The university presidency has become an increasingly complex and stressful job, encompassing responsibilities ranging from strategic planning and relationship-building to budgeting and fundraising. As institutions have struggled with reduced state funding and increased scrutiny over the past decade or so, the tenure of college presidents has become shorter. Whereas university presidents often stayed in their positions for 10 to nearly 20 years in the past, the last decade is seeing many presidential tenures coming to an end after three to five years. Some have come to an abrupt end following financial misconduct, sports scandals or disagreements between presidents and governing boards; others have simply ended due to retirement or for personal reasons.

The American Council on Education’s (ACE) report, “The American College President 2017,” found that college presidents served an average of 6.5 years in that position, compared to a 7-year average in 2011 and an 8.5-year average in 2006. The report also finds that, “Presidents of public bachelor’s colleges reported the lowest average number of years of service (five years).”

According to AASCU’s data covering the past five years, presidential tenures lasted four years or less for 44.9 percent of member institutions. Over the same period, 28.3 percent of AASCU presidential tenures lasted between five and nine years, and 26.9 percent lasted 10 years or more.

“Fundamentally, the reason why tenures are shorter is because the agenda for leadership is so dynamic and is changing more quickly than it was in the past,” says Lucy Leske, a senior partner with Witt/Kieffer’s Higher Education Practice. “[Literature on leadership shows that] the average human being may have a set of experiences and competencies that are right for a particular agenda. Once they complete that agenda, they either need to reinvent themselves or they need to come up with a new agenda. You couple that with how quickly things are changing in higher education, and it’s rare that you’ll see an individual who can reinvent themselves and recreate an agenda five or six times over.”

Juggling Pressures
There are numerous demands and stressors facing college presidents today. As states provide substantially less funding than ever, institutions struggle to keep tuition costs reasonable. In many
Balancing the budget while meeting strategic goals proves to be a challenging task. Fundraising and coalition-building have become a significant part of the university president’s job description.

“There’s so much reduction in state support for public universities that there is great demand for presidents to find ways to supplement the loss of income,” says Richard Rush, who served as president at Minnesota State University, Mankato and was the founding president for California State University Channel Islands. “And this isn’t just through fundraising. It requires presidents to be entrepreneurs to find other ways of putting together partnerships [with local and regional businesses and non-profits].”

When Rush was named as founding president of CSU Channel Islands, he built a university from scratch in an area where the state legislature had for decades resisted efforts to establish an institution of higher education. During his interview for the position, the board told him that he would have to “help pay your own way.” So he came into the position with “eyes wide open,” drawing from previous experiences as president at Minnesota State, Mankato, where he dealt with significant state budget cuts throughout his tenure.

“I told the board, ‘I don’t find this intimidating; I find this as the way of the future and a real opportunity,’” Rush recalls. “And so, what we did from the very beginning is accept that the DNA of Channel Islands encompassed the fact that we’d have to find a way to support ourselves in addition to whatever we got from the state.”

Accountability and assessment of student learning also are important issues that put intense pressure on today’s university presidents. The board of governors for the State University System of Florida, for example, adopted a performance funding model that evaluates institutions on 10 metrics, such as the academic progress rate, the six-year graduation rate, the number of degrees awarded in areas of strategic emphasis, and the median salaries of graduates during the first year after graduation. The results are used to determine the allocation of state funds.

“The money is distributed to the winners and not to the losers,” says Judy Bense, president emeritus of the University of West Florida. “The real losers are penalized, and it’s all based on
Your score on these 10 metrics by which we’re measured. That’s [the governing board’s] value of a college education measure."

The university presidency is a very public position, and another critical aspect of the job is cultivating relationships with multiple constituencies—from faculty, staff and students to alumni, parents, donors, local community members and legislators. These groups often have conflicting priorities and needs, requiring the president to perform a delicate balancing act. At the same time, the general public is becoming increasingly skeptical about the value of higher education, raising the need for promoting awareness and partnerships among residents of the surrounding communities.

“You literally have to balance five or six major constituencies, where you’re not too heavy in support of any one at the expense of the others,” says AASCU Senior Scholar William Sederburg, who has served as president at Ferris State University (Mich.) and Utah Valley University. “You have to be a public person and interact on a personal level with people. I see the most successful presidents are those that not only can manage these multiple constituencies, but also be a political leader in bringing people along with them on the journey.”

