

Money & Management

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A Crash Course for the Loneliest Job on the Campus: the Presidency

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Washington

Lobbying and government relations are an essential part of being a college president, especially at public institutions. Yet few would-be college leaders are taught how to work with lawmakers.

So last month, when a group of 37 prospective presidents came here to learn how to run a college, they got a crash course on the ways of Washington. It was one of many aspects of an increasingly complex job covered during the Millennium Leadership Institute, a four-day program run by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

The institute is among a growing number of training programs that have emerged in recent years to teach aspiring college presidents to deal with the stresses and responsibilities of the top job on a campus. The American Council on Education sponsors a similar fellowship program, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education offers a two-week Institute for Educational Management. Doctoral programs in higher-education management for prospective college presidents have popped up as well at the University of Pennsylvania and at Jackson State, Vanderbilt, and George Washington Universities.

"There is clearly a need for new presidents to have some preparation for what will be a very complex job, and in some cases an almost undoable job," said Ann J. Duffield, a founder of the Presidential Practice, a consulting firm in Philadelphia. "Presidents today, and particularly presidents at public institutions, have so many demands placed on them by so many different constituencies that it's almost schizophrenic."

Learning to Lobby

What has distinguished the Millennium Leadership Institute from the others since its inception, in 1999, has been its focus on training prospective college presidents from underrepresented minority groups. Two-thirds of the program's graduates from 1999 to 2005 were black administrators or business leaders, and almost half were women.

On the fourth day of the program, before they went to Capitol Hill as part of their training, the presidents-to-be attended an hourlong session on governmental relations. "When you are a president, you will be on the Hill" asking for money to pay for campus projects, a government-relations specialist at a higher-education group told one session. "Not all of you are cut out to do this." (A *Chronicle* reporter attended the session under an agreement not to identify the speakers.)

The administrators, about half of whom said they had had some lobbying experience, were told by one college president that "lobbying is about personal relationships" as well as being "willing to work the system."

A former Congressional aide said that when asking for money from Congress, college presidents should try to "wrap it in the flag" but should avoid partisanship. "Politics is not a dirty word," the former aide said, "but you don't want to get involved in politics." Presidents should be persistent, courteous, and most of all succinct when dealing with politicians: "They want to hear, 'On the seventh day he rested.' They don't want to hear about days one through six."

The would-be presidents tested those abilities later, when they got together with members of Congress or their staff members.

Charles F. Harrington, provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, met with a new legislative aide to Rep. Mike McIntyre, a Democrat who represents Pembroke's district in North Carolina.

"I'm not going to ask for anything," said Mr. Harrington, who was making his fourth trip to Capitol Hill this year (a fifth was scheduled for this month). The aide who had been his contact in Mr. McIntyre's office was about to leave the job, and the provost simply wanted to develop "another good, inside contact."

When Mr. Harrington met with Ashley Clark, the congressman's new aide for education issues, they found some common ground — he mentioned Erskine B. Bowles, the former chief of staff to President Bill Clinton who became president of the University of North Carolina system in April, and she said she used to work for Mr. Bowles. After the meeting, Mr. Harrington said he did not mind meeting with an aide: "When you talk to the staff, you are talking with the officeholder, because they have the ear of the officeholder."

Mr. Harrington and the other program participants discussed their meetings over lunch. One said that when she met her congressman, she "couldn't get him to shut up," but when she realized that he was on the Science Committee, she invited him to speak on her campus at a seminar on science and education. Another participant had a "wonderful chat" with an office intern from his institution.

The four-day training program also included workshops on news-media relations (participants were videotaped being interviewed by former television and print reporters, and the tape was shown and assessed), and on negotiating pay packages, keeping on good terms with governing boards, and fund raising.

Moving Up

In the institute's first seven years, 29 of 214 graduates — almost 14 percent — have become college presidents or chancellors. Some of this year's participants said the program helped them be sure that they wanted to become college presidents.

"I'm feeling presidential already," said Chanta M. Haywood, dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research at Florida A&M University. "A presidency is the type of track that I definitely want to pursue."

Especially helpful, some participants said, was the presence of dozens of current and former college presidents and chancellors. Each aspiring president will be advised by one of those experienced leaders for a year after completing the program — someone to "be your guy through the maze" of reaching a presidency, said Arthur B. Jackson, vice president for student affairs at Westfield State College, in Massachusetts.

"Where else would you have 20 sitting presidents in a room to answer questions?" he asked, adding that he appreciated their candor during the sessions.

But Ms. Duffield said no program can "ultimately totally prepare a president or chancellor for what they're going to find when they sit down at that desk." Presidents must "sort through a very complex set of circumstances, and do that entirely on their own, because ultimately they can't talk personally to anyone. It's a lonely job."

Mr. Jackson and other participants said they valued the program because it put them in contact with other potential or current presidents who can give support and advice. "We become immediate colleagues, and hopefully we will all support one another as we aspire to the next level," he said.

That safety net, Ms. Duffield agreed, may prove invaluable, especially to a leader under fire.

"With all the good training in the world, presidents still need outside counsel," she said. "It's incredibly important for college presidents to build a network to seek advice from, but also to seek comfort from."

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