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NONTRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT: FROM CANDIDATE TO PRESIDENT

By

Mark J. Braun

BA University of Iowa 1991
BS Upper Iowa University 1994
MBA University of Iowa 2012

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to understand a nontraditional university president's transitional experience of the presidential search process and the competencies he believed he possessed and how those competencies have been utilized as a university president. The study utilized Creswell's approach to phenomenology to document the experience of going through the search process. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2016) report, the AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model, provided the framework for this study. This study used that framework to evaluate whether the nontraditional president has the same competencies called for in the model.

This study addresses two research questions. What is the experience of a nontraditional candidate who transitions from industry leader to a university president? How does a nontraditional university president translate his professional competencies into the role of a university president? This study used an in-depth semi-structured interview with the nontraditional president. The interview focused on his previous experience and competencies, his candidacy and appointment experience, and about applying the previous developed competencies in the academic environment. The setting was a Midwest public flagship university where the president came from a nontraditional career pathway.

The nontraditional candidate followed a nontraditional path during the search process because he believed the process was flawed. The nontraditional president demonstrated the majority of the competencies called for in the AASCU model. The governing board also broke with the norms by meeting with a potential candidate before he had gone through the search committee process. The search process was rooted in the culture of the university, which led to a negative reaction to the nontraditional president. When search committees and governing boards are interviewing candidates, regardless if they are traditional or nontraditional, they should use the AASCU (2016) model as a framework for evaluating candidates. To avoid a negative reaction, the search process needs to be clearly defined at the beginning of the search and any candidate, traditional or nontraditional, must follow that process.

Nontraditional, president, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, search committee, phenomenon, competencies, search process, governing board

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This dissertation was presented
by

Mark J. Braun

It was presented on
November 12, 2020
and approved by:

Marylin Newell, PhD, Lead Advisor
University of New England

Corey Berg, EdD, Secondary Advisor
University of New England

James McCormick, Affiliated Committee Member
AGB Search

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Nontraditional presidents are not a new phenomenon to higher education and have historically been a significant proportion of the population of university presidents. While there is a traditional pathway to the presidency of starting as a tenure-track faculty member and then progressing through the steps of a tenured faculty member, department director or chair, dean, provost, and president, any candidate for president who has not followed that specific stepped process can be considered nontraditional (Beardsley, 2015).

An article in *Inside Higher Ed* recently noted that the proportion of presidents coming from a traditional background is more common (Toppo, 2018). Toppo referenced a recent Virginia Commonwealth University study that reviewed the background of the 215 leaders, mostly from land-grant universities, of whom 46% began their careers in something other than a tenure-track position (Toppo, 2018). According to Toppo (2018), the authors of the Virginia Commonwealth Study believed their research indicated that institutions of higher education were never solely about academics where financial considerations of the institution were not a primary focus. Toppo (2018) also referenced the American Council on Education (2017) study that showed over time that the number of nontraditional presidents has averaged 16% from 2001-2016, with the highest percentage being 20% in 2011. This longitudinal study indicated that roughly one out every six presidents is nontraditional.

The research that has been done on nontraditional presidents indicates that nontraditional presidents will continue to be a part of academic institutions. While the proportion of nontraditional presidents may not be increasing over time, institutions of higher education do have a one in six chance of being led by a nontraditional president every time there is a presidential search. Researching the experience of nontraditional presidents will add to the

current literature and help inform institutions that may experience a nontraditional president in their future.

Statement of Problem

Existing research on nontraditional college and university presidents falls into three categories. Most of the research has focused on a demographic review of their career paths. Additional research has centered around colleges and universities and why they may be looking for a nontraditional president. Finally, recent dissertations have focused on the characteristics of nontraditional presidents after they have been appointed as president. This study addresses the experience of the nontraditional president through the search and selection process, and their experience after being appointed president. This dissertation study focuses on the experience of one such candidate who was selected for a university presidency.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to understand a nontraditional university president's transitional experience, the competencies he believed he possessed that qualified him for the position, and how those competencies have been utilized as a university president.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the questions:

RQ1: What is the experience of a nontraditional candidate who transitions from industry leader to a university president?

RQ2: How does a nontraditional university president translate his professional competencies into the role of a university president?

Conceptual Framework

The AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model, issued in 2016, provided the framework for this study. The model was intended to be used to build a developmental assessment program for current and future presidents. In developing the model, AASCU (2016) looked at research that showed an increased interest in hiring presidents that had not spent their career in academia. However, AASCU was concerned that leaders who had not may be less focused on students (AASCU, 2016).

According to the AASCU, the model was first developed by conducting a qualitative research analysis to determine a profile of a successful president. Then a planning symposium was held with experts and practitioners to review the profile and discuss assessment methodologies. They believed that this model could be applied to higher education for succession planning and leadership development by developing a well-defined set of competencies. The study used the AASCU model to understand how a nontraditional university president translated his professional competencies into the role of university president

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

This study assumed that the experience of the nontraditional president and the competencies he expresses are different than those of traditional presidents. Another assumption was that the nontraditional president has not experienced a public selection process that typically happens at a university where the campus community has the opportunity to question the candidate and provide feedback to the board of regents.

Limitations of the research design may include an inadequate interpretation by the researcher or errors in data collection (Creswell, 2015). Additionally, with the number of possible competencies, there was concern about a clear interpretation from the interview of

which competencies the nontraditional president believed would make him successful. The interview required an extensive discussion of competencies to determine the sub-competencies from the conceptual framework, however, member checking was utilized to account for this limitation.

Additionally, the study may be limited because it only considered the experience of one nontraditional university president. A robust examination of a nontraditional university president provides a better understanding of that individual's experience and his competencies and traits as they apply to the role of a university president. The results of the study may be influenced by the unique characteristics of the nontraditional president, the selection process, or the university itself.

Rationale and Significance

This descriptive phenomenological study begins to address a gap in the literature about the experience of nontraditional candidates who are selected president of a university. The study provided an understanding of what it was like for someone outside the education sector to apply for and go through a presidential search. Additionally, learning what competencies the candidate believed qualified him for the position and how those competencies have served him as a university president helped to fill in the gap of the literature. By examining the experience and competencies of a nontraditional candidate-turned-university president, the study serves as a template for additional research into the lived experience of others who followed the same trajectory.

Governing boards and boards of trustees with an understanding of these areas will be better equipped to evaluate nontraditional candidates in future searches. Ultimately, this understanding could help governing boards and boards of trustees make appropriate selections of

university presidents who come from industry. Deno Curis, a senior consultant with Academic Search Inc., argued that when presidents report directly to a board where the members are mostly from the business world, there is a greater willingness to hire a nontraditional candidate (as cited in Doss Bowman, 2011).

Conclusion

Roughly one in six university presidents are nontraditional presidents. Using the AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model (2016) as a framework, this phenomenological study describes the experience of one nontraditional university president from his candidacy to his appointment and beyond. Examining the experience of a nontraditional president provides insight for those who will be selecting university presidents, for institutions that may experience their first nontraditional president in the future, and for nontraditional candidates who are thinking of applying to become a university president.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Governing boards and boards of trustees will continue to see nontraditional candidates in the pool of applicants in university presidential searches. A 2018 article in *Inside Higher Ed* noted that the proportion of presidents coming from a traditional background is still the majority of candidates selected, however, when surveying land-grant universities almost half began their career in something other than academic settings (Toppo, 2018). Understanding the motivation and attributes of a nontraditional candidate who applied, was selected, and assumed the position of president will assist governing boards and boards of trustees in understanding the experience of nontraditional candidates. This is especially important when looking at how the nontraditional candidate will fit into the culture of the institution.

The model developed by AASCU (2016) was conceived as a way to develop current academic leaders and serves as a conceptual framework for this study to determine if nontraditional presidents demonstrate the same competencies as those developed by AASCU for current academic leaders. Finally, while there are volumes of literature about university presidents and the changing role of the college president, this chapter presents relevant literature review about nontraditional presidents.

The following literature review begins with an overview of the role of the president, presidential search process, and a section on preparing for a nontraditional president. Following this section is a review of the description and demographics of nontraditional presidents. It should be noted that the literature reviewed in this chapter did not distinguish between college and university presidents when examining the role of the president, the selection of a president, or the demographics of nontraditional presidents. College and university are used interchangeably throughout this literature review to reflect the terminology of the authors cited.

The literature review is followed by a detailed description of the framework that was used in this study.

Role of the President

When universities were founded in the United States, the original presidents were men who were also members of the clergy (Harper, Mathuews, Pulcini, Tackett, 2017). Since then, the role of a university president has changed. In the 1800s the Morrill Land Grant Act made higher education more available, and presidents began to take on more administrative duties along with their faculty responsibilities (Harper et al., 2017). In the 1900s, as enrollments and the number of educational offerings grew, presidents became full-time administrators who not only were scholars but also were expected to have financial and organizational skills (Harper et al., 2017). In the 21st century, higher education has new challenges that further change the role of the university president. Presidents are an emissary of the university whose responsibilities are focused on fundraising and building relationships (Harper et al., 2017). Mead-Fox (2009) also argued that, over the last two decades, the role of educational leadership has changed from educational to managerial.

