

Why You Should Still Want to Be a College President

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It's been painful to watch so many college presidents struggle in recent years. As a former university president and system chancellor, I could definitely relate as they negotiated uncertain terrain while facing public scrutiny and open critique at every step.

I don't mean to imply that none of the criticism has been deserved. Like any place where human beings are involved, there have been some individual missteps and also sector-level shifts that require change. But I hate to see the damage that's been done to the office of the presidency and to the psyches of today's presidents, the vast majority of whom are capable, caring individuals doing their level best under strained circumstances. Due to the sheer scope of challenges inherent in the role, it is understandable to see so many people now wondering who would want "to be a college president."

Admiral William H. McRaven, former chancellor of the University of Texas system, once called the college presidency the "toughest job in the nation." He reiterated that observation last summer, and this moment in higher ed provides ample evidence of wholly new problems on top of persistent ones: pandemic health and mental-health issues, unresolved social injustices, widespread political backlash against DEI policies and programs, volatile student protests rooted in events far beyond campus walls, historic enrollment pressures, persistent outcries over student debt, and growing skepticism about the value of college.

As a college leader, I had my share of trials and challenges — some of which played out on the pages of this very publication. There is simply no way to paper over the difficulty and occasional dreadfulness of the job. And, as I've written, being a president is an isolating job that takes a heavy personal toll. So when headlines read, "You Could Not Pay Me Enough to Be a College President," "Wanted: New College Presidents. Mission: Impossible," or "The Impossible College Presidency," I get it.

Are we, then, approaching a time when no one wants the job? Hardly.

As my colleagues and I in the executive-recruiting business can attest, the list of qualified candidates for leadership openings is still robust. In fact, the current crises in higher education are expanding the pathways to the presidency for female and minority candidates as well as those with formerly unconventional professional backgrounds inside academe (enrollment management, finance, development) and outside the sector. And as our aperture widens, we find: People still want to be presidents.

Appreciate the hidden pleasures of the job. Being a college president still has plenty of obvious benefits going for it: pay, perks (e.g., a home, plenty of free meals, severance), prestige, and power. Presidents and chancellors meet fascinating people, attend important events.

But in addition to the pleasures that all career academics experience — seeing young people grow and launch their dreams, for instance — there are particular thrills that I think only the president feels. Because those joys are so rarely seen, or spoken of, it's important to share a few of them at a time when potential presidents might be harboring a few doubts about their calling.

One of the best has to be graduation day — always the most emotional day of the year. As president of a small, struggling Catholic institution, I recall looking out from the perch of my podium at a parade of graduates whom I knew had scraped and persevered to get to this day, many of them the first in their families to do so. They were surrounded by throngs of family and friends, all expressing and feeling sheer joy and gratitude. I've been at many commencements as a parent, a professor, and a department chair, but the president's reward on that day is singularly special. It amazed me to receive exuberant hugs, fist bumps, and high fives from hundreds of graduates and their families who believed that I had made a difference for them. It was a day-long rush of adrenaline. There is yet reverence for this office, and to experience it was humbling and, at times, electrifying.

The particularly hard-won battles also have their satisfactions. Securing an historic tuition offset for an entire system of state institutions was a moment I'll never forget. To see months of contentious negotiations result in winning a reprieve for thousands of struggling students filled me with pride — not for myself, but for the dozens of people required to get this effort across the finish line. I was privileged to witness rare alignment transcend partisan animosity, regional loyalties, and socioeconomic and cultural division: Ultimately, all were transcended for the good of our students.

Sometimes being in the trenches produces rewards few get to witness. The public battle is reported widely; the private satisfaction is not, and somewhere in the privacy of the moment, there is magic.

So I am here to say that it's great to be a college president and always will be. The trick becomes

managing the inevitable crises, the litany of onerous tasks, and the soul-taxing moments in order to secure wins and experience the highest of career highs. As the job becomes more difficult, it is incumbent upon those of us privileged to have had these moments to share the other side of the story.

Understand how to find strength in crises. At exactly the moment when we need colleges to perform at their highest potential, leadership is too often distracted from its core responsibilities. To combat what feels to many presidents as the relentlessness of the crisis du jour, I offer the following suggestions:

- *First and foremost, set aside time once a week to do work that contributes meaningfully to your institution's mission.* Accomplishing tasks — no matter how minor — that you know will lead to positive student outcomes, more stable budgets, or happier faculty members is critical for your own sense of purpose and satisfaction. It keeps you resilient.
- *Be relentless and painstaking in choosing your battles.* Really question whether you must respond to each and every angry constituent or request for input. In this era of ever-available professionals and the constant hum of the 24/7 news cycle, pause to ask whether your response is actually necessary, and whether your involvement will advance your institutional goals. Will providing comments to a local reporter calm a controversy, inflame it further, or have no effect whatsoever? In many cases, it's best just to sit it out.
- *Project yourself into the future.* Every presidency has rough patches. But will you remember the current problem or criticism a year from now? Five years from now? Take the long view. You are here for outcomes that last well beyond your tenure in the actual job.
- *Befriend your board chair.* When everything seems challenging to you, your relationship to the board, and the chair in particular, is vital. Communicate, socialize, and strategize with the chair to ensure

alignment of purpose and messaging. If anyone on the campus can understand the challenges of your job, it is the board chair. Create a trusting bond.

- *Reassure your leadership team and staff. They see you getting beat up — whether it's in the local newspaper or in Congress.* While they may not express it, it affects them deeply and can dampen their spirits and weigh on their job performance. Be realistic but also find ways to buoy their spirits. Every so often (and even when you're not sure) let them know, "I'm fine. I've got this."
- *Take care of yourself and your family and friends.* Recognize that your inner circle is in this with you, and it takes a toll on them, too. No matter the crisis, spend time away from work for your own mental wellness and for theirs.

Seek out the joy in the work. Becoming a president is not about mere survival. Anyone assuming a leadership post — and all the pressure and long hours that go along with it — deserves to feel the joys of the job as often as possible. To that end:

- *Remember your why.* When it all gets exhausting, or there are no good solutions to your current challenge, sit down and write out why you entered higher-education service in the first place. What brought you here? What is your purpose in this role? Sometimes these reminders can re-inspire and refocus your efforts.
- *Soak in the good stuff.* As presidents, we can be a pretty cerebral lot. Allow yourself to feel the joy in the role — to really soak it in. Pause at the podium to see those faces covered in tears of happiness at commencement. Check in to see the progress on the construction of that new rec center. Buy some pizza for a student study group. Yes, you have a million things to do, but not in this moment. Don't let your to-do list rob you of the pleasures of each given day.

- *Get out of your office.* The world can seem against you if you stay behind your desk. Walk the halls. Walk the whole campus. Do it without a destination in mind. Listen to what you hear, watch for signs of kindness. Maybe sit in on a class. Slink into the back and learn something new outside of your discipline. And then be sure to email a thanks to the professor.
- *Spend time with students.* As challenging as this moment of activism may be for many academic leaders, students always brought me joy and reset my perspective. As a chancellor, my staff knew that if I got discouraged, it was time to get me onto the campus to commune with students. Sometimes that can be to gather feedback — positive or negative — but don't let that be your only interaction. Just hang out with them. Have conversations. Have fun. Have lunch in a campus cafeteria. Go to a game and sit in the student section.

For those for whom the relentless risks, criticisms, and frustrations have deprived you of the joys of a presidency, I say: I understand. Take care and heal. And for those who aspire to the presidency as the pinnacle of their careers, I say: Good for you. Approach the opportunity soberly yet with the expectation of great rewards.

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