



Presidential Dialogues

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THE  
CHANGING PRESIDENCY  
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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By

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In dialogue with

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## An Impossible Job?

The president of a college or university stands in the cross-hairs, operating in an environment where the challenges are complex, there are no clear answers and decisions come in all shades of gray. Pundits disagree on the right path to achieve a stable and sustainable model for growth – invest in technology or physical plant? Lower costs or improve student and academic services? Diversify the markets you serve or stick to your core competencies? Embrace adult and online learning or double down on the liberal core? In the midst of this debate, all eyes are on the institution’s chief executive—and his or her cabinet—to navigate these strategic dilemmas and chart a path forward.

And presidents have to navigate not only the complexity of this changing landscape of higher education, but also the conflicting demands and pressures of a job in which they are accountable to an array of stakeholders. They’re asked to be the compass for the institution’s mission and values while at the same time moving the institution in new, bold directions. They must be a trusted and accessible leader on campus while at the same time serving as the external face of the institution. They must cut costs, increase enrollments, and find time to raise increasing sums of money from donors and alumni. Compounding the difficulty in the role is that presidents can’t always count on the buy-in and support of the board—leading them to spend much of their time managing the board. The role of the president is changing and the critical question is whether presidents—and ultimately the institutions they lead—are positioned for long-term success.

### It’s Time for a Unique Conversation

The increasing challenge and complexity facing the chief executive officer of the institution led us to begin our series, “Presidential Dialogues: Focus on the Future.” In our first, we asked five movers and shakers in higher ed—five presidents who understand the demands of the president’s office thoroughly and have proven excellent at navigating those demands with creativity, boldness, and resilience—to help us paint a clearer picture of the presidency in higher education.

In an era where fewer and fewer provosts aspire to the presidency (see *Inside Higher Ed’s* 2014 Survey of Chief Academic Officers), more presidents are being hired from outside academia (20%, according to a 2012 study by the American Council of Education), and too many presidents are derailed (see Trachtenberg, Kauvar, & Boque’s *Presidencies Derailed: Why University Presidents Fail and How to Prevent it*), we were seeking real insights for those who wish to better understand the office of the president or chancellor.

The chief executives who joined us for our first program are deeply committed to higher education and to their institutions. They are characterized by incredible work ethics, passion for their communities, and a desire to do good. They were open and honest about how they approach their role and the challenges they face. While the obstacles vary by type and size of institution, and by the length of tenure of the chief executive, in this paper we have summarized the most important challenges cited across the entire group. We hope these findings from the first AI Presidential Dialogues will be useful to boards as they hire and support presidents, to those aspiring to the role, and to the broader higher education community to create a deeper understanding of the president’s role.

## 3 Challenges Facing the Chief Executive Officer

While we discussed many issues facing presidents and chancellors, three complex dynamics stood out as integral to the president’s ability to do their job and lead their institutions forward:

1. Negotiating competing demands on your time and talents
2. Skillfully effecting change
3. Managing the board

## Challenge #1: Negotiating Competing Demands on Your Time and Talents

The apparent contradiction between these two quotes from our participants illustrates the tension college presidents are caught in: how can they be the external face of the institution, the primary advocate and ambassador, while also building and nurturing the internal relationships on campus that they need to move their agendas forward? How can they simultaneously woo donors, legislators, parents, and community stakeholders—and direct an effective senior team?

Managing the president's schedule is a challenge under the best of circumstances and only becomes more difficult as financial pressures rise. The presidents in our dialogue were very cognizant of the value of their time and the risk of misusing it.

Our CEOs from private institutions spoke of the challenge of splitting their time across advancement or enrollment work—the two main drivers of revenue for their institutions. Which objectives—fundraising or student enrollment—should get most of their attention? Presidents at private institutions are often in the most precarious position when balancing the demands of their time as there is seemingly no end to their external duties, and yet they also play a more operational role in helping to shape and execute the vision for the institution. They commented extensively about inclusiveness and engagement as keys to effective leadership.

One commented, “Leaders have to be not only the external face but have to be seen on campus on a regular basis. A trip that could take three days has to take only one, so that I can get back and be seen. Not only during a crisis, mind you, but whenever there is a good story to tell, too.”

