



RENEWAL AND PROGRESS

Strengthening Higher Education
Leadership in a Time of Rapid Change

FULL REPORT

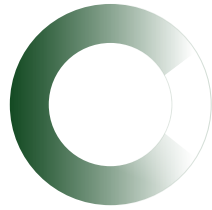
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A REPORT BY THE ASPEN INSTITUTE TASK FORCE ON THE
FUTURE OF THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Higher Education and the Strength of the College Presidency

The original vision for higher education in the United States was that it would not just benefit individuals but be vital to the development and maintenance of a healthy republic. For centuries, colleges and universities have contributed enormously to the establishment and sustenance of American democracy, as well as a robust, diversified economy. The United States' leadership role in revolutions in industry, science, agriculture, public education, arts and culture, technology, management, and a host of other arenas has benefited from the research and talent produced by universities and colleges.

As important as higher education is to the nation, the sector is facing significant challenges. In recent years, demographic, economic, technological, and political changes have accelerated, changing the context within which colleges and universities operate. And while the value of a college degree has never been greater, students and families are increasingly worried about the price of a college education, and a broader set of stakeholders question whether colleges can or will adequately control costs. Declining state investments and escalating tuition have forced colleges to make politically complicated decisions about funding priorities and lead creative efforts to address financial shortfalls.

While the number of college students from backgrounds historically underrepresented in higher education has increased, it is clear that access to quality higher education is still inequitable and that outcomes continue to fall short for many of those students. Growing diversity in the student body has been accompanied by questions about faculty and staff diversity. As political divisions within the United States seem to be deepening, tensions are growing between free speech within the academy and respect for inclusivity and civility on campus.

In light of these challenges, the demands of the college presidency are more complex than ever.

As changing public perception collides with the fast-approaching, long-term demographic and economic headwinds, college presidents must lead the charge to:

- Ensure equitable access, opportunity, and success for students of all backgrounds;
- Balance commitment to quality learning experiences, financial sustainability, affordability, research and knowledge creation, and local and national economic development goals, while relying less on traditional sources of support; and,
- Preserve the authenticity and communicate the value of higher education as both a private and public good during a time of increasing public skepticism.

THE NEXT GENERATION OF COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

To succeed, college and university leaders will need a skillset that is both deeper and broader than ever before. They must be able to lead courageous conversations within their institutions about improved models of teaching and learning, provide a strong vision for fiscal sustainability, take a multifaceted approach to diversity and inclusion, monitor and ensure that students and faculty are secure in their ability to search for truth through disciplined inquiry, and aspire unwaveringly to better student outcomes. Different fiscal planning, budgeting, and revenue-raising capacities are needed, given shifting levels of public support and the proliferation of new educational delivery models. The growth of

social media necessitates new communication skills and greater sophistication in public relations. And accelerated changes in technological innovation, labor market conditions, and numerous other areas that influence college and university operations require that presidents be adept at leading organizational change.

As in the past, presidents must be able to communicate the distinct value of their institutions to a broad range of audiences. Making the case has long required both distinguishing an institution's value to students within a competitive higher education marketplace and championing the institution's value to the public good, in producing a more engaged and educated citizenry and in contributing to economic and social vitality. But changes in public support and perception make conveying that value proposition more complex than ever before. Presidents increasingly need to join with others—including leaders in K-12 education, government, community-based organizations, industry, and other sectors—to demonstrate how they can act together to educate the citizenry and produce knowledge that helps to address significant regional and global challenges.

The ability of higher education to flourish will require an expanded and more diverse pool of talented individuals who aspire to and are prepared for the college presidency. Developing and supporting these new leaders is urgent; at a time when thoughtful leadership is more consequential than ever, three trends suggest the need for immediate action:

- Enormous turnover of college presidents and senior leaders resulting from a wave of retirements;
- A shrinking pool of individuals interested in the presidency who hold positions that traditionally precede the presidency; and
- Inadequate systems for preparing diverse and non-traditional candidates for the presidency.

Stakeholders—including college presidents, national associations, and boards of trustees—must be willing to invest in the college presidency to ensure that a healthy supply of talent can be identified, cultivated, and

supported, lest they leave higher education incapable of delivering quality in the face of demographic, political, and economic pressures.

Against this backdrop, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program convened a *Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency* to examine what will be needed to strengthen the presidency in the coming decades and to identify concrete and actionable areas of focus for doing so. Three major questions informed their work:

- What *enduring* qualities and conditions are critical to the efficacy of future college presidents?
- What *new* qualities and conditions will be required for effectiveness in the future?
- In light of these qualities and conditions, what needs to be done to strengthen the college presidency?

The following summarizes key findings and recommendations of the Task Force that are spelled out in greater detail in the full report.

FOCUS AREA 1: Expand and improve professional development and peer learning opportunities for new and veteran presidents. Regardless of the breadth of professional experience one has prior to entering a presidency, few enter the role fully prepared for its complexities. While programs to prepare college presidents are important, more should be done to ensure that presidents can learn effectively on the job. Greater attention to intentional onboarding and increased continuing professional development opportunities can equip college presidents with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate and adapt to the diverse and evolving needs of their institutions. Specifically:

- Because the initial year sets much of the tone for an entire presidency, every president, in consultation with their board and senior leadership team, should establish a *first-year induction plan* to provide structured opportunities to learn about their institution, in part through extensive engagement with internal and external stakeholders.

- To provide more opportunities for presidents to share effective leadership practices throughout their tenure—especially given the rapidly changing context in which they operate—national associations and nonprofit organizations should develop *additional learning opportunities for presidents and expand existing ones*, with an emphasis on developing support networks and creating structured, protected venues for peer learning in emerging areas of importance, such as technology and new modes of communication.

FOCUS AREA 2: Provide boards greater and more integrated assistance to set institutional goals and to hire, support, and work with presidents.

When boards of trustees lack a full understanding of the role of the college president and the changing nature of higher education, they may be underprepared to help set institutional direction and identify and support highly effective presidents. The development of proactive and consistent coaching for boards, as well as opportunities for trustee education about national trends implicating colleges' and universities' evolving role and circumstances, can better inform their decision-making and their partnerships with current and future college presidents. Specifically:

- National associations, nonprofit organizations, and consulting firms with a mission of supporting effective leadership should offer *enhanced services* to assist trustees in setting goals for the college that are grounded in an understanding of the institutional and national contexts, hiring presidents equipped to help achieve those goals, and providing support to new presidents during the first-year transition and beyond.
- Those who provide services to boards should better integrate assistance in the areas of coaching and setting institutional goals, searching for and hiring presidents, and ensuring strong presidential induction and transition processes.

FOCUS AREA 3: Advance new and expanded ways to identify and develop a diverse presidential talent pool.

The traditional academic pathway to the presidency includes too few senior leaders who aspire to the college presidency, and too few women and people of color.

Outside that traditional pathway, moreover, there are few opportunities for nontraditional candidates to be identified and adequately acclimated to the academic culture prior to assuming a presidency. The significant impending turnover presents an opportunity for higher education leaders and other stakeholders to be more intentional about long-term succession planning. Specifically:

- To expand and diversify the talent pool, *all presidents should be encouraged to identify and mentor two to three exceptional individuals* from the faculty and staff within their institution, with a focus on encouraging women and people of color to aspire to and prepare for the presidency. Moreover, states, systems, and consortia of colleges should develop additional leadership programs to expand the pipeline.
- Filling the vacuum of impending retirements may necessitate expanding the pool of potential presidents beyond traditional academic candidates. *Associations and other national nonprofit organizations should build programs to match nontraditional candidates to institutions* and provide intensive acclimation experiences—such as service on higher education boards and intensive opportunities to understand the campus culture—coupled with leadership development opportunities to help them understand academic cultures and systems of governance.

The recommendations in this report will require the commitment and cooperation of many actors dedicated to ensuring that the next generation of college presidents can effectively advance the financial health of their institutions and the mission and opportunity higher education provides. While broad in scope, the recommendations provide a robust foundation on which those of us dedicated to the enduring success of higher education—sitting presidents, boards of trustees, search consultants, and higher education associations—can work together to organize and innovate highly effective practice. The Task Force is optimistic about the opportunities. But given the current and future demographic, economic, and social challenges facing higher education at a time of rapid presidential turnover, we must act with urgency to chart a path forward.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

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Today's and tomorrow's presidents need skills that weren't necessarily required in the past. Higher education's history has been characterized by an extended period of institution-building, with leaders engaged in a kind of stewardship that focused primarily on developing resources to underwrite a mission that was largely unquestioned. Now presidents must not only commit to that mission and generate the resources to support it, but also address a host of new and complex challenges.

