

A Scheme for Enhancing a University President's Performance in a Transforming World

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Abstract

As society evolves and technology advances, a university like any other dynamic institution will need to change and adjust its teaching, research and community service to stay relevant, keep pace and prepare future professionals and leaders. These adjustments need to be reflected in the university's outlook and strategic plan to remain relevant and competitive. Consequently, the role of a university president is constantly evolving as they are tasked with strategically developing and positioning their university to benefit from future developments and provide best possible service to the community. Experience shows that whilst university presidents have the most important, challenging and dynamic position at their respective universities, they typically have training and expertise which can be best described as 'narrow and deep' this contrasts with the skills needed for the presidential role in a changing world which requires 'broad experience' across many disciplines of academia, management and finance. This paper will analyse and reflect on the role of the university president or leader of a higher education institution in a changing world. It will argue that university presidents often lack the essential training and expertise needed for the presidential role which can be best described as 'broad experience' across many disciplines of academia, management and finance. Then, it will offer some thoughts to maximise chances for success in a relentlessly changing world.

Keywords: President, University, Success, Changing World

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Introduction

The title of the position varies at different institutions, president at many, but also known as rector, provost, principal or vice-chancellor. These titles originated from the English and Scottish influence on higher education.

The President is the principal academic and administrative officer of the University and is accountable to the Governing Board for the exercise of these responsibilities. More specifically, a president is expected to (McCaffrey, 2004; Baban, 2017, 2018, 2022).

- Provide energetic and inspiring leadership in the directing a university to meet the evolving needs of the community and the nation
- Lead the recruitment of high-quality academic staff to begin the process of establishing a national and regional reputation for high quality academic degree programmes, scholarship and research
- Lead the recruitment of high quality senior administrative staff to establish an efficient and effective administration and management structure integrated with the academic mission
- Establish core values of integrity, high standards, dedication and innovation amongst all levels of staff and students
- Lead and enthuse all levels of staff to work individually and corporately to build an efficient and effective organization of which they are properly proud.
- Promote relationships and where appropriate working links with other regional and international universities.

The university president is a key governance, management and administrative post for the university and it is also critical for the wellbeing of the community and establishing an informed society, a society that is evolving sustainably on the basis of equity and citizenship, at ease with itself and can embrace new technologies.

In fact, higher education has never been more important in the history to encounter and dissipate the spread of extreme and intolerant views throughout society. The modern world requires an understanding of other peoples and cultures, hence, the need for graduates who are capable of being independent thinkers and problem solvers. Henceforth, the on-going changes and transitions in communities need to be reflected in university planning and thinking to meet its objectives (Baban, 2022). The need has never been greater for active and effective citizens with a clear understanding of local, national and international events and mastery of technical skills (Peterson, 2008; Balderston, 1995).

Universities are expected to respond to pressures for greater accountability while preserving academic governance models and traditions. Consequently, universities are evolving into models which are much closer to the corporate model with greater scrutiny and accountability by students, parents and governments built in. Evidently, if this trend continues, universities will increasingly look outside academia for their leaders - people with well-honed managerial and communications skills who will act as the public face of the university, someone who goes around shaking hands and kissing babies and raising funds for the institution. These circumstances have made the president's job more complicated and political; they have to be charismatic, aggressive and not step on toes often while making tough decisions. Hence, presidents need to be good managers as well as accomplished academics, able to juggle an

increasing array of complex issues and answer to a growing number of constituencies (Peterson, 2008; Baban, 2017, 2022).

This development is not welcomed by everyone, as some tend not to subscribe to the idea of universities endangering their independence. A business leader may come in and run the university more effectively and the outcomes may be improved. However, as a consequence, the soul of a university will be harmed.

In terms of university functions and tasks, the president, as the chief executive officer of the institution is responsible for the overall strategic planning and the sustained performance of the University. More specially, these can be divided into the following overlapping areas (McCaffrey, 2004; Balderston, 1995; Baban, 2017, 2022);

i. **Planning:** This involves preparation for and attempts to shape the future. More specifically, leading the vision, the strategic planning, and implementation of the growth and development of university programs and facilities to meet future challenges and needs. Time is also spent on working with plans for appropriate construction or renovation of facilities, or with opportunities to expand or adapt programs and services offered to students and the community.

ii. **Leadership:** Leading and directing the daily operations of the University, the tasks can include chairing university meetings, making strategic and operational decisions related to finance and budgetary resource issues, personnel, facilities planning, academic programs and cooperative public-private partnerships.

iii. **External Relations:** The involves hosting and/or travelling to meet with national, regional, state, community, and business leaders as well as alumni, members of the general public and members of the media. As the most visible symbol of the University, the President is also expected to extend the University's services and goodwill to the public, and to find ways for the University to contribute to the social, economic, and intellectual development of the state as well as the local community and the region.

