

# **CRISIS** AND **OPPORTUNITY**

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Aligning the Community College  
Presidency with Student Success

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**FULL REPORT**



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE



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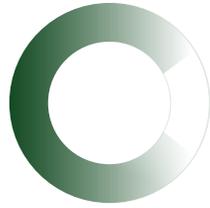
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ACHIEVING THE DREAM  
AND THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE  
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THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
FOR THIS REPORT IS AVAILABLE AT:

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

In recent years, Americans have awakened to the profound connection between community college student success and the strength of our nation. That community colleges matter deeply is clear from a few simple facts:

- They educate over 7 million degree-seeking students, more than 40 percent of the U.S. college population.
- They have in recent years been growing at four times the rate of four-year colleges.
- They enroll a disproportionately large share of the rapidly expanding number of college students of color and first-generation students.

Today, though, not enough community college students succeed. This reality was boldly acknowledged in a recent report by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC): “What we find today are student success rates that are unacceptably low, employment preparation that is inadequately connected to job market needs, and disconnects in transitions between high schools, community colleges, and baccalaureate institutions.”<sup>1</sup>

Focusing exclusively on the challenges facing the entire sector, however, obscures an important fact: Many community colleges have been engaged in difficult work on their campus to achieve improved rates of completion, higher levels of student learning and job preparedness, and more equitable outcomes

for students of color and others who have historically been left behind in public education. The organizations that prepared this report, Achieving the Dream and the Aspen Institute, work with many institutions that are in fact demonstrably improving student success.<sup>2</sup>

What we have learned through our work is that while strong leadership can be exercised by people throughout an institution, every high-performing community college has a first-rate president. The best leaders across the country have a special set of qualities and know-how that enable them to lead institutions to high and improving levels of student success.

This report presents a unified vision of who these leaders are and what they do, so that everyone involved in hiring and preparing community college presidents—trustees and leaders of state systems, universities, and associations—can consider the extent to which their assumptions and practices ensure that strong presidents are chosen and effectively trained to lead colleges in ways that meet the aspirations of every student as well as the critical goal of significantly improving student outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> American Association of Community Colleges (2012). Reclaiming the American Dream. Available at: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/21stcenturyreport/index.html>.

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<sup>2</sup> These colleges have been recognized as winners and finalists with distinction in the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, have earned recognition as Achieving the Dream (ATD) Leader Colleges, or both.

# THE RAPIDLY CHANGING CONTEXT

The world faced by community colleges is changing, and presidents must adapt, developing new strategies and skills that will enable their colleges to thrive by ensuring student access and achieving much higher levels of student success. States are ramping up accountability measures, tying funding to outcomes, and calling for greater transparency on how many students graduate and are employed.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the number of underprepared students entering community colleges remains high.<sup>4</sup> Parents and students want (and often need) community college tuition to remain as low as possible at the same time community colleges face budgetary pressures, exacerbated in many states by cuts in funding for higher education.<sup>5</sup> More and more students of color, many with serious financial challenges, arrive on community college campuses every year, but unacceptable gaps persist between their success rates and those of other students. And the number of for-profit and online competitors is expanding, while community colleges are still grappling with how and when to employ technology to increase efficiencies while improving the quality of education they provide to their unique student populations.

Together, these pressures demand that community colleges deliver more degrees and credentials of higher quality at lower cost to an increasingly diverse student population. But just as these new expectations are being made clear, the sector is entering a period of dramatic leadership turnover. In 2006, AACC reported that 86 percent of community college presidents were expected to retire within a decade<sup>6</sup>, and a more recent

survey revealed that 42 percent aim to retire in the next five years.<sup>7</sup> If these projections hold, by 2017, 500 community colleges will be led by different presidents than are at the helm today.

With so much change and so many presidential openings expected, there is an unprecedented opportunity to reconsider community college leadership. Achieving the Dream and the Aspen Institute have prepared this report because we understand how important community college presidents are today and will be in the future.

Based on original research and experience working with community colleges nationwide, this report describes the attributes and skills we need in the next generation of community college presidents. It explores the qualities of exceptional (or “highly effective”) community college presidents, which we define as those whose colleges have achieved high or significantly improving levels of student success. The report goes on to compare those qualities to what trustees have historically valued most in the hiring process and what programs that prepare and develop community college leaders typically focus on. It concludes with concrete recommendations for improving leadership development and hiring practices.

The Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream issue this report because we believe it is time for a fresh look at the community college presidency. We have witnessed exceptional community college leaders adapting to the changing landscape, ensuring that these vital institutions fulfill their roles as highly effective educational centers, strong economic drivers, and engines for closing access and success gaps for low-income and minority students.

But a report alone will accomplish little. The development of an exceptional generation of community college presidents—who are capable of achieving

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, recent legislative activity in Texas (HB9), Colorado (SB 11-052), and other states to create performance-based funding systems like those already in place in a handful of states.

<sup>4</sup> Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl (2010); Bailey, Jeong, & Cho (2008).

<sup>5</sup> The College Board (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Weisman & Vaughan (2006), AACC. The new generation will almost certainly include many with experiences different from presidents of the past, given the fact that chief academic officers and provosts, who have traditionally filled the presidential pipeline, themselves average over 55 years old. Eckel, P.D., Cook, B.J., & King, J.E. (2009), ACE.

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<sup>7</sup> Tekle (2012), AACC

much better student outcomes—will require greater investment and a more coherent and collaborative effort by all those involved in training and hiring them. Unfortunately, there is not enough new investment in leadership training, and several well-known community college leadership programs have been reduced in size or eliminated.

Our goal is for this report to inspire greater investment in the field of community college leadership, and to inform and feed into existing leadership reform efforts, including those being undertaken by the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association

of Community College Trustees, the Association of Governing Boards, the American Council on Education, the League for Innovation in the Community College, and graduate programs that prepare future community college executives. Given the rapid rate of presidential turnover and the fast-changing conditions surrounding community colleges, no single effort can meet the challenge ahead. What our nation and its community college students need is greater urgency, alignment, and collaboration to ensure that every community college is being led by a strong president.

# PART 1: QUALITIES OF EXCEPTIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

Community colleges are as varied as the communities they serve. Diversity in student demographics, local and regional economies, and institutional histories are reflected in distinctive missions and unique mixes of academic and vocational programs. To be successful, presidents must understand—and in many ways reflect—the mission, demographics, and culture of the colleges they lead.

At the same time, however, our research has uncovered a series of qualities common among the most effective community college presidents, regardless of the context within which they lead. For this report, we have gathered information about the qualities of exceptional presidents through:

- Interviews with 14 presidents who lead high-performing community colleges about attributes they possess and actions they have taken that contributed to their colleges' success.
- Interviews with nine experts who have worked on student success-oriented reforms with multiple community colleges, asking about attributes and actions that are distinctive among presidents that achieved high and/or improving levels of student success.
- Two focus groups of Achieving the Dream Leader College presidents, and a third meeting of community college presidents and experts, who discussed and clarified points made in a written summary of the findings from the two sets of interviews described above.

Together, this research has revealed a series of five core qualities present in highly effective community college presidents.

## QUALITY 1: Deep Commitment to Student Access and Success

A primary attribute of exceptional presidents is that they demonstrate a deep commitment to student access and success. While many who devote their careers to community colleges are concerned for the populations and missions their institutions serve, it is clear that some leaders, more than others, demonstrate a persistent, almost zealous drive to ensure student success while at the same time maintaining access for the broad range of students community colleges have traditionally served. For these presidents, this commitment is more than rhetoric; it is what drives them to become community college presidents and informs a great majority of their actions.

Perhaps most importantly, a deep commitment to student access and success leads the most effective presidents to persist, over the long haul, in doing all the things needed to create lasting change on community college campuses.

