

# Innovative Leadership

Insights from the *American College President Study 2017*

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## AMERICAN COLLEGE PRESIDENT STUDY

In 2017, in partnership with the TIAA Institute, the Center for Policy Research and Strategy (CPRS) of the American Council on Education (ACE) released the eighth edition of the most comprehensive survey on the college presidency, the American College President Study (ACPS). The survey and its findings have provided a comprehensive view of the college presidency. ACPS helps ACE, and all stakeholders in higher education, better reflect on ways to diversify the presidency.

In March 2018, CPRS convened a group of 15 current and former presidents and association leaders for a roundtable to reflect on what ACPS data tell us about their own experiences leading colleges and universities. The discussion provided qualitative points to help us understand the qualities that have been identified as innovative leadership. Observations from the roundtable, shared anonymously, are represented throughout this brief.



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## INTRODUCTION

College presidents find themselves in a setting that is unprecedented in its complexity. Even though challenges currently facing specific institutions vary in type and intensity, there are broad forces reshaping campuses nationwide. These include demographic changes (Soares, Gagliardi, and Nellum 2017), the increased number and sophistication of competitors,<sup>1</sup> the erosion of public support, and declining public perception and trust (Laderman 2018; Pew Research Center 2017). The convergence of these factors has made for an incredibly turbulent environment, one that has given the higher education community pause to consider what it means to be a modern college president. In addition to the management and oversight of loosely coupled and hierarchical organizations, campuses need a leader who can manage a crisis, identify opportunities, and get things done (Birnbaum 1988; Cohen and March 1974; Weick 1976).

In response to this need, innovative leaders have begun to emerge. Even though their stories are shaped by a unique set of circumstances, innovative leaders at our nation's higher education institutions share similar abilities and common approaches to building a more successful campus. Innovative presidents are able to make decisions based on a long-term vision shaped by the distinctive history and identity of the campus they lead. They have a tolerance for taking strategic risks associated with potential policy shifts, and thrive on turning challenges or moments of campus crisis into opportunities or accelerants for change. Innovative leaders also strive to create continuity on their campuses and sustain progress. Finally, these leaders are able to establish and leverage both internal and external networks to help them achieve their goals. ACE is dedicated to providing institutions with the support that they need, especially in these volatile times; to that end, we sought to distill these shared characteristics with the help of college presidents who participated in a recent roundtable and from insights obtained through the *American College President Study 2017*.

## TURN PREDICAMENTS INTO SUCCESS

Innovative leaders often share one common experience—at some point they turned a predicament into greater security and success for their campus. This is not by accident. In leading a college or university, presidents need to make decisions with the insight they have, and the more, the better. The roundtable revealed just how important gathering evidence and diverse perspectives was for effective decision making. Many presidents cited the importance of creating a data-savvy culture, and a strong team of trusted and experienced leaders as key components of doing so (Gagliardi and Turk 2017; Gagliardi, Parnell, and Carpenter-Hubin 2018).

Recently, the University of Wyoming received recognition for taking steps to strengthen its strategic operations. The new president and provost learned of a \$42 million decrease in state appropriations for the upcoming academic year and a 600-student enrollment confirmation shortfall (Wilkinson 2018). Realizing the need for timely, accurate, relevant, and integrated data about the current and projected standing of the campus, the president and provost turned to an outside consultant to facilitate a strategic and fundamental shift in their student enrollment management office and systems. After campus leaders took inventory of the available data, they set out to create a multi-year plan to improve the student experience. Some of the new initiatives included creating a diagnostic system to find

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1 Concerns about these competitors include the growth of for-profit institutions, online options, and non-degree credentialing.

patterns in student retention and success, investigating what resources successful students used on campus, and creating a student success activity inventory that seeks to align resource offerings with what future students will need to be successful. Initial results include increases in enrolled freshman and transfer students; better fall-to-fall retention rates; substantial growth in freshman and transfer applications for the upcoming year; and buy-in from key campus stakeholders. These early successes highlight a frequently recurring theme of the roundtable: innovative leaders are able to recognize and act on opportunities even in times of distress. The solutions they devise often center on students.

## KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Many of the presidents who participated in the roundtable discussed the importance of understanding the students they serve more deeply, particularly given the changing nature of the undergraduate population. These executives came from institutions of all shapes and sizes across the United States. Their local context played a major role in shaping their recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation strategies and metrics.