At public institutions, the push and pull on the chief executive's time is not much different, though their time off campus can be greater than that of their private counterparts, amounting to as much as 80% of their time spent off campus. Given the changing political landscape and attitudes towards higher education, public leaders must spend significant time with state legislators and community advocacy. In these cases, they have to be very disciplined in how they spend their limited time on campus. One noted, “My internal piece focuses by and large on the budget. I have a great Provost and a great team; they run the inside of the university, and I'm the face.”

During the discussion, it became clear that the kinds of leaders that would succeed in a public versus private setting vary greatly. This has significant implications for boards when evaluating a candidate's background and fit with the institution. People can adapt to different contexts, but each of our five presidents were well suited for their roles and couldn't imagine “switching sides.”

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***If you want to sit in the office and manage internal relationships, that's not the job. Maybe it was in the past. It's not anymore.***

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***If the currency you deal in is trust, then the only way to build that currency is to be both visible and accessible on campus.***

## Building and Managing an Internal Team

Cognizant of how much time they are away from campus, presidents must have capable Provosts and other cabinet members to conduct the day-to-day business. Our presidents' advice? "Hire people who are smarter than you. Surround yourself with people who are really good and then trust them to go run their unit." They also recommend, "Hire people who don't think like you. People who will challenge you. And encourage those people to challenge you; invite contrary opinions. This is counter-intuitive and so critical. This takes real courage and confidence. You need a 'no BS' rule and you have to be willing to ask for help."

One participant summarized this challenge well: "Know what work is yours, know what decisions are yours, and know when to give work and decisions back to other people."

### Slowing Down & Reflecting

Our five presidents also stressed the importance of deliberately scheduling time to reflect, and all credited taking that time as a key part of their own success. "You have to use yourself as data," one noted. "Maintain a sense of curiosity, take time to reflect, and learn that the president has a range of options for how to solve a problem—not just one or two default ways of addressing the problem." Another president emphasized, "New presidents have to not only learn the institution but learn how to be a president. It's okay to not know how to be a president on your first day." Others mentioned taking time away from campus—judiciously—to refuel and regroup.

Carving out time for both reflection and self-care to sustain the grueling schedules is a critical factor in a president's ability to be—and remain—effective.

## Challenge #2: Effecting Change

Regarding the complexity and pressures higher-ed leaders face, there's a feeling among many that "this too shall pass." But the evidence is that the current turbulence isn't passing and is unlikely to pass—that we have entered what leadership experts call a time of "permanent white water" for college presidents. Historical approaches to managing costs and planning for the future simply no longer apply.

All of the presidents in our group recognize the tremendous upheaval facing higher education and are acutely aware of the unique dimensions of these changes for their campus. Challenges ranged from wrestling with issues of financial survival to shifting the institution to think more about regional economic and workforce needs, to reclaiming the power of the liberal arts in preparing students for a fast-paced and complex world. One institution we spoke with had lost all state financial support; another has undertaken dramatic internal cuts. All are facing rapid change and adaptation.

This pressing need for change was a dominant theme in our conversation. And every time change was mentioned, so too was the necessity of transparent processes and courageous decision-making.

One president asked, "How do you instill a sense of urgency? You don't want your roof to actually leak before repairing it." Another commented, "We need courageous leadership—if we can see the storm coming, and we know we have a couple of years, how do we make the courageous decisions now, before the crisis? How do you get people to have that conversation?"

Presidents have a unique but difficult opportunity. They sit at the confluence of multiple streams of information; their challenge is to be able to synthesize these streams and create a complete picture that they must share with others on campus. They must paint a picture of the institution's current realities, opportunities and



***We have to shift from historical and passive and even magical thinking to a willingness to do something bold.***

threats. One president used the analogy of a puzzle. Every person (or department) has a piece of the puzzle, but they don't see the other pieces. The president must show how the pieces fit together. To do this, they must be present on campus. They must listen and reflect. They have to be connected. They need to see themselves as "conveners" of cross-boundary groups.

The related issue of culture came up frequently. One president commented, "it's important for the leader to learn and respect the culture of the institution. If the new leader ignores the culture, they do it at their own peril. This is different than accepting the culture—but they must understand and respect it." To do so, they must invest the time in building relationships and trust with key players on campus. This is especially true for presidents that come from "the outside," not just those from outside academia but also those entering the position from another institution. Three of our five presidents entered their institutions in the role of chief executive and they were especially cognizant of the need to understand the culture of their new institution and build the trust and relational capital needed to effect change.