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“The challenge is being the change, not just declaring it. People will follow if they believe you are living out the change as opposed to using the institution to further your own goals.”

— **SANDY SHUGART**  
PRESIDENT, VALENCIA COLLEGE

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The winner and finalists-with-distinction in the inaugural Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence competition all had presidents in place for at least a decade. This, we believe, is not a coincidence, but rather a reflection of how important it is for community college presidents to believe so strongly in student success that they will stay at one institution long enough to provide the leadership needed to confront significant challenges and create a lasting culture driven to continuously improve student success.

Building such a culture is hard and complex work that requires leaders to maintain a seemingly paradoxical set of attributes. They must push urgently and relentlessly for scaled and sustainable advances in institutional behavior that result in measurably better outcomes for students, while understanding that change takes time in community colleges. They need to make hard choices on behalf of students, while grasping that many decisions should be made collectively and broad buy-in is needed for change to take root.

## **QUALITY 2:**

### **Willingness to Take Significant Risks to Advance Student Success**

The most effective community college presidents recognize that the existing cultures at their institutions often foster resistance to fundamental reform. While these leaders understand that cultures cannot be turned around overnight, they are willing to take significant risks to inspire changes in how their colleagues think and act to improve student outcomes.

Community college cultures are often built around compromise, and some leaders are reluctant to do anything that disrupts longstanding collaborative traditions. Exceptional presidents judiciously risk disruption, choosing moments to take risks that signal their commitment to change. In our research, two kinds of risks were identified most often among exceptional presidents: openly admitting low levels of student success and realigning resources when needed to

advance student outcomes. While both are exceptionally important, neither is common practice.

Nearly every president champions his or her college's successes. While doing so is important to engender pride and attract resources, it does nothing to create a sense of urgency around the goal of improving student outcomes. Rather than defending current institutional performance—including completion and transfer rates that are commonly below 50 percent—exceptional presidents openly acknowledge shortcomings, regularly using them to challenge and inspire everyone at their community college to improve student outcomes.

Having created a sense of urgency, exceptional presidents make clear their commitment to change by reallocating resources whenever needed to support programs and policies that improve student success. Too often, presidents avoid risk by largely maintaining existing budget allocations, fearful that reallocating funds might cost people jobs or otherwise upset the status quo. Exceptional presidents minimize risk by tying controversial funding decisions to shared goals, often embedded in strategic plans. In the end, though, they understand that budget reallocations are necessary to maximize the portion of limited resources spent on what matters most to student success and to make clear that the bottom line—where dollars are spent—will be guided first and foremost by the institution's student access and success mission.

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“When I’m talking about taking risks, you have to have a certain amount of passion, you have to have a certain amount of security in yourself to be willing to take those risks, because you believe in the purpose of that institution, and that is to make students better.”

— **DON CAMERON**

FORMER PRESIDENT, GUILFORD TECHNICAL  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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## QUALITY 3:

### The Ability to Create Lasting Change Within the College

The many external responsibilities of community college presidents can easily consume all of their time. Exceptional community college presidents understand, though, that fulfilling those responsibilities is not enough to improve student success and spend roughly equal amounts of time focusing inside and outside their institutions. They recognize that their leadership within the college is central to scalable and sustainable change and typically work to make this happen in four core ways.

- **Build urgency**

Exceptional presidents build a culture of urgency by using data and the bully pulpit to communicate about student success challenges clearly, honestly, and frequently, without laying blame. These leaders act as articulate and persistent advocates for the student success mission inside the college and serve as honest representatives to the broader community, taking ownership of their institutions' shortcomings and signaling a deep personal commitment to improvement.

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"It is not about the faculty, staff, or administration; it is really about the student. ... The president, of all people, must first and foremost be an advocate for the student and create a culture where the student is the centerpiece of the institution."

— **JERRY SUE THORNTON**

PRESIDENT, CUYAHOGA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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- **Create strong plans**

Excellent presidents create change by planning and executing scaled and sustainable strategies that are unified and meaningful to student success. At many community colleges that have significantly improved student outcomes, a strategic plan serves

as the blueprint for a coherent, campus-wide effort over multiple years. Exceptional presidents often run strategic planning out of their offices, making sure that plans are developed collaboratively and are well understood by the entire college so that meeting a plan's goals drives behavior throughout the institution and can be used to explain (and depersonalize) tough decisions, such as the closing of programs or reallocation of resources.

- **Collaborate**

Presidents effective at leading positive change have strong listening and communications skills and demonstrate an authentic appreciation for dialogue. They collaborate and build strong relationships across campus, paying significant attention to faculty and student support staff, understanding that they have the most contact with students. They engage frequently in conversation with faculty, attending their meetings or stopping to talk in hallways. They work to break down silos between faculty and student services staff to ensure that knowledge is shared and practice is informed by a deep understanding of the challenges faced by students who often arrive at college underprepared or without adequate resources.

- **Implement and evaluate**

While they are collaborative, exceptional presidents do not allow process to indefinitely delay action, communicating the urgency to improve by repeatedly utilizing data and setting deadlines for decisions. They understand that strong plans often fail due to poor or incomplete implementation or failure to closely monitor and evaluate success. Accordingly, they make clear that they expect follow-through on prescribed actions and, while their role in implementation is often limited, maintain constant familiarity with the data needed to measure impact and the processes and practices on campus that are critical to success. A common strategy used by effective presidents is to regularly ask faculty and staff how they know (or plan to test) whether their actions have been effective.

## QUALITY 4:

### Having a Strong, Broad, Strategic Vision for the College and Its Students, Reflected in External Partnerships

The most effective presidents have a vision that goes beyond ensuring student success while at the college to broader aims for student success that the college cannot alone fulfill, such as improving college readiness or expanding the regional economy so that more good jobs are available for graduates. This broad vision enables exceptional presidents to see a world beyond the borders of their campuses and develop partnerships with others so they can access assets, reach underserved populations, and educate students in new, highly effective ways.<sup>8</sup>

Because they define their college's performance in substantial measure by how well students succeed, highly effective presidents often work to serve students not just while on campus, but in ways that other college leaders might deem beyond their college's control or responsibility. Specifically, they focus on who in their community gets access to a college education, whether entering students are positioned to succeed when they arrive, what non-educational services they receive while on campus, and whether they actually succeed after they graduate.

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"The biggest part of my job is relationships and the big vision of the college, how we fit into the community, where we are going, and how do we plan to get there."

— **BARBARA VEAZEY**

PRESIDENT, WEST KENTUCKY COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE

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<sup>8</sup> This theme is consistent with findings from the AACC assessment of the competencies for community college leaders, which found that "an effective community college leader develops and maintains responsive, cooperative, mutually beneficial, and ethical internal and external relationships." AACC's competencies also conclude that effective leaders "work effectively and diplomatically with unique constituent groups such as legislators, board members, business leaders, accrediting organizations, and others" (Competencies for Community College Leaders, p. 4).

Viewing the community college as one step in an educational journey, highly effective presidents work closely with other educational institutions to ensure student success. Thus, relationships with K-12 systems are built not just on a desire to recruit new students, but on a vision of reducing incoming students' remedial needs. Relationships with four-year colleges aim to establish very clear transfer pathways that extend well beyond standard articulation agreements to ensure that large numbers of students actually transfer and receive a high-quality education—and complete degrees—at four-year colleges.

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"Follow the students. Where are they coming from and where they are going will tell you where to develop partnerships to help students."

— **BOB TEMPLIN**

PRESIDENT, NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Similarly, exceptional presidents develop strong employer relationships that are designed to provide students on-the-job training, that provide open and honest feedback about whether students graduate with the skills they need to succeed in jobs, and present graduates with good employment opportunities. Community relationships are developed to reach new students that the college cannot access alone, and to make sure students receive social services so they have the resources they need to consistently attend class and do their homework.

