

Achieving Balance: Lessons Learned from University and College Presidents

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This study investigated strategies used by college and university presidents in balancing their professional and personal lives. The conceptual framework for this study comes from the work of Schein (1985, 1992). Lessons learned and words of wisdom from these presidents can enhance leadership effectiveness at all levels in higher education.

Our culture embraces priorities in terms of careers, families, and personal commitment. Individuals from all levels of professions seek ways to achieve balance among the three. While scholars have written about the role and functions of the presidency in higher education as well as barriers women face in ascending to the presidency, relatively little attention has addressed how presidents balance their professional careers with their personal lives.

A number of formal and informal discussions have taken place over the years focusing on the challenges to professionals in finding balance between their careers and personal lives. Galinsky, Kim, and Bond (2001) documented the stress of working individuals trying to find and keep balance. The authors noted that stress leads to health concerns, relationship challenges, and to an overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction.

There are currently over 4,000 higher education degree-granting institutions in the United States, with men and women serving as presidents (McCormick, 2001). Data on the characteristics of college presidents (Evangelauf, 2003) as presented in the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* reported that the majority of presidents are White (78.9%), 51-60 years old (57.3%), married (83.1%), and male (78.9%). In addition, majorities of university/college presidents hold the Ph.D. degree (55.67%) or Ed.D. degree (20.8%) and serve on external boards (78.6%). Most of these presidents interviewed spend 6-10 years in the position of president (27.9%).

Presidents, as the chief executive officers of institutions of higher education, are responsible for overall leadership and administrative actions. The many duties of the office of the president include planning, organizing, directing, and representing the institution (Brown, 2000). Presidents must insure that the

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standards and procedures in operational use within the institutions conform to the policies established by the governing board and are consistent with sound academic practice. They are largely responsible for institutional resources and the creation of new resources. In addition, presidents are responsible for public understanding and must represent their institutions to the many public constituencies. The professional and personal demands of time and commitments of the presidency are tremendous. Dowdall (2004) described the presidency as relentless and complex. Presidents' jobs include multi-tasking and setting priorities. Can these men and women who serve as presidents of colleges and universities find a balance between their personal and professional lives?

Culture affects the professional and personal demands and commitments in societies. Schein (1992) defined the culture of a group as shared assumptions and beliefs about the environment and their place in it, the nature of time and space, human nature, and human relationships. In the United States, there are numerous careers where two sets of norms pertain relating to balancing one's professional and personal lives (Schein, 1992). One set of norms specifies that certain professions must treat professional demands as higher priority than personal and family demands. These professions, such as medicine, the military, and police, are usually where public safety and welfare are priority concerns. The other norm recognizes individual choice if an individual decides to leave a profession for family or personal reasons. Concepts for understanding how professionals balance their careers and personal lives have value when derived from observations and occurrences of real behavior.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lessons learned from current leaders who are presidents of colleges and universities on finding and maintaining balance in their professional and personal lives. Domains that draw an individual's commitment are lifted from the work of Schein (1985, 1992) to present the conceptual framework of the study. These domains exist and are valued because of cultural influences. The value and the importance of one's professional, family, and self-oriented commitments and responsibilities determine distinctions and priorities. The lessons from the presidents in the study are valuable assets in providing models for others aspiring to the presidency, individuals currently serving as presidents, or individuals serving in other leadership roles in higher education. The leaders in this study provide lessons learned and words of wisdom from their experiences and reflections that can enhance leadership effectiveness at all levels in higher education.

Conceptual Framework

The professional and personal structures of every society evolve to fulfill the functions needed in that society (Schein, 1992). Career and professional

responsibilities within organizations reflect the broader culture in which they exist and continue to develop cultures of their own because of the founders and participants (Schein, 1985). Each college or university defines the professional structures of the presidency based on the histories and evolving responsibilities of the institution. The issue is how do presidents set their priorities between the demands of the profession and other areas of their lives?

Schein (1984, 1985, 1992) offered the utility of distinguishing the three settings or domains that draw an individual's attention and commitment: (a) the professional setting, (b) the family setting, and (c) the self-oriented setting. Professional setting activities are those spent within the context of the occupation or vocation and encompass the roles and responsibilities of the position. The family setting activities may include time spent with spouse or significant other, children, grandchildren, or others who share a common ancestry. Self-oriented activities refer to those hobbies, sports, friendship relations, and other activities pursued primarily for purposes of self-development and which sometime take as much or more time away from family as does work (Schein, 1985, 1992).

