

# Pathways to the Top: Cruising through the Valleys and Avoiding Derailment

Facilitator: Sofia Martinez Ramos, Ph.D., Hispanic Center of Excellence, University of Arizona Health Sciences

Recent executive leadership turnover including resignations, terminations and aging college and university presidents present opportunities to increase diversity at the top ranks of higher education. Seventy-five percent of presidents have announced plans to retire in the next 10 years, as have 75 percent of senior administrators, said O'Banion, of the National American University.<sup>1</sup> However, as Table 1 shows, diversifying the presidency continues to be a formidable task that will require concerted national effort to change.

Table 1 - Diversity of Presidents of Colleges & Universities in the U.S.					
Year	Total Minority	African American	American Indian	Asian American	Latino
2011	13%	6%	1%	2%	4%
2006	14%	6%	1%	1%	5%
1986	8%	5%	1%	0	2%

Movement up the ranks to top-level administration requires an understanding of institutional language, culture, protocols, and expectations requiring lifelong training, mentors, and translators. Unwritten rules and expectations must be learned and navigated to succeed. These challenges and other minefields people of color experience during their career trajectory, result in a continued lack of substantive diversity at the top policy making positions.

The development and preparation of leaders of color is sporadic, not strategic therefore progress continues to be negligible. Leadership development programs provide noteworthy and effective skill building, but you have to be singled out, and sponsored by your campus leadership. An ever changing environment, demands and conflicting agendas along with diminished higher education funding create daily challenges. This exploration of challenges that can derail leaders will help you prepare for leadership and avoid pitfalls. Additionally, different leadership styles, characteristics and behaviors that either help or hinder individuals in leadership positions is explored.

**Table 2: Understanding Institutional Agenda and Unwritten Expectation Are Key to Success<sup>2</sup>**

1. Problems with interpersonal skills arrogance
2. Inability to lead constituents
3. Ethical Lapses, lavish spending to poor information sharing.
4. Difficulty adapting with institutional culture, community context or academic presidency
5. Failure to meet business objectives: financial goals, fundraising expectations, enrollment projections.
6. Board Shortcomings, from flawed search to dysfunctional board dynamics.
7. Lack of institutional knowledge or sensitivity for culture and language diversity

<sup>1</sup> Ashley A. Smith, Tension at the Top, May 20, 2016

<sup>2</sup> S. Trachtenberg, *Presidencies Derailed: Why University Presidents Fail and How to Prevent it*, 2013

**Table 3: Challenges for People of Color in Higher Education**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. A lack of established networks;</li><li>2. Cultural differences which result in being excluded from important opportunities;</li><li>3. being made responsible for diversity efforts and representing this perspective;</li><li>4. Expected to take on extra diversity commitments without compensation or acknowledgement;</li><li>5. Internal conflict resulting from feeling responsible for serving their communities,</li><li>6. Taking on too many service and community commitments;</li><li>7. Not clearly understanding the nuances of institutional culture and expectations;</li><li>8. Feelings of isolation due to lack of critical mass.</li></ol>
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**Table 4: Characteristics that help and hurt your advancement**

Consider the characteristics described in the first column. Which one describes you the best? Which one is most effective in higher education or in your organization and why?

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Strong Interpersonal Skills vs. Financial or Technical Skills</li><li>2. Change Agent vs. Agenda Mover</li><li>3. Conflict Diffuser vs. Conflict Creator</li><li>4. Rule Follower vs. Boundary Crusher</li><li>5. Autocrat vs. Collaborator</li><li>6. Easily swayed flip flop vs. Inflexible</li></ol>
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**Table 5: Skills and Behaviors to Develop and Foster**

Consider how might you develop the skills and behaviors in table to enhance your performance and advancement.

**Communication:** identify issues, problem-solve, move agendas, garner support in challenges. Positive inquiry approach.

**Negotiation-** for resources, timelines, policy changes .internal/external constituencies vie for resources or agenda items.

**Self confidence-** to enable others to trust and follow your leadership.

**Resilience-** Able to bounce back and keep going

**Optimism and adaptability** Have to believe in yourself, the institution, and the people in it.

**Strategic and visionary** With broad view of interconnectivity of issues

**Multiculturalism-** Able to understand and work with diverse cultures and viewpoints avoid myopia.

**Facilitates creativity-** Accepting difference or dissent, negotiate dissent. Able to move unpopular agenda or change.

## The American College President: 2007 Edition

### FACTS TO CONSIDER

In 1986 the American Council on Education (ACE) surveyed college presidents, in 2006 the comparison data shows small changes in diversity. The "typical" American president, like in 1986, is "a married, white male who had earned a doctorate and had served as a president at his institution for an average of nine years."

The proportion of women presidents increased from 9.5% in 1986 to 23 %. Yet, their share does not reflect their numbers in faculty and senior administrative ranks at 45 % women. Women of color still represent only 4 percent of all American college presidents

The proportion of People of Color in presidential roles has grown slowly. Their growth between 1986 and 2001 was a mere 4.5 % (from 8.1 % to 12.6%.

The percentage of presidents of underrepresented backgrounds grew from 8.1 % in 1986 to 13.6% in 2006; if Minority serving institutions are removed, the 2006% drops to 10 %. African American women, comprised 7.4 percent of all African American presidents in 1986, represented 32.0 percent in 2006. Hispanic women rose from 21.8 percent to 34.8 percent of all Hispanic presidents in the same period (20--See Table 8).

[www.acenet.edu/bookstore/pubInfo.cfm?pubID=384](http://www.acenet.edu/bookstore/pubInfo.cfm?pubID=384)

### Tension at the Top Notes - by Ashley A. Smith

Following are some common issues around resignations and terminations among community college presidents.

- ✓ Many conflicts between college trustees and presidents have led to resignations and terminations.
- ✓ Numerous college presidents have been fired or resigned from their positions.
- ✓ Often departures followed controversies related to how presidents managed finances or their relationships with trustees, students or faculty.
- ✓ [Drake State Technical & Community College's](#) president announced her retirement after being informed she would face termination for allegedly hiding details of a federal inquiry into grant money.

- ✓ [Rochester Community and Technical College's](#) former president resigned after 18 months, after students, faculty and staff demanded a change in leadership.
- ✓ In New Jersey, state and federal authorities [launched investigations](#) after the President recommend disciplinary action against employees for allegedly tampering with emails
- ✓ Lake Michigan president and the college's trustees disagreed over finances and management, 90 days into her term; suspended and then fired by the board for \$20,000 in unapproved expenses, not filing expense report, improper conduct, and inadequate goals.
- ✓ President disputes allegations, blames board for micromanagement, says money was not spent and is suing.
- ✓ Presidential /top leader pipeline development is an important consideration for Latinos.

Table 6: American Association of Community Colleges' Transition in Leadership Positions

Year and Number of Transitions Out of Presidency				
2011-12 = 134	2012-13 = 158	2013-14 = 262	2014-15 = 269	2015 - March 2016 = 203