Finally, exceptional presidents develop strong relationships with funding and legislative authorities. Much of this relationship-building is aimed at ensuring that policy and financial decisions support the college's efforts to educate students in quality facilities. But exceptional presidents also use these relationships to make the case for the mission of community colleges: to keep higher education open to populations that would otherwise not have access and to provide a well-trained workforce to fuel the regional economy.

## QUALITY 5:

### Raise and Allocate Resources in Ways Aligned to Student Success

An oft-repeated lament about the college presidency is that it has evolved to be a fundraising job and little else. No doubt, community college presidents play a central role in securing funds from state legislatures and higher education systems, raising grant money, and soliciting contributions from corporate and individual donors. But in an era of shrinking government contributions, exceptional community college presidents do even more: they find entrepreneurial ways to raise revenue to support their strategies for improving student success.<sup>9</sup> For example, they develop relationships with corporations so that their employees receive needed training and students receive internships that lead to jobs. Other presidents formalize relationships with community groups to provide training to unemployed workers, accessing both workforce development funds and student financial aid dollars. These and other strategies are used to bring in new funds, leverage existing resources, and align revenue-raising activities with the specific goal of achieving higher levels of student success.

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“As a new leader, you don’t have the luxury of being under the radar screen. ... On day one, people are going to be expecting bigger things from you than perhaps your predecessor ... with fewer resources, I might add.”

— **WALTER BUMPHUS**

PRESIDENT AND CEO, AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Obviously, effective presidents must have a good grasp of their institutions’ budgets to ensure fiscal strength. But exceptional presidents also maintain ultimate responsibility for fiscal resource allocation and use

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<sup>9</sup> This finding is consistent with AACC’s competencies for community college leaders, which say that “an effective community college leader equitably and ethically sustains ... financial assets to fulfill the mission, vision, and goals of the community college.” These competencies also suggest effective leaders “take an entrepreneurial stance in seeking ethical alternative funding sources” (Competencies for Community College Leaders, p. 2).

that authority to align expenditures with strategies for ensuring student success. Exceptional presidents make sure they have access to data to understand which programs are effective and affordable—delivering measurably higher-quality education or advancing more students to complete credentials at sustainable costs—and then find the money to expand those programs. Often, that means reducing funding for or eliminating programs or services that don’t achieve the same results.

Highly effective presidents allocate resources transparently, making clear to everyone where dollars are spent and justifying major revisions by emphasizing alignment to strategies for ensuring student access and success. They avoid keeping pockets of money aside for pet projects that cannot be justified as promoting student success goals. In this way, they demonstrate honesty and integrity, consistently and visibly acting in ways that make clear to observers that they are driven by students’ interests.

## ACTIONS INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT IN THE FUTURE

Given the rapidly changing environment in which community colleges operate, presidents in the future will almost certainly confront different challenges than those facing presidents in the past. Some skills presidents will need to confront those challenges will remain the same. For example, the increasing focus on accountability for completion rates will require that presidents know how to communicate with urgency the need to improve student outcomes, strategically plan and execute effective strategies, and evaluate data to assess progress. Similarly, exceptional presidents are already taking actions to raise revenue from new sources, actions that will become increasingly important if—as most analysts agree—government resources remain limited.

A number of factors emerged from our research, however, that are not routinely reflected in the skills and competencies of the current and prior generations of exceptional presidents. These factors, summarized in greater detail in Appendix 1, include:

### **Engaging part-time faculty**

To improve quality, produce more graduates, and hold down costs, presidents will have to identify cost savings without compromising access and success. Trends strongly suggest that doing so will entail an increasing reliance on part-time faculty. To inspire these faculty to contribute more to creating and implementing strategies to advance student success goals, presidents will increasingly have to take the skills that allow them to build urgency and consensus among full-time faculty and apply them to faculty who are on campus less often and have competing professional demands.

### **Accelerating reform**

To meet the growing demand for higher completion rates and increased productivity, presidents will have to figure out how to take reforms to scale more quickly. Many ways of achieving change faster may vitiate the collaborative decision-making processes needed to build a culture of continuously improving student success. Thus, presidents must devise new strategies for accelerating reform while still building a culture of improvement.

### **Harnessing uncertain technological innovation**

The evolution of education technology offers an opportunity for more efficient and effective educational delivery and has significant implications for the community college business model, including the role of faculty. The president of the future must understand how to use technology to increase (and not compromise) quality and efficiency, while at the same time manage the internal dynamics needed to shift a culture long built around traditional modes of educational delivery. Presidents' abilities to effectively engage faculty and staff in this work will be critical if community colleges are to harness the potential for technology to accelerate reforms, generate productivity gains, and improve quality.

## PART 2:

# WHAT TRUSTEES VALUE IN HIRING

The second part of this report describes factors community college trustees prioritize as they interview and hire new presidents.<sup>10</sup> To address this question, we interviewed eight search consultants from across the United States who collectively have conducted more than 500 community college president searches over the past 20 years.

These interviews reveal that, in the hiring process, trustees strongly value five characteristics above others: fiscal management ability, fundraising capacity, external relationship-building skills, communication skills, and ethical and risk-averse behavior. Combined, these characteristics offer a portrait of a charismatic and honest community college president capable of ensuring institutional stability and establishing strong relationships with many external actors, from legislators to corporate executives to community members. There is nothing wrong with what is contained in this portrait—it reflects many qualities and skills community college presidents must have if they are to achieve high and improving levels of student success.

But this portrait is missing three of the five central elements identified in the first part of this report as critical to the ability of exceptional community college presidents to lead their institutions to excellent levels of student performance:

- A deep commitment to student access and success
- The ability to effectively lead change within the community college environment
- The willingness to take risks

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<sup>10</sup> Some presidents are appointed not by trustees but by heads or boards of centralized higher education authorities. Because 70 percent of all presidents are hired by trustees, this report focuses on the perceptions of those hiring authorities. Appendix 1 summarizes the kinds of entities responsible for hiring public community college presidents in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

## THE PRESIDENTIAL QUALITIES TRUSTEES VALUE MOST

### Fiscal Management Ability

The single capability cited most often as being valued by trustees is fiscal management. Rather than expecting presidents to be capable of doing the work of CFOs or to have a background as financial professionals, trustees look for evidence that candidates understand the importance of sound fiscal management and will make sure that systems and staff are in place to ensure strong fiscal operations. Trustees often appear concerned that the college, under the president's leadership, will spend inappropriately or fail to raise adequate revenue.

### Fundraising Capacity

Trustees value the capacity of presidential candidates to raise money from a variety of sources, including from corporations, federal grants, and individual donors. This appears to be an increasing focus during the presidential hiring process, with boards seeking presidents whom they believe can make up for cuts in state appropriations without significantly raising tuition.

### External Relationship-Building Skills

Boards strongly value the ability of presidents to build relationships, particularly with three sets of external actors: employers and others engaged in economic development, who can deliver jobs to fuel the regional economy, enabling the college to fulfill its economic development role; political entities that fund, regulate, and oversee community colleges; and community members who are key players in recruitment, funding, and extending educational opportunities for students.

### Communication Skills

Trustees highly value the communications ability of presidential candidates. During the search process, they look for those qualities that they believe will allow a president to be highly effective internally and externally: being charismatic and articulate, and having good listening and relationship-building skills. Our research suggests, however, that trustees may overemphasize this skill set, being drawn to charismatic candidates they like best and perhaps overlooking candidates who could better perform the other functions needed to lead institutions to higher levels of student success.

### Ethical and Risk-Averse Behavior

Trustees value presidential candidates who will not destabilize the institution, who will maintain ethical standards to ensure that no actions are taken that would embarrass the college (and the trustees) or risk the college's ability to fulfill its mission. The strong emphasis on this quality reflects trustees' strong risk aversion, which appears to cause many boards to value presidential candidates whom they believe will stay out of trouble after being hired—rather than those who would risk being ousted pursuant to a faculty vote of no confidence or make poor ethical decisions.

