A 360° View of Non-Traditional University Presidents

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Introduction

Institutions of higher learning continue to face many challenges, from declining revenues and increased costs (Fain, 2008) to lack of confidence in their ability to meet the needs of the students and the society they serve (Smith, 2004). At the center of the institution is its CEO: the president. It is in this office and at this person that the buck stops. It is here where decisions are made that will affect the institution and all of its constituencies. As the literal and symbolic leader, the vitality of a given institution is dependent upon the effectiveness of its president (Rhodes, 1998). Yet, it is not uncommon to have hundreds of presidential positions in higher education open in any given year (Alton & Dean, 2002), and institutional governing boards are continually faced with the daunting task of searching for, and selecting, these important leaders.

Traditionally, most university presidents have been chosen from those having previous academic experience. Scholars have outlined multiple definable paths to the presidency (e.g., Cohen & March, 1974; Wessel & Keim, 1994), and most involve a traditional academic path including previous faculty and/or administrative positions in an institution of higher learning for a majority of the individual’s career, and immediately prior to being appointed to the position of president (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001). Many believe presidents coming from traditional academic paths are essential to lead using a shared governance model prevalent in American higher education institutions (Bornstein, 2003).

Increasingly, however, the normative academic career path is no longer considered the only route, nor it is always the preferred route for higher education presidents. Over a decade ago, a national Commission on the Academic Presidency (1996) examined the governance of American higher education institutions to determine if such institutions were prepared for present and future demands, and strongly suggested that governing boards consider selecting presidents who come from non-traditional backgrounds. Higher education leaders are now expected to forge partnerships, improve and maintain relationships within and outside the college, and develop a vision for the institution, as well as financial planning, communication skills, political savvy, and adaptability (Boggs, 2003). Yet, such skills are not typically associated with traditional academic backgrounds. As a result, more governing boards are looking at candidates with non-traditional backgrounds to serve as their institution’s leaders. In 2006, the immediate prior position held by approximately 13% of all college and university presidents was from outside of higher education, compared with 8% in 1986 (King & Gomez, 2007).

Despite the relative importance of the university president, most studies regarding these leaders—traditional or not—are quantitative in nature (e.g., Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Rottweiler, 2005), focusing on statistics related to demographics such as gender, age, educational background, and career path. With few exceptions (e.g., Covert, 2004; Davies, 2005; Glover, 2005), there has been little in the way of current qualitative research related to presidential characteristics and career paths, let alone to understand the aspirations, motivations, and challenges they have faced. And even less attention has been paid to those individuals who have not taken the normative career path to the
presidency.

Given the increased numbers of non-traditional presidents being appointed by governing bodies, it is important to learn more about them by obtaining in-depth information about the type of individuals they are, what motivated them to move into academia from a private, public or non-profit organization, what skills and unique insights they bring to their positions, particularly as a result of their non-traditional career paths, and what obstacles they faced in their move to academe. It is also important to listen to the voices of those who hired such non-traditional presidents and those who worked for them. To this end, we implemented a study to collect such information.

Methodology and Participants

We used a qualitative design to gather a 360° look at four non-traditional college/university presidents within one mid-western state. We looked at those termed a stranger within higher education (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001), having little or no traditional academic background. Purposeful sampling allowed us to target these nontraditional presidents from a diverse spectrum of Carnegie-classified institutions within this state: one large research university (Doctoral/Research Universities – Extensive), one mid-sized state university (Masters Colleges and Universities I), one traditional private college (Baccalaureate Colleges – General), and one private “system” college/university (Specialized Institutions – Schools of Business and Management).

Overall, 16 individuals within three definable groups surrounding the position of a non-traditional president were interviewed: four presidents, four chief academic officers who directly worked for these presidents (i.e., academic vice president or provost), and eight governing board members/trustees (two from each institution) who hired these presidents and to whom they reported. The decision to focus on higher education institutions in just one state was made given the access we had to the number and level of such higher education leaders within this state.

General interview questions were developed to ascertain the opportunities and challenges presented to individuals who have changed from a career in non-academic settings—such as a corporate or a governmental organization—to that of higher education, specifically the position of president. We shared these questions with study participants at least two weeks prior to interviews, allowing time for reflection on those questions. Each of the 16 interviews took between 45 and 90 minutes. Prior to these interviews, the presidents’ resumes/biographies, as obtained from their institutional websites, were examined to review their professional histories.

Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative data reduction methodology. Experiences and the voices of individual members were examined to identify commonalities or themes across participants within a group. We also used member checks whereby participants reviewed the themes extracted from their interviews.

Results

Our 360° analysis regarding the viewpoints of four non-traditional presidents and 12 individuals surrounding them resulted in a number of themes and subthemes (Delabbio, 2006), of which only the major themes are summarized in this article. Figure 1 identifies these major themes which emerged from each of the three groups, as well as those across all 16 participants.
The View from the Presidents

Historically, the American college or university president has been primarily male, Caucasian, and middle-aged (King & Gomez, 2007), and non-traditional presidents follow a similar pattern (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001). This held true for the four presidents in this study: all are Caucasian, male, middle-aged, and married. Thus, they are referred to as “he,” “him,” or “his” throughout this narrative.

