



# NEW PARADIGMS TO THE PRESIDENCY

Given the many challenges inherent in running a college or university today, should more search committees consider candidates with disparate “nontraditional” backgrounds?

BY STEPHEN G. PELLETIER

A RECENT SURVEY BY Deloitte and the Georgia Institute of Technology made headlines with its finding that more college presidents are ascending to the top leadership position at a university without first serving a stint as provost. Among other findings, the survey showed that more academic deans are springboarding from that position directly into the top job. That is particularly true at smaller universities: At institutions that enroll fewer than 5,000 students, 62 percent of presidents had not previously served as provost, in contrast to 51 percent who had served in that role, according to the study.

Based on a survey of 165 presidents and a review of the CVs of 840 college leaders, augmented by interviews and a literature search, the survey concluded that “the paths prospective presidents now take are becoming more complex, fragmented, and overlapping.”



Apart from different channels to the presidency within academe, other research shows boards have been fairly consistent in tapping institutional leaders from outside higher education. In its 2012 American College President Study, the American Council on Education found that 20 percent of presidents came from outside academe—up from 13 percent reported in the 2006 edition of the survey. In the most recent edition of the survey, released in June 2017, 18 percent of presidents from private institutions came from outside higher education, compared with 12 percent of public university leaders. But it's another statistic from the new survey that may make trustees sit up and take notice: 54 percent of presidents surveyed said they expect to leave their current presidency in five years or less. That means that more than half of college and university boards can expect to soon be searching for a new leader.

The bottom line is that more college and university boards are looking at nontraditional candidates as they consider who they will hire as their institution's next leader. To better understand this evolving landscape, *Trusteeship* sought the perspective of several recruiters and other experts, as well as sitting presidents whose career paths diverge from the norm.

## LEADERSHIP FROM WITHIN THE ACADEMY

Apart from the finding that more academic deans are becoming presidents without first being provosts, Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence and the Georgia Institute of Technology's Center for 21st Century Universities revealed some telling trends about the role of the presidency in general. While the president is definitely still in charge of the entire university, for example, the survey recognized the growing internal role of the provost as an important complement to the role of president. One way to think about this, the survey suggested, is to picture the president as "outward focused" when it comes to the business of the university—interacting with the university's board, donors, the public, alumni, and legislators—while the provost oversees internal academic operations.

Under no circumstances should that "outside/inside" divide be construed as an absolute division of labors in most universities, and in practice, presidents are deeply engaged in internal operations while provosts often engage in external activities. But in general, those findings point to the overarching trend that leading a college has never been more complex or challenging—a reality that has deep implications for the types of leaders that search committees seek for institutions of higher learning and for the skill sets that those new hires bring to the table.

Noting that "the role of the college president has no analog in the modern business world," the Deloitte-Georgia Tech survey listed the "dizzying array of stakeholders and constituents" to whom college leaders are accountable, including students, faculty, administrative staff, trustees, parents, community leaders, alumni, and legislators. It detailed a broad range of skills that presidents must have, including "administrative and financial acumen, fundraising ability, and political deftness." In addition, the survey emphasized that "presidents must chart a difficult path with their academic deans, providing incentives for individual schools to excel and grow while fostering collaboration and cooperation with each other to drive the overall health of the academy."

That list only *begins* to frame the full scope of responsibilities of today's college leaders. Cole Clark, Deloitte's executive director of higher education client relations, says one of the survey's key findings focused on "the changing dynamics of the stakeholders and constituents that are exerting the most influence and

## TAKEAWAYS

**1** While the president is in charge of the entire university, the provost has a growing internal role as an important complement to the president's role. The president is "outward focused"—interacting with the university's board, donors, the public, alumni, and legislators—while the provost oversees internal academic operations.

**2** Perhaps reflecting the reality that running a university has become a lot more like running a corporation, more institutions of higher learning are looking to the private sector for their leaders.

**3** Successful presidential candidates also are coming more often from university schools of business, law, engineering, and even the arts. Some schools are tapping university fundraisers and enrollment managers as their next leaders.

pressure on the role of the president." In addition, the survey observed that presidents need to be able to "balance the pressures of society to improve the 'return on investment' of education at their institutions as well as manage pressure from community and political leaders around critical issues." Those evolving dynamics "are having a big influence on the types of skills and capabilities with which new presidents need to come to the table in order to be selected and be successful," Clark notes.

As the Deloitte-Georgia Tech survey shows, the evolution of the scope of responsibilities that universities expect their presidents to fulfill goes hand in glove with an evolution in the pathway to the presidency. That's not coincidence. As the survey authors noted, "Given the diverse set of skills needed to run institutions these days and with provosts increasingly saying they don't want to be presidents, search committees may have little choice but to consider candidates from nontraditional backgrounds."