The original vision for public higher education in the United States, reflected in Jefferson's founding of the University of Virginia and subsequent public investments in public land grant institutions and community colleges, was that higher education was vital not only to the social and economic well-being of individuals but also to maintaining a healthy republic. Advanced learning and knowledge development were envisioned as essential to cultivating a citizenry capable of self-government and to building an economy driven by entrepreneurial spirit. *Higher education was to be a cornerstone of the nation, a source of new vitality in the arts, sciences, law, education, and other fields.*

Over the generations since the founding of the first American colleges and universities, higher education institutions have contributed enormously to the establishment of the first successful liberal democracy in the modern era, as well as a robust, diversified economy. The United States' leadership role in revolutions in industry, science, agriculture, public education, arts and culture, technology, management, and a host of other arenas derives from the research and talent produced by universities and colleges.

INCREASING PUBLIC CONCERNS ABOUT COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

Notwithstanding this remarkable heritage, higher education today as a public good is being called into question. Despite clear evidence that a college degree has greater value than ever before—in terms of increased earnings as well as an array of other personal, family, and societal benefits—increasing numbers of Americans are, in the face of rising costs, questioning whether college is affordable and a good investment.¹

Today, much of the public dialogue about higher education presumes that its value is primarily to private individuals. Discussions about the importance of the higher education enterprise to the larger society—including the value of the liberal arts and of original inquiry into important social and scientific issues—have been largely absent from the public debate. Even recent proposals to make college free (or debt-free) are largely framed as ways of alleviating the economic burden on students and families rather than expanding the public benefits that flow to communities and the nation from an educated populace.

Thus, each of the value propositions upon which our systems of higher education were built is under strain: the concept of higher education as an imperative public good and as an affordable stepping stone to personal success. In order to ensure that colleges and universities achieve the mission of educational opportunity and excellence, college presidents must be prepared to reassert these value propositions across multiple constituencies and ensure that their institutions deliver that value.

¹ Public Agenda, *Public Opinion on Higher Education* (2016). <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-opinion-higher-education-2016>

A RAPIDLY CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

The financial situation of colleges and universities has grown increasingly strained.² As state subsidies to institutions have declined, competition for enrollment has increased. Constrained revenue streams mean that presidents need to be more knowledgeable about finances and work more closely than ever before with their chief financial and advancement officers. Today's presidents must make politically complicated decisions about priorities and lead creative efforts to address financial shortfalls without harming the institution and the quality of education it provides students.³ At the same time, college presidents face mounting pressure to generate substantial and much-needed external funding to balance the annual operating budget, build the endowment, and secure their colleges' fiscal future.

Presidents are also increasingly tasked with leading their institutions to utilize technology—including online and hybrid courses, modular instruction, automated student advising systems, and predictive analytic software—and to create cost savings, educate more students, and increase efficiency. But while technology has transformed aspects of operations in all institutions, higher education as a whole has been slower than other sectors to adopt technology and build the infrastructure necessary to derive efficiencies from its integration into the core functions of the college.

For many colleges and university presidents, cost pressures are coupled with the urgent challenge of ensuring that more students graduate. Changes in the marketplace spurred by technological innovation and globalization require a more highly skilled labor force, which in turn means that greater numbers of college-aged and adult students must enroll in and complete college. Policymakers, philanthropies, and others are pushing colleges to improve completion rates—for all students—and measures by which those actors assess college and university performance have changed over the past decade.

² Eugene P. Trani and Robert D. Holsworth, *The Indispensable University: Higher Education, Economic Development, and the Knowledge Economy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

³ Trani and Holsworth, 2010.

Other pressing issues confronting today's college presidents include escalating tensions among freedom of speech, academic freedom, and respect for inclusivity and civility on campus; pressures to lower or freeze tuition in the face of student debt that now exceeds the total national credit card debt; responding to campus sexual assault; and strained race relations and incidents of racial violence.

GROWING INEQUALITY

This rapidly changing environment and set of expectations come at a time of massive demographic and economic change. Gaps in wealth and income were greatly reduced between the end of World War II and the mid-1970s. Since then, the gaps have increased, with minority populations disproportionately left behind in periods of income and job growth. These troubling trends persist despite the rapidly changing face of the nation's future workforce: Students of color already account for more than half of all K-12 enrollment in U.S. public schools, and by 2024 they will comprise half of high-school graduates.⁴ By 2044, it is projected that people of color will make up the majority of the U.S. population.⁵

Higher education is vital for stemming the tide of growing inequality: Since 1980, the top 10 percent of U.S. earners have seen income growth of nearly 15 percent, while those in the bottom 30 percent have seen a decline of 10 percent or more⁶ — a gap that has become increasingly tied to higher education attainment. In the economic recovery following the recession of 2008, 73 percent of all new jobs have gone to those with a bachelor's degree, and the vast majority of full-time jobs with benefits that pay a living wage have gone to those with at least some postsecondary education.⁷ People of color and from low-income

⁴ William J. Hussar and Tabitha M. Bailey, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2024: 43rd Edition*, National Center for Education Statistics, September 2016.

⁵ Data from PolicyLink and the USC Program for Environment and Regional Equity, *National Equity Atlas*, 2016; <http://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators>

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Anthony P. Carnevale, Tamara Jayasundera, and Artem Gulish, *America's Divided Recovery: College Have and Have-Nots* (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2016).

families are disproportionately underrepresented in higher education, which provides access to those jobs: for example, African American and Latino adults in the United States have rates of college attainment 16 and 24 percentage points lower, respectively, than white adults.⁸

This earnings gap has its roots in a stubborn academic opportunity and achievement gap. People of color have been historically underserved by higher education not only in terms of access but also opportunities to excel within institutions and after graduation. Lower-income and minority students are significantly underrepresented in colleges and universities with the highest graduation rates, and overall the disparity in educational attainment among different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups is widening.⁹ And it remains true that the best predictor of both access and outcomes in higher education is family income. College presidents must lead their institutions to increase access to and completion of credentials among diverse student groups—something many colleges and universities are making strides towards but which few have accomplished at scale.

EVOLVING COMPLEXITIES IN THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

As the environment within which American colleges exist has changed over time, so has the role of the college president. In colonial colleges, presidents had responsibility for almost all administrative affairs—they were fundraisers, registrars, bursars, and librarians, and spent considerable time managing student disciplinary issues. As the enterprise evolved, administrators took over many of those day-to-day duties, while presidents became more focused on academics, both teaching and research. By the early

1900s, presidents were thus often selected from among the faculty, first among equals, focused on faculty support.

As higher education expanded after World War II, the role of the president became more complex, and more external-facing. Presidents needed to work with an ever-growing group of stakeholders: policymakers, who were now putting considerable money into higher education; local communities, which were seeing campuses expand; faculty, who wanted to maintain academic priorities in a time of change; alumni, who expected attention to their individual demands and preservation of existing quality; and students, who demanded their voices be heard about curriculum and campus life.¹⁰

Today, college presidents are still focused on a variety of complicated concerns. They are still pulled into local politics. They are still tasked with being entrepreneurial and partnering with increasing numbers of stakeholders. Just like colonial college presidents, they must deal with highly unpredictable funding and other financial and bureaucratic complexities.¹¹ But many of these challenges have intensified in recent years, and will continue to do so. And altogether new complications, borne of demographic, economic, communications, and other societal changes, have emerged, challenging presidents and their institutions even further. Policymakers are emphasizing access, affordability and student success within a complex regulatory environment; campus boards emphasize prestige, rankings, and financial growth and stability; faculty prioritize academic quality, support for the teaching and research mission, and protection from external forces that may threaten historic goals; and business leaders demand the supply of highly-skilled work-ready graduates.

⁸ Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation* (2016)

⁹ From 1995 to 2015, the gap between White and Black 25- to 29-year-olds who had attained a bachelor's or higher degree widened from 13 to 22 percentage points, and the gap between White and Hispanic 25- to 29-year-olds who had attained a bachelor's or higher degree widened from 20 to 27 percentage points. U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), Annual Social and Economic Supplement, selected years, 1995–2015. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2015*, table 104.20.

¹⁰ On this shift, see Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Harvard University Press, 1963).

¹¹ John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins, 2004) and Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (St. Martin's Press, 1994).

THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY OF RISING LEADERSHIP VACANCIES

These conceptual and practical challenges combine to make the job of leading a college harder than ever—at a time when the sector is about to experience massive turnover, among both presidents and other senior administrators. The average age of college and university presidents has risen from 52 to 61 in just two decades, and the age of other top higher education leaders is increasing as well.¹² Given limited succession planning among colleges, impending retirements will leave a vacuum of rising leaders in positions that have historically fed into the presidency. In what may be the sector with the highest turnover, 80 percent of current sitting community college CEOs expect to retire in the next decade.¹³

There is a perception that the increasing demands of the position have made the presidency less desirable than in the past.¹⁴ So it may come as no surprise that fewer candidates are applying or interested, particularly among provosts—traditionally the most common candidates.¹⁵ Less than one in four chief academic officers at small and mid-sized colleges intend to ever seek a presidential appointment.¹⁶

This turnover both poses a risk and offers an opportunity. At present, there are not adequate systems in place to recruit and prepare a cohort of exceptional future leaders. If beginning today, however, focused and thoughtful investments are made in expanding the pool of potential leaders and developing new mechanisms to provide the right preparation and ongoing support, a renaissance of leadership in higher education could be accomplished. This would require reaching both within and outside the academy for creative pioneers, growing cohorts of presidents who are inclusive, reflect

the diversity of our country and the people colleges serve, and focus on impact for the public good while at the same time ensuring that their students benefit and institutions thrive.

THE NEXT GENERATION OF COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

The first step to building such a cohort is to understand that many of the leadership characteristics that have made college and university presidents successful for the past 50 years may not be those that enable the institutions to thrive in the future. Yesterday's effective presidents raised billions of dollars, built buildings, recruited faculty, and developed new schools, programs, and enterprises. These things still matter. But tomorrow's effective presidents will also create opportunities for and often personally lead deep and courageous conversations within the institution toward new models of teaching and learning, new configurations of the academic workforce, new visions for fiscal sustainability, new approaches to diversity, inclusion and equity, and new aspirations for student outcomes that extend through and beyond graduation. They will collaborate with other educational and economic institutions to provide the interlocking services needed by today's mobile students and serve as engines of innovation, social mobility, talent development, and democratic practice required by society.

Presidents of the future may require a set of skills pioneered in other enterprises to achieve needed organizational and community change, to use new technologies to create value for the students and communities they serve, not just the institutions and their bureaucracies, and to articulate a new and compelling vision to the public whose support they will require. New skills must also respond to the fast-moving evolution of the context in which colleges and universities operate. Communications skills must evolve with new forms and changing uses of social media. Fiscal planning, budgeting, and revenue-raising capacities must evolve with shifts in revenue streams. And decision-making and governance processes that uphold the research mission must evolve with the pace of change in society as a whole.

¹² Bryan Cook and Young Kim, *The American College President 2012* (American Council on Education, 2012).

¹³ Kent A. Phillipe, *AACC CEO Survey: CEO Compensation 2015* (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016).

¹⁴ Harold V. Hartley III and Eric E. Godin, *A Study of Career Patterns of the Presidents of Independent Colleges and Universities* (Council of Independent Colleges, 2009).

¹⁵ Cook and Kim, 2012

¹⁶ Hartley and Godin, 2009

Above all, the next generation of presidents needs the skills to lead and manage change effectively.¹⁷ They must work with multiple campus constituencies to develop a compelling vision of their institution's distinctive value and possess the strong communication skills needed to articulate that value and engage constituencies in fleshing out details and embracing the vision. They must be versed in the language of business, philanthropy, and government as well as the language of the academy, so they can translate the institution's vision and direction for different stakeholders.¹⁸ While good communication has long been a skill needed of presidents, many studies have found that framing of vision and priorities is much more important in today's context. Given the norms of shared governance, presidents must be able to appeal to the underlying passions of faculty and staff and be able to understand and work through – or work to change – slow-moving systems.¹⁹ As change becomes the norm, leaders who can frame and help campus constituents define and enact reforms are essential. They also must be facile with data analysis, so that they focus on completion, research productivity, and other bottom-line goals while at the same time valuing the core principles of the academy so that stakeholders are engaged in meeting those goals as well.

One overarching aspect of the current landscape is the unpredictability of today's higher education environment.²⁰ Given the pressure to modernize rapidly given technological and other tumultuous changes, various commentators have noted that it will be more important than ever that college presidents be able to learn and adapt, as well as to inspire and lead learning

among faculty and staff.²¹ Embracing creativity and innovation is one way presidents can develop solutions to current problems, but all such efforts must be undergirded by systems thinking: ensuring that new or bold ideas take into consideration the many aspects of higher education that entail a vast and complex ecology.²² In past studies of effective college presidents, systems thinking has focused on the internal college environment. Now the notion of "system" must include a much broader set of actors and mechanisms. For example, success for first-generation college students happens in a complex ecology that includes K-12 education, community and social agencies, business, social policy, parents, neighborhoods, and numerous on-campus programs and supports. Presidents need to be aware of and help to connect component parts of that ecology to help students.

¹⁷ On the new skills needed in a new environment, see Goldie Blumenstyk, *American Higher Education in Crisis?: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2014), and Desna L. Wallin, ed., *Leadership in an Era of Change: New Directions for Community Colleges*, Vol. 208 (John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

¹⁸ Pamela L. Eddy "Leaders as Linchpins for Framing Meaning," *Community College Review*, 37(4), April 2010, 313-332.

¹⁹ Adrianna Kezar, *How Colleges Change: Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change* (Routledge, 2013).

²⁰ Wallin, 2010.

²¹ On the intense pressure on presidents to modernize, see Barry Glassner and Morton Schapiro, "College Presidents: Bruised, Battered, and Loving It," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 11, 2013. On how the many challenges facing colleges make it more important than ever for presidents to be adaptable and responsive, see B. Jeanne Bonner, *Leading The Charge: A Multiple Case Study of Presidential Perceptions of Essential Leadership Characteristics for the 21st Century Community College* (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, July 2013).

²² John Jacob Gardiner, "Building Leadership Teams: A Comprehensive Study of America's College and University Presidents, 1988-2003," *Leadership Review*, Vol. 6, Fall 2006, 131-143.

**THE TASK FORCE:
UNDERSTANDING THE
FUTURE OF THE COLLEGE
PRESIDENCY**

THE TASK FORCE: UNDERSTANDING THE FUTURE OF THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

College and university presidents must ensure that their institutions can meet public purposes in the context of a competitive marketplace and an increasingly skeptical public. Arguably, no one is better positioned to understand the unique strengths and weaknesses of their organizations, to lead processes that help the institutions reframe their purposes for the future, and to align the work of the institutions for the impact they seek to have in society and through their students. But for this to happen at scale, we need an increased sense of urgency that a new generation of highly effective leaders is necessary, as well as new processes and committed leaders to help identify and develop those emerging leaders.

Over the past year, the Aspen Institute convened a Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency. This group consisted of 35 college and university presidents across four sectors of higher education (community colleges, liberal arts colleges, research universities, and regional public universities) tasked with discerning whether our hypothesis—that presidents of the future need a fundamentally new set of leadership skills and qualities—is correct and, if so, what those new skills and qualities are and how they can be identified and developed.

The following are questions that have informed the work of the Task Force as it set out to wrestle with the future of the presidency and form recommendations about how to prepare for that future.

- What *enduring* qualities and conditions are critical to the efficacy of future college presidents?
- What *new* qualities and conditions will be required for effectiveness in the future?
- In light of these qualities and conditions, what needs to be done to strengthen the college presidency?

Through extensive individual and group conversations, a series of themes, ideas, and tentative conclusions emerged. Those concepts were tested and refined in five focus groups, each lasting between 90 and 120 minutes, with academic deans, liberal arts faculty, presidential search consultants, student leaders, and trustees of colleges and universities.

What surfaced from these conversations was quite simple—to strengthen the college presidency to lead higher education through rapid change, we must reinforce preparation for the traditional duties and responsibilities to uphold the central tenets of higher education, season the next generation of leadership for new and emerging challenges associated with our shifting social and economic realities, and hardwire flexibility in our leadership ecosystem, so that it can respond and adapt quickly to weather changes yet unforeseen.