The backgrounds of these four non-traditional presidents include a mix of government (federal or state), non-profit, law, and business. Two individuals in particular enjoyed eclectic careers prior to becoming a university president: one individual possesses a law degree and held high-level leadership positions in banking/finance and the federal government, while the other (who holds both a law degree and a doctorate) held high-level positions in banking/finance and in the gas and oil business. Of the other two individuals, one held a masters degree and spent a majority of his time in high-level positions in the

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<td>- Need to delegate academic matters to others who know the institution well</td>
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<td>- Non-traditional presidents offer different perspectives, but must learn patience</td>
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Common 360° Themes/Conclusions

(1) Prior Affiliation with Institution is Important Asset for Non-Traditional Presidents
(2) Previous Non-University Leadership Experiences of Great Value to the Institution
(3) Obstacle of “Not Being an Academic” Can be Overcome, in Part by Creating a Strong Team

Figure 1. Non-traditional university president 360° themes and conclusions.
government sector and the other held a masters degree and was involved exclusively in leadership positions in the non-profit health care industry. All had enjoyed the career they held prior to becoming a college/university president.

While longevity of a university presidency does not equate to success, it can be viewed as one important element. Of the four non-traditional presidents in this study, one is currently still in that position and has been serving this institution for 13 years. The other three recently left to pursue other challenges, after having served their institutions for 11 years, 8 years, and 5 years respectively. Thus the average longevity for these four non-traditional presidents is 9.25 years, slightly higher than the national average length of service for all university presidents (traditional and non-traditional) of 8.5 years in 2006 (King & Gomez, 2007).

Non-traditional president theme 1: Strong connection with institution and/or its mission. These non-traditional presidents held an affiliation with their institutions or had bought into its mission and culture. Three presidents had some previous association with the college or university they were recruited to lead. Two individuals were alumni of the institutions they headed, with one observing that, “you just simply do not get those types of opportunities to go home very often . . . Going back home was of enormous appeal.” In the other instance, the person was serving on the institution’s governing board when he was recruited to apply for the position. In all three cases, it appears that had there not been some prior affiliation with the institution, none of the individuals would have considered the profession. Two presidents explicitly expressed that the thought of leading a college or university would not have entered their minds, had a prior affiliation with the institution not existed.

One president, not previously affiliated with the institution he led, had extensive experience in government and saw further opportunity to serve the public, noting his appreciation for “the opportunities I’ve had to work in the public sector because the public sector is very important to our community life.” In addition, he was attracted to the institution and its mission.

Regardless of whether the individual held a prior affiliation with the institution or bought into the mission of the institution, all four presidents held a healthy respect for the tradition and culture of their college or university. One president reported that he brought “an admiration for the work that’s done here” to his institution and “a respect for what higher education is.” Another president argued,

Make very sure you know what the mission of the institution is and that you buy into it 100%. Because if you don’t, when the tough times come you're not going to stick around, you won’t succeed, you won’t appreciate the hassle because you’re not going to be 100% committed to what’s happening. You really have to fit. If I ever did this at an organization that I was lukewarm about . . . I wouldn’t survive.

Non-traditional president theme 2: Previous non-academic experiences valuable. The four presidents had multiple leadership experiences in the private, public, and non-profit sectors, and all found these of great value as they took on the challenge of leading an institution of higher learning.

Two of the four presidents had served in government, either at the state or federal level, and both found that the experiences gained in those environments were invaluable. One noted, “Leadership in a public university involves recognizing and honoring the legitimate concerns of multiple constituencies . . . And that’s very much the same as any kind of public leadership.”
Another president believed his background in the public and private sectors, plus his law degree, all paid dividends when it came to leading a public university: “I had practiced law and tax law for a number of years and of course any big institution has its share of legal questions…. [My] finance banking was helpful because in any big organization there are also lots of major financial issues.”

The fourth president likened his experience in the non-profit health field, specifically dealing with medical staffs, to college and university presidents having to work with faculty. He also believed that reporting to, and working with, the university’s governing body is very similar to his experiences reporting to and working with non-profit boards in his other positions.

In all cases, the presidents believed that they could look at the institution with a fresh perspective and offer alternative methods to address problems and issues. One noted that “outside presidents . . . bring in a different approach to running an enterprise.” Another asserted “I contribute by bringing both the different vantage point and a different skill set than a typical president would have who had come up through the ranks.”

