Nontraditional Candidates Often a Natural Fit for Campus Top Spot

When Patrick Gamble was named the 13th president of the University of Alaska Statewide System in June 2010, the retired four-star U.S. Air Force (USAF) general and former head of the Alaska Railroad Corp. had a proven record of managing large organizations with thousands of employees and massive budgets. His experience in education, however, was more limited. He had served for several years as commandant of the U.S. Air Force Academy (Colo.) and had several appointments to university governing boards, including the USAF’s Air University (Ala.).

“The biggest challenge [of the presidency] is there’s a culture deep down inside an organization that you have to figure out and respect,” Gamble says. “During my first year here, I’ve worked really hard to gain a level of understanding of the culture of academia . . . I’ve done a lot of reading and a lot of talking to people. I may be an outsider looking in, but that doesn’t mean I can’t understand and respect the culture at the same time.”
Though Gamble came into the position as a virtual newcomer to higher education, his management style and understanding of academia’s ideal of “shared governance” has helped him win over the faculty’s respect and trust. One of Gamble’s first major assignments, for example, was to revive the University of Alaska (UA) system’s stalled efforts at completing an academic master plan. Though he oversaw the process, Gamble invited the faculty to reformat and complete the plan. “By bringing the Faculty Alliance on board to work on the academic master plan, President Gamble did a lot to demonstrate he was interested in faculty input and shared governance,” says Daniel Monteith, an associate professor of anthropology and Faculty Alliance chair at UA. “The alliance had some good ideas about how to bring the document to completion. President Gamble listened and gave us the chance to bring things to fruition.”

Unlike the majority of U.S. college and university presidents, Gamble did not rise through the academy’s ranks in the traditional way—from faculty member to department chairman to dean to chief academic officer. As a candidate hired from completely outside of higher education, Gamble says he has lots to learn, but he also offers many skills and insights gleaned from his stellar career in the USAF and the railroad industry.

“I don’t rest on my academic laurels . . . I’m not an academician by trade,” Gamble says. “What I bring mainly is the ability to organize and run a large organization. Because not only do we have students and faculty and the education that goes on between the two, but surrounding that is the whole operating entity—with 16 campuses and three major universities—and all the mundane stuff that goes on within those small cities. I bring those kind of talents, and then a recognition and respect of the specific talents of our faculty with regard to what they can do with our specific programs.”

### Increasing Opportunities for Nontraditionalists?

Although nontraditional candidates filling presidential shoes is nothing new, experts say university governing boards increasingly are open to hiring outside the academic ranks, particularly as the position becomes more externally focused with fundraising and legislative relations as key responsibilities. There are two types of nontraditional candidates: The first is one who becomes president after working in nonacademic posts within the university, such as advancement, development, finance or student affairs; the second type, like Gamble, comes from professional experiences entirely outside of higher education.

Among AASCU member institutions, 66 first-time, permanent presidents were appointed since July 2009. Of those, 42 came from academic affairs backgrounds, while just 24 were nontraditional candidates. Among those 24 nontraditional candidates, only five came from completely outside the academy. “It’s not common, but the number of presidents and chancellors from nontraditional fields has been growing,” says former AASCU president Constantine “Deno” Curris, a senior consultant with Academic Search Inc. who focuses on searches for presidents and chancellors.

According to *The American College President: 2007 Edition*, a report by the American Council on Education (ACE), 40 percent of the sitting college presidents in 2006 rose to the helm from the position of chief academic officer. The report also shows that 23 percent of the presidents previously worked in senior administrative roles within higher education, while 17 percent were hired from outside of higher education.

But many of the nation’s college presidents are approaching retirement age. The same ACE report found that nearly half of all college presidents in 2006 were 61 or older, leading to speculation that the next decade will see substantial turnover. Will a wave of presidential retirements open more doors for nontraditional candidates?

“Only time will tell,” says Curris, who previously served as president of three state universities.

As higher education has evolved over the past two decades, so has the role of the college president, says George Mehaffy, AASCU’s vice president for academic leadership and change. The presidency used to be primarily an academic role, focused on curriculum, faculty development and student scholarship. Nowadays, these are still important areas of concern for any president, but these leaders also are charged with external tasks, such as fund raising, alumni and donor relations, legislative affairs and community relations.

“Certainly universities are bigger, but they’re also more complicated,” Mehaffy says. “They’re more complex organizations in an increasingly complicated environment. There’s an increase in regulation; there’s more scrutiny; there...
Nontraditional Candidates Must Heed Campus Culture

Nearly half of all college presidents in 2006 were 61 or older, leading to speculation that the next decade will see substantial turnover, according to a report from the American Council on Education. Experts say that the number of presidents and chancellors from nontraditional fields has been growing, and the trend is expected to continue.

