

The Challenges of Leadership: Unique Aspects of Leading the American Community College

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Abstract

Community colleges have a history of an ability to adapt to their changing environment quickly and in response to changing learner needs. This ability to change has historically relied on strong presidential leadership. The current study was designed to explore the leadership trait needs of community colleges in the US, and how these desired traits vary based on constituent levels. Drawing upon a sample of faculty, students, community citizens, and business and industry leaders at a one case study community college, the findings showed that each constituent group wanted something different. The faculty agreed most strongly that they wanted a leader with high emotional intelligence, students wanted an empathic leader, community members a leader with gratitude, and business and industry representatives were looking for fostering innovation. Based on a sample from one community college, the findings suggest that there is a need for further research as well as a need to better understand the definition of leadership within community colleges.

Keywords: Community Colleges, Leadership, Administration

Introduction

The American community college is unique within the landscape of higher education. These institutions that evolved from the secondary school structure serve a variety of roles in their communities, including basic job training, academic transfer programmes, remedial education, community education, and continuing education. They serve as the ‘glue’ that can hold a community together, providing facilities and structures that bring individuals from diverse walks to life together

into a common space. For these kinds of reasons, they have been referred to as ‘democracy’s college’, and they have an important role in not only their immediate communities, but in the larger landscape of state policy.

With such diverse activities, these colleges can be difficult to manage and lead. Although most activities are arranged around traditional organisational functions, staff sizes and reliance on part-time help, in addition to scarce fiscal resources, can complicate their operations. To make the leadership of these institutions even more complex are the range of learners and users. The result is that the college presidency, already considered one of the most complicated and political jobs in the US, is made even more challenging in the community college sector (Tarker, 2019; Smith, 2021).

The complexity of the community college structure and expected outcomes are further complicated by the challenges of leading in higher education. Traditional leadership theories tend to focus on transformation and transaction, and increasingly authentic and ethical leadership (Yukl, 2013), often assumed within organisations that have a clearly defined role, mission, and vision. For community colleges, much like other organisations within higher education, the role diffusion makes applying leadership practices difficult, at best.

Cooney and Borland (2018) offered an exploration of transformational leadership in community colleges by applying one of many available leadership inventories with a sample of aspiring community college presidents. Their study, while unique with the sample they were exploring, relies on self-reporting by aspiring presidents. They found that these leaders reported that they did indeed use transformational leadership practices, yet there remains a significant question about what kinds of leadership practices best serve, and are needed, within the

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world of community colleges. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the current study was to offer a cross-sectional exploration of the leadership skills needed for community college senior administrators.

Background of the Study

Community colleges are at a crossroads in their evolution. Many, through online programming and relaxed state oversight, see their missions as much more than local community service and job training, and are developing programmes and plans that serve wider audiences than they have in the past. These same colleges maintain much of the language of their founding, attempting to serve local needs and constituents, creating a ‘mission strain’ in their work. Added to the questions about what they should be focusing their attention on are concerns for degree relevance, financial stability, enrolment management, and how leaders can survive and thrive in these new environments.

The evolving nature of the community college can cause stress on the leadership needs and profile of these institutions, meaning that leaders can feel pushed and pulled in different directions, sometimes with little clarity or support (Cooney & Borland, 2018). In some instances, governing boards are very clear about expectations, and state regulatory guidelines are similarly prescriptive. In other environments, however, there is tremendous discretion for the college leader to make decisions and set priorities with few limitations.

Weissman (2022) profiled the challenges of leading a community college and noted the range of issues that leaders face. These include both the internal and external pressures of the presidency, as well as personal pressures to perform, including, most recently, the pandemic. With an ageing cadre of college leaders, new leaders are hired and brought into institutions, often causing a ripple effect through an institution. She noted that nationally the average length of time a community college president serves is 5.1 years.

From the perspective of students, leadership is also complicated from a variety of perspectives. Community colleges have historically provided a gateway to higher education for those from diverse backgrounds, and currently enrol a majority of the diverse learners in higher

education. At least part of the reason for these colleges being so successful in recruiting diverse learners has to do with providing career-focused education to those who would not otherwise pursue higher education, and another part has to do with providing affordable educational opportunities to many of those from lower socio-economic groups in society.

In addition to the range of expectations, meaning job training and immediate placement, support for adult returning students who might need child care, and so on, there are generational issues that can complicate the most basic functions of an institution (Evans & Forbes, 2012). For example, what Evans and Forbes referred to as the “net generation” represents a group of students and faculty who are driven and fully integrated into technology use, while senior leaders might have very different ideas, and experiences, with the integration of technology into workplace issues.

Regardless of generational differences, there remains a strong emphasis on communication skills as a key to effective leadership. This reliance on communication includes not only oral and written communication, but the more nuanced commitment to communications within an organisation, such as the rituals and language used (Tomlin, 2015). This idea of communication skills being critical to effective leadership has been underscored throughout higher education, but specifically for faculty who seek to understand the mission and vision of their institutions (Czech & Forward, 2010).

