Big Fish in a Small Pond: Leadership Succession at a Rural Community College

Background
Replacing community college leaders remains a central issue for community colleges and their boards as the demographics in the sector point to a massive turnover of leadership over the next decade. Indeed, almost half of current community college presidents are 61 years of age or older. Accompanying the mass exodus of presidents are retirements of chief academic officers (CAOs), which compound leadership succession challenges because many presidents ascend from CAO positions. Likewise, seasoned faculty are retiring in mass, further exacerbating the problem of adequate candidate pools for all levels of leadership positions. Complicating recruitment of new leaders are contextual challenges facing campuses. All colleges are facing fiscal pressures and corresponding demands to increase fund development and entrepreneurial activities. Yet, the differentiated demands on leaders emerge by location, with rural leaders facing problems unique to their locale when compared with their urban counterparts.

Rural community college presidents lead in regions of the country that suffer from low income per capita, aging populations, fewer business and manufacturing opportunities, and lower levels of participation in college attendance among residents. Yet, it is often the college that is looked to for help with economic development and to be a leader in supporting job creation within the region. Moreover, rural community colleges make up the majority (60%) of all community colleges in the nation. It is often difficult to recruit leaders for these colleges because the regions offer little in terms of culture relative to cities and are often geographically isolated. This context is often a tough sell for potential leaders used to more urban living or with partners who are also professionals seeking employment and are challenged by the limited employment options. Fit matters for both the college and the new leader. Rural communities are tight-knit and may distrust “city” people coming in who do not understand local networks or traditions, and who are unfamiliar with rural living.
Petticoat Community College (PCC) is a small rural college with a population of 1,500 students. As with many rural colleges, the bulk of its faculty are full-time, as are the students; the typical full-time student enrolls in 12–15 credit-hours per term. The college opened in 1960 as a branch campus of a nearby four-year university and recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. The current president, Joe Carson, has worked at the college for 43 years, starting as one of the early college faculty and moving up through the ranks. Joe has served as president for 16 years. Steve Elliott, the current vice president of administration likewise has had a long career at the college. Steve has served as VP for the past five years, initially starting his career alongside Joe as a faculty member and also serving a stint as dean of academics. These two leaders serve as the institution’s prime source of collective memory and have been instrumental in growing and expanding college operations over time. The two believe strongly in the institution’s commitment to access. Joe recently announced his retirement and Steve indicated that he would be retiring the following year to allow for some transition time for the new president. The college has undergone operational changes in addition to the upcoming personnel changes.

Four years ago, the college opened its first set of residence halls. This new campus option allowed for recruitment of students from a wider service area and came at a time when demand for two-year colleges was exceeding capacity. However, the opening of the halls got off to a bumpy start. In the first year, the lack of experience with operations of the residence facilities meant that no restrictions were placed on who could live in the new building. As a result, 35% of the student body in residence were placed on academic probation, with 20% of students withdrawing from the college. An additional 15% of residence students were removed from the hall for disciplinary actions after the first term. New policies emerged requiring a minimum GPA of 2.5 and a zero-tolerance rule for disciplinary infractions. Today, the halls remain full and have witnessed little trouble since the first year. Local students as well as those from across the state see the residence halls as an opportunity to have a “real” college experience. However, students still complain that the shift to a residential campus has not been entirely successful because few events or services are available on the weekends or evenings, and much of the commuter culture and environment remains. Some campus members also are concerned that the opening of the
residence halls signals a movement toward more selectivity for admissions and a pressure to offer a community college baccalaureate.

The most recent state assessment of the college highlighted several areas in which the college missed targets. First, graduation rates have been on the decline despite increases in enrollment. The all-time high of 250 graduates occurred a decade ago and each subsequent semester has shown a steady decline. The three-year graduation rate is currently 25%, which still ranks it in the top quarter of rates for all community colleges in the state. Second, student participation in remedial courses has been increasing. Some faculty correlate this increased need for remediation with the opening of the residence halls, asserting that admission standards were lowered in the quest to fill beds in the halls. Finally, internal institutional assessment and data tracking has been lacking. Campus leaders do not know how well PCC students are doing regarding transfer, how remedial education is impacting persistence or graduation rates, or how a newly created academic support course and office has attributed to student success. A survey on student engagement highlighted that there has been less engagement with faculty by commuter students and that not all students have been engaged in collaborative learning outside of class. The lack of faculty mentorship and advising has impacted student transfer experiences as well. The college has been under pressure by the state to increase graduation rates and to increase enrollment.

