STEPHEN VOSS

Why Is the Job of College President So Difficult?

By ALINA TUGEND

THERE IS no Guinness World Record for the most college leaders to depart from their posts unexpectedly over a few days. But if there were, the casualties of late June 2019 might well rank at the top.

That was when the boards of Bennett, Marist and Muhlenberg Colleges, as well as Auburn and Hollins Universities, announced a parting of ways with their presidents, all of whom had served between two and four years. The timing and close-mouthed nature of the abrupt departures may be nothing more than a coincidence, but they give credence to a growing belief: The job of a college president is harder than ever.

TAKEAWAYS

Financial pressures – on top of polarized constituencies and social-media scrutiny – have made the president's job more difficult.

Presidents are serving shorter tenures, possibly because governing boards are more assertive and may be more willing to dismiss a leader if dissatisfied.

Trustees and presidents alike need more and better executive training and leadership development.

Training is particularly important as the pathway to the presidency has shifted, with more candidates bypassing the provost's office.

Despite the enormous challenges, experts say there is no shortage of qualified candidates still eager for the top job.

There are many reasons: "Demographics, money, culture, expectations, civility, politics, race, gender, mission," says Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, president of George Washington University from 1988 to 2007, and, before that, of the University of Hartford. "The institutional agenda is no longer commonly agreed upon. Resources are thin. Budget cuts abound. Critics are everywhere. So, the president is the blame-catcher."

Presidential resignations following scandals related to financial impropriety, sexual abuse, and other ignominies seem to grab headlines on a regular basis. And data do show that presidential tenures appear to be getting shorter than in the past.

According to the 2017 American College President Study, conducted by the American Council on Education, the average tenure of sitting presidents who responded to the question was 6.5 years, down from 7 years in 2011 and 8.5 years in 2006. And 2017 figures from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities show that over the past five years, 45 percent of its members' presidencies lasted four years or fewer, compared with 28 percent who served between five and nine years and 27 percent who lasted 10 years or more.

> Two factors that make the job different now: "the seriously challenged financial model and the increasing polarization of constituencies on campuses."

Historically, the role of college president has never been viewed as an easy one, despite the tendency to look back longingly at a largely mythical time when college leaders simply jollied along faculty members, dined with alumni, and paid little attention to pliable boards of trustees.

Consider the following statement, written 30 years ago: "Balancing conflicting expectations … has always been difficult: Changing demographic trends, fiscal constraints, and unrealistic public expectations now make it virtually impossible for presidents to provide the leadership that is expected from the position." It's from a 1989 book to which Robert Birnbaum, now an emeritus professor of higher education at the University of Maryland at College Park, was a contributor.

Birnbaum's chapter, "Responsibility Without Authority: The Impossible Job of the College President," quotes one president as saying: "It's like treading in a minefield." And another: "Any day you can be knocked out of office by something unexpected." And, Birnbaum says in an interview, these sentiments don't just go back 30 years, but to the earliest American college presidencies of the 17th century.

A DARKER FINANCIAL PICTURE

Nonetheless, things are different now. Tougher financial constraints, declining college-age populations in many parts of the country, a new emphasis on achievement gaps and graduation rates, more assertive boards of trustees, and the rise of social media have all made the college presidency increasingly fraught.

And universities are now, more than ever, in the position of having to justify their value. Public support and confidence in higher education has dropped: A 2018 Gallup survey found that 48 percent of those surveyed expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education, down significantly from 57 percent in 2015.

That, combined with questions about the purpose of a college education and whether it's worth the rising cost of tuition, means colleges and their presidents have a much smaller cushion of good will.

"The president does have to navigate and mediate between many diverse constituencies, all of whom see the world somewhat differently, many of whom have very different goals and values," says Judith Block McLaughlin, educational chair of the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents and the Harvard Seminar for Presidential Leadership, for experienced presidents. "That's always been the case, and some will argue that that's the strength of higher education."

But she points to two factors that make the job different now: "the seriously challenged fi-

HARVARD U.

Judith Block McLaughlin, who is educational chair of Harvard's seminars for presidents: "The president does have to navigate and mediate between many diverse constituencies, all of whom see the world somewhat differently, many of whom have very different goals and values."

nancial model and the increasing polarization of constituencies on campuses."

According to the latest ACE survey of presidents, from 2017, the job frustration cited most often — by 61 percent of leaders — was financial challenges, or "never enough money." That's because, as McLaughlin says, "the economic model that has been successful for generations in higher education simply is not working. That's visible in large colleges and small, precariously perched colleges."

Public universities can no longer rely on state money — one study found that three decades of budget cuts mean states are spending 25-percent less per student. Many private colleges are struggling after years of taking on too much debt and discounting tuition. Addressing budget concerns increasingly eats into presidents' work hours.

The ACE survey found that the majority of presidents said they spend the most time on budget and financial management, followed by fund raising.

