

Competency Model for the Role of President of Religion-affiliated Colleges

*Katherine Tunheim
Tunheim Leadership Group, Inc.*

*Gary N. McLean
University of Minnesota*

A competency model for religion-affiliated college presidents is proposed. The model consists of three main components: spiritual calling, personal values, and professional roles. The spiritual calling component may make the model unique for this group of college presidents. An impetus for the competency model is the trend toward shorter tenure for presidents of religion-affiliated colleges and the model's usefulness and growing popularity. Such a model assists in selecting, training, and evaluating religion-affiliated college presidents.

Keywords: Competency Models, Higher Education, Religion

One view of human resource development (HRD) is that it is engaged in unleashing human expertise for the purpose of improving individual and organizational performance (Swanson, 1995). McLagan (1989) defined HRD as the integrated use of training and development, organization development, and career development to improve individual, group, and organizational effectiveness. Her competency HR wheel highlighted the importance of building competency models for individual positions. The use of a competency approach as the basis for human resource management has become widespread in the United States and is gaining a foothold in international human resource practices (Athey & Orth, 1999).

Training and development professionals use competency models to clarify organization-specific competencies to improve human performance and unify individual capabilities with organizational core competencies (Rothwell & Lindholm, 1999).

Competency models have been used extensively in higher education and business since the 1970's (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999). Competency models help identify required areas of strength for success in performance (Philpot, Devitt, Parr, & Nixon, 2002). In addition, they permit organizations and institutions "to distinguish individuals with the characteristics required to build and maintain an organization's values from those who do not" (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999, pp. 13-14). Competencies offer a language for a systematic framework of leadership development (<http://siop.org/Conferences/05Con/CFP>, September 20, 2005).

Once competencies are developed, companies and institutions most often apply them to selection and development. Competency frameworks are largely systematic, giving a degree of sophistication to applications, such as succession planning that has sometimes been lacking (Briscoe & Hall, 2005). Thus, competency models help solve the serious problems that plague HR systems and result in an increased "likelihood of higher retention rates, job satisfaction, and the achievement of strategic goals" (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999).

While there are numerous benefits from using behavior-based competency models, the decision to introduce a competency-based strategy into an organization should not be made without due diligence. In order for competency-based strategy to be successful in an organization, the management and particularly the HR professionals need to devote a significant amount of time for organizational needs assessment, planning, data collection, change and resistance management, and communication. (Gangani, McLean, & Braden, in press).

Creating a competency model needs to be done with rigorous research practices.

The challenges facing the field of competency practice are both daunting and exciting; the opportunities for HRD practitioners to reinvent competency methods to meet the challenges of the future are significant (Athely & Orth, 1999). Gangani, McLean, & Braden (in press) list the following challenges:

- Gaining leadership support for the new initiative
- Articulating a competency-based HRD approach to the organizational mission, values and strategic business objectives
- Building a conceptual framework for the competency model
- Adopting appropriate methodology for competency model development

Copyright © 2006 Tunheim & McLean

- Communicating the new initiative to employee
- Evaluating the results of competency-based strategy on HR performance improvement.

Significance of the Problem

There are many reasons why competencies for this particular group of higher education leaders are needed. This section describes those reasons, underscoring why the need for a model is so significant.

Pressures on Higher Education

The last twenty years have brought pressures on higher education on a variety of fronts, including fiscal challenges, shifting demographics, and changes in the marketplace (Smith, 2000). Because of these pressures, colleges and universities need to become adaptive and open to change. Within higher education, there are barriers to dramatic change at the structural, cultural, and personal levels. Strong, capable leadership is needed on college and university campuses. Leaders must be able to utilize a full set of integrated competencies in their positions to be successful (Smith, 2003).

Tenure of University Presidents

Before 1965, many state university presidents had much longer tenure in office than do their successors in the late 1990's. In 1965, 43.7% served fifteen or more years in office. In 1997, it was only 3.6% (Davis & Davis, 1999). In 1984, the Association of Governing Boards (1984) warned, "The American college and university presidency is in trouble" (p. xix). Ten years later, 1994, Kerr observed that the office of president was still in trouble, stating, "I started out wondering why presidential terms were so short and getting shorter." Kerr raised a critical issue. Given the importance of presidential leadership in the nation's universities and colleges and the relationship between length of service and leadership effectiveness, very little substantive research has been done on this topic (Davis & Davis, 1999).

