

The President and the Chief Academic Officer

By Kofi Lomotey

Having served as both president and as chief academic officer (CAO), I am convinced that the latter is not only the most challenging position on campus, it may also be the most important. The relationship between the president and the CAO is critical, and its dynamics are crucial to an administration's success.

The president must surround herself with people who are highly competent, committed, creative and articulate self-starters. Neglecting to select those with these traits will doom an administration to failure or, at best, mediocrity.

Ultimately, the most critical aspect of the relationship is the unconditional trust that a president must be able to place in a CAO—the CAO, after all, is the second in command.

Absent such individuals, the president must fill these other roles herself, thereby limiting her ability to meet her own basic responsibilities. The selection of the CAO, therefore, is of particular importance.

The chief academic officer has myriad responsibilities on campus and, as a lieutenant, usually has more direct reports than most administrators. The CAO is responsible for hiring, evaluating, providing professional development for and terminating faculty. He must be able to quickly gain the faculty's respect (this is, in part, why CAOs most often come from the faculty ranks and are thus able to exercise "expert power"), as he is the leader of the faculty and the number one communicator of institutional policy. He must not only ensure that policies and directives are carried out, but he must also demonstrate his understanding of the importance of academic freedom and shared governance. Further, the CAO must be able to quickly size-up situations and address conflicts, disagreements,

stumbling blocks and crises. He must be able to communicate effectively with faculty (and others) so that there is, to the extent possible, a shared understanding of strategies, goals, mission and objectives—and a minimum of conflict.

While communication skills are vital, of equal importance is the CAO's responsibility for the curriculum—new courses, new degree programs, program evaluation and more. With oversight responsibilities in this area, this knowledge is critical. When efforts are made to change degree requirements; alter academic policies; add courses; or establish, evaluate, eliminate

or merge degree programs, it is the CAO who must effectively evaluate the merits of the proposed changes and communicate those merits to others—faculty, administrators, students and, sometimes, board members and alumni.

Ultimately, the most critical aspect of the relationship is the unconditional trust that a president must be able to place in a CAO—the CAO, after all, is the second in command. It is the CAO who is in charge of the day-to-day operation of the campus in the president's absence, and the person responsible for the faculty and the curriculum—the heart of the institution.

Again, the CAO holds the most essential role on campus. Her responsibilities are extensive and campus-wide. In selecting a compatible CAO, the president must focus on trust, curriculum knowledge, respect, academic freedom and shared governance. The success of an administration depends on it. **P**

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