

## **LOOKING FOR LEADERS: CURRENT PRACTICES IN LEADERSHIP IDENTIFICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **Introduction**

To be successful in today's changing environment, higher education institutions need competent, effective academic leaders. The rise of college costs, a perceived lack of accountability of higher education to taxpayers and state governments, and a heightened sensitivity of taxpayers toward ineffective and inefficient leadership in academe have contributed to the increased scrutiny on academic leadership. With the challenges of finding effective and efficient leaders for all levels of academic leadership, additional research is needed to gain a better understanding of how current leaders are identified and trained. As interested institutions learn of the specific challenges of leadership identification and training, programs can be developed to better meet these challenges. Individuals can be identified earlier and provided with targeted and focused leadership development activities for meaningful training that is applicable and timely for future leaders.

Using data collected in a research study initiated in fall of 2004, this article discusses how mid-level academic leaders are identified in land grant universities, what position they held when they were identified, whether they were internal or external candidates for their position, and how they were selected as potential leaders. In preparing the literature review for this study, every effort was made to use current academic references. There was limited research available but the emerging importance of leadership identification was indicated by edited, non-referred articles.

### **Literature Review**

The continued success of higher education institutions depends on key positions at all levels being staffed with effective, competent leaders (Gaither, 2002). In this world of information superhighways, student consumerism, increased calls for accountability, and rising costs of education, academic leadership has become even more complex and multi-dimensional (Wisniewski, 2002).

Gaither (2002) suggested that a new view of academic leadership could be traced to the changing organizational structure of multi-campus institutions, the different expectation of a more diverse work force, and a movement towards quality. He gave other factors that have influenced this change, including a flatter organizational structure, decreased institutional loyalty, and the idea that quality leadership can be found and is necessary at all levels of an organization. Performance expectations have increased as responsibilities and accountabilities have increased. In addition to a complex and decentralized internal environment, higher education leadership has been challenged to be responsible to an ever growing number of external constituents.

There has been a call for academe to find dynamic leaders to meet these challenges (Brown, 2001). One way to help ensure there are trained leaders in academe is to identify potential leaders and provide them with support, training, and encouragement to take on leadership roles. Both key current leaders and institutional programs can be instrumental in helping to identify and train leaders. The Saratoga Institute's Leadership Development Report (1998) indicated that

identifying the next generation of leaders requires the effective skills of current leaders. Choosing leaders who are astute, informed, strategic, and who have strong character and interpersonal skills requires leaders with those same skills. It has become a crucial task of leadership to select and develop the men and women who will be their successor. Potential leaders exist throughout organizations, yet the process of identification and development is often inadequate or too late. (p. 55)

### *Leader Identification*

Historically, the ladder of succession for academic leadership started with bright, ambitious, usually senior faculty who began the climb by serving as department chairs (Estes, 2001). Those who found satisfaction at the department chair level would continue to be upwardly mobile as opportunities presented themselves.

There has been a change in recent history (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). Twombly (1990) found most academic deans started from a faculty position, but the perceived career move from faculty, department chair, associate dean, and dean was followed by relatively few individuals. Careers paths to deans have become splintered with only a little more than half of the deans serving as department chairs. This tended to vary by college, with Arts and Graduate School deans following a more traditional path, and professional school deans going directly from faculty to dean. Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) found only 60% of college deans had been department heads and approximately 40% of college deans had been associate deans. The career ladders of administrative academic leaders now have many entry points, making the early identification and training of leaders even more complex and challenging (Twombly, 1990).

### *Challenges to Leadership Identification*

Heuer (2003) stated the next five to ten years would be critical in finding effective replacements for academic leaders, at a time when the increasing complexity of leadership in academe has discouraged many from seeking administrative positions. Hoppe (2003) wrote that fewer faculty are voluntarily applying for departmental chair positions. Murphy (2003) explained administrative roles have become very stressful with high turnovers and a high burnout rate. Lucas (2000) pointed out the increased emphasis on accountability, internal change, and high-performance teamwork has contributed to intensifying the role of mid-level lead-

ers in higher education. Also contributing to a decreasing applicant pool is the aging baby boomer faculty. An increase in retirements over the next decade will shrink the pool of potential candidates for future leaders (Land, 2003).