Although all concur that their previous experiences were important, they agreed their success hinged on having previous exposure to public policy and service work. The president who came from an exclusively private-sector background agreed that his work in finance and the law were helpful, but he cautioned that “it would have never worked to just come in here and be an expert in law and finance.” He also pointed to his service as a member of the governing board of an institution of higher learning (not his own), as well as his familiarity with the school as a graduate, his passion for the institution’s mission, and his experience in fundraising for the institution as being critical components in his background that prepared him for the position. This is consistent with an observation made by one of the other presidents, who said “I think if their whole career has been in business, I think it’s probably a mistake.”

These presidents also understood that while they may have enjoyed success in their past professions, there was also a need to understand and appreciate the unique nature and characteristics of academic leadership. One president acknowledged that he would have failed in his attempt to lead a university if he had tried to manage it like a manufacturing operation or a hospital. Another president observed, “If you come in believing that because you’ve been in business or because you’ve been in government, you can now show up and reveal to these poor, unenlightened, sheltered individuals who’ve been off in their ivory towers all this time, the ways of real decision-making, and real customer service—if that’s your orientation, stay home.”

Non-traditional president theme 3: Developed strong leadership teams and relationships. Each president believed that his success was based, at least in part, on the team he developed. One president, reflecting on his background in law and business, commented that “Getting the right people in the right positions in important.” This same president humbly observed that he “had good people to learn from.” Another president had similar sentiments when he stated that “You have to be humble—you have to allow people to be successful and basically take a second chair and then realize when things aren’t going well you’re back in the first chair.”

A third president, as he characterized several aspects of his leadership, asserted that building a “good team and motivating them has been the most important thing that I’ve done . . . We’ve built a really solid
team.” This same aspect was echoed by another president, as he outlined his philosophy of leadership: “Leaders facilitate and help others to do what they need to do and can do.”

In addition to developing a strong administrative team, another common element was what one of the presidents termed “the grant of legitimacy and authority” coming from both above and below them. All four presidents acknowledged the importance of faculty governance. As one noted, “when you are in a university setting with the faculty governance process . . . there is a grant of authority from below you in the hierarchy of the organization. Faculty has a significant role in determining fundamental educational processes by which the institution operates.” He further cautioned that if a person with a non-traditional background does not respect the fact that academic governance is real and legitimate, “I think [s/he is] in for a pretty rough ride and you may not be able to accomplish what the institution needs you to accomplish.”

The presidents also emphasized the need to work with governing boards and other stakeholders associated with their respective institutions. All of the presidents had well-established relationships and were familiar with at least some of the members of their governing boards prior to being appointed, in three instances because of their past affiliations with the institution (one himself being on the governing board), and in the fourth case through his role in government. “I've had extremely good relationships with my board [members],” one president, who noted he knew one-third of the board members when he was appointed, said,

I have had absolutely no conflicts with my board in 10 years. I think that came out of my previous experiences; being on boards . . . I understand what they're looking for and I think I can keep the information flow and the decision-making at exactly the right level to make that work.

Non-traditional president theme 4: Faced obstacles, but none insurmountable. The presidents voiced that the non-traditional nature of their backgrounds did produce some obstacles, but all could be dealt with and often were more perceived than real. These presidents found that while faculty resistance was present, it was not difficult to overcome, at least from their perspectives. There was recognition that obstacles existed, but as one president put it,

I think at the point you show up as a non-traditional president, people immediately work from some caricatures of wherever you come from. If you come from business, then you’re going to be a businessman and you’re not going to understand education and all you’re going to care about is the bottom line. . . . so you have to overcome those things, but I didn’t think they were much of a challenge to overcome.

Another president acknowledged that there is always some skepticism about a new president, regardless of whether that individual came from outside of academia or from another institution. “I think that some faculty, not most, assume that the president is of a different breed than they are, even if they are an academic in real life. I don’t think in the end there was a problem, particularly after the first year or two,” he observed. And a third president said being non-traditional “was initially purported to be a barrier. . . . In the end it wasn’t at all.”

While only one president specifically mentioned not having a Ph.D. was, at least in his mind, a shortcoming, the one president who possessed a doctorate indicated that it was essential: “At [this institution] they wouldn’t hire a president without a Ph.D., at least at that stage they wouldn’t, and I don’t
think they would in the future.” It was this same president, interestingly, who declared that he “was most worried about the academic affairs side of things, because that’s the one that I had the least direct involvement in. It turned out not to be a major problem because I studied it hard and I had good people to learn from.”

Overall, the four presidents universally believed that any barriers of being non-traditional are more perceived than real, and any such barriers that existed were mitigated early in their tenures. They also understood that they were under a microscope and being closely scrutinized. “Being aware of the prism through which people look at you as you came in and then being straightforward as you engage people,” one president identified as a trait he believed was necessary.

Non-traditional presidential theme 5: Successfully acclimated to a deliberative, decision-making process. These non-traditional presidents acknowledged the decision-making processes used within higher education to be both frustrating and refreshing.

