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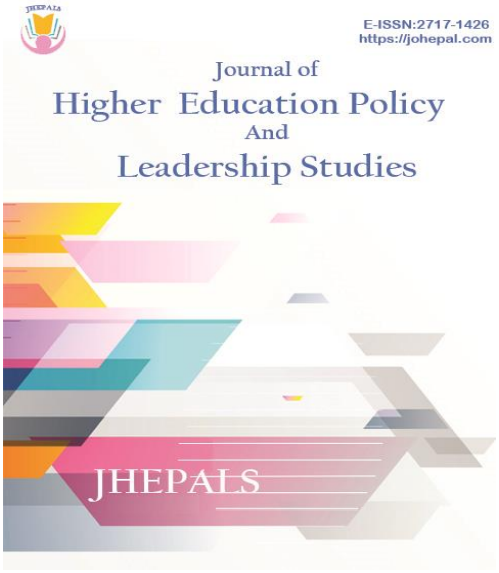
Rethinking University Presidencies in Canadian Higher Education



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Rethinking University Presidencies in Canadian Higher Education

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Abstract

This article discusses the evolving role of university presidents in Canada. The university president is accountable for the successful operation of a university and achieving its strategic goals. The role has become complex due to factors such as the absence of a standard definition of a university, decentralization of funding, and increased competition for student enrollment and research funding. Universities have grown considerably, leading to more diverse and activist populations, larger budgets, and the need for more people to manage internal and external relationships. University presidents must now balance the interests of various stakeholders such as faculty, boards, alumni, governments, and learners. They must also plan for and address the challenges created by system modernization and enterprise technologies, internationalization, campus health and security, changing governments, shifting policy directions, climate change, social justice, and neoliberalism. This article argues that university presidents must possess strong communication skills, impeccable management acumen, and the ability to relate to the evolving realities of learners. This article concludes that the role of university president has evolved from being presiding figures to being accountable leaders who must navigate the complex demands of the modern university system.

Keywords: Higher Education Leadership; University Presidents; University Culture; Career Complexity; Leadership Roles

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> "Being president of a university is no way for an adult to make a living. Which is why so few adults actually attempt to do it. It is to hold a mid-nineteenth-century ecclesiastical position on top of a late-twentieth-century corporation".
>
> A. Bartlett Giametti, 19th President of Yale University, 1978-1986

The World Changed

Unexpectedly, the COVID-19 pandemic occasioned the single largest disruption of education ever experienced resulting in the closure of learning spaces in some 190 countries and affecting 1.6 billion learners (United Nations, 2020), as well as educators and families. It tested and continues to test the resilience, fortitude, and ingenuity of educational leaders worldwide.

As the world becomes more globalized and interconnected, as recognition grows regarding planetary limits to our civicidal (Hancock, 2019) commodification fetish (Marx, 1887), as violence and environmental disaster lead to mass migration and refugeeism (Talbot, 2013), as populism threatens acceptance of science as reality (Wall et al., 2017) and distorts reality through the "weaponisation of information" (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 15), as the world reckons with institutions and processes grounded in putative privilege for some (Carr, 2016; McIntosh, 1988), and as the gap between marginalized populations and the rest of the world grows (Corbett, 2008; Leal Filho et al., 2020), the world turns to education, and its leaders, for solutions (Kwauk, 2020; Wals & Benavot, 2017). In fact, the OECD (2018) suggests that education may be the difference between people embracing or being defeated by future challenges (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020). Educational leadership continues to grow increasingly complex as a profession as does the pressure on an educational leader to perform and succeed (Cafley, 2015).

This paper explores the evolving and increasingly complex role of university presidents focusing predominantly on the characteristics and attributes fostering efficacy. Specifically, this paper considers post-secondary education leadership in a Canadian context through both historical and future visionary lenses.