For many presidents, developing a positive working relationship with the university’s governing board can be particularly challenging. Typically appointed by the state’s governor, these boards may consist widely of people who have little understanding of how higher education works—especially the concept of shared governance, which requires a deliberative process to bring about change. Disagreements over strategic goals and how to accomplish those goals often lead to presidential resignations or firings. At the University of Virginia, for example, President Teresa Sullivan was fired by the governing board in 2012 over disagreements about online education and other issues. She was reinstated within weeks, however, after faculty, students, alumni and others waged a massive rebellion against the ousting.

“I think boards are not as willing to give presidents a chance to achieve the university’s goals,” says Jessica Kozloff, president of Academic Search and president emerita of Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. "I just don’t think there’s enough tolerance for the fact that sometimes universities are like battleships—you can’t turn them on a dime. So there’s just not the patience to allow these things to happen, particularly in highly critical situations where there often are issues that are not caused by the president’s leadership, but rather external forces, like a state drastically cutting funding to higher education.”

Many states also offer either shorter-term contracts to new presidents or, in many cases, no contract at all. And legislators are questioning long-held values of higher education, including tenure and accreditation processes. These challenges cause a great deal of uncertainty, both for the president and for the institution.

Does it matter if presidential tenures trend on the shorter side? What is the ideal length of an effective presidency? Kozloff cites change management research which overwhelmingly shows that in any organization, five years is the minimum time required for anyone in an executive leadership position to make a positive impact on the organization they’re charged with leading.

“I think institutions do suffer when you have these short turnovers because you lose continuity, you lose your momentum, and you just have a leadership vacuum,” Kozloff says.

“You don’t want a revolving door,” adds Patricia Cormier, president emerita of Longwood University in Virginia and executive director of AASCU-Penson Associates. “Most presidents are going to come in with a vision for the institution, and they’re going to set about the process of doing strategic planning. The key to this is getting as many people in that process as you possibly can so that you can move the institution forward. If you’re changing that every three to five years, it’s a problem. What you want is stability so that you really can get things done and see results. You want that stability so that everyone at the institution feels a sense of security that this is going to be something that will have lasting value, and therefore they’re more willing to go the distance and cooperate and do what is necessary.”

The Settings for Success

There seem to be so many challenges facing college and university presidents these days, one might wonder why anyone would apply for these positions. Despite the pressures of the job, there are still many applicants in any given search. For many who have served in these roles, however, the rewards are plenty.

“For me, it was a supreme privilege and honor to serve as a university president for two institutions because you can affect people’s lives,” Rush says. “You can make
decisions that can make people’s lives better, and in that regard, I think the altruism aspect of it motivates people to be presidents. They want to make a difference and help others, and this is a way that they can do it.”

Setting the path for success for new presidents—or those who aspire to become president—requires preparation. Many presidents emerge from the academic pipeline: from faculty member to department chair, dean and/or provost. People in these academic roles can begin preparing well before they begin holding a job as president, you don’t know what it involves. You think you do, but you don’t. Until you’re in that seat, you’re not always sure what you need to know.”

Every college and university has its own unique culture, priorities, strengths and challenges. The presidential application process is critical for finding the person who has the competencies, experiences and personality that can carry out the agenda of the college or university engaged in the search.

“The prospective president needs to make a conscientious effort to make sure the values they hold are shared by the governing board,” says AASCU’s past president Deno Curris, who also was president of three universities and is now an executive with AGB Search. “If they do not match, an individual ought not to apply for that position, or they ought to withdraw from consideration if they’ve already started the application process. Nothing good happens when there are conflicting values between the governing board and the president.”

Another important step to ensuring presidential success is to put in place a strong transition plan that engages the governing board and the campus community in conversations about changes to come—and how those changes may be brought about. Collaboration is important, and the different constituents should come to some agreement on institutional priorities. About 15 percent of incoming presidents come from outside of academia, according to the ACE report, and they need to be educated on how shared governance works. These conversations are important for building trust and creating an open, transparent and supportive environment that promotes success.

Sederburg, a former Michigan state senator, also recommends that presidents listen to their critics and strive to better understand their perceptions of higher education. From that point, he says, presidents can work to develop positive relationships, promote understanding between institutions and the communities they serve, and communicate the value of higher education for society.

“We have a good story to tell, but it’s like no one’s listening—or no one’s willing to make any sacrifices for supporting higher education,” he says. “We really need to work harder to sell the value of higher education and the value of what we do. I think the most effective president not only understands their constituencies and what they’re up to, but they also develop a plan for how to move their institution ahead. They’re always cognizant of what their legacy is going to be.”

Karen Doss Bowman is an independent writer and editor based in Bridgewater, Va.