The American Council on Education (2017, [ACE]) in its 2016 survey of presidents determined that college and university presidents spend most of their time on fundraising and financial management. The results of the survey showed that 65% of the respondents spend most of their time on budget and financial management (2017). Fifty-five percent of the respondents spent most of their time on fundraising. The other categories listed among the five areas of time consumption were managing a senior-level team (42%), governing board relations (33%), and enrollment management (32%) (2017). Finally, the survey showed that 44% of college and

university presidents believe they do not have enough time for reflection and contemplation (ACE, 2017).

Selingo (2017) looked at the role of 800 presidents and noted that their paths to the presidency varied. He also studied the role of the president and argued that the position of president has transitioned to a position that focuses on external issues. Additionally, Selingo (2017) found that presidents expect their successors to have more of a business background. He noted that presidents feel the need to have short-term gains that they can demonstrate to their governing boards and that there is more pressure from governing boards to see actionable items implemented, which is creating additional demands on the presidency.

Selecting a President

Search committees are an essential part of the hiring of a president in higher education, according to Loren Anderson (2018), an executive search consultant for AGB Search. Anderson (2018) noted that all search committees are not the same and some can be more effective than others. According to Anderson (2018), search committees express the shared governance model for decision making in higher education, as well as contribute to making better selections on who to hire.

Anderson (2018) argued that there three qualities for an effective search committee. The first quality is ownership. According to Anderson (2018), ownership provides a sense of responsibility for the outcome and the success of the new leader. The second quality is engagement. Anderson (2018) related this quality to committee members participating in every step of the search process. The third quality is trust. This quality involves sharing the common interests of the committee and the institution (Anderson, 2018).

Watkins-Hayes (2015) indicated that a presidential search should have two goals. The first goal should be to choose a president who will move the institution forward. The second goal should be to design a process that looks to enhance the institution's strengths. Watkins-Hayes (2015) believed that the presidential search needs to provide stakeholders with confidence in the search process. If a search process does not provide confidence, it will require the new president to repair the damage from the controversial search process. Watkins-Hayes further argued that for a search process to be successful, the search committee should identify the issues facing the institution and the strategic direction of the institution. Also, a key to a successful search is introducing the candidates to various campus stakeholder groups and then listening to the feedback on the candidate from each stakeholder group.

McDade et al. (2017) discussed that even with qualified nontraditional presidents, the institutions themselves may not embrace a nontraditional candidate, and there is too much resistance at some institutions for a nontraditional candidate to be successful. They also argued that when there are nontraditional candidates in the pool, their off-list reference checks may provide the best insight into whether they would be successful in an academic setting. For those nontraditional candidates that are selected, McDade et al. (2017) went on to say that change management skills would be needed to deal with the social and political challenges they would face in the academic setting.

How well nontraditional presidents will be welcomed was highlighted in an article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Gardner, 2018) that focused on a politically connected businessman hired to run the Tennessee university system. The Tennessee system had come under political fire for several controversial activities at the University of Tennessee (Gardner, 2018). The external pressures led the university board to look for a leader who could bring an

outside perspective to the system. The businessman, who had political connections to the governor, raised the concerns of the faculty about the impact of a politically connected system leader on academic freedom.

Watkins-Hayes (2015), when discussing the process of selecting a president, concluded that search committees should interview a wide range of candidates so that the search committee can have several options for the future leadership of the college or university.

Career Pathways

Researchers have been gathering demographic data on nontraditional presidents since the 1980s. One of the first studies was done by *The Educational Record* (Green, 1988). In this study, a survey was sent to presidents asking them basic demographic information including details about their career paths. Approximately 1,500 presidents responded to the survey. The results of the survey showed that the average college president in 1988 was white, married, male, and 53 years old.

In their study of the four types of career paths of college presidents Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) identified one category labeled “strangers”. Strangers are nontraditional presidents whose careers have moved in and out of higher education as well as those who have never held a position in higher education (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001). The authors went on to describe strangers as those who go directly into the position of the president, coming straight from politics, the military, or some other nonacademic field, with no experience in higher education (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001). Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) also argued that for some nontraditional presidents, the position is not a dedication to higher education but rather a specific opportunity that presented itself at the right time.

Gardner (2017) published an article based on an interview with Scott Beardsley, then Dean of the University of Virginia Darden College of Business. Beardsley is a nontraditional dean who spent 25 years in the consulting business before becoming a dean. He recently published “Higher calling: The rise of the nontraditional liberal arts college president: Context, pathways, institutional characteristics, views of search firm executives, and lessons learned by presidents making the transition” (2015). In the interview, Beardsley (2015) noted that the number of tenured professors is down and therefore more presidents will not follow the traditional tenure-track, tenured professor, department head, dean, provost to president route. Beardsley believed academia needs good leadership and that nontraditional candidates can be good leaders. Beardsley went on to say that nontraditional presidents must establish an honest dialogue with those on campus and that running a university is a team effort and no one can be successful without the right team. Lastly, he noted that governing boards are becoming more accepting of nontraditional presidents who demonstrate strong leadership skills.

Beardsley (2015) found in his research that the type of higher education institution may give rise to the selection of a nontraditional candidate. Beardsley gave three examples of institutions that may look to nontraditional candidates. Religious institutions may look for someone of the same denomination but not necessarily an academic to run the college or university. A low-ranking institution may look for a nontraditional candidate who can think outside of the box and is willing to take risks to raise the institution’s ranking. Also, institutions that are lacking sustainable revenue may look to nontraditional candidates who may bring financial connections or are willing to try a new business model for the institution.

Beardsley (2015) noted that search firms are casting a wider net when looking for presidential candidates if there are not search parameters set for the type of candidate to be

recruited. Beardsley also noted that nontraditional candidates who have the correct fit with the correct opportunity would likely be a successful candidate. Beardsley wondered, though, whether a nontraditional candidate who becomes president ever just becomes a president and not a nontraditional president.

In a 2018 article Toppo noted that the proportion of presidents coming from a traditional background is still the majority of candidates selected, however, when reviewing the background of over 200 land-grant presidents, 46% began their careers in something other than a tenure track position (Toppo, 2018). This research also reinforced the findings of Hartley and Godin (2009) who studied the career pathway of presidents of independent colleges and universities and found that 13% of the presidents of independent colleges and universities came from outside of higher education.

The American Council on Education has done multiple surveys on the career pathways of university presidents. These surveys are done every five years and started in 2001. In 2017, the American Council on Education, in conjunction with the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association Institute (2017) published the results of the 2016 survey of presidents. Figure 1 highlights what position presidents held before becoming a college or university president since 2001. In 2016, 15% came from outside higher education.

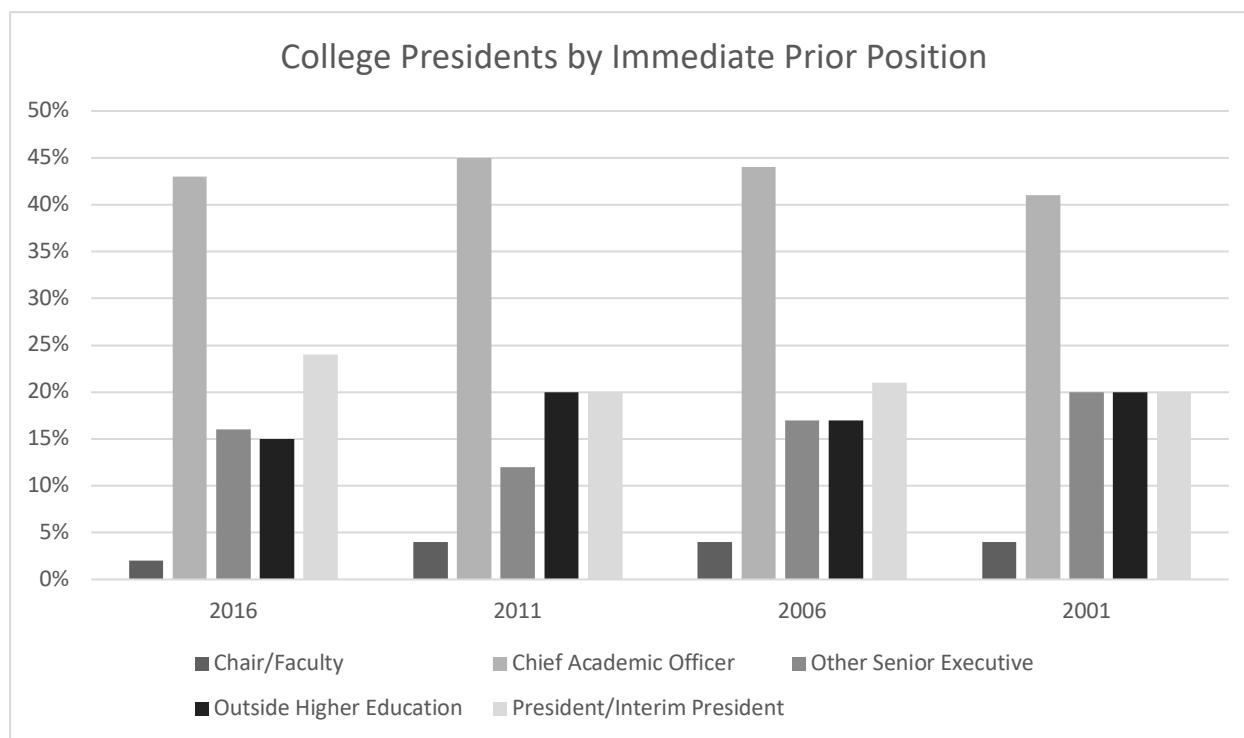


Figure 1. American Council on Education 2016 study of college presidents' previous position.