There are several challenges in identifying people who are willing to accept the responsibility of leadership roles. One challenge in academe is the very nature of the faculty themselves. Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) found most faculty join academe because they are looking for autonomy and independence. Faculty valued the ability to focus solely on their work, and most were not willing to set themselves up for the criticism and perceived lack of power as a dean.

The culture of higher education presents another challenge to leadership identification. Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) wrote that institutional culture discouraged young faculty from taking leadership positions. Faculty were rewarded for efficiency and effectiveness in their discipline, not for taking and excelling in leadership roles. Prestige came to faculty from their research and their teaching, sending the message that leadership was either second place or something to be avoided.

The fact that many universities do not clearly define the responsibilities and expectations of the various leadership positions creates another challenge. Heuer (2003) found there was often a lack of information on what made a competent leader and what made him/her successful. Although many types of individuals are necessary to make an organization run, not everyone had the capability to move into administrative positions. Heuer (2003) stated “the type of individual necessary to staff the organization often depends on the systems and processes in place” (p. 44). Institutions without clearly defined systems and positions have a harder time identifying capable leaders.

Where to look for leaders presents another challenge. There is a decisive difference of opinion on whether leaders can be more effectively chosen from within or external to an institution. Sagaria and Dickens (1990) examined position changes for over 1,200 academic and administrative leaders and reported that 60% of academic administrators built their careers from within the institution.

There has been an ongoing debate on whether it is best to hire internally or externally. Some higher education organizations identified their reasons for hiring inside candidates. They felt these candidates were familiar with the culture and the goals of the organization. They had built personal communication networks that would help them to handle new responsibilities (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001). In many cases they were proven contributors (Byham, Smith, & Paese, 2002). Another benefit of offering leadership opportunities to internal employees was that it motivated them to stay with the organization because they were presented with new job challenges and could grow personally (Byham et al., 2002).

Some higher education institutions took a very different view of hiring inside the organization. Heuer (2003) found in some institutions, hiring internal candidates was a challenge. The prevalent theory seemed to be it was easier to bring someone in with the skills than to train an insid-

er. Higher education administrators had the attitude that internal candidates did not look as good as external candidates, and they held the former to higher standards (Heuer, 2003). These internal candidates had to work harder to prove they could be successful in the position. Heuer (2003) also found some search committees felt if a candidate had not done the job before, that person would not be worth hiring.

Most of the participants in Heuer's (2003) survey did agree the learning curve in moving from one university to another was not very steep. Both internal and external academicians could learn to be competent within a relatively short time and work within the specific culture of their organization to obtain goals, leading change where appropriate. In contrast, Heuer (2003) found the external candidate from the for-profit world was at a real disadvantage in understanding the culture of higher education and functioning successfully within its norms and values.

Replacing effective leaders with effective leaders requires a commitment from the institution to first identify potential leaders and then provide ongoing support and development opportunities. There is a lack of literature that provides information on where current leaders in higher education come from and how they are identified as potential leaders. This study examined this important first step in our knowledge of leadership development, namely, who current leaders are and how they got there.

## **Method**

As a largely exploratory study, land grant universities were selected for inclusion due to their comprehensive nature, consistency among mission statements, and complexity of academic offerings. Within the scope of land grant universities, this research studied how higher education institutions identify academic leaders and possible differences between academic units and academic leadership positions.

The survey instrument was administered through a web survey program in November of 2004. The questions were designed to collect quantitative data, although there were two open-ended questions that allowed for qualitative data. The closed-form questions asked how and where current leaders began their academic careers and for their past and prospective trajectories as academic leaders. The open-form questions asked for comments on leadership identification and development in academe. Members of the designated sample population received an initial email contact describing the project and inviting them to link to a website to complete the survey. After three email reminders, the study was concluded with a 64% response rate.

The sample population for this research was chosen by a stratified, random sample using the 1862 Land Grant Universities. Sixteen institutions were selected using a table of random numbers. Four academic units (colleges) were chosen from each of the 16 institutions: Business, Education, Arts and Science, and Agriculture. The participants in this study included the provost, academic dean, academic associate dean, and two department chairs/directors selected from each of the four academic

units that participated in this survey. These department chairs/directors were selected using a random number table. Table 1 indicates the sample participants by position and by academic units.

