

Why Enrollment Leaders Are Poised for the Presidency

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Enrollment leaders are increasingly viewed as presidential material. Boards and presidential search committees we've spoken with indicate they are more willing to consider – and hire – “non-traditional candidates,” including leaders with enrollment backgrounds.

To better understand this career trajectory and the value that enrollment managers can bring to the presidency, we spoke with three leaders who transitioned from successful careers in enrollment to presidencies: [Stefanie Niles](#) of Cottey College, [Roger Thompson](#) of St. Mary's College of California, and [Tomikia LeGrande](#) of Prairie View A&M University. While enrollment leadership may never become the primary pathway for the college presidency, it is encouraging to see the value increasingly placed on enrollment leadership.

Niles, Thompson, and LeGrande told us that the journey is not for the faint of heart. “You have to go all in if you want to do this,” says Thompson, president at St. Mary's since 2024 and, among other things, former vice president for student services and enrollment management at the University of Oregon. “You have to have thick skin” to face doubters who prefer their presidents to come from primarily academic backgrounds.

Niles, who before she became president of Cottey served as the vice president for enrollment and communications at Ohio Wesleyan University, was passed over in her first few bids as a presidential candidate at other institutions. “When final decisions were made, selection committees most often defaulted to more traditional candidates,” she says. And she admits she wasn't ready at first. She looked for new and different experiences, including serving as president of the board of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). This role strengthened her confidence and credibility by giving her experience leading a national organization that addresses complex issues across higher education – experience well aligned with the demands of a presidency.

Candidates must convince institutions they're ready, says LeGrande, Prairie View A&M's president and former vice president for strategy, enrollment and student success at Virginia Commonwealth University. “How you own your narrative is powerful,” she states. “You have to be clear about your brand, contributions, and evidence long before you apply.”

Read on advice from Thompson, Niles and LeGrande below.

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Why Now?

Why are enrollment leaders now considered viable presidential candidates? Clearly, they possess experiences and skills that are relevant and vital to leading higher education institutions during these turbulent times. Among the relevant factors:

- **Healthy enrollment is critical to institutional sustainability.** Low enrollment presents the [greatest risk](#) to institutions' futures, meaning enrollment managers bring knowledge sets that are vital to an institution's very existence.
- **Battle-tested and resilient leaders are needed to navigate today's complex and volatile environment.** Next to the presidency, the chief enrollment officer is, according to NACAC CEO Angel Pérez, the ["hottest seat"](#) on campus. Enrollment leaders understand how to manage pressure and stay positive in the face of [outsized expectations](#).
- **The ability to harness data is critical for institutional sustainability.** With greater calls for accountability and challenges to higher education funding, strategic visioning and financial management require strong data acumen. Enrollment is all about data and using analysis to advance insight into the enterprise. Chief enrollment officers are results-driven, which is a critical mindset for a president today when "success" must be quantified.
- **An understanding of the power of relationships and influence to move institutions.** In order to achieve an institution's enrollment objectives, enrollment leaders engage with every key function on campus, including:
 - Academic leaders whose programs rely on healthy student enrollments to survive;
 - Advancement teams about fundraising for scholarship support;
 - Finance and budgeting, as both functions are inextricably tied to enrollment;
 - Marketing and communications, partnering to tie messaging to the market;
 - Student Affairs teams to support the student experience and retention and graduation goals.
- **Enrollment leaders have unique insight into:**
 - **Funding and financial sustainability.** In most institutions, a large part of the budget comes from tuition, meaning chief enrollment officers are central to stability and sustainability.
 - **Where student interests and programs are headed.** As a matter of course, enrollment leaders look five or 10 years ahead to determine what future applicants and enrollees will desire. They tend to be nimble and responsive because the needs and expectations of the student population change quickly.
 - **Technology innovation.** Enrollment leaders are adopting artificial intelligence to improve efficiency and scale, even as AI threatens to disrupt long-standing models of higher education and redefine student interest and enrollment behavior.

