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Run Your Campus

Your Next Few Leaders

By Dennis M. Barden

I had the good fortune to give a talk with Rita Bornstein, president emerita of Rollins College, at the recent meeting of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. Our topic was succession planning, and our premise was that every institution in the country should — indeed must — start considering it sooner rather than later.

Some of the trustees and senior administrators at the conference must have agreed with us. When I led a roundtable on that same subject at the 2008 conference, three people attended. This year the audience numbered more than 50. I wouldn't call it a groundswell, but I will hazard an opinion and call it a trend.

For compelling reasons, the time has come for succession planning in higher education. For one thing, several recent reports — most notably “Too Many Rungs on the Ladder?” and “The CAO Census,” both from the American Council on Education — have illustrated with significant research and analysis that the pipeline of potential leaders in academe (or at least those from the usual-and-customary career paths) is less than robust. In fact, according to ACE, less than a third of all sitting chief academic officers aspire to presidencies or chancellorships. If one presumes that not all of those who do have such aspirations are competent to perform the duties (and I can assure you from experience that that is the case), then the most obvious source of potential leaders is destined to run dry before demand for them does.

It is also the case that the job of the president or chancellor — and, for that matter, of the dean, provost, and just about everyone else in academic administration — has changed radically over the past few years. The current economic meltdown and the necessities it has forced on colleges and universities are only the most recent and dramatic illustration of that change. The fact of the matter is, the traditional apprenticeship of the college president — doctorate, appointment as a tenure-track faculty member, tenure, promotion to full professor, department chair, dean, chief academic officer, president — is no longer fully adequate to the task of preparing people to lead the nation's institutions.

What, then, must we do?

We must be intentional about preparing people for those top jobs. We must train them, and then give them meaningful experiences to put those lessons into action and to test their abilities before they are actually on the job. We must find ever more efficient and effective ways to choose leaders, and we must, in particular, become vastly more intentional about helping them to succeed once they take office.

Leadership and academic culture. Rita and I acknowledged in our talk that there are many barriers to succession planning in higher education (including the very phrase, which smacks uncomfortably of corporate culture). A key barrier is the egalitarian nature of colleges and universities; it just doesn't come naturally in academe to single people out for leadership potential early in their careers, leaving others behind. Another barrier is the common disdain that older, more established faculty members feel for administrative work of any kind; young faculty members are often advised to eschew administration as a distraction, at best.

The traditions of shared governance make succession planning intrinsically different for colleges and universities than for corporations, which otherwise might provide models. It will never be acceptable in higher education for any group of leaders — be they board members, sitting senior administrators, or some combination thereof — to handpick one or more successors to an institution's leadership. Succession planning in academe must be a process that involves every key constituency, none of them more critical to the effort than the faculty.

Constituent involvement in institutional leadership has traditionally focused on the search process. As a result, the open, national, inclusive search has long been the principal (and, if the mail generated by this column is any indication, the only) acceptable means of identifying and enfranchising that leadership.

But that's not the only reason why institutions go to the trouble of national searches. Bringing in leaders from other institutions is

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one of the only ways that our traditional colleges and universities can achieve an influx of new ideas and approaches. Leaders that are unbiased by precedent, personal loyalties, or organizational orthodoxy can inject creativity and energy into a college. Finding those leaders and bringing them on board is frequently one of the only ways to catalyze change within our purposefully slow-to-change environments.

That paradigm comes at a cost, though. As has been said over and over in these pages, a national search frequently has the effect of disenfranchising worthy internal candidates. And all too often, when inside candidates do emerge successfully from a search process, the transaction costs to the institution — the costs of the search, the morale issues associated with internal candidacies, the anxiety and apprehension of the unknown — are considerable. Is a national search a good investment? I know of no analysis of that question. That's because the necessity of a national search has always been presumed.

A common lexicon. One of the barriers to succession planning is the lack of a common language to describe the process. We didn't solve that problem in our discussions at the AGB conference, but we did identify three central components of an institutional succession plan.

- **Professional development:** Every institution must identify potential leaders, train them, and supply them with real-world experience. Institutions (and especially their governing boards) must also recognize that such internal programs will prepare leaders who will find opportunities elsewhere — a reality in the enclosed ecosystem that is higher education.
- **Leadership transition:** Protocols must be in place in anticipation of vacancies (whether planned and orderly, or unplanned and urgent). Those protocols may or may not include a traditional open search.
- **Once on board:** An institution must take steps to ensure that its new leader gets off to a positive, productive start, especially if he or she is also new to the campus.

Over the weeks, months, and, undoubtedly, years to come, a common language will emerge that will allow all of an institution's constituencies to play a meaningful role in the succession-planning process. The analogy here is strategic

planning. Two decades ago, no meaningful strategic planning was done in higher education; now it is de rigueur, so common that it has become a part of the accreditation process. So shall it be with succession planning. Or it will be if Rita (who is writing a book on the topic for AGB) and I are correct in our prognostication.

I actually feel more confident about that prediction as the result of an encounter after our presentation. The next day, I jumped on a hotel shuttle to go back to the airport and found myself in conversation with one of the other attendees. Dick Kinney is an investment adviser from Milwaukee; he is also a trustee of Gallaudet University, in Washington. I told him about our presentation, and his response was, "Succession planning?! Boy do we need that!" He went on to tell me about how the Gallaudet board, at the outset of a previous presidential search, commissioned a study of the marketplace. Board members were looking for three attributes in a new leader: experience in higher education, an earned doctorate, and significant hearing impairment. A consultant hired by the board found precisely 27 people worldwide who fit all three criteria. From that pool, the board had to find a president.

The irony, of course, is that Gallaudet is arguably the finest institution in the world educating hearing-impaired students. Who would be better to provide the energy, the vision, the drive for that university's next generation than one of its own? I sure wish I had run into Dick Kinney before our presentation; I could have related that story. Then again, I did note several representatives from Gallaudet in the audience for our session. Maybe they have figured this out already.

Rita and I do not pretend to have all the answers. What we hope is to start a conversation — to provide the impetus and a common set of assumptions for colleges and universities as they start down the road toward succession planning. It should be a long and lively discussion, indeed.

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