Some of the participants led institutions in areas of the country where a rapidly aging population or overall depopulation had begun to impact the bottom line. This made recruiting students who fit their traditional profile more difficult. These demographic shifts magnified preexisting challenges on their campuses. Roundtable participants expressed concern about policies, programs, and services that were designed to promote student success, but had outlived their usefulness in light of ongoing changes. They lamented that the existing infrastructure on many campuses to recruit, educate, and graduate students was not adequately meeting the needs of modern students. Others focused on the state of their physical plants, which had begun to deteriorate rapidly due to declining use. While presidents understood that they needed to adapt and modernize, there was also a palpable sense of apprehension about the cost and risk of such changes.

In parts of the country where the population was growing, some presidents were grappling with structural limitations, some were dealing with how to adjust recruiting (the students that they previously had targeted were no longer enrolling in their institutions), and some were grappling with both. In one instance, a president described the challenges that rapid population growth posed to their campus. The institution was bursting at the seams in an effort to satisfy the growth in demand, which led to discussions about new facilities and expansion. It was an exciting time for the entire campus community. However, experience had taught the president that the institution needed to be prudent. This led to a review of campus space and its utilization that ultimately validated the need for expansion, albeit far less than what had initially been proposed.

Nearly all of the roundtable participants were struggling to serve an increasingly diverse population in an equitable fashion. An urban-serving university president sought to identify solutions for the lagging outcomes among the institution's largest undergraduate student segment—women in their late twenties. Other presidents in the roundtable were worried about how to serve low-income students effectively. Many had confronted for the first time challenges related to housing and food insecurity (Nellum 2018). As one executive at the roundtable put it, “Institutions that don't focus on these [demographic] shifts will suffer the consequences.” There was a shared concern that many campuses are simply unprepared to deal with changing student needs, and that policy misalignments and knowledge gaps are at the heart of the matter. To address this, roundtable participants underscored the growing importance of creating a more positive campus climate. The very survival of many

colleges and universities will depend on their ability to welcome diverse students and guide them to a quality degree.

## STUDY THE RULEBOOK

Aside from better understanding their students, institutional leaders who strive to be innovative also take the time to understand the laws and policies that govern their campuses because it allows them to identify creative solutions to the challenges they face. One president shared how his team was able to maximize university funding from the state by exploring the differences in rules and regulations around merging institutions versus establishing a new one. Merging two campuses under the banner of either would restrict the amount of funding the institution could receive to previously set legislative caps. However, no such caps existed for a new institution created from both campuses. This would allow for a far more massive state investment, if the communities of both institutions could be convinced that the most prosperous path forward was worth losing their individual identities. This president succeeded by knowing the rulebook, keeping all options open, and taking advantage of an unorthodox solution to a major problem.

## A DEEP BENCH

Innovative leaders also realize the importance of continuity on their campuses, and they look to marshal their resources in order to act collectively, cohesively, and continuously. As one participant in our roundtable shared, “I’m concerned about increasing turnover and how that derails culture change . . . I’m interested in exploring [ways to ensure there is continuity] because we are in the midst of a generational swing in terms of faculty, presidents, and other academic leaders.” These leaders believe that a functioning institution is one that sustains itself during times of executive turnover; doing so often hinges on whether or not the campus has the ability to react to new situations quickly and knowledgeably. Inherent in this ability to react is establishing clear lines of communication that facilitate a common understanding of direction, decision making that is evidence-based and in sync with the strategic priorities of the college, and effective implementation. The conditions necessary to set up such a culture on campus are accomplished by maintaining a level of employee stability, and finding strength and backing by working in concert with institutional stakeholders. Presidents build toward this by placing a high value on professional development, and collaborating and engaging with both shared governance bodies and boards of governance, even if it initially slows the rate of change. They respect the rhymes and rhythms of the campuses, but nudge where they can find consensus.

During our roundtable, a common theme involved the inability of innovative leaders to be successful without a strong supporting cast. Senior administrators, junior administrators, and staff members are required to run their institutions, raise red flags about issues or potential problems in their departments, and provide on-the-ground insight. Innovative executives understand the need to develop a “deep bench” of capable and innovative leaders throughout their campus. Nearly half (45 percent) of presidents in our survey indicated that they wanted to see national associations providing professional development programs for their cabinet-level executives. These presidents want the confidence of knowing that they can rely on administrative teams to turn their vision into reality, and to step in and fill gaps. One president emphasized during the roundtable that in order to create momentum and keep moving forward, a campus needs to be training and preparing the next generation of leaders. Another leader talked about establishing programs that regularly met to discuss strategic actions

and strategic planning, and that provided access and experience for more junior-level executives and administrators. This created a group from which the executive could quickly identify interim leaders from within the organization rather than having to wait on lengthy and costly searches to find experienced and capable replacements.