## ALIGNMENT OF TRUSTEE EXPECTATIONS WITH QUALITIES OF EXCEPTIONAL PRESIDENTS

In our interviews, we asked search consultants what characteristics trustees seem to undervalue and overvalue, assuming that trustees' primary aim is to hire a president capable of leading an institution to high and improving levels of student success. Below is an analysis of their responses, and what they reveal about the alignment between what trustees look for in the hiring process and the five qualities of exceptional presidents set forth in the first part of this report.

### QUALITY 1:

#### Deep Commitment to Student Access and Success

Nearly every search consultant we interviewed strongly suggested that trustees sometimes neglect—or perhaps take for granted—candidates' commitment to student access and success. Although a personal commitment to ensuring student access and success might seem like an abstract personality trait, several search consultants noted that this attribute can readily be assessed during the search process, as almost all candidates have spent time leading departments or divisions in community colleges. Thus, several consultants strongly believe that boards should pay more attention to how deeply each candidate is committed to student access and success, and extensively research candidates' experiences at prior jobs to determine whether they have led efforts that actually increased access and improved student outcomes.

### QUALITY 2:

#### Willingness to Take Significant Risks to Advance Student Success

The search consultants we interviewed said that the hiring process commonly favors candidates who are risk-averse. This stems from a completely rational desire among trustees not to hire—and faculty who serve on search committees not to recommend—a president who will take the kinds of risks that may spark controversy or result in irresolvable conflict with faculty or others. But this aversion stands in stark contrast to our finding that highly effective presidents are willing to take reasoned risks to improve student success, believing that their boards will support them when they do so. Accordingly, it is important that trustees understand, both during the hiring and continuing oversight processes, the benefits of a leader who will prioritize actions that are necessary to achieve high levels of student success even if they deviate from common practice in ways that may upset some colleagues and stakeholders.

### **QUALITY 3:**

#### **The Ability to Create Lasting Change Within the College**

According to interviewed search consultants, trustees pay inadequate attention to presidential candidates' ability to lead and manage change within a community college. The heavy emphasis they place on hiring presidents who can build external partnerships can divert their focus from—and investigation into—whether presidents can lead internal change, on a college campus. Trustees appear to undervalue the ability of candidates to strategically plan in ways likely to establish scaled and sustainable reforms, to inspire others to succeed rather than desiring to stand in the spotlight themselves, and to both implement and evaluate the effectiveness of change. Our research suggests, therefore, that trustees need to better understand that presidents who can lead institutions to significantly higher levels of student success must be able to create and sustain urgency, plan strategically, and ensure strong implementation and evaluation.

### **QUALITY 4:**

#### **Having a Strong, Broad, Strategic Vision for the College and Its Students, Reflected in External Partnerships**

The search consultants we interviewed suggested that trustees look for candidates with a strong, unified sense of direction for the college, but sometimes neglect to test rigorously whether a candidate's vision adequately includes a focus on student success. Vision—however defined and expressed—may thus be both a strong area of alignment between trustees' priorities and the traits of exceptional leaders, as well as an area where trustees could better test candidates' commitment to improving student outcomes. The search consultants also agreed that boards place enormous value on the strong communications skills needed to build external partnerships, particularly with important stakeholders such as legislators and funding entities. Building such relationships depends, without doubt, on candidates'

charisma, political savvy, and communications skills. In this way, trustees' emphasis on a likeable, effective communicator who understands the importance of relationships is aligned with the attributes identified in our research. However, the search consultants also suggested that trustees sometimes do not emphasize a candidates' ability to form alliances specifically around improving student success outcomes, a quality of exceptional presidents.

### **QUALITY 5:**

#### **Raise and Allocate Resources in Ways Aligned to Student Success**

Our research suggests that trustees tend to highly value the capacity of candidates to raise money from a variety of sources, including individuals, corporations, governments, and foundations. In this way, trustees' expectations are well-aligned to the skills of exceptional presidents. On the other hand, trustees' priorities regarding internal fiscal management are only somewhat aligned with the qualities of exceptional presidents. Search consultants emphatically said that trustees look for evidence that candidates understand the importance of sound fiscal management and will ensure that systems and staff are in place to ensure strong fiscal operations, both qualities present in exceptional presidents. However, trustees' aversion to candidates who are willing to take risks may prevent them from hiring presidents who will make needed changes in internal funding allocations—an inherently risky endeavor—in order to better align internal incentives with goals for improving student success. In addition to looking for candidates who can effectively raise money and ensure strong internal financial oversight, trustees should look for presidents who are committed to and capable of ensuring that resource decisions support and enhance student success improvement strategies.

## PART 3:

# WHAT LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS TEACH PRESIDENTS

Next, this report examines the extent to which existing programs that train aspiring and sitting community college presidents teach skills that align to the qualities of exceptional presidents. We gathered and analyzed the curricula of 16 prominent traditional academic and continuing professional education programs that are specifically aimed at teaching community college leadership.<sup>11</sup> We then compared the content of these programs with the qualities of exceptional community college presidents set forth in Part 1 of this report in order to identify areas of alignment and gaps in training that need to be filled to create a new generation of strong leaders.

Our findings reflect an aggregate assessment of the curricula at 16 diverse leadership development and academic programs. Each of these programs has unique strengths in how it educates and trains community college leaders, with some curricula being more clearly aligned with the qualities of exceptional presidents than others. Our goal in this report is not to assess individual programs, but rather to determine what needs to be done in the field of community college presidential preparation and development as a whole to increase the number of sitting and aspiring presidents who have the skills needed to achieve significant gains in student success. Accordingly, this report should not be read as a critique of any particular program.

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 3 for the characteristics of the programs we surveyed and our method of analyzing program content. It is important to note that this analysis is based on an evaluation of curricula, which include course descriptions but do not include detailed information about course assignments.

## THE OVERALL EMPHASIS OF LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

Our review reveals that, as a group, community college presidential preparation and continuing education programs aim to teach many of the skills and knowledge areas common to exceptional presidents. Most of the programs we examined, for example, offer courses in budgeting, finance, and organizational development, and half offered training in institutional planning and assessment. These are skills that all community college presidents must have if the institutions they lead are to significantly improve student success.

Our analysis reveals, however, that programs may neglect to ground the teaching of skills in the context of improving student outcomes. For instance, our review of budgeting and finance courses suggests that they do not consistently address strategies for measuring program effectiveness and sustainability or reallocating resources to those expenditures most closely aligned with student success goals. Descriptions of research courses focus on methodology, but reflect little content about using data to create a sense of urgency or developing inquiry processes that drive an entire college toward assessing the scalability or sustainability of programs needed to improve student success. This is not to say that overviews of finance and budgeting, or of data and research, are unimportant to the preparation of future presidents, but rather that the equally important lessons regarding how exceptional presidents use those skills to advance student success may not be taught commonly enough in leadership programs.

In addition, leadership programs appear to underemphasize or overlook a series of qualities our research identified as exceptionally important. Specifically, curricula we examined did not include course content in communicating effectively with faculty and staff—a

trait essential to creating change within a community college—or in building strong partnerships with external entities, such as employers, K-12 systems, or community organizations. Similarly, most programs did not describe any courses that cover legislation and fundraising, and we found no evidence of courses focused on building relationships with legislators or donors.

In sum, our analysis suggests that while training programs for community college presidents teach many of the right skills, they likely underemphasize others and infrequently teach all skills in ways that clearly aim to prepare presidents to lead institutions to higher levels of student success.