In terms of accountability, the President reports to the Board of Trustees, the Governing Board or the Senate, based on the governance structure, for the exercise of these responsibilities. This governing body is formed from a group of individuals elected or selected by different constituencies including the Chancellor, Academic staff, captains of industry and at times, the Education and Higher Education committee in the Parliament. In addition, there are faculty and student representatives who serve as ex-officio, non-voting Board members. The Board's primary role is to establish the broad policy initiatives that guide the development of the University. The Board delegates the administrative responsibility for managing and leading the University on a daily basis to the President.

The Presidency and the President; and Overview

Society in general and the Academic Community in particular tend to have an idealistic image of the nineteenth century college and university presidents. In this ideal, the president, an experienced person of vision, is joined by scholars and students who share that vision, and moves boldly forward with invariably supportive senate and trustees. The backdrop is idyllic, and everyone is shielded from the daily turmoil of the world. This romantic organization, probably has never existed entirely, except in the imagination of the public (Baban, 2018).

However, Universities like any other dynamic institutions are subject to change. Modern universities and the role of President are generally influenced by three types of changes. These are external changes driven by government affecting the provision of opportunities, changes driven by advancement in technologies and consumer demand for educational services both nationally and internationally. These include for example, the delivery of education through distance learning programs using web-based and web-enhanced courses and video-conferencing. The final changes are internal changes and adjustments within the organisation of the universities generated as a response to the external changes (Baban, 2022).

The role of the president in modern universities can vary based on the type of institution and its decision-making configuration in terms of being private/independent or public, size of the student body, the programs offered (associates, bachelors or graduate and professional studies) and historical background. Despite this variation, the president represents the most powerful and influential individual in the academic community. To the external community, the president embodies the university and its values, and leads the institution in its contributions to academia, industry, government and the community. Internally, the president is expected to direct and manage the university with regard to realizing its strategic objectives (Rile, 2001).

University presidents tend to manage and govern their universities employing various types of power. These include; reward power, using rewards to recognize those individuals that support the mission and goals of the institution. For example, Faculty receiving tenure as a reward for strong teaching ability and academic expertise. Charismatic power, the paternal/maternal president who is serving in the parental role and providing guidance and counsel to the students, possesses charismatic power. However, Legitimate power is the most important to the president. This power is accepted by the university community without regard to resources, charisma, rewards or punishments. Legitimate power tends to stay in place until abused or ineffectively used by the President (Rile, 2001; Baban 2022).

Evidently, the president has over the years needed to adapt to arising cultural and societal changes including (McCaffrey, 2004; Balderston, 1995; Baban, 2022);

i. Deference to authority, authority has traditionally rested on the assumption that people assigned authority deserve to have it, but in recent years acceptance of, and deference to, authority were eroded by wars and conflicts. Accompanying the erosion of authority has been a loss of social capital, the bonds that hold together communities and nations.

Deference to authority and having exclusive access to information and records has also rested on the assumption that the authority figure possesses specialized knowledge. With the relatively recent development of the Internet, we can all gain access to complicated information, and decisions that may have relied on specialized information, possessed by the select few, are becoming fewer and fewer.

ii. The democratisation of information is also having dramatic consequences in the society, for example, patients routinely challenge their doctors based on information (and misinformation) globally, derived instantly from the internet. The interest in pursuing information from alternative sources is especially acute among young people who have never known any other way of conducting their lives.

iii. The generations effect, University presidents in the early twenty-first century come from a generation that knew a different way of life than their students and, often, their faculty and staff. They deal daily with the consequence of the erosion of a respect for authority, the democratization of knowledge which has made everyone an expert, the loss of social capital, while at the same time the competition for funding and students has increased.

Evidently leading a university is a challenge and an uncertain undertaking. The role of a president is hard and often requires out of hours work. Furthermore, they are vulnerable to unbearable political, economic and social pressures, especially early in their presidencies. Presidents also need to adapt to ongoing cultural and societal changes (McCaffrey, 2004; Balderston, 1995).