Each individual acknowledged that in previous private, non-profit, and/or governmental settings, there was always pressure to get things done, “some of it self-imposed but some of it very real” that he didn’t feel existed as deeply in his role as a university president. As one president stated, “Everything I did in health care was urgent. You didn’t have to run it through 100 different [boards]—we had a task force and work groups and all that—but you couldn’t noodle on something for two or three years.” He went on,

There’s a comfort, a familiarity, in higher education that is very hard to change. So you come in as an outsider, a non-higher education guy, and you say ‘Let’s do this.’ Well, this is how you do it: you have to form committees, you have to get students involved, and in two years there is a semblance of a recommendation. . . . which is something I’ve had to learn to appreciate and acclimate and embed myself more into the culture of the university . . .

Although each expressed frustration at the deliberative process that exists in higher education, including use of multiple committees, there was an acknowledgement of the importance of a longer decision-making process. Decision-making in higher education, according to one president, “doesn’t operate on election cycles; there’s a longer time horizon.” Another president noted:

The real benefit of long-term time horizons is that you really take on more of a steward’s role knowing that you will make decisions that will have an impact 10, 15, or 20 years from now. That is a powerful reality that causes you to be very careful and deliberate in your decision-making because there really is a significant impact for the long term.

Despite the slower decision-making processes of higher education, they felt success in bringing a different perspective to the position and the institution. One president readily admitted that his impatience with the decision-making process at his institution “caused some friction,” yet the re is now a stronger focus on results and moving the institution forward. One president mused, “the consensus around here, of people who’ve been here before I came or came when I came, is that the [decision-making] pace . . . is [now] much faster than it was before.”

The View from the Chief Academic Officers
The four chief academic officers hold doctorates and have (or had) spent the majority of their careers in academia. Three were with their respective institutions when the non-traditional presidents were hired, and each had spent all or a majority of their careers at that institution. The other CAO was hired by the non-traditional president, who specifically looked for a person with strong academic credentials to balance his non-academic background.

Chief academic officer theme 1: Non-traditional presidents must understand culture, but coming from outside can be an advantage. The chief academic officers noted that non-traditional presidents must understand the culture and traditions of higher education. One summed it up by saying that there is a “fraternity feeling in higher education that doesn’t exist in a lot of [organizations].” Similarly, alluding to the highly participative culture of higher education, another reported,

Almost everybody that works in higher education is . . . well educated and they are used to being valued in ways that employees in other kinds of institutions might not be. So a president just can’t come in and start ordering people around. They have to understand that there is an expectation here that “I will be asked what I think; I’ll be given an opportunity to participate in some kind of consensus-building exercise” so that ultimately when a decision is made lots of people feel like they maybe own a piece of that decision.

The chief academic officers acknowledged that although the leadership backgrounds of these non-traditional presidents—including prior affiliations with the institution—helped them understand the culture of the institution, a learning curve did exist. As one chief academic officer observed, “I think that lack of experience of what goes on in the trenches . . . required a longer-than-one-would-have-hoped-for learning curve.”

Conversely, it was acknowledged that not having been part of the culture and tradition of higher education could be beneficial. One chief academic officer candidly admitted “Higher [education] is just a kind of Byzantine place. It has a culture of its own; it has traditions that people adhere to without really even thinking about them.” Another agreed, arguing, “the traditions in academics are traditions but they don’t always make sense.” And a third believed that not having a clear understanding of the culture of higher education and how it operates,

Makes it far easier for [the president] to challenge it—which is good for us . . . He can ask us, “Why the hell is it taking so long?” So, we had to be able to answer that question. And by answering that question, we discovered sometimes, you know what, it does take too long . . . And so I think by him sometimes asking those kinds of questions simply because he doesn’t understand causes us to say, “Whoa, wait a minute. That’s a good question.”

Chief academic officer theme 2: Previous non-university experiences valuable. Whether politically savvy, experienced with fundraising, familiar with the institution, or having experience in the non-profit sector, the background each president brought to the institution was deemed valuable by the chief academic officers. “This guy,” one argued, “was one of the most politically savvy presidents that we’ve had. . . . He understood what pulled the strings downtown and he understood what pulled the strings in public opinion.” As a result, the president was able to push the university on a number of issues rather than waiting for the issues to be pushed on the university. Before the president’s arrival, the chief academic officer noted, the institution,
Seemed to be going through two or three years or longer of being on the front page every day with some stupid story . . . or some other transgression that the university was supposed to have committed against somebody or other. That almost stopped over night when he got here. [He] kept us off the front page or he made sure that most of the time we were on the front page it was for good reasons. . . . I just think as an outsider, especially a political animal himself, he was intensely sensitive to those kinds of issues—for the good of the university.

Another chief academic officer, in discussing the president’s ability to work with the governing board, observed that “the board [of trustees] is full of business people primarily. They all speak the same language. I think it’s easier for [president], or [president], or others to make an easy connection with the board . . . He has made a splendid connection with his board.”

