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Developing Leaders: The Role of Competencies in Rural Community Colleges

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Abstract

Pending retirements underscore the need to develop community college campus leaders. Rural community colleges will be particularly hard hit by changes in leadership as they represent the majority of 2-year colleges and face unique challenges given their location. To help address the anticipated leadership transition, the American Association of Community Colleges developed a set of competencies to frame critical skill areas and guide leadership development efforts. The research reported here showed both resource development and organizational strategy as areas of weakness for rural leaders and, paradoxically, the areas of most need. Leaders acquired competencies predominantly on the job, which has implications in planning development of future leaders.

Key words: presidents, chief academic officers, rural community colleges, leadership competencies, leadership development

Aging leaders, pending retirements, and smaller pools of qualified applicants for college presidencies have led to concerns regarding a community college leadership crisis (Shults, 2001). Indeed, 53.5% of current presidents are 61 years of age or older (American Council on Education [ACE], 2012). Adding to this scenario are concerns over the pipeline to the corner office. The American Council on Education's recent report on chief academic officers (CAOs; Eckel, Cook, & King, 2009) found that only 30% of individuals in these positions had aspirations for a presidency. This narrowing of the pipeline is of particular concern because a traditional pathway to the presidency is via the position of CAO (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; McKenney & Cejda, 2000). The potential for a leadership void is occurring just as the nation has placed high expectations on community colleges to help increase the number of college graduates by 2020 (Lumina Foundation, 2009; The White House, 2009).

Given the concerns over replacing current leaders, professional associations (e.g., ACE, the American Association for Community Colleges, and the League for Innovation in Community Colleges) have been motivated to increase leadership development offerings and to expand training opportunities that include mid-level leaders. The attention to community college leaders is driven by several factors. First, community colleges represent over half of all institutions of higher education (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2005) and educate nearly half of all students involved in postsecondary education (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008). Second, Weisman and Vaughan reported in 2007 that 84% of community college presidents planned to retire by 2017. With 1,078 public community colleges in the country (Carnegie Foundation, 2005), the impending turnover in leadership is staggering. Finally, the subgroup of rural community colleges presents a unique situation in that they

comprise 60% of all community colleges (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007) and are primarily located in regions pressed with economic decline, high levels of poverty, and constrained college resources. It is often a challenge to attract leaders to these rural colleges. Leist (2007) outlined the need to differentiate how rural areas advertise and attract candidates for presidential openings based on the unique characteristics of these colleges. To address the challenge of filling positions in these remote areas, programs that promote grow-your-own leaders are blossoming (Hull & Keim, 2007; Jeandron, 2006).

Recognizing the need to prepare leaders for the future, the Leading Forward Initiative of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) identified six essential presidential competencies that aspiring presidents can use to gauge their professional development: organizational strategy; resource management; communication; collaboration; community college advocacy; and professionalism. The AACC listed these competencies in a monograph entitled *Competencies for Community College Leaders* (AACC, 2005). This document defined each competency and provided examples of how skills associated with these competencies could be developed.

Previous research (Eddy & Drake, 2008) has shown that of the six competencies, those most enacted in rural areas are professionalism, collaboration, and resource management. Even though these areas of emphasis were noted as critical, it was not evident how prior leadership development informed these practices. The context of a rural location presents particular pressures on 2-year-college leaders because rural community colleges are often located in high-poverty regions with low population bases (Eddy & Murray, 2007). Hence, it is more difficult to recruit within the area. Further, these leaders hold no anonymity in the region (Eddy, 2007), must deal with a wide spectrum of constituents, and serve as the linchpin within collaborative

partnerships (Amey, Eddy, & Campbell, 2010). Assessing the preparation of rural leaders is critical. Leadership development in community colleges in general is a mosaic of practices and opportunities (Eddy, 2009), but given their location and the unique demands facing their campuses, rurally located community colleges confront an even bigger challenge in developing leaders.

Thus, the purpose of this research was twofold. First, the study sought to understand how rural leaders developed skills in the six areas identified in the AACC competencies. Second, this research investigated how the forms and types of prior development influenced how current leaders executed the competencies on their campuses. The questions for this research included: a) How does leadership development inform the development of competencies for rural community college leaders? b) What is the impact of leadership development on the enactment of community college competencies in practice?

Background

Research on college presidents often focuses on the leaders of 4-year institutions. Attention to community college presidents is not as prevalent, and research on rural community college leaders is even rarer. Emerging definitions of leadership indicate a broadening of the conceptions of what it means to be a leader (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). Positional leadership still accounts for the bulk of why leaders think of themselves as leaders. However, in a context of perpetual change, the ideals of collaboration, mentoring, coaching, and servant-leading are gaining a foothold in how leaders lead (Hickman, 2010). These concepts are important considerations as the changing of the guard occurs in the 2-year college sector. Of note, the AACC competencies support collaborative

leadership with its focus on relationship building in communities, heightened communication, and partnerships through the use of fiscally prudent organizational strategies.