Another way of considering community college leadership was framed nearly 25 years ago by Shugart (1999), who conceptualised leadership as being grounded in the idea of stewardship. The conceptual framework he presented focused on serving others, similar to the foundation of servant-leadership, whereby institutional leaders find their success and workplace satisfaction in seeing others be successful and giving themselves to help those individuals be successful. True academic accomplishment, whether in job training or academic transfer work, therefore, has more to do with leaders providing the resources and encouragement to be successful rather than being the focus of the institution.

Regardless of position, the practice of leadership in higher education is complex and leaders can find their careers and their work ‘derailed’ by any number of variables,

ranging from faculty relationship problems to student controversies (Trachtenberg, Kauvar & Bogue, 2013). Halpern (2015) stressed that to be effective in academic leadership, the leader must truthfully and faithfully engage in a process of shared governance that is framed around open communication and a clarity of goals and decision-making criteria. This process, however, is increasingly difficult in the community college context where many faculty are hired on a part-time, adjunct basis, unions are prevalent, and the institution's mission is complex and evolving. The result, then, is the need for the current study to explore the leadership skills of these community college leaders and how they might differ based on the constituent being served.

Research Methods

In an effort to understand the perceptions of community college leadership needs, four different constituent groups were identified for a one-case study community college. The college, located in a rural, mid-western US state, enrolled approximately 2,500 credit students and another 500-700 annual non-credit students through continuing professional education courses. The rural location of the college had a population of approximately 12,000 and was supported by light manufacturing as well as several service-based industries. The college was over 60 years old, offered 22 different academic degree programmes and 11 occupational certificate programmes, such as truck driving, welding, nursing, construction management, and so on. The college was led by a 'president' who was appointed by a locally elected board of trustees.

The constituent group to be surveyed were identified in consultation with the president's office at the college, and included all 45 full-time faculty and 180 part-time faculty, a random sample of 250 students enrolled at least part-time, 80 business and industry partners who were listed on a 'business and industry partner list', and 150 individuals who had attended or participated in some activity hosted by the community college within the last year. These 150 individuals were broadly defined as 'community members', and most likely participated in either a non-formal learning programme (such as a college-sponsored book club), attended a reception on campus, or registered to use the college's facilities, including their recreation

room. The combination of these groups resulted in a total sample of 705 individuals.

To understand the sample members' perceptions of the leadership needs of the college, they were administered a 15-item researcher-developed survey instrument. A variety of literature sources were first identified and a listing of 61 leadership characteristics were chosen. These 61 characteristics (some considered 'traits') were then assembled into a pre-survey that was administered to ten community college presidents. They were asked to rate their agreement that the leadership characteristics were critically important and relevant to the community college sector of higher education. They rated each item, and the top 15 were then included in the survey to constituents. The survey was then field tested with non-respondents and the wording was adjusted to reflect the best possible understanding of the survey intention. The survey was approved by the institution's Institutional Review Board and administered in the spring of 2022 using an electronic survey platform (Qualtrics).

Findings

Using three reminder emails sent at three-day intervals, a total of 209 surveys were returned and deemed useable in the data analysis (29.64% response rate). As shown in Table 1, the returns varied by sample member categories, including 88 responses from faculty (39.1%), 45 students (18%), 37 business and industry representatives (46.75%), and 39 community members (26%).

Constituent respondents were asked to rate their agreement with 15 statements using a Likert-type scale, where 5 = strongly agree progressed to 1 = strongly disagree, so that a rating of '5' would mean that the respondent strongly agrees that the leader of the community college should possess that leadership trait. Taken as a collective group, respondents agreed most strongly that community college leaders should be effective communicators ($\bar{x} = 4.76$), show respect ($\bar{x} = 4.67$), have a high level of integrity ($\bar{x} = 4.63$), and show gratitude ($\bar{x} = 4.58$). This group of respondents agreed to strongly agreed with all 15 leadership traits, but agreed least strongly with the traits serving as a team builder ($\bar{x} = 4.37$), have an ability to influence others ($\bar{x} = 4.35$), and have a high level of agility ($\bar{x} = 4.33$).

Table 1: Overall Mean Agreement Levels for Perceptions of Leadership Needs of Community College Presidents

N = 209

	Mean	SD	Range	High	Low
Effective communicator	4.76	.8292	4	5	2
Respect	4.67	.2893	4	5	2
Integrity	4.63	1.598	5	5	1
Gratitude	4.58	.6820	4	5	2
Empathy	4.57	.3483	5	5	1
Transparency	4.52	.7295	5	5	1
Foster innovation	4.50	.7629	5	5	1
Persistence	4.48	.8723	5	5	1
High emotional intelligence	4.46	.4829	4	5	2
Problem-solving	4.45	.7239	5	5	1
Self-awareness	4.44	.8723	5	5	1
Empower others	4.40	.2896	4	5	2
Team builder	4.37	.4320	5	5	1
Ability to influence others	4.35	.9823	5	5	1
Agility	4.33	.8290	5	5	1

Using a one-way analysis of variance and Tukey post-hoc test of honestly significant differences, overall mean responses were compared by group of respondents. Faculty, who had an overall agreement, $\bar{x} = 4.69$ for the 15 items, agreed most strongly with having a high level of emotional intelligence ($\bar{x} = 4.88$) and being empathic ($\bar{x} = 4.84$). Faculty had the lowest level of agreement with the trait of ability to influence others ($\bar{x} = 4.38$).