## ALIGNMENT OF TRAINING PROGRAMS WITH THE QUALITIES OF EXCEPTIONAL PRESIDENTS

### QUALITY 1: Deep Commitment to Student Access and Success

While a deep commitment to student access and success cannot be taught to those who are primarily motivated by other things, programs can perhaps deepen aspiring presidents' commitment by teaching them about the broad access mission of community colleges as well as about the deep challenges students face of remaining in college, learning at high levels, and attaining market-valued credentials. Among the programs examined, 70 percent offer a course on student success and 70 percent offer a course on the mission of and current issues facing community colleges. While it is encouraging that so many programs include a course on student success, it is unclear that a single course is adequate to teach the breadth of obstacles institutions and their leaders face to increase access and achieve high levels of student success. Nor is it clear that current research and evidence on strategies to improve student outcomes are covered in sufficient depth. Indeed, these are subjects that college leaders in the Aspen and Achieving the Dream networks report an eagerness to know more about, suggesting that additional continuing education is needed. Similarly, other courses make little mention

of student success goals, suggesting that – even if some individual assignments relate to student success – programs may not be focusing enough courses on imparting an understanding of student success challenges and strategies. Programs may wish to examine both course descriptions and a sample of course assignments to assess whether their curricula include adequate instruction on measuring student learning outcomes and improving success for students—including those who begin with remedial needs. Developing additional coursework in such areas could provide presidents a deeper understanding of challenges to access and success, which could in turn deepen their commitment to leading colleges to improve student outcomes.

### QUALITY 2: Willingness to Take Significant Risks to Advance Student Success

While many of the programs we examined offer courses on general principles of leadership and higher education policy, we found no evidence that these courses provide targeted training on how presidents can take reasoned risks to improve student outcomes. For example, no leadership course descriptions we examined reflect a focus on how leaders can communicate the challenges an institution has with low student outcomes in order to build urgency and momentum for change. Similarly, curricula do not indicate that programs teach how to reallocate resources to improve student success in ways that are transparent and aligned with strategic plans. While such elements may be present in some course assignments, it appears that these areas could be bolstered to better align preparation and training to the qualities of exceptional presidents.

### QUALITY 3: The Ability to Create Lasting Change Within the College

Exceptional presidents communicate about student success clearly, honestly, and often. They are not just effective at making public appearances and delivering speeches, but also at using data strategically in order to build consensus, create a sense of urgency, and advocate for funding and other forms of support.

Our research also shows that exceptional presidents demonstrate a highly skilled balance between patience, deliberation, and delegation on one hand, and advocacy for the urgency of reform on the other. In essence, these skills are about managing organizational culture and leveraging internal relationships effectively in ways that build a foundation for lasting change. In the programs we reviewed, courses titled “Assessing Leadership Strengths: Emotional Intelligence” and “Using Power Productively” suggest that some programs are teaching participants how to balance authority and collaboration to bring about organizational change. Still, such courses are present in only a handful of programs. Unless these topics are also included in general leadership and management courses, key skills needed to manage academic organizational change may be inadequately addressed. The abundance of general leadership courses currently offered in community college leadership programs serve as great opportunities for further strengthening curricula with respect to student success. These courses should include specific sections on how to communicate and use strategic planning to build a culture of urgency to improve student outcomes as well as how to plan, execute, and evaluate the effectiveness of change management strategies.<sup>12</sup>

#### **QUALITY 4:** **Having a Strong, Broad, Strategic Vision for the College and Its Students, Reflected in External Partnerships.**

While exceptional presidents spend equal amounts of time within and outside their colleges, community college leadership programs pay much greater attention to skills needed for internal leadership. Indeed, fewer than half of the programs we examined offered any courses specifically in external affairs, including raising funds and interacting with legislative authorities or executive branch officials. These are activities that community college presidents feel poorly prepared for, according to

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<sup>12</sup> The Teaching/Learning Academy at Valencia College, a professional development program, developed and led by faculty, that factors into promotion and tenure decisions, is an excellent example of a strategy for creating this form of improvement-oriented culture that reflects both collaboration and urgency.

studies, and that our research confirms are important for leading an institution to high and improving levels of student success.<sup>13</sup> Training programs need to significantly strengthen those components of their curricula and consider the extent to which hands-on, experiential learning might be better suited than classroom-based education for acquiring needed skills. As well, because our research demonstrates that exceptional presidents align their external work closely with a strong strategic plan for improving student outcomes, future presidents would be well served by training in how to pursue alliances with external constituencies as part of broader student success strategies.

#### **QUALITY 5:** **Raise and Allocate Resources in Ways Aligned to Student Success**

Approximately one-third of the programs we reviewed offered courses in the development of resources. Given the tremendous pressure on presidents to raise money, we expected to see a greater emphasis in programs on developing relationships—and “sealing the deal”—with donors, corporate partners, and other potential sources of revenue. That relatively few programs offered such courses suggests that fundraising is, in general, an underemphasized skill set. Moreover, we found little evidence that existing coursework in fundraising focused on teaching how to align revenue-raising activities with strategic plans for improving student outcomes. This apparent misalignment, then, suggests not just that presidents must be better trained as fundraisers, but also that they must also be trained in how to pursue innovative relationships that both bring in revenue and align with strategic reforms focused on student outcomes.

After leadership courses, budgeting and financial management courses were the second most common across the programs we examined. This is consistent with the attention to sound fiscal management demonstrated by exceptional presidents. We found, however, that exceptional presidents took consistent action not only to maintain sound fiscal conditions but

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<sup>13</sup> McNair, Duree, and Ebbers (2011).

also to align budget and resource allocations with programs and efforts targeted at improving student success. This suggests that presidents should be prepared not only to monitor and manage finances, but also to understand mechanisms for aligning resources internally with improvement initiatives. In part, this

means presidents must be trained to organize their institutions so they and others receive better financial reports that provide information not just by general ledger category but also in a format that demonstrates the return on investment of different strategies and interventions.

## HOW DO PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES ENTER THE PIPELINE?

Before candidates are ever considered for the presidency by trustees and others, two dynamics factor into who is prepared for the opportunity.

First, continuing education and traditional academic programs play a central role in signaling who is ready for leadership roles. In interviews with leaders of several community college presidential training programs, we asked about how candidates are recruited and selected for their programs. While the admissions criteria differed for each program, our sense is that programs place too little focus on recruiting or selecting candidates with the qualities we found in exceptional leaders. For example, leaders of several academic programs stated that they recruit broadly and select students based on traditional measures of academic ability, including Graduate Record Examination scores and the perceived ability to complete a dissertation. While such criteria make sense for an academic program, it is not clear that those measures align with the qualities of the most effective community college leaders. As well, continuing education programs tend to be either open admission or based on recommendations by sitting leaders of “who would make a good future president,” and we found no guidance for making such recommendations that align well with the five qualities of exceptional presidents identified in this paper.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, sitting community college presidents and other leaders often identify potential presidents from within their institutions, inspired by important goals of planning for succession and fostering the professional development of valued staff members. Indeed, this approach has been explicitly endorsed by some leaders in the field, and it is estimated that about one-third of community college presidents were internal candidates, hired

from within their current institutions.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars and practitioners have emphasized the strength of this approach, noting the unique and highly contextualized community college environment and arguing for a leadership development strategy that draws on homegrown talent and in-house training in order to align leadership with organizational culture and minimize friction between administrators and faculty.<sup>15</sup> Others have contended that relying too heavily on internal selection and training processes constrains innovation and entrenches biases that may be counterproductive, and that movement between colleges ensures that leaders have a valuable diversity of perspective.<sup>16</sup> Finally, some argue that there is an increasing need to draw from outside the pool of sitting administrators both to ensure adequate talent in the wake of retirements at all levels of administration and to meet the changing demands of community college leadership in the coming decades.<sup>17</sup>

While our research does little to resolve this debate, it strongly suggests the need to reevaluate both the informal processes used to identify future leaders and the formal processes for recruiting candidates into training programs. Regardless of how and from where they are recruited, the central goal should be to assess whether – and seek to ensure that – those hired share the qualities of presidents who have greatly improved student outcomes at their community colleges.