Stefanie Niles: A Growth Mindset

Niles describes her pathway to the Cottey College presidency as a gradual evolution – one shaped by mentorship, self reflection and an expanding desire to influence the full student experience. A formative moment was when a doctoral program professor, University of Pennsylvania’s Robert Zemsky, told her entire cohort, “Whether you admit it or not, you are all here because you’re interested in being a college president.”

It prompted her to imagine it and think differently about her trajectory. She threw her hat in the ring for presidential positions. “It quickly became evident that a career as a chief enrollment officer is not considered a traditional pathway to the presidency,” she recalls. “There were several occasions when I advanced to the semifinal round of a search, only for the search consultant to come back and say, ‘Well, there were sitting presidents in the pool.’ Or, ‘The committee has decided on a set of finalists with a more traditional background.’”

After completing her NACAC board presidency, she applied for the top job at Cottey in 2022. She refined how she articulated the transferability of her skills – strategic planning, public communication, writing, stakeholder engagement. “As a small, rural-serving, women’s college, enrollment is at the forefront of our challenges,” she says – meaning her experience is “appreciated and seen” by faculty, staff and trustees.

She brings a sense of commitment and professional growth orientation to her leadership team, qualities rooted in her enrollment career. “I had a colleague tell me once, when I was a chief enrollment officer, that I spoke with an urgency,” she recalls. “I have worked to bring that same sense of urgency, inspiration and straightforward communication style into my current role.”

Her advice to others? “Don’t get discouraged,” she says. “Take any constructive criticism to heart and be open to all possibilities.”

Roger Thompson: “I’ll Do That”

Thompson grew up being told “whatever you want to do, you can do,” though that didn’t exactly help make his Major League Baseball dreams become a reality. As an enrollment leader, he was fortunate to work closely with and watch good presidents who positively changed institutions, which inspired him. “I found that so admirable and I wanted to have that kind of impact,” he recalls. He was encouraged by those presidents and mentors to aim higher.

His background in strategic enrollment management (SEM) nonetheless painted him as a non-traditional applicant. “People have an image of what the ideal candidate looks like,” he says. “I’m not sure that person is around.” To counter assumptions, he emphasized the breadth of SEM work – data analysis, strategic planning, budgeting, cross-campus collaboration and constant adaptation. He credits his expanded portfolio at University of Oregon, which encompassed student services and academic partnerships, with helping search committees see his depth and readiness.

As a candidate, he zeroed in on institutions that appreciated his expertise and values. “My faith means a lot to me, so I started to dial into Catholic schools because I thought that’s what I’d really like to do. I could combine my personal life and my professional life.”

When he arrived at St. Mary’s, he sought to ease concerns among faculty, going out of his way to engage and learn from them. He relied on his experience teaching graduate courses and serving on a university’s undergraduate curriculum committee.

For enrollment leaders pursuing presidencies, he advises: Excel in your current role, seek broader responsibilities, engage meaningfully with faculty and gain budget experience. “When a chance comes to expand your scope, take it. If that doesn’t happen, assist in non-enrollment areas so you have a cadre of people who have seen you work in other areas. Be the person saying, ‘I’ll do that.’”

Tomikia LeGrande: Alignment Is Essential

As an undergraduate studying chemistry with an interest in pursuing a career in pharmacy, LeGrande recognized disparities in opportunities for women and underrepresented students in the STEM fields. Later, after attending a meeting where faculty discussed gaps in student preparation in a deficit-oriented manner, LeGrande confirmed her desire to be part of the solution, to influence student success at scale and have “a seat at the leadership table.”

After vice president roles at three institutions, she decided it was time to pursue a presidency. “I became a valued resource to the president where my advice outweighed my title,” she recalls. “I decided to see if I could do the job myself.” She sought out institutions that were oriented toward access and opportunity. An “informative moment” came during her first candidacy, when it quickly became clear her values didn’t align with the institution’s vision. She advises, “If the search committee doesn’t have high aspirations for the institution, take that cue because it tells you a lot.” She found alignment in Prairie View A&M.