DEFINING THE CHALLENGE: THE EVOLVING JOB DESCRIPTION OF THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

Enduring Competencies

- ✓ Develop a vision and long-term strategic direction
- ✓ Lead and navigate complex shared governance systems
- ✓ Communicate vision and build consensus across multiple constituencies
- ✓ Deliver equitable access
- ✓ Secure strong budgets, enrollments, and resources
- ✓ Ensure quality teaching and knowledge development through research
- ✓ Understand how to manage the complexities of athletics, real estate, medical centers, and other auxiliary enterprises
- ✓ Articulate the value of their institutions
- ✓ Manage crises

Capacities to Respond to New & Emerging Challenges

- ❑ Foster thoughtful discourse amid increasingly polarized cultural and political climate
- ❑ Respond to swift contextual changes, accelerate decision-making in a shared governance context
- ❑ Lead development of new teaching, program, and advising models to respond to evolving technology and student demographics
- ❑ Ensure equitable outcomes
- ❑ Identify and develop nontraditional partnerships and resource streams
- ❑ Re-envision models of research, knowledge development, and engagement to respond to regional and global challenges
- ❑ Integrate technology and big data to achieve efficiencies while maintaining quality education
- ❑ Articulate the value of the institution as part of an ecosystem advancing individual and societal goals
- ❑ Manage public relations in the era of social media

The Presidency of Tomorrow and Beyond: A Model for Building a Leadership Ecosystem Adaptive to Rapid Change

1. Expand and improve transition planning, professional development, and peer learning opportunities for new and veteran presidents.
2. Provide boards greater and more integrated assistance to hire, support, and work with presidents who will act not just as institutional stewards but also as forward-thinking educational leaders in a changing environment.
3. Advance new and expanded ways to identify and develop a diverse presidential talent pool.

To set the presidency on the path to this ideal, the report that follows outlines practical near- and long-term improvements in three key focus areas: expanding high-quality learning opportunities for newly chosen and sitting presidents; integrating and enhancing board services to support effective presidential leadership; and expanding, diversifying and strengthening the pipeline of future presidents.

The premise of this report is that—given substantial turnover in the college presidency, rapid demographic

and technological change, accountability pressures, and concerns about the cost of a college education at a time when it has never been more valuable—significant changes will be needed to enable college and university presidents to not just sustain institutions but help higher education be responsive to and shape American society. The findings and recommendations of this report offer hope and identify specific opportunities for addressing these challenges.

**FINDINGS OF THE
TASK FORCE ON
THE FUTURE OF THE
COLLEGE PRESIDENCY**

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Strengthening the College Presidency: Establishing the Foundations for Success

Conversations with presidents for this report covered a wide range of subjects, including the purposes of higher education, processes for board engagement, relationships between presidents and faculty, new research on teaching and learning, the role for in-person education as acquisition of information becomes more broadly available (and often free), the needs of students as demographics change, and race relations. Across these discussions, the Task Force sought to distill the most pressing needs to identify recommendations that are *critical* and *actionable* for helping presidents be effective.

In the end, the Task Force concluded that professional development for presidents, services available to boards, and processes for developing the next generation of leaders urgently need to be expanded and improved, especially in light of rapid turnover in the college presidency. To be clear, important work is being done in each area, often at a high level of quality. But the complex and changing context in which colleges and universities operate, educate students, and conduct research has not been matched by an evolution in these three areas.

To address this challenge, the Task Force identified specific ideas in three focus areas to identify and cultivate innovation and best practice to advance the college presidency across all sectors of higher education.

Focus Area 1: Expanding and improving transition planning, professional development, and peer learning opportunities for new and veteran presidents. Though many current presidential fellowships and institutes have tremendous

value, there are simply too few opportunities—due to limited numbers of programs and slots in existing programs—to meet the need for targeted professional learning opportunities for presidents in the future, especially given the growing complexity of the role and required skillset. During their first year, all presidents need structured transition plans that enable them to learn with support from their boards and senior teams. Even experienced presidents are facing new challenges that require additional high-quality opportunities to learn from one another and relevant experts—in a private setting—about critical facets of their jobs and campus challenges.

Focus Area 2. Provide boards greater and more integrated assistance to hire, support, and work with presidents who will act not just as institutional stewards but also as forward-thinking educational leaders in a changing environment. Boards are a critical and under-leveraged partner in identifying, developing, and supporting presidents, especially given the evolving leadership skills and qualities presidents will need in the future. There is a tremendous opportunity to educate trustees about evolving leadership needs and institutional contexts and to expand, reinvent, and integrate the support boards of trustees receive to set college goals, hire presidents, and support them through the first-year transition and beyond.

Focus Area 3. Advancing new and expanded ways to identify and develop a diverse presidential talent pool. The pool of potential presidents must be expanded, diversified, and strengthened to

meet the need for future presidents to lead for impact in a changing environment. Doing so will require resources targeted to the development of strong leaders within and beyond higher education institutions, both in traditional and nontraditional pathways to the presidency, in order to identify and nurture a cohort of talented and diverse individuals who aspire to and are qualified for the job.

By honing in on these three focus areas, a set of critical actors—including sitting presidents and boards of trustees, higher education associations, search firms, and state systems—can advance a college presidency that is prepared for the complexity of the job’s demands, adaptive to the shifting needs of students and families, and steadfast in preserving the central mission of higher education—cultivating an empowered, thoughtful, and engaged society. Within these three focus areas, the Task Force recommends a series of foundational practices that together could expand the ecosystem in which innovation to advance the college presidency can thrive.

FOCUS AREA 1:

Expanding and improving professional development and peer learning opportunities for new and veteran presidents.

- **Presidents, in consultation with their boards and senior leadership teams, should establish a *first-year induction process* to provide structured opportunities to learn from and engage with internal and external stakeholders. National foundations, associations, and nonprofit organizations should play a role in financing, developing, and disseminating best-practice models for this first-year induction process.**

There is consensus among presidents, senior administrators, faculty, and trustees that the initial year of a presidency sets much of the tone for the president’s entire tenure. Given colleges’ growing challenges, building a solid foundation for a president’s tenure is more important than ever. For this reason, we recommend that every president and every board commit to an extended, intentional induction process by which incoming presidents can understand the particular challenges and opportunities associated

with their institution’s internal and external contexts. Some institutions have already developed and enacted such practices; the key is to ensure they are practiced at more institutions with the degree of thoughtfulness needed to set the stage for strong presidencies.

By engaging the board and senior administrative staff in designing a first-year induction process, presidents can ensure that key partners understand and support them in allocating significant time and focus in the first year, and the first semester especially, to deeply learning about the institution, its culture, and the external environment in which it operates. In consultation with the board, provost, and other top administrative staff, the president should lay out a “learning and listening” schedule that allows him or her to become acquainted with the institution’s faculty, students, and staff; the internal decision-making cultures and processes; and the key political actors, nearby educational institutions, alumni, and other constituencies that serve as partners or play a role in institutional support and governance.

This induction process should consider what the new president is going to do and with whom they are going to meet on their first day, first week, first month, and first year. The process should be aligned to the essential roles presidents must play to lead their colleges, which vary by institutional context and type. For example, incoming presidents of national, highly selective colleges and universities may plan less intense engagement with local community colleges and K-12 schools than those leading open-access regional universities, whose students are more likely to come from the community and remain there after graduating. New community college presidents might plan more time with regional employers and four-year college partners, while research university presidents might need to be more connected with organizations that are oriented to setting national research goals or distributing research funding. While each of these areas of focus have relevance for every president, the relative emphasis on each during the induction year should vary based on institutional type and context.

In addition to promoting strong systems to onboard incoming presidents, effective transition plans would respond to another challenge raised during the Task Force’s deliberations. Specifically, as the college

presidency has grown more complex, it has become increasingly difficult for various constituencies to fully understand the scope of the position. The process of developing and enacting a good transition plan can, for example, help faculty leaders understand the legislative and donor relationships presidents must cultivate and help boards understand the multiple constituencies engaged in making campus decisions.

Despite variations by sector, the Task Force noted some elements that should be common to a first-year induction process. Key elements of this model (outlined in the text box beginning on page 16) are:

- Engaging in systematic efforts to listen deeply to faculty, students, and staff, including by showing up in places where they congregate and by holding focus groups.
- Becoming familiar with institutional decision-making processes and culture by attending governance meetings of faculty, staff, and students.
- Establishing a management dashboard containing data on issues related to fiscal matters, research, student demographics, and student success.
- Understanding the evolving national landscape within which higher education institutions operate.
- Engaging partners in the regional educational and employment ecosystem, including leaders within K-12 schools, other higher education institutions, and employers.
- Getting to know political leaders in positions relevant to the financing and regulation of the college or university.
- Developing a president's professional support network of other presidents, trusted friends, and mentors.
- Crafting a plan for the president's emotional and physical well-being.

- Understanding the perspective and priorities of individual board members while reinforcing the president's goals during the transition.

There are contexts in which executing such a comprehensive transition plan in the president's first year will be challenging. A new president at an institution facing substantial fiscal challenges, for example, may need to focus on budgetary and revenue-raising activities to an extent that would constrict his or her capacity to complete all elements of a transition plan in the first year. Even in more stable fiscal circumstances, a new president that lacks a strong and effective senior team may choose to spend substantial time on internal restructuring. Such obstacles should not prevent presidents from developing and completing a transition plan, however, but rather cause consideration of how to thoughtfully extend that plan into a second year.