Nontraditional Presidents: Definition, Examples, and Preparation

There is no standard definition of a nontraditional president or candidate for president. There is, however, a traditional pathway of starting as a tenure track faculty member and progressing through the steps of a tenured faculty member, department director or chair, dean, provost, and president. Any candidate or president who has not followed that specific stepped process can be considered nontraditional (Beardsley, 2015).

Examples of University Presidents

While nontraditional candidates and presidents are not a new phenomenon in higher education, many nontraditional university presidents have had a corporate or political background with little or no experience in academia.

Culture Clash (Heuvel, 2014) explored three well-known nontraditional presidents from the past. Through historical research and interviews, Heuvel (2014) explored the presidencies of

Dwight D. Eisenhower at Columbia University, Terry Sanford at Duke University, and Paul Tribble at Christopher Newport University. Heuvel (2014) illustrated that Sanford and Tribble had an adjustment period after being selected but adjusted to the position and culture of academia. However, Heuvel (2014) demonstrated that Eisenhower was not able to adjust from the order of the military to being a president in academia where the culture allowed for questioning direction and expressing opposing viewpoints.

Well-known former military or elected officials are certainly nontraditional candidates. McDade, Dowdall, Polonio, and Hamos (2017) looked at the perspective of search firms on nontraditional candidates. From their perspective, the best candidates are not looking for the position and must be recruited to apply. McDade et al., (2017) argued that some of the best candidates to lead a large complex organization are those from large corporate organizations or those who were former politicians who have held executive offices or were in the military, such as the examples studied by Heuvel (2014). Those candidates who are recruited to be in the pool value confidentiality and if there is a chance that their candidacy may become public, some potential candidates will not get into the pool. This is not just a nontraditional candidate concern, but holds for those who are applying from within the academy as well.

Wall (2015) conducted a study of the characteristics of nontraditional presidents in New England. The study was comprised of 17 interviews of nontraditional presidents. The data showed relationship building was the most prominent characteristic. By being able to network and build relationships these nontraditional presidents were able to acclimate to academia. The Heuvel (2014) study showed Dwight D. Eisenhower had a hard time transitioning to academia from a structured hierarchal military background where the hierarchy determined the relationships as opposed to networking and building relationships.

Some nontraditional presidents have even reflected on why they were hired. McCulloch-Lovell (2012) argued one of the reasons nontraditional presidents are hired is that they have experience in running organizations that also have administrations and large budgets (in particular budgets that may be running a deficit). McCulloch-Lovell (2012) surmised that nontraditional presidents have adapted to multiple organizations and workplace environments, which gives them the skillset of adapting to different workplace cultures. McCulloch-Lovell (2012) further explained that nontraditional presidents are more open to innovation. Lastly, McCulloch-Lovell (2012) argued that an asset nontraditional presidents have is viewing the institution from a bigger lens when looking at economics, politics, and the social environment. This perspective, McCulloch-Lovell (2012) noted, could also be a challenge.

Doss-Bowman (2011) interviewed several nontraditional candidates. One interview was with Patrick Gamble, a retired U.S. Air Force general who had been named the president of the University of Alaska statewide system. Gamble stated that just because he was an outsider did not mean that he could not understand and respect the university culture (Doss-Bowman, 2001). Gamble further stated that the skills he brought to the position were his ability to run a large organization and to organize (Doss-Bowman, 2011). Gamble elaborated that with those talents he also recognized the talents of the faculty and the impact they could have on specific programs (Doss-Bowman, 2011). In the same article, Ann Milner, who was named the president of Weber State University in 2002, stated nontraditional presidents need to focus on what they are good at and then bring together others who have the academic expertise and experience, so there is a collective approach to running the institution (Doss-Bowman, 2011).

Rita Borstein, president emerita at Rollins College argued that sometimes academics are good when working externally from the institution and sometimes they are not (Rededen, 2008).

She went on to explain that the pressure on presidents to bring in external funding is mounting, and sometimes nontraditional presidents are selected because of their ability to bring in external funding (Redden, 2008).

An article written by Selingo and Storbeck (2013), from Storbeck/Pimmental & Associates, argued that not everyone who has intellectual capacity ends up as a scholarly academic. In the same article T. Mills Kelly, an associate professor at George Mason University, stated that a crucial trait for future presidents is that they have experience in leading organizational change.

Preparation for Nontraditional Presidents

In 2018 the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) prepared a paper for nontraditional presidents. The paper was a path to follow for nontraditional presidents on how to be successful in their presidencies. AGB articulated that the more proactive a nontraditional president is, the more successful they will become. By being proactive, a nontraditional president will begin to build trust with the academic community at the university. Also, AGB recommended the nontraditional president needs to have a real dialogue with the faculty to begin to understand each other and needs to be the bridge between the academic community and the governing board, who do not always understand each other. AGB also noted that board and presidential orientations do not focus on the realities of the academic culture at the institution. Only by having a real conversation with faculty can the president create the bridge.

Gardner (2018) wrote an article that mirrors much of what AGB proposed. Gardner argued that the nontraditional president should spend time learning their organization and the leadership team. Gardner explained that listening and learning before trying to lead the

university are the keys to being a nontraditional president. Finally, Gardner suggested the nontraditional president needs to trust their team.

Conceptual Framework

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2016) report that led to the AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model, is the framework for this study. The model is intended to be used to build a developmental assessment program for current and future presidents. In developing the model, AASCU (2016) looked at research that showed an increased interest in hiring presidents that had not spent their career in the academy. However, AASCU was concerned that leaders who had not may be less focused on students (AASCU, 2016). The model was intended to develop current and future leaders in academia. Using this framework allows teams to evaluate whether the nontraditional president has the same competencies that the model shows should be developed in current academic leaders.

The model was developed by first doing a qualitative research analysis to determine a profile of a successful president. Then a planning symposium, with experts and practitioners, was held reviewing the profile and discussing assessment methodologies. They believed that this model could be applied to higher education for succession planning and leadership development by developing a well-defined set of competencies. AASCU surveyed and interviewed its members and used the results to determine the competencies for the model.

The model consists of five overall competencies, with each competency having several defined sub-competencies of each competency. The five overall competencies and each of the sub-competencies can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

AASCU Competencies for College and University Presidents Model

Management	Interpersonal	Personal Characteristics	Leadership	Additional Traits
Knowledge of academic enterprise	Formal and informal communication	Integrity	Problem solving	Support and exemplify expectations
Business enterprise management	Positively engaged	Servant leader	People and team development	Achievement orientation
Resource development and stewardship	Relationship development and maintenance	Continuous self-development	Strategic vision	
	Climate creation and maintenance	Resilience	Adversity leadership	

Each sub-competency has a specific definition. The detailed definitions can be found in Appendix D. By using this model, the responses provided by the nontraditional president as to why he believed he was qualified to be a university president and how he utilized his competencies after becoming president may align with a specific competency that has already been researched and reviewed by current and former presidents as well as experts in the assessment field (AASCU, 2016).

In the interviews, the nontraditional president was asked to describe his previous career and competencies he developed and used from that career. He was asked about the search experience and becoming president. Then he was asked about how used his previous competencies once he became president. The questions solicited answers that allowed analysis to compare traits the nontraditional president had from his previous career and how he translated

those into his experiences after becoming president. This helped identify how the nontraditional president's competencies align or do not align with those identified by AASCU or if there were any additional competencies exhibited that are not in the AASCU model.

Conclusion

Much of the research that has been conducted on nontraditional presidents has been a demographic review of their career paths. Additional research has centered around why colleges and universities may be looking for a nontraditional president, though the institution's reasoning is outside the scope of this study. Finally, recent dissertations have focused on the characteristics of nontraditional presidents after they have been appointed as president. There is a good understanding of the variety of pathways candidates have taken to become a university president. The literature has defined that the pathways to becoming a university president are changing. More candidates from outside academia want to be a university president. This study seeks to understand the experience of one such president.

AASCU developed a model for assessing current and future presidents that consists of five overall competencies and 17 sub-competencies. The responses provided by the nontraditional president as to why he believed he was qualified to be a university president may be aligned with a specific competency or sub-competency that has already been researched and reviewed by current and former presidents as well as experts in the assessment field (AASCU, 2016).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview and description of the research methodology, setting and participant, the data that were collected, the data collection procedures, and how they were analyzed. By using a descriptive phenomenological approach and examining the conscious intent of one nontraditional candidate through a series of interviews, the interviews provided an understanding of the experience of a nontraditional candidate becoming a university president and how the nontraditional president uses his competencies after becoming president.

Purpose

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to understand a nontraditional university president's transitional experience, the competencies he believed he possessed that qualified him for the position, and how those competencies have been utilized once he became president.

Research Questions and Design

This study was a descriptive phenomenological examination of the experience of a nontraditional candidate answering the research questions:

RQ1: What is the experience of a nontraditional candidate who transitions from industry leader to a university president?

RQ2: How does a nontraditional university president translate his professional competencies into the role of a university president?

A descriptive phenomenological approach was chosen for this research because other forms of research would not be able to paint as robust a picture of the experience of nontraditional candidates as a phenomenological approach can provide. "Phenomenology is a complex, comprehensive and intricate philosophy that thematizes consciousness and its

functions” (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017, p. 177). The researcher is keenly interested in the perceptions of the nontraditional president regarding his desire to become president, the competencies he believed he possessed that qualified him for the position, and how he translated those competencies once he became president.

