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# Colleges should be preparing their own leaders

The strongest argument one can make regarding a complicated issue is to integrate both a set of statistics and some specific examples that validate the point you are trying to prove.

In the last few years we have seen the transformation of the figure of the college president. Originally it was a person exemplifying the best of higher education, with a solid record as a scholar and as a teacher. Those credentials allowed him or her to have the respect and support of both the internal and external constituencies. However, in the last decade or so the number of college leaders that are coming from outside academia has been steadily increasing. According to the American Council on Education, 20 percent of U.S. college presidents selected in 2012 came from fields outside academia, up from 13 percent six years earlier. And if you follow the announcements of new campus leaders you will probably see that that proportion will continue to increase in the coming years.

We are also seeing an increased number of college leaders failing. According to the book "Presidencies Derailed: Why University Leaders Fail and How to Prevent It," those failures have become more and more common, up to 50 per year. Among the most recently publicized instances of these failures has been the case of Timothy M. Wolfe, who was forced to resign as president of the University of Missouri after racial issues on campus made the national news. Mr. Wolfe had no academic experience, coming from the business world as a former executive at IBM and Novell Americas. From the beginning he started to behave in ways that ran contrary to the philosophy

### Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

of an academic institution, a culture that places great value on the concept of shared governance. According to some faculty, he was autocratic, failed to consult different constituencies and appeared indifferent to student concerns.

Because of cases like this, campus communities – particularly the faculty – are becoming more and more resistant to accepting non-academics as their leaders. Take, for example, the University of Iowa. This year and under pressure from several sectors outside the institution, the board of trustees chose Bruce Harreld, former president of the restaurant chain Boston Market, as the new university leader. The decision was criticized as soon as it happened. A survey showed that only three percent of the participating faculty considered him qualified for the job. Subsequent events confirmed those suspicions. Within weeks of his appointment, Harreld suggested in a meeting that professors unprepared to teach be shot, comments that generated a public uproar, particularly in these times of campus shootings. He later apologized for those remarks.

Although boards of trustees may have their reasons to choose people from outside academia as campus presidents, they do so at their own risk and that of the institution as a whole. These governing bodies claim they need people with business acumen who can navigate the financial challenges faced

by higher education today caused by an erosion of their traditional sources of funding. This need seems particularly relevant at public institutions that have faced significant cuts from state governments. For this reason, boards of trustees look for people with more fundraising experience or political connections.

The problem is that universities are not corporations and their main activity, education, is not a commodity. The culture of colleges and universities is deeply rooted in traditions that date back to medieval Europe. Campuses are highly unique environments that unless you have had a long experience with them you will have a hard time understanding. For one thing, consultation is key to getting things done. Orders from the top will not do, particularly with faculty who are very well versed in the tactics of passive resistance and because tenure provides them with a much higher sense of job security than your average employee.

Dealing with issues such as student protests, race, inequality and bigotry require levels of sensitivity and finesse not always common in the corporate world.

Yet, we need to recognize that most people in academia are not trained to be effective leaders. We see that from department chairs and program directors all the way to presidents/chancellors. A number of institutions have been providing some training opportunities but that has happened in very few places and only sporadically, which means that most people in positions of leadership do not go through any training specific to the needs of the academic institution.

Until very recently the only option for would-be presidents/chancellors to get some training was

provided by Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, which has an enrollment of about 50 per year. In the summer of 2012, the American Council on Education launched the Institute for New Presidents. In 2014 the presidents of Arizona State University and Georgetown University announced a joint program aimed at creating the Institute for Innovation in Higher Education Leadership. Others provide more specific training for new presidents, such as The Council of Independent Colleges and the American Association of Community Colleges through its Presidents Academy Summer Institute, as well as one by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

Although all these represent positive developments, they address only part of the problem. It does not matter how prepared a person is for a position of campus leader when the people who hire him or her (boards of trustees or system leaders) do not really know what is needed for that position. Those boards of trustees, composed mainly of people who also have no academic experience, many times hire someone who has an expertise in a narrow issue of concern, because of personal chemistry, or just because that person does not seem to threaten the status quo. What that means is that they are hiring someone they think they want, which is not at all the same as hiring who they need.

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