<sup>14</sup> Weisman, I. M., & Vaughan, G. B. (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Boggs (2003); Cooper & Pagotto (2003); Hull & Keim (2007); Phelan (2005); Piland & Wolf (2003); Vaughan & Weisman (2003); Wallin, (2002).

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy (2003); Reille & Kezar (2010); Roe & Baker (1989); Vaughan (2001).

<sup>17</sup> Vaughan (2001).

## PART 4:

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING ALIGNMENT IN THE TRAINING, HIRING, AND PREPARATION OF PRESIDENTS

The processes for hiring and preparing community college presidents have delivered many individuals with the core competencies needed for effective community college leadership, including some exceptional performers. That is not faint praise, given the enormously daunting task of being a community college president, the relentless demands made by multiple constituents, and the hugely diverse and critical role community colleges play in economic, social, and workforce development in the United States.

At the same time, continuing current hiring and training practices without taking inventory of quickly changing contexts will not likely produce enough leaders capable of ensuring that increased numbers of community college students are able to succeed in the future. The world around and within community colleges is changing rapidly. For more presidents to achieve high levels of success for their increasingly diverse student bodies, trustees, other hiring authorities, and training programs will need to advance their practices in a number of key ways. The Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream offer the following recommendations, aimed at improving alignment between the many important qualities of presidents who achieve great results for students and the practices used to prepare, hire and develop those presidents.

## TRAINING, EDUCATION, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

### Overview of Recommendations:

Programs that prepare and develop community college presidents, whether aspiring or sitting leaders, should offer education and training in the full range of skills presidents need to lead institutions to much higher levels of student success. This will require them to institute new courses in areas essential to excellent leadership but not covered in many leadership development programs, such as change management, productivity, and building partnerships that improve student success. As well, existing core courses—like leadership, communications, and budgeting—need to place a greater emphasis on not just developing skills, but also on developing an understanding of how they can be used for the purpose of improving student outcomes. Additionally, the leaders of these programs should ensure that substantially more coursework is oriented around the real-world practices that have enabled presidents to engage in effective change management to improve student success, including strategic planning built around improving student outcomes; using data to focus faculty and staff on needed success goals; building strong teams that can drive reforms throughout the campus; and ensuring implementation of the strategic plan, using data to evaluating success, and making necessary changes along the way.

## A CALL TO IMPROVE TRAINING OF SITTING PRESIDENTS: AACC'S 21ST-CENTURY COMMISSION

A 2012 report by the American Association of Community Colleges' 21st-Century Commission found significant challenges in graduation rates, employment preparation, and outcomes for low-income and minority students. The report outlined many reforms needed to achieve substantial improvements in student success, then concluded that "none of them will happen without ... committed and courageous leaders."

The report went on to explain:

*Community colleges have been developing leaders to maintain the inherited design. They need now to develop leaders to transform the design. Reshaping the community college of today to meet the needs of tomorrow means that community college leaders need to see change as their friend, embrace it, and, then, indeed, lead it.*

Recognizing the urgency of the pending turnover in the community college presidency, AACC recently partnered with the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) to launch a new leadership initiative.

In the first stage of this work, AACC and ACCT began "Thriving in the Community College Presidency" to provide new presidents training in new skill sets. In addition, AACC is supporting members' "grow-your-own" leadership programs by developing curricula and toolkits to enable community colleges to build new leadership programs and improve existing programs. ACCT is supporting its members by building upon its existing online trustee education service, creating a new series of webinars and teleconferences that focus on board-CEO relationships aimed at improving student outcomes.

AACC has also created a 21st-Century Commission implementation team on leadership to determine what additional steps will be needed to develop more community college leaders capable of achieving dramatic gains in student success. Charged with recommending strategies that align with the 21st-Century report, the leadership committee—comprised of presidents and other experts in the community college sector—is currently meeting and will issue its recommendations in late 2013.

### Recommended Actions:

To increase alignment between the skills needed by exceptional presidents and the training and education that prepares them:

- University-based academic programs should add coursework, and arrange for hands-on training experiences, on responsibilities related to external affairs, including:
  - Understanding the legislative and financing structures relevant to the community college, as well as the motivations of and interactions between political actors
  - Building relationships with industry that increase educational and employment opportunities for students
  - Establishing strong relationships with a broad range of constituents in the community and educational systems with the purpose of enrolling, preparing, and serving students the college historically has not reached
  - Developing and implementing entrepreneurial approaches to raising revenue that improve outcomes for students and help initiate and sustain student success initiatives

- Programs for sitting presidents should consider building additional curricular modules around competencies of highly effective presidents, including:
  - How to inspire and sustain institutional change that results in a culture of evidence, inquiry, and action around improving successes in program completion, student learning, and labor market outcomes
  - How to synthesize and communicate data in ways that establish and sustain urgency for reform with multiple stakeholders, including faculty, administrators, boards, legislatures, and others
  - How to communicate and work with a board of trustees to develop and sustain a shared understanding of and commitment to student success goals, institutional strategies for achieving those goals, and progress made in achieving those goals
- How to create strategic plans and other processes that result in a clear and unified direction, inform action throughout the college, enable the realignment of resources and incentives, and provide blueprints for evaluating success
- How to align fiscal reporting with efforts to deliver more degrees of better quality at lower cost by presenting information that enables assessment of cost per credential and the costs and benefits of each program intervention, rather than typical budget line items, which often reflect aggregated inputs such as faculty salaries and benefits, facilities costs, or travel expenses

## A LONG-STANDING COMMITMENT TO TRAINING NEXT-GENERATION PRESIDENTS: THE LEAGUE FOR INNOVATION'S EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

A central actor in the field of leadership development, the League for Innovation in the Community College, trains senior-level administrators for the community college presidency through the Executive Leadership Institute (ELI). Guided by prominent faculty members—community college CEOs, leadership development experts, and senior community college trustees—ELI participants attend a weeklong program that allows them to analyze their interests and abilities, engage in discussions of strategy and leadership, and enhance their interview skills and applications through simulations with presidential search consultants. Since 1988, almost 700 participants have graduated from ELI, and 43 percent have since become presidents. In some graduating classes, as many as 70 percent have become presidents.

In addition to ELI, the League aims to strengthen community college leadership through other initiatives, including:

- “Leadership Abstracts” published each month on key leadership issues and distributed to more than 22,000 presidents, trustees, and senior administrators, nationally and internationally
- The “What Do CEOs Want to Know About?” survey, conducted four times a year of more than 570 community and two-year college leaders, providing valuable benchmark data to community college presidents
- Innovation iSteem, the League’s web-based, multimedia professional development portal, which provides webinars, videos, articles, publications, and learning programs, along with the best of the League’s conferences, services, partnerships, and collaborative communities

- All education and training programs should review the content of their courses and modules and look for opportunities to infuse a stronger and more explicit link between the skills and practices they teach and strategies for improving students' success in learning, graduating, and succeeding in the labor market. Regardless of their objectives or content, existing courses should be changed to more deliberately challenge existing practices and instill in future leaders the instinct to constantly ask, "How will this budget—or enrollment plan, or proposed program, or board agenda—help our college improve student success?"
- Additional opportunities should be created for highly effective presidents to teach aspiring leaders strategies for improving student success and managing change. While experienced presidents already serve as instructors in many education and training programs, including those administered by AACC and the League for Innovation, students would benefit from even more hands-on engagement with those who have successfully advanced student access and success in the rapidly changing environments in which community colleges operate.