Setting and Population

The setting was a Midwest public flagship university where the president came from a nontraditional career pathway. The university is a Research 1 university and a member of the Association of American Universities. The University has been in existence for over 170 years. The board of regents is appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate of the state legislature.

The president was selected from a small group of finalists proposed by the presidential search committee. Each finalist candidate’s name was made public, each candidate was presented to the university community, and the public was able to provide feedback regarding the candidates. The selection of this nontraditional president was a first for the university. This study is a discussion of the president’s experience transitioning from industry to academia without disclosing enough information so that he becomes identifiable.

Sampling Method

The researcher’s interest in understanding the experience of a person outside the higher education industry choosing to move into a university presidency led to a purposive convenience sample of a public flagship university president who has a nontraditional background. Having observed presidential searches and the reaction from those inside academia to a nontraditional candidate led the researcher to think about the perspective from the viewpoint of the nontraditional candidate and then president. The researcher reached out to the

president by email (Appendix A) to discuss the dissertation and his willingness to participate. The email included the informed consent form (Appendix B).

Instrumentation and Data Collection

This study used an in-depth semi-structured interview (Appendix C) with the nontraditional president. The interview focused on his previous experience and competencies, his candidacy and appointment experience, and about applying the previous competencies in the academic environment.

The interview inquired about his previous experience and competencies he believed he possessed that made him qualified for the position. This was an open-ended question to allow the president to include any competency he believed would qualify him for president. He was asked about his experience as a nontraditional candidate while applying and becoming a university president. Finally, the president was asked how he translated those competencies after he became president and asked to provide specific examples.

The interview was video recorded using Zoom and transcribed using Zoom's transcription service. The nontraditional president was asked to review the transcripts, as well as provide any additional comments he would like to add to the transcripts. Additionally, member checking was used with the nontraditional president by sending a summary of the findings to help ensure the trustworthiness of the research and the findings.

The interview questions were field-tested by a small group of higher education professionals to ensure the questions are not leading, are objective, and are appropriate to the purpose of the study. Three current professionals known to the researcher were asked to review the interview questions to determine if the questions will solicit the data the researcher expects to gather from the interviews and that will answer the research questions. At the same time that the

field testing of the questions took place, the invitation to the president to be interviewed for the study was sent by the researcher.

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question, the data analysis process followed the process suggested by Creswell in 2013. The first step was for the researcher to start by describing their own personal experience with the phenomenon. By taking this step, the researcher will understand their own biases to help avoid interjecting personal bias into the responses of the nontraditional president. The second step was to develop a set of statements as a fundamental understanding of the hiring of nontraditional presidents. After writing the statements, the researcher was then grouped into meaning units or themes. Following the grouping, the researcher wrote a description of what the nontraditional president experienced with being selected and the descriptions included verbatim examples (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell (2013) then suggests that the researcher write a description of how the phenomenon happened in order to understand the setting and context of the phenomenon. The last step suggested by Creswell (2013) was to take all of the previous descriptions and write a comprehensive description that led to the core of the experience and the crowning aspect of the study.

For the second research question, after the interview recording was transcribed, the transcripts were reviewed and coded. Each of the five main competencies from the AASCU (2017) model was given a color and each of the sub-competencies was given a shade of the main competency category. Each of the responses that corresponded to a subcategory was given the appropriate subcategory or main category color. Those statements were then reviewed and were compared with the AASCU (2017) model descriptions to determine how the response

of what competencies the president had from his previous career and how he translated them after assuming the presidency aligned with the AASCU competencies.

Limitations of the Research Design

Limitations of the research design may include an inadequate interpretation and coding by the researcher or errors in data collection (Creswell, 2015). With the number of possible competencies, the researcher had anticipated that there would not be a clear indication of the sub-competencies that translated to the nontraditional candidate as a university president. Without clear sub-competencies, a clear overall competency would not have been possible to determine. However, by using member checking, this limitation was eliminated. Also, while the nontraditional president was able to provide his experience in implementing those competencies after becoming president, he did not articulate which competency he used. The responses from the nontraditional president may have been biased by his experience being president, specifically in what competencies he believed he possessed that qualified him to be president.

Additionally, by only interviewing one nontraditional president, the study may be limited in its ability to be transferrable to other nontraditional presidents or university settings. The study relied on only one nontraditional president's responses regarding the experience of the search and the competencies analysis with the AASCU framework. The utilization of those competencies may be limited by any unique experience at the university.

Ethical Issues

The researcher's background and interests are what brought him to these research questions. The researcher has worked with various college and university presidents at the same institution the nontraditional president. The researcher has dealt with numerous presidents and

interim presidents for over 22 years in both a campus setting and as an executive director of a multi-institutional governance board. The researcher has certain biases regarding college presidents, and every effort was made to be objective throughout the study. The researcher avoided comparing the nontraditional president to previous presidents that he has worked with, understanding that each university president and circumstances during the presidency are unique. The researcher's interest in the topic was acknowledged and taken into consideration during the analysis of data and research findings.

The nontraditional president is known to the researcher and there is a professional relationship but not direct reporting lines between the researcher and the president. While the president is not a subordinate to the researcher, the researcher frequently interacts, on behalf of the governing board, with the president. The researcher engages with the president on many issues, such as state funding and tuition increases.

“Phenomenological methodology is an inquiry conducted according to the rules of evidence. It is rigorous in its observations. Its objective is not to confirm the investigator's commitments but to investigate” an issue (Biddle, 1986). Therefore, the researcher focused on the research questions about the nontraditional president's interest in becoming a public university president, what competencies he believed he possessed that qualified him to be president, and how he translated those competencies after becoming president. The researcher accepted what emerged from the data collected understanding that the data may not match the researcher's preconceived notions of what he thought the results might be.

Conclusion

This study used a descriptive phenomenological methodology to study a nontraditional university president. The design of this research project was to interview a currently seated

nontraditional president of a single-campus state university who came to the position from outside of the education industry. The nontraditional president was appointed five years ago and was willing to participate in a series of interviews.

The interviews gathered a response to the research questions, what is the experience of a nontraditional candidate who transitions from industry leader to a university president, and how does a nontraditional university president translate his professional competencies into the role of a university president? The AASCU model was used to guide the interviews as the model represents valid research about presidential competencies.

While there are possible limitations, the researcher worked to ensure that the interview questions solicit appropriate responses that allowed for good analysis. Additionally, during the semi-structured interviews the researcher evaluated if additional questions were needed to gather sufficient data for analysis. Finally, the researcher ensured that he is solely focused on the nontraditional president's experience in becoming president, the competencies he possessed when applying to become president, and his experiences in translating those competencies after becoming president without comparing or contrasting to any other president that the researcher has worked with as each presidential experience is unique.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

A descriptive phenomenological approach was chosen for this research because other forms of research would not be able to paint as robust a picture of the experience of nontraditional candidates. This phenomenological study was intended to provide more insight into the experience of a nontraditional candidate going through the search process and being selected president. Also, this study was intended to identify what competencies, or skill sets, the nontraditional president possessed from his previous career and how he translated those competencies after becoming president.

Specifically, this study answered the following two research questions:

RQ1: What is the experience of a nontraditional candidate who transitions from industry leader to a university president?

RQ2: How does a nontraditional university president translate his professional competencies into the role of a university president?

The data for this study came from an extended semi-structured interview with a nontraditional president. While it was initially planned to be a series of three interviews, the nontraditional president gave concise answers that did not require follow-up and had available time to extend the initial interview long enough to include the questions from the additional interviews that were planned.

Analysis Method

After the interview, the transcript and initial findings were provided to the nontraditional president for review. The nontraditional president suggested some non-substantive edits to the transcript, which provided clarity for his answers included in the transcript. Comparing the

verbatim and edited transcripts did not change any of the initial findings of the interview transcript. The nontraditional president agreed with the initial coding of the transcript.

To answer the first research question, the transcript was analyzed using Creswell's (2013) process for understanding the experience of understanding the phenomenon, which consists of four steps. The first step was to understand the researcher's experience with the phenomenon. Over the course of the researcher's career, he has worked for or interacted with roughly a dozen different university presidents. Ten of the presidents followed the traditional path to the presidency. One president was a long-tenured dean who moved into the presidency and one was the subject of this research. The second step was to develop statements to understand the phenomenon and to group those statements using verbatim examples. The statements were focused on the changing role of the presidency, the changing higher education landscape, and the desire to have a fresh perspective on the challenges for higher education. After writing a description of how the phenomenon happened to understand the context and setting, the final step was to write a comprehensive description to understand the core of the experience.

The second research question was addressed by coding interview responses and then comparing them to the AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model (AASCU, 2016). The AASCU model identified five overall competencies with each competency having several defined sub-competencies. Each of the five competencies was given a specific color code and when the overall or sub-competency was identified in the responses to the interview questions, that portion of the transcript was given the appropriate color coding with a notation of which sub-competency applied.

Presentation of Results

The coded data from the interview were analyzed to provide a more robust understanding of the two research questions. The initial part of the interview focused on the professional background of the nontraditional candidate and the search process. The remaining part of the interview focused on the competencies the nontraditional president used after becoming president. The pseudonym of Phillip Ryan for the nontraditional president was used in the results.