The survey findings don't quite jibe with the experience of Robin Mamlet, a managing partner in the education practice of Witt/Kieffer Executive Search. "I'm not sure that nonprovost placements were that unusual 20 years ago," she says. "Presidents then came from mostly academic dean and vice president's roles, most commonly from academic affairs or related positions."

Mamlet, whose firm has helped place 200 presidents in the past 20 years, notes that another trend today is successful presidential candidates coming more often from university schools of business,

law, engineering, and even the arts. Some schools are tapping university fundraisers and enrollment managers as their next leaders, and Mamlet says her firm recently helped recruit a campus chief diversity officer for a presidency.

The evolution in channels to the university presidency has a strong historic precedent. In a review of presidents dating back to the 1800s, the Deloitte and Georgia Tech researchers found that in the early days of higher education, presidents were typically faculty members, many of whom were also members of the clergy. Over the first half of the 20th century, a model of university administrators/managers evolved. Following World War II, many universities chose presidents who could lead the expansion of both the college's physical plant and its academic offerings. In the last quarter of the 20th century, as federal and state financing of higher education changed, more institutions sought leaders with strong fiscal skills. In the early part of the 21st century, a multidisciplinary model has emerged, predicated on leaders who bring a wide variety of skills to the table, the survey suggests.

## LOOKING BEYOND THE ACADEMY

Perhaps driven by the fact that today's presidents need a broad portfolio that includes business and management skills, more universities are looking for leaders outside the academy. Corroborating ACE's data, which show a clear pattern in this direction, *Renewal and Progress*, a recent study by the Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency, part of the Aspen

Institute College Excellence Program, noted that "boards and search committees are increasingly willing to consider candidates who come from outside the traditional academic route." Moreover, the study said that "given the increasing complexity of higher education administration in terms of the legal, human resource, political, and economic contexts, seeking out leaders with proven skill sets and accomplishments in nonprofit, government, corporate, and other sectors is an intriguing idea."

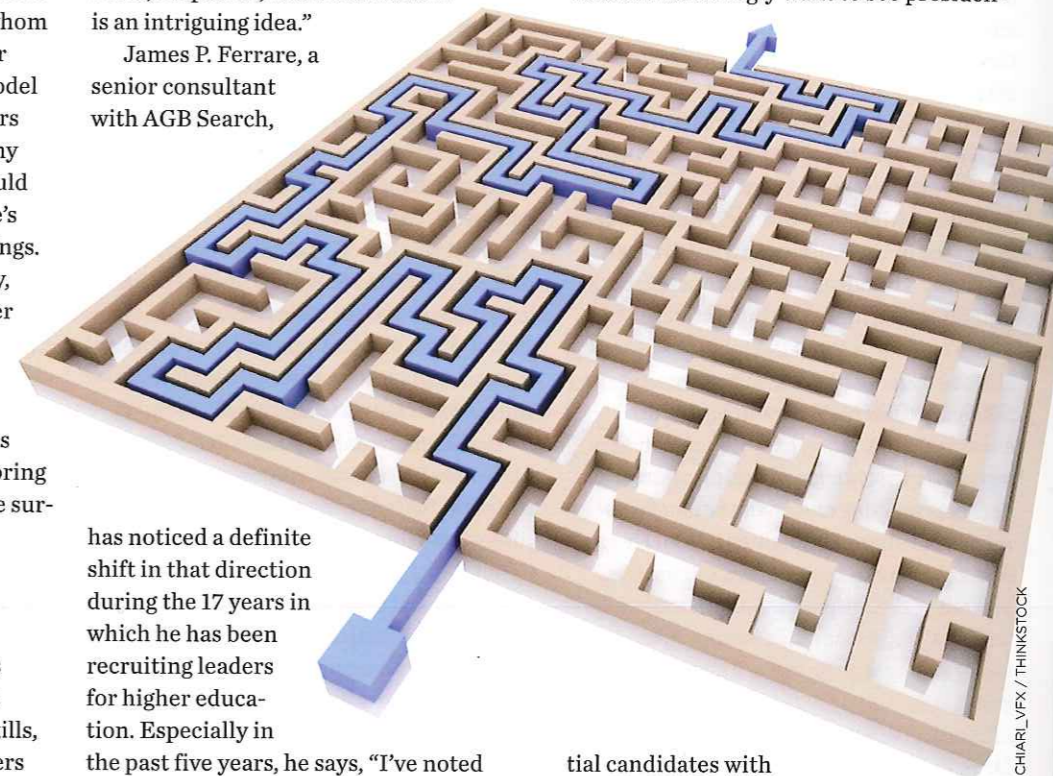
James P. Ferrare, a senior consultant with AGB Search,

