

Presidential Succession Planning at Faith-Based Colleges and Universities



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A palpable sense of anxiety exists among higher education leaders and on many college and university campuses today. Contemporary trends in higher education, including fluctuating enrollments (Marcus 2025), declining confidence in colleges and universities (Jones 2024), and uncertainty around the future of federal funding and financial aid availability (Blinder et al. 2025) contribute to a culture of unease from deans' councils to cabinet meetings. To make matters more tenuous, recent data from the American Council on Education's (ACE) American College President Study (ACPS) has found that institutions may be experiencing presidential transitions more frequently (Melidona et al. 2023), potentially creating a vacuum of leadership at the highest levels of colleges and universities.

These trends in higher education, including more frequent presidential transitions, suggest that the general leadership environment for higher education will become more uncertain and generally riskier in the future. Presidents, however, can offset some of the uncertainty and risk through more intentional succession planning.

Succession planning is an understudied topic within scholarship on leadership and higher education, though it will become more significant as leadership turnover in higher education increases (Brantley 2019; Davis, n.d.). Informed by data and trends gleaned from the 2023 edition of ACPS, a qualitative study was developed to investigate the leadership perspectives and practices of college and university presidents at faith-based institutions of higher education related to succession planning. The study was limited to self-identified faith-based institutions of higher education in hopes that a narrower subset of institutions might produce a more precise set of findings.

Informed by the context of leadership uncertainty in higher education, a potential increase in the frequency of presidential transitions, and the need to study succession planning practices to mitigate institutional risks, this study answered the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the leadership perspectives of current presidents at faith-based colleges and universities as they relate to succession planning?

RQ2. Are presidential leaders at faith-based universities preparing succession plans? If yes, what is the scope and nature of this succession planning? If no, why not? What factors are limiting this activity?

Answering these questions will narrow a gap in scholarly literature by highlighting the perspectives of current presidents around the topic of succession planning and shed light on current succession planning practices.

Literature Review

Higher education leadership and practice has been studied widely by scholars and practitioners, but gaps remain within crucial topics, including succession planning and presidential involvement in leadership transitions. One factor influencing presidential appointments and leadership transitions is the pathway to the presidency itself. While the traditional pathway is via being a faculty member or academic leader, it has evolved in recent decades (Gagliardi et al. 2017; Melidona et al. 2023; Selingo et al. 2017).

Recent survey data and scholarly research on university presidents has detailed a complex leadership environment wherein presidents are beholden to many constituencies, responsive to many challenges, and often tasked with driving transformational change efforts at a time when the value of their institutions is under attack both internally and externally (Gagliardi et al. 2017; Jaschik and Lederman 2016; Melidona et al. 2023). This environment is contributing to leadership turnover in higher education more broadly, and within this leadership environment, scholars have found that succession planning remains understudied (Jackson and Allen 2022), even as more corporate practices permeate higher education (Klein and Salk 2013; Selingo et al. 2017). Some scholars have attributed a lack of succession planning to difficulties filling senior-leader vacancies, the emphasis on external hires, or other external factors such as competing institutions (Gigliotti 2017; Jackson and Allen 2022). These factors point to larger issues surrounding leadership development (Jackson and Allen 2022), which could also be influencing the lack of succession planning. If leadership development is not clearly articulated and planned, then it should not be surprising that succession planning at the presidential level is described as informal at times.

Scholars are quick to highlight the challenges within higher education leadership and note the evolving nature of the presidency, which factor into the general sense that both leadership development and succession planning need more context and study (Melidona et al. 2023; Selingo et al. 2017). Recent survey data and analysis from the 2023 edition of ACPS provides valuable context through the surveying of 1,075 presidents in 2022. Led by Melidona and colleagues, the 2023 edition found that 55 percent of presidents planned to step down from their current position within five years, with nearly one in five planning to retire. While these transitions are an opportunity to make the college presidency more representative of the populations that institutions serve, they also come with the challenges typical of any leadership transition, including knowledge loss.