Leo M. Lambert led Elon University from 1999 to 2018, during a time when the institution grew from 4,000 to almost 7,000 students. During his years in the job, "I could feel very definitely a much stronger pull to spend time away from campus, connecting with alumni and fund raising," he says. "We have alumni all over the country and all over the world, and people want to see the president."

The primary purpose of his fund raising, he says, was to raise money for increased student aid. College costs are a major topic of dinnertime discussions among families with college-age children, he says. "And institutions are seeking ways to remain competitive, to assist as many families as possible. The issue of access is of paramount importance, and the primary story."

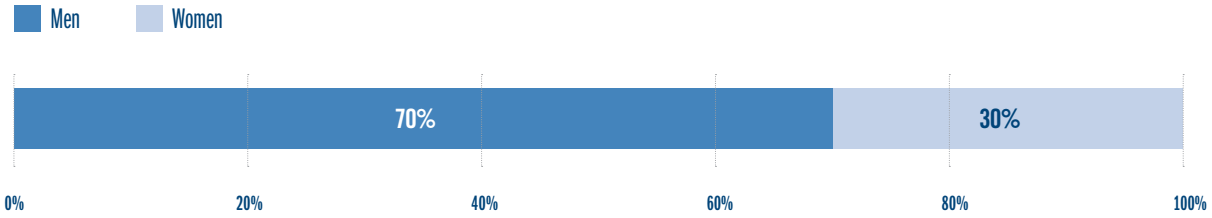
THE MAGNIFYING POWERS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Elon still worries about finances even though its enrollment is growing. The president of a small, financially challenged liberal-arts college, though, often faces even more difficult circumstances. When Susan D. Stuebner became president of Colby-Sawyer College in New Hampshire in 2016, she learned that the 1,000-student college had an operating deficit of $2 million to $3 million and was regularly discounting tuition by 70 percent.

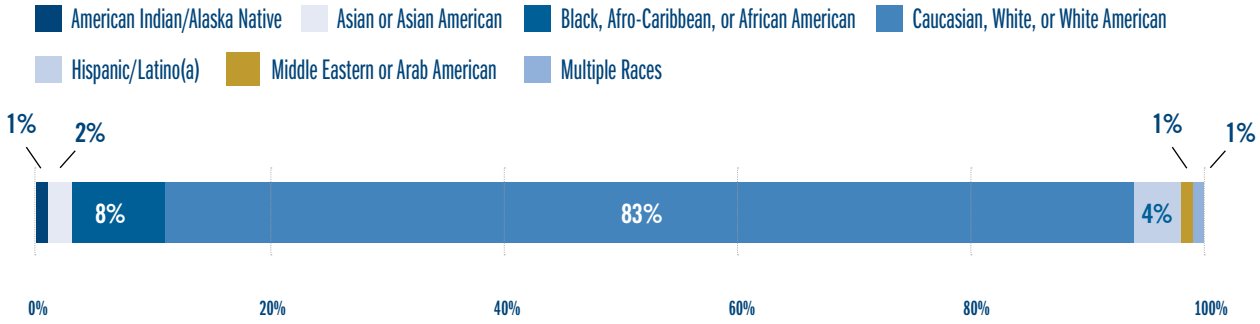
A lack of transparency about the deficit meant that faculty and staff members knew

