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## Student Affairs Professionals: Path to the Presidency

Shane McGoey<sup>1</sup>

*This study examined a sample of senior student affairs officers (n=22) who successfully attained the presidency at an institution of higher education. An analysis of participants' vitae was used to examine three areas that seem historically vital for a successful college president: teaching/research, fundraising, and administrative experience. Results indicate that senior student affairs officers who have attained the college or university presidency possess strong backgrounds in two of the three areas identified above; specifically, senior student affairs officers' experience in teaching/research and administration were strong. Conversely, experience in fundraising was lacking among many of the participants surveyed.*

David Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, stated in a U.S. News & World Report article (March 19, 2001), "Board of Trustees want someone with the fundraising magic of Midas, the vision of Moses, the patience of Job, and the ingenuity of Noah" (Marcus, p. 46). While no candidate could hope to live up to these lofty ideals, there is some truth to the statement that governing boards seek presidents who are good managers and fundraisers. Historically, a president was a distinguished scholar and possessed administrative experience (Bolman, 1965) as well as the ability to raise money for the institution that he/she led (Stoke, 1959). Upon examination of executive postings in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, it would seem that experiences with scholarship, administrative functions, and fundraising have remained relatively consistent as prerequisites to the college presidency.

Many in academe, based on this author's observations of faculty and presidents' responses to the issue, would frown at the idea of having a senior student affairs officer (SSAO) as the institution's leader due to conjecture that student affairs personnel lack credibility on scholarly issues necessary to lead an institution. However, there is a group of SSAOs who have attained the college presidency (NASPA, 2001). Somehow, they were able to develop the skills that made them attractive candidates to governing boards. The purpose of this study is to explore whether SSAOs who have attained the college presidency possess experiences related to teaching/research, fundraising, and administrative experience that are evidenced to be prerequisites for the college presidency.

### Definition of Terms

Senior student affairs officers, for the purpose of this study, are defined as those who have transitioned to the college presidency from either a vice president of student affairs or dean of students role, depending on the institutional administrative model that was used. The three criteria chosen, teaching/research, fundraising, and administrative experience, for the purpose of this study, are defined as follows. Teaching/research relates to teaching experience, whether the participant possessed an adjunct or full-time tenure position, scholarly research, and presentations at conferences. For the purpose of this article, fundraising experience relates to actively meeting with potential donors or grant writing in order to seek funds for specific institutional priorities. This may occur, separately from or in cooperation with an institutional development officer. Administrative experience is defined for this study to include leadership positions held within the administrative structure, experience in managing people and resources, the ability to set strategy and implement initiatives, and the acquisition of additional responsibilities dependent upon institutional needs. The criteria were selected based on common themes that were prevalent in the literature.

### Literature Review

#### *Scholarly Activities*

Bolman (1965) believed the most basic requirement at many institutions of higher learning was that presidential candidates possess doctoral degrees. He elaborated that in order for a president to command the respect of his/her faculty it was necessary to demonstrate that he/she was once one of them. But is this sufficient for a presidential selection? Bolman indicated that an academician can move into the rank of a departmental chair simply on the basis of peer approval of his/her research. Yet the skills necessary for an administrative position also include managerial ability.

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### *Administrative Experience*

Zwell (1999) suggested that an academic president possess competencies akin to a governmental unit, meaning the ability to successfully navigate through a bureaucratic system. Therefore, presidential leadership competencies identified included political sensitivity, personal credibility, influence, the ability to build relationships, strategic thinking, and visionary leadership.

Gray (1998) argued that "... the roles of academic leadership relate above all to ...service..." and what she called "... 'enabling,' an activity never performed by one person alone in one setting..." (p. 114). Thus, a president should use a leadership model that is collaborative and supportive, communicating a common mission for all to embrace.

Dodds (1962) believed that faculty were no longer looking to the president for academic leadership, but to the provost. The president is the leader of a complex organization, and as such must rely on the expertise of others to effectively manage the daily operations of the institution, therefore permitting the president to focus on more global and strategic institutional issues.

### *Fundraising*

A major responsibility of the office of a college presidency is the acquisition of resources, monetary and otherwise. In order for a president to be successful in this endeavor, he/she must be adept at collaborating with the institutional advancement staff, as well as building and maintaining relationships with potential donors (Appleton, 1997; Covington, 1997). Hesburgh (1980) believed that presidential leadership is the keystone for advancement. Murphy (1997) suggested that a president must possess the power to influence people; this is accomplished by a president building coalitions that are issue-specific as they also develop informal relationships that can be used later in acquiring resources.