The chief academic officers also believed their respective non-traditional presidents brought a stronger “sense of urgency” and need to their institutions. As one argued, “He brought a very, very strong sense of measurables with him to campus.” Another reported,

We were used to a very deliberative process. Some would say a slow, deliberative process. He wanted action, so on the one hand that could cause some tension, but overall I thought it was good. He was focused on what we were trying to do and wanted to accomplish that. I welcomed that. I welcomed someone who was going to help achieve, as long as I could also convince him of my agenda . . . He was results-oriented, action-oriented and not deliberate. He had a quick mind; he came to his conclusions quickly. I liked that.

Finally, the chief academic officers felt their non-traditional presidents brought a fresh view to the institution, whereby coming in without the academic background brought “a freshness to the perspective you get when you’re coming in without that baggage.” As a result, one asserted that “the outsider is probably, all other things being equal, much more inclined to lead change.”

Chief academic officer theme 3: Non-traditional presidents need to delegate academic matters to others who know the institution well. The chief academic officers believed it critical for the non-traditional president to create a strong team and delegate the “academic stuff” to others. As one chief academic officer noted, “That kind of [non-traditional] background . . . can be very dependent on a provost or chief academic officer and [the president must] be willing to delegate a lot or responsibility and leadership to them in terms of the academic programs.”

The chief academic officers also believed their non-traditional presidents had been successful in listening, learning, and delegating academic matters to those with more traditional academic backgrounds. “He said when he was hired that he would be hiring a provost who had a strong academic background,” one reported. Another chief academic officer said it was crucial for a president to allow his staff to “speak to power” as a way to provide proper balance to leadership:

The basic practice in universities hasn’t changed in 100 years . . . But bringing in an outsider, with a very strong personality, with no one from the inside to work with, is almost a recipe for disaster. [Yet] there was a happy convergence of talents here that really permitted [president] to be effective, and that was [the provost] . . . [The provost] had a very good sense of the institution, and not afraid to call him out. And call him up . . . There needs to be—especially if you’re hiring an outsider—an effective countervailing set of ideas to sort of try to keep things in balance.
At the same time, two chief academic officers referenced the fact that their new presidents brought in a new team, or a partially new team, and the inherent dangers in doing so (even if that team included those with a strong academic background). As one stated, “It is not all that unusual for a new president to come in a build a whole new senior leadership team . . . And I think the disadvantage of that can be that you’ve just completely changed the institution because the history is gone.” In this particular instance, the new team was necessitated in part because of a reorganization taking place due to the merger of three institutions. Another chief academic officer cautioned, “if you come in as an outsider, be careful who you bring with you . . . [President] brought in about four or five people . . . at one stage or another. I think only one really displayed superior talent and ability on this campus.”

Chief academic officer theme 4: Non-traditional presidents must prove themselves. The chief academic officers indicated that non-traditional presidents did face faculty resistance and suspicion. “People in the institution. . . I think always look a bit askance at somebody coming in who hasn’t come up through their ranks some how, or hasn’t been in the classroom, or hasn’t published anything,” noted one chief academic officer. They also acknowledged “the prism,” as one president suggested, in which the presidents were viewed. “I think it’s a challenge to feel comfortable in a world that you know is watching you so carefully and watching to see if you know what you’re talking about,” said one chief academic officer.

As a result, one academic officer noted that his president had to “prove that he could be president even though he has never been a faculty member.” This person went further, acknowledging that “He [had] to prove himself open to academic life to me, too.” Another chief academic officer put it this way, “I don’t think he fully appreciated, coming from the outside, really how involved and hard-working the majority of the faculty is. So that set up . . . from the start, a bit of rancor.”

Several chief academic officers also voiced there was a greater learning curve than would have been necessary had the president come from a traditional background, even if it were from another institution of higher education. “It’s understanding what happens on the shop floor . . . that required some time for him to sort of come to terms with and for the campus to come to terms with him,” one chief academic officer asserted. Another argued, “So with [the president] coming in, who’s never been in higher education, it’s going to present us with a whole different set of challenges than somebody else would.”

The chief academic officers freely pointed out, however, that over time they saw the non-traditional presidents become more comfortable in their roles. “[He] came to have a better understanding of the guts of the university and the work on the shop floor and what faculty [does],” one concluded. Another believed there was “some mutual learning” that took place, from both the president and the campus community.

Views from the Governing Board Trustees

Given the critical role a governing board member plays in the recruitment and selection of a university president, two current or former board members of each institution were interviewed. In one institution’s case, one of the two trustees interviewed was a member of the search committee while the other was not. In another instance, one trustee was on the search committee and subsequently became a member of the governing board. In the other instances, the trustees were part of, or chaired, the search committee while serving on the board.
Trustee theme 1. Passion and vision are essential. First, it was the consensus of all eight governing board members that the individual elected as president of the college/university must demonstrate a sincere concern, passion, and vision for higher education and for the mission of the institution. “We clearly wanted someone who was in tune with the value system of [the institution],” asserted one trustee. “Our goals were to have someone who was committed to the values.” Another trustee, from the same institution, observed that the non-traditional candidate “not only bought into it, he had been a part of it his entire life; he understood it and understood what it really was about and what it had to be in the future . . . he was a solid believer in the vision and mission of [the institution] . . . he was deeply concerned about the education here.” Other board members from different institutions had similar responses. One reported their president not only embraced the mission, but “lived the mission.” The trustee went on,

He was very good about laying out that vision. . . . He knew how to take education and make it work; make it work for the larger masses, and to me that’s the mission of [institution]. You go beyond the theoretical; you teach your students how to take that theoretical knowledge and go out and put it in practice so it benefits society. I think he knew that; he just knew it.