Presidents of Religion-Affiliated Colleges

A subset of universities and colleges in the U.S. are religion-affiliated colleges. Andringa (2005) estimated that there are 900 self-described religion-affiliated campuses in the U.S. These 900 colleges enroll more than two million students, employ upwards of 600,000 faculty and staff, and have operating budgets of more than \$35 billion. The president of each college has a complex leadership position that wields significant influence in terms of people and dollars managed. "The American Council of Education reports that the average length of a college president of a religion-affiliated college today is about 5.9 years" (Bob Andringa, President of the Council of Christian Colleges & Universities, personal communication, July 28, 2005).

Presidents of Lutheran Colleges

And yet another subset of U.S. religion-affiliated colleges is Lutheran colleges. The average length of tenure for a Lutheran college president has also dropped. Ralph Wagoner, LECNA President, said:

I would maintain that we are in a different era with a different set of variables from those who served in the 1960's to late 1980's. I would predict that we will never see the long terms we read about from the 1920's to the 1950's. (personal communication, August 4, 2005)

In 2005, the average was 5.07 years (Arne Selby, Executive Director of Higher Education Division of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, personal communication, August 3, 2005). With the increased pressures on higher education, presidents do not serve as long as in the past.

Research Problem

Boards of Trustees or Regents are held responsible for the performance and evaluation of college presidents. This can be a difficult task for Boards that are typically comprised of volunteer alumni and friends of the college. Due to the pressure on these colleges and presidents, Boards need to approach this important HRD work with a higher level of HRD sophistication than in the past. If presidents are turning over more often, the Boards need better tools with which to hire, train, evaluate, and terminate these individuals.

As a practicing leadership and organization development consultant who has spent 20 years in business using competency models, the first author saw a need for such a model for Boards of Regents/Trustees to help them with some of the tenure problems. In addition, she had observed the importance articulated by presidents of feeling called to the position. She also had seen the need to match their values with the institution's and knowing what is necessary to be successful in this challenging role. Out of these observations, the following three research questions emerged:

1. Are religion-affiliated college presidents called to the position internally (the silent whisper) or by an external source (another person tapping them for the job)?
2. What are the top five values of a religion-affiliated college president?
3. What are the main roles and behaviors religion-affiliated college presidents need in their positions to be successful?

From the first author's consulting practice of working extensively with Lutheran Educational Colleges of North America (LECNA), her expectation was that presidents of religion-affiliated colleges are different from other liberal arts college presidents in that the spiritual component is generally more important and needs special consideration. The spiritual calling, personal values, and professional role components all comprise the fit or match of an individual with an institution. If this fit is not right, the president potentially turns over faster, and the negative consequences could include loss of alumni/donor support and dollars; defection of faculty and staff; loss of reputation or confidence in the institution; fewer students enrolling, which means less revenue for the institution; loss of accreditation; or even a potential shut down of the institution altogether.

Review of the Literature

The literature written about competency models for religion-affiliated college presidents is quite limited. Martin and Samels (2003) offered eight skills of highly effective new presidents. Although these are skills, not competencies, they are, nevertheless, helpful in this discussion as they point to behaviors that are necessary for new presidents. These skills are:

1. Mastering technology choices
2. Producing partnerships
3. Vanquishing adversaries
4. Building a brand
5. Seeking selective excellence
6. Valuing bricks and clicks
7. Leveraging mentoring networks
8. Ensuring entrepreneurial advantage

Smith (2000) offered two helpful competency models for human resource employees who are hiring administrative leaders and professional staff in higher education institutions. The data from Smith's study generated two models for working successfully within college administration: the Leadership Competency Model and the Professional Competency Model. They provide a beginning competency framework with which to develop leaders in higher education. The Higher Education Leadership Competency Model lists five competency clusters with specific leadership competencies under each cluster. They include:

1. Leadership
 - a. Visionary leadership
 - b. Decision-making
2. Building and managing relationships
 - a. Working collaboratively
 - b. Interpersonal sensitivity
 - c. Promoting and managing diversity
 - d. Managing conflict
 - e. Clear communication
3. Cognitive
 - a. Analytical and systems thinking
 - b. Using technology
4. Personal responsibility
 - a. Flexibility
 - b. Accountability
 - c. Passion for one's work
 - d. Self-confidence
 - e. Stamina
5. Fundamental Skills
 - a. Financial Management

While these studies offer important insights into leadership development, what the research seems to be lacking is specific competencies relative to the role of the religion-affiliated college president. The purpose of this paper is to propose a competency model for defining the roles of religion-affiliated college presidents. The model does not discount or diminish existing leadership competency models; but, rather, it offers another way of thinking about leadership roles and contributes to existing research.

Methods

There are a number of methods for creating competency models. Briscoe and Hall (1999) suggested three approaches to use when creating competency models: the research-based competency approach, the strategy-based competency approach and the values-based competency approach. For this study, a combination of two approaches was used. Clark's (1999) five-stage approach for building a competency model was selected; this approach combined research-based and values-based approaches: This combination was selected because of its well-developed ease of application and its applicability to the specific context.

- Stage One: Assemble focus team and create a list of processes.
- Stage Two: Build behavioral indicators for each process.
- Stage Three: Categorize the data.
- Stage Four: Order each category.
- Stage Five: Validate the competency model.

Stage One: Assemble Focus Team and Create a List of Processes

Thirty-eight presidents of religion-affiliated colleges attended the Lutheran Educational Conference of North America in February, 2004, in Victoria, British Columbia. This focus team was a convenience sample for the purposes of this study. The group members were each directed to list the top five roles Lutheran college presidents must fill to perform successfully. A total of 190 roles/processes were listed.

Stage Two: Build Behavioral Indicators for Each Process

Two subject matter experts (SMEs)--a retired president of a Lutheran college who served for 25 years and a current, high performing president of a Lutheran college for 6 years--teamed up with the first author to study the 190 responses and build the behavioral indicators for each process.

Stage Three: Categorize the Data

Using sticky notes, the data were categorized according to an affinity process, clustering like responses together.

Stage Four: Order Each Category

The results of the affinity diagram were reviewed, and the top six categories were identified, and the categories were labeled.

Stage Five: Validate Competency Model

Fourteen high-potential academic leaders from Lutheran colleges attended the Thrivent Fellows Leadership Development Program in Fremont, Nebraska, in June, 2005. These 14 individuals were nominated by their respective LECNA presidents at their home institutions based on their leadership potential. The purpose of this training program was to develop future presidents of Lutheran colleges. Stages one through four above were replicated. Seventy responses were analyzed, and the same six categories emerged from the data, thus validating the first iteration.

Other Approaches

Next, in addition to Clark's model, two other methods were used with both groups. The first was to hand out a 4x6 index card and instruct the respondents to write on the card whether they felt that they had been called to this presidential position by an internal or external call. Of the current presidents, 66% reported that an external tap was what got them interested in the presidential position. No president reported a mix of both internal and external call. The first author had observed the importance articulated by presidents of feeling called to the position. She felt that this piece of data would be helpful for other candidates who were perhaps interested in a presidential position as a point of personal validation in spite of a lack of an internal call.

Finally, using the LifeKeys Values Cards (Kise, Stark, & Hirsh, 1999), 38 current presidents participated in a card-sort activity. They were instructed to select the top five values cards that defined their most important values in the presidency role. The top five included integrity, service, religious beliefs, family, and creativity. These data may prove useful in helping presidents and potential presidents check the fit of their values with institutional values.

Kise, Stark, and Hirsh (1999) defined values as clues to what is important to an individual. They define one's fundamental character. They influence the decisions people make and supply meaning to work and life. Most

importantly, if the values of the individual match the institution, it can provide an atmosphere in which people are the most productive.

Results

The primary outcome of this process was the development of a model for presidents of religion-affiliated colleges and a listing of the competencies contained in the model.