A Statistical Portrait of the Presidency

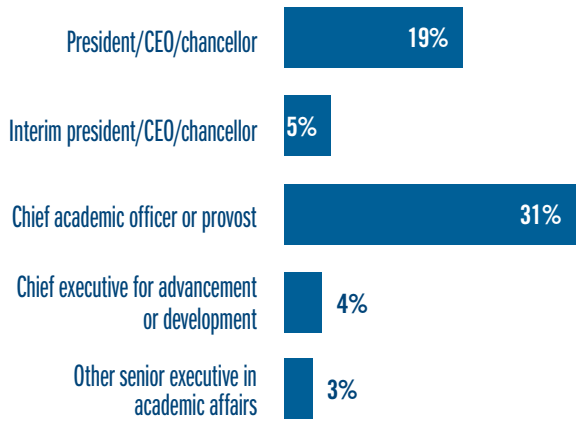
BY GENDER, 2016

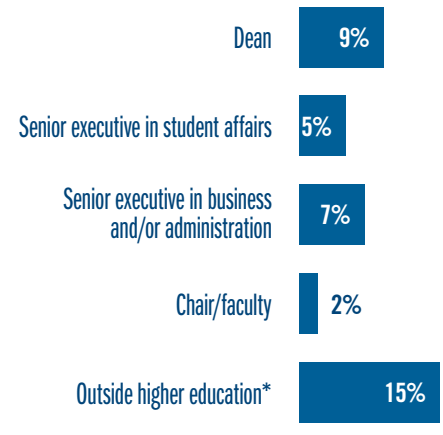


BY RACE/ETHNICITY



BY IMMEDIATE PRIOR POSITIONS

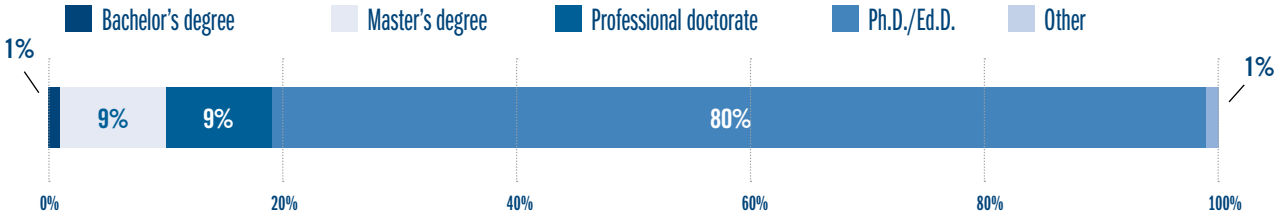




*Outside higher education includes K-12 administrator/educator, business/industry, religious counselor/member of religious order, elected or appointed government official, legal professional, military personnel, medical professional, nonprofit sector, and other.

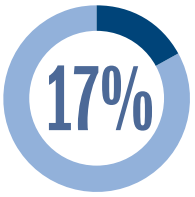
Source: "American College President Study, 2017," by the American Council on Education and the TIAA Institute

BY HIGHEST DEGREE EARNED

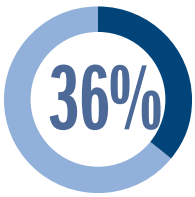


MINORITY PRESIDENTS

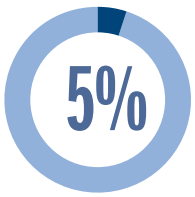
The percentage of minority college presidents has slowly increased over the last 30 years. Women of color, however, are the most underrepresented in the presidency.



of college presidents are racial minorities



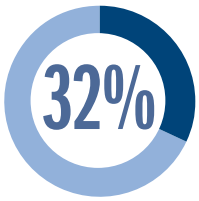
of college presidents lead associate colleges



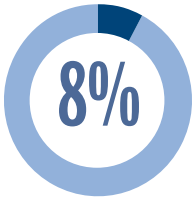
of college presidents are women of color

WOMEN PRESIDENTS

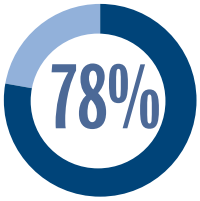
The percentage of women college presidents has slowly increased over the last 30 years. However, women remain underrepresented and typically follow different paths to the presidency than men.



of women presidents have altered their career progression to care for a dependent, spouse or partner, or parent

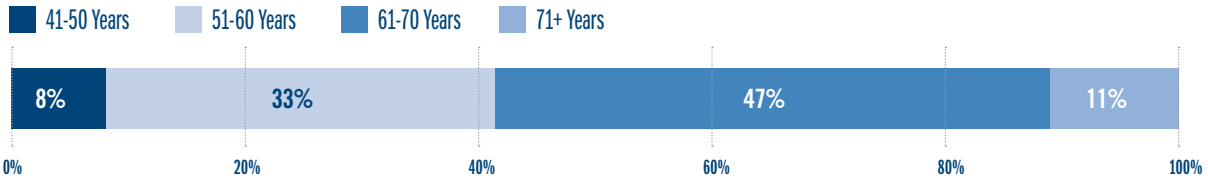


of women presidents lead doctorate-granting institutions

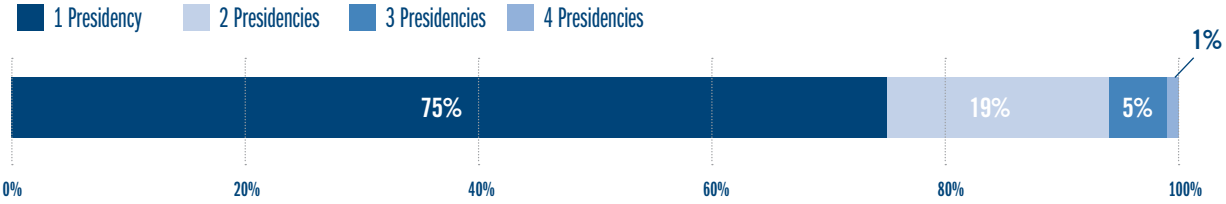


of women presidents are serving their first presidency

EXPERIENCE: COLLEGE PRESIDENTS BY AGE



EXPERIENCE: COLLEGE PRESIDENTS BY NUMBER OF PRESIDENCIES HELD THROUGHOUT CAREER



something was wrong, but didn't know the extent of the problems, she says. To help get finances under control, the college had to lay off seven faculty members and 13 staff members. It now has 60 full-time faculty members. "We had only six weeks to do it, so we were more tactical than strategic at that point," Stuebner says. "There was real grief."

