

2024

# Competencies for the College Presidency

A NATIONAL STUDY OF EFFECTIVE  
LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Kevin R. McClure, Ph.D.



Jorge Burmicky, Ph.D.



Academic  
Search

# Study Rationale

- The question of what it means to be an effective president is as relevant as ever
- Previous studies of presidential competencies are a decade or more old
- The position is always difficult, but the context and specific challenges shift
- Chance to continue updating and enhancing search processes, leadership preparation, board education

# Study Features & Methodology

- Over 700 current presidents surveyed online with questions in the following areas:
  - Leadership Qualities or Abilities
  - Institutional Management Skills
  - Knowledge Areas to Be Effective
  - Knowledge Areas Leadership Programs Should Prioritize
- Four focus groups with current presidents at AASCU and CIC president meetings

**Table 1.  
Profile of Survey  
Respondents**

Characteristics	Group	Percentage of Sample
Gender	Men	53.0%
	Women	33.5%
	Nonbinary	0.1%
	Not reported or declined to state	13.3%
Race	White or Caucasian	68.0%
	African American or Black	9.5%
	Hispanic and/or Latinx/a/o	3.5%
	Asian American or Asian	2.1%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	0.4%
	Middle Eastern or North African	0.4%
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.8%
	Multiracial	0.8%
Age	Not listed or not reported	14.3%
	40 years or younger	0.6%
	41-50 years old	9.0%
	51-60 years old	36.2%
	61-70 years old	33.8%
	71 years or older	7.9%
Total time in college president position	Not reported	12.6%
	Less than 1 year	5.8%
	1-5 years	28.8%
	6-10 years	28.9%
	11-15 years	14.2%
	16-20 years	5.3%
	21 years or more	5.3%
Not reported	11.8%	
Total Respondent N		713

# 7 Key Competencies Identified

- Trust-Building
- Demonstrating Resilience
- Communication Savvy
- Crafting a Cabinet and Team Building
- Emotional Intelligence
- Leading with Courage
- Data Acumen and Resource Management

**Figure 1.  
Items Most  
Frequently  
Rated as Very  
Relevant in  
Leadership  
Qualities or  
Abilities**



# Trust-Building

- The survey item most frequently rated as very relevant was behaving in a way that is trustworthy, consistent, and accountable (96% of respondents)
- Establishing trust was one of the most common codes used for open-ended survey comments, connecting it to being an attentive, curious listener. Presidents emphasized the importance of giving stakeholders, especially faculty, a reliable channel for voicing concerns

“If your behavior consistently is aligned with university values, community values, and strategic planning...then you’re seen as being okay. You’re steering the ship in the right direction, you’re making sure that the rudder doesn’t slip”

# Demonstrating Resilience

- Coping with adversity and demonstrating resilience was frequently rated as very important by survey respondents (92%)
- Focus group participants discussed how their resilience is a product of leaning on teams and networks of friends, family, mentors, and faith communities. Not a solo project, but rather a product of *relationships*.

“Isolation is very real in this role...my situation is unique because I’m in a very small institution in a very small world community...so having that network to reach out to in times of need is critical.”



# Communication Savvy

- A strong majority of respondents viewed communicating effectively and authentically in formal and informal settings as very relevant (90%)
- Focus group participants explained that communication savvy entails tailoring messages to different audiences, storytelling through diverse types of data, infusing their personality and emotion into messages, and discerning which issues merit the “president’s voice.”

“We’re using a different set of tools now to help people understand the budget because they don’t [understand it]... So I think it’s also about using data differently until the message gets across. And that takes time and it takes a creative team of people, too, to come up with a different way to say the same thing.”

# Crafting a Cabinet

- One of the top institutional management skills rated as very important was building a collaborative cabinet and empowering it to make progress on institutional goals
- All participants credited their success to having a cabinet they can trust. Relying on cabinet members who possess skills that they do not have was a common theme.

“My advice to a new president would be get the cabinet you need right away.”

# Emotional Intelligence

- Focus group participants highlighted the importance of self-awareness, knowing when to ask for help, and not needing to be the smartest person in the room.
- One of the most frequent codes for open-ended comments on the survey was humility, appearing in 37 separate comments. Comments spoke to the importance of admitting mistakes, apologizing, and praising others while not expecting to receive credit for successes.

“The leaders who struggle the most, from my perspective, are the ones who have the least emotional intelligence and not able to say, ‘I don’t know how to do this, will you help?’ or reach out for help.”

# Leading with Courage

- Dealing with hard but necessary decisions was a nearly unanimous experience among focus group participants.
- Open-ended comments spoke of the need for presidents to listen but ultimately take action, avoid paralysis after hearing from stakeholders with different priorities, and take responsibility for managing change and advancing the strategic plan.

You must “act in the best interest of others, even if they don’t credit you with that and that’s why we do the job, that’s why I’m in the role.”

# Data Acumen and Resource Management

- 80% of survey respondents indicated that gathering and using relevant data to evaluate the best course of action was a very relevant leadership skill.
- Focus groups noted their need to increase their knowledge of institutional finances, while others dedicated considerable time to ensuring they had the right people in finance, enrollment, fundraising, and marketing roles.

“I let that go too long, and finally let the CFO go after about four years and let the provost go, although she went back into the faculty after six years. And I wish I had done that a lot sooner.”

# Notable Differences by Gender and Race

Women were much more likely than men to indicate that demonstrating a commitment to equity-mindedness and weighing the consequences of decisions on different groups are very relevant.

Presidents of Color were more likely than White presidents to indicate help-seeking and recognizing how emotions impact other people as very relevant.

Presidents of Color vs White presidents and women vs males were more likely to respond they needed mastery of specific knowledge areas to be effective at their institution.

# Our Takeaways

- There is no “checklist” for presidential leadership competencies today
- Public perception influences the salience of certain competencies
- Emotional intelligence was a key ingredient in trust-building and resilience
- Cabinets can be your biggest asset—or your biggest challenge
- Data acumen is more than just numbers

# Thanks!

Kevin R. McClure ([mcclurek@uncw.edu](mailto:mcclurek@uncw.edu))



Jorge Burmicky ([jorge.burmicky@howard.edu](mailto:jorge.burmicky@howard.edu))