## HIRING PRACTICES

### Overview of Recommendations:

Trustees and others responsible for hiring presidents should take concrete steps to ensure that they balance the important qualities they now focus on—including fiscal management and strong communications abilities—with three qualities of the most effective presidents that have sometimes been overlooked or undervalued: a personal commitment to improving student success; a willingness to take risks; and an ability to lead institutional change that results in high and continually improving levels of student success, including through the capacity to inspire, engage, and empower others to bring about and sustain that change. In addition, efforts should be made by governors, state departments, and systems to orient appointed trustees' thinking around student success and to inform voters who elect trustees about the qualities of exceptional leaders.

### Recommended Actions:

To increase alignment between the qualities of exceptional presidents and trustees' priorities in hiring:

- States and systems should establish programs for trustees as a group and for each individual board prior to beginning a presidential search that summarize common characteristics of effective presidents and make explicit the linkages between these traits and patterns of improvement in student outcomes.
- Governors and others who appoint trustees and leaders of centralized systems should provide background material to new trustees and system leaders on the importance of ensuring that presidents have the full range of qualities needed to improve student success, making clear that student access and success are the highest priorities.
- Associations and other groups should develop tools and guidance for trustees and other hiring authorities to use as they engage in the hiring process, including:
  - An assessment tool to evaluate candidates against the core qualities and competencies of presidents who have achieved high levels of student success
  - Sample questions for candidates that align with each of the critical attributes and actions of exceptional presidents
  - Model job descriptions that emphasize the qualities of highly effective presidents
  - A protocol for evaluating candidates' records of success, including recommended processes and sample questions to be used during reference checks that could provide information on whether a candidate possesses important characteristics and competencies

- A best-practice process for engaging board members and members of the search committee in a dialog at the outset of the hiring process that identifies what qualities and competencies the next president needs to substantially improve student success
- Associations and other groups should develop tools and guides for voters to enable them to better understand the connection between the qualities of exceptional trustees and the recruitment, hiring, and retention of highly effective presidents.

## A PROMISING STRATEGY FOR ADVANCING TRUSTEE UNDERSTANDING: THE GOVERNANCE INSTITUTE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

For community colleges nationwide to improve, more boards of trustees will need to carry out their responsibilities, including presidential hiring decisions, with a greater focus on student success objectives. In some cases, though, trustees may not have spent significant time understanding data on degree completion and other measures of student success or considering what they can do to support and monitor the efforts of their institutions to improve student outcomes. A relatively new effort offers hope that more trustees will be given the time and space to do exactly that.

In partnership, the American Association of Community College Trustees and the University of Texas at Austin's Community College Leadership Program have established the Governance Institute for Student Success (GISS). The Institute provides focused training for trustees aimed at elevating their understanding of how governance coordinated between the board and the president can advance a culture of evidence and, ultimately, improve student completion of credentials with value in the labor market. The program features three components:

### **Data review:**

Each governing board participates in a self-assessment process, reviewing longitudinal cohort data on areas such as course completion, persistence, and attainment.

### **Initial convening:**

Community college trustees and presidents from across the state attend a two-day institute to share challenges they have faced and successes achieved, become familiar with tools and methodologies used to achieve student success goals, create opportunities for collaboration, and build awareness of student success data.

### **Ongoing engagement:**

After the convening, additional training, tools, data, and online resources are provided to support leaders as they act to improve student success. For instance, the GISS website provides governing boards with questions to consider as they monitor their institutions' readiness to advance student success, strategic planning, implementation of student success initiatives, and data use.

The 23 community colleges in Ohio participated in a pilot of GISS in 2010. Since then, trustees and presidents from Texas and Washington have participated in the initiative, and the program has plans to expand significantly in the coming years, both initiating work in new states and deepening its engagement with trustees in states where GISS has already begun.

# CONCLUSION

In 2001, former community college president George Vaughan suggested that the impending retirements of huge numbers of community college presidents would prove to be one of two things: a moment of crisis or an opportunity to develop a new generation of great leaders.<sup>18</sup> With 500 new presidents expected to be hired in the next five years, the moment of crisis *and* opportunity Vaughan anticipated is now upon us.

With this report, we echo his call to use this moment as an opportunity to rethink and revitalize the development and hiring of community college leaders. Our research finds not only that there are lessons to be learned from presidents of institutions that help their students achieve great success, but also that there are specific actions through which those lessons can be applied and meaningful changes can be made.

Programs around the country that train future administrators are varied, robust, and vital to the success of those they educate. At the same time, changes in the environment and pending retirements

challenge each of them to improve their curricula to instill an even stronger set of skills focused on student success. Similarly, boards of trustees hiring presidents possess a unique opportunity to ensure that even more community colleges can fulfill their potential and match the aspirations of their students, including the rapidly expanding number of low-income, first-generation, and minority students who seek educational opportunity in community colleges every year. To do so, trustees need guidance about those traits and attributes that matter most so they can ensure that future leaders are even more focused on, and capable of improving, student access and success.

Together, these two strategies are essential to strengthen community college leadership and, more importantly, student outcomes. A coherent, collaborative effort across those working in academic, policymaking, and advocacy organizations can ensure that in the next decade, many more of our nation's community colleges become institutions where high levels of success for students is both the vision and the reality.

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<sup>18</sup> Vaughan (2001).

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# APPENDIX 1: COMPETENCIES COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS WILL NEED TO RESPOND TO CHANGE

FACTORS DRIVING CHANGE	REQUIRED STRENGTHS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS IN THE FUTURE
Increasing political pressure to be accountable for graduation rates and productivity	Maintain collaborative nature of institution while accelerating and scaling reforms
	Be able to translate broad external accountability measures into authentic internal measures, so change is viewed as not being done “to us” but “by us”
	Possess deep knowledge of student success data and initiatives to improve success
	Change communications goals from those aimed at proving value by citing the number of students served (and other inputs) to evidence-based recitation of outcomes achieved
	Commit to and be skilled at reallocating resources to student success
	Hire people with the commitment and know-how to improve student outcomes
	Focus on revamping developmental education, including devising better systems for assessing the abilities of incoming students
Decreasing state appropriations for public higher education	Be entrepreneurial in raising revenue; creatively using assets of land, equipment, and resources; raising grant-funding; and attracting fee-for-service
	Increase productivity by producing more graduates, more quickly, at less cost
	Possess greater financial expertise to manage tighter budgets
	Better develop and engage growing number of part-time faculty
Rising public frustration with rising cost of college	Advocate for need-based scholarships
	Pay attention to public reaction to tuition increases and be prudent with respect to increases in tuition
Changing demographics	Work with community organizations to enroll and support diverse students
	Redouble commitment to access and speak publicly about its importance
Increasing competition from for-profit colleges	Quantify student success to prove value
	Better market success and value to prospective students and funders
Changing job skills requirements and increasing demand for targeted training	Communicate with employers to better understand their needs and coming changes
	Better assess whether students are graduating with relevant job skills
	Make job placement as important as graduation in terms of accountability
Advances in technology	Stay on top of substantive developments in learning-related technology
	Understand and discuss implications for changing role of faculty