Also, in Stuebner's first year in office, "every position on my senior team turned over, which was not ideal." While she now has a "wonderful" senior staff in place, she says, the difficulties she walked into as a president allowed no time for a gradual adjustment.

Stuebner and many other presidents say their role constantly requires them to assess competing needs: sharing governance but keeping things moving. Doing the day-to-day work but making time for strategic thinking. Getting off campus to fund raise but being present on campus to forge relationships with faculty members and students. And while that balancing act may be nothing new, what has changed is that placing a foot wrong can become instant fodder for social media.

Presidents attending her seminars at Harvard come with much more of a sense of urgency than in the past, McLaughlin says. "They are fully aware that an issue totally unanticipated by them—perhaps totally unrelated to them—may explode, and they're going to be the collateral damage."

For presidents, the specter of a 2017 incident at Middlebury College looms large; student protests that disrupted a controversial speaker's appearance left a professor injured and were splayed all over social and traditional media for weeks. "Everything is seen through that lens," says Susan Resneck Pierce, former president of the University of Puget Sound. She now runs a consulting firm, SRP Consulting, which focuses largely on higher education. "Most presidents are terribly conscious of what the impact might be beyond the boundaries of campus. Often a match gets thrown into a pile of kindling no one even knew was on the campus."

Mildred García, who was president of California State University at Fullerton from 2012 to 2018, devoted significant time to making sure that a potentially volatile event didn't spin out of control on Facebook and Twitter. For her, the date October 31, 2017 "is etched in my head." That was when Milo Yiannopoulos, the politically conservative provocateur, was set to speak on her campus.

"We managed and planned for that for six months," says García, who is now president of AASCU. "We knew any false move would go viral. One faculty member told me, 'Don't let him come here. Your career is on the line.'" While there were some arrests following fights outside the event, García believes there could have been far more serious consequences without the extensive planning.

THE RIGHT JOB SKILLS FOR THE RIGHT TIME

It's not just the politically charged events that draw attention. These days politicians, policy makers, and accreditors are keeping a much closer eye on how universities are run. "When I started in 1981—those were the salad days—they were just throwing money at universities," says E. Gordon Gee, president of West Virginia University, who has held seven presidencies since 1980. "Fast-forward four decades and there's a tremendous amount of scrutiny in how we operate in terms of quality versus cost."

And in that environment, the role that governing boards play both in hiring presidents and ensuring their future success (or failure) has taken on far more significance. "Over the last 10 to 12 years, there has been a steady growth in a board's expectations of being engaged in issues that really matter," says Richard D. Legon, who retired as president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and

> "They are fully aware that an issue totally unanticipated by them – perhaps totally unrelated to them – may explode, and they're going to be the collateral damage."

Colleges in June 2019. The days of rubber-stamp boards are over — and mostly for the better, he says. "All of the fundamental responsibilities of boards are now being reviewed by agencies that have a rather substantial degree of impact on the capacity of the institution to actually sell its product," he says.

Many experts argue that the education and training of trustees have not kept pace with their increased involvement. Choosing a new president, for example, is too often done without a clear understanding of the type of competencies and skills needed, says Frank A. Casagrande, president of Casagrande Consulting, which works with higher-education and nonprofit organizations. "I believe if institutions of higher education were more specific about what they were looking for and how they selected the president, there would be less turnover in the presidency," he says.

Clara M. Lovett, president emerita of Northern Arizona University, says her research confirms that premise. She looked at 34 presidencies, which she considered as failed because the leaders served for three or fewer years. Putting aside deaths, poor health, and a felony indictment, she says, in most cases the reason for the departure was a disconnect between the newly appointed president and the board. "Boards too often can easily be impressed or enchanted by someone's previous experience, charisma, call it what you want," Lovett says, "without looking at the condition of their own institution and seeing whether the person they are hiring will be able to provide the needed strategic and moral leadership."

COLBY-SAWYER COLLEGE

Susan D. Stuebner had six weeks to get finances under control when she became president of Colby-Sawyer College.

A successful candidate must not only be the right fit for a particular university, but also must be the right person for that particular time. For example, Colby-Sawyer's Stuebner came up through administrative rather than academic ranks of higher education, and was well-acquainted with finances. "There are a lot of schools where my experience wouldn't be the right fit," she says. "At this one, it is."