- **National associations and nonprofit organizations should develop additional ongoing learning opportunities for presidents, with an emphasis on creating structured, protected venues for peer learning and building support networks.**

While structured learning is perhaps most important in the first year, ongoing targeted learning opportunities are vital to allow presidents to continue developing as leaders. Presidents want more opportunities to share effective practices, engage with case studies, brainstorm strategies and solutions, and receive feedback from peers about challenges and tensions.

Presidents on the Task Force discussed new skills president need to address a growing number of complex challenges, including communications skills in an era of social media, the capacity to accelerate decision-making as the pace of change increases, ways to assess technology that can fundamentally alter the academic enterprise, and the ability to understand new student bodies as demographic change accelerates. At the same time, Task Force members noted the need to effectively address ongoing challenges and demands, such as political engagement, fiscal management, faculty engagement, and campus unrest related to racial issues and sexual assault.

The following are topics that emerged as particularly important for ongoing professional learning:

- Engaging and communicating with faculty, staff, and students on a range of issues, including the intersection of teaching practice, advising, and technology use.
- Helping the board understand the president's roles and responsibilities as well as the leadership context in which presidents operate, including shared governance.
- Working with the board to identify key performance indicators through which institutional progress towards goals can be measured and the president's performance can be evaluated.
- Enacting strategies for change leadership and management, including the presidential role in communicating the need for change, establishing shared goals and intended outcomes, and accelerating decision-making processes.
- Understanding how to evaluate and deploy technology-driven changes and interventions – such as digital learning, predictive analytics, technology-supported advising, and tools for strategic finance and budget models – and their intersection with the changing landscape of higher education delivery and credentialing.
- Engaging effectively with and learning from policymakers, donors, policy advocates, and foundations and others to demonstrate the institution's value to regional and state economies and to the resolution of national challenges.
- Assessing the capacity of the senior administrative team to execute against institutional goals and options for restructuring the senior team.

While there are a number of high-quality institutes and fellowships for sitting presidents offered in the field currently, the demands of the presidency now and in the future are so great that many more (and more targeted) opportunities will be needed.

MODEL ONE-YEAR INDUCTION PROCESS FOR NEW COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS

Get to know students, faculty, staff, alumni, and donors

In the first semester, the president should be supported in getting to know faculty, students, and student services at the college. In addition to developing important relationships, presidents can through these meetings begin to understand everyone's perspectives so that, as decisions are made, consensus can be reached and, as needed, resistance can be understood and addressed. The board, provost, and other senior administrators should support the president in conducting the following types of activities:

- Run focus groups with students, faculty, and student services staff, asking what they like and want to change about the college.
- Spend mealtime as often as possible in dining halls, talking with groups of students, and at places where faculty congregate for meals, talking with groups of faculty.
- Visit the library, student support center, testing center, registrar, financial aid offices, and other important offices at busy times early and throughout the semester to observe students' experiences.
- Go to cultural and athletic events, from varsity to intramurals, and make a point of interacting with not just board members and donors but also students, faculty, and staff.
- In the first or second year, consider teaching or co-teaching a class, such as a first-year seminar, or guest lecturing in several courses.
- Engage as a participant in professional development offerings offered to faculty.

In addition, advancement professionals, board members, and (as appropriate) the prior president should support the president in meeting key alumni and donors in the community and, for institutions with a national reach, in cities where alumni and donors are concentrated.

Become familiar with institutional decision-making processes and culture

Within the first few weeks, presidents should be given key information to help them understand the decision-making processes and cultures at their institution, including an organizational chart listing all committees that make decisions at the college and their current membership. The president should attend at least some major committee meetings where decisions are made and *listen* to the conversations. These might include, for example:

- Shared governance bodies (of faculty and staff)
- Student government
- Hiring committees
- Finance/budget and personnel committees
- Curriculum and assessment committees

Develop a management dashboard to guide institutional priority-setting

The provost or other top administrator should be asked to prepare for the president key institutional and student outcome data (disaggregated by race, ethnicity, Pell status, gender, and part-time/full-time status if applicable). While the specific data collected should be appropriate to the institutional context and culture, some data that could be included are:

- Student completion, retention, and transfer rates
- Acceptance rates, yield, and financial aid data (number and percent of students receiving Pell Grants, number and percent receiving institutional

aid and loans, average aid amount and average loan package, and trends in discount rate over the past five years)

- Students' post-graduation success in employment, earnings, and subsequent education
- Five-year trends in enrollment
- Summary of five-year revenue and expenditure trends (including broad allocations)

In addition, the president should consider asking the senior team to prepare an analysis of the institution's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (a "SWOT" analysis).

Within the first semester, the president should convene the senior administrative staff to walk through these analyses, noting where there are surprises, concerns, strengths, and opportunities for improvement. The objective of this meeting should be to begin to explore important indicators of institutional strength and come to some agreement on what measures matter most moving forward. Those can, in turn, be used to jointly develop a dashboard of metrics that convey key information about student success and institutional health. The dashboard should be reevaluated at least once per year.

Understand the evolving national landscape

To understand the demographic, economic, educational, technological, and political contexts within which their institutions operate, presidents should find time in their first year to attend at least one or two major meetings or conferences that are well-attended by presidents that include sessions about which they are least knowledgeable. Forums on the future of higher education, advances in educational technology, preK-12 success, and achieving better and more equitable student outcomes can be readily identified by senior staff and outside peers.

Engage in the community

The specific community constituents that are most relevant to the institution's mission will vary depending on the type of institution, but presidents should within the first semester (and perhaps even between the time of selection and taking office) begin to conduct a scan of the community to understand (1) how the institution is situated within both education and community ecosystems; (2) how the institution contributes to and benefits from those ecosystems; and (3) how altering the institution's engagement with specific community actors could strengthen the institution, the community, and the education students receive. Throughout the first year, presidents should be encouraged to meet with a range of constituencies. While the specifics may vary by institutional type, a list of meetings to consider should include:

- Leaders and key staff of state legislative committees with jurisdiction over higher education.
- Superintendents of school districts that send the most students to the institution (as well as visits to K-12 schools).
- For community college presidents, leaders at the four-year institutions that are the most common destinations for transfer students.
- For four-year college presidents, leaders of regional community colleges, including those that transfer the most students to the institution.
- CEOs of the largest regional employers, chambers of commerce, county or regional workforce development boards, trade union leadership.
- CEOs of nonprofit or government employment and social service agencies (e.g., Goodwill).
- Head of the state education agency and state workforce and economic development agencies or councils.
- Local community leaders, economic development boards, and college access providers or college access networks.

Before each meeting, the president should be provided with key data to help structure the conversation and prepare important questions or points of engagement relevant to each constituent—for example, data on student outcomes after transfer, data on students' labor market participation and outcomes in particular sectors, enrollment data by school district, equity in access relative to the regional and state population, and so on.

Develop a president's professional support network

Throughout the first year, and especially for first-time presidents, the president should be supported in developing a vision of what their presidency will "mean"—what particular goals, values, and aspirations they have for their institutions during and after their presidency. This process should allow the new president to establish a shared understanding with the board about where the president intends to focus attention over the coming years. The process should be carried out both individually and in collaboration with the board. For example, the president should be expected to:

- Meet with each board member separately, listening to their priorities, assessment of governance, and sense of board culture.
- Visit three or four other college presidents with admirable leadership styles and accomplishments.
- Identify at least one mentor from within academia and one from another sector (business, government, health care, etc.) and begin building and solidifying relationships with those mentors. Presidents of institutions with significant athletic programs, medical centers, or urban real estate holdings should consider related competencies when identifying mentors.
- Attend meetings with other presidents with whom he or she can openly share challenges and successes, such as the AASCU, ACE and CIC programs for new presidents and the Harvard New Presidents Seminar.
- Consider retaining a professional coach or organizational development consultants, valuable resources that are often overlooked.

Craft a personal well-being plan

Finally, presidents should use the one-year transition period to plan for the personal demands that accompany the college presidency. The enormous professional complexities of the college presidency demand exceptional physical and emotional endurance, and new presidents are often surprised by the difficulty of attending to personal needs. While this portion of a transition plan will vary based on each president's personal circumstances, elements could include scheduling vacation time during which the president

largely or completely disconnects from work, securing a quiet place away from campus for reflective work (especially for presidents who live in a university-owned home on campus), dedicating regular time to spend with family and friends, and setting health and exercise goals that take into account the number of business trips to be taken and meals eaten away from home. The plan should also, whenever appropriate, include consideration of the role of the president's spouse/partner, whether they are marginally involved or serving actively with a formal appointment.