University Presidents

The university president is the chief executive officer of the organization and is formally accountable to a Board of Governors or Senate for the fiscal and reputational operation of a university as well as for the successful achievement of strategic plans, goals, and objectives. Michael et al. (2001, p. 332) describe the university president as "the most visible embodiment of institutional mission, vision and culture". Paul (2011) concurs and views the role as the leader and manager of a university's big picture while Woodsworth likens the role to a translator: "communicating between cultures and across borders, conveying the sense of the academic enterprise to external stakeholders and board members, and interpreting the business-related concerns and preoccupations of a responsible board to the internal community" (2013, p. 134).

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Evolution of a Complex Role

Establishing the Dominion of Canada in 1867 under the *British North America Act* created, perhaps, the earliest and longest lasting of challenges facing university presidents. To assure a relatively even distribution of power and authority between federal and provincial governments, Section 93 of *The Act* gave the provinces authority over education. To confound matters further, responsibility for academic research remained with the federal government. Consequently, presidential advocacy efforts for funding are decentralized. Likewise, there is neither a standard definition of 'university' across Canada (Usher, 2018) nor a standard system of accreditation creating a network of unique educational systems between which student and credit transferability is not streamlined (Paul, 2011). That said, decentralization also created stability for university presidents by preventing national interference in and requiring the collaboration of 13 jurisdictions to make changes to the mandate for universities (Paul, 2011). Canada remains the only federated country without a national Ministry of Education.

Influenced greatly by French and British colonialism, the majority of Canadian universities prior to 1960 were faith based (Paul, 2011; Usher, 2018). Since c.1960, however, most universities are secular, many revising their purpose to take advantage of changes to ongoing provincial funding requiring a public, secular governance model. In Canada, the separation of state and church in education is now well established.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the university sector in Canada experienced tremendous growth both in the number of institutions and the proportion of the population engaged in university study (Paul, 2011). Growth in demand and numbers of competitors increases the pressure, challenging educational leaders to increase both depth and breadth of academic programming and to find ways to distinguish their university from others. Absent a complementary increase in funding, growth also created challenges such as larger class sizes, greater student/teacher ratios, the growing use of sessional and other part-time instructors (Paul, 2011), and the seemingly ubiquitous task of ephemeralization.

In the early 2000s, more than a few colleges and other institutes made the strategic transformation to become universities (Usher, 2018). These transitions in status create greater direct competition between universities for student enrollment, both domestic and international, and for faculty expertise. At the same time, more universities now vie for limited funding available for research. In their previous iterations as colleges rooted in more technical and applied learning, the new universities also create dilemmas of culture and self-identity for others that viewed their central roles as research institutions by blurring the lines between academic research and career preparedness. In Canada, this often materializes as conflicts of perspective and motivation among faculty who view research as their mandate and career preparedness as specifically not their responsibility (Spencer, 2014). Unions for post-secondary faculty and staff, akin to those throughout education in Canada, are particularly effective in representing these and other interests on behalf of their members, increasing the complexity and criticality of communication and interpersonal relations for university presidents.

In the past, university communities comprised faculty with longevity and a more homogeneous full-time student body that resided close to campus. Times were simpler; organizations less complex. University presidents, usually men with previous Canadian post-secondary executive experience, presided over their institutions more than they managed

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or led (Paul, 2011). The president of a small university might know all students, staff, and faculty; teach one or two courses; represent the university in the community and with government; and attend or host community events. The role was somewhat low-key because "universities were not generally in the public eye" (Paul, 2011, p. 12).