An Analysis to the Academic Path to Presidency

Evidently, University presidents have the most important and difficult position at their institution, yet they typically have received the least amount of training for their position. Usually, a President has earned a doctorate or holds an equivalent terminal professional degree. Very often a President has substantial experience in higher education administration along with proven leadership, management, planning, fund-raising, public speaking, and organizational skills (Baban, 2018). There is no one automatic “path” to becoming a president, it often depends on the particular needs of a given university at a given time (Baban, 2022). Hence, a President should have in-depth knowledge of strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities facing higher education in general now and in the future.

The conventional path to University Presidency often is as follows (Baban, 2018, 2022):

1. The candidates obtaining a PhD based on extensive and original research in their specialised very narrow chosen field.
2. The candidates becoming a lecturer, senior lecturer and Professor. This path will provide the candidates with the academic understating and evaluation for the processes involved in quality teaching, learning, research and research training.
3. The candidates gaining administrative and management experiences in Higher Education through competitively obtaining and performing the duties of Head of Department, Associate Dean and Dean. This path will provide the candidates with the necessary administrative, management and financial experiences as well as an in-depth and practical knowledge of Human resources management.

Examining the three points above will show that the candidates would have learned about the university, about management and delegation mostly in relation to the candidate’s discipline and department. As result, some will argue that the candidate’s training and experiences are insufficient for the presidency and can be described as being narrow and deep. More specifically:

1. In terms of qualifications: postgraduate studies and research degrees often required isolation, increased specialization, disciplined thinking, and a methodology that is based on 'deconstruction', i.e. braking concepts into very small pieces.

2. In terms of administration and management; the positions of Head of Department, Associate Dean and Dean, typically require the candidates to interact mostly with colleagues in the same discipline, hence, people that mostly think in the same way and will prioritize the same matters within and outside the university. Having a common outlook and experiences within the professional and personal circles for a significant time, can lead to assumptions that colleagues view the world as the candidates do and that those who think otherwise are at best inappropriate or unfamiliar or, at worst, badly motivated.

Hence, within this context, the candidates may have had few opportunities to deeply and regularly interact with people unlike themselves. A university president daily interacts with many people with very different life experiences including, legislators, board members, alumni, the media and community members who do not necessarily see the world in the same way as the President. This does not mean they are badly motivated, or want to harm the university. It does mean that their life experience and, therefore, their perspective, are different.

A significant challenge for a University President is then the transformation from the '*narrow and deep environment*' based on '*deconstruction, i.e., breaking concepts into small pieces*' into an environment requiring '*breadth*' and '*construction, i.e., piecing small fragments to establish a University Wide picture*' (Baban, 2022). Hence, the position requires a holistic view, synthesis and comprehending how the various segments and specializations in higher education are essential parts of and form the University as a whole.

Maximizing Chances for Success

The question often asked is Why do some university presidents succeed, while others do not? Evidently there is no one path to guarantee success, partly because presidents invariably do not have total control over their success or failure.

Trow, 1985 identified four aspects of university leadership. First, symbolic leadership which is the ability to effectively communicate and embody, the universities central goals and values both internally and externally. Internally, being able to articulate the institution and its decisions to staff, by linking its organization and processes to the larger purposes of teaching and learning in ways that strengthen their motivation and morale. Externally, articulating the mission effectively helps to shape its image, affecting its capacity to gain support from its environment and to recruit able staff and students. Second, political leadership which is related to the president's ability to resolve the conflicting demands and pressures of the many constituencies, internal and external, and in gaining their support for the institution's goals and purposes, as may be characterized by them. Third, managerial leadership, this is related to good judgment and the capacity to direct and co-ordinate the various support activities of the university including the selection of staff; the ability to develop and manage a budget and plan for the future. Finally, academic leadership represented by the ability to recognize excellence in teaching, learning, and research; in knowing where and how to intervene to strengthen academic structures; in the choice of able academic administrators, and in support for them in their efforts to recruit and advance talented teachers and scholars.