The Model

The model that emerged from this process is shown in Figure 1, below.



Components of the Model

There are three components in the model: 1). Spiritual leadership calling, 2). Personal values, and 3). Six main professional. These roles with their associated behaviors are listed next.

Strategic Leader. Three behaviors emerged as a part of this role:

- Leads a strategic planning process to create the vision for the institution
- Challenges stakeholders and empowers decision making
- Involves constituencies through an organizational change process

Fundraising Leader. Four behaviors emerged as a part of this role:

- Identifies opportunities and sets priorities
- Supports the advancement team
- Builds constituent relationships
- Asks for donations

Educational Leader. Three behaviors emerged as a part of this role:

- Integrates academic and strategic planning
- Enables and supports academic leaders
- Evokes and articulates ideas that will strengthen student learning

Managerial Leader. Four behaviors emerged as a part of this role:

- Identifies people for the right positions

- Develops and builds effective teams
- Executes financial management plan
- Hires, manages performance, and terminates effectively

Spiritual Leader. Four behaviors emerged as a part of this role:

- Nurtures mind and soul
- Shares a spiritual story
- Connects faith, work, and life
- Fosters community spiritual development

Mission Leader. Three behaviors emerged as a part of this role:

- Tells the institutional story
- Communicates mission to stakeholders
- Evaluates effectiveness of mission
- Updates institutional brand

Personal Values. After the card sort exercise using 50 value cards, the following five personal values received the most votes from 38 current Lutheran college presidents:

- Integrity—maintaining congruity between what one claims to be and how one acts
- Service—helping others or contributing to society
- Religious Beliefs—sustaining faith in a higher power
- Family—placing importance on maintaining familial relationships
- Creativity—being imaginative and innovative, going outside the norm

Leadership Calling. In the 15th century, Martin Luther gave shape to the idea that all professions are a calling from God. Luther took the word, *vocation*, meaning “divine calling,” and applied it to all Christians in their many roles and places of responsibility (Kolden, 2002).

In Luther’s eyes, the occupations of the farmer, the doctor, the school teacher, the minister, the magistrate, the house-mother, the maidservant and the manservant were all of them religious callings, vocations in which one was to work diligently as serving not merely an earthly but also a heavenly master. (Bainton, 1952)

Leadership calling is a very important notion relative to religion-affiliated college presidents and, therefore, is at the very center of this leadership model.

As 66% of the presidents reported that their calling came from another person tapping them and encouraging them to consider being a college president, the concept of calling in the model needs to be viewed in its broad context of both internal and external calling.

Constraints of the Model

This article has a number of limitations or constraints:

1. The focus of this article is on only one denomination of religion-affiliated college presidents. Thirty-eight presidents of Lutheran colleges were involved in the focus team. It is a unique group of college presidents and the data represented in this competency model may not apply to any other higher education group of presidents of religion-affiliated colleges.
2. The author was personally involved with this group as a Leadership and Organization Development consultant. In such a situation, it may not have been possible to bracket these data appropriately to present an objective perspective.
3. Models such as the one proposed here are sanitized versions of reality; they are not the same as reality. Some slippage can be expected as one moves from a model to the real world. A major constraint on this, and any other model, is that the real world is complex and dynamic (Lewis, 1996).
4. There is some potential for bias in analyzing the results during Stage 2, when the behavioral indicators were determined. Asking two presidents familiar with this role might have biased their perspectives on the indicators.

Recommendations for Practice

This research suggests that:

1. The model should be applied by Lutheran and perhaps other religion-affiliated colleges for the purposes of selecting, evaluating, developing, creating succession plans, and providing career development for their presidents.