Attention in the past decade has focused on how best to prepare for the replacement of retiring leaders (Shults, 2001). The thrust of the AACC's Leading Forward Initiative was to better prepare community colleges for the leadership gap (AACC, 2005). A guiding principle of the initiative is the notion that individuals can learn how to lead and that many different types of people can lead. The AACC report concluded that a commitment to lifelong learning allows leaders a mechanism for adapting to ongoing changes. Despite general agreement regarding the desirability of the leadership qualities embodied in the six competencies, how these competencies translate into practice remains unknown. Further, although the AACC identified ways in which aspiring presidents can gain practice in the various competency areas, no one has studied how leaders learn these skills and what competencies are favored in practice. Duree (2007) found that current community college leaders were less prepared in organizational strategy and resource management than in the other four competency areas and that most development opportunities occurred within formal leadership programs and within the university programs from which the leader's highest degree was obtained. Duree did not, however, look at the placement of these leaders in either rural, urban, or suburban settings or try to link development background to competency preparation.

Leadership development for community college leaders occurs in a variety of venues, but only a minority of current leaders has participated in these formal development opportunities (Hull & Keim, 2007). Community college professional organizations, such as the League for Innovation and the AACC, provide programming for potential leaders. These forms of development, however, are often too costly for those in financially strapped rural locales and are

often hosted at an inconvenient distance from these remote colleges. Other means of development occur on the job (Jeardorn, 2006) or within doctoral programs focused on community colleges (Amey, 2005; Friedel, 2010; Katsinas & Kempner, 2005). Thus, the research reported here focused on how current rural leaders perceive that they developed their leadership competencies and how these development experiences influenced their performance on the job.

Research Methods

A hermeneutic phenomenology approach (Van Manen, 1990) was used for this research. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach as well as a form of qualitative methodology (Smith, 2008). This method focuses on specific happenings, investigating how participants experience these situations and focusing on the description of the essence of lived events. For this research, the focus was on how rural community college leaders described their positions of leadership and what factors were most central to developing their leadership ideals. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher plays an integrated role because researcher assumptions are not bracketed; rather, they are essential to the interpretive process (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutics shifts the research findings from mere description of the phenomenon to interpretation. Of particular interest for this research were how the leaders used the competencies in practice and how the requirements of leadership affected their choice of development opportunities.

The participant pool for the study included rural community college presidents and CAOs (vice presidents or deans of instruction). Both levels of leadership were included given the career path to the presidency from the CAO position (ACE, 2007; Weisman & Vaughan, 2007). A Midwestern state served as the site of participant selection. Each of the 30 leaders in the state's 15 rural community colleges received a letter of invitation to participate. The colleges are located

in communities with populations of less than 35,000. Moreover, these institutions do not reside

in communities that are immediately adjacent to a major metropolitan area. Ultimately,

interviews occurred with 20 leaders, with at least one person from 13 of the rural institutions

represented. An equal number of presidents (n = 10) and vice presidents or deans (n = 10)

participated, but they were not necessarily matched pairs from the same institution. Interviews

were conducted both in person and via telephone by the principal investigator.

The interview protocol consisted of semi-structured questions focused on identifying how

these presidents and vice-presidents prepared for their positions and how they faced campus

challenges. The focus of the questions was to determine the influence of the college's rural

location on the ways in which the interviewees enacted the various AACC competencies. Both

presidents and vice-presidents (or deans) had identical interview protocols. Questions centered

on how the participants described their leadership development and how the leaders described

their leadership in practice. Probing follow-up questions allowed for a better understanding of

which AACC competencies were most present in leadership. Interviews were recorded and

transcribed verbatim. Coding of the data occurred using the AACC competencies, descriptions of

leadership career pathways, and leadership theories. Patterns and categories were identified and

noted, using what Marshall and Rossman (1999) referred to as "analyst-constructed typologies"

(p. 154). This process creates categories based in the data, but the naming process may not be

taken directly from the participants. Here, the researcher applies the typology to the data. The

following section reviews the emerging themes from the study.

Findings

The rural locations of the colleges in this research affected how leaders sought and

obtained leadership development and also how they led on campus. The first section of the

findings creates a portrait of the rural leaders. Here, the influence of location is highlighted. The second section reviews the development process for the leaders. Two subthemes emerged in the development process. First, leaders learned how to lead on the job rather than through formal training and, second, their advancement was influenced by relationships and interactions with others. The third section of the findings reviews how the competencies were put into practice by the participants on their rural campuses. Advocacy, collaboration, and communication were the three skill areas most readily used in practice, and each of these competencies was affected by the college's rural location and the leaders' development pathways. Resource management was often noted, but mostly as a reaction to the need to do more with less rather than as a leadership skill per se. In addition, the lack of leadership preparation meant that the leaders had a limited range of organizational strategies to employ on their campuses. In particular, this leadership trait (i.e., organizational strategy) was constrained by the rural location, because many of the participants had not worked at colleges in different settings and were therefore not familiar with or experienced in a range of strategies.   Finally, the competency of professionalism was closely coupled with leadership development and occurred most often on the job. Limited networking within the national community college system was noted.

