

Profiling Community College Presidents

The facts, some surprises and going forward

HIGHER EDUCATION DOES ITSELF A DISSERVICE

“Historically, Community College cultures have not supported comprehensive executive and leadership development . . . even though they have spent a great deal of time discussing it.”

**Dr. Rufus Gasper, Chancellor,
Maricopa Community Colleges**

A 2011 survey by The Campus Computing Project found enrollment gains of 69 percent at the colleges surveyed and concurrently continuing budget reductions reported by 58 percent of the presidents interviewed.¹ In some instances nationally, state government funding will be non-existent in the next five years.

Even as slashed and strained state and local budgets threaten the future of this country’s community colleges and intensify the challenges to effective leadership, a somber, more fundamental vulnerability lurks below the surface of today’s heated budget protests and fights.

We are currently in the midst of a wave of retirement eligibilities for the majority of community presidents, creating a leadership vacuum within the very institutions educating the backbone of the U.S. workforce and at a time when budget constraints are mounting. Even more surprising is that most community colleges have neither formalized succession plans or leadership development programs designed to cultivate the particular skills needed to lead this education juggernaut that is the community college.

“The aging of (college) presidents is leading to unprecedented turnover in the not-too-distant future,” wrote Dr. Rita Bornstein in 2010, in *Succession Planning for the Higher Education Presidency*. “The lack of systemic approaches to identifying and developing internal talent has left limited numbers of successors in the pipeline.”

The American Association of Community Colleges acknowledged this leadership conundrum as far back as 2001.³ And a 2006 article by Ben Leubsdorf in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, acknowledged that “institutions are finding that the usual recruitment methods are not enough.”²

Recently the first-ever White House Summit on Community Colleges was held to discuss the fact that the U.S. has spent the last decade declining from first to ninth in the world in the percentage of young people holding college degrees. The trend was deemed unacceptable, and President Obama stated “community colleges are an essential part of our recovery in the present and our prosperity in the future.” The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation sees the community college crisis as important enough to contribute \$34.8 million to the Completion by Design grant program.⁴

Nonetheless, once funded and in pursuit of a clear goal, the difficulty in identifying excellent leadership talent still exists. Until now, no practical research has been completed to systematically identify and quantify performance factors linked to peak on-the-job performance for a community college president.

*“Community colleges
are an essential part of our
recovery in the present and
our prosperity in the future”*

President Obama

JOB BENCHMARK RESEARCH

FOR THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT POSITION

The lack of practical research was the basis for a study finalized recently by Cizek Associates, in conjunction with HRGroup. The goal: Benchmark the position of a community college President and define the specific **behaviors, motivators** and **personal skills** required for achieving success in the position. Once a Benchmark is established, institutions are better able to attract and identify candidates for a community college president position who can successfully lead the college during these critical times and into the future.

“Job Benchmarks provide insights into position requirements that enable a direct comparison of individual characteristics to the ideal position profile,” according to Marti Cizek, President, Cizek Associates. “Once the factors essential to success in the position are understood, a process to identify and develop individuals based on *measurable* performance standards will enhance the likelihood of effective selection of future college presidents and assist in development and retention of valued incumbents.”

The data was gathered from an analysis of the ten college president positions at the Maricopa County Community College District (Maricopa Community Colleges), Arizona. The college president Benchmark was developed by subject matter experts (individuals who know the job well) selected by the ten Maricopa Community Colleges presidents who responded to a questionnaire that addressed 37 performance factors of critical importance to the position.

The community college president position Benchmark was established after completing the initial survey and in-depth follow-up interviews. The Benchmark provides quantifiable data regarding the **behaviors, motivators** and **personal skills** required in order to achieve success in the position.

“The Maricopa Community Colleges have embraced the use of extensive position and employee assessments that have practical, measurable outcomes, combined with in-depth talent management programs.

Because no president position Benchmark exists currently in the world of community colleges, we agreed to participate in the study. This research, while somewhat unique to Maricopa, has value to all of us, not only for how we can develop our talented employees who aspire to be presidents, but also the potential benefit it provides in recruitment and selection.”