Statement of the Problem

The announcement of the retirement of Joe Carson provided the board of trustees with an opportunity for change. The concern was determining how to find the “right” leader for the position. Higher education is notorious for its lack of planning for leadership succession compared to the business sector. Nationally, 35% of college presidents obtain their promotions from within the institution. Despite this significant percentage, it remains unknown how much intentional grooming for leadership occurs. Anecdotally, rural colleges tend to promote even greater numbers from within the institution given the college’s location and difficulty in attracting national candidates. The emergence of “grow-your-own” leadership development programs in response to difficulties with leadership hiring, however, remains understudied regarding outcomes of the job placement. Leaders who emerge from within the institution are able to hit the ground running, know where all the skeletons are located, and have built-in relationships with major stakeholders.
A year before announcing his retirement, Joe Carson moved Kate Bradley from director of fund development and outreach to the position of provost and dean of the faculty without a national search. She has now served in this position for two years but has retained many of her responsibilities for fund-raising as well. Campus members saw this move as one to position Kate to succeed Joe as president. Kate is a homegrown leader, having started as a student at the college when it first opened in the 1960s, and has worked solely at the college for her entire 30-year career. She understands the issues facing the college and has a strong loyalty base with community and state leaders, key college donors, and the faculty.

The first year of Kate’s tenure involved a steep learning curve as a result of her lack of experience in academic leadership. She was well equipped for the administrative functions of creating a schedule, dealing with student advisement, and record keeping, but less prepared for being an academic leader. It had been 15 years since she had completed her doctorate, and she had not kept up with national trends in teaching and learning or recent work on student engagement and developmental education. Her single campus experience rooted her in the traditions of the college and one form of operations. Kate’s modus operandi was not to rock the boat. Yet, she has the ability to get things done, especially when it comes to working with faculty to make changes.

As the board of trustees begins its search for a new president, there is much uncertainty on campus. Several current faculty members lobby for Kate to assume the presidency, a position that Joe and Steve also support. She would provide a known commodity for campus members as well as a good bridge from the long-serving tenures of Joe and Steve to the future. The search committee created by the board of trustees consists of members from the local region as well as members in common with the nearby four-year university board of trustees from which it sprang. These fiduciaries wish to bring in a leader who can transition PCC into a leading college ready to address demands of the twenty-first century and to change the perception of the college from a sleepy regional college to a leader in the state. Driving the need for change are state and national pressures to have students obtain degrees or successfully transfer to a four-year university. As at other colleges, PCC is struggling with the best approach to address developmental education. The contextual demands placed on the college require hiring a leader who can manage a delicate balancing act—bringing about change, dealing
with a traditional and loyal community base, and addressing resource issues. The board of trustees ultimately wishes to have a change agent on campus to shepherd the process of improving student progress and degree completion. The question at the center of the search is whether this is best accomplished by going with someone who can hit the ground running and who knows the internal landscape or by hiring someone from outside who can bring a fresh perspective.

Tensions surround the search process. On the one hand, campus members are rooted in college traditions and are supportive of Kate Bradley assuming the presidency. On the other hand, the search committee has sent clear messages that change must occur given current demands. The committee would like to hire a change-agent president equipped to navigate the college through the anticipated rocky times facing the state. Evidence of declining graduation rates and increasing student enrollment in developmental courses raises concerns over meeting state and national objectives for college completion. However, bringing in an external leader does not ensure positive outcomes and hiring from the outside may be difficult. Recruiting leaders to rural areas is a challenge given lower pay, fewer cultural amenities, and low levels of campus funding and generally poorer regional economies. PCC is at a crossroads and a critical element influencing future outcomes is the selection of the next president.

**Questions**

- How should the search committee craft the posting of the opening for president at PCC? In what ways do the leadership competencies outlined by the American Association for Community Colleges influence this job posting?
- What is implied by the board of trustees’ desire to bring in a change agent? Is there a particular leadership style that would best support this frame of leading?
- Given the challenges of attracting candidates to positions of rural leadership, how might college administrators plan for leadership succession? How does a rural context influence leadership?