



The 5 key aspects of a successful college president today

By *Alcino Donadel* September 17, 2024

The verdict is in: There is no one-size-fits-all formula to build the perfect college president, according to a new analysis by [Academic Search](#). But among 700 leaders surveyed, trustworthiness, data acumen and a strong supporting cast are key to tackling higher education's latest headwinds.

"What it takes to be an effective college president evolves in concert with the context, meaning presidential competencies are not a fixed checklist but rather a constellation of skills whose salience rises and falls," the report read.

As colleges and universities face unprecedented political polarization, demographic changes and financial constraints, report researchers Jorge Burmicky of Howard University and Kevin McClure of the University of North Carolina Wilmington detailed five concepts that make aspiring and current presidents effective leaders.

Academic Search, along with help from the American Academic Leadership Institute, American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the Council of Independent Colleges, compiled the report's survey and focus group analyses from spring 2023 to January 2024.

No "checklist" for leadership competencies

What a president needs to succeed is highly individualized based on their previous experience, professional background and cabinet's strengths, the report contends. As a result, university leaders must demonstrate "self-awareness" to identify the help they need and a certain "willingness" to develop their skills. However, the kinds of competencies that presidents prioritize can vary by race and gender.

"This research revealed that presidents' identities—with an emphasis on race and gender—are essential to consider when drawing conclusions about which presidential competencies are most important," read the report.

President's corner: [Why Hilary Link anchors herself in history for perspective, poise and innovation](#)

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Of the over 700 presidents surveyed, 53% were men, 34% were women and 13% did not report their gender. Sixty-eight percent were white, 9.5% were Black or African American, 4% were Hispanic, 2% were Asian American and 14% did not report their race/ethnicity.

Despite their differences, here are the No. 1 competencies presidents found the most essential depending on category.

- **Leadership qualities:** Behave in a way that is trustworthy, consistent and accountable (96%)
- **Management skills:** build a collaborative cabinet dedicated to institutional goals (85%)
- **Knowledge areas to be effective:** The institution, culture and students (90%)

Trust is the bedrock of public perception

Gaining trust lays the foundation for a president to be recognized for all their other competencies. If they fail to confidently communicate comprehensive knowledge of their institution and its culture, things fall apart.

For instance, a perceived lack of transparency and responsibility in the failed hiring of a faculty member at Texas A&M University led to its president's [swift resignation](#).

“When presidents are no longer perceived as trustworthy, their ability to lead crumbles,” the report read. “When presidents are no longer perceived as communicative enough their constituents become frustrated.”

One way presidents can build stakeholder trust is by building a “reliable channel” for them to voice their concerns, especially for faculty, the report suggested.

Emotional intelligence is key for a successful college president

Successful college presidents must balance their technical prowess with their ability to read a room. That includes giving credit to others, checking their egos and being willing to admit mistakes. Humility, a common trait presidents listed as important in open-ended comments, should be demonstrated toward cabinet members as well.

For example, building resilience, one of the seven core competencies researchers identified

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Cabinets can be your biggest asset—or your biggest challenge

It may take “years to build a trustful cabinet,” according to one president. However, leaders should act swiftly and decisively to replace members, when necessary, to avoid “toxic environments and public mistrust,” the report contends.

“In our focus groups, we noticed a sense of regret by presidents who waited too long to replace key cabinet members that were not a good fit for their presidencies.”

Successful college presidents can compensate for their own skills gaps by hiring cabinet members who excel in those areas.

Data acumen is more than just numbers

Presidents don't have to be a “numbers person” to make the most of their institutional data. In fact, their most important asset is being able to communicate its value to stakeholders. In the age of “data-driven decision-making,” presidents can use data to enhance their storytelling skills when speaking with stakeholders on a specific issue.



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Data-driven, unbiased decision making is crucial to forming a sustainable master plan. Whether you're initiating a new master plan or updating an existing one, now is the time to put facilities data at the forefront of this major strategic effort. An objective analysis of facilities performance will be critical to your plan's success, the bedrock of an intelligent long-term strategy. It gets the planning process off to a strong start. Here are three ways **higher ed** leaders benefit from leading their master planning efforts with comprehensive facilities data.

1. Improvement of Ownership Capabilities

A campus facilities portfolio is complex to manage. Older buildings add to the character and the legacy of the institution, and pose significant risks. New buildings are critical for attracting new students and remaining relevant in a competent marketplace, but require significant time and financial investments. Facilities data helps institutional leaders act as more thoughtful facilities owners. It provides the foundation for more informed decision-making that acknowledges current and ongoing campus needs and expenses. By getting a clear picture of where your institution is today, you can channel the innovation and ingenuity typical of the planning process to create the most powerful and financially-responsible impact upon your campus.

2. Give Accurate Direction to the Master Planners

Data helps guide institutions to better manage their master planners. Master planning must focus equally on addressing issues inside existing buildings and adding new facilities to be successful. Facilities data helps support this mindset as an intelligent and productive starting place.

A **facilities condition assessment** provides concrete evidence that certain buildings must be accounted for in the planning process to ensure the institution continues to meet campus needs. **Facilities performance benchmarking** and analytical insights can provide a contextual understanding of how specific investment decisions align with broader market trends. This data will impact a campus' competitive edge in an increasingly volatile environment.



plan. Additionally, this review can open up the conversation on complex issues so the planning team can focus on resolving problems, rather than finding them. Objective facilities data, presented in a way that's easy for anyone to understand, provides a basis for these fruitful conversations.

[Download this free guide to find out more about why facilities data should be the cornerstone of your campus master plan.](#)

Leading With Facilities Data

Planning firms across the country create master plans that are often exciting, dynamic and inspirational, and that attend to the stated needs of the institution. However, a planning process lacking facilities data that demonstrates how campus properties support the institution's mission may result in a campus that ages poorly and is unable to carry the institution into the future. The typical master planning process is, unfortunately, susceptible to overlooking existing needs. This oversight is not willful, but the result of using underdeveloped or outdated facilities data and the inherent vulnerability in the transfer of knowledge and insights. Existing financial plans only compound the problem, as they may not provide the capacity to support the campus over time, and risk growing out of sync with the realities of the higher education landscape.

This is why it is imperative for campus leaders to begin the master planning process with current facilities data and to consistently refer to that data for the duration of the process. A commitment to leading with data results in intelligent campus stewardship, the optimization of existing assets and balanced action toward institutional goals. These conditions lead to happy faculty, happy donors and happy students.

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