Within this context, Melidona and colleagues found that institutions may be experiencing presidential transitions more frequently and that “59 percent of presidents were not preparing a successor for their current position...fewer than 30 percent of institutions had a plan in place for future presidential searches, and only 14 percent [had] a temporary succession plan in place” (Melidona et al. 2023). Of the minority who were preparing a successor, “81 percent indicated that their successor was at their current institution,” which affirms the internal emphasis of succession planning more broadly identified in scholarly literature (Melidona et al. 2023). Spread across a larger swath of institutions, it is clear that more frequent leadership transitions, potential shorter presidential tenures, and the challenging leadership environment within higher education will affect hundreds of leaders and their institutions in the short to medium term, thus impacting institutional knowledge, presidential competencies, and demographic representation (Melidona et al. 2023).

While succession planning is more common in corporate environments, literature within higher education focuses on the development of generalized succession plans, the factors that contribute to those plans, or single campus or small-sample case studies common to doctoral dissertations or theses. Investigations tend not to poll the perspectives of active presidents who are engaging in or could engage in succession planning to understand their perspectives and the scope and nature of their involvement in succession planning, if any.

Succession planning could be studied in many contexts, including how plans are designed and implemented or the leadership theory underpinning succession planning, but presidential perspectives within the context of succession planning remains understudied and warrants further investigation.

Methodology and Study Design

A review of scholarly literature on presidential leadership in higher education, succession planning, and leadership development informed this study’s design and how data was collected and analyzed. Moreover, ACE’s recent survey data and analysis from the 2023 edition of ACPS offered ample opportunity to study the factors influencing presidential succession planning—or lack thereof.

The broad nature of presidential leadership and institutions necessitated that specific parameters be set around participation selection and the collection of data. To this end, participants would be limited to presidents or chancellors at self-identified faith-based institutions of higher education. Faith-based institutions are an understudied subset, and purposive sampling garnered a strong sample size of leaders with diverse backgrounds from a range of faith-based institutions. All leaders confirmed the faith-based nature of their institution, and no limitations were set regarding a particular religious affiliation or geographic area.

Initial outreach to the 20 presidents in the ACE Commission on Faith-Based Colleges and Universities yielded 13 responses and 10 interviews. Sampling adequacy was reached after six interviews (Saldaña 2021). Study participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, participated in a semi-structured interview, and were provided the opportunity to confirm perspectives shared in their interview through member checking. Careful attention was paid to crafting exploratory and open-ended questions that provided participants the opportunity to offer perspective (RQ1) and a description of the factors influencing their involvement—or lack of investment in—succession planning (RQ2).

Qualitative data was collected through both the demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and coded in multiple rounds to develop themes for reflection across multiple perspectives. Start codes and second-round codes were tied to broader themes that responded to the study's research questions.

This study was not without limitations, including the researcher's positionality. The study's narrow focus on leadership and succession planning at faith-based institutions limits the generalizability of its findings across other educational contexts. Purposive sampling and an interpretivist approach allowed for the collection of rich and varied insights, but the intentionally narrow focus on presidential leadership perspectives could constrain broader applications. Careful methodological practices, including utilizing elite interviewing techniques (Harvey 2011) and member checking, ensured rigor and facilitated the identification of valuable themes.

Results

The interviews revealed a range of insights that underscore the complexities and common challenges of succession planning within faith-based institutions. Several themes emerged across multiple interviews that illustrate how presidents are navigating this often-sensitive aspect of leadership.

Governance

Several presidents described the need for defined roles and governance boundaries in the succession planning process, particularly between the president and the institution's board, which can create some tension within the succession planning process. President Emerita Shirley Hoogstra of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities noted that presidents walk a fine line between preparing for transitions and respecting the board's authority by noting that presidents can feel that they are "overstepping the board's role by putting [their] thumb on the scale for one or two people."

