

Non-Traditional Bac and the Presidency

Leading and Learning

By Gayle Bennett

Admiral Tom Cropper was serving his 31st year in the Navy, when he got a call from his son, a student at California Maritime Academy, a member of the California State University (CSU) system in Vallejo, Calif.

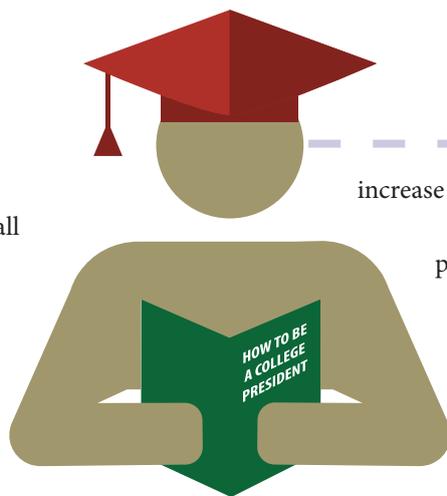
“He said, ‘Dad, you’ve always wanted to be a college president, now’s your chance,’” Cropper recalls. The current Cal Maritime president had just announced his retirement.

Cropper and his wife had a great affinity for Cal Maritime; their son flourished after transferring to the campus. In addition, Cropper had spent most of his career training and working with 18- to 22-year-olds. “I really enjoyed that transformative experience that I got to witness and be part of working with that cohort. That’s what attracted me to higher education,” he says.

Cropper threw his hat in the ring, and after grueling interviews with the CSU system board and the institution’s board of trustees, he was offered the presidency. While his maritime experience is clearly relevant, he’d never worked in higher education before.

The most common path to the presidency is from an academic position such as chief academic officer (CAO) or provost. According to the American Council on Education’s (ACE) last study on the topic—*The American College President 2012*—in 2011, 34 percent of presidents served as CAO or provost prior to becoming president. That’s an increase from the 31 percent who ascended to the presidency from those roles in 2006.

At the same time, an increasing number of presidents, like Cropper, are coming from outside the academy. According to the ACE data, in 2011, 20 percent of presidents worked outside of higher education when they were offered their positions, an



increase from 13 percent in 2006.

And, according to Mark Kinders, vice president for public affairs at University of Central Oklahoma, who is currently conducting research on the acclimation of first-time presidents at AASCU and AASCU-like institutions, there’s also an increasing number of non-CAO higher education administrators—such as CFOs, general counsels and vice presidents

of various stripes—ascending to the presidency. In Kinders’ survey of 61 presidents, part of his dissertation, after CAO, the most common previous position for a president is vice president of student affairs, at 10 percent. (The percentage of former CAOs who are now presidents in his study is higher than the ACE data, at 48 percent.)

Kinders points out that the role of president has changed over the past decade or so and continues to evolve. “The complexities of the work, the demands on their time, and the tremendous tension—from a public policy standpoint and the expectations of the federal government, governors, state legislators, regents and others—that’s a lot of pressure,” he says.

That might explain why not all CAOs want the top spot, potentially leaving more room for other types of candidates. According to the 2014 *Inside Higher Ed Survey of College and University CAOs*, 43 percent of CAOs indicated they want to be president, and an equal percentage said they did not.

The number of presidents who come from nontraditional backgrounds is slowly rising—and could increase at a faster pace with the impending rash of retirements. Current leaders who did not ascend from the CAO route offer advice on how to prepare for the role, acclimate to the institutions, and succeed in this evolving higher education landscape.

kgrounds

Preparing for the Role

Many higher education administrators get their doctorates whether they want to ascend to the presidency or not, but having this credential probably helps presidential aspirations. Tom Jackson, president of Black Hills State University in South Dakota, had already earned his doctorate when he became vice president of student affairs at Texas A&M-Kingsville, a position he would also hold at the University of Louisville.

At Louisville, he began to think about whether he wanted to remain a vice president for the next 15-plus years of his career or try to become a president. “As an African-American male, the question often comes up ‘Why aren’t there more presidents like me?’” he says. So, he decided to prepare himself for a presidential opportunity by attending programs for aspiring presidents, applying to different types of institutions, and soliciting feedback on how he stood up as a candidate. He also sought advice from current presidents.

In the early 1990s, George Ross, currently president of Central Michigan University (CMU), was serving as the vice president of business and fiscal affairs at Tuskegee University. Like Jackson, he decided he was interested in the CEO spot. Already a CPA and an MBA, he drove three hours each way to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa for three and a half years to earn his Ph.D. and better position himself for the opportunity.

In addition, in subsequent CFO and executive vice president positions at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Clark Atlanta University and CMU, Ross educated himself on areas outside of finance, including fundraising, student services and athletics. “With the cooperation of my bosses, I started getting more involved in the

other parts of the university, so I could practice some of that formal book learning I learned at Alabama,” he says. From his CFO position at CMU, he was offered the presidency at Alcorn State University in Mississippi. Two years later, he returned to CMU as president.

Jonathan Alger, president of James Madison University in Virginia, also sought to broaden his role when he was senior vice president and general counsel at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. “One of the nice things about being a general counsel is you have a wide range of responsibility across the institution,” he says. “I had an opportunity to work with all the academic units and disciplines, as well as all the administration

Not all CAOs want the top spot, potentially leaving more room for other types of candidates.



units across campus, on issues like governance, public relations, development, finances, facilities, and athletics.”

One of the reasons that Alger was able to immerse

After CAO, the most common previous position for a president is vice president of student affairs.

himself even further in these other areas at Rutgers was because his president, Richard McCormick, was also his mentor, and he encouraged Alger to prepare himself for a potential presidency. “He gave me opportunities like chairing task forces, whether on athletic, diversity or governance issues,” Alger says. “I had a broad range of roles other than just the traditional job description of a VP and general counsel.”

