

Succession Planning & Career Management: Are Community Colleges Planning for the Future?

“Winning leaders build winning organizations by developing other leaders.”

Noel Tichy

Dr. Penne Prigge
Dean Humanities/Social Science
Rockingham Community College

Dr. Penne Prigge is currently Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rockingham CC, which includes the Early Childhood Associate Degree Program and the Child Development Center lab school. She has nineteen years of experience as a Dean and Department/Division Chair in North Carolina and New Jersey. She is a graduate of the NC Institute for Senior Administrators, the North Carolina Community College Leadership Program, past president of NC Association of Women in Community Colleges, and active in the North Carolina Association of Instructional Administrators. Penne has a BA in political science from Drake University, an MA from William Patterson University, and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Teaching from UNCG. Her areas of research are leadership and succession planning.

A recent online search for the topic “succession planning and community colleges” resulted in three articles, while the same search for “succession planning and business” resulted in 1021 sources. How is it that businesses are anticipating solutions to future leadership needs while community colleges are not? Comments from administrators at community colleges bear witness to the lack of succession planning and career management in many community colleges today. A vice president in the Midwest describing succession planning at her college reports, “At this institution it consists of waiting until someone leaves or retires and then putting an ad in the paper.” An extension center dean declares, “The lack of strategic thinking for the system is most troubling. Here we wait until the last minute for a vacancy to appear; we have an empty desk in a critical area and then we search.” When asked about career management, a suburban administrator maintains, “It doesn’t happen at this college. I have never been asked to

discuss it [my career] in an evaluation or asked my plans or where do I see myself in five years.” These and similar comments on a recent survey of women administrators at over 200 community colleges suggest a lack of planning for succession in many of our colleges today and at the heart of this succession planning is career management, both critical elements as colleges prepare for the future.

It is no secret that better managed companies develop career paths through the use of developmental job experiences to cultivate leadership. These corporations identify high potential individuals and deliberately structure experiences to improve their skills. Companies like Bank of America, General Electric, Intel, and Coke find that a commitment to planned leadership development ensures that they have capable leaders to successfully compete in the global market place. Developing such talent is called succession planning and involves senior management in the systematic identification and preparation of the next generation of leaders. Fortunately, for educational institutions, leadership development in successful companies has similar attributes that can be duplicated in higher education.

What are common elements used by successful companies in developing leaders?

- *Senior management is committed to planned leadership development.*
- *Organizations are willing to invest time and money in developing and rewarding high potential talent.*
- *People with leadership potential are identified and told they are chosen.*
- *High potential individuals are offered challenging developmental job experiences which stretch their capability.*
- *Support is provided by mentors from the ranks of senior executives.*
- *The process is systematic, offers rewards, and part of the organizational culture.*

It is this type of proactive talent development that will be essential to educational institutions if they are to be prepared for the challenges of the future and the exodus of leaders at all levels in our colleges in the decades to come.

How are community colleges planning for succession and developing leaders?

Community colleges, in particular, will see a mass departure of leaders in the next decades. In 2001 researchers for AACCC anticipated the departure of 45 percent of community college presidents and 25 percent of senior administrators by 2007, and these predictions are occurring today. More recently, research predicts an additional shortage of administrative staff in positions such as Registrar, Institutional Research, or Business Affairs, all creating a serious leadership vacuum in the system. At the same time that new leaders should have been developed, the number of graduate degrees in community college administration decreased 78% between 1982 and 1997. Recently AACCC and other leadership organizations have attempted to address the need for senior leadership by developing programs and establishing institutes aimed primarily at the executive level; however, it is essential that community colleges themselves begin to adopt proactive measures on their own campuses to “grow their own” by planning for succession as colleges face this exodus of leaders at all levels.

Based on recent articles lamenting this upcoming shortage, it appears that community colleges expect to replace administrators using traditional methods— leadership preparation through individual initiative in graduate programs, off-site leadership training that may or may not reflect the reality of an individual’s workplace, or a reliance on non-academics from the business world to replace leaders. Additionally, there continue to be calls for recruiting women and minorities to fill positions, and gains have certainly been made by these groups over the past ten years. However, it is exceedingly unclear whether colleges are engaged in planning for succession by actively

grooming individuals for leadership or whether colleges are purposely engaged in career development in any way at their institutions.

In a recent study, over 200 women administrators and presidents at community colleges from eighteen states were surveyed to determine their perspectives regarding opportunities for developmental job experiences, succession planning, and career development at their institutions. Their responses focused on the following key topics:

- Are colleges actively engaged in career development and succession planning?
- Do women administrators at community colleges perceive that they are being given developmental job experiences to groom them for leadership?
- Do community college presidents perceive that they are giving women developmental job experiences to groom them for leadership?

Respondents were questioned on whether high potential individuals are identified and given special projects and challenges to stretch them, whether they are informed if they are high potential, and whether individuals know when they are given special projects that these are growth opportunities and not just additional jobs on top of what they are already expected to do. The survey asked whether colleges practice job rotation, initiate lateral transfers, or expose individuals to higher management. It asked whether supervisors are evaluated on the developmental opportunities they create for staff. The respondents were, community college presidents and women administrators, a cross sample in years of experience, variety of positions, location and size of colleges, ethnicity, age, and reporting levels. In addition to the survey, telephone interviews were held which provided insightful comments from the respondents.