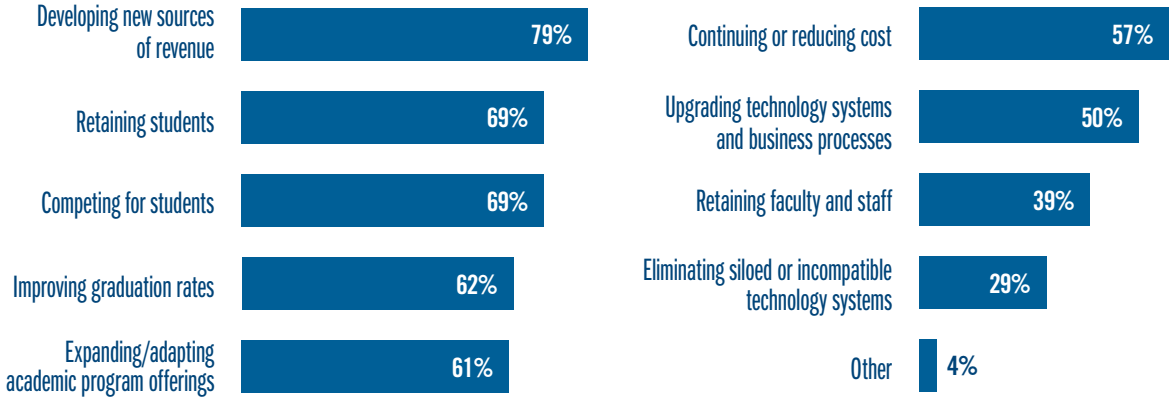
The president who capably leads a university through a major change may not be the right leader once that transition is over, Casagrande says, because he or she may have alienated too many stakeholders in the process. "Someone can be the perfect person for the first five years and not the next five years — it depends on what has to get done," he says.

Gee, who is believed to have held the most U.S. college presidencies of any leader, knows that well. The shortest of his seven presidencies lasted two years — from 1998 to 2000 — at Brown University. While he calls it "a fabulous institution," it was completely wrong for him. "I came from a university of 65,000 to one of

Chief Concerns of College Presidents

TOP INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

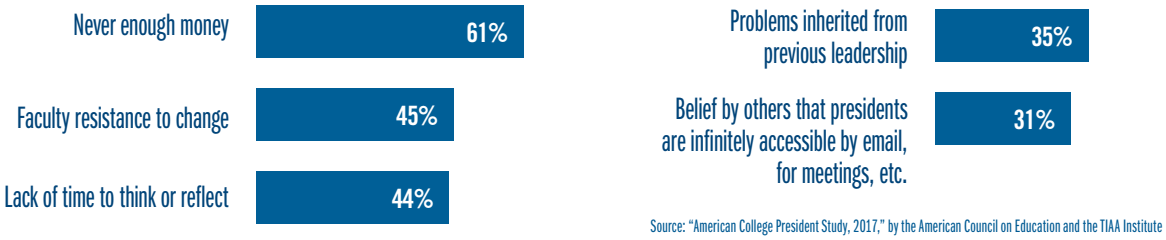
Academic leaders were asked about their major concerns.



Source: "Making Way for Innovation," based on a 2017 survey of academic leaders conducted for *The Chronicle* by Maguire Associates

TOP FRUSTRATIONS

Presidents were asked what frustrated them about their roles.

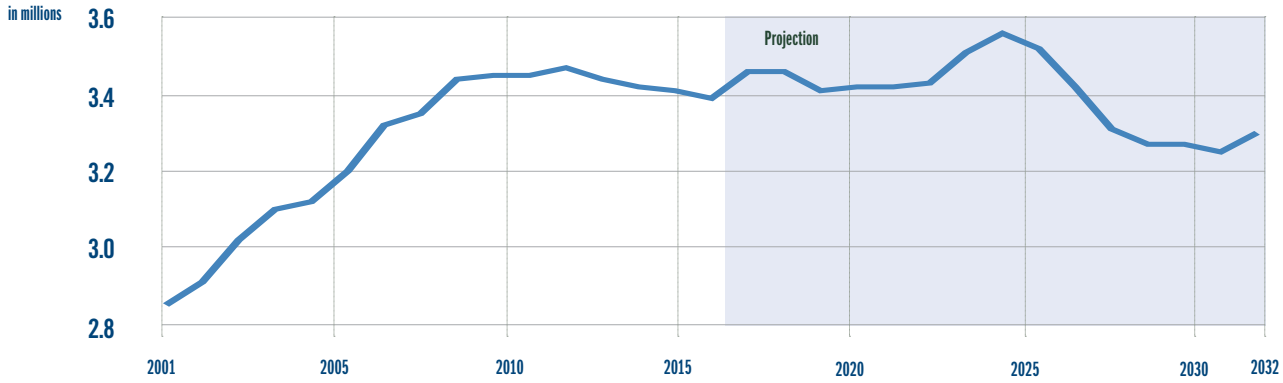


Source: "American College President Study, 2017," by the American Council on Education and the TIAA Institute

ENROLLMENT HEADACHES

The number of high-school graduates is expected to decline sharply in 2025.

High-school graduates nationally



Source: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, "Knocking at the College Door, Projections of High School Graduates, 2016"

7,000 students. I felt like an antelope in a phone booth," he says. "Mechanically I was doing fine, but I wasn't the kind of enthusiastic leader that I think I should have been. I thrive on complexity and the ability to make change. I've learned over time there are things I do really well, and there are things I don't do really well."