has noticed a definite shift in that direction during the 17 years in which he has been recruiting leaders for higher education. Especially in the past five years, he says, "I've noted a bit more openness to nontraditional candidates" for president. In fact, he notes, universities are exploring their own openness to nontraditional candidates even in the preliminary screening process

for search firms, "whereas before it almost never came up." As one result, AGB Search has broadened its pool of potential presidents beyond individuals in academe, drawing viable candidates from government service, the legal profession, and the

business community.

Mamlet says boards are open to nontraditional types of candidates for a host of reasons. In part, she says, "boards are just more aware that the economic model for colleges and universities in America is really threatened," and overcoming those challenges requires a different approach than in the past. For those reasons, she says, boards are "looking for fresh thinking and fresh ideas." In that vein, she says, boards increasingly want to see presiden-



**N**oting that "the role of the college president has no analog in the modern business world," the Deloitte-Georgia Tech survey listed the "dizzying array of stakeholders and constituents" to whom college leaders are accountable, including students, faculty, administrative staff, trustees, parents, community leaders, alumni, and legislators.

## TAPPING THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

Perhaps reflecting the reality that running a university has become a lot more like running a corporation, more institutions of higher learning are looking to the private sector for their leaders. Jody Horner, the president of Midland University, previously ran several businesses for the large agriculture company Cargill. Rebecca M. Bergman, president of Gustavus Adolphus College, spent her prior career as an executive with Medtronic. John I. Williams Jr., president



of Muhlenberg College, was a consultant, business executive, and entrepreneur. At the same time, an increasing number of presidents have a military background. Retired U.S. Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2001 to 2005, returned to his alma mater to serve as president of Kansas State University. And following in the footsteps of Woodrow Wilson and Dwight Eisenhower, more presidents are coming from politics, notably former governors Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., president of Purdue University, and David L. Boren, president of the University of Oklahoma.

Jeff A. Weiss, who was named president of Lesley University after a successful career as a management consultant, served for more than a decade as an adjunct professor at the United States Military Academy. In addition to an academic background in teaching, writing, and research, Weiss brought a lot to the table that would entice any institution that was looking to advance: He had run and built global consulting practices, experience that gave him skills in strategic planning, shared decision making, and change management operational implementation. He also had expertise in negotiating, partnering, and managing differences. Weiss says he believes the presidential search committee at Lesley was “looking broadly for both traditional and nontraditional experiences and skills” to move the university ahead. He believes “committee members also were quite open to a different set of questions, a different set of perspectives, and a different set of skills.”

Horner says her prior experience in a manufacturing environment has direct application in her work at Midland: “I understood how the pieces—everything from finance, marketing, and operations to strategy and growth—have to fit together for an organization or institution to be successful.”

Among the specific skills he brought to Muhlenberg, Williams says the expertise he developed in competitive strategy while working in the private sector is invaluable in higher education’s highly competitive environment. “I think a more traditional candidate might have less experience in this area,” he says.

## LEARNING CURVE

Does the traditionally slow pace of change in academe pose a challenge to leaders tapped from private sector

jobs that might move at a faster pace? Even though Gustavus Adolphus President Bergman was a member of the college’s board of trustees before becoming its leader—an “outside-insider, if there is such a thing”—she says she found the initial learning curve as president to be “practically vertical.”

For one thing, she says she definitely did not cotton to academia’s relatively slow and deliberative pace. “I have to say that there was almost none of it that felt comfortable in the beginning,” Bergman says. “The challenge that drove me the most nuts was the slower pace. The fact that you could spend two years planning before you start something was a complete anathema to me.”

Rather than adapt to that speed, Bergman has worked to get the academy to pick up the pace. “Coming from business, I definitely brought a sense of urgency,” she says. “That pace thing is something that I have really worked on. I’ve done some of that work by management by objective, setting deadlines that people tell me are crazy.” Bergman has worked to create “a culture of experimentation,” getting the college “comfortable with the idea of a pilot or a small-scale trial that you can learn from while you’re continuing on detailed planning for a broader rollout. Those are some of the ways I’ve adjusted but yet not let go of a sense of urgency.”

One might think that presidents recruited from outside the academy could have trouble adapting to the principles of shared governance, and no doubt some do. But Kansas State’s Myers says shared governance reminds him very much of his military experience. “When you’re at the level of chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, everything you do is very collaborative with your colleagues and with folks from other departments, agencies, and government. The shared governance part is not so different.”