**Table 1**

*Respondent (and Sample) Educational Leaders From 16 Land Grant Universities*

	Provosts	Deans	Assoc. Deans	Chairs	Total
16 (16) College of Agriculture	–	10 (16)	7 (16)	17 (32)	34 (64)
16 (16) College of Arts/Sciences	–	10 (16)	9 (16)	25 (32)	44 (64)
16 (16) College of Business	–	12 (16)	8 (16)	24 (32)	44 (64)
14 (15) College of Education <sup>a</sup>	–	10 (15)	7 (15)	19 (30)	36 (60)
University	10 (16)	–	–	–	10 (16)
Total	10 (16)	42 (63)	31 (63)	85 (126)	168 (268)

<sup>a</sup> One institution did not have a College of Education.

## Findings

In response to how the respondents started their academic career, 91% (249) indicated they began as faculty. A small number (18, or 10.7%) of respondents did not start their academic career as faculty members. Of these, eight started in business and four started in industry.

The career path of the 29 associate deans who responded to this question showed 48% (14) had served as department chairs. Sixty-three percent (18) of associate deans had been department chair/director, whereas 37% (11) went directly from faculty into associate dean positions. Of the associate deans who responded, 19% (6) had served as dean, and 10% (3) had served as provost. When indicating the career history of associate deans, 36% (11) had served in their position 3–4 years, 16% (5) had served over 10 years as associate dean, and 19% (6) had been associate dean twice in their careers.

For those serving as deans, career paths were somewhat fractured. Thirty-three percent (13) started as department chair/director, and served as associate dean before becoming deans. Forty-two percent (17) of the deans surveyed started as department chair/director and went straight into the dean's position. Approximately 10% (4) of the deans started as associate dean and went into their current position without being a department chair/director. Over half the provosts (6, or 60%) who responded had served as department chairs/directors. Of the six who had been department chairs/directors, 33% (2) served as associate deans, and 50% (3) served as deans.

The career history for deans and provosts indicated that 80% (32) of the deans had been in their position 6 years or less, and 24% (10) had

served as dean twice. Forty percent (4) of the provosts had served for less than 6 years, with 30% (3) serving for over 9 years.

Eighty-three percent (122) of the participants had been identified at some point in their career as a potential leader. When examined by position, department chairs/directors had the highest percentage (73, or 86.9%) and provosts were the lowest (7, or 70%) of respondents who were identified as leaders. When the data were grouped by position, 95% (73) of the department chairs/directors were chosen as a leader when they were a faculty member, with other positions slightly lower. The majority of respondents across all four academic units were identified as potential leaders when they were faculty, with the range between Agriculture at 96.4% (27) and Arts/Sciences at 84.6% (33).

Table 2 shows the participants' response as internal (rather than external) candidates for their current position both by academic unit and by position. When analyzed by position, 61.2% (53) department chairs/directors were internal candidates, along with 75.9% (22) associate deans. Approximately half the deans (22, or 52.4%) were internal candidates to their college for their current job. Over three quarters of the provosts (7, or 77.8%) were internal candidates. When examined by academic unit, over half of those serving in leadership positions were internal to their college: 52.9% (18) from Agriculture, 69% (30) from Arts/Sciences, 63.6% (28) from Business, and 57.1% (20) from Education.

**Table 2**

*Internal Candidates for Current Position by Percentage*

		Internal to college	Internal to institution
<b>Position</b>			
Chair/Dir.	<i>n</i> = 85	61.2	4.7
Assoc. Dean	<i>n</i> = 29 <sup>a</sup>	75.9	6.9
Dean	<i>n</i> = 42	52.4	9.5
Provost	<i>n</i> = 9 <sup>a</sup>	—	77.8
<b>College</b>			
Agriculture	<i>n</i> = 34	52.9	14.7
Arts/Sciences	<i>n</i> = 43 <sup>a</sup>	69.0	4.8
Business	<i>n</i> = 43 <sup>a</sup>	63.6	6.8
Education	<i>n</i> = 35 <sup>a</sup>	57.1	—

<sup>a</sup> Not all participants answered every question.