Other presidents added that the board has a clearly defined role to select the president, which must be respected, but presidents can and should also mentor and help to identify other potential leaders. These leaders could serve in short- or longer-term roles, depending on the context of a leadership transition, but the president who is mentoring a potential future leader must avoid being too heavy handed in their guiding a candidate or promoting that candidate to the institution's board. Relatedly, there was an awareness that the board might decide to pursue a different or external candidate, which could derail internally developed successors.

Overall, presidents described how succession planning required longer-term cultural shifts in both institutional and board leadership, including a new focus on institutional values and the changing needs of higher education.

Culture

Even among presidents advocating for or practicing succession planning, many identified systemic and cultural barriers that hinder the implementation of consistent succession planning for the presidential role. These barriers included a lack of frameworks for effective succession planning; how the presidential role is often tied to dealing with urgent demands and crises in a way that minimizes the ability to devote time to succession planning; challenges with the political dynamics between the president and their board, including limited board expertise in higher education; and concerns about the readiness of potential successors at their current institutions.

Multiple presidents described how universities struggle to engage in effective leadership development and succession planning—for the president and any leadership role—and how this effort ought to be a larger part of institutional leadership development. President Debra Schwinn of Palm Beach Atlantic University highlighted this when she described how succession planning is an integral leadership practice regardless of one's role. She said that leaders "should be developing the people within your group to take your place." One president described how he had seen succession planning attempted for the presidential role at multiple institutions, but it was not consistent. Multiple

presidents added that succession planning could be limited to putting a board-approved policy in place that would allow for some succession planning without pulling leadership attention away from the present moment.

President Gayle Beebe of Westmont College noted that unlike a more typical corporate environment, universities operate on longer timelines, which influences governance and leadership transitions. President Beebe added that presidents and institutions that understand this longer time horizon are “more effective” in how they lead overall and in periods of transition. Similarly, numerous presidents argued that succession planning was valued as a regular part of a university’s ongoing leadership culture—something to be embedded in team development and that permeates all levels of the institution.

Impetus

Several presidents also described their motivation to build and sustain an institutional legacy and a personal legacy, and succession planning furthered these goals by facilitating continuity and transformation over time. Three presidents described how succession planning was tied to their board-approved goals, with one president being required to provide a succession recommendation report to his board of trustees each year. Multiple presidents described that if this process is board initiated and board managed, then the president is given the opportunity to speak freely about potential future leaders and removes some of the tension from an otherwise awkward process. Two presidents detailed how they initiated succession planning conversations with their board chair, with one adding that they initiated the conversation because they would be transitioning out of the role within a year and another describing not wanting to put their board chair in the awkward position of having to ask about the president’s future plans.

Mission

When asked to speak to the larger umbrella of leadership development within higher education, multiple presidents spoke about how one facet of leadership development includes preparing current and future presidents to expand the value proposition of faith-based institutions and higher education. At a time when the value of higher education is being questioned, President Jim Gash of Pepperdine University argued that there is a growing market for “those that are looking for serious academics and serious faith.” In this vein, succession planning was described by numerous participants as a strategic leadership act that facilitates the preservation and flourishing of an institution’s mission.

This study also sought to understand if and how presidents at faith-based institutions were preparing succession plans and what the scope and nature of that planning entailed, including factors that limited investment in succession planning. Eight of the ten presidents interviewed for this study stated that they were engaged in some form of formal or informal succession planning for their presidential role.

Informal succession planning

Succession planning efforts for six of these eight presidents could be qualified as “informal”—where they are mentoring and coaching members of their team for future opportunities. All six described these efforts as a way to broaden the skill sets of the leaders they were mentoring, including ensuring that they were engaged in areas outside of their strengths. Their efforts were included in development plans, and they had opportunities to debrief in regular 1:1 meetings—usually at least once a month. Several presidents added that while succession planning was not the primary topic of these recurring meetings, they kept the agenda open to allow time for coaching and future planning. Effective succession planning was seen as a way for presidents to retain talent and give capable leaders growth opportunities. President Peter Kilpatrick of Catholic University of America noted that “at root, good succession planning is based on, first and foremost, love and care of the individual person, that you want to help your people be the best people they can be, be the best professionals, be the best leaders.”