Resource acquisition also requires a college or university president, especially at a public institution, to be involved in governmental affairs. Presidents need to seek support from legislators on key issues related to government funding of higher education (Johnstone, 1997). According to Johnstone, they must ensure, as a matter of public policy, that legislators have a full understanding of the importance of state funding and supporting the institution's need for private donations. Johnson (1997) further stipulated that a president needs a complete program related to government affairs, whereby the president plays an important public role in maintaining the needs of his/her institution before legislators, governors, or other political leaders whose support of higher education is needed.

### *Student Affairs and the Presidency*

Dodds (1962) believed that the tone of student life on campus seemed to be neglected to a large degree by college presidents and viewed this as a problem that may hinder a president because of the great force students and the public can wield with elected officials. Today's college president needs to be adept in addressing issues related to student life that include, but are not limited to, student involvement in institutional governance, the impact of campus life on retention, and balancing the curricular needs of the faculty with the needs of student life. Flawn (1990) further addressed the challenges a president must face in working with students on today's college campuses. He believed that it was important to identify major issues that students felt strongly about and to gauge the variety of student reactions to institutional priorities by collaborating with student leaders. A president needs to be keenly aware of student life on the campus, specifically student experiences and interactions with the college environment during their tenure on campus. Faculty may not have the background or interest in areas in which SSAOs have responsibility. Therefore, SSAOs and their staff must assist the president in understanding the campus climate related to student issues, as well as serve as the institutional representatives to students. Interestingly, there is little research regarding whether the SSAO possesses the skills necessary for the presidency.

However, Hartford (2001) advocated that student affairs professionals do possess necessary skills in managing and leading higher education in today's society. Such skills include establishing inclusive visions, interacting with numerous constituencies, not letting one's ego get in the way of managing the institution, dealing with financial issues effectively and creatively, being a good public speaker, managing crises effectively, and being able to raise funds for specific projects. Furthermore, Jacobson (2002) stated that SSAOs "deal with the sort of intense controversies that land institutions in the headlines – racial tensions, student alcohol abuse, suicide, and rape, to name a few" (p. 1). In essence, SSAOs deal with practical issues on a daily basis while providing out-of-classroom educational experiences that complement the educational mission of an institution.

Many of the perceptions and views related to this topic lack supporting research, therefore misperceptions exist of SSAOs and the skills they possess that may be of value as a college president. The literature fails to adequately address

information related to SSAOs' interest and success in or preparation for becoming a college or university president. Further, there seems to be a dearth of information that would assist student affairs professionals in making a decision to become a college president and how to prepare for such a position. Additional research is necessary to better understand how SSAOs can attain the college presidency by analyzing those who have successfully accomplished this goal.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants were selected from a purposive sample of college and university presidents who had previously served as SSAOs. Information was obtained from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA).

The sample population (n=22) was selected based on certain criteria: current status as a president and relevant, timely information available. Every effort was made to locate those individuals who had left the presidency, but forwarding information was difficult to obtain.

Participants were contacted via telephone, informed of the research study by means of a script, and were asked to submit a copy of their complete vita to the researcher for analysis.

### *Procedures*

The study was conducted during the months of June and July 2001. Contact was initiated during the third and fourth week of June asking participants to send their vitae. Follow-up contact was made during the middle of July with participants who did not respond to the first contact or had not yet sent a vita as requested. Participants' vitae were coded for content based on certain themes analogous with the literature related to teaching/research, fundraising, and administrative experience.

### *Research Design*

A census study of participants' vitae was used to measure the level of frequency of specific variables as outlined above. Analysis was based on the coding of specific categories that were consistent with the variables of this study: teaching/research, fundraising, and administrative experience. Given the small population of college/university presidents in this category, only frequency analyses were possible.

## **Results**

### *Demographic Information*

Regarding the sample contacted for this research, 22 responded (78.5% response rate) out of 28 solicited. Male respondents comprised 86.4%. Ninety-five and one half percent of respondents possessed a Ph.D. or Ed.D. The top three major fields of study were Higher Education Administration (50%), Counseling (13.6%), and Student Personnel (9.1%). Table 1 provides additional information.

The institutions at which each SSAO attained the presidency were analyzed based on the Carnegie Classification, as reported in the Carnegie Foundation's 2000 Fact File report, published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Attainment of the presidency by SSAOs occurred with greater frequency at two primary institutional classifications. The first, in order of frequency, was Masters (comprehensive) Colleges and Universities I, institutions which offer a wide range of undergraduate programs and are committed to graduate education through the masters degree. The second was Associates Degree Colleges, institutions that offer associates degrees and certificate programs only (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2000). The geographical range of institutions was the continental United States. There was no specific region that exhibited a greater frequency. Refer to Table 2 for further information regarding Carnegie classifications.