A number of trustees emphasized the propensity of the non-traditional presidents to move the institution to a higher level. “His conviction of where he felt education had to go was solid,” stated a trustee from a public university. “He could really see his role as pushing us to a higher level, academically.” One trustee reported that another president “had this vision about how we could move the university within its mission to another level, and he was always looking at that . . . always thinking about ‘how can we move the university to the next level?’”

Trustee theme 2: Previous non-university experience valuable. Without exception, governing board members believed that regardless of background, the prior experiences and skill sets that these non-traditional presidents brought to the position were valuable and relevant. While all trustees pointed to the general leadership abilities of the presidents, most trustees identified specific skills the non-traditional president brought to his role, especially in the areas of finance, fundraising, and political connections. “[He] knew [state] appropriations better than anyone else,” one trustee confided.

A trustee from another institution had similar feelings about its president. “The greatest attributes that attracted me to [him] and made me confident with his selection were his commitment to promoting global understanding, his depth of knowledge about financial matters, and his connections in Washington, D.C.” And the other trustee from the same institution observed the president “deplored waste,” and was always looking at “where we could get the most bang for the buck.”

While the fiscal condition of the institution was important, one trustee acknowledged the need to balance the finances of the university with its mission. The trustee noted the financial acumen that the individual brought to the position, and to the institution, was “essential” and that he “grasped the financials [of the institution] extremely quickly because of that previous background,” and he also didn’t use the “bottom-line” as an excuse for not doing things. “He saw the university’s needs, didn’t try to say everything’s got to be focused on the bottom line. He honored the mission and vision of the university.”

Trustee theme 3: Must develop a strong team. The governing board members voiced their non-traditional presidents’ successes were based in part on having solid staffs to support their efforts. One trustee asserted that 90% of the president’s job in the particular institution was fundraising,
and the other “10% is surrounding yourself with the people who are able to carry out the rest of what’s going on here . . . and [continuing] to look at the vision and the mission of [the institution].”

A trustee from another institution believed one of the first things the president did to add credibility was to appoint the interim provost, who was held in high regard by the academic community, as the official provost. “[The provost] played a key role in helping the non-traditional president have credibility with the faculty,” the trustee suggested. Another trustee from the same institution agreed, “[The president] I think, very effectively resolved any of those initial qualms by immediately reappointing [the interim provost] as provost.” Another trustee believed the president and his provost had a “great team relationship” and they “worked very well together.”

Several governing board members also noted it was necessary for such presidents to seek out, as one trustee put it, individuals on campus who would “not tell you what you want to hear, but what you need to hear.” The trustee further cautioned that a president needs to find people s/he can trust and confide in. Another trustee from a different institution suggested the president look at the “whole organization, not just deal with staff. They’ll only bring you things that they want you to hear.”

Trustee theme 4: Obstacles are not insurmountable. Similar to the views held by both presidents and chief academic officers, trustees also believed that not having a traditional academic background was a barrier, but not insurmountable. One trustee noted, “without having that strict academic background, it was easy [for people] to take shots at [the president] because, well he’s not an academic after all. What does he know? While he’s taught, he’s not published; he doesn’t do research.”

As a result, trustees specifically mentioned the need for the president to prove himself and to earn the respect of the academic community. One summed it up this way, “There were some who said, ‘Buddy, you’re going to have to really prove yourself to us. We’re going to make you work for our respect.’” And in one particular instance, a trustee pointed out the president also had to prove himself “to alumni and sports fans and . . . the other pieces of the university.”

As universally as trustees believed being a non-academic was the biggest single obstacle faced by non-traditional presidents, they also held that their institution’s president was successful at overcoming that obstacle. It was not uncommon for a trustee to state that over time the president was able to prove himself and earn the respect of the campus.

Being able to listen, exhibiting a willingness to learn, and accepting the input of others were traits also deemed necessary to help the presidents overcome obstacles. “He’s done a very nice job of listening,” a trustee remarked of one president. One trustee observed of another president, “He’s a very inspiring leader who is so willing to learn from other people and there’s nothing he is not interested in.” A governing board member noted that the president of a third institution sought advice on a regular basis from his predecessor. “He used to confer with [his predecessor]. A lot of people don’t know that.”