“I think today in higher education, you’ve got to be fairly flexible, agile, and,

**P**erhaps reflecting the reality that running a university has become a lot more like running a corporation, more institutions of higher learning are looking to the private sector for their leaders.

sometimes, quick to seize opportunities to work with the issues you have,” Myers adds. “What I’ve found here at Kansas State is that we’re probably more agile than most. A good idea can take flight pretty quickly if you can get people behind it.”

In the case of bringing her business skills to Midland, Horner says, “It can be really beneficial when two worlds come together—in my case, business and higher education—where you can find the best in both and create a hybrid approach. You obviously need the right set of business experiences for that institution, but you also need to be open to adapting a skill set or experiences as needed for a new environment.”

## LIP SERVICE?

Rod McDavis, the managing principal of AGB Search, detects an interest on the part of boards of trustees to screen a more diverse group of candidates. “Boards are asking for a pool that includes nontraditional candidates,” he says. Another factor in this mix, he notes, is that trustees from business and industry tend to think the leadership skills that work in their businesses would also benefit colleges and universities.

Having participated recently in a handful of presidential searches, AGB consultant and senior fellow Terrence MacTaggart thinks some search committees may only pay lip service to being open to nontraditional candidates. “Search committees say that’s what they want, but at the end of the day I see them hiring the usual suspects,” he says. “They begin talking about wanting someone with executive skills, and then they wind up hiring someone who looks a lot like the guy who was there before.”

MacTaggart is the author of a new AGB report, *The 21st-Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise Leadership*, which argues in part that today’s challenges “require presidents of colleges and universities to

possess different talents and skills than in the past.” (See related story on pg. 10.) MacTaggart says that regardless of their background, university leaders today need to be “smarter, tougher, more decisive, and more courageous.” His paper also advocates for a stronger relationship between the president and the university board. “Boards must also change to meet the demands of the 21st century,” he writes. “They must rethink and redesign governance in ways that enable them to work as allies of the president.”

The subtitle of the Aspen Institute *Renewal and Progress* report is “Strengthening Higher Education Leadership in a Time of Rapid Change.” That encapsulates the task before every board recruiting new institutional leadership. As the report urges, “boards and search committees should be guided in a careful consideration of the particular skills their institution may need in top leadership over the next five years and whether a candidate who brings those skills from another sector may be a good fit for those needs.” That may mean that boards need to be open to different kinds of institutional leaders.

One stumbling block in being open to a different type of institutional background is that boards can find it difficult to envision a nontraditional president. Sometimes, for example, boards and search committees pay far more attention to “pedigree” than might be warranted, Mamlet notes. “Somebody from Yale and Harvard makes a wonderful announcement, but moving forward, colleges and universities need people who know how to lead in a hungry and challenging environment,” she says. “I’d like to see a greater openness to looking at candidates from a broader range of institutional backgrounds.”

Ferrare says that too many boards tend to frame what they want in a new leader in the context of what they perceive as the former leader’s shortcomings. Many boards assess “what the current president did not do and what the university was not successful in doing over the last five years,” he says, and conclude “that we need someone to do that over the next five years.” But such thinking, he suggests, is myopic.

“Higher education is in a sea change right now,” Ferrare says. “So I think boards and campus communities need to take a look at the future and at what they’re going

to do, not what they have been. If you are going to consider nontraditional candidates, there needs to be an open and early dialogue on your campus about that, and you need to build a sense of community around that. You are trying to launch a successful presidency here, which is greater than just hiring an individual. And if that requires skill sets that are outside the traditional set, then so be it.”

Institutions that opt to tap a president from a nontraditional background need to fully understand why they went in that direction, Ferrare argues, and then get on board to help that new leader succeed. In the final analysis, he suggests, “it’s about moving forward once the person is hired and about how the institution, working together, can build the synergy to launch this presidency in a successful way.” ■

**AUTHOR:** Stephen G. Pelletier is an independent writer and editor who writes frequently about higher education.

**EMAIL:** Pelletier\_Editorial@verizon.net

**T’SHIP LINK:** Celeste Watkins-Hayes, “The Pick and the Process: Leading a Presidential Search in the Digital Age,” November/December 2015.

**OTHER RESOURCE:** Terrence MacTaggart, *The 21st-Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise Leadership* (AGB, 2017).



LUDDMYLA MALYSHEVA / THINKSTOCK





# NEW PARADIGMS TO THE PRESIDENCY

Given the many challenges inherent in running a college or university today, should more search committees consider candidates with disparate “nontraditional” backgrounds?