Mentors are a critical piece of presidential preparation. Kinders’ survey found that three-quarters of the first-time presidents in his study had a mentor or have one now.

Jackson counts many individuals as mentors, most importantly two vice presidents of student affairs who encouraged him to consider a presidency and two presidents he worked with. “Every person who ever walked in front of me, I latched on to; I was not shy about holding on,” Jackson says. “There’s a lot holding on the other way now, too, which is very humbling.”

Acclimating to the Presidency and Culture

When Cropper started his presidency on July 1, 2012, he and his provost had already created his orientation program, which they called “The Education of the President.” Cropper committed to spending two one-hour blocks, one in the morning and one afternoon, with different campus leaders, so they could tell him about their jobs—the challenges, opportunities, nagging issues. “I did that from about July 2 to the middle of September,” he says. “I just didn’t leave the campus. I had two good months of strong connection to the people on the campus as I started the role of president with the full faculty and student body on campus.”

He notes that it was important to publically call it The Education of the President. “I wanted the campus to know that I needed to be educated. I wasn’t afraid to let them know that there are things I don’t know, and you’re going to help me learn.”

Similarly, Alger started his presidency with a listening tour. “Listening is an undervalued, underappreciated leadership skill,” he says. “Especially when you first start, it is critical. But it continues to be; it doesn’t stop. We have to do so much talking and presenting that I think it’s sometimes something people forget.”



Three-quarters of the first-time presidents had a mentor or have one now.

Kinders’ presidential acclimation research backs up the importance of listening, because it’s the best way to learn an institution’s culture. “What permeates the research literature [on higher education leadership] is the importance of learning the culture,” he says. “One of the best comments of 600 [from survey respondents] was, ‘Spend your first 100 days with your ears open and your mouth shut. Really!’”

Because the most common path to the presidency is via the CAO role, some faculty members can become concerned when one of their own doesn’t get the job. Jolene Koester, former president of California State University, Northridge and currently a consultant with AASCU-Penson Center for Professional Development, is conducting a study on presidential succession planning. As part of this research, she interviewed 20 long-time AASCU presidents about what it takes to be a successful president now and in the future.

“One of the themes that emerges pretty strongly is that there be an understanding and an appreciation for the academic enterprise,” Koester says about her interviews with the presidents. “They recognize that there are increasingly individuals who come from nontraditional backgrounds who are being appointed to the presidency. Is there some respect and understanding of the academic enterprise and the culture of the academy inherent in the person?”

Alger recognizes this and works hard to understand the needs and perspectives of faculty. “Faculty are on the front lines, day to day with students as educators. Understanding the challenges they face and the support and resources they need to be successful is really important, especially for someone who has not served as a provost.”

To a certain extent, cultural acclimation is a skill, and Jackson thinks former administrative leaders could have a leg up here; they often have had to move on to move up, possibly more so than on the academic side. Black Hills State University is his first presidency but his eighth institution. “Each move gives you skill sets in adjusting to another culture, climate and institution. After eight times, you know that you don’t say certain things, you embrace certain things, you study certain things very

quickly. I think that makes it a lot faster for the student affairs vice president to come in and have a greater impact earlier simply because we've moved around before in a significant way."

Bringing Different Skills to Today's Challenges

Ross says the major issues facing him—and likely most other presidents in the country now—are access, affordability, attainment and accountability. He's also dealing with ever-decreasing state funding, Michigan's declining high school population, and the changes that technology continues to bring to higher education. "While the academics of the institution is always first in my mind, the major challenges are in technology, finance, government relations, and working with the state legislature and the federal delegation; those are the skill sets that I have to exercise on a more regular basis."

Alger adds to that list strategic planning and fundraising, which he notes, "wasn't as much of the job description years ago, but now it's critical."

Coming from the military, Cropper was surprised how much of his leadership skills and training transferred to the presidency, including helping his staff focus on the mission of the institution; clarifying communications and framing problems; breaking down silos, which he now calls "mineshifts of excellence"; and helping people avoid paralysis by analysis. "Those are the same things I did in the service," he says.

Jackson points out that the presidents he served under weren't experts in student affairs. Conversely, "I don't necessarily need to know how to run academic affairs, I just need a really good VP for academic affairs or provost who does."

Ross echoes the importance of a strong team. "This job doesn't get done by the president alone. I think my colleagues across the country will say that recruiting good talent at the administrative level and recruiting good talent at the faculty level is a constant."

Furthermore, Ross believes his financial background helps him with certain increasingly important constituencies. "I think it's given me some credibility with legislators, particularly business people I deal with. When the CPA-MBA president walks in the room, I feel I am treated differently. We talk a different language, especially with donors, business people and legislators." **P**

Higher Education as a Business?

Mark Kinders, vice president for public affairs at the University of Central Oklahoma, recently conducted a national study of how first-time presidents at public, regional comprehensive institutions can best acclimate to the leadership role. This research is part of his dissertation for a doctorate in higher education administration from the University of Arkansas.

"We often hear that higher education should operate more like a business," Kinders says. So he took a deep dive into the literature on corporate executive leadership to determine what first-time presidents could learn and borrow from the business world. His research included the decision-making processes of executive teams, how business leaders prepare themselves, and the acclimation and succession of corporate CEOs.

What did the research tell him? "When it comes to executive leaders, they are no more successful than we are in what they accomplish," Kinders says. Further, he points out that researchers have been studying corporate leadership for 40 years, "and they still don't have all the answers about why people fail."

Gayle Bennett is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.