*Dr. Rufus Glasper, Chancellor,
Maricopa Community Colleges⁵*

SUCCESSFUL BEHAVIORS

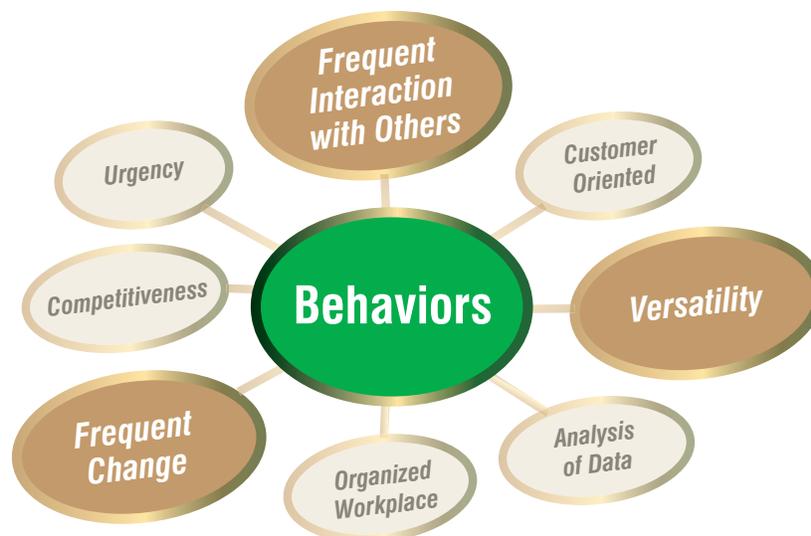
OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT POSITION

It is generally accepted within the realm of hiring community college presidents (in fact, all hiring processes) that **behaviors** comprise the largest percentage of hiring decisions. The reasons are predictable – **behaviors** are what we all see. **Behaviors** display how presidents get the job done and observable actions are the easiest to quantify and measure.

Frequent Interaction With Others, **Versatility** and **Frequent Change** are the three **behaviors** identified as most critical to the success of the community college president position. As the ambassador and chief advocate for the college, **Frequent Interaction With Others** is essential. We expect the president to effectively interact with a wide range of constituent and stakeholder groups, both internal and external to the operation of the college. Presidents lead the institutions internally and are also the face of the colleges to the communities they serve. After all, they are **community** colleges, and that connection to business, industry and demographic populations and the ability to establish and maintain effective relationships, including public/private funding partnerships, is critical to college success. In addition, the political environment of community colleges is demanding that presidents and their institutions interact more effectively with their boards and state government, but in what capacity? For example, how do state policies (i.e. immigration laws) influence a college's ability to recruit top candidates nationally and what is the community college president's appropriate sphere of influence in state policy-making? Regarding governing boards, how do presidents effectively navigate board idiosyncrasies and their frequent lack of position experience and training? Past strategies may no longer be effective. **Versatility** and **Frequent Change** identify the position's ability to effectively multi-task, deal with routine distraction without incident, stress or seeking isolation, and yet effectively work toward and achieve goals and objectives.

Less important behaviors are **Analysis of Data** and an **Organized Workplace**. Apparently it is not critical the president be detail-oriented or observably organized. As the chief executive officer, the president position is heavily supported and the senior executive leadership team that reports to the president provides accountability in these areas.

Unexpectedly, **Customer Oriented** ranked fifth out of eight measured behaviors. Why are presidents not expected to exhibit customer oriented behaviors? With the current trend in community colleges on completion and student success, we need to ask if the culture of community college presidents is displaying the best range of behaviors.