FOCUS AREA 2:

Provide boards with greater and more integrated assistance to hire, support, and work with presidents to lead institutions to accomplish public purposes and institutional goals in a rapidly changing environment

Boards must join presidents in partnership if colleges and universities are to adapt in ways that enable continuing excellence in education and knowledge development in a changing environment. Given changes in public expectations and support, student demographics, and other essential circumstances in which colleges and universities operate, current systems of board support—while often strong—may not be extensive or integrated enough to enable highly effective board leadership.

College and university board members come from a variety of professional backgrounds, and the diversity of board members' experience can add valuable perspectives to institutional governance, in areas ranging from finance and management to politics and community needs. However, relatively few board members have experience as leaders, administrators, or faculty members at higher education institutions. Accordingly, board members may not enter their jobs with adequate knowledge of the president's role or the institution's culture to provide presidents with constructive feedback and support in light of the wide array of responsibilities presidents hold.

As the college presidency has grown more complex, it has become increasingly important that boards of trustees understand that complexity and the context in which presidents work so they both fulfill their fiduciary duties and also position their presidents and institutions for future success. Yet board members often receive little or no training prior to assuming their board position and, once in office, have relatively few opportunities for training, feedback, evaluation, coaching, or other support. Both search firms and board members in Task Force focus groups suggested that boards would benefit from a greater understanding of emerging challenges in higher education and what that means for the complexity of the president's role in fulfilling his or her institution's mission.

Several associations and other organizations offer valuable resources for trustees, and a few examples exist of training for boards specifically focused on helping them understand the challenges of institutional change needed to improve student success outcomes and address fiscal challenges. Three notable examples are the Improving Board Oversight of Student Learning initiative from the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges; the Governance Institute for Student Success from the Association of Community College Trustees; and a series of publications developed by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. Given the immense challenge of hiring and supporting a new generation of higher education leaders, board members need more resources and opportunities.

- **National associations, nonprofit organizations, and private consultants with a mission of supporting effective leadership should offer enhanced and more integrated board tools and services across a long-term process of succession planning, search consulting, and president support and evaluation.**

After consulting a selection of well-regarded individuals who provide board support services, it is clear that the current demand for and supply of board services is skewed towards the presidential search process. While selecting an effective president is clearly among a board’s most important responsibilities, identifying a good match for the institution can depend on the board’s ability to identify and articulate the institution’s goals and understand those goals in the context of the institution’s campus, community, political, and national higher education contexts. Put another way, when presidencies fail, reasons can often be traced back to the failure of boards to select presidents with such goals and contexts in mind.

When presidential searches begin, boards have often not done the hard work of setting goals and understanding institutional contexts. Given the urgency of filling the position, it is virtually impossible for boards to fill such gaps prior to selecting a president. As a result, boards are not only hamstrung in their abilities to select candidates most capable of leading their institutions, but may be inadequately prepared to understand the kinds of support their presidents may need during the critical first-year transition and beyond in light of the particular institutional goals they have set and the vision the president holds.

Ideally, to empower boards to strengthen the college presidency, boards should receive support in the following areas:

- Coaching to facilitate regular conversations about institutional mission and goals and the connection of those goals to evaluation of the president.
- Training on how to execute an executive search, ideally delivered long before presidential transitions take place.
-

- Support for developing transition plans for new presidents as well as plans for evaluating progress towards the institution’s goals and president’s performance.

While some of these resources require further development, many are already available at a high level of quality but appear to be underutilized by boards of trustees. This is likely due to both a lack of current demand—boards not seeking coaching, transition, and evaluation services—and inadequate supply owing to the high level of expertise and experience required to deliver these services with quality at scale. Expanding these services will require the engagement of more individuals with knowledge of the higher education context and governance as well as qualities needed for effective coaching, including the capacity to listen, synthesize ideas, understand root causes of problems, and thoughtfully facilitate changes in board behavior.

Even when boards take advantage of existing services, they are generally difficult to integrate with one another. Board coaching tends to be provided distinctly and separately from the presidential hiring training, which in turn is usually delivered separately from transition planning services for new presidents. All of these services are aimed at the same audience and share substantially overlapping goals. Board coaching is often used to help ensure that boards are setting policy and acting in accordance with institutional goals—related to, for example, student retention and graduation rates, diversity of student bodies and equitable outcomes, and costs and other financial measures. Board deliberations on institutional priorities ought to inform the evaluation of sitting presidents and, during moment of transition, goals for selecting the next president, but search firms and board coaches often don’t work closely with one another. Similarly, what is learned during the presidential selection process should inform the specific goals a new president establishes for his or her first-year transition plan, but few search firms offer transition services, instead handing off the process to other professionals. Integration across these services could increase the chances for presidents to succeed by better connecting the board’s setting of institutional

²³ A few search firms, including AGBSearch, offer transition services to boards for whom they provide search services,

goals and understanding of institutional culture with priorities during presidential hiring and first-year transitions.²³

Providing additional board services and further integrating them will require action by many higher education actors. Some activity will be required to increase demand for such services. In public higher education contexts, state systems and governors' offices may wish to support the development of additional board education and coaching opportunities. Philanthropic foundations could invest in new or expanded services of this sort, providing the incentive for those who may recognize the need for additional board services but have not chosen to engage due to the upfront investment costs associated with starting a new endeavor. On the supply side of the equation, trustee or institutional associations that already provide valuable programs may expand their offerings, which could be financed by institutions if intentional efforts have been made to build demand. It is also likely that new actors will be needed to meet the sectoral need, some of which may operate as for-profit consultancies and others as nonprofit organizations.

- **A First Look at an Enhanced, Integrated System of Board and Leadership Support**

We recommend the development of integrated coaching, search, and transition services to ensure that boards can better fulfill the breadth of their responsibilities, in particular as they relate to the presidency. For this set of services to achieve their intended purposes, boards must be willing to invest significantly more time and resources to their own development and support. Simply put, boards must change how they operate if higher education institutions are to fulfill their public purposes while remaining fiscally strong in a rapidly changing environment. The Task Force recommends the following framework as a starting point.

BOARD COACHING

The Task Force recommends that every board institute a regular review (e.g., every three to five years) of their institutions' mission and goals, assessing how well their institutions are meeting those goals, and then engage

in a process of reaffirming, modifying, or substantially altering those goals. The conclusions from this process should be reflected in regular board review of progress towards the goals set – at each board meeting or, at the very least, annually – and course correction when necessary. The conclusions should also inform the evaluation process for the sitting president and, when the time comes, priorities for selecting a new one.

Sitting presidents should be central to these conversations. Not only are they best positioned to understand the institution's strengths and challenges, but they will be required to enact the goals set forth and, ideally, will be assessed against their accomplishment. During this process, boards should—with expert help from coaches—look to future challenges and opportunities the institution is likely to face to ensure that it considers presidential qualities that will be needed to address challenges and opportunities in the long term, not just immediate ones.

At least two barriers must be overcome for such a standard to be established. First, boards that are satisfied with the current direction of their institution and performance of their president must nonetheless come to understand the value of conducting a three-to-five-year review. Because the context in which colleges and universities operate is rapidly changing, rigorously conducting such a review will be helpful even for institutions that appear well-positioned. Trustee associations and others that comment and provide trustees essential guidance on governance are particularly well-suited to set the tone for such a standard to be set. Second, boards will generally benefit from expert coaching or facilitation by a professional who has the capacity and knowledge to help the board honestly assess the strengths and challenges of their institution. Among other benefits, such professionals can ensure that conclusions drawn are documented clearly, enabling the cohesion of future deliberations even as board composition changes. During times of presidential transition, it will be important that search firms be engaged in this process to promote continuity between board deliberations about institutional goals and the presidential search.

PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH TRAINING

While some board members may have experience with executive searches in other sectors, college presidential selection processes are different. While the decision ultimately rests with the board (or chancellors in centralized systems), multiple constituencies play a role in the decision, all of whom may have differing visions of what's needed in the next president. The complexity of these hiring processes creates challenges for communication and alignment between interests and priorities. A lack of intentional communication across stakeholders during the process can result in a mismatch between the president hired, a board's sense of institutional priorities, and the campus culture, adding to the already significant challenges of presidential leadership.

Though board members generally value the services of search consultants immensely, they can also be concerned about overreliance on the consultants' expertise without themselves fully understanding what they could do during the search process to maximize the chances that they could identify, assess, and hire the best president available in light of their institution's specific goals and circumstances. Search consultants themselves expressed concern that boards often fail to fully understand the presidential role or the institutional context, and lamented the limited amount of time available during the search process to bring them up to speed. And presidents express concern that search firms at times lack the time needed, and also an incentive, to educate the board about the institutional context so that searches consistently yielded a good presidential match.

