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Our University: Planning for Leadership Change

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Our University: Planning for Leadership Change

Universities are propositions for the long run. Short-term strategies lead to short-term successes. Little is more important to a university than succession planning and it is almost universally overlooked as institutions lurch from one foggy set of leadership goals to another.

A Japanese proverb says it best:

When you're dying of thirst it's too late to think about digging a well.

Leadership changes are a fact of life. Presidential tenure averages about eight years according to a study of The American Council on Education.

Succession planning identifies and develops people for leadership roles within an organization. This is common practice in the private sector. At General Electric it was all Jack Welch talked about. In Japanese corporations - known for their long term inter-generational view of excellence - succession planning is the primary job of corporate executives.

Succession planning is also practiced at Ivy League institutions. Properly approached, this is good practice for any enterprise, but implementation can be tricky. Predictable patterns emerge when promoting from a coterie of mostly white males, steeped in the traditions of the institution. Appropriate confidence in mission leads to a strong preference for appointing people "like them" to take over the reins when they are gone. Human frailty tends to reproduce the most superficial aspects of "like them", such as race, gender, and ethnicity.

Environmental forces might compromise succession planning at universities. Primary among those is the notion that participatory governance makes every search process a "wake-up call" in a new world.

It is difficult to argue against casting a broad net to find the best leadership talent from a deep, diverse pool of candidates. As public higher education becomes more politicized, ringers and cronies are sometimes placed in positions of leadership based on political relationships. Whether looking the world over or in your own backyard, patronage can have a disastrous impact on the academy and shackle institutional progress in the absence of knowledge of institutional purpose.

Change in the ability of students and faculty to think about and address compelling social, moral, and intellectual problems is paramount. Universities need to be organized efficiently, like businesses, with savvy, trained, educated leadership.

Changes in the leadership of political organizations frequently bring with them wholesale changes in the leadership of a government bureaucracy. Go to any recently elected governor's website and look at the calls for resumes and interest in new patronage positions.

Christina Gonzales of the University of California Davis goes a step further and suggests that political appointments to leadership positions frequently undermine their predecessors who may have instituted excellent programs and guided the university with vision and care. Previous success may take the shine off the successor... that is the political nature of succession.

At Notre Dame, five years before Father Theodore Hesburg was to leave the post, a process for identifying a number of potential successors began. Internal leadership was groomed, developed, and tested so the trajectory of Notre Dame would remain constant or be improved. No happenstance, but institutional will to improve leadership.

Possible replacements were in a no-lose situation. If their experience and training did not lead to the presidency at Notre Dame, they would be well placed to become senior staff or compete effectively for leadership positions at other institutions. This kind of succession planning creates many winners and builds reputation for the institution.

One of the biggest challenges of internal replacements for senior leadership is that decision makers, no matter how deft their handling of difficult issues, tend to alienate some members of the university community, and in so doing hurt their chances for affirmative votes from search committees. Worse yet, anticipating the possibility of competing for a promotion on campus may cause leaders to become timid in decision-making, avoiding even necessary risk for fear of tarnishing their reputation.

These forces tend to make succession planning difficult, whether at the presidential, dean or department chair level in the academic arena or in areas vital to support of academics. Still, such planning should be a significant part of the mission of senior leadership at any university.