It's not uncommon for presidents to want to leave their mark on their institution, and many are quick to dismiss prior plans and priorities to move ahead with their own agenda. In many cases, presidents are brought on specifically for this purpose—to inject new thinking and ideas and move the institution in a different direction. We were fortunate to have a team of presidents who all prized the idea of collaboration—inclusiveness, engagement, and respect. This was a key way that they approached change efforts. As one of them stated, "Get people in the room—you are going to have a battle in most situations; get the key people in the room at the start."

At the end of the day, the president's job is to move the institution forward. They have to produce results, and their biggest challenge can be an entrenched culture. The presidents we spoke with were confident that their campuses have the right people and requisite talent to overcome today's challenges (shifting demography, financial and enrollment concerns) but they need the will to act. One president summarized, "it takes us 5 years to stop what we've been doing, 5 years to debate what we should be doing, and 5 more years to implement." Unfortunately, too many institutions don't have the luxury of waiting 15 years to act.



***The job would be hell without a supportive board.***



***There are three lines in my job description. Manage the Board. Manage the Board. Manage the Board.***

### **Challenge #3: Managing the Board**

In this time of upheaval in our industry, presidents are called upon to navigate these strategic dilemmas, take bold and decisive action, and make the difficult decisions – yet in doing so, they can't always count on the board's support as a given.

The connection between a president's capacity for bold action and the need for a supportive board is critical to understand. University presidents don't enjoy the same leadership mandate that CEOs of large companies have. They don't have a primary goal of maximizing profit—they are balancing the needs and interests of multiple stakeholders who have different and often conflicting demands. Nor do university presidents report to a single supervisor; they report to a team of individuals, and managing that team's expectations is intensive work in and of itself. The president's ultimate direction comes from the board. The president and the board must have a shared vision; this is crucial to the willingness and readiness for change.

The board needs to hold the president accountable but also must provide enough support and “cover” so that the president can make the difficult decisions to move the institution forward. When difficult decisions have to be made—to reposition the academic offerings, to re-price, to undertake faculty and staff reductions—large numbers of stakeholders will be disaffected. The president needs to know the board is behind him or her and that there is enough buy-in and commitment to the plan to overcome inevitable resistance and scrutiny.

It is clear that the dynamics surrounding the board-chief executive relationship vary widely from public and private institutions, in both cases, this relationship consumes a significant portion of the president’s time and attention. Boards are becoming more interested and involved in the operations of the institution – with mixed results.

One chief executive commented that boards today are different than in past years, describing a situation in which he perceives less sense of ownership and less awareness of the institution’s history, faculty life, and the complexities of governance, and yet boards feel a mandate to become more involved. Talk about a dangerous dynamic. For example, this president struggles to negotiate the board’s role in financing—needing their help at the macro level but instead getting a lot more interest in micro-level issues. In the end he spends more time building relationships with board members and finding ways to turn detractors into supporters. He also spends a great deal of time keeping them out of the details and minutiae of operations and trying to focus them on the strategic issues facing the institution.

This is a catch-22, and speaks to the increased complexity of the president’s role. The more time spent securing the board’s support, the less time the president can be working to advance the institution’s mission, secure the necessary resources for its work, and facilitate the forward progress of the strategic plan. And given the severity of the challenges facing some institutions, time is of the essence. We need to better understand board functions and dysfunctions because this relationship is the most critical to the work that stands in front of us as an industry. The clear point: without the support of the board, the president cannot lead.

## How Do You Move Forward? What New Presidents Need to Know

Never has the chief executive been under so much pressure. In this “permanent white water,” there is urgency to thinking differently about the role of the president, about who boards hire, and about how we develop these leaders. New presidents must be equipped to:

- Leverage their time and talents in the best way possible
- Skillfully manage change processes with inclusive practices and meaningful engagement of diverse stakeholders
- Build authentic trust and a shared vision with the board and faculty

The five presidents who joined us for the first of our Presidential Dialogues have proven adept at navigating these challenges. Recognizing this, we asked them to provide some critical advice for presidents new to the role on how to keep an impossible job—possible.

The following pages present their advice.



### **Peter Cimboric, Ph.D.**

President of Ohio Dominican University  
Columbus, OH  
2,200 students

#### **Advice for new presidents:**

You are not your role. There's a difference between your role and who you are as a human being. If you're more interested in being the president than in doing the presidency, you are in trouble.

Know what work is yours, know what decisions are yours, and know when to give some work and some decisions back to other people. The president can't also be the provost. These are both huge jobs, and you'll end up doing badly at both. Let the provost be the provost. You have to be the president, with your eyes on the whole picture.

