

**Presidencies Derailed: Why University Leaders Fail and How to Prevent It.** Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, Gerald B. Kauvar, and E. Grady Bogue. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013. 163 pp. \$34.95 cloth (ISBN 978-1-4214-1024-1)

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The presidency of U.S. institutions of higher education (IHE) is not a well-understood occupation in American society. That is the result of a combination of the sheer number of IHEs together with their diversity. According to the Carnegie Foundation there are more than 4,600 of them grouped into 33 categories<sup>1</sup>. To that add the different nomenclature for that position that includes, but is not limited to president, chancellor, rector, and the like. There is tremendous confusion when it comes to the usage of those names in different systems, such as SUNY (State University of New York) where the top executive is called Chancellor and each campus has a president, or the University of California system where the CEO is called President and the campus top executives are called chancellors. In addition to title, the authority vested on them varies from very broad with loose reporting to a Board of Trustees (BoT) (whose names also vary such as regents or visitors), to being just an executer of the policies designed by the Chancellor of the system or by a BoT.

Most presidents appear as the public face of their institution for ceremonial functions while most people have little understanding of what they actually do beyond performing at public events. They are vaguely seen as the top fundraising and public relations person of the institution unless there is a major crisis or scandal where people look at the president for answers. If they are fired or forced to resign, it is usually under confidentially agreements that leave little room for comprehending the reasons behind such an event.

Now three authors, all with executive experience in institutions of higher education, try to help us understand an increasing phenomenon: the dismissal of college presidents. Trachtenberg served as president of the University of Hartford and George Washington University; Kauvar was his special assistant at the latter; and Bogue was Chancellor of Louisiana State University in Shreveport.

One of the first statistics we learn about in this rather slim book is that “during 2009 and 2010 fifty college, university and system presidents resigned, retired prematurely, or were fired” (p. vii). Given that most of those occurrences happened under the shadow of confidentiality agreements, the authors try to come up with patterns and, more importantly, what can be learn from those experiences.

One of the approaches they took in writing this book was to describe some cases based on interviews with the participants of such events. They did so by narrating the stories but changing the names of both the actors and the institutions where those derailed presidencies took place. Another approach (like the ones described in the appendix of the book, pp. 141-152) was to use press accounts that, for the most part, cannot provide much in-depth information about the actual circumstances.

The reasons behind those derailments vary, but the authors grouped them into six categories: ethical lapses, poor interpersonal skills, inability to lead key constituencies, difficulties in adapting to their new roles, failure in achieving objectives set, and BoTs shortcomings. In more cases than not there is some combination of those factors.

The lessons explained in this book are useful for both presidents and BoTs as well as for those involved in searches of future presidents. One of the most important conclusions one can draw from reading this book is that both presidents and members of the BoTs represent a sample of the human population and, hence, their failings are not that different from other groups of humans. One might expect that intelligent people who have had long careers in academia will not commit foolish mistakes but, as the book shows, that is not always the case. For example, no matter how thorough a search process is, a new president may change his or her personality once s/he achieves the pinnacle of the institution. Just as mountaineers suffer the effects of little oxygen when reaching high altitudes without an oxygen

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<sup>1</sup> <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/summary/basic.php>

tank, they may transform themselves and not always for the better. In other occasions presidents forced to resign or even fired from previous institutions because of ethical lapses get hired by a new one where, not surprisingly, they may commit the same offenses.

BoTs have also a great deal of responsibility in presidential derailments, from poor oversight to inconsistent evaluations, to meddling in the day-to-day business of the institutions. Sometimes they set procedures that seemed designed to fail. Many worthwhile applicants to the position of president already hold a similar executive position in another academic institution; therefore, they do not want to make public that they want to move elsewhere. As a result, the search process is maintained in confidentiality until the finalists are invited to visit the campus of the institution they are aspiring to lead. In a case not mentioned in the book, but of which I have direct knowledge, the selection process for the presidency of a private liberal college was conducted in such secrecy that the new president was publicly announced with just a handful of individuals in the loop. Needless to say that causes a very negative reaction among many constituencies, particularly faculty, to the point that the incoming president had to spend considerable time and effort just to be accepted in his/her new academic home.

In general, the book provides good advice to people involved in the process of selecting and evaluating academic presidents as well as other important issues, such as the transition into the new job. In many ways this book complements other excellent sources on college presidencies<sup>2</sup>. The only advice I disagree with is to expose these chief executive officers to what is called a “360-degree” evaluation where virtually everybody in the institution participates in the process and whose results are made public. Experience shows that many times the process is high jacked by individuals who have an ax to grind against the CEO by generating a recommendation that even runs against the very data that they themselves collected, causing an institutional failure that ends up weakening the authority and prestige of the president.

In conclusion, this book is a “must-read” not only for those aspiring to be presidents, but also for anyone involved with academic institutions of higher education.

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<sup>2</sup> Bowen, W.G. 2011. *Lessons Learned. Reflections of a University President*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. Padilla, A. 2005. *Portrait in Leadership. Six Extraordinary University Presidents*. Westport, CT: Praeger. Pierce, S.R. 2012. *On Being Presidential. A Guide for College and University Leaders*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Weill, L.V. 2009. *Out in Front. The College President as the Face of the Institution*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education.