BY STEPHEN G. PELLETIER

A RECENT SURVEY BY Deloitte and the Georgia Institute of Technology made headlines with its finding that more college presidents are ascending to the top leadership position at a university without first serving a stint as provost. Among other findings, the survey showed that more academic deans are springboarding from that position directly into the top job. That is particularly true at smaller universities: At institutions that enroll fewer than 5,000 students, 62 percent of presidents had not previously served as provost, in contrast to 51 percent who had served in that role, according to the study.

Based on a survey of 165 presidents and a review of the CVs of 840 college leaders, augmented by interviews and a literature search, the survey concluded that “the paths prospective presidents now take are becoming more complex, fragmented, and overlapping.”



Apart from different channels to the presidency within academe, other research shows boards have been fairly consistent in tapping institutional leaders from outside higher education. In its 2012 American College President Study, the American Council on Education found that 20 percent of presidents came from outside academe—up from 13 percent reported in the 2006 edition of the survey. In the most recent edition of the survey, released in June 2017, 18 percent of presidents from private institutions came from outside higher education, compared with 12 percent of public university leaders. But it's another statistic from the new survey that may make trustees sit up and take notice: 54 percent of presidents surveyed said they expect to leave their current presidency in five years or less. That means that more than half of college and university boards can expect to soon be searching for a new leader.

The bottom line is that more college and university boards are looking at nontraditional candidates as they consider who they will hire as their institution's next leader. To better understand this evolving landscape, *Trusteeship* sought the perspective of several recruiters and other experts, as well as sitting presidents whose career paths diverge from the norm.

## LEADERSHIP FROM WITHIN THE ACADEMY

Apart from the finding that more academic deans are becoming presidents without first being provosts, Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence and the Georgia Institute of Technology's Center for 21st Century Universities revealed some telling trends about the role of the presidency in general. While the president is definitely still in charge of the entire university, for example, the survey recognized the growing internal role of the provost as an important complement to the role of president. One way to think about this, the survey suggested, is to picture the president as "outward focused" when it comes to the business of the university—interacting with the university's board, donors, the public, alumni, and legislators—while the provost oversees internal academic operations.

Under no circumstances should that "outside/inside" divide be construed as an absolute division of labors in most universities, and in practice, presidents are deeply engaged in internal operations while provosts often engage in external activities. But in general, those findings point to the overarching trend that leading a college has never been more complex or challenging—a reality that has deep implications for the types of leaders that search committees seek for institutions of higher learning and for the skill sets that those new hires bring to the table.

Noting that "the role of the college president has no analog in the modern business world," the Deloitte-Georgia Tech survey listed the "dizzying array of stakeholders and constituents" to whom college leaders are accountable, including students, faculty, administrative staff, trustees, parents, community leaders, alumni, and legislators. It detailed a broad range of skills that presidents must have, including "administrative and financial acumen, fundraising ability, and political deftness." In addition, the survey emphasized that "presidents must chart a difficult path with their academic deans, providing incentives for individual schools to excel and grow while fostering collaboration and cooperation with each other to drive the overall health of the academy."

That list only *begins* to frame the full scope of responsibilities of today's college leaders. Cole Clark, Deloitte's executive director of higher education client relations, says one of the survey's key findings focused on "the changing dynamics of the stakeholders and constituents that are exerting the most influence and

pressure on the role of the president." In addition, the survey observed that presidents need to be able to "balance the pressures of society to improve the 'return on investment' of education at their institutions as well as manage pressure from community and political leaders around critical issues." Those evolving dynamics "are having a big influence on the types of skills and capabilities with which new presidents need to come to the table in order to be selected and be successful," Clark notes.

As the Deloitte-Georgia Tech survey shows, the evolution of the scope of responsibilities that universities expect their presidents to fulfill goes hand in glove with an evolution in the pathway to the presidency. That's not coincidence. As the survey authors noted, "Given the diverse set of skills needed to run institutions these days and with provosts increasingly saying they don't want to be presidents, search committees may have little choice but to consider candidates from nontraditional backgrounds."

The survey findings don't quite jibe with the experience of Robin Mamlet, a managing partner in the education practice of Witt/Kieffer Executive Search. "I'm not sure that nonprovost placements were that unusual 20 years ago," she says. "Presidents then came from mostly academic dean and vice president's roles, most commonly from academic affairs or related positions." Mamlet, whose firm has helped place 200 presidents in the past 20 years, notes that another trend today is successful presidential candidates coming more often from university schools of business,

## TAKEAWAYS

**1** While the president is in charge of the entire university, the provost has a growing internal role as an important complement to the president's role. The president is "outward focused"—interacting with the university's board, donors, the public, alumni, and legislators—while the provost oversees internal academic operations.