Not surprisingly, most sitting presidents laud their boards as supportive, skilled, and strategic. They talk more openly of colleagues' complaints. Walter M. Kimbrough, president of Dillard University, says the worst combination involves boards that are overly involved in telling presidents what to do without giving the necessary help. "They're trying to direct what's happening on the campus without providing any support," he says.

Politics has always played a role in the selection of public-university board members, who are appointed by governors or elected. But like much of the country, this process has become even more partisan in recent years, as demonstrated by high-profile governing-board battles that have played out in North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin, to name just a few.

"The president is often put in the middle of a political struggle, rather than a genuine struggle over the quality and effectiveness of the institution," says Ted Mitchell, president of ACE.

There also appears to be less board deference to presidents, which may account for some of the greater turnover. Michael S. Harris, an associate professor of higher education at Southern Methodist University, examined 500 presidential departures at more than 200 Division I universities from 1988 to 2013. He found that the most departures occurred during the six-year period from 2008 to 2013.

While the recession was clearly a factor, he says, the deeper he looked into the numbers, the more he realized it was not the only one. Financial scandals, academic scandals, and more-activist governing boards also played a role during that period, he says.

Problematic relationships between a president and board were one of the most common reasons for a leaders' departures, he says. In the past, boards — for better or worse — that were unhappy with their presidents were less willing to push them out. Now, there is "both an impatience and a tolerance for disruption," Harris says. "Disruption now is seen as what we should be doing, uprooting things, and not let the status quo just sit there." Or, as Gee says, these days, "the heads of presidents are very light on their shoulders."

BETTER JOB TRAINING IS ESSENTIAL

While presidents have to answer to boards, they also must answer to their campus communities. And more and more of them are wrestling with financial and political concerns that affect both faculty members and students, such as the replacement of tenure-track jobs with adjuncts who often work for low pay and no benefits. "The ability to connect and manage with adjuncts is a more difficult proposition," Gee says.

While campus unrest or tension between the faculty and administration is nothing new — recall the loyalty oaths and anti-McCarthyism of the 1950s and the protests over civil rights and the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s — colleges at the time generally didn't face the same degree of financial pressure on top of the politicization. "It's very hard when faculty see their salaries being cut, or people aren't getting hired or see programs being closed down — particularly the liberal-arts programs — and they're baffled," says Trachtenberg, co-author of *Presidencies Derailed: Why University Leaders Fail and How to Prevent It.* "They look around at someone to hold accountable, and presidents seem the most likely.

> "The president is often put in the middle of a political struggle, rather than a genuine struggle over the quality and effectiveness of the institution."

"And if you graduate from college, go on and have a career and pay off your college debts because you make enough money, people are not

How Do Administrators and the Faculty View the Presidency?

The average tenure of the college president has decreased, from 8.5 years to 6.5 years, and by all accounts the top job at higher-ed institutions is increasingly challenging. But do administrators and faculty members see eye to eye on what makes the job so difficult?

In a recent survey, *The Chronicle* asked those two groups why they thought the average tenure of college presidents had decreased. Both groups agreed that financial challenges are the top reason, with 68 percent of administrators and 55 percent of faculty members citing that factor.

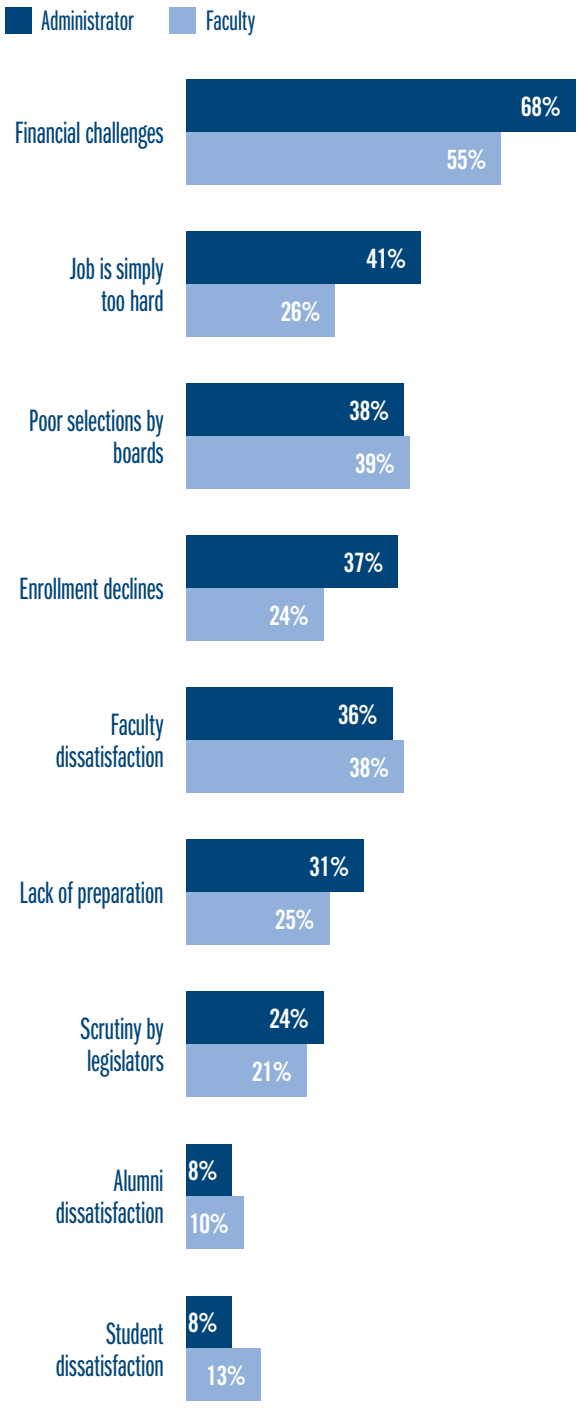
The next reason cited by administrators—that the job is simply too hard, mentioned by 41 percent—was cited by only 26 percent of faculty members, suggesting that professors lack a full understanding of the challenges of the president's job.