Table 3 shows institutional employment history. When analyzed by position, 98% (83) of the department chairs/directors, 96.7% (28) of the associate deans, 100% (42) of the deans, and 100% (9) of the provosts had served as faculty members. Most of the respondents were still in the same institution they started with. Sixty percent (51) of the department

chairs/directors are still at the same institution, as are 65.5% (19) of the associate deans, 47.6% (20) of the deans, and 66.7% (6) of the provosts.

Table 3 also shows the institutional employment history by college. Fifty-nine percent (20) of Agriculture leaders were serving at the institution where they started as a faculty member as compared to 62.8% (27) in Arts/Sciences, 54.5% (24) in Business, and 54.3% (19) in Education.

**Table 3**

*Institutional Employment History by Percentage*

		Started as faculty member	Leaders in same institution
<b>Position</b>			
Chair/Dir.	<i>n</i> = 85	98.0	60.0
Assoc. Dean	<i>n</i> = 29 <sup>a</sup>	96.7	65.5
Dean	<i>n</i> = 42	100.0	47.6
Provost	<i>n</i> = 9 <sup>a</sup>	100.0	66.7
<b>College</b>			
Agriculture	<i>n</i> = 34	97.1	58.8
Arts/Sciences	<i>n</i> = 43 <sup>a</sup>	95.5	62.8
Business	<i>n</i> = 44	100.0	54.5
Education	<i>n</i> = 35 <sup>a</sup>	97.1	54.3

<sup>a</sup> Not all participants answered every question.

Respondents indicated how they were selected to be leaders. Some participants were selected by more than one method. Forty-three percent (50) of those who listed a single method had been nominated by peers, and 35% (41) had been recommended by their supervisor. Of those participants who indicated two selection processes, 69% (11) were chosen by either a supervisor or peers. Of those participants who indicated three different methods of selection, the majority (9, or 61%) were chosen by committee, by peers, or by supervisors.

Table 4 shows respondents' future plans. As qualified leaders are in short supply and presumed to be in even more danger of becoming extinct through the retirement of the aging baby boomer generation, it is interesting to note that almost half of those participating were planning on returning to faculty ranks. Overall, forty-six percent (76) of the respondents would go back to a faculty position, 22% (36) wanted to move to another institution, 14.6% (24) would move upward at their institution, 4.3% (7) wanted to move to industry or business, and 32.3% (53) would like to retire. When examined by academic unit, the trend was similar.

**Table 4***Future Plans by Position in Percentages*

	Chair/Dir. <i>n</i> = 85	Assoc. Dean <i>n</i> = 31	Dean <i>n</i> = 39 <sup>a</sup>	Provost <i>n</i> = 9 <sup>a</sup>	Total <i>n</i> = 164 <sup>a</sup>
Return to faculty rank	27.4	8.5	7.9	2.4	46.3
Move up in institution	7.9	2.4	3.7	0.6	14.6
Move to other institution	13.4	3.0	4.9	0.6	22.0
Go to corporate industry	3.0	1.2	—	—	4.3
Retire	13.4	7.3	9.1	2.4	32.3

<sup>a</sup> Not all participants answered all questions.

Two open-ended questions asked for further comments on leadership identification and development. Clearly stated was the need for institutions to do more in identifying and training potential leaders. Many of the respondents felt that there was a need not only to emphasize early identification of leaders, but that these potential leaders should be exposed to more leadership opportunities through various experiences. Several types of training were mentioned, including more in-house opportunities, more special assignments, and offering more part-time roles for faculty before they accept leadership positions.

Others expressed a concern that leadership training did not seem to be valued by their institution, which had antiquated processes to haphazardly select individuals with potential but then found itself unable to get rid of those who had not performed well. Over a third of those responding felt the leadership development programs were not adequately funded. Some comments emphasized the importance of shifting the institutional climate to recognize faculty for leadership development, make leadership jobs more attractive, and provide more career planning in these areas.

### Conclusions

This research study examined current practices of leadership identification in higher education, including if potential leaders were identified, what positions they were serving when identified, if they were internal candidates for the position, and how they were selected. Over eighty percent of the participants had been identified as potential leaders sometime in their career. Ninety percent of those identified as leaders were serving as faculty members at the time. Over half the department chairs/directors and deans were internal candidates to their institution for their current jobs. Over three quarters of the associate deans and provosts were internal candidates for their current jobs. Approximately half of the participants were currently serving leadership positions in the same institution in which they worked as faculty. Three quarters of the respondents were selected as potential leaders by a supervisor or by their peers. Twenty-

five percent had received some type of leadership training. Seventy percent of those participating felt that job experiences were the most valuable type of leadership development.