Research Question 1

To get an understanding of the nontraditional president and the experience of the transition from being an industry leader to a university president, a series of questions were asked about Ryan's professional background, why he was interested in applying for the presidency, his knowledge of the university and its culture, and why he believed the governing board selected him to be president.

Ryan graduated with a bachelor's degree in engineering and after completing a Master of Business Administration (MBA), Ryan began his career focusing on corporate strategy and later worked with an international company where he helped pioneer a new business line for the company. He then began teaching at a private Midwest business school in its MBA program. After a brief stint as an adjunct faculty member, he, along with a group of his colleagues, started a service industry company that became a national chain, where Ryan was president of the company. Ryan was then recruited to work for an international company that was struggling to remain in business. After a stint at the international company, he again became an adjunct faculty member at a different private institution. It was during this time as an adjunct faculty member that he was contacted by the search firm regarding the presidency.

When asked about his interest in the presidency, Ryan explained that he, his wife, and many family members all attended public institutions. He went on to say that he had been observing the changes in public universities. Specifically, Ryan mentioned the reductions in state funding across the nation, and the increasing reliance on tuition which had led to increased student debt. Ryan also mentioned that the funding and mission of higher education had become highly politicized. All of this led him to believe that this was a flawed model for higher education that needed to be addressed and turned around, which is why he was interested in the presidency.

Ryan explained that he knew of the university and generally what the university's academic strengths were, including being more focused on liberal arts than science and engineering. In a follow up question to his response on his knowledge of the university, Ryan admitted that he did not know about the culture of the university or the state politics and their impact on the university.

When asked about the recruitment and search process, Ryan stated he “wanted to meet the principals...to talk to the real decision-makers about the real problems and real issues.” He added he was not interested in the search firm and search committee as much as the “real decision-makers in the university process.” He added, “I know enough about how organizations tend to work.”

Ultimately, Ryan did meet with members of the governing board before submitting his application for the presidency, believing that he had a skillset the governing board members felt was needed to address the challenges facing the university. In response to why he thought he was selected, Ryan went on to say he attributed it to him understanding public universities and having worked in large organizations that had experienced fiscal problems. He also added that

he felt the governing board wanted something different because they had been getting the same type of leadership and wanted someone who knew how to navigate through the huge fiscal issues facing the university.

After being selected for the position, the nontraditional process was disclosed. The disclosure was met with protests and calls for resignation from the university by the faculty, staff, and members of the larger university community. Ultimately, the faculty senate passed a vote of no confidence resolution about the governing board, as the selection was outside of the traditional process used by the university and the governing board in selecting a president.

Research Question 2

The next set of questions in the interview was to understand how Ryan translated his previous experience in the role of the university president and to what extent those competencies align with the AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model (2016). The major competencies and seventeen sub-competencies are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

<i>AASCU Competencies for College and University Presidents Model</i>				
Management	Interpersonal	Personal Characteristics	Leadership	Additional Traits
Knowledge of academic enterprise	Formal and informal communication	Integrity	Problem solving	Support and exemplify expectations
Business enterprise management	Positively engaged	Servant leader	People and team development	Achievement orientation
Resource development and stewardship	Relationship development and maintenance	Continuous self-development	Strategic vision	
	Climate creation and maintenance	Resilience	Adversity leadership	

The remainder of the interview questions focused on the sub-competencies from the AACSB model. Below are the sub-competencies Ryan referenced in his responses to the interview questions.

Knowledge of the academic enterprise. Ryan had some experience in academia. He had served on the board of a private institution and was on his second stint as an adjunct faculty member when he was contacted by the search firm regarding the search for the presidency at the university.

Business enterprise management. Ryan referenced business enterprise management several times during the interview. When talking about the period where there was unrest about his selection as president he was also trying to learn the culture, figure out who did what and how well they did it, and in particular he was trying to understand the budget process, which he found complex and confusing. When asked how this compared to his previous work on budgets, Ryan stated there was very little transparency in the university budget process. One of the first things Ryan did was to form a small team and visit every college.

Ryan and his team met with the dean and budget officers to get a presentation on their strategy, performance, and plans for the key programs in the future. He said there were meetings where he could not understand the budgets and the priorities going forward. Ryan added that the presentations were full of charts and not very many numbers. The colleges did not know where they ranked versus other colleges and their peers.

Later in the interview when Ryan was asked what competencies he believed a university president should have, one of the competencies he referenced was budgeting skills. He elaborated on the budgeting skills needed and said that fund accounting in particular is

something that university presidents need to have. He referenced a conversation with a peer who became president and noted that that university had 30,000 different accounts and that no corporation has 30,000 different accounts. Ryan explained to his peer that it is actually good as 30,000 different sources of money need to be labeled differently based on where the money came from. It helps to diversify the revenue sources, he added. Ryan also said that if a president is selected from the outside, they need to understand fund accounting because it is so much different.

Resource development and stewardship. Ryan discussed that at the university each of the colleges was different but the tendency was to blend them all together. He said his previous work at the international company taught him the difference between understanding that different divisions are different businesses and they cannot be treated the same. He said it is no different at the university where there is a difference between the business of the college of medicine and the college of liberal arts. Ryan went on to say that when he taught execution strategy one of the fundamentals is that in order to change the strategy the elements of the organization need to be pulled apart and reorganized into a new organization.

Ryan went on to say that because he had enough different experiences in other organizations he understood that a different approach was needed at the university. He added that those who work in academics have not had enough different types of experience to figure it out. Ryan then pivoted to team building and team development and that leaders tend to hire people like themselves and the same holds in higher education.

Formal and informal communication, relationship development and maintenance.

Ryan explained that one of the ways that he dealt with the initial unrest at his appointment was to go and meet with those who were the most vocal in opposition to him

remaining as president. He explained that while as an undergrad he developed a communication style based on the theories of Chris Argyris. Ryan said that by studying Argyris's theories he developed the communication skill of being blunt and direct. Ryan believed that by dealing with his detractors directly and bluntly talking about what concerned them he was eventually able to develop a working relationship with them. He also said that to be a leader "you have to work through the organizational hierarchy and other times you need to work around the organization." He went on to say that a leader may not be friends or do things together, but each person knows the other person's perspective and reasoning.

Later in the interview, Ryan was asked if he was lacking a particular skill that he had not developed previously that he wished he had after becoming president. Ryan said that public speaking and doing media interviews is a skill he was lacking. Given his blunt and direct communication style, he believed he was too honest.

Positively engaged. When asked about how he stays positively engaged with people, Ryan said that a leader has to be honest and humor helps a lot. He added that a person needs to say thank you a lot. Ryan added that when you make a mistake, as a leader you need to say you made a mistake or "I could have done better." He also said that you need to have small celebrations along the way, but that has not been possible because of the pandemic.

Climate creation and maintenance. Ryan demonstrated climate creation and maintenance two different times during the interview. The first is when he discussed his initial meetings with the deans and business officers to learn about that college. When asked about how he took that knowledge from these initial meetings Ryan said he had to learn how they talked about their business and their customers. He wanted to learn their culture.

Ryan then circled back later in the interview and talked about having different experiences to provide a different perspective and understanding of the university. He believed that leaders in the university needed to have different experiences and work in different areas as an element for those leaders to have a career path forward to other university leadership positions such as a dean or a president, a lack that Ryan saw as a flaw in higher education.

Integrity. When discussing the problems that different administrators bring to the president, Ryan said that if a decision is inconsistent with the morals and the values of the organization, the president has to overrule them and say we are not going to do that. Ryan also said there are some decisions that are made where you know the decision is problematic or politically unpopular but do not violate the values of the university and for those you have to ask for forgiveness. Ryan added that the institution needs to be transparent about the decision and he needs to be honest about why he agreed with the decision.

Continuous self-improvement. Ryan was asked if he does much personal development. Ryan said he is not a fan of books or programs that are "how-to" be a leader. He tells those around him what he is trying to work on personally and asks them to tell him if they see a particular behavior. Before becoming president, Ryan would join groups that are outside of his comfort zone to gain new and different skills.

People and team development. When asked what skill he used the most as president, Ryan said it was building teams. He believes that building teams and getting them to work together on challenging issues and for those teams to fundamentally understand those issues are important. He added that there are layers of governance all across the institution that are not in the corporate world. He noted that when he became president he met with the leaders of the shared governance organizations separately and learned that the leaders of these organizations

did not meet with each other, which he thought was a bad model. As a result, Ryan decided to build a team, named Path Forward, which focused on how the university moves toward the future following the university's strategic plan. A subgroup of that team is called student success and all four elements of shared governance are a part of the student success team. Ryan added that this is very different in the corporate world. He added that in the corporate world you may have a little shared governance when dealing with a union or labor group, but shared governance is a very different approach in higher education.

Tied into the sub-competency of climate creation and maintenance was Ryan's opinion on succession planning. When asked about a nontraditional candidate advocating for leadership to be developed so an internal candidate has the experience to become president, Ryan said that universities do not do much to develop the next round of candidates. He added that when search committees are formed they tend to look outside the university. Ryan also added that the governing board reinforces the tendency to look outside otherwise they would be asking him once a year to go through potential candidates. He added that at the international company he and his boss spent a lot of time on succession planning. Ryan added that when someone from the outside is hired, they aren't a good fit because there are cultural differences that cannot be overcome, and they eventually leave.