## **FRIENDS, NOT FOES**

Another common trait among innovative leaders is that they understand and value institutional stakeholders that have shared governance roles—whether they are boards of regents or faculty senates. Yet, these bodies are often points of contention for many college presidents today. While many presidents seek to build buy-in with faculty, more than half of presidents surveyed (57 percent) indicated that faculty least understood their challenges. Additionally, presidents expressed a high level of frustration in trying to deal with faculty resistance (45 percent of presidents found this the most frustrating aspect of leading a higher education institution) (Gagliardi et al. 2017). This is partially explained by the natural push and pull over the long-term direction of an institution that exists between presidents and longer-tenured academic leadership in the face of changes that are perceived to threaten historic identities. Presidents often seek to be agents of change, while academic leadership focuses on sustaining the academic enterprise. These feelings are contrasted with the high-level support that presidents find from their board of regents (over half of all presidents identified their boards as their most supportive constituents) and their closest staff.

On the other hand, innovative leaders are looking at these stakeholders as friends, not foes, with an eye toward being able to rely on them as allies and partners. In fact, one in five presidents indicated in our survey that they found faculty to be the most supportive internal constituent group (Gagliardi et al. 2017). In an environment that has seen an increasing number of instances of salary and hiring freezes and program closures, these presidents find that it is more important now than ever before to build bridges between administration and faculty. One president during the roundtable was leading a public institution that was running without a budget because of an extended standoff over budget negotiations among the state’s legislature. When a budget was finally passed, the institution realized that it was going to face financial challenges, but at the same time, the president saw it as an “amazing opportunity to transform the university to a more sustainable model.” The president credited an increase in transparency about the budget with budget committees who had sitting faculty members on them as “huge” for the administration to be able to move forward with their plans by gaining understanding and support from faculty members. This president and others have realized that leveraging the messaging from outside stakeholders (including boards and legislatures) can aid in rallying support from faculty to support a common goal, and the good of the institution. When used properly, such messages can distill things to the least common denominator—student success and sustainability.

## **NETWORKS MATTER**

While being a chief executive in an organization can often feel like a lonely and isolated job, innovative leaders rely on using and establishing both internal and external networks to help guide and support their agendas. Two data points from our presidential survey highlight the importance of networking for college presidents (Gagliardi et al. 2017). First, over 40 percent of presidents have memberships to professional organizations paid for by their institution as a condition of employment,

and over a third have memberships to social organizations included as a condition of employment. The second data point informs us about how presidents rely on their colleagues. Fifty-seven percent of presidents indicated that they turned to colleagues in the field for advice, the most common response for this question.

Above, it was discussed how presidents who value continuity seek out and develop a deep bench for their executive boards and administrative teams. These networks allow for the building of a coalition within the institution that is dedicated to advancing the aspirational goals, vision, and mission of the campus. They are vital for communicating, decision making, and implementing leadership's goals. In the same way, presidents also look to participate in and establish networks outside of their campuses that they can both learn from and influence, especially when they find members that have shared interests and aspirational goals who are also interested in collaborating. These networks serve to provide presidents with valuable safety, cover, support, and most importantly, peers with similar goals but different approaches.

Similar goals are important because they help crystallize what the president envisions for the institution. They provide a vision and strategy set that an institution can identify with and rally around. One president stated that this helps ensure that everyone on campus is "rowing in the same direction." At the same time, campuses will approach the shared goal differently, which can be incredibly useful for presidents. The differentiation in approaches and applications exposes each president in the network to a new solution or potential challenge that their campus can learn from.

Often, these goals and strategies are initiated by different stakeholders. For example, Complete College Georgia is an initiative created under the direction of the governor that brings together the two public higher education systems in Georgia (the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia) to "rapidly increase the proportion of young adult with a certificate or degree" (University System of Georgia 2018). Similarly, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board established an aspirational goal called 60x30TX that aims to have at least 60 percent of Texans having obtained a certificate or degree by the year 2030. Additionally, outside organizations work to bring together like-minded colleges and systems to work together toward a common goal. Recently, the National Association of System Heads developed Taking Student Success to Scale (TS3) (National Association of System Heads 2018). The initiative has brought together a number of systems that are working together to identify programs that are evidence based and scalable. These include guided pathways, predictive analytics, and high-impact practices. Recently, it received recognition and support from the Lumina Foundation for its innovative approach to scaling what works.