Contemporary universities have much larger, more diverse, and activist student, staff, and faculty populations. Some have operating budgets in excess of $500 million and all have multiple departments staffed with people to manage internal and external relationships. As Paul (2011) delineates, university presidents are now accountable to: (a) faculty with interests in academic freedom, profile, prestige, and reputation; (b) a board of governors or senate that values integrity, financial stability, impeccable management acumen, and stellar communication skills; (c) alumni seeking strong and stable, but growing, community relationships; (d) governments needing change agents to weave academic culture with fiscal performance and the successful achievement of strategic goals; and (e) learners who, increasingly, have growing obligations (with university studies being just one of many) and needing a leader who can relate to their evolving realities. Adding in system modernization and enterprise technologies; internationalization and globalization; campus health, well-being, safety, and security; politics, changing governments, and shifting policy directions; changing and increasingly less reliable funding mechanisms; evolving best practices in learning and teaching; and competing and conflicting demands from almost every possible direction, it is clear that presidential workloads are expanding and that expectations for success are more numerous, diverse, and acute than ever (Khalideen, 2014; Fullan & Leithwood, 2012; Paul, 2011).

The continuously mounting and intensifying responsibility, and concomitant complexity, required to lead an increasingly public institution led to the development of a satirical job posting:

> Wanted: A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paper, and work double shifts (75 nights a year out). He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace any personnel, or upset any constituency. (Evans, 1995, p. 23)

Challenges of Culture

Perhaps the single greatest challenge facing a university president, especially one who may have recently been appointed from outside the organization, is developing an understanding about and participating effectively and respectfully within the culture of the university. It can be a delicate balance between being culturally aware and respectful, and finding ways to move a new agenda for change positively forward, including finding opportunities to voice a few key strategic initiatives as frequently as possible (Paul, 2011).

Ultimately, the fit of a president within the culture of a university often determines success going forward (Cafley, 2015; Paul, 2011). Every stakeholder, internal and external, has a personal perspective on fit and the efficacy of the person in the role. To help navigate the challenge of innumerable perspectives that, I would argue, is not dissimilar to simultaneous, diverse, continuous, on-the-job performance evaluations, Bennis (2009) identifies six core competencies required of a university president: (a) have a strong sense

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of mission, (b) foster support for the mission among others, (c) establish relationships that are flexible and adaptable, (d) engender optimism and trust, (e) develop leadership qualities in others, and (f) achieve results. Cafley (2015) combines the first two of Bennis' competencies, suggesting that these and success of the organization might be better served by working toward these collaboratively with the university community. Campbell (2003/2016) describes fit within organizational culture as the basis for a solid, positive, successful working relationship with its president.

Presidencies Looking Forward

Presidential roles are influenced significantly by current events, especially if those events arise from systemic social oppression or systemic consumerism. Freire (2000) advocates empowering individual consciousness to overcome oppression in education. In Canada, this is best exemplified by three significant social uprisings: (a) the calls to action arising from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report (see Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015); (b) the rise of Black Lives Matter and its founding principles of diversity, intersectionality, empathy, and engagement (see Potvin, 2020); and (c) the #MeToo movement that challenged post-secondary leaders to acknowledge that an absence of policy and action may have increased vulnerabilities, predominantly those of female students and staff, on campuses across the country (see MacArthur, 2019).

Similarly, Orr (1992, 2020) and others (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2020; Reid, 2019; Suzuki, 1998) advocate taking action to mitigate the "long emergency" (Orr, 2020, p. 13) created by our tendency to overlook anthropocentric causes of the climate crisis facing the planet. Both the global #FridaysForFuture movement demanding adults believe climate science and take action against climate change (see Bowman, 2019; Pickard, 2019), and the fossil fuel divestment movement in Canadian academia (see Maina et al., 2020) are affecting policy directions and, therefore, affecting the qualities and characteristics of an effective university president going forward.

I argue that, in order to be both relevant and successful in leading universities, presidents of the 21st century must be responsive to these and other growing public demands for changes in policy and action, particularly regarding systemic issues. Future presidents will be those who can capitalize on university culture, build on past accomplishments of the institution, implement an agenda focused on teaching learners how to learn, foster agency in learners, and ensure they have a solid foundation of skills to function and adapt to the 21st century workplace and climate (Bates, 2019; OECD, 2018). In order to produce graduates who are active citizens that know how to "navigate through uncertainty" (OECD, 2018, p. 5), presidents must be able to anticipate ambiguous future global and community needs and to champion this direction within the university community and among external partners.