In response to a follow up question on whether he himself had cultivated people that could replace him as president, Ryan said he had not, but that he had the notion the provost would be the one to cultivate as most of the presidents come out of the provost's office. He added that what should be done is to go get a provost, give them a variety of experiences, and have nonacademic units also report to the provost to broaden the issues the provost deals with. He added that he had tried that approach but was unsuccessful. Ryan did provide additional

details about his attempt and the provost, but those details would disclose his and the provost's identity, so they were withheld from the results.

Strategic vision. Ryan discussed that these are positions are journeys and not just jobs. There needs to be a lot more attention to thinking about the future and not be positive about what has been achieved. Using the strategic plan and hitting the metrics is how Ryan said he defines his success as president. He added that he prefers the perspective of what is left to do instead of what was accomplished.

When asked what Ryan's vision for the university was, he believed the university should be smaller and focus on its core world-class strengths. He talked about Harvard's approach by having 10,000 graduate and professional students and 6,000 undergraduate students. It allows more focused attention per student during their formative years, as opposed to having 20,000 undergraduates to deal with. He believes moving to this approach will strengthen the graduate and professional programs. He added that universities need to keep looking for funding resources, like public-private partnerships. He concluded by saying he thinks private universities will be more successful in the near future than public universities.

Adversity leadership. When asked what his first hundred days were like Ryan said "It was Hell. I mean, first of all there was a whole group of people that thought I was Donald Trump reincarnated." He went on to say his perception of this group was that they believed businesspeople do not have any values and are only concerned about the money and the bottom line. Ryan also said the reaction to him was pent up frustration from the faculty towards the board because they selected someone like him.

Ryan later talked about the challenges the university is currently facing. He talked about declining state funding. The political leaders are becoming more intrusive into the business of

the university, and there is a lot of social unrest that no one knows how it will impact the university going forward.

Achievement orientation. When asked about how he perceived his leadership style, Ryan said his basic approach to leadership was to gather a lot of data and talk to a lot of different people to try and connect all the dots. Ryan also said during the interview that he looks at a problem and how to solve it, and views the problem as either a performance gap or an opportunity gap. He added that once a gap has been closed, he is always looking for the next gap to close. He added “I hate the status quo, so I am always pushing the edge of something.”

Summary

The experience of the search process was outside the traditional process a governing board and a university go through in the selection of a president. Because the nontraditional candidate thought the process was flawed he went around the process directly to the governing board. The governing board also varied the traditional search process by agreeing to meet with the nontraditional president before him entering the search process. Of the seventeen sub-competencies in the model Ryan touched on fourteen of them in the interview. At least one sub-competency was touched on in each of the five major competencies.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Nontraditional presidents are not a new phenomenon. In 2017, the American Council on Education, in conjunction with the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association Institute (2017) published the results of the 2016 survey of presidents. In 2016, 15% of university presidents came from outside higher education, which translates to roughly one in six being a nontraditional president (ACE, 2017). Using the AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model (2016) as a framework and Creswell's (2013) process for understanding the phenomenon, this phenomenological study describes the experience of one nontraditional university president from his candidacy to his appointment and beyond.

Interpretation of Findings

Watkins-Hayes (2015) believed that the presidential search needs to provide stakeholders with confidence in the search process. If a search process does not provide confidence, it will require the new president to repair the damage from the controversial search process. Ryan did not want to follow the traditional process and work through the search firm or the search committee. After being selected for the position, the nontraditional process was disclosed and was met with protests and calls for Ryan's resignation, as the selection was outside of the traditional process of selecting a president.

Watkins-Hayes (2015) was correct about the president needing to repair the damage from a controversial search process. The nontraditional candidate followed a nontraditional path during the search process because he believed the process was flawed. The governing board also broke with the norms by meeting with a potential candidate before he had gone through the search committee process. The search process was rooted in the culture of the university, which

both the nontraditional president and the governing board that hired him did not consider which led to the negative reaction to the nontraditional president. This reinforces McDade et al. (2017) who discussed that, even with qualified nontraditional presidents, the institutions themselves may not accept the candidate.

This made the beginning of Ryan's presidency more challenging because of his desire to go outside of the traditional search process creating controversy around his selection instead of Ryan's ability to move the university forward. While it is impossible to know the reaction to his selection could have been tempered if the nontraditional president and the governing board had honored the search firm and search committee process, the reaction to his selection could have been tempered.

The literature and the AASCU (2016) model reflect many of the same skills that a university president should possess and steps nontraditional presidents should take. Ryan's experience as a nontraditional candidate and then a nontraditional president confirms the literature about nontraditional presidents as well as reflect the five major competencies of management, interpersonal, personal characteristics, leadership and additional traits from the AASCU (2016) model.

The researcher compared Ryan's experiences to the literature, beginning with the American Council on Education (2017) that surveyed university presidents about how they spend their time. Sixty-five percent of those presidents surveyed spend most of their time on budget and financial management. Selingo (2017) found that university presidents believe their successors will have more of a business background. Ryan repeatedly cited the amount of work and time and effort he put in on financial matters.

Brinbaum and Umbach (2001) studied the four different paths for university presidents and defined one of the pathways as “strangers” who are defined as presidents who move in and out of higher education. Ryan was an adjunct professor at two different institutions at two different times during his career. Beardsley (2015) noted that search firms are casting a broader net when looking for candidates. Ryan was at his second adjunct position when the search firm contacted him about the university presidency.

McCulloch-Lovell (2012) argued one of the reasons nontraditional presidents are hired is that they have experience in running organizations that also have administrations and large budgets. McCulloch-Lovell (2012) surmised that nontraditional presidents have adapted to multiple organizations and workplace environments, which gives them the skillset of adapting to different workplace cultures. Ryan reinforced this as one of the competencies that he had and used when he became president.

Ryan’s experience coincides with McCulloch-Lovell (2012). Ryan talked about having to learn the budget and the culture of the university after becoming president and talked about the previous experience that gave him the skills needed as a university president. This finding was reinforced by Patrick Gamble, a nontraditional president, who stated that just because he was an outsider did not mean that he could not understand and respect the university culture (Doss-Bowman, 2001).

The Association of Governing Boards (2018) recommended that nontraditional presidents should have a real dialogue with faculty to understand each other. Ryan met with those faculty that were his loudest detractors to begin a dialogue and understand each other. Gardner (2018) reinforces AGB’s recommendation, saying that nontraditional presidents should spend time

learning their organization and its leadership. Ryan, along with a small senior team, met with the deans, wanted to hear how they described themselves and their culture.

Ryan's experiences and actions closely reflect the literature about the role of the presidency and what strengths nontraditional presidents bring to the position of the president.

When looking at the Competencies for State College and University Presidents (2016) model, Ryan expressed all five major competencies and fourteen of the seventeen sub-competencies. Table 3 demonstrates the major competencies and sub-competencies that Ryan discussed most frequently and the sub-competencies that did not surface in his responses.

Main Competency	Management	Interpersonal	Personal Characteristics	Leadership	Additional Traits
Sub competencies	Knowledge of academic enterprise ✓	Formal and informal communication ✓	Integrity ✓	Problem solving ✓	Support and exemplify expectations X
	Business enterprise management ✓	Positively engaged ✓	Servant leader X	People and team development ✓	Achievement orientation ✓
	Resource Development and Stewardship ✓	Relationship development and maintenance ✓	Continuous self-development ✓	Strategic vision ✓	
		Climate creation and maintenance ✓	Resilience X	Adversity leadership ✓	

Note: Competencies marked with a ✓ are those that were discussed in the interview: those marked with an X did not surface with the analysis

The nontraditional president showed at least one example of each sub-competency in three of the five major competencies. There were only three sub-competencies that were not

referenced by the nontraditional president during the interview: servant leader, resilience, and support and exemplify expectations. As each university and university president faces different issues, it is not clear if those competencies were not used yet or if the interview questions were not successful in soliciting responses to touch on those sub-competencies.

However, the nontraditional president had most competencies called for by the AASCU Competencies for State College and University Presidents model.

Implications

As the AASCU model was developed to help train and identify the competencies needed to develop leaders within higher education to have a pathway to the presidency. This study demonstrated that those competencies are not unique to higher education. The nontraditional president interviewed for this study demonstrated the majority of the competencies called for in the model. Therefore, it is possible for this, and other nontraditional presidents, to acquire the competencies, as described in the AASCU (2016) model, necessary to lead a university. In other words, corporate experience may be sufficient to equip someone for the role of a university president.

Recommendations for Action

When search committees and governing boards are interviewing candidates, regardless if they are traditional or nontraditional, they should use the AASCU (2016) model as a framework to determine if the nontraditional candidate has a majority of the competencies called for in the model. Additionally, to avoid the reaction to this nontraditional president, the search process needs to be clearly defined at the beginning of the search and any candidate, traditional or nontraditional, must follow that process. Every candidate must receive equal treatment for there to be campus buy-in on the search process.

Also, higher education needs to do a better job of succession planning. Each institution should look internally for those who have the potential to gain the competencies called for in the model. They should be allowed to gain experience and knowledge called for the model if they choose a presidential career path. Even this nontraditional president advocated for better succession planning. While interesting that a nontraditional president who was a nontraditional candidate is advocating for greater internal succession planning, it is a valid issue that should be addressed.