**2** Perhaps reflecting the reality that running a university has become a lot more like running a corporation, more institutions of higher learning are looking to the private sector for their leaders.

**3** Successful presidential candidates also are coming more often from university schools of business, law, engineering, and even the arts. Some schools are tapping university fundraisers and enrollment managers as their next leaders.

law, engineering, and even the arts. Some schools are tapping university fundraisers and enrollment managers as their next leaders, and Mamlet says her firm recently helped recruit a campus chief diversity officer for a presidency.

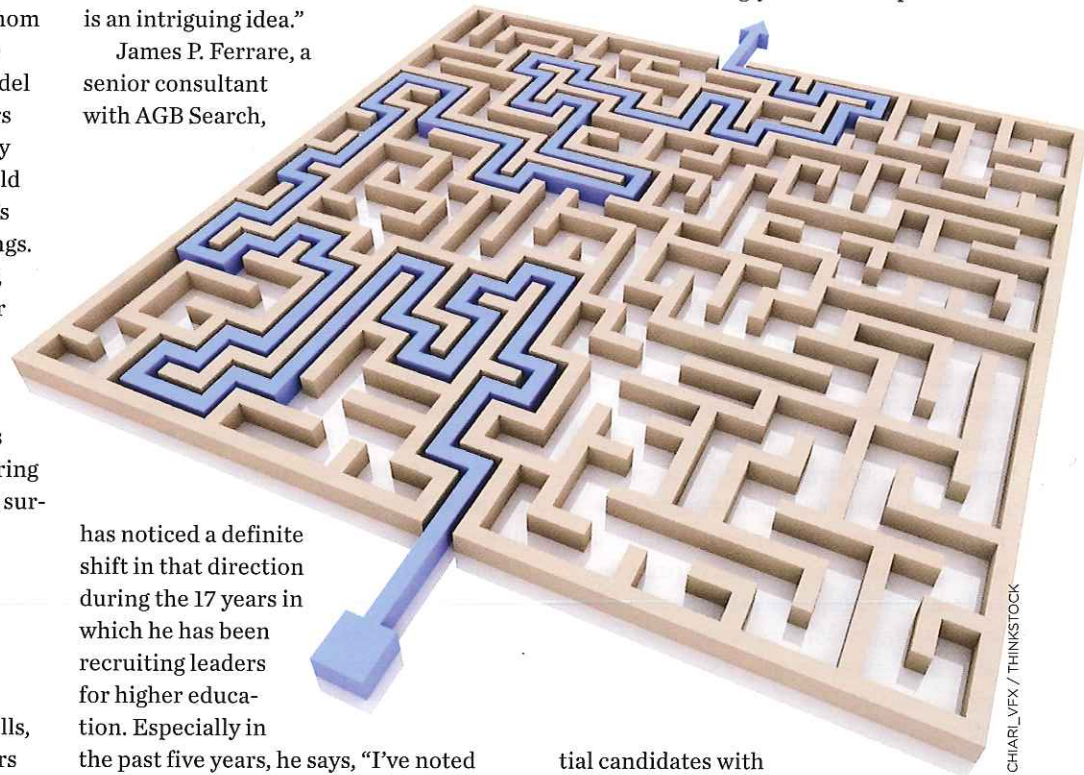
The evolution in channels to the university presidency has a strong historic precedent. In a review of presidents dating back to the 1800s, the Deloitte and Georgia Tech researchers found that in the early days of higher education, presidents were typically faculty members, many of whom were also members of the clergy. Over the first half of the 20th century, a model of university administrators/managers evolved. Following World War II, many universities chose presidents who could lead the expansion of both the college's physical plant and its academic offerings. In the last quarter of the 20th century, as federal and state financing of higher education changed, more institutions sought leaders with strong fiscal skills. In the early part of the 21st century, a multidisciplinary model has emerged, predicated on leaders who bring a wide variety of skills to the table, the survey suggests.

## LOOKING BEYOND THE ACADEMY

Perhaps driven by the fact that today's presidents need a broad portfolio that includes business and management skills, more universities are looking for leaders outside the academy. Corroborating ACE's data, which show a clear pattern in this direction, *Renewal and Progress*, a recent study by the Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency, part of the Aspen

Institute College Excellence Program, noted that "boards and search committees are increasingly willing to consider candidates who come from outside the traditional academic route." Moreover, the study said that "given the increasing complexity of higher education administration in terms of the legal, human resource, political, and economic contexts, seeking out leaders with proven skill sets and accomplishments in nonprofit, government, corporate, and other sectors is an intriguing idea."