One assumption about the nature of professional careers and relationships among professional, family, and self-oriented settings is that the professional career is primary. A second assumption is that the family is primary, with a third assumption being some form of an integrated and balanced lifestyle as possible and desirable (Schein, 1985). Schein (1992) asserted that individuals experience independent pulls from these three settings. An attempt is usually made to segregate the demands of these domains, for example, "leave work at the office," and "do not take work home." Schein cited other instances of combining domains such as when a spouse travels along on a trip or participates in activities in cities where children and grandchildren may reside. An important implication embedded in the third assumption is that the three domains or settings can coexist with balance and bring satisfaction to an individual.

Methodology

This study used the qualitative strategy of oral histories (LeCompte, Millroy, & Preissle (1992). The researchers used two forms of purposeful sampling to select participants. These were intensity sampling and homogeneous sampling. According to Patton (1990), intensity sampling is useful to pursue information-rich cases with the potential of revealing phenomena. Homogenous sampling draws from participants who are similar. Including at least two forms of purposeful sampling enhances the credibility and integrity of the study (Patton, 1990). The following criteria guided the selection of participants: (a) service as a president for at least three years at a college or university, and (b) current

leadership as a president of a college or university. The researchers knew all of the presidents from professional associations.

Procedures

The narratives of four current presidents at colleges and universities were the focus of data collection for this study. The researchers invited the four presidents to participate by telephone. Each participant received a follow-up letter explaining the purpose of the study, confidentiality issues, and the study procedures. Next, researchers scheduled individual interview times with the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Researchers used semi-structured questions, exploring the participant's experiences and gathering demographic information. The last question was a "grand tour" inquiry regarding balancing their personal and professional lives. With this question, participants shared specific strategies for balancing lives.

Sample

The participants were four current presidents of colleges and universities in the United States ranging in size from 3,500 to 11,000 on-campus students. The average number of years in the position of president for the participants was 9. Three of the participants were married and one was divorced. All of the participants reported having grown children and grandchildren. The participants' ages ranged from 50 to 68 years old. All four of the participants (three females and one male) were Caucasian and held doctoral degrees.

Discussion

Several themes emerged from the interviews with the participants. These themes were consistent with Schein's (1992) distinctions delineating the level of attention and commitment in the three domains of professional, family, and self-oriented settings.

Professional Settings and Responsibilities

Within professional settings and responsibilities, the topics for the interviews with the participants included (a) the number of hours in a typical day, (b) the major public service commitments, (c) a description of leadership style, and (d) what it is like to be a college or university president. The four presidents work long days. The participants reported working anywhere from 10 to 14 hours per day, five to six days per week. Weekend work was typical.

All participants had been and continue to be heavily involved with major public service commitments. The number and type of these commitments varied according to the size of the community and the regional demands for the area in which the president worked and lived. For example, several presidents reported being actively involved in economic development for their

community and/or state. Two participants reported active involvement at the national level with professional service to organizations and boards.

The presidents spoke confidently about their leadership styles. All of the presidents in the study recognized the importance of empowering constituents in the decision-making process, but also took responsibility for making decisions when needed. Vroom and Yetton's (1973) model described a continuum of autocratic decision-making by the leader, consultative processes, and participatory group processes. Transactional leadership theorists (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1998) contend that transactional leaders build commitment to the organization's goals and objectives and empower followers to achieve the objectives.

The responses from the presidents in this study followed an emerging leadership style, transformational leadership (Burns, 1978). This transformational leadership style focuses on participatory leadership and shared governance by empowering followers. All of the presidents in the study spoke of the benefits of shared governance.

In identifying their own leadership styles, all four participants in the study used words like "situational," "influential," "interactive," and "inclusive" as descriptors. These descriptors are indicative of transactional leadership behaviors and are consistent with Vroom and Yetton's (1973) consultative and group processes.

Gallimore-McKee (1991) identified four leadership styles to describe perceptions of faculty towards presidents of colleges and universities. The four styles are high task/high relationship, high task/low relationship, low task/high relationship, and low task/low relationship. She found that when combined with a job satisfaction scale, most faculty members preferred a president with the high relationship/low task style. Today's scholars recognize the influence of high relationships with employees and students as being critical to the presidency and other leadership roles. Leaders appeal to the followers' values and emotions to harness their energy and resources to transform institutions (Yukl, 2002).

Family Settings and Responsibilities

According to a survey conducted by the American Council on Education, the overwhelming majority of male presidents are married, compared with only about one half of all female presidents (Basinger, 2001). Approximately half of the male presidents' spouses have their own careers, whereas three quarters of the spouses of female presidents have their own careers. Basinger noted that more women presidents are single, trying to take care of all the obligations that two people do, which adds to the stress of the position.

During our interview process, the participants described their family settings and commitments. Overall, the importance of family structures and relationships were consistent. Of the four participants in this study, three are currently married, with one participant recently divorced. All participants have grown children with grandchildren in their lives, and one participant serves as the primary care giver for her mother. One participant admitted feeling “someone is always getting shortchanged.” This person stated he did not feel successful at balancing all of these areas many times.