Recommendations for Further Study

As nontraditional presidents are not new to higher education, the study may serve as a template for additional research into the lived experience of others who took the same trajectory, or it may be used to help define a survey of nontraditional presidents about their competencies and experiences to determine if this experience is unique or common. It may also be a template for additional research on traditional presidents to determine if they have the majority of the competencies called for in the model.

Given the controversy that arose from the search for Ryan, another area for study is the tension between shared governance and the governing board during the selection of the president. Is the traditional method of using a shared governance search committee still the best practice to use in a presidential search? Are universities that do not use a search committee as effective as those who do? Anderson (2018) argued that there must be trust in the search committee process. Additional research on whether governing boards trust the search committee process, would definitely add to the literature.

Additionally, research needs to be done on why search committees advance nontraditional presidents. In conjunction with that research could be a study about why

governing boards select nontraditional presidents over those who have followed the traditional pathway to the presidency and what unique trait governing boards believe nontraditional candidates have that traditional candidates do not possess.

Conclusion

While there has been research done on the demographics and history of nontraditional university presidents, this study adds to the literature about the experience of the nontraditional president during the search process. Also, this study helps readers to understand the competencies nontraditional candidates have who are selected to be president and how they apply those competencies in a university setting. The researcher hopes that this study will help search firms, search committees, and governing boards to gain a further understanding of nontraditional candidates they may encounter in future searches.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear (xxx):

I am a doctoral student at the University of New England in the process of completing my dissertation on the experience of a nontraditional candidate-turned-university president.

The qualitative study will gather data by interviewing a person who comes from outside higher education and becomes a university president. Based on the career pathway that led you to the leadership role at the university, you are a person who can provide insight into the reasons why professionals might decide to make the transition and the competencies from industry that served well in the university setting.

I have attached a copy of the consent form that describes the study in more detail. If you have any questions about participating in the study, please contact me by email (mbraun2@une.edu) or by phone (319-430-7034). If you have no questions and are willing to participate in this study, please sign and return the consent form to me by (date here) to schedule an interview. I encourage you to keep a signed copy of the consent form for your reference.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this request. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Mark J. Braun

Appendix B: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Nontraditional Presidents: From candidate to president

Principal Investigator(s): Mark J. Braun

Introduction:

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during, or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this research study being done?

Most of the research that has been done to this point on people who transition from industry to the university president has been a demographic review of the career paths of these nontraditional presidents. Additionally, some of the research has been about colleges and universities and why they may be looking for a nontraditional president. Finally, there have been some recent dissertations about characteristics of nontraditional presidents after they have been appointed as president.

Identifying why nontraditional candidates apply to become presidents at colleges and universities and researching their transition from other industry sectors to higher education is the focus of this dissertation study. Specifically, this phenomenological study will explore the experience of one nontraditional candidate who applied to be president at a public university, his experience of being selected, and his experience after being appointed.

Who will be in this study?

This study consists of a series of interviews with a nontraditional president.

What will I be asked to do?

Your role as the nontraditional president is to participate in a series of 3 semi-structured interviews with the researcher as well as review the transcript of that interview for accuracy. The interviews will be to understand your previous career experience, your transition into the

presidency, and then to examine the competencies you had or had to develop to be successful as president.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

While the site and name of the nontraditional president will not be included in the dissertation, anyone familiar with the circumstances of the nontraditional president may be able to identify the nontraditional president.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study; however, your experiences and reflections will add to the understanding of the experience of nontraditional presidents.

What will it cost me?

There is no cost to you for participating in this study.

How will my privacy be protected?

The site and the name of the nontraditional president will not be included in the dissertation and pseudonyms will be used for the nontraditional president and the name of the university.

How will my data be kept confidential?

Recordings and transcripts of interviews will be in a password protected and encrypted external hard drive controlled by the researcher.

What are my rights as a research participant?

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
 - If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

What other options do I have?

- You may choose not to participate.

Whom may I contact with questions?

- The researcher conducting this study is Mark J. Braun

For more information regarding this study, please contact me at (phone number here) or mbraun2@une.edu

- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research-related injury, please contact my advisor, Marilyn Newell, Ph.D., at 207-345-3100 or mnewell@une.edu
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

- Please retain a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant's Signature

Date

Printed name _____

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher's signature

Date

Printed name _____

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview 1

1. May I record our interview?
2. Would you give me an overview of your professional career before becoming president?
3. Can you describe why were you interested in applying to become president?
4. When you applied for the position, what did you know about the university or academic enterprise (AASCU management sub competency)?
5. What did you know about its culture?
6. What about the social, political, and legal context of the university?
7. Tell me about the recruitment and search process or in other words what was your experience as a candidate like?
8. I am sure you must have researched the other finalists for the position. Tell me why you think the Board of Regents selected you over the other candidates?
9. Tell me what it was like during the first 100 days when you became president?

Interview 2

During this interview, I will query the president about the competencies and sub-competencies from the AASCU model.

Main Competency	Management	Interpersonal	Personal Characteristics	Leadership	Additional Traits
Sub competencies	Knowledge of academic enterprise	Formal and informal communication	Integrity	Problem solving	Support and exemplify expectations
	Business enterprise management	Positively engaged	Servant leader	People and team development	Achievement orientation
	Resource Development and Stewardship	Relationship development and maintenance	Continuous self-development	Strategic vision	
		Climate creation and maintenance	Resilience	Adversity leadership	

1. I would like to talk about the skill sets needed to be president of a university. My first question is about management. Tell me about your general experience in being a

- manager from your previous career and then, in particular, I would like to hear about your previous enterprise management, resource development, and stewardship?
2. Communication is the key to being an effective leader. Can you tell me about developed and use informal and formal communication?
 3. Tell me about how you engage with others, do you always try to remain positively engaged, and in particular how you create the climate with those around you and how you maintain that climate?
 4. In addition to communication, relationships play an important part in being an effective leader. Tell me about how you have developed relationships both in your previous career and as president?
 5. How is the workplace different at a university campus than your previous places of employment?
 6. Tell me about your interpersonal skills and how you used those when you became president?
 7. The job of the president is very public but is often taken very personally. Tell me about your personal traits and characteristics. How would you describe yourself to someone who has never met you before? (AASCU sub-competencies: integrity, servant leader, self-development, resilience – follow up on the specific sub-competencies if they were not included in the first answer)
 8. Being a leader takes a variety of skill sets. There are four in particular that I would like you to tell me about from your past and as president. They are problem-solving, team development, strategic vision, and adversity leadership?
 9. Tell me about any skills or competencies you developed after becoming president?

10. My last question for you today is about personal development. Tell me about how you manage your own personal development? What type of personal development do you think is helpful for a university president?

Interview 3

In our previous interview, we talked about your skillset and competencies. I would like to dig a little deeper into those.

1. You mentioned you developed XXXX skillset in your previous career, can you give me an example of how you used that after becoming president? (Repeat this question for every skill set and competency identified from the first two interviews)
2. Tell me what skill sets or competencies you think university presidents should have?
3. Which competency do you use the most and why?
4. Were there any competencies or skill sets you did not have that you wished had when you became president?
5. How would you measure your effectiveness in this role?
6. Finally, can you tell me the vision you have for the university in the future, both while you are president and after you leave the presidency?

Appendix D: AASCU Competencies for State College and University Presidents

Competencies for State College and University Presidents

Executive Summary

This document reports on the evolution and validation of the **AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model**. Building on both commissioned qualitative research (AASCU, 2015) and the outcomes of a planning symposium with experts in assessment center methodology, higher education leaders, and search consultants, a draft competency model was prepared. The competency model was then vetted and revised based on further literature review and structured, critical incident-style interviews with 14 subject-matter experts. The revised version was then presented to the entire AASCU membership for comment via a quantitative content validation survey. Survey results confirmed the importance of the competencies identified as necessary for state college and university presidents to meet strategic higher education goals.

As AASCU plans to use this competency model to inform the building of a developmental assessment program for current and future presidents, this report concludes by mapping the AASCU Competencies onto other competency models used by two assessment consultancies identified as potential partners in this endeavor.

Background

Organization Overview

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is committed to delivering America's promise by supporting member institutions in their missions to prepare all students to be competitive and effective participants in our democracy and in the global economy.

AASCU represents more than 400 public colleges, universities, and systems. Member institutions share a learning-centered and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to underserved student populations, and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions' economic progress and community development.

Collectively, AASCU's member institutions serve nearly four million students and award almost 500,000 baccalaureate degrees each year. A characteristic that sets AASCU apart from other associations is the personal involvement of presidents and chancellors on our board of directors, on committees, and in events and programming. They also support full participation by their top institutional decision makers. AASCU is committed to helping these leaders enhance their expertise, learn about best practices, and stay abreast of trends in higher education.

The Evolving Presidency

Leaders of public colleges and universities face unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Their rapidly changing environments are becoming more complex and demanding. Declining budgets, flattened management structures, and the increased need for collaboration and transparency all require that public institutions pay heightened attention to developing effective leaders at all levels of the organization. In addition to these environmental and policy changes, many institutions will face major leadership transitions over the next few years as the "Baby Boom" generation retires and boards consider people from external and less traditional academic careers to fill leadership roles.