### *Teaching/Research Experience*

Eighty-seven percent of respondents reported teaching experience that ranged from 1 to 36 years at the college level (M=12.14 years). Twelve (55%) served as adjunct faculty members at graduate schools that offered programs in Student Affairs/Personnel Administration or Higher Education Administration; they were able to teach while maintaining full-time administrative positions at institutions of higher learning. There were seven respondents who held tenure or tenure track positions.

Sixty-eight and one fifth percent reported publishing academic research prior to attaining the presidency. Additionally, 77.3% of respondents had presented one or more academic or research-oriented papers or studies at professional conferences during their careers prior to the presidency. Eighteen and one fifth percent had successfully acquired

research grants to conduct studies on various fields of interest. Refer to Table 3 for further information.

#### *Fundraising Experience*

Only 27.3% of the respondents indicated experience in fundraising prior to becoming a college president (M=1.96 years). Fundraising for initiatives related to student affairs programs or capital improvements was cited most often.

#### *Administrative Experience*

Respondents' experience in student affairs ranged from 3 to 35 years (M=20 years). Administrative skills included supervision of personnel, strategic planning, budgeting, developing collaborative program efforts, dealing with a broad constituency base, and developing services and programs for students.

The specific positions and areas of experience cited most frequently included vice president for student affairs, dean of students, campus life, student activities, and residence life. Multiple coding occurred due to multiple positions respondents held in student affairs. There was no uniform number of administrative posts each respondent had achieved prior to becoming a college president. Table 4 provides further detail.

While there seems to be no clear pathway among the participants on how each achieved the presidency through administrative experience, many began their careers in residence life or student activities. Skills identified in each vita show that the respondents each gained experience in advising/supervising students, budgeting, program planning, and counseling as well as other administrative skills. As each respondent progressed in their career, each was able to broaden his/her administrative experiences in order to gain additional skills and responsibilities that included employee supervision, budget forecasting and planning, contract negotiation, and capital improvement oversight responsibilities. Ultimately, each respondent became a dean of students or vice president for student affairs. In addition to having been an SSAO, other leadership experience included positions such as Academic Dean (n=4), founder of a business (n=1), and chief executive officer of a for-profit organization (n=2). All respondents were found to have held leadership positions within civic organizations and/or professional associations prior to becoming a college president.

Finally, respondents' vitae were examined for participation in presidential preparation programs, such as the one offered by the American Council on Education (ACE) or practical experience that facilitated their attainment of the college presidency. Nine (41%) participants reported completing presidential preparation courses at Harvard University. Two other participants reported previously serving as an assistant to a college or university president.

## **Discussion**

The educational status of respondents seemed to emphasize the practical administration of colleges and universities. There seems to be a parallel between the scholarship of higher education administration and the practicality of effectively managing colleges and universities. Years of service as a SSAO did not appear to play a role as much as administrative skills. There was no specific number of years that could be identified as uniform for a SSAO to serve prior to moving to the presidency.

The data on teaching/research of the respondents generated some important themes, which show that most of the SSAO participants possess the academic qualifications that Bolman (1965) had hypothesized. This factor is important in presenting scholarly ability to faculty when a search for a president is being conducted. Furthermore, given the data on research experience, the majority of participants would be able to show some scholarly work that included teaching and research.

In addition, the administrative experiences of and skills learned by the respondents prior to becoming college presidents seemed congruent with those often used by presidents, thus lending support to the practical obligations of the college presidency.

The findings suggest that SSAOs who have attained the college presidency do possess the educational and administrative background which appears important to the success of any college or university president. Through experience related to teaching/research and the administration and management of a division that focuses on the needs of students, SSAOs can prepare themselves well for consideration to be a college or university president.

Conversely, fundraising experience does not seem to be a strong quality represented by presidents that come from a

student affairs background ( $M = 1.96$  years). It is likely that fundraising skills will continue to grow in importance as a prerequisite to the college presidency; therefore, potential candidates need to be skillful in acquiring resources in order to remain credible. Increasingly, governing boards are looking for leaders who possess a record of successful fundraising due to diminishing state and federal resources. If more SSAOs wish to become future presidents they may find fundraising to be a key job requirement. In addition, this experience could prove valuable in directing resources toward issues, support, and events important to student affairs and improving campus perceptions of student affairs administrators.