Furthermore, this should promote the strengths and opportunities that come with diversity, inclusivity, collaboration, and respect for the valuable contributions each person brings. Presidents must be prepared to change mindsets; specifically, to promote and instill a cultural proficiency mindset across the university community (Lindsey et al., 2019). That is, they must come with some form of vision for changing the general perception of cultural differences as problematic to one of intercultural interaction that celebrates diversity and,

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academically, to one that recognizes the value of cultural uniqueness as a foundation from which to create learning experiences. Such presidents would be confident enough in themselves, their beliefs, values, and worldviews to be robustly self-reflective and sufficiently self-disruptive and open to reconsidering, and changing, deep-rooted meanings. They must model critical thinking, creative problem solving, and communication transparently, respectfully, and collaboratively.

They may wish to surround themselves with a senior executive team that shares and believes in the mission and strategic vision but that may have perspectives on pathways to success that differ and which, together, facilitate, foster, and nurture the development of emergent citizens who are prepared for the challenges of any eventuality (Islam et al., 2006). Learning from the COVID-19 experience, university presidents must come with a plan to work with the university community and with the executive team, specifically, to strengthen the capacities for risk and resilience of the institution, to reimagine education and the right to equitable learning, to remove barriers to learning, and to support the professional development of all faculty and staff (United Nations, 2020).

Conclusion

From climate to technology, politics to academics, and from global health to individual people, the education landscape today is shifting and evolving at an ever-increasing pace. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau commented at the 2018 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, that "the pace of change has never been this fast, yet it will never be this slow again" (World Economic Forum, 2018, 5:34).

The roles and spheres of influence of universities have expanded greatly in recent decades. No longer can the role of a university president appear as a concise list of management and leadership duties on a single page job posting. "Leadership within a system of education that has been comfortable, predictable and ordered, to one that is new, uncertain and chaotic is no small task" (Khalideen, 2014, p. 44).

Instead, in the coming decades, university presidents will be required to work and interact with stakeholders simultaneously at the micro, meso, and macro levels and to develop autonomy and agency across a team, indeed across an entire community, in order to support them in this work (Fullan & Leithwood, 2012). They must demonstrate an overtly high degree of social respect, emotional intelligence, spiritual wisdom, integrity, and maturity (Astin & Astin, 2000) as well as sufficient self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-disruptive openness to consider changing their own deep-rooted belief systems and worldviews. The future requires a university leader who genuinely understands, in a deeply personal way, the value of respectful and equitable collaboration in the co-creation of knowledge (Harris et al., 2019) and "learning to become with the world" (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020).

I conclude with a word of caution. In moving in these directions and in having these expectations of university leaders, we run the risk of expecting them to be "all things to all people" (Evans, 1995, para. 8). With the risks of professional burnout or making university presidencies unattainable, we need to temper our enthusiasm and find ways to support and help leaders to cope in the challenging times ahead. After all, if education is the solution to global challenges and problems, their success is our success.

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Human Participants

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Mr. Lawrence A. White is an advanced graduate student pursuing a Doctor of Education (EdD) at Unicaf University. His current research interests lie at the intersection of curriculum and pedagogical design and development with supporting learner mental health. In a grounded theory study rooted in lived experience and pedagogical journey mapping, he hopes to identify new pedagogical approaches that mindfully reduce or remove academic stressors that students invariably experience on their academic journeys in the hope of reducing challenges to mental well-being and improving academic success. White also holds a Master of Distance Education (MDE) and a Bachelor of Environmental Studies (BES). He worked for 20+ years in various increasingly senior leadership roles in Canadian colleges and universities throughout his career, is active with several global research projects related to mental health, and volunteers with the Global Mental Health Peer Network. He now lives in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada.

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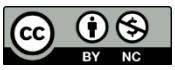
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