## APPENDIX 2: COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTIAL HIRING AUTHORITY, BY STATE

### NUMBER OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS HIRED BY:

PUBLICLY ELECTED TRUSTEES		APPOINTED TRUSTEES		CENTRALIZED SYSTEMS	
ARIZONA	19	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	1	ALABAMA	25
ARKANSAS	22	FLORIDA	28	ARKANSAS	11
CALIFORNIA	112	ILLINOIS	7	COLORADO	14
COLORADO	1	LOUISIANA	2	CONNECTICUT	12
IDAHO	4	MARYLAND	16	DELAWARE	1
ILLINOIS	41	MASSACHUSETTS	1	GEORGIA	37
IOWA	15	MISSOURI	2	HAWAII	7
KANSAS	25	NEW JERSEY	19	INDIANA	15
MICHIGAN	28	NEW MEXICO	10	KENTUCKY	16
MISSISSIPPI	15	NEW YORK	35	LOUISIANA	14
MISSOURI	12	OHIO	36	MAINE	7
NEBRASKA	7	OKLAHOMA	14	MASSACHUSETTS	15
NEW MEXICO	10	PENNSYLVANIA	16	MINNESOTA	29
OREGON	17	SOUTH CAROLINA	20	MONTANA	3
SOUTH DAKOTA	4	TEXAS	6	NEVADA	4
TEXAS	59	VIRGINIA	1	NEW HAMPSHIRE	7
WYOMING	7	WASHINGTON	34	NORTH CAROLINA	58
<b>17 STATE TOTAL</b>	<b>398</b>	WEST VIRGINIA	11	NORTH DAKOTA	5
		WISCONSIN	30	RHODE ISLAND	1
		<b>19 STATE TOTAL</b>	<b>298</b>	TENNESSEE	13
				UTAH	6
				VERMONT	1
				VIRGINIA	23
				<b>23 STATE TOTAL</b>	<b>324</b>

NOTE: Eight states in this chart appear more than once because each state uses more than one method to appoint presidents within its community college system

## APPENDIX 3: METHODOLOGY

The Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream conducted original research on the community college presidency between January and June 2012, exploring three core questions:

1. What are the common actions taken by and attributes of community college presidents who have led institutions with high or significantly improving levels of student success?
2. What qualities do trustees value most in community college presidential candidates?
3. Which skills do education and training programs for future and sitting community college presidents emphasize most in their curricula?

Several methods were used in the research, with interviews serving as the primary methodology for gathering data on the first two questions, and a curriculum review as the primary method to answer the third.

### ATTRIBUTES AND ACTIONS OF EXCEPTIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

In the first phase of our research, we sought to gather information about the attributes and actions of presidents whose community colleges had achieved high and/or significantly improving levels of student outcomes. Our inquiry rested on the assumption—drawn from substantial experience leaders within the organizations partnering to produce this report have had with community colleges—that community colleges achieving strong and improving student outcomes are led by highly effective presidents.

#### **Identifying Interviewees.**

To gather data, we conducted structured interviews with leading college presidents and experts in community college leadership and change management.

Specifically, we interviewed 14 current community college presidents who are part of the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Leader College network and/or whose institutions placed in the top five in the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence competition, and nine experts who have worked with multiple community colleges on improving student success.

- ATD Leader Colleges have shown three or more years of sustained improvement in student success and have demonstrated commitment to and made progress on the five principles of Achieving the Dream: committed leadership, use of evidence to improve programs and services, broad engagement, systemic institutional improvement, and equity. Among the Leader Colleges, the ten presidents chosen for interviews led institutions that had seen the most improvement in retention and completion.
- The institutions that placed in the top five in the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence demonstrated exceptional or significantly improving student outcomes. Specifically, the prize is a year-long, three-phase process that gathers and factors into the decision-making process quantitative and qualitative information in four areas of student success: learning outcomes, graduation and transfer, graduates' labor market success, and minority and low-income student success.
- To identify experts, we surveyed six recognized experts in community college operations and leadership, asking for recommendations of people who were both committed to student success and would have knowledge about the specific traits of multiple community college presidents, some of whom have who have led successful efforts to improve student outcomes. From the 16 names recommended by multiple individuals, nine were chosen to reflect the diversity of community colleges and community college leaders.

### **Gathering and Analyzing Data.**

We began our research by conducting an exhaustive literature review on community college leadership, and then developed a protocol of questions that included open-ended questions about the qualities of effective leaders and queries in specific areas the literature identified as critical in leadership: building and maintaining a culture and vision around student success, leading change aimed at student success, managing staff and others to improve student outcomes, building strong external partnerships, identifying future trends that will impact community college, being able to make effective decisions and manage risk, and managing time well. Using this protocol, two researchers conducted 90-minute structured interviews with each of the 23 individuals identified. The researchers then summarized each interview in approximately six pages. Responses were then coded in a spreadsheet and a draft summary prepared.

### **Focus Groups of Leading College Presidents.**

A summary of the research was distributed to approximately 40 current and former presidents who are either ATD Leader College presidents, Aspen Prize finalist presidents, or both. They met to discuss their perceptions of the interview findings at two focus groups during the ATD Dream Institute in February 2012 and at a meeting of presidents (along with several funders and other community college experts) at the Aspen Institute in September 2012. While no changes were made to the coded responses based on these meetings, language in the final report reflects the interpretation and emphases of the findings expressed in these meetings.

## **WHAT TRUSTEES VALUE IN THE HIRING PROCESS**

In the second phase of research, we sought to identify the characteristics most valued by trustees in the hiring process so that we could compare their orientation to areas that college presidents and experts in community college success identified as the most important for being an effective president.

### **Identifying Interviewees.**

To gather data about the characteristics that trustees commonly value most when hiring community college presidents as well as those characteristics commonly overlooked and underappreciated, we interviewed eight search consultants, who collectively have led hundreds of community college presidential searches over the past 20 years. We selected the consultants by asking six community college experts to recommend the leading community college presidential recruiters. We interviewed the eight most commonly recommended.

### **Gathering and Analyzing Data.**

With each of the eight search consultants, two researchers conducted 60-minute structured interviews, posing three core questions:

- What three to five characteristics do trustees commonly value most among presidential candidates during the hiring process?
- What one to three characteristics do trustees most commonly overvalue during the search process? Those are characteristics highly valued by trustees but not tied to a candidate's ability to lead an institution to high and improving levels of student success.
- What one to three characteristics do trustees most commonly undervalue during the search process? Those are characteristics important to a candidate's ability to lead institutions to high and improving levels of student success but are given relatively little weight during the search process.

In addition, our interviews included questions about the common process for conducting searches, the role of faculty in the search process, and how different contexts affect hiring decisions. As with the first stage of our research, responses were coded in a spreadsheet and a draft summary prepared.

## WHAT LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS TEACH PRESIDENTS

In the last phase of research, we sought to assess the competencies that doctoral and executive education programs designed to prepare community college presidents focused on most, so we could compare those to areas that college presidents and experts in community college success identified as the most important for being an effective president.

To find information about which topics programs preparing community college presidents emphasize, we examined the course offerings of six executive education programs (ranging from two to five days) and ten (mostly part-time) doctoral programs—six EdD programs, three PhD programs, and one doctor of management program). Though continuing education and traditional academic training target different kinds of audiences, and the depth of education in these types of programs differ, they collectively represent the bulk of education available to existing and future college presidents. We included both in our analysis to paint the most comprehensive picture of the types of topics community college leadership programs offer.

### Identifying Programs for Review.

To find a list of programs to analyze, we contacted five recognized experts in community college leadership and education and asked for recommendations for the programs that served significant numbers of students and had strong reputations. We then contacted the 16

programs recommended and requested information about their course offerings. For 10 of these 16 programs, only the title of the course was made available for analysis. For the other six, we were able to examine course descriptions as well.

### Gathering and Analyzing Data.

We considered each course title and, where available, the course description. We did not collect significant information – or analyze the limited information gathered – about individual course assignments. We categorized the 244 courses into 20 topic areas by predominant subject. An additional 18 course titles were too ambiguous to categorize or did not fit into one of the categories. We then grouped the 20 topic areas according to whether they focused on topics related to internal college operations (such as budgeting, strategic planning, and assessing the effectiveness of internal programs) or external affairs (such as fundraising, building relationships with legislators, and working corporations or other educational institutions). A few of our topics were broad enough that they applied both to internal and external elements of the college (such as leadership skills, legal issues, and ethics).

After grouping the topic areas, we analyzed the curricula in two parts. First, we analyzed the course topics offered by most programs in terms of what our experts said was important. Second, we examined the skills and qualities our experts identified as most important and then looked at the course curricula to see to what degree these were emphasized.