The study indicates that leadership experience lends preparatory support for the presidents who come from a student affairs background; specifically included are experience as a vice president for student affairs or dean of students, or careers related to campus Life, student activities, or residence life. Rising through the ranks of the administration permits an individual a unique perspective on the various management and leadership techniques necessary for an academic chief executive to run an institution of higher education. The data collected suggest that involvement in civic and professional organizations can well prepare a potential president by enhancing leadership skills and building relationships with various constituencies. Volunteer organizations can facilitate skill development in the areas that are important for a president. Participating in fundraising activities, managing programs and projects, and networking with people in pursuit of a common goal within a volunteer organization may serve to prepare an individual well. These experiences are especially good preparation for work in higher education because institutions are often comprised of subsets of loosely coupled organizations with competing interests that must embrace broad themes toward a common institutional mission.

The findings support the literature in suggesting that academic presidents must possess a terminal degree and have conducted scholarly work that faculty deem important when selecting a president. However, the respondents to this study seem to also possess a mastery of the administrative competencies that governing boards believe are paramount to a successful presidency, as stipulated by Zwell (1999). Thus, SSAOs can promote the virtues of both the academic and administrative worlds by broadening their skill base as they climb the career ladder, continuing to identify with academic affairs as they assume administrative positions, and exploring ways to promote the profession. Collaborative opportunities might include co-curricular activities, leadership development, academic success, and retention.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of the study included the inability to generalize to populations other than the participants' vitae studied, the lack of randomness due to the limited pool of participants, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) being the only source of information regarding SSAOs who had become college presidents. Additionally, each vita may possibly lack relevant information due to a participant's desire to withhold certain personal or professional data to a search committee. Finally, the lack of a comparative study of other presidents from backgrounds other than student affairs is a limitation.

### **Conclusion & Implications for Future Research**

This study provides information to SSAOs and others in student affairs that are interested in considering a college presidency as part of their career goal. While faculty have risen to the presidency in greater frequency in the past, many governing boards are choosing other options that may better meet the needs of their respective institution today and in the future. Criteria related to scholarship are no longer the primary attributes that governing boards seek; they are looking for individuals who can manage the institution of higher learning well and communicate to stakeholders the institutional vision and mission in a manner that is clear and facilitates the resources necessary to support the academic missions of colleges and universities.

Future research should compare the educational backgrounds and teaching/research experience of presidents with student affairs backgrounds and presidents who rose through the academic ranks. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine the decision-making process governing boards used to select executives with student affairs backgrounds. Some future questions for consideration include: Was an institutional assessment utilized in the selection process? Are the governing boards that hired SSAOs to the presidency more student-focused than other institutions? Were these participants effective once they attained the presidency?

While this exploratory study indicates that SSAOs do possess the necessary experiences for the college presidency, further research is critical in addressing the questions in the preceding paragraph. However, at minimum, student affairs

practitioners with presidential aspirations can prepare themselves by securing experience in teaching/research, increasing administrative responsibilities, and gaining fundraising skills, which seem to be increasingly important to the college presidency.

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## Appendix

**Table 1**

*Educational Degree & Major Educational Background*

<u>Type of Degree</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Ph.D.	13	59.1%
Ed.D	8	36.4%
M.S.	1	4.5%
<u>Educational Major</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Higher Education Admin.	11	50.0%
Counseling	3	13.6%
Student Personnel	2	9.1%
Unsure/Not Available	2	9.1%
Theater	1	4.5%
Community College Admin.	1	4.5%
Administrative Behavior	1	4.5%
Educational Administration	1	4.5%

**Table 2**

*Breakdown of Institution Type That Senior Student Affairs Officers Became Presidents based on Carnegie Classifications*

<u>Carnegie Classification</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Master I	9	40.9%
Master II	1	4.5%
Bachelor Liberal Arts	2	9.1%
Bachelor General	2	9.1%
Associate College	7	31.8%
Health	1	4.5%

*NOTE: The following institutions, based on Carnegie classifications, were not represented by participants' responses: Doctoral/Research Universities-extensive, Doctoral/Research universities-intensive, Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges, Theological Seminaries, Medical Schools & Centers, Health Profession Schools, Schools of Engineering & Technology, Schools of Business & Management, Schools of Art, Music & Design, Law Schools, Teachers Colleges, Other Specialized Institutions, and Tribal Colleges.*

**Table 3**

*Research Experience*

<u>Type</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Publications	15	68.2%
Unpublished Writings	1	4.5%
Presentations	17	77.3%
Grants	4	18.2%

**Table 4**

*Student Affairs Areas of Expertise*

<u>Areas of Experience</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO)	17	77.3%
Dean of Students	12	54.5%
Campus Life	13	59.1%
Student Activities	13	59.1%
Greek Affairs	4	18.2%



Counseling	9	40.9%
Residence Life	12	54.5%
Career Counseling	5	22.7%
Student/College Union	3	13.6%
Admissions	5	22.7%
Financial Aid	5	22.7%
Judicial	8	36.4%
International Student Services	1	4.5%
NCAA/Athletic	1	4.5%