Here are some things that experts advise nontraditional presidents to keep in mind:

• Gain an understanding of the “shared governance” culture of academia, and learn to respect its slow deliberative process.

• Solicit faculty input on major initiatives.

• Cultivate your fundraising skills.

• Appreciate and value the mission of your institution.

• Build internal relationships and learn how and why people do their jobs.

• Fortify relationships with constituents within and outside of the university. This includes faculty, staff, alumni, donors, legislators and board members.

• Look at things through the eyes of the students and support the faculty.

• Know what you’re good at and select a strong executive team to fill-in experience gaps.

are dramatic decreases in funding; there’s a growing role for external relationships—particularly fundraising. All of these issues have conspired to change the nature of the role of the president.”

Though Weber State University President Ann Millner did not ascend to her post in 2002 through the traditional academic pipeline, she had been an educator and administrator at the university for more than 20 years. Having served as the vice president for university relations and vice president for community partnerships, Millner already had extensive experience with fundraising, communications, alumni relations and governmental affairs. And in a previous role as the administrator overseeing Weber State's continuing education program, Millner also had a hand in the academic side of campus life.

“If you look at the role of presidency, a significant part of the responsibility of this position is helping your institution be successful—and that requires an external focus, so I already had really good preparation,” Millner says.

University governing boards seem to be increasingly interested in candidates whose backgrounds include experience in management and budgeting, experts say. As state funds become more and more scarce for higher education—while demand is increasing for students who want to enroll—colleges and universities need creative leaders who are adept at doing more with less resources.

“The first thing [hiring boards] are looking for is the ability to bring resources, especially in this very difficult financial environment,” says Jean Dowdall, senior vice president with the executive search firm Witt Kieffer. “The ability to attract private funds from donors and public funds from the legislature—not to mention grant funds—is just very important.”

Adds Ann Die Hasselmo, president of American Academic Leadership Institute: “The position of president is hard; it’s complicated; and it’s very political—there are so many constituencies who have an interest in the institutions. There are many competing and conflicting demands on the president.”

On the Outside Fitting In

Faculty members aren’t always quick to welcome higher education outsiders to the presidency. They consider themselves to be fierce guards of higher education’s ideals of shared governance, academic freedom and academic integrity. Faculty may be suspicious of newly hired presidents who come to higher education with an eye to the bottom line but little regard for these long-held academic values.

“Nontraditional candidates face initial questions of credibility,” Dowdall says. “What do they know about higher education? Are they going to bring assumptions about this college as a business as opposed to an educational institution? Are they willing to see the university as fundamentally an educational institution? So these questions of the candidate’s willingness to respect the academic process, which is a relatively slower process than in business, are the kinds of issues [nontraditional candidates] face.”

In fact, Curris points out that in many cases, the likelihood of a nontraditional candidate being hired as president simply depends on who’s sitting on the search committee.

“In cases where the president reports directly to the governing board—which is comprised primarily of people who are involved in the business world—if it is actively involved in the search process, there’s a greater openness to candidates who do not come from within the academy,” Curris explains. On the other hand, he says, search committees that are heavily constituted of individuals who are part of campus—the faculty, staff and students—are more likely to choose someone from their own ranks.
In the article, “A 360° View of Non-Traditional University Presidents,” published in the Winter 2009 issue of Academic Leadership: The On-line Journal, the authors pointed out that an important ingredient determining the success of nontraditional presidents was the ability to “understand, appreciate and value the missions of their institutions as well as the overall culture of higher education.”

For Kenneth Dobbins, president of Southeast Missouri State University—who rose to the position after serving for nearly a decade as the university’s chief financial officer—part of understanding the culture of the institution requires building internal relationships, as well as learning how and why people do their jobs. When any senior leader on his campus wants to change his or her departmental processes, for example, Dobbins invites all stakeholders who may be affected by the change to come together and discuss the potential ripple effects.

“Doing that gives you a broad understanding of how the academy works,” says Dobbins, who is chair of AASCU’s board of directors. During his tenure as Southeast Missouri’s chief financial officer, he adds, “I felt I needed to know as much as I could about all of the divisions, including taking on more responsibilities like athletics or advancement, so that I could get as well-rounded an experience and exposure as possible.”

Building relationships with constituents within and outside of the university may give nontraditional candidates a competitive edge and is valuable for gaining faculty acceptance.

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