Multiple presidents added that in order to conduct this informal mentoring of top talent, the president needs to be secure in their role and understand the challenges of the presidency while also creating opportunities for potential successors to learn through action. In this situation, presidents can play a hands-on role in coaching potential successors while maximizing the exposure for those budding leaders.

Formal succession planning

Formal succession planning efforts were only pursued by two of the ten presidents interviewed, with one initiating a formal succession plan with his board chair because they planned to depart within one year. A second president described efforts to steer a potential successor with presidential aspirations into a leadership development program, such as a fellowship or presidential aspirant institute where the potential successor could network with like-minded peers. One president added that this presidential preparation activity seems to be happening more at the association level than institutional level and that presidents who want to engage in this more formal succession planning activity must rely on potential successors taking the initiative in getting ready for a future role.

Emergency succession planning

Seven of the ten presidents interviewed described working in partnership with their board or board chair to establish emergency plans, including planning for an unexpected presidential transition. In all seven instances, these plans were described as risk management tools but not necessarily a longer-term leadership or strategic planning act where a potential successor is identified and developed for a planned transition. At three institutions, the board had developed a policy for an unexpected presidential transition, and presidents were asked to help develop that manual, including the process for identifying an emergency successor. President Deana Porterfield of Seattle Pacific University described this process as specifically delimited in executive in charge documents.

In summary, while succession planning is recognized as necessary, its implementation is inconsistent, often informal, and challenged by governance complexities, cultural hesitations within institutions, and the demands placed on presidents in the current moment.

Opportunities for Future Research & Board Leadership Practice

There are numerous opportunities for future research on succession planning in higher education. These opportunities include further study of the critical role of mentorship and leadership development as well as institutional barriers to consistent planning.

For instance, scholars could conduct comparative studies of succession models between faith-based and secular institutions, including best practices that are transferable across missions and governance models. Scholars could study the role of boards in succession planning, including how board training and experience within higher education affects succession planning effectiveness. Longitudinal studies could be conducted on leadership development pipelines, including how some of the informal presidential mentoring practices described by this study's participants lead to leadership continuity or effectiveness. Future studies could also investigate how succession planning efforts influence the retention and satisfaction of potential successors, especially in mission-driven environments. Crisis or emergency-driven succession planning could also be studied, particularly comparing that which is undertaken in a reactive environment with strategic and proactive succession planning. These future research directions would deepen leadership practices, promote succession planning, and support sustainable governance in higher education.

Governance complexities contribute to the inconsistent implementation of succession planning as a leadership practice, and in an attempt to strengthen institutional resilience and ensure leadership continuity, university boards should embed succession planning into board governance. The establishment of clear policies that balance presidential input with board oversight would ensure that succession planning is viewed as an ongoing and proactive governance responsibility. This would

also allow board leaders to invest in board education on succession practices, including models and leadership dynamics, which would facilitate more informed and strategic decisions. Normalizing leadership development among a university's board could also normalize leadership development across other levels of an institution and create a culture of succession planning.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study, which interviewed ten presidential leaders at faith-based institutions of higher education, reveal that while presidents recognize the critical importance of succession planning, current practices remain largely informal, reactive, and shaped by institutional cultures and governance dynamics. Leadership development—particularly the mentoring of potential successors—is emerging as a key strategy, yet many institutions struggle with consistent frameworks, board engagement, and longer-term strategic planning. The insights shared by presidential participants underscore the need for a more intentional, structured approach to succession planning that honors the mission and vision of colleges and universities while preparing for leadership transitions. As the landscape of higher education evolves and presidents are forced to respond to more and increasingly complex challenges, future research must further explore comparative models, the role of board governance, and the impact of leadership pipelines to inform more strategic presidential transitions.

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