Approximately half the academic leaders felt well prepared for their current position and leadership in general. A small group of department chairs/directors indicated they did not feel prepared at all for either their current position or leadership in general. A third of the participants felt there was a need to have better, earlier identification of academic leaders. They also felt training and leadership should be valued more, institutions should provide more opportunities and experiences for potential leaders, and mentoring should be an important part of leadership development.

About half of the current academic leaders were planning to return to faculty rank when they finish in their current position, and approximately one third were planning on retiring.

### **Discussion**

There was a clear directive from the participants in this study for institutions to do a better job in early identification and training of future leaders. The data showed that many of the current leaders came from within the ranks of the faculty, even within their own institutions. This should encourage institutions to make a serious investment in professional development and career training as the individuals will likely be leaders in their own institution.

Effective leadership development programs could be targeted within the campus community and will be successful if they are clearly intentional in preparing leaders from faculty ranks. Most faculty must serve on department, college, and/or university level committees. These existing opportunities could be structured in such a way as to promote leadership development by building in program objectives that support acquisition of leadership skills for all the committee members. Rotating the chair position, inviting human resource training, assigning responsibilities for group members, rewarding committee members for achievement of leadership skills, and being held accountable for progress toward leadership development objectives could be adapted into most committee formats. Early identification of potential leaders would allow for more formal and informal training activities as faculty members work with college projects and establish networks across their disciplines.

Formal mentoring programs could focus on those leadership skills that would assist participants in being effective and efficient leaders. There is limited literature on faculty mentoring for leadership training, which suggests that mentoring programs in academia should be studied in more depth to gain a better understanding of success factors and how these programs can be effectively used to enhance the leadership skills of participants. By establishing a structure to administer, review, and reward positive mentoring experiences, institutions would indicate to faculty that leadership, mentoring, and development are important. Skills could continue to be passed along to newly identified faculty allowing them to be successful in leading

their department, their college, or their campus community.

These early training programs could also be the means for identifying those who will not be good leaders. The participants in this study felt that it was just as important to have a process for identifying those who would not be good leaders as for those who would be good leaders.

Many of the current, formal programs for leadership development, including mentoring programs, are offered through professional organizations such as the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and the American Association of Colleges and Schools of Business. Associations have largely assumed training responsibilities because universities for the most part lack the commitment, resources, and/or infrastructure to do it themselves. Although leadership development programs are available in some disciplines, these tend to be targeted for deans, chancellors, or presidents. There is a need for leadership development programs for department chairs and directors as well as for associate deans.

The success of leadership programs depends on the value institutions place on leadership development, which can be evinced by how the programs are funded, the establishment of a reward system for acquired skills, and increased opportunities to serve in leadership capacities. Institutions should step forward in recognizing the value of identifying and training leaders to the success of their missions. There needs to be a shift in most higher education cultures to value and reward good leadership. Rewards could include financial rewards, increased opportunities to exercise abilities in leadership experiences, and possible recognition on promotion and tenure review documents. The value placed on leadership may involve a cultural change which should be driven by existing academic leadership.

Leadership development is a process, not a single event. Encouragement, recognition of leadership activities, and rewarding successful demonstration of leadership could keep people interested in acquiring and maintaining their leadership skills. Many faculty feel that leadership is at best a duty to perform before returning to their research or teaching programs. There is a majority of faculty who will never want to serve as academic leaders, but if everyone at least understood the challenges administrators face, the university would function more smoothly and bring greater satisfaction to the whole campus community.

The future challenge for existing leadership in academia is to identify, fund, develop, encourage, and reward individuals who are effective and efficient leaders. As leadership roles have become increasingly complex, institutions need to put even more emphasis on the professional development of these key people. Programs could be put in place that allow for professional development for those who are willing and interested in becoming leaders. If the success of higher education depends on leadership that can function effectively and efficiently in an increasingly complex society, every effort must be made to provide that leadership. This will help to maintain the well being of higher education for future students, staff, and faculty.

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