What are the perspectives of presidents and women administrators on succession planning and career management?

The study of women administrators and presidents revealed two troubling issues. It demonstrated first that there is a significant difference between the perceptions of women administrators and presidents on the state of leadership preparation in community colleges and on whether developmental job opportunities are offered at community colleges to women. Additionally and equally important, it revealed that career management and succession planning are non-existent on the vast majority of the campuses surveyed. Given the diversity of the respondents in location and size of colleges, ethnicity, reporting levels, and other variables, one would have expected a difference in the perspective of the women themselves. However, no matter whether the respondents came from large or small schools, from Texas or North Carolina, were black or white, had five or 20 years of experience, responses were similar. On the other hand, responses based on the perceptions of presidents and women administrators on the survey questions revealed a very significant difference, focused in four distinct areas:

Career Development and Management

Such processes are essential in order to assist individuals in gaining experience in their careers and include factors like special assignments, lateral transfers, job rotations, exposure to higher levels of management, feedback on job opportunities, or discussion of career plans with superiors. The study indicated that feedback on career development is non-existent on most campuses and that there is a lack of formal or coordinated practice that supports career development for employees.

Identification of High Potential Individuals

This is a procedural dilemma in corporations as well as in higher education. Many organizations hesitate to identify candidates for fear of making an implied promise that cannot be fulfilled. Self identification is not a consideration because in most cases there is no common articulation of required competencies which can serve as the basis for initial selection. In this survey presidents and women administrators had quite different perceptions on whether high potential individuals are identified, mentored, or even told they are high potential. One male president admitted that he felt more comfortable talking to other men about their career plans. In any case, the need for replacement at all levels requires identification of a diverse pool of candidates from all areas of the college and points to the need for a system of identification of possible replacements at our colleges.

Communication

There appeared to be a lack of communication at the institutions about opportunities for career experiences and leadership development. When asked if it was clear to employees that special assigned projects in addition to regular responsibilities are growth opportunities, women administrators did not perceive that this was the case and assumed such projects were just add-ons to their already busy jobs. Presidents, on the other hand, believed that individuals were given special projects to expose them to a broad range of experiences. This same difference of opinion was evident in a number of responses, including whether career plans are discussed with employees, whether high potentials are aware of their selection, or whether developmental experiences are available to women administrators. Clearly, lack of communication is an obstacle here.

Succession Planning

Succession planning would appear to be important for those colleges who are experiencing a greater turnover in faculty and staff due to retirements and resignations, and one would assume that such colleges are actively engaged in planning for the future. Based on the interviews, all the colleges appear to be facing or expect more retirements over the next three to five years. However, on the topic of succession planning, presidents and women administrators had significantly different responses; women administrators were often dismayed at the lack of planning they perceived. Women administrators discussed how disruptive it is to have constant senior management changes and how little thought went into the anticipation and filling of vacant positions. On this topic both groups agreed during interviews that succession planning is a low priority at their institution.

What are the options for community colleges to create succession planning?

Do these differing perspectives on succession planning and career development reflect only a lack of communication between presidents and women administrators? Or do they point to a deeper problem, an expectation by community colleges that outside forces will develop their next tier of administrators and leaders? One woman administrator echoed the sentiments of many when she said, “It is the college’s responsibility to give people experience – to stretch them.” However, more often than not, there seems to be agreement that colleges don’t nurture people but expect them to come to a job prepared with the needed skills and competencies. Developing a systematic succession planning and career management process is the first step essential for community colleges to prepare for this leadership gap.

Ten steps for systematic succession planning and career management:

1. Survey college community regarding future leadership needs
2. Identify present practices of leadership and career development
3. Design action plan for succession planning with college community
4. Formulate institutional competencies for each position, e.g. Department Chair, Director, Vice President of Planning, Registrar, etc.
5. Identify process to assess and identify high potential employees
6. Design challenging developmental experiences for each position
7. Create shared understandings of how assignments can be developmental
8. Tie supervisor evaluations to opportunities they create for career management of individuals they supervise
9. Create a system to evaluate and reward progress
10. Assure college community that management will take responsibility for overseeing employee progress and the process will become part of organizational culture

Given the many and complex challenges facing colleges today, skilled leaders are crucial at all levels, and planning for leadership transition is critical to strategic planning. The implications of this study argue for changes in policy and practice at community colleges in regard to succession planning and career management for all employees.

References

- Campbell, D., (Feb/March, 2006). Shortages in administrative positions. Community College Journal, 76 (4), 10-14.
- Kotter, J.P. (1988). The leadership factor. New York: Free Press.
- McCall, M., Lombardo, M., & Morrison, A. (1988). The lessons of experience: How successful executives develop on the job. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Ohlott, P. (1998). Job assignments. In McCauley, C., Moxley, R., & Van Velsor, E. (Eds.), The Center for Creative Leadership handbook of leadership development (pp. 127-159). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Shults, C. (2001). The critical impact of impending retirements on community college leadership. AACC Leadership Series, 1.

Tichy, N. (1997). What it takes to be a winning company. [Electronic version].

Management Review, 86 (10), 50-53.