Boards would benefit from facilitated conversations, built into the outset of the hiring process, that clarify and translate institutional context and goals into specific hiring criteria. To further improve search results, boards would do well if they were better informed about the mechanisms of the hiring process, so that they may discern how to select and effectively partner with search firms to yield candidates aligned to their institutional vision. The Task Force recommends that trustee associations and others develop robust training for boards of trustees and presidential search committee members that includes items such as how to:

- Evaluate rigorously and compare search firms
- Manage search firms' role in the hiring process
- Craft interview questions and assessment rubrics aligned to sought-after presidential characteristics
- Include the perspectives of various constituencies in the search process while at the same time protecting the privacy and identity of candidates, consistent with relevant state law and institutional policy.

SUPPORTING PRESIDENTS THROUGH INDUCTION AND BEYOND

The board's role in hiring an effective president should not end once the offer has been made and accepted. Boards must be able to continuously support the new president, including during the critical first year to ensure that the president is successfully acclimated to the institution and is given the space to deeply learn the institution and its culture. This includes taking steps before the president's arrival to address challenges and defuse controversies surrounding college athletics, the presidential home, alleged fraud or other improprieties, and other foreseeable issues that could derail the presidency in its first year.

As noted in Focus Area 1 above, to ensure strong transitions, presidents should develop first-year induction processes in consultation with their boards and senior teams. While boards themselves should not be charged with crafting such plans, they can play a central role in setting the firm expectation during the hiring process that a transition plan will be developed. In keeping with this expectation, boards may offer to engage a consultant to work with the president in the crafting and implementation of such a plan.

Beyond the first year, boards need to understand how to assess institutional effectiveness and, in turn, presidential performance. National associations and others dedicated to board effectiveness should provide additional training on the importance of having key board-level indicators of institutional performance so that the board and president can jointly monitor progress towards institutional goals in areas such as fiscal strength,

student access and success, and research effectiveness. While presidents should generally lead—or co-lead—the process of setting such institutional goals, helping boards understand the value of and processes associated with setting and monitoring such goals could deepen the boards' knowledge of their institutions.

In addition, board training on the conduct of presidential evaluations should be expanded so that the president's annual review is informed by institutional progress towards goals and designed to foster support for and feedback to the president as much as accountability.

FOCUS AREA 3:

Advancing new and expanded ways to identify and develop a diverse presidential talent pool.

- **All presidents should be encouraged to identify and mentor –directly and by sponsoring their participation in a significant leadership development program – at least two or three exceptional individuals from the faculty and staff within their institution, with a focus on encouraging women and people of color to aspire to and prepare for the presidency.**

The scope of impending retirements translates into an enormous need to fill the number of open presidencies. And yet evidence suggests that fewer among those in positions that have traditionally led to the presidency—provosts in particular—are aspiring to the role. While there are many possible reasons, focus groups conducted during the research for this paper indicate that they are unsure that the presidency would offer them the opportunity to continue their service to students, faculty, and academia. Instead, many view the job as both too demanding and inadequately mission-focused and substantive, amounting to what one focus group participant called an “embattled fundraiser-in-chief.”

If framed properly, the complexity of the challenges facing presidents could be a selling point for the right sort of candidate, rather than a turnoff. Lessons can perhaps be learned from K-12 reform efforts, where urgency to improve student success and close equity gaps a decade or so ago galvanized talented individuals

to become superintendents of urban school districts, supported by new national leadership development efforts.

Compounding the challenge is the underrepresentation of women and people of color in many traditional feeder positions for the presidency—specifically provosts, deans, and faculty leaders. The chart on page 24 illustrates the stark underrepresentation of individuals of color within the presidency and among full-time faculty, relative to the U.S. population. Given the overrepresentation of women among those with college degrees and the fact that populations of color are growing at the fastest rate in our country, the lack of diverse talent in positions that typically emerge to the presidency is especially concerning.

While immediate efforts to diversify the presidency are certainly warranted given the high degree of presidential turnover, long-term efforts must focus on expanding and diversifying the presidential talent pool through strong mentorship and helping more people see themselves as potential leaders. Presidents should see this as part of their responsibility, professional associations should help to normalize this expectation in the field, and boards should support presidents' mentoring of future leaders and expect it as part of carrying out the role effectively.²⁴

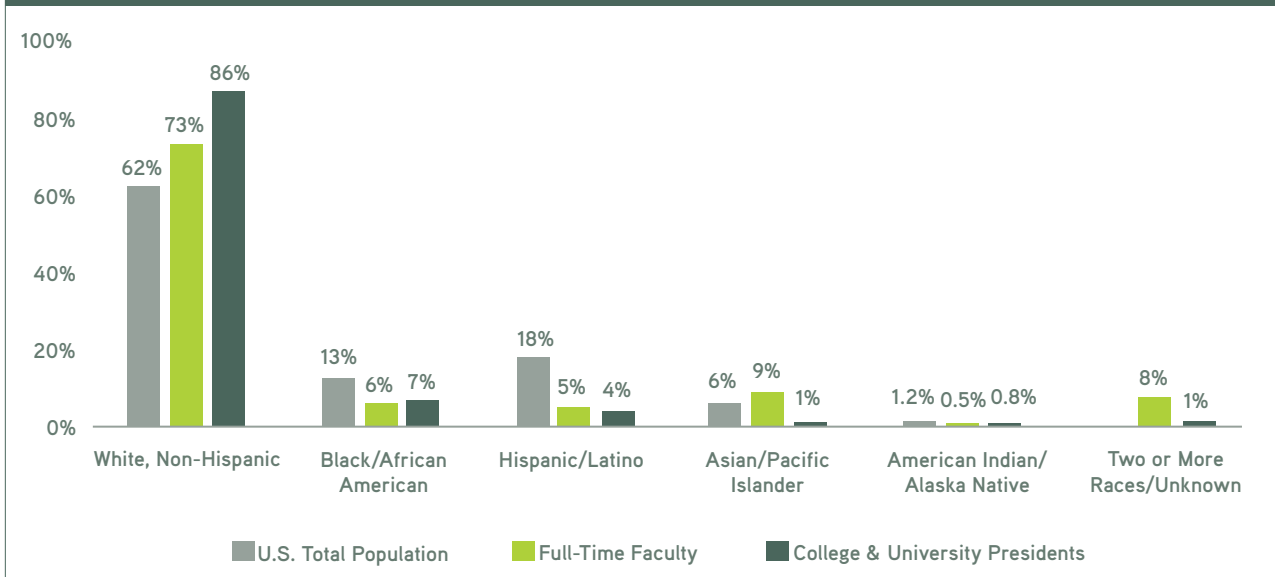
- **Associations and other national organizations should build programs to prepare professionally diverse candidates for the presidency.**

Recent trends suggest that boards and search committees are increasingly willing to consider candidates who come from outside the traditional academic route and even those without extensive experience in higher education. Given the increasing complexity of higher education administration in terms of the legal, human resource, political, and economic

²⁴ For a thoughtful example of such mentorships, see Leo Lambert's 2015 article, <https://www.agb.org/trusteeship/2015/marchapril/a-grow-your-own-strategy-to-develop-administrative-leadership>.

²⁵ For example, in the case of Simon Newman's controversy-laden one-year tenure as president of Mount St. Mary's University in Maryland. See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/01/president-quits-mount-st-marys>

RACE/ETHNICITY OF FACULTY AND PRESIDENTS COMPARED TO THE U.S. POPULATION



Sources: US total population (2015): Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States, U.S. Census Bureau. Full-time faculty (2013): U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Spring 2014, Human Resources component, Fall Staff section. College & university presidents (2012): Bryan Cook & Young Kim, American Council on Education, *The American College President 2012*. Note: available data for this comparison span several years but don't change significantly year-to-year.

contexts, seeking out leaders with proven skillsets and accomplishments in non-profit, government, corporate, and other sectors is an intriguing idea. And yet a few highly visible incidents of leaders from outside the academy coming into colleges and pushing for dramatic change without understanding the norms and values of higher education have highlighted the challenges associated with such transitions.²⁵

To bridge this gap, we recommend the creation of better systems to vet, develop, and acclimate nontraditional candidates. Candidates, including those who advance to the presidency through the traditional leadership ladder of professor-dean-provost, often need extensive professional development in areas such as understanding the president's role in financial administration, athletics and other auxiliary functions, and legal affairs. There are currently intensive professional development opportunities for traditional candidates to develop such skills, including the ACE Fellows Program and the AASCU and CIC Executive Leadership Academy, and even ones tailored for higher education professionals from non-academic positions—including the American Council of Education's (ACE) workshop on Advancing the Presidency. But these

programs are typically designed for and populated by individuals with experience in higher education institutions, whether within academic roles or fulfilling other functions within a college or university.