Business and industry representatives agreed most strongly that community college presidents should foster innovation ($\bar{x} = 4.90$) and persistence ($\bar{x} = 4.87$), and agreed least strongly with the president empowering others ($\bar{x} = 3.86$). Citizens similarly had the lowest level of agreement with empowering others ($\bar{x} = 3.90$), and agreed most strongly with the traits of gratitude ($\bar{x} = 4.91$) and self-awareness ($\bar{x} = 4.90$). Students agreed

least with the trait of fostering innovation ($\bar{x} = 3.87$), and agreed most strongly with the president having the traits of empathy ($\bar{x} = 4.86$) and integrity ($\bar{x} = 4.81$).

The ANOVA identified eight significant differences among mean scores (as shown in Table 2). For the trait of empowering others, the business and industry and citizen group’s responses were significantly lower than those of the faculty and students ($p < .05$). The citizen group’s responses were also significantly lower than the other group’s responses for the traits of self-awareness and empathy, while significantly higher than the others for the trait of ability to influence others ($p < .05$). Student mean perception ratings were significantly lower for emotional intelligence and transparency, and the faculty mean rating of team building was significantly higher than the other group’s means (all $p < .05$).

Table 2: Responses and Differences in Leadership Perception Needs of the Community College President

N = 209

	Faculty n = 88	Students n = 45	B&I n = 37	Citizens n = 39	Sig.
Empower others	4.82	4.50	3.86*	3.90*	.021*
Integrity	4.75	4.81	4.22	4.58	1.37
Effective communicator	4.77	4.63	4.85	4.90	.812

	<i>Faculty</i> <i>n = 88</i>	<i>Students</i> <i>n = 45</i>	<i>B&I</i> <i>n = 37</i>	<i>Citizens</i> <i>n = 39</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Self-awareness	4.62	4.51	4.63	3.86*	.017*
Agility	4.44	4.00	4.84*	4.00	.022*
Empathy	4.84	4.86	4.24	3.99*	.018*
High emotional intelligence	4.88	4.07*	4.22	4.23	.009
Gratitude	4.72	4.13	4.53	4.91	.222
Respect	4.75	4.55	4.51	4.82	.261
Transparency	4.77	3.97*	4.51	4.65	.006*
Ability to influence others	4.38	4.01	4.27	4.80*	.038*
Persistence	4.49	4.30	4.87	4.34	.618
Foster innovation	4.70	3.87	4.90	4.44	.400
Team builder	4.80*	3.89	4.35	4.01	.043*
Problem-solving	4.76	4.26	4.37	4.11	.498
OVERALL	4.69	4.29	4.47	4.36	

Discussion

Community colleges are undergoing dramatic changes, as is the entire higher education industry. The global pandemic has played a role in intensifying the use of technology and remote learning; however, the evolution of the community college goes even further. The rise of micro-credentials, offering professional baccalaureate degrees, and a shifting curriculum that prepares students for a broader number of careers are all shaping the priorities of these colleges. And at the helm of the community college is a leader with multiple pressures and demands from a wide variety of constituents.

As demonstrated with the responses from those participating in the current study, different populations can articulate what they want from the community college leader. The faculty want leaders who have a high level of emotional intelligence, presumably to help best understand what the faculty want and need. Students want an empathic leader, someone who will feel the challenges of what it is like to be a student and to perform on tests, memorise material, and balance life inside and outside of the classroom. Business and industry leaders want a leader who is innovative and can see the world through different lenses and can see how to take on tasks and challenges differently. Citizens in the community want a leader who has gratitude, presumably for the community that is supporting the college. Taken as a whole, these indications suggest that a leader is one who understands

the time and place of service and can respond to a wide variety of needs.

These findings also point towards a fertile range of future research, notably beginning with what constitutes a leader in the community college. Perhaps harkening back to conversations about positional authority, leadership might be defined by a position, but it might also be defined as a personality or charisma. Future research should explore how different senior administrative positions exert leadership and perhaps differentiate that leadership from other senior positions. Does, for example, the dean of academics have a different realm of leadership, complete with different leadership traits and practices, than the president? Similarly, faculty leadership should be explored, seeking to understand how faculty members can be first-among-equals, and how that might be described in a world that employs mostly part-time faculty.

Future research should also explore the intersection of the senior leadership position with governing boards, attempting to understand how leadership can be brokered between individuals who share a common vision for an institution. Both qualitative and quantitative studies can provide important insights about how community colleges can excel in the future.

The findings of the current study at their most basic level show that different constituents want different things from the higher education leader. This finding would most likely not be unique to the United States, where the study was

conducted, and most likely has strong similarities around the globe. Scholarship that builds a better understanding of cross-cultural applications to higher education research would also serve the future of the academy well.

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