James P. Ferrare, a senior consultant with AGB Search,



has noticed a definite shift in that direction during the 17 years in which he has been recruiting leaders for higher education. Especially in the past five years, he says, "I've noted a bit more openness to nontraditional candidates" for president. In fact, he notes, universities are exploring their own openness to nontraditional candidates even in the preliminary screening process for search firms, "whereas before it almost never came up." As one result, AGB Search has broadened its pool of potential presidents beyond individuals in academe, drawing viable candidates from government service, the legal profession, and the

business community.

Mamlet says boards are open to nontraditional types of candidates for a host of reasons. In part, she says, "boards are just more aware that the economic model for colleges and universities in America is really threatened," and overcoming those challenges requires a different approach than in the past. For those reasons, she says, boards are "looking for fresh thinking and fresh ideas." In that vein, she says, boards increasingly want to see presiden-

tial candidates with proven records of innovation and entrepreneurs who "have shown that they can effectively launch additional mission-related ways for the university to bring in extra revenue."

## TAPPING THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

Perhaps reflecting the reality that running a university has become a lot more like running a corporation, more institutions of higher learning are looking to the private sector for their leaders. Jody Horner, the president of Midland University, previously ran several businesses for the large agriculture company Cargill. Rebecca M. Bergman, president of Gustavus Adolphus College, spent her prior career as an executive with Medtronic. John I. Williams Jr., president

**N**oting that "the role of the college president has no analog in the modern business world," the Deloitte-Georgia Tech survey listed the "dizzying array of stakeholders and constituents" to whom college leaders are accountable, including students, faculty, administrative staff, trustees, parents, community leaders, alumni, and legislators.



of Muhlenberg College, was a consultant, business executive, and entrepreneur. At the same time, an increasing number of presidents have a military background. Retired U.S. Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2001 to 2005, returned to his alma mater to serve as president of Kansas State University. And following in the footsteps of Woodrow Wilson and Dwight Eisenhower, more presidents are coming from politics, notably former governors Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., president of Purdue University, and David L. Boren, president of the University of Oklahoma.

Jeff A. Weiss, who was named president of Lesley University after a successful career as a management consultant, served for more than a decade as an adjunct professor at the United States Military Academy. In addition to an academic background in teaching, writing, and research, Weiss brought a lot to the table that would entice any institution that was looking to advance: He had run and built global consulting practices, experience that gave him skills in strategic planning, shared decision making, and change management operational implementation. He also had expertise in negotiating, partnering, and managing differences. Weiss says he believes the presidential search committee at Lesley was “looking broadly for both traditional and nontraditional experiences and skills” to move the university ahead. He believes “committee members also were quite open to a different set of questions, a different set of perspectives, and a different set of skills.”

Horner says her prior experience in a manufacturing environment has direct application in her work at Midland: “I understood how the pieces—everything from finance, marketing, and operations to strategy and growth—have to fit together for an organization or institution to be successful.”

Among the specific skills he brought to Muhlenberg, Williams says the expertise he developed in competitive strategy while working in the private sector is invaluable in higher education’s highly competitive environment. “I think a more traditional candidate might have less experience in this area,” he says.

## LEARNING CURVE

Does the traditionally slow pace of change in academe pose a challenge to leaders tapped from private sector jobs that might move at a faster pace? Even though Gustavus Adolphus President Bergman was a member of the college’s board of trustees before becoming its leader—an “outside-insider, if there is such a thing”—she says she found the initial learning curve as president to be “practically vertical.”

For one thing, she says she definitely did not cotton to academia’s relatively slow and deliberative pace. “I have to say that there was almost none of it that felt comfortable in the beginning,” Bergman says. “The challenge that drove me the most nuts was the slower pace. The fact that you could spend two years planning before you start something was a complete anathema to me.”

Rather than adapt to that speed, Bergman has worked to get the academy to pick up the pace. “Coming from business, I definitely brought a sense of urgency,” she says. “That pace thing is something that I have really worked on. I’ve done some of that work by management by objective, setting deadlines that people tell me are crazy.” Bergman has worked to create “a culture of experimentation,” getting the college “comfortable with the idea of a pilot or a small-scale trial that you can learn from while you’re continuing on detailed planning for a broader rollout. Those are some of the ways I’ve adjusted but yet not let go of a sense of urgency.”

