaps even five different generations of individuals will exist in the workplace you will be charged with leading. While no single individual can be pigeon-holed into a generational classification, make no mistake, that there are generational differences at play. Communication styles and preferences, personal priorities, tradition, etc., all differ. Knowing how they differ and effectively leading different generations will be one of your greatest challenges. This is about understanding where individuals and groups are coming from and what their orientation is. Knowing that and using it to your advantage is a skill effective leaders have mastered.

5. No matter what you think, it's not about you. Thick skin is a necessity in this line of work. You will receive advice, feedback and even criticism from a variety of individuals in myriad ways. The vast majority of the time they are pointing to the position of CEO and not directly at you. You'll need to

find ways to remove your own emotion from interactions and look for the true meaning in the message. There is no better way to build respect and trust than to be able to be un-phased by tough conversations.

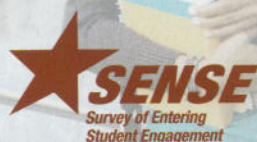
6. Invest time up-front to build trust and learn culture. New CEOs often want to hit the ground running. After all, you were hired to get things done. Many action-oriented leaders find spending time in meetings, establishing relationships, and listening to campus feedback painful. Consider this an investment in building trust with your employees and don't blow it early on by acting too quickly. You'll find that once you have earned their trust and understand their culture, the speed at which you

can facilitate and execute change will increase exponentially.

7. Once you have the job, your past is irrelevant. Many CEOs rise through the ranks of faculty and chief academic officer. However, more and more CEOs are now coming from all aspects of higher education, as well as directly from the private sector. Although your past experience may help you land the presidency, you'll quickly find that some people have limited tolerance for hearing about it. Many CEOs describe being branded with the Scarlet A (Administrator), and their tenure roots being quickly forgotten by their one-time peers. CEOs appointed from the outside find the willingness of folks inside to hear about how things were

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done somewhere else is limited. Your experience and expertise has tremendous value, but know that your new role changes the way people recognize it, so use it strategically.

8. Don't be a problem solver (at least not right away). It's natural to start your presidency with energy, passion, and a vision. In fact, that is probably what landed you the job. You will most likely see areas and things you want to change immediately. Avoid that urge. Don't jump in and solve problems unless they are absolutely critical to the health of the organization. Good leaders take the time to learn the environment and the culture prior to taking action. Your employees will respond better if you take the time to consider all aspects of an issue, and more importantly, empower them to discover the problem and find ways to resolve it on their own.

9. A world of extremes. This probably isn't advice, but rather full disclosure of the CEO position. It is one of extreme highs and lows. You will find those changes keep the pace of the job moving and unpredictable at times. Whether it is being recognized for all the great work your institution does, receiving the thanks of a student, celebrating commencement or awarding tenure, take the time to revel in those peaks. Soon enough you will find yourself dealing with disheartening employee issues, legal struggles, crises and the responsibility of making the most difficult decisions of your career. Be prepared for those swings and fluctuations and always remember it is those high points that make dealing with the lows manageable.

10. It's lonely at the top. There's no doubt that the higher you rise in the organizational structure, the lonelier it becomes. You'll find it harder and harder to keep deep relationships with people at work.

To combat this, start to build relationships with your peers across the nation. Use AACC and other networks to do this. Take the time to keep your spouse

There you have it: some basic advice for those of you brave enough to step into this challenging, yet meaningful, work during a time of community

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and/or family aware of your work, but don't burden them with it. They will become your primary support system for work-related issues, but you do not want to spawn animosity for what you do. Lastly, don't forget to pat yourself on the back every now and then. Not publicly, but privately, say "good job," when you know that is what you have done.

college leadership crisis. Hopefully, this Top 10 List will provide insight and encouragement as you seek opportunities to become emerging and successful leaders of our nation's great community colleges. ■

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