In addition to using their skills in developing relationships, presidents found acceptance on the campus through their accomplishments on behalf of the institution. As one trustee observed, “When people saw, for the most part . . . the progress that the university was making, and the public support that the president had generated for the university, I believe then that the skepticism and some of the criticism began to die.”
Trustee theme 5: Non-traditional presidents offer different perspectives, but must learn patience. With their various backgrounds and experiences, trustees also believed the non-traditional presidents brought a different perspective to the institution and did not “fall into the old tradition that ‘we can’t touch that’ because it’s sacred ground,” as one trustee observed. “They will ask more questions.” A trustee from another organization agreed,

I think from the board’s perspective, to look at issues and problems in a non-traditional way, it was a real advantage to have a president or a candidate who was not traditional. It gave a sense of, “Yeah, this person can look at that from a balanced perspective, not a prejudiced perspective.”

One benefit a different perspective brought was that decision-making on even the most routine actions is improved. “You know, you get in a rut. A new person comes in and says, ‘Look, you want to accomplish X, but there’s another way of accomplishing X.’ And maybe there is another way and a better way.” Even the most routine decisions may be subject to error, one trustee argued, because “you don’t look at your work so carefully because you’ve done this so many times.” As a result, the decision can “come back to haunt you.”

While governing board members agreed that the different perspective brought to the institution by a non-traditional president was a significant benefit, an equally collective belief among trustees was that impatience in dealing with the decision-making processes in higher education was a potentially detrimental characteristic of non-traditional presidents. Although decisiveness in a leader is a positive trait, there were concerns about how presidents might deal with the deliberative process in higher education. When addressing the challenges facing presidents, a trustee stated the president had to “adapt to the board and campus expectation of their participation in decision-making, and that’s not something that’s as readily accepted by people who come from the outside.”

In discussing one president’s tolerance of academic governance, a trustee believed that “he was much more proactive in giving [the faculty] things to react to rather than waiting for them to generate ideas at their end and bring them up to him for acceptance or rejection.” This same board member believed the president “did learn sensitivity. He learned that you . . . do try to build a consensus. And then he had people around him that he’d assign the task [of] going out and getting a consensus so there was buy-in.” Other trustees agreed.

Putting it all Together: Conclusions & Discussion

As noted, only a few qualitative studies on non-traditional presidents could be found (e.g., Davies, 2005; Grover, 2005). The goal, therefore of this 360° view of non-traditional presidents was to gain a deeper understanding of the motivating factors for non-traditional presidents, how beneficial or detrimental their past experiences and existing leadership skills were viewed, and any obstacles that had to be overcome to be successful. While each of the three groups projected their own perspectives onto the non-traditional president, three common themes emerged from the discussion: (1) prior affiliation with the institution is an important asset for non-traditional presidents; (2) previous non-university leadership experiences of great value to the institutions; and (3) the obstacle of “not being an academic” for non-traditional presidents can be overcome, in part by developing a strong team. This section will summarize these conclusions and indicate any connections to previous qualitative studies on this topic.
Conclusion 1: Prior Affiliation with Institution is Important Asset for Non-Traditional Presidents.

Three of the four non-traditional presidents had an affiliation with the school they led or currently lead: two being alumni and one having served on the institution’s governing board. This finding is similar to one found by Davies (2005), who noted that four of the six non-traditional presidents he studied had a personal connections to their universities and most likely could not have been presidents at other universities (three held degrees from the institution, while the fourth was associated through his political connections).

Because of these previous associations, we found there was a personal appeal to lead the institution that transcended the professional challenges associated with it. This was supported by the similar nature of responses made by each individual, asserting that becoming a college or university president would not have entered their minds had it not been for the prior affiliation, familiarity, and affinity they had for the institution. Chief academic officers and governing board members also found that having a prior connection with the institution was a positive attribute, primarily because it helped acquaint—at least partially—the non-traditional president with the culture of the institution specifically, and the culture and tradition of higher education in general.

Two presidents spoke fondly of the “unique opportunity” to serve their alma maters. In addition, all three presidents, without hesitation, affirmed that they would not have considered leading an institution of higher learning had they not held a prior affiliation with the college or university. In the fourth instance where the president had no prior association with the institution, he—along with the chief academic officer and both trustees from the university—acknowledged that his grasp of its mission and culture was unquestionable, and that he was committed to the niche the university had established for itself.

Having a prior affiliation with the institution and its values were deemed important characteristics by governing board members. Although they did not use that as a primary criterion in the recruitment and selection process, it was a consideration. One trustee, reflecting on the two finalists for the presidency, felt that while one traditional finalist was a very competent individual, he “was a person who didn’t really carry that strong—what shall I say—knowledge, support, buying in to the vision of . . . education as I saw it and as I thought we ought to be seeing it.” As a result, the non-traditional finalist who held the values of the institution and stated “he was deeply concerned about the education [here]” was ultimately selected.

All three groups voiced it important for the presidents to have an understanding of, and appreciation for, the culture and mission of the institution. They went further by implying that the importance for this respect could not be underestimated.

