

# Changing Roles and New Expectations

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From

## NEW DIRECTIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Leaders on Leadership: The College Presidency

James L. Fisher, Martha W. Tack,  
Editors

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*The life of a college president can be fun; it can kill; it can be eternally frustrating—but it also can provide an inner satisfaction that few other professions afford.*

## *Changing Roles and New Expectations*

*Prezell R. Robinson*

It is reasonably clear to most individuals who have occupied the presidential office during the past fifteen years that their roles and expectations have changed dramatically. Suffice it to say that those in the grandstand—some faculty, trustees, alumni, and students—have from time to time romanticized the presidency as a position for an erudite scholar, whose every word reflects broad training in philosophy, history, religion, languages, and the sciences. Perhaps in the earlier days of higher education, presidents were glorified and content; then, too, opportunities abounded for reflective thinking, and there was time for research and the occasional presentation of scholarly papers. Certainly, some of these opportunities and expectations still exist, but they certainly are not as prevalent as they were twenty-five or thirty years ago. The truth of the matter is that at many of our small, church-related, nonprestigious institutions, the president is not only expected to lead but to be a jack of all trades. Leading in such an environment is certainly tricky. Leadership means different things to different constituencies.

The president must be able to communicate effectively with his or her board, soothe the psychic wounds of some influential alumni, become a fundraiser par excellence, and keep students happy, especially at homecoming and other strictly social affairs. Fisher (1984) has said, "The

president is expected to perform as a master of everything—an effective combination of Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Queen Elizabeth I, and Mother Teresa" (p. 3).

A dentist generally spends four years in college, another three to four years in dental school, and perhaps a year as an intern; a doctor follows a similar career path. The architect and the engineer generally pursue training designed to equip them to carry out their professional responsibilities effectively. As Riesman (1978) noted, however, there is no specific career line that prepares one for the college or university presidency. Indeed, the notion still exists in some quarters that the college presidency is a peaceful, rather static position that has not changed substantially over the years. Using the 1926 Lowell lectures at Harvard as his foundation, Whitehead (1966) indicated that throughout recorded history people have thought, built, and acted as though each generation of leaders would essentially live under conditions similar to those of their ancestors and that they would transmit these same conditions to their children. Moreover, he implied that we are living in the first period of time when this notion may be false. Whitehead also conveyed the idea that the accelerated rate of change today has an impact on leadership qualities such as objectivity, flexibility, and resiliency. These comments anticipate the situation in which some college presidents find themselves today.

Accordingly, no matter what problems confront an institution, the president is expected to handle them. In numerous situations, new presidents, many of whom have been departmental heads, deans, and administrative assistants, find themselves totally unprepared for the rude awakening they experience when they are thrust into a presidency.

In recent years, some observers have noted the exit of an increased number of presidents from their positions in the academy. I recently attended a meeting of presidents of historically black colleges, where over 50 percent of the presidents had been in their positions for less than three years. Of course, there are similar problems at other institutions.

Consider these lines by Miles (1973):

A man arrived at the Pearly Gate. His face was scarred and old.

He stood before the Gate of Fate for admission to the fold. "What have you done," Saint Peter asked, "to gain admission here?"

"I've been a college president, sir, for many and many a year."

The Pearly Gate swung open wide, and Saint Peter touched the bell.

"Come in," he said, "and choose your harp; you've had your taste of hell" [p. 4].

Presidents, as leaders, must lead, but if leaders march too far ahead of those being led, followers fall by the wayside. If leaders march too closely to followers, however, sometimes followers march over them. As Brown (1979) so aptly put it: "A leader has to be able to convey to those around him that he has a sense of vision and knows the direction in which the institution is going. . . . He must be able to sift out of the various alternatives those which are important directions. He must see these in advance; he must be able to predict problem areas over the forces and winds of change. If he cannot do this, he and his institution will be off balance. It is like steering a ship and keeping it on course" (p. 6).

Problems do indeed exist in the administration of small, church-related, historically black colleges. On the basis of my twenty-one years as president of such an institution in the South, I also believe there are some demonstrable differences in role expectations and opportunities. To elaborate further:

1. These colleges are very likely to be grossly underfinanced, with infinitesimally small endowments. This situation requires a special kind of assertive leadership from the president.
2. A fairly large segment of the total community feels strongly that these institutions are fundamentally and basically inferior. Leaders in this situation must convince the larger community that support for one of these colleges is a sound investment.
3. In many cases, the view prevails that leaders of these colleges simply should expect less support than the majority institutions. Unquestionably, presidents of these colleges generally do not have access to the coffers, nor do they often have the access to affluent citizens that chief executive officers of majority institutions can depend on.

In fairness, I should say there does seem to be a slowly evolving concept, especially in corporate America, that there is a need for these colleges to have first-rate leadership, because they represent a vital part of a great pluralistic society and are therefore vital to the national interest.

During my tenure as president, I have discovered some general guidelines that enhance the possibility of success.

1. The president must establish an effective relationship with his or her board, alumni, the larger community, parents, and students.
2. The president must learn early to delegate authority to his or her deans and other administrative officers.
3. The president should make a conscious effort to seek out the very best faculty and staff he or she can find, especially when appointing a chief fiscal officer, a chief academic officer, a chief development officer, and a chief of student affairs.

4. There simply is no substitute for an enlightened, deeply committed board of trustees, and the chief executive officer must seek out the very best trustees he or she can find. Other things being equal, several wealthy individuals certainly would not hurt.
5. Early in his or her tenure, the president should try to establish a reputation as an effective manager of fiscal affairs.
6. With the support and encouragement of his or her board and faculty, the president should make a conscious effort to produce competitive graduates.
7. With the support and involvement of the board, faculty, staff, students, and alumni, the president should constantly review the mission of the college. He or she should also develop strategies to guide the institution successfully toward its stated goals. Furthermore, he or she must gain from faculty a strong commitment to the attainment of those goals.

The twenty-one years I have spent at Saint Augustine College have been among the most rewarding of my life. I have gained much satisfaction from putting together a first-rate board and securing the best administrative officers and faculty our resources could command. If I were starting out anew, a college presidency would still be high on my list of job opportunities to seek.

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