You will also have responsibilities you don't want. You'll go to events you don't want to go to. Representing the institution at these events goes with the role. These are very important symbolic points of time that you have to attend to and do it well.



### **Rufus Glasper, Ph.D., CPA, CGFM**

Chancellor of Maricopa Community Colleges  
Arizona  
250,000 students

#### **One thing I wish I'd known when I started:**

Provosts, Vice Chancellors/Presidents and other step up candidates require earlier education and exposure to topics including the politics of finance: the politics of working with the budget, of working with the board, of hiring. These are not rational processes, and people will not always accept a solution simply because it's rational. The president has to understand the community and its political tensions. It's not just about the mechanics of finance, it's about the politics.

As a new president, you need to know the game. You need to understand the players, the politics, the rules, and actively commit to being a part of that – or you will lose. You need courageous leadership; you can't be passive.



### **Mary Hinton, Ph.D.**

President of College of Saint Benedict  
St. Joseph, MN  
2,000 students, women only

#### **One thing I wish I'd known when I started:**

I wish I'd known more about the institutional culture: what underlying assumptions, beliefs and values have shaped the organization; what is the past culture of leadership; how was decision making addressed; and how did those who came before me lead and manage the campus? That would make onboarding easier.

It's critical that a new president know:

- Looking at past leaders of the campus, what can you learn from them? What will you be doing different? How do you honor the institutional narrative and still effect change?
- How well do you fit with the culture, and where might there be lines of difference?
- Your own skill sets, strengths, and ways of addressing challenges. And, be open to sharing those ways and learning new ones.
- It's important to be open and vulnerable with your community: You have to be forthright about where you're not able to do something on your own. You can't walk in assuming you have to have all the answers. Build collaboration by being open about where you're vulnerable.



### **Clif Smart, J.D.**

President of Missouri State University  
Springfield, MO  
25,000 students

#### **Advice for new presidents:**

Hire people who are smarter than you, people who know their area better than you know their area. Your job is to surround yourself with people who are really good and then trust them to go run their unit. Being afraid to hire people who don't know more than you is a bad strategy.

Hire people who don't think like you, people who will challenge you. And encourage those people to challenge you; invite contrary opinions. This is counter-intuitive, and so critical. You need those contrary opinions. You need a "no BS" rule, and you have to be willing to ask for help. You, as the president, either will or won't facilitate dialogue. You have to work at that. Remove the barriers to open communication and open feedback.



## **Steve Titus, Ph.D., J.D.**

President of Iowa Wesleyan University

Mt Pleasant, IA

600 students

### **One thing I wish I'd known when I started:**

In my first presidency, I wish I'd apprehended that the most effective leaders are not the well-rounded ones, but the ones who know, cultivate and play to their strengths, and who then assemble and develop well-rounded teams. Had I understood this, I'd have been more realistic about the expectations I set for myself, I would have known how to ask for help, and I would have had more appreciation for the importance of institutional "fit."

Nothing really prepares one for the presidency. Until one is in the presidential seat, one cannot fully apprehend the demands, responsibility, pressure and privilege of the role. So knowing and investing in your strengths; attending to the interior dimensions of leadership, in addition to the technical and operational dimensions; and cultivating renewal and resiliency are imperative to sustaining your leadership, and presidential, journey.

## **Looking Ahead**

The first of our Presidential Dialogues made it clear that the presidency of the future is not the presidency of the past. We will need presidents to enter the job better prepared for its challenges, and we will need boards to rethink what qualities, abilities, and capacities they are hiring for. If new presidents—and their institutions—are going to survive life in the cross-hairs, new presidents are going to require considerable personal resilience, creative thinking, on-the-job learning, the ability to make sense of and synthesize multiple streams of information, and inclusive but bold decision making. In the months ahead, Academic Impressions will present our research on the new leadership skill set that presidents and their senior teams will need to navigate the challenges facing their institutions.

This has been the first of the AI Presidential Dialogues. Through this ongoing series, we will continue to convene leading minds in higher education to uncover those skill sets and ways of rethinking the president's work that will educate boards and inform and empower aspiring presidents. Watch for future papers from this series.

If you would like to talk with us about the AI Presidential Dialogues or our research on the presidency in higher education, please contact me at [amit@academicimpressions.com](mailto:amit@academicimpressions.com). I would love to talk with you!