Self-Oriented Settings

Interview questions for this domain centered on the “grand tour” question of how these presidents balance their personal life commitments with their professional commitments. Several participants discussed the need to stay in shape both physically and mentally by regularly exercising and watching their diets. These same presidents start their days early before the office staff arrives. Arriving early allows them to carve out time to take care of themselves as well as sorting email messages and establishing priorities.

Participants outlined other areas for self-oriented commitments. These commitments included (a) the need to have hobbies and activities outside of the university, for example, playing golf; (b) developing relationships outside of the institution; (c) maintaining a faith life; and (d) being creative in scheduling ways to spend time with the significant others in their lives, for example, traveling together to conferences, or going to campus events together. One participant summarized this self-oriented theme when stating, “Remember, the college will go on if your mission is to be the best president, spouse, and parent possible.” We feel this statement reflects many of the items discussed during these interviews.

The findings of this study were consistent with the Basinger (2001) study. One president in this study expressed the struggle for balance in finding time to relax in privacy. One president described the challenge of “always needing to be concerned with my dress attire even when I am working in the yard.” This president learned the importance of carving out personal time and turning down invitations to extra community events. According to Swensen (2002), integrating work and family life and maintaining a sense of balance challenge many professionals. He insisted that many people live “marginless” lives. He defined “margins” as the spaces that once existed among our professional and personal commitments and our limits. To assist the professional, Swensen suggested completing a self-assessment in order to develop strategies for balancing one’s professional and personal life. The self-assessment includes exploring the status of one’s emotional, physical, time, and financial margins.

Strategies for Balancing Personal and Professional Lives

Clearly, there is a need to balance personal and professional commitments. The concept of finding balance among professional, family, and self-oriented settings is important for the health and satisfaction of individuals (Schein, 1992; Galinsky et al., 2001). The strategies presented below are based on Schein's (1984, 1992) third assumption, which states that priorities and commitments may exist in some integrated and balanced lifestyle that may be very rewarding. The following strategies and suggestions, outlined by the presidents interviewed in this study, are beneficial to any higher educational professionals. These suggestions contribute to influencing the cultural structures in the work environment that can support and allow for more balance in leadership roles in higher education:

1. Periodically discuss the following with your spouse, family, and/or significant others: (a) your priorities; (b) your specific strategies for restoring the emotional, physical, time, and financial margins in your life; and (c) continuously evaluate your priorities and check those against your schedule and commitments. (Henion, n.d.)
2. Develop a network of other professionals to which you can be honest, seek advice, and be able to discuss issues related to the position. These colleagues can provide inspiration and direction.
3. Make a commitment to get away from it all. Leave the office behind—when you are with your family, give them your undivided attention. Take one long weekend per month. Allow time for self-oriented activities when traveling.
4. As a human, be realistic as to what you can accomplish in each day. Take the time to reflect on the important components of your life. Ask yourself what is important and critical in each domain of your life. Do not be afraid to delegate tasks to others.
5. Find ways to relax. Whatever provides release from the stress of the job is relaxation. These may involve intense activity and/or lengthened days.
6. Take breaks throughout the day. Getting up and walking around your campus and taking small breaks allows for self-reflection.
7. Develop an understanding with your spouse or partner and significant family members about the role your career will play in your life and their lives.
8. Develop friendships with people outside your field. These relationships are important in helping you keep perspective.
9. Use one calendar for all aspects of your life. This allows you to keep track of personal and professional obligations so that you do not over schedule yourself.

10. Establish routines, rituals, and traditions to help provide a sense of meaning and, moreover, control. These practices also provide reasons for connecting and celebrating with significant others in our lives.
11. Find ways to protect yourself and your family from work-related intrusions. Set limits on work-related phone calls and email messages at home. Learn to say “no.”
12. Get organized. The more goals you have and the more roles you play, the more organized you must be.

Summary

Presidents of colleges and universities as well as other professionals often face the dilemma of balancing their personal and professional lives. Can men and women serving as presidents of colleges and universities find a balance between their personal and professional lives? This study presents a response based on viewing the professional structures of the presidency of colleges and universities as requiring distinctions of priorities between the demands of the profession and other obligations in their lives. The presidents interviewed in this study are aware of the challenges and competing forces of work, family, and personal demands. The presidents' contributions to the study come from their occurrences and reflections of real behavior as they bring balance to their lives. The results of the study offer guidance for those struggling to juggle competing priorities.

For student affairs professionals, the utility of understanding and distinguishing the three settings (the professional setting, the family setting, and the self-oriented setting) within the conceptual framework of the study is requisite. The strategies and suggestions offered by the presidents in the study, organized around the three settings, present insights that can have a positive influence on promoting balance. Achieving balance in one's personal and professional life is a key goal for all.

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