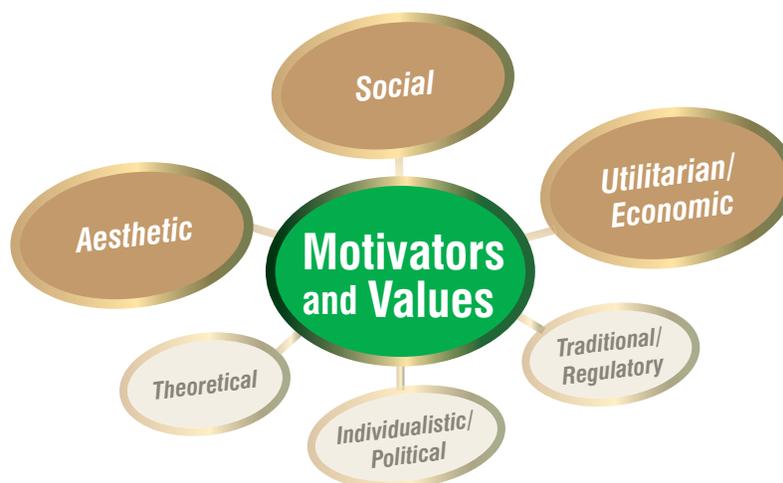
SUCCESSFUL MOTIVATORS AND VALUES

OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT POSITION

Utilitarian/Economic as a motivating value speaks to the return on investment (ROI) the position requires to be successful as it relates to capital, time and human resource (energy) expenditure. Decisions made through the expenditure of capital, time and energy are based upon anticipated practical outcomes and accomplishments. This ROI is also identified through diminished budgets that continue to face reductions, which necessitates position activities focused on the development of alternative revenue streams and fundraising. While the **Utilitarian/Economic** motivator for the community college president position is understandable, we wonder how many incumbent and aspiring presidents have this as a highly ranked value.

Social as a motivating value for the community college president position is consistent with what we know about higher education. The social value involves contributing to the progress and wellbeing of society, selflessness, self-sacrifice and a genuine compassion for others. There is an altruistic component to the world of education. Education makes society a better place, not only because knowledge for its own sake is of value but also because an educated population offers great advantage to the overall enrichment of our culture. The community college president position wants and is expected to give back to society and be of service to others. The importance of **Social** as a motivating value makes perfect sense.

Aesthetic showing up as a motivating value was a surprise. It was also a surprise to the participants and much discussion revolved around this data point in our meetings. Remember that motivators are not visible, but play an important role in driving visible behaviors. So how does a high ranking **Aesthetic** influence a successful community college president position? Consider that the world of the community college is historically a rather safe and secure environment where ideas flow, people are valued for putting forth those ideas and survival in a competitive and capital resource sense has not been top of mind. As a not-for-profit endeavor, higher education has not been focused on providing shareholders quarterly profits, but in educating students and supporting their ultimate success. In an environment in which survival is NOT a core value, the participants are free to focus on more self-actualizing activities, which often include balance and harmony, minimizing conflict and seeking a win-win for all parties, creative self-expression, sensitivity and valuing nature. Look at academic freedom in the classroom – this is an **Aesthetic** value. Recall the focus on the sharing of ideas, making sure all input is gathered and heard with significant discussion before decisions are made – also an **Aesthetic** value. To define **Aesthetic** in political terms, higher education is historically populated by open-minded, free thinkers.



SUCCESSFUL ATTRIBUTES/PERSONAL SKILLS

OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT POSITION

Personal Accountability, Diplomacy and Tact, Results Orientation, Decision Making, Leading Others, Interpersonal Skills, Self-management and *Teamwork* are the *attributes/personal skills* currently valued most in the president position. It is clear the community college president position requires several competencies we would expect to see in a chief executive officer. Of the range of *personal skills* evaluated, most were scored at 8 or higher (on a scale of 1-10), which tells us the position requires proficiency in a wide range of talent areas.

An unexpected and rather surprising finding is while the president position *Leads Others*, it doesn't *Develop Others* and isn't particularly focused on having *Accountability for Others*. This data indicates a characteristic of higher education in general. Leadership development, executive development, succession planning and talent development are activities the higher education culture historically does not support. Long accepted wisdom is that the chief rite of passage to become a community college president is the attainment of a doctorate. If successful presidents have leadership skills, they have largely been gained through self-development, chance and osmosis, or because another community college leader personally, without structure, process or support in place, identified high potential employees and mentored them. By contrast, executive development in the private sector is ingrained in the strategic plan of the entity, a strategic plan that is an operational document as compared to one activated and updated for purposes of accreditation. Higher education does itself a disservice by continuing to research and discuss executive development and leadership training and not operationalizing it, making it part of the culture of the college. It is not our intention to over-generalize and state higher education has no commitment to executive development; however, it is our observation that no consistent strategic effort is in place. This presents a tremendous opportunity for community colleges.