Conclusion 2: Previous Non-University Leadership Experiences of Great Value to the Institution

All 16 participants agreed the past experiences of these non-traditional presidents were valuable to both the individual and the institution, regardless of whether the president had came from the public, private, or non-profit sector. Although specific assets varied depending on the situation, advantages brought from their non-traditional backgrounds included: financial skills including fundraising experience, political sophistication, public policy experience, working with multiple and often conflicting constituencies, ability to work with high level governing boards (often composed of business and community leaders with no academic backgrounds),
Given their backgrounds and experiences, each president had an ability to work with a variety of individuals and to develop and maintain relationships that equipped them to serve their positions and institutions effectively. This was a consistent theme, not only among presidents, but also reflected in the comments made by chief academic officers and trustees. As part of their leadership abilities, the presidents recognized their own shortcomings and were able to identify talent and developed strong teams to compliment their skills and assist them in managing the institution, especially the academic affairs.

Glover’s (2005) study of new first-time college presidents and their transitions (including eight non-traditional presidents of the 15 total presidents in the study) revealed similar results, whereby the transferability of prior leadership skills, the different perspective—primarily a broader view—was valuable to the institution, especially the ability to work closely with corporate leaders, and proved to be strengths that traditional presidents were not always able to bring to the institution. Glover also found that bringing a different perspective to the institution, in the forms of “newness and enthusiasm,” was a characteristic of non-traditional presidents. We too found this to be a consensus among our study participants as well.

A case can be argued, however, that any new leader—regardless of a traditional or non-traditional background—can bring a different perspective to an organization. What differentiates the non-traditional president from the traditional president, one trustee observed, is that a person from a private-, non-profit-, or even public-sector background will be able to adapt more quickly to change simply because those organizations have oriented them to do so. The trustee pointed specifically to the vibrant environment from which the president had just moved. Thus, our study found that these non-traditional presidents were believed able to adapt to change more quickly than traditional presidents.

Indeed, the most significant advantage, according to most of the respondents, was the ability of the non-traditional president to bring a more global perspective to the institution and to not be encumbered by past practices and traditions and therefore question “the way things were done.” By asking questions, the non-traditional president encouraged the institutional players to think more deeply about why they were acting the way they did. It was not uncommon to hear terms like “fresh views,” “thinking outside the box,” “global perspective,” as being descriptive of the non-traditional president. As such, the problem-solving abilities of the individuals were viewed as improving the problem-solving abilities of the institutions. This ability was universally described as the single biggest advantage for both the individual and the institution.

Conclusion 3: Obstacle of “Not Being an Academic” Can be Overcome, in Part by Creating a Strong Team

Similar to that reported elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Glover, 2005), the three groups in this study readily admitted that these non-traditional presidents faced the obstacle of “not being an academic.” This general hurdle spawned several ancillary obstacles, including the need for presidents to prove themselves and gain credibility with faculty, the fact they might not understand or appreciate shared governance, the perception that the institution would be operated like a business and the academic foundations would be ignored, and institutional jealousy.

It was, however, the consensus of all study participants that the non-traditional presidents were
successful in overcoming this obstacle. This success was based on the individual’s ability to work with the various constituencies and stakeholders of the institution, the fact that all four presidents embraced the missions of their respective institutions, and the demonstrated tangible successes each person brought to the institution, most notably fundraising and capital improvements.

The presidents acknowledged that they were viewed as outsiders, and as such, were open to learning about, and orienting themselves with, the academic community and its many stakeholders. They developed a strong management team, which the presidents—from their own perspectives as well as those of the chief academic officers and governing board members—indicated was an essential ingredient to their success. This is not to suggest that all faculty and staff accepted the non-traditional presidents, but there was certainly a large part of the campus communities that did accept them.

Non-Traditional Presidents: Worth the Risk?

While each group, and each individual, brought their own perspectives into this 360° analysis, it was clear these non-traditional presidents brought value to their respective institutions. Across the groups, it was recognized and deemed important that the non-traditional president understand, appreciate, and value the missions of their institutions as well as the overall culture of higher education. It was also apparent that the background and experience of the non-traditional presidents, regardless of sector, prepared these individuals to deal with the complexities of leading institutions of higher learning. The various backgrounds brought different perspectives to the institution, acknowledged by various study participants as a more “global” perspective. Finally, non-traditional presidents acknowledge their shortcomings and, as a result, understood the critical nature of developing and maintaining strong management teams to aid in their ability to be effective leaders of their respective institutions.

Overall, we found that four non-traditional presidents, and 12 top leaders surrounding those positions, clearly viewed the risk they took as positive and beneficial to their respective institutions. Given the significant demands being placed on such leaders, as well as the increased complexity and challenges facing higher education, we are likely to see more talent from outside of academia being tapped to lead such institutions in the future. The results of this study, albeit small, supports that such outside talent can indeed be a valuable asset to institutions of higher learning given the correct fit between a non-traditional leader and the mission of an institution.

References

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