In their 2011 report, *Presidential Leadership in an Age of Transition: Dynamic Responses for a Turbulent Time*, Eckel and Hartley explain that, "Today's presidents are

not tomorrow's presidents. Nearly half of all college and university presidents are over the age of 61, quickly approaching traditional retirement age." Additionally, they state, "Only 23 percent of college and university presidencies are held by women and only 14 percent of presidencies are held by a person of color."

Research shows an increasing interest in hiring presidents and chancellors who have not spent their careers in the academy. According to a 2012 report by the American Council on Education (ACE), "the share of presidents whose immediate prior position was outside higher education has increased since 2006, from 13 percent to 20 percent." Although ACE says that much of this growth is within the private college sector, this trend seems to be increasingly present in the public sector as well. While leaders with diverse backgrounds bring many sought-after skills to the presidency, there are also concerns that some may be less attuned to the needs and interests of students.

As career pathways, demographics, financing, and expectations for higher education evolve, it is now more critical than ever before to develop leaders who can simultaneously manage extremely complex organizations and focus on student success.

Project Overview

AASCU is particularly interested in helping current and future higher education leaders develop and refine the skills needed to better serve students. AASCU seeks to apply assessment center methodology, an underutilized tool in higher education (see Appendix A), to improve the professional development of those seeking increasingly more responsible leadership positions in state colleges and universities.

Over time, this work will help provide standardization in assessing university leadership and identify national benchmarks to better understand both individual and systemic gaps in leaders' commitments and skill sets. Collectively, these insights will better enable AASCU and other higher education organizations to train the next generation of effective higher education leaders who are oriented toward student success.

In 2015, AASCU commissioned preliminary qualitative research focused on the skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics required for success as a public university president. Following this, AASCU convened a planning symposium with a panel



Competencies for State College and University Presidents

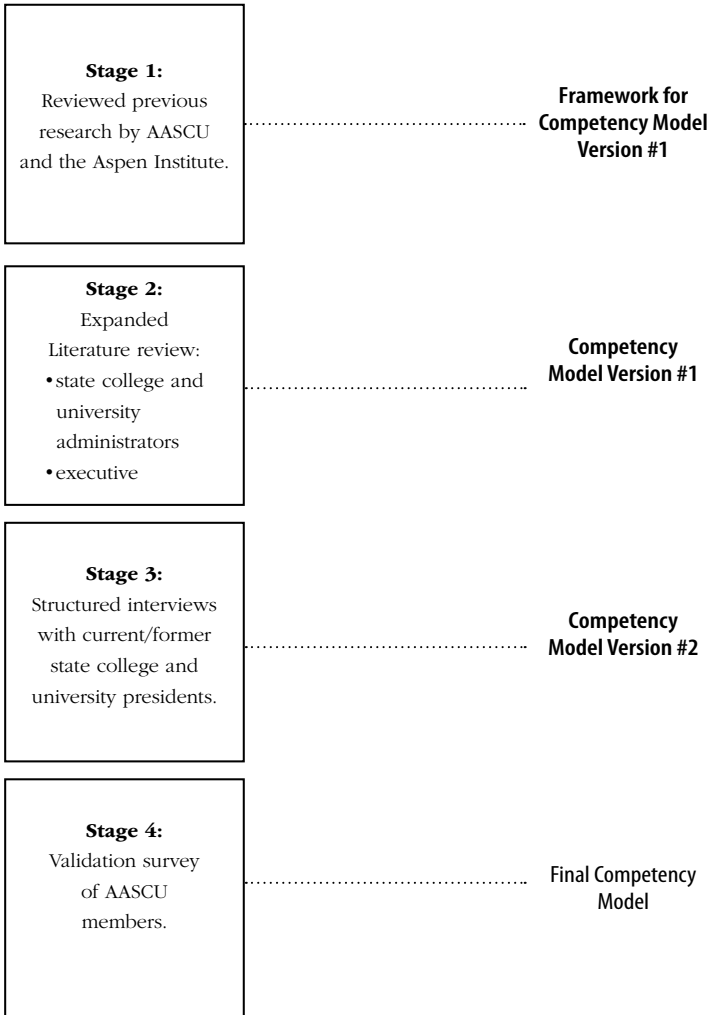
of experts and practitioners in assessment center methodology, as well as higher education leaders and search consultants. The preliminary profile of a successful university leader was shared with the group and discussed. Symposium participants also explored many different dimensions of assessment center methodology and its possible applications to higher education. The group concluded that there may be considerable promise in applying assessment center methodology to improve succession planning and leadership development in higher education, but that to achieve those ends, the preliminary profile of successful university leaders would need to be fashioned into a set of well-defined, assessable, and “developable” competencies. Evidence would then need to be collected to validate this competency model.

Building on this preliminary work, AASCU now has:

- Developed a competency model for state college and university presidents that specifically connects to appropriate higher education strategies;
- Validated the competencies using interviews and surveys of subject-matter experts;
- Mapped the competencies to those currently used within assessment center practice.

This document provides a detailed report on the process and findings stemming from these three tasks, which has culminated in the **AASCU State College and University Presidential Competency Model**.

Overview of Project (Final)



AASCU State College/University Presidential Competency Model

Management Competencies

1. *Knowledge of the Academic Enterprise:* Possesses knowledge of and appreciation for the state college/university (its past, present, and future), its culture (e.g., shared values and traditions), its context (e.g., social, political, legal), and its students.
2. *Business Enterprise Management:* Applies business and financial knowledge to proactively create, develop, and secure resources from various sources using established (e.g., campaigns, fundraising) and innovative methods in an effort to grow the state college/university. This includes demonstrating an understanding of pertinent financial considerations; possessing the ability to identify, recognize, assess, and capitalize on opportunities; taking calculated risks and tolerating ambiguity; and developing partnerships that will secure financial and non-financial resources. Demonstrates ability to recognize opportunities in various parts of the system (e.g., technological, enrollment management, legal issues, and personnel).
3. *Resource Development and Stewardship:* Manages (i.e., distribution and creative utilization of) financial, technological, human capital, enrollment, physical property, and other resources. This includes an appreciation of shared governance (e.g., faculty, administrators) in the management and allocation of resources. Involves leading institutional change and consideration of interdependent organizational systems, each of which requires sufficient resources to carry out its work.

Interpersonal Competencies

4. *Formal and Informal Communication:* Communicates in an effective and authentic way in both formal and informal settings using various methods appropriate for the message (e.g., public statements, social media), as well as demonstrating comfort and confidence in writing, speaking in public, and using information technology to communicate. Actively listens and understands the needs and concerns of internal and external stakeholders.

5. *Positively Engaged*: Maintains a visible and active presence and an appropriate level of involvement with both external and internal stakeholders at all levels of the institution (e.g., students, parents, faculty, trustees, community).
6. *Relationship Development and Maintenance*: Develops and maintains purposeful interpersonal connections and relationships throughout the college/university and among individuals in the local, state, national, and international communities, in order to advance the institutional mission. This includes working and communicating with internal and external stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, students, alumni, parents, prospective students, donors, government, local organizations, community leaders, trustees) in both collaborative and supportive capacities; managing synergies among these relationships; and maintaining this network of relationships in order to promote continued and collaborative stewardship.
7. *Climate Creation and Maintenance*: Intentionally shapes a campus climate (e.g., fostering and reinforcing shared beliefs and values) that fits the growing needs of the university. Maintains and fosters a welcoming, diverse, and inclusive campus environment, as well as engages in collaboration and entrepreneurship within and across units (and beyond).

Personal Characteristics

8. *Integrity*: Behaves in a way that is ethical, trustworthy, transparent, consistent, accountable, honest, committed, and socially responsible, thus setting high standards for staff, faculty, students, and the community.
9. *Servant Leader*: Engages with stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, and especially students) in a way that conveys empathy and primary concern for and commitment to increasing their well-being, achievement, and success.
10. *Continuous Self-Development*: Maintains self-awareness and attention to continuous self-improvement and growth. This includes knowledge acquisition, professional development/skill building, and maintenance of emotional and physical health.

- 11. Resilience:** Demonstrates strength in the face of adversity (i.e., determination, perseverance, tenacity) and the capacity to recover quickly from challenges and difficulties without dwelling on failures or setbacks.

Leadership Competencies

- 12. Problem-Solving:** Applies systems-level thinking in order to define problems, gather and integrate relevant quantitative and qualitative information, generate and identify potential solutions, and evaluate the best course of action against identified criteria with an integrated systems- and results-oriented focus.
- 13. People and Team Development:** Effectively supervises and delegates (i.e., defines tasks, sets goals, and drives performance toward attainment/fulfillment of goals); selects, builds, and develops diverse and cohesive groups of individuals who can work together to achieve the institutional mission.
- 14. Strategic Vision:** Develops, articulates, advocates, and executes a clear vision for the state college/university's future that others will accept, support, and advance. This includes orchestrating effective change management via short- and long-term strategic thinking.
- 15. Adversity Leadership:** Manages, identifies, addresses, and responds to emergencies, crises, social issues, and controversies on campus in a prompt and effective manner. This involves an understanding and continuous monitoring of relevant issues.

Additional Traits

In addition to the preceding behaviorally defined competencies, our research revealed a number of relevant personality traits that underlie these behavioral competencies, and that are necessary for success in a leadership position. These include:

- 16.** Traits that support and exemplify positive expectations of success (i.e., hope, optimism, self-efficacy, confidence).
- 17.** Traits indicative of an achievement orientation (i.e., needs for achievement, autonomy, personal growth and development).