
Regional

There are many reasons why college leaders fail

In difficult times leaders are tested. We see that in many spheres of life, from politics to business. And higher education is not an exception. In the last few years colleges and universities have faced multiple challenges ranging from diminishing financial support in the case of public institutions to reduced enrollments to misunderstanding of what these institutions do and why. As a consequence of that we see an increasing turnover of their leaders.

The way college leaders present their departures falls into three categories: outright resignation for “personal reasons,” retirement, or being fired. Yet, regardless how these departures are presented, they rarely describe the actual circumstances for their leaving. Most of those departures are portrayed as taking place under “friendly” circumstances, while actually they happen under stressful conditions of which we know very little because of confidentiality agreements and/or because everybody wants to save face.

In a 2013 book titled “Presidencies Derailed: Why University Leaders Fail and How to Prevent It,” former university president Stephen Joel Trachtenberg analyzes the actual reasons why many leaders leave. By going beyond formal announcements, the author grouped the actual reasons why college leaders leave 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 shortcomings in their boards of trustees. In more cases than not, there is some combination of these factors.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

In many ways these reasons are not surprising. First, not all colleges and universities are created equal. According to the Carnegie Foundation there are more than 4,600 postsecondary institutions in the United States, grouped into 33 categories. That means that someone may be suited for one type of institution but not for others. But probably the most fundamental reason for failure by leaders is that the higher education system does not really prepare people to become college leaders, with most of them learning by “osmosis,” and not by actual training. In some cases, some of those college leaders are chosen among people who do not even have real academic experience in higher education. These leaders oftentimes find it very difficult to adapt to a very unique culture.

The majority of presidents appear as the public face of their institutions for ceremonial functions, but 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 when people look to them for answers.

One of the most important conclusions one can draw from reading this book is that both presidents and members of the boards of trustees who choose and oversee them represent a sample of the human population and, hence, their failings are not that different from

other groups of humans. One might expect that people who, for the most part, have spent a long time in academia because of their alleged high intelligence 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 achieving the pinnacle of the institution. Just as mountaineers suffer the effects of little oxygen when reaching high altitudes without an oxygen tank, they may transform themselves and not always for the better. In other occasions presidents who were forced to resign or even fired from a previous institution because of ethical lapses, get hired by a new one where, not surprisingly, they may commit the same offenses.

Boards of trustees have also a great deal of responsibility in presidential derailments, from poor oversight to meddling into the day-to-day business of the institutions. Sometimes they set procedures that seem designed to fail.

Because many worthwhile applicants to the position of president already hold a similar executive position in another academic institution, they do not want to make public that they want to move elsewhere. Because of that, 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 arts college was conducted in such secrecy that the new president was publicly announced as a

matter of fact, with just a handful of individuals in the loop on the selection process. Needless to say, that caused 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 her new academic home.

There is much to learn from the experiences presented in the book and that should help both boards of trustees and incoming presidents, especially when it comes to evaluating how well the new leader is doing. Yet we really need to get serious about evaluation and not to make that process a beauty contest, but rather a measurement of effectiveness.

I would advise not to expose these chief executive officers to what is called a “360-degree” evaluation where virtually everybody in the institution participates in the process. Experience shows that many times this process is hijacked by individuals who have an ax to grind against the CEO, unnecessarily causing an institutional failure that ends up weakening the authority of the president.

If we want successful college leaders who stay for longer periods of time for the sake of stability, we need to conduct more thorough searches that concentrate on the future potential of the individual.

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