2. In a time when religion-affiliated college presidents are turning over rapidly and the pool of prepared leadership candidates is decreasing, the result of 66% of current LECNA presidents being called externally is quite interesting. Because of this, current presidents need to tap potential presidents more often, letting them know they have leadership potential.
3. Instruments for assisting colleges in selecting and evaluating their presidents should be developed, piloted, and implemented.
4. The approach used here can be extended to other senior leaders in higher education. In fact, the process and model could be adapted to leaders in non-religious institutions – presidents, but also Vice-Presidents of Academics, Enrollment, Development, Finance, and Marketing. This process could even be replicated for professors, who perhaps also feel called to their vocation. Anyone who feels called to their profession (vocation), could use this process – in higher education or business.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study suggests the usefulness of continuing research on competencies for presidents in higher education, as follows:

1. Continuing efforts at validating the model in this article should continue among Lutheran-affiliated colleges, other religion-affiliated colleges, liberal arts colleges, and other types of higher education.
2. Instruments developed out of the recommendations for practice need to have their psychometrics verified for validity and reliability.
3. In future research, other methods for creating competency models should be used, with the results compared to determine if equally effective outcomes might be developed with greater efficiency. Perhaps a software tool where forced choices are involved, might be quicker and more succinct.

Conclusions

The model proposed here has the potential of helping Boards of Trustees or Regents of religion-affiliated colleges hire and develop religion-affiliated college presidents. In addition, it can help future candidates who are interested in this presidential role. No claim is made here that the model accounts for all of the variables involved in this important leadership role. It can, however, provide an important perspective when Boards are hiring, training, evaluating, and succession planning for this important role. This research provided an opportunity to link theory and practice in a practical way. Religion-affiliated college boards, presidents, future presidents, and HRD practitioners can all gain from this research.

Implications for HRD

As training and development or organization development professionals work in higher education, whether it is with large, public universities or smaller liberal arts colleges, competency models can be helpful tools. HRD professionals need to do more research in this area to provide more sophistication to Boards to provide better selection, training, development, and evaluation for current college presidents. In addition, these tools and processes can assist in the leadership development, career development, and succession planning processes for any college president, vice-president, other senior executives, or even faculty members in the future.

References

- Athey, T. R., & Orth, M. S. (1999). Emerging competency methods for the future. *Human Resource Management*, 38(3), 215-226.
- Bainton, R. H. (1952). *The reformation of the sixteenth century* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Briscoe, J. P., & Hall, D. T. (1999). An alternative approach and new guidelines for practice. *Organizational Dynamics*, 28(2), 37-51.
- Clark, D. (1999). Building the leadership competency model. Retrieved May 22, 2005 from <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/case/build.html>
- Competency models: A boom or bane to leadership development? (n.d.) Retrieved September 20, 2005, from <http://siop.org/Conferences/05Con/CFP/Competency%20debate.doc>
- Davis, W., & Davis, D. (1999). The university presidency: Do evaluations make a difference? *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 13(2), 119-140.

- Gangani, N., McLean, G .N., & Braden, R. A. (in press). A competency-based human resource development strategy. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*.
- Kise, J., Stark, D., & Hirsch, S. (1996). *Lifekeys*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House.
- Kolden, M. (2002). *Christian's calling in the world*. St. Paul: Centered Life.
- Lucia, A. D., & Lepsinger, R. (1999). *The art and science of competency models: Pinpointing critical success factors in organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/ Pfeiffer.
- Lewis, T. (1996). A model for thinking about the evaluation of training. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 9(1), 3-22.
- Martin, J., & Samels, J. (2003, September/October). On strategy: 8 skills of highly effective new presidents. *Trusteeship*, 11(5), 8-12.
- McLagan, P. (1989). Future HRD issues. In D. Gradous (Ed.), *Systems theory applied to human resources development* (pp. 61-82). Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development.
- Philpot, A., Devitt, R., Parr, J., & Doe, J. (2002). Leadership competency models: Roadmaps to success. *Hospital Quarterly*, 6(1), 42-45.
- Rothwell, W., & Lindholm, J. (1999). Competency identification, modeling and assessment in the USA. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 3(2), 90-105.
- Smith, D. M. (2003). Higher education leadership competency model: Serving colleges and universities during an era of change [Electronic version]. *CUPA-HR Journal*, 54(1), 12-16.
- Smith, D. M. (2000). Leadership and professional competencies: Serving higher education in an era of change (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2000). *DAI-A*, 61(02), 529.
- Swanson, R. (1995). HRD: Performance is the key. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 6(2), 207-214.