

References

Ekman, R. (2010). The Imminent Crisis in College Leadership. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 57(5), A88. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.

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Section:	POINT	OF	VIEW
The Imminent Crisis in College Leadership			

College leadership is nearing a tipping point. Recent reports by the Council of Independent Colleges and the American Council on Education indicate that fewer chief academic officers--the traditional pool of future college presidents--are now willing to be candidates for presidencies than in the past.

At both public and independent institutions, academic leaders say presidential duties are inherently unattractive in comparison with their own jobs or those of faculty members. At state colleges, the added discouragement of "sunshine" laws depresses the number of potential candidates, who do not want their candidacies for other positions to be widely known. More than anything else, however, it is the increasingly external orientation of presidential duties that best explains why only 30 percent of all chief academic officers (and just 24 percent of them at independent colleges) still aspire to become college presidents.

Other people are willing. There has been a notable increase in the number of new presidents whose previous experience has been mainly as vice presidents in nonacademic areas like development, finance, and enrollment (23 percent over all; 33 percent at independent colleges) and a small but noticeable number of new presidents who have come to campuses directly from the upper levels of business, government, and the military (17 percent over all; 13 percent at independent colleges). There is no single route to the top, and many people with nontraditional backgrounds have been highly successful as college presidents.

Still, we should be concerned that a growing number of colleges are being led by people who have never had direct experience in the heart of the enterprise as faculty members, department chairs, deans, or provosts. If the number continues to increase, the risk is that higher education will become an industry that is led by people who do not truly understand it, who view it as a

commodity to be traded, a production problem to be solved efficiently, or a brand to be marketed. What makes colleges distinctive may be ignored--their role as sources of new ideas and as places where judgments about the quality of intellectual achievement are made routinely. The responsibility of higher education to prepare engaged citizens may come to be measured in only the short run, for example by how much money has been raised in a year or how many students were recruited or graduated in a given time period.

There are lessons for higher education from analogous shifts in the leadership of other sectors of society. The American automobile industry is a prime example. Its management became dominated by people who had not designed or built cars, and those CEO's presided over a long period in which expensive, unreliable, and energy-consuming vehicles persisted long after foreign competitors had improved their products. It is no coincidence that in this period the brightest college graduates often chose careers in law, medicine, or investment banking over what had once been a core component of the American economy.

Within higher education, we can see a similar pattern in the leadership of schools of education. As the Education Schools Project, a research group, reported a few years ago, the faculties of many of the most prestigious schools of education today include few recent classroom teachers and rarely emphasize the preparation of new teachers. The research that those education schools foster--and the resulting grand schemes for fixing the public schools--is too often uninformed by reality. When a profession's most prestigious institutions stop preparing newcomers to the field, the remaining institutions that produce large numbers of teachers have a harder time attracting students with top academic records.

What are the lessons from manufacturing corporations and schools of education for the leadership of colleges? Many of the brightest college graduates are--thankfully--still choosing to pursue advanced degrees that lead to faculty positions. Some of those faculty members will eventually become deans and presidents. But faculty positions are shrinking in number, and many would-be scholars are therefore opting for careers with more promise. Among those who are faculty members, few efforts have been made to encourage potential leaders to serve in roles where they could learn more about administration. Service as a department chair or as an assistant dean is seen as an additional chore, to be rotated among reluctant department colleagues.

We need to ensure that the future generation of higher-education leaders understands the core values of higher education--the importance of ideas, the pursuit of truth, candor in judging

quality, and the relationship of learning to democracy--that come from direct experience in the heart of the enterprise. As a start:

- * Chief academic officers need professional-development opportunities to gain experience in nonacademic areas, which will help them to become viable candidates for presidencies and to begin their new roles. One approach is to establish specific programs. For example, together with the American Academic Leadership Institute, the Council of Independent Colleges recently set up the Senior Leadership Academy--a series of seminars for midlevel administrators in higher education who aspire to senior positions.

- * Faculty members with the potential to serve effectively as department chairs or assistant deans need both encouragement to view such roles as opportunities for professional growth and support in the face of narrow-minded colleagues who regard any administrative assignment as a fall from grace.

- * Presidents should take seriously their role as mentors of talented young administrators and faculty members, underscoring the intellectual stimulation and professional satisfaction of the presidency. When criticized for bad decisions or overly generous compensation, presidents should not defend themselves by emphasizing how difficult and unpleasant their office is, but instead point to its complexity and satisfactions. Observers who bemoan the paucity of public intellectuals among college presidents rarely note the intellectual challenges inherent in the president's role. It's up to the people who fill those positions to make the point.

- * Boards of trustees should resist the assumption, however instinctive, that a person who has had mainly academic experience is incapable of solving the college's problems, especially financial problems.

- * Search consultants should be willing to promote nontraditional candidates from both inside and outside the academy, but should also remember that the best candidates, however reluctant, are likely to be found among those with extensive academic experience.

What will happen if we fail to act before we reach the tipping point? Our colleges will probably become like other institutions in which management for efficient production dominates, while administrators and faculty members will lose focus on the quality and the content of education.

Higher education has been urged by national policy leaders to increase the number of high-quality college graduates. We can do so only if colleges are led by talented individuals--those who understand the core enterprise.

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