Poor selection of presidents by boards was cited by about the same proportion of both administrators and faculty members—38 and 39 percent, respectively.

Members of both groups were more likely to agree on the skills that are most important for a president. A large majority of both administrators and faculty members said that the ability to lead change, work well with the board, and be a good public communicator are very important skills for presidents.

Not surprisingly, 74 percent of faculty members said that working well with the faculty is a very important skill, while only 52 percent of administrators cited that skill.

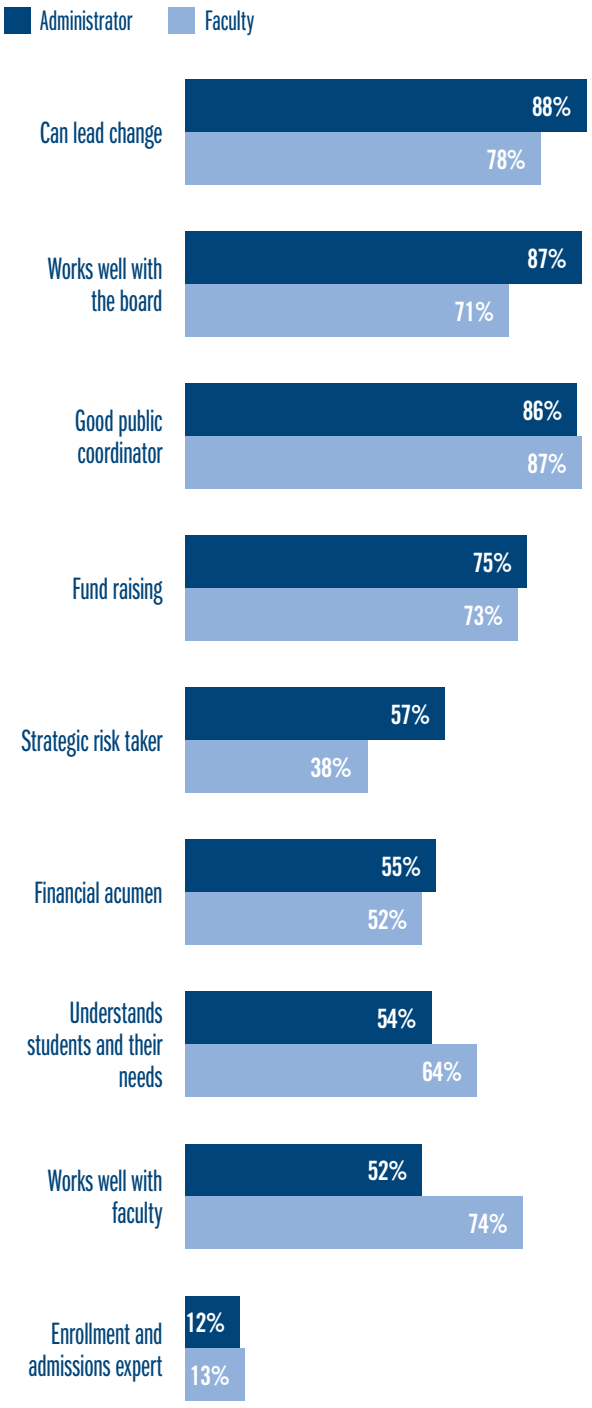
WHY DO YOU THINK THE AVERAGE TENURE FOR COLLEGE PRESIDENTS HAS DECREASED?



Note: Multiple response options were accepted for this question.

Source: "The College Leadership Challenge," based on a 2019 *Chronicle* survey of 439 administrators and 435 faculty members

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES FOR A COLLEGE PRESIDENT?



Note: Multiple response options were accepted for this question.

Source: "The College Leadership Challenge," based on a 2019 *Chronicle* survey of 439 administrators and 435 faculty members

going to complain. But if you graduate and you have debt and you can't get a job, you're obviously going to feel you've been misled."