Framing her experience to reflect institutional aspirations was another important step. “No one hires a leader to keep things status quo,” she says. She began by clearly positioning the role of enrollment management for an institution. “Sometimes boards don’t know what enrollment management is,” she says. “I talk about how enrollment management is an institutional change strategy.”

When applying to the Prairie View presidency, LeGrande researched the institution, honed in on what made it unique, and crafted a vision, which she articulated in her interview and has now refined over time with campus constituents to become the basis of Prairie View’s strategic plan. She also leveraged her experiences leading the development and implementation of Virginia Commonwealth’s strategic plan to demonstrate her ability to successfully execute a vision.

While believing there is no position that better prepares a person for the presidency than a chief enrollment officer, LeGrande recognizes there are gaps to be filled. She encourages aspiring leaders to do an honest career audit: “Find job descriptions that speak to you. Then, take your CV or resume and compare it to the skills and experiences within the leadership profiles.”

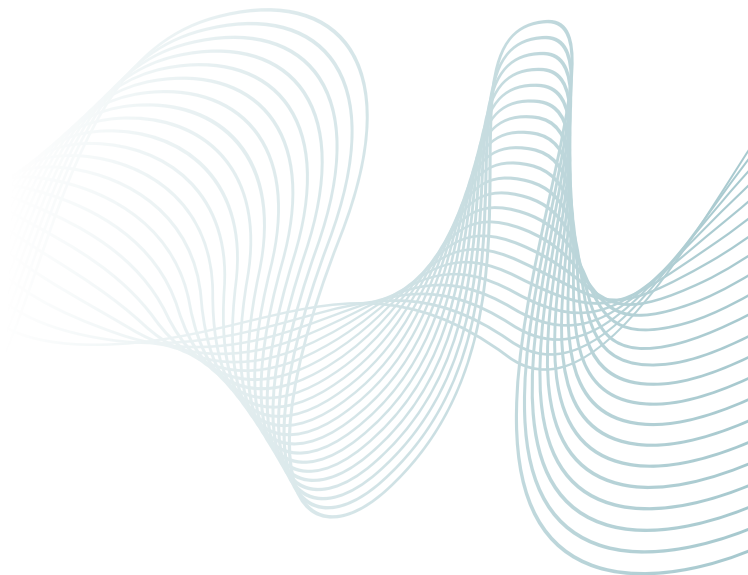
Seeking constructive feedback from search consultants is another way to identify gaps, even if one might not agree with the criticism. “Other folks’ perspectives are the deciding factor in how you are hired,” she observes. “You have to get perspective on how you are viewed.”

New Players for a New Game

Higher education is at an inflection point. The challenges to the value of a college degree, the demographic cliff, and changes to higher education funding threaten how universities have traditionally operated. As LeGrande counsels, “We have to think about how our business model needs to shift.” During this time of disruption, institutions will benefit from casting a wider net and being curious about non-traditional candidates who may help them face the future with fresh eyes.

The skills honed by enrollment leaders—the ability to think institution-wide, to anticipate long-term challenges, to understand an institution’s brand and figure out how to craft a compelling story that substantiates that brand, and to make data-informed decisions—all position them well to lead in this evolving context where increased attention is being paid to metrics and outcomes. Enrollment, Thompson notes, brings clarity and accountability: “There’s a scoreboard with enrollment” that comes in handy in a time when presidential agendas are results-driven.

If enrollment leaders are, indeed, being called to the presidency, they would do well to heed the advice offered here: Envision yourself in the role. Learn and accumulate valuable experiences. Expect skepticism. Sharpen your narrative and articulate a compelling vision for the institution. Focus on institutions that fit your values and aspirations. And, when alignment is established, prepare to step up to the plate and hit it out of the park.



About the Authors

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