One might think that presidents recruited from outside the academy could have trouble adapting to the principles of shared governance, and no doubt some do. But Kansas State’s Myers says shared governance reminds him very much of his military experience. “When you’re at the level of chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, everything you do is very collaborative with your colleagues and with folks from other departments, agencies, and government. The shared governance part is not so different.”

“I think today in higher education, you’ve got to be fairly flexible, agile, and,

sometimes, quick to seize opportunities to work with the issues you have,” Myers adds. “What I’ve found here at Kansas State is that we’re probably more agile than most. A good idea can take flight pretty quickly if you can get people behind it.”

In the case of bringing her business skills to Midland, Horner says, “It can be really beneficial when two worlds come together—in my case, business and higher education—where you can find the best in both and create a hybrid approach. You obviously need the right set of business experiences for that institution, but you also need to be open to adapting a skill set or experiences as needed for a new environment.”

## LIP SERVICE?

Rod McDavis, the managing principal of AGB Search, detects an interest on the part of boards of trustees to screen a more diverse group of candidates. “Boards are asking for a pool that includes nontraditional candidates,” he says. Another factor in this mix, he notes, is that trustees from business and industry tend to think the leadership skills that work in their businesses would also benefit colleges and universities.

Having participated recently in a handful of presidential searches, AGB consultant and senior fellow Terrence MacTaggart thinks some search committees may only pay lip service to being open to nontraditional candidates. “Search committees say that’s what they want, but at the end of the day I see them hiring the usual suspects,” he says. “They begin talking about wanting someone with executive skills, and then they wind up hiring someone who looks a lot like the guy who was there before.”

MacTaggart is the author of a new AGB report, *The 21st-Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise Leadership*, which argues in part that today’s challenges “require presidents of colleges and universities to

**P**erhaps reflecting the reality that running a university has become a lot more like running a corporation, more institutions of higher learning are looking to the private sector for their leaders.

possess different talents and skills than in the past.” (See related story on pg. 10.) MacTaggart says that regardless of their background, university leaders today need to be “smarter, tougher, more decisive, and more courageous.” His paper also advocates for a stronger relationship between the president and the university board. “Boards must also change to meet the demands of the 21st century,” he writes. “They must rethink and redesign governance in ways that enable them to work as allies of the president.”

The subtitle of the Aspen Institute *Renewal and Progress* report is “Strengthening Higher Education Leadership in a Time of Rapid Change.” That encapsulates the task before every board recruiting new institutional leadership. As the report urges, “boards and search committees should be guided in a careful consideration of the particular skills their institution may need in top leadership over the next five years and whether a candidate who brings those skills from another sector may be a good fit for those needs.” That may mean that boards need to be open to different kinds of institutional leaders.

One stumbling block in being open to a different type of institutional background is that boards can find it difficult to envision a nontraditional president. Sometimes, for example, boards and search committees pay far more attention to “pedigree” than might be warranted, Mamlet notes. “Somebody from Yale and Harvard makes a wonderful announcement, but moving forward, colleges and universities need people who know how to lead in a hungry and challenging environment,” she says. “I’d like to see a greater openness to looking at candidates from a broader range of institutional backgrounds.”

Ferrare says that too many boards tend to frame what they want in a new leader in the context of what they perceive as the former leader’s shortcomings. Many boards assess “what the current president did not do and what the university was not successful in doing over the last five years,” he says, and conclude “that we need someone to do *that* over the next five years.” But such thinking, he suggests, is myopic.

“Higher education is in a sea change right now,” Ferrare says. “So I think boards and campus communities need to take a look at the future and at what they’re going

to do, not what they have been. If you are going to consider nontraditional candidates, there needs to be an open and early dialogue on your campus about that, and you need to build a sense of community around that. You are trying to launch a successful presidency here, which is greater than just hiring an individual. And if that requires skill sets that are outside the traditional set, then so be it.”

Institutions that opt to tap a president from a nontraditional background need to fully understand why they went in that direction, Ferrare argues, and then get on board to help that new leader succeed. In the final analysis, he suggests, “it’s about moving forward once the person is hired and about how the institution, working together, can build the synergy to launch this presidency in a successful way.” ■

**AUTHOR:** Stephen G. Pelletier is an independent writer and editor who writes frequently about higher education. **EMAIL:** Pelletier\_Editorial@verizon.net

**T’SHIP LINK:** Celeste Watkins-Hayes, “The Pick and the Process: Leading a Presidential Search in the Digital Age,” November/December 2015.

**OTHER RESOURCE:** Terrence MacTaggart, *The 21st-Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise Leadership* (AGB, 2017).

