

Selection of Community Colleges Presidents: Exploring Board Members' Understanding

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Abstract. This qualitative study explored 14 community college CC board members' understanding about (1) their institutions utilizing organizational identity theory and (2) critical elements of the match between their understanding of the CC and the desired characteristics of the selected presidential candidate. Documents including mission and vision statements and presidential position descriptions from 48 rural and urban CCs across the nation were compared with board members' interview data. CC documents emphasized presidential experience. Board members also discussed experiences; however communication skills and the ability to develop relationships were critical elements in the presidents' selection. Rural interviewees spoke about using their CCs as an institution to preserve the community and culture. Urban interviewees desired their CCs to be an institution of relevance.

Introduction

There was a generally accepted belief that potential applicants who seek the presidency of a community college (CC) should be selected based on qualifications such as experience [1]. Fiedler stated that institution decision makers preferred leaders who were intelligent and experienced [2]. However, the selected presidential candidate may not be the effective leader as was once believed by the members of the governing board [3].

As an illustration, suppose a CC board did not have a clear understanding of the organization's culture and hired a presidential candidate with fund raising experience. Such a president might prove ineffective and have difficulty adjusting to the local CC culture [4]. This simple disconnect was an illustration of broader educational implications as the governing board should enable the new president to effectively implement board policies [5].

Since the governing board expected the president to work with them and keep them informed, the president became the connection between them and the CC. This interaction required a board's understanding of the CC and a presidential candidate who possessed desired characteristics to effectively work together in the administration of the CC. Since the board was responsible for hiring a president, this study explored critical elements board members used to select a new president. Based upon organizational identity [6] and its

depiction within the CC mission [7], what was the governing boards' understanding of the CC and was there a relationship between final board decisions regarding the selection of the presidential candidate and the organizational identity?

Methodology

This qualitative study included board members who were recently involved in a CC presidential selection process.

Methods

There were 48 mission statements, 23 vision statements, and 48 position descriptions collected throughout the nation and divided according to urban and rural classifications established by the United States Census Bureau's [8] publication of urban communities. Semi-structured interviews included 14 board member participants who represented both urban and rural CCs in the Midwest. Follow-up questions were emailed to participants for further clarification.

Discussion

Mission and vision statements reflected student support through a learning culture conducive to student preparation for job entry, transfer to universities, developmental education, and workforce development. The documents also suggested CC collaboration with local community and businesses. Presidential position description responsibilities placed the president as head of the institution who reported to the governing board or in some cases, the state chancellor. The president oversaw all aspects of the CC encompassing operations, finance, public relations, political advocacy, and workforce development.

Position descriptions also included presidential candidate qualifications, which entailed experience, personal characteristics, and a preferred level of education. Position descriptions seemed to suggest a greater emphasis on experiences rather than personal characteristics. Some experiences were administrative, teaching, fundraising, program, public relations, and planning. Some included personal characteristics were

communication skills, ability to develop relationships, cultural sensitivity, and personal integrity. Although a master's degree was required, a doctorate's degree was preferred.

Both urban and rural interviewees described their understanding of the CC as institutions supporting both students and the local community. Rural CC interviewees seemed to suggest that their CCs should be utilized for the self-preservation of the local community or culture. This was done by providing programs that would enable students to stay home and support local businesses. Their urban counterparts seemed more concerned about their CCs maintaining relevance within the community. CC programs were designed to support the needs of the local corporations and provide a ready workforce. Corporations would provide funding and capital to support the CC programs.

When asked about their reasons for presidential selection, experience and personal characteristics were mentioned. Experience was stated in terms of financial experience or administrative experience. Personal characteristics were described as intelligence, interpersonal skills such as communication skills and the ability to develop relationships with members of the community or political relationships. The ability for the president to communicate and develop personal relationships seemed critical as they were threaded throughout the interviews. Interviewees appeared more interested in hiring a presidential candidate based on personal characteristics rather than experiences listed in position descriptions which now seemed disconnected.

In an attempt to clarify if personal characteristics were preferred to experience, a follow-up question was emailed to interviewees. Responses were compared to their CCs' position description qualifications. The majority of the seven interviewees who responded indicated a preference for personal characteristics.

Conclusions

This study looked at CCs' Boards of Trustees to try to comprehend their understanding of their own institutions and the critical elements of the match between their understanding of the CC and the desired characteristics of the selected presidential candidate. Mission and vision statements illustrated CC support for students and the community. Position descriptions emphasized the need for experience and certain personal characteristics such as the ability to communicate and develop relationships. Interviewed participants stated a desire for CC experiences; however personal characteristics seemed to be used as the final basis for selecting a presidential candidate.

If I were to offer advice to someone interested in applying for a CC president position, I would suggest the need for financial and fundraising experience and to develop the ability to develop communication and relationship building skills as a way to make a connection to others.

Future research could include the inclusion of CC instructors, administrators, or members of the community. Additional research could include the relationship between regional culture and the CC.

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