If the current shifts in higher education feel like an earthquake, university presidents are right at the epicenter. They must balance new types of tensions, including those related to growing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity among students and, to a lesser extent, among faculty members.

The debate over free speech and inclusivity is an example of one such tension. "Presidents are trying to reconcile and negotiate widely divergent values," says Harvard's McLaughlin. "There's no way they can please or appease everyone. When you have a more diverse student body, alumni, and faculty, it makes for a richer, ultimately healthier conversation, but not an easier one."

Today's campuses are a microcosm of the outside world. Policies around immigration and the undocumented and the #MeToo movement are not only political issues, but also personal ones. Take Title IX, the federal civil-rights law that prohibits discrimination — including sexual harassment and violence — against women at educational institutions or programs that receive federal funds. The complexity and recent changes made to the regulations, as well as the increased spotlight on sexual harassment, mean that understanding and complying with the law is of far more concern than in the past.

> "When you have a more diverse student body, alumni, and faculty, it makes for a richer, ultimately healthier conversation, but not an easier one."

"We weren't talking about this in 2004," says Kimbrough. "It's not necessarily the time it takes up, but the constant threat out there. We have to

make sure we stay on top of it — we hired a full-time person just to deal with Title IX."

Not everyone thinks campus politics are more fraught than in the past. "I lived through an era where I was sitting in board meetings with the smell of tear gas seeping through the door and students trying to enter," says Birnbaum, the professor emeritus at the University of Maryland. "At other board meetings, the board was told to leave because students were coming down the street with spears. It wasn't true, but they thought it was."

Helping presidents learn how to handle these complicated concerns before taking office is key, and one way to do that is to provide more formal leadership development. Presidents who were surveyed for a report conducted by Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence with Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities identified leadership development as the second most important training opportunity needed, after fund raising.

Higher education tends not to embrace leadership training or succession planning, unlike the corporate world, which invests heavily in it, the Deloitte report states. The presidents interviewed for the report "often reminded us that the leadership track in higher education is too often seen as a step back from the primary goal in academia: teaching and research," the report states. As one president put it: "Colleges are among the few places where taking a leadership position is tantamount to going over to the dark side."

There are programs to guide new and sitting presidents, but many say that there are not enough, and that too few presidents take advantage of the ones that do exist. Fewer than 20 percent of presidents have an executive coach, while many CEOs have executive coaches during their entire tenure, Casagrande says. "When you're developing your strengths and weaknesses, it has to be with someone you're not accountable to. And don't wait until the president is in trouble, so that it's not remedial or punitive."

ALYSSA SCHUKAR

Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard U., says a worst-case scenario is when boards are overly involved in directing presidents but provide no support.

PIPELINE TO THE PRESIDENCY

This training is especially important as the traditional pipeline to the presidency shifts; the provost is no longer the obvious president-in-wait-

ing. "The paths prospective presidents now take are becoming more complex, fragmented, and overlapping," the Deloitte report notes, with academic deans increasingly moving directly to the top job without stopping at the provost's office on the way up.

"Now because of the pressures, more and more provosts are self-selecting out," Casagrande says. "People would rather be a great provost than a failed president. And without leadership training, the pipeline will remain weak."

A number of universities are helping create their own pipelines. For example, about 10 years ago Elon set up its Faculty Administrative Fellows program for young, tenured faculty. One fellow is given a reduced teaching load, joins the president's senior staff for a two-year appointment, and participates in all aspects of senior-level administrative work. "I believe higher education is very short-sighted," says Lambert, Elon's former president. "We are not doing enough to identify and prepare emerging leaders, particularly on our faculty, to assume administrative roles."

Connie LeDoux Book, who took over from Lambert after serving as provost of The Citadel, participated in Elon's faculty fellow program and says it changed the trajectory of her career. "I had no plans to be a president or provost," says Book, who, when chosen as a fellow in 2008, was a professor in the school of communications. "I was very focused on getting tenure, and it was something that wasn't even on my radar."

But when Lambert asked her to be a fellow and work on the university's strategic plan, the assignment intrigued her. She learned practical aspects of working on a team across university departments, a skill that was completely foreign to her. Perhaps most importantly, she learned that she had to rely on her own instincts, and that having a vision isn't enough; the hard part is creating lasting change. She believes it is particularly important to have a leadership pipeline for professors. So when she became Elon's president, she tapped a woman faculty member to become her fellow, coming full circle.

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Many presidents say the whole idea of an "impossible job" is overblown. It's difficult, yes, even relentless. But the rewards are numerous. "It's hard, complex, but enormously fulfilling," Lambert says, echoing many of his peers.

And those who recruit and train future presidents say there is no shortage of well-qualified people willing to step into the top role. But while they may embrace the job, the feeling of peril is much more present than it was a decade ago, says Harvard's McLaughlin.

"There is a sense that I may be the college's best president," she says, "or I may be its last."