Some have indicated that university presidents tend to (McCaffery, 2004; Balderston, 2008, Baban, 2017, 2018, 2022):

1. Understand the unique characteristics of their universities including the organization's culture, its history and way of doing things which shapes the behaviour of people in the university. This understanding enables them to articulate an appropriate vision, goals, and expectations of excellence. They understand what the organization needs at a particular time in its history, and they are able to focus on the organization, not on themselves. Some organizations require transformation. Hence, the need for bold leadership at this point in their history. They must drastically alter the way in which they do business in order to survive, and transformational leadership is essential. Others need to continue on the same path. Understanding the organization's needs at a particular time in its history and leading accordingly, makes all of the difference.

2. Understand the difficult nature of the job and its complexity. All presidents face difficulties which are considered normal and part of the job.

3. Understand people. Often, people who are important to the university behave as factions or interest groups. Faculty, governing boards, legislators, community members, and students may have unrealistic expectations or may resist change. As president you are pulled in several directions at once. Consequently, university presidents often feel that others don't understand these pressures and don't provide the necessary support.

4. Identify goals that are sufficiently common, elevated, and ambitious, that the interests or factions can be united, at least most of them, most of the time. Understanding how to identify and describe those goals in a way that has meaning to diverse groups is a major challenge for a successful president.

5. Understand themselves. Successful presidents approach their jobs as students of the presidency, exactly as they saw themselves as perpetual students in their academic field. They engage in more thinking than acting, and adopt the problem-solving approach, hence look for more information or other points of view, or seek alternative approaches.

University presidents can bring their qualities of leadership, management and administration experiences to the success equation but to succeed they will need to have the legal authority and resources to act, to choose among alternatives, even to create alternatives, in short, to exercise discretion. Without that discretion and the authority and resources behind it, a president cannot exercise leadership, whatever his/her personal qualities are (Trow, 1985).

The leadership awareness and strategic challenges segments of the program clearly indicated overlapping issues facing leaders of universities across the world. The following steps would contribute to addressing these issues:

- Newly appointed presidents require support in the form of coaching or mentoring to provide guidance through the initial challenges.
- Boards of trustees, directors, or governors need to better prepare for their governance and strategic roles to be able to provide better guidance and direction.
- Leadership teams require training in leadership and management skills to more effectively support the head of their institutions.
- Major strategic issues are not getting sufficient priority due to lack of preparedness and recognition of priorities on the part of newly appointed presidents.

- Greater attention needs to be given to developing effective succession plans in university institutions, accompanied by appropriate professional development, to prepare potential presidents for their future roles.
- There is a general recognition of the importance of bringing about change in university cultures. This includes enhancing teacher quality and utilizing information technology, but there remains a lack of clarity on how to bring about this change.
- Greater emphasis needs to be given to financial self-reliance.
- Greater priority needs to be given to addressing student-centric challenges, such as jobs placement and improvement of student 'on-boarding' programs and strategies for effective linkages with the private sector.

Far-sighted and effective university leaders can play a positive role in an age of profound change. This intension and willingness to embrace change needs to be encouraged through training, coaching, mentoring and establishing supportive networks to advance their transformational journeys.

Conclusions

The traditional and classic image of a university president is of a person of vision who often teaches courses in ethics and religion, as well as their academic field. The role of the president in this constantly evolving world has changed and has become more difficult and complicated. They are tasked with strategically developing and positioning the University to benefit from future developments and provide best possible service to the community. Consequently, as society evolves and technology advances, universities need to respond and be ahead of the curve to stay relevant and competitive.

This essential strategic objective can be realised through the tangible adaptations to their research, teaching, consultancy and community services. Evidently in the age of globalisation and a constantly evolving world, as well as topic specific expertise, society requires an understanding of other peoples and cultures. Hence, particular attention should be given to the developing of relevant graduate profiles which will produce graduates capable of being independent thinkers and problem solvers and also to ensure jobs for recent graduates.

Experience shows that whilst university presidents have the most important, difficult and evolving position at their universities, they typically have training and expertise which can be best described as 'narrow and deep' this contrasts with the skills needed for the presidential role which requires 'broad experience' across many disciplines of academia, management and finance.

These circumstances indicate that at times, universities are not paying sufficient attention to major strategic priorities due to a lack of preparedness and recognition of priorities on the part of newly appointed presidents. Consequently, newly appointed presidents require coaching and mentoring to guidance them through the initial challenges. Furthermore, boards of trustees, directors, or governors need to better prepare for their governance and strategic roles to be able to effectively guide and direct. Moreover, greater attention needs to be given to developing effective succession plans in university institutions, accompanied by appropriate professional development, to prepare potential presidents for their future roles.

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