But leaders from outside academia—who often bring valuable, distinct skill sets from corporate, government, and nonprofit experiences—face challenges that existing programs are not focused on teaching. They often need to learn the norms, processes and culture of governance in higher education through professional development opportunities distinctly different from those needed by candidates with extensive higher education experience.

Today, there are few points of entry for nontraditional candidates who come from outside the academy and want to explore, prepare for, or be considered for higher education presidencies. One or more national organizations could develop a program to provide accomplished professionals from other sectors with an entry into higher education leadership. There are good examples of such programs in K-12 education. Education Pioneers, for example, matches accomplished professionals who have specific skillsets (e.g., data

analysis, human resource management, organizational development, and communications) with schools or other educational organizations that have specific needs for someone with those skills. The program's fellowship model then provides the professional with contextualized leadership development while also providing value to the hosting organization.

Partnering institutions would need an incentive to host participants. Participants might be expected, for example, to teach one class in their area of expertise each semester over the course of the program—providing value both to the participant and to the institution. Participants should also be expected, as part of their work on a special project over the course of a year, to attend faculty meetings and be given roles in contributing to key administrative responsibilities on a range of issues such as finance and budget, strategic planning, learning assessment, and diversity and inclusion.

Board service, too, can provide a valuable entry point for nontraditional candidates to understand college goals, leadership, operations, and challenges. Structured opportunities to serve on higher education boards should be established for aspiring presidents from nontraditional backgrounds. Indeed, all those responsible for appointing trustees and providing them professional development should ask how their processes and offerings might be improved in light of the need to expand the pool of potential presidents.

- **All institutions should consider – alone or in regional or statewide systems and consortia – developing high-quality leadership development programs to prepare individuals for advancement at all levels that might lead to the presidency.**

Many colleges and universities have created programs to develop leaders on their campuses that are usually open to talented faculty, staff, and administrators interested in career advancement. In addition to the substantive learning they provide, such programs can ensure that a diverse set of individuals with leadership potential are both regularly identified and sent the signal that others believe in their leadership capacity. However, such programs are not without limits.

Strong selection processes, effective programming, and efficient delivery is needed to attract the best candidates and maximize the value of such programs. Because securing the resources to establish high-quality leadership programs may be challenging for individual colleges and universities, especially smaller ones, institutional leaders may wish to work through regional consortia or state higher education systems to develop leadership programs.

- **Search firms, boards, and search committees should work together to assess whether a nontraditional candidate might match the institution's needs and could be adequately supported and gain legitimacy within the institution.**

While more could be done to prepare professionals from outside higher education for top leadership roles, more work must also be done to ensure that nontraditional candidates are a good fit for institutional needs. Search firms should be intentional about introducing the possibility of external candidates as they work with boards and search committees to help assess institutional needs. Boards and search committees should be guided in a careful consideration of the particular skills their institution may need in top leadership over the next five years and whether a candidate who brings those skills from another sector may be a good fit for those needs.

Some faculty members and administrators have concerns about the capacity of individuals from outside the academy to lead colleges and universities, so boards and search committees should engage in thoughtful dialogue with multiple stakeholders about the value and risks associated with nontraditional presidents before and while one is being considered. Based on those conversations, boards will be better able to assess how an outside candidate would be perceived by the campus community, while acknowledging their own biases either for or against such candidates.

Ultimately, the need for an expanded and more diverse talent pool for the college presidency requires a number of actors—but especially current presidents, search firms, boards, and national associations. Each has a role to play in building an ecosystem in which

there are far more formalized opportunities for highly talented individuals from within institutions and across professional sectors to be identified and developed as higher education leaders, and in which higher education institutions are better equipped to develop and support talented leaders.

CONCLUSION

Members of the Aspen Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency envision a strong future for higher education—one in which colleges and universities of all sizes and missions are able to thrive and, collectively, to strengthen our democracy and economy, one in which quality higher learning is equitably accessible and delivers knowledge that contributes to solving humanity's most pressing problems.

Yet that optimism is not universally shared. As higher education has become more expensive, its perceived accessibility has diminished in the eyes of many who would most benefit from it and less worthy of investment by policymakers who cast the academy as elitist and out of touch. Future leaders must counter these perceptions—not only by better communicating the value their institutions provide but also by leading change to be responsive to the evolving needs of individuals and society. Strong, diverse leadership will be critical for higher education to rise to the emerging and unforeseen challenges of the coming decades.

This Task Force has offered ideas about how to identify and develop leaders so they are capable of leading institutions through transformational change for the good of students and society. Deliberations of the Task Force and discussions with individuals occupying many different positions and perspectives made clear that current mechanisms for identifying and nurturing talented and diverse leaders are inadequate to the needs of the future.

Accordingly, the areas of focus for innovation in practice outlined here provide not just discrete calls to action around specific needs but also, collectively, a framework for further developing an ecosystem in which higher education leaders are identified, prepared, and supported early in and throughout their tenure. Achieving this systemic change will require coordinated effort—associations, boards of trustees, state and system leaders, and sitting presidents themselves must all contribute to a renewed and sustained effort to identify and nurture the talented leaders of the future.

This report offers optimism and a path forward. But the Task Force wishes to also convey a sense of urgency in its calls for all those committed to the present and future success of higher education to redouble our efforts. We must take seriously the challenges before us. Now is the time to invest all we can in advancing the role of higher education in our society by ensuring that we bring forth and support a new generation of exceptional leaders.

TASK FORCE METHODS AND PROCESS

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Identify Presidents for the Task Force

To identify presidents invited to engage in this project, Aspen surveyed national experts in higher education leadership—including leaders of major national higher education associations—seeking ideas of presidents who would thoughtfully engage their ideas and in conversation with other presidents. From this initial list, a group of four sectoral leaders were identified, each of whom agreed to serve as co-conveners of their colleagues for this project, as follows:

- Community colleges: Sandy Shugart, Valencia College, Florida
- Liberal arts colleges: Dan Porterfield, Franklin & Marshall College, Pennsylvania
- Regional public universities: Dianne Harrison, California State University, Northridge
- Research universities: Freeman Hrabowski, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

From conversation with these sectoral co-conveners, the initial list of recommended presidents was refined and expanded to result in the final list of presidents that appears at the beginning of the report.

COMMISSION BACKGROUND RESEARCH

As background material for participating presidents, Aspen commissioned a paper from Adrianna Kezar summarizing research on the college presidency, portions of which serve as the introduction to this report. The paper was circulated to presidents prior to their initial interviews for this project.

CONDUCT INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

In the first stage of research, Aspen conducted one-hour interviews with each of the 35 participating college presidents, aiming to distill themes and ideas from their own leadership experiences. The one-hour individual interviews focused on the following issues:

- Internal traits and external conditions that contributed to their greatest successes and most significant challenges
- Their views about what the goals for higher education should be going forward, broadly and for their institutions specifically
- Presidential traits and abilities needed to achieve those goals and concrete changes needed to ensure that those conditions and traits are present in sitting and future presidents

These interviews largely defined the Task Force's definition of higher education's purpose and the characteristics needed in presidents to meet that purpose. They also generated a list of common challenges and needs of college presidents within and across sectors. Finally, these interviews made clear the areas of inquiry participants viewed as most important, which were reflected in the agendas for our subsequent Task Force meetings.

CONVENE PRESIDENTS

Aspen convened presidents who served on the Task Force in five separate meetings. The first four were defined by institutional types: community and technical colleges, regional public universities, liberal arts colleges, and research universities. Framed by the earlier planning interviews, these meetings allowed for deeper discussion of the unique challenges facing leaders of each type of institution and the opportunity to identify commonalities across them. For each of these meetings, each attended by between six and eight presidents of like institutions, an agenda was set based on the individual hour-long interviews conducted in the first stage of the project. At the end of the meeting, Aspen identified and prioritized key, actionable areas on which to focus.

The fifth and final meeting brought together representatives of the four types of institutions—20 in all—to craft concrete recommendations for aligning the college presidency to public purposes in the decades ahead.

CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS OF ADDITIONAL KEY STAKEHOLDERS

With a set of preliminary ideas and conclusions in mind, Aspen convened 60- to 90-minute focus groups of 8 to 12 individuals in each of five categories: faculty, provosts/deans, board members, search firms, and student leaders. We sought diversity among the participants in professional background, institutional type, disciplinary expertise, race, and gender.

PREPARE REPORT

Based on written summaries of all of these conversations, Aspen prepared a draft report that was circulated first to the four sectoral co-conveners and then the entire Task Force for comment and revision. A final draft was then circulated to several individuals and organizations for comment, after which edits were made only when consistent with the Task Force's deliberations. A final draft was endorsed by the Task Force prior to publication.