Customer Focus ranked near the bottom of *personal skills* measured. Should we be concerned that the *personal skills* currently sought in community college presidents do not list *Customer Focus* as one of the top eight? Is higher education hanging onto the status quo? Why is the community college president position structured in a way that values other attributes much more? Should this change? Is higher education really about the students or is it about something else?



APPLICATION

While the stressors on community college education will persist into the foreseeable future, having an accurate starting point for identifying the key characteristics of an effective and successful community college president will be an aid in any high level job search, whether it is internal or external. The anticipated vacancies for community college president positions will necessitate that college boards and search committees consider how those openings will be filled. They will have to explore a wide range of alternatives including where the candidates come from:

- *Will they come from internal succession planning?*
- *Will they be doing the same job for another community college?*
- *Will they be moving up from a lower level position with another community college?*
- *Will they come from organizations other than community colleges?*

The research methodologies and insights in this study have application in any of the above circumstances because they provide a quantifiable process that captures what is required for superior performance in a position as well as the means to compare and contrast the abilities of any incumbent or candidate. As a result, the methodologies can be applied to:

- *Talent selection*
- *Performance management*
- *Incumbent evaluation*
- *Succession planning*
- *Executive coaching/development*
- *Onboarding*

This particular Benchmark provides the community college community with an array of quantifiable and identifiable characteristics of the community college president position. Does it accurately describe the ideal characteristics of YOUR president position? Yes and no. There are probably more similarities than differences, but each college is unique. You may want to Benchmark your own president position.

The other discussion worth having is an acknowledgment that this Benchmark defines where the position is today. Is this where the position needs to be in the future? Will the issues facing community colleges nationally eventually require that they redefine the successful characteristics of the president position? Probably. But for today, we have an accurate starting point.



The complete research report contains tables that provide examples comparing sample candidates in a selection process and sample incumbents in a coaching process to the Benchmark. The research also offers questions for the top characteristic in each of the three assessment categories — ***behaviors, motivators and personal skills***. In looking at other important characteristics identified in the research, questions can be developed for purposes of interviews, evaluations and development.

For further information or to obtain a copy of the full report contact:

Cizek Associates, Inc. at 602-553-1066 or phx@cizekassociates.com

HRGroup, LLC at 480-753-6188 or info@hrgrouponline.com

1 - <https://www.campuscomputing.net/item/community-colleges-and-economy-2011>

2 - <https://chronicle.com/article/Boomers-Retirement-May/5562>

3 - [https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=diss&sei-redir=1#search="](https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=diss&sei-redir=1#search=)community+college+succession+planning

4 - *The Maricopa Community Colleges fully support the concept of leadership development within institutions of higher education and generously enabled us to conduct the Benchmarking, however the observations made and conclusions drawn do not necessarily reflect their views and are those of the papers' authors.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CIZEK ASSOCIATES, INC. (CAI)

Cizek Associates, Inc. is a national retained executive search and assessment firm and has conducted senior level executive searches for client companies in a range of industries in both the private and public sector since 1992. Within the context of searches and stand alone, CAI utilizes assessments for purposes of executive development, management audit and coaching. The firm has a higher education specialty practice that is limited to senior level executive administrators.

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HRGroup is the workforce catalyst. There is a direct relationship between how organizations manage their workforce and ultimate organizational success. Operating since 1996, HRGroup's extensive use of a broad range of nationally and internationally recognized assessments provides the platform upon which it works with institutions to improve performance and fiscal accountability through talent selection and the development of superior individual and workforce performance.

Maricopa County Community College District

Maricopa Community Colleges, known for innovation and best practices nationally, is comprised of ten individually accredited community colleges and two skills centers and is one of the largest providers of higher education in the United States specializing in university transfer, continuing education, and career and job training programs.

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