In each of these three examples of partnerships, institutions are bound by a common goal, but enter into agreements that are flexible enough to allow programs to be tailored by and for each institution. This makes sense given that goal setting is typically a global activity whereas implementation is usually local in nature. In fact, in most cases, institutions are responsible for creating their own ideas and programs that they believe will result in progressing toward the stated goal. One thing that they do collectively is agree, in a standardized fashion, to collect and define data, set minimum standards and practices, and share data at regular intervals so that they can learn from one another and advance the collaboration. Presidents are welcoming such initiatives, because they can often allow executives to sidestep some of the on-campus politics that can derail campus-wide programs and initiatives in the early stages. These programs and initiatives attract early adopters with the will and urgency to act, and they also help presidents leave a lasting legacy on their campus.

Presidents are looking to work together with other higher education institutions, and innovative leaders are also looking to establish cross-sector collaborations. They are reaching out to stakeholders such as politicians, businesses, and other community leaders. For example, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities recognizes and celebrates institutions that demonstrate commitment to their regional economic development by working with these stakeholders to promote “innovation and entrepreneurship, excellence in technology transfer, leadership in talent and workforce development, establishing strong government-university-industry partnerships, and fostering community and ‘place’ development through public service, engagement and outreach” (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, n.d.). For instance, Northeastern University and General Electric (GE) partnered to co-develop an accelerated bachelor of science degree in advanced manufacturing (Northeastern University 2017). This is just one example of numerous partnerships between universities and corporations. In fact, when asked about the most supportive external groups, college presidents ranked local business leaders and community leaders as the third most supportive group, behind their boards of regents and alumni. By working with and creating networks with these stakeholders, college presidents can increase their presence in the community, discover new political clout and influence, and access new and untapped resources.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on our conversations and the data that we have collected, we have found that innovative leaders work to empower their campuses in the following ways:

1. **Developing and maintaining a senior team.** Being a university or college president requires a competent team to help run the day-to-day operations of the institution and to advance the institutional mission. Naturally, these teams rarely stay intact at an institution for an entire presidential tenure. Innovative and entrepreneurial leaders recognize the need to develop leaders from within the organization that can fill in at a moment's notice and ensure organizational continuity.
2. **Emphasizing strategic decision making and cultivating a data-enabled culture.** Innovative leaders dissuade decision making that is anecdotal in nature. Instead, they promote decision making based on evidence, which can increase the tolerance for strategic risk and small failures. They are willing to make and advance less traditional decisions if they are supported by accurate evidence and compelling stories. Cultivating positive attitudes toward the collection and use of data enables a culture on campus that elevates informed decision making at all levels across the campus.
3. **Embracing shared governance.** Faculty resistance grabs headlines and has been the source of much frustration for presidents. Still, leaders who are looking to make impactful and lasting change on their campuses realize the need to create a culture of buy-in, which

involves diverse campus constituents. One way that they are doing so is by leveraging the messaging from their boards, other networks, and faculty leaders on campus. Innovative leaders see shared governance as an opportunity rather than a challenge. They believe it is fundamentally positive because those who will be affected by a decision are able to participate in its making. It also introduces multiple perspectives into the decision-making process, which ultimately leads to better strategy and outcomes.

4. **Turning crisis into opportunity.** Innovative presidents are realizing that sometimes the best time to make a strategic shift in strategy and planning is when the institution is either in, or near, crisis. These moments provide rare opportunities that, if handled properly, can increase the financial security, prosperity, and growth of the institution.
5. **Communicating and implementing.** Innovative leaders ultimately realize that success on any campus is dependent on effective communication, decision making, and implementation campus-wide. More leaders now realize they alone are unable to move the institution in a certain direction. These presidents see the value of creating aspirational goals and assessing whether or not the campus is capable of achieving the goal in its current state. They create and empower teams of talented, knowledgeable, and functional administrators who they rely on to carry out their visions. Innovative presidents develop guiding coalitions and use data to further scale out their objectives, and they are willing to pivot if progress is limited or mistakes are made (Barber, Moffit, and Kihn 2010).
6. **Engaging with peers inside and outside of higher education.** These leaders understand that sometimes the best answer for their problems can be found at another institution. Sharing insights and resources on innovative programs and pedagogies benefits not only their institution but also the practice of higher education as a whole. Additionally, by bringing together business, community, and political leaders, higher education institutions are able to discover allies, make demonstrable contributions and impacts for their communities, and begin to reestablish the public's trust and faith in higher education.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, college and university presidents must solve a wide array of daily challenges. Recently, William H. McRaven, the outgoing chancellor of The University of Texas System and a former special-ops military commander, noted that “the toughest job in the nation is the one of an academic- or health-institution president” (Ellis 2018). But despite the difficult environment that college presidents are now required to navigate, there is a thriving pool of innovative college and university presidents that are helping to propel both their institutions and the field of higher education forward. Still, more are needed, and ACE is committed to growing them.

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