Portrait of Leading a Rural Community College

The portrait of these rural community college leaders showed them operating under highly stressed circumstances. In describing the colleges they led and the regions in which those colleges were located, the leaders in this study noted the critical issues they faced. One leader reflected on some of the challenges of her rural location, stating:

> Most folk are driving an hour, students and staff, each way. There is a lack
>
> of cultural events. Although I grew up in this area, I'm [a] 25-, 30-mile

drive from the college. It's what I'm used to, but in bringing new staff in,

some people aren't satisfied with what the area can offer.

By default, those leading rural colleges are off the beaten path; thus, transportation is a

critical issue for students, faculty members, and administrators. The remote locations of the

majority of the community colleges within the state made it difficult for the leaders in this study

to contribute to the state political process as well. However, another president noted how rural

locations were not without their perks. He commented, "[E]very rural setting is different—we're

more like a resort." The charms of small-town America meant that people could leave their doors

unlocked and that kids could bike around without parents worrying. The culture of the small

town was evident when one of the presidents asked upon his arrival at the college about the

police office on campus. His assistant just laughed and replied, "This is [rural college name].

All we have, all we need, is a part-time parking lot attendant."

The majority of leaders in this study had strong roots in their communities. One vice-

president for instruction commented on his links to the region. He reflected, "I am from a small

rural area and started school in a one-room schoolhouse…. My great-, great-, great-grandfather

was the first white settler in this area." Familiarity with rural living helped lessen the initial

culture shock experienced by the interviewees when they moved into leadership positions. For

those from the region, relationships were long standing, but often complex. The remote location

of the colleges meant that colleges employed many staff members who were related. Thus,

communication within the organization occurred on multiple levels beyond the typical

organizational reporting structure. One president commented on the close connections on

campus:

You can be absolutely sure that every single living body on the campus

knows every single thing about every other living body on campus. So,

there's just no question of doing anything on a confidential basis. If you're

really good at confidential, maybe you've got half a day before the word's

out.

Decisions to cut positions were complicated given family relations. The presidents knew all

employees more personally than they would in large urban colleges that are characterized by

employee anonymity.

Rural colleges are financially strapped, given the lower values of local property on which

their millage revenues depend as well as the lack of general state support for higher education.

The financial strains faced by rural colleges also stem from two other factors. First, the fixed

costs at rural colleges are similar to those at their urban counterparts, but the rural colleges have

fewer resources. As one vice-president noted, "Our community college is located in an area

where 70% of our tax is publically owned or tax-exempt land. So, we don't have the resources to

budget for more staff." The aversion to tax increases has also affected budget decisions. A

college dean recollected the time his college was in serious financial straits and needed the

community to pass an increased millage. He recalled how the president "was actually walking

around with a six-pack of pop and saying this is what it would cost you individually for a tax

increase if you owned a house of this value." Second, campus resources have been stretched by

increases in unemployment as plants closed and dislocated workers placed more demands on

programming. One president stated, "Under the present funding formula, if I increase by 200

students, I might go bankrupt." Exacerbating the resource constraints are the needs in the

community. Poverty is a persistent problem in rural areas, with rural poverty rates higher than

those in metropolitan areas; in 2002, 14.2% of rural residents lived in poverty compared to 11.6% of those in metropolitan areas (United States Department of Agriculture, 2004). Moreover, even higher rates of poverty occur in the most remote rural areas (16.8%) and among racial minorities in rural areas (Black = 33%; Hispanic = 26.7%; Native American = 34.6%; United States Department of Agriculture, 2004). Persistent poverty over the generations is even more problematic in rural areas, particularly in the south (United States Department of Agriculture, 2004).

In terms of demographics, the community college leaders in this study were similar to community college leaders nationwide, but they also exemplified distinct differences. The 13 colleges in the study are located throughout the state and include one tribal college. Twenty percent of the presidents in the study were women relative to 29% nationally (ACE, 2007). Likewise, 20% of the vice-presidents or deans interviewed in the study were women, which was lower than the national figure of 39% (McKenny & Cejda, 2000). Overall, the proportion of women leading the rural colleges in this study was lower than the proportion of women leading community colleges nationwide.

The portrait of the leaders in the study represented three other key differences relative to national data: More leaders had been promoted from within the organization; the educational backgrounds of the leaders in this study differed from the educational backgrounds of leaders nationwide; and few participants (relative to leaders nationwide) took part in national training programs. The majority of the participants followed a traditional pathway to their positions through the academic ranks, a pattern that mimics the national picture. The exception was a president who came to this current position from a K-12 superintendency and who also had been an elected state legislator prior to that. Three of the presidents in the study and two of the vice

presidents (or deans) came directly to their positions from out of state; the remaining 15 leaders

either moved up through the ranks at their own institutions or made moves within the state.

National research indicates that 35% of presidents had moved up from an internal position

(Weisman & Vaughan, 2007), but the data from this study showed a full 50% had moved up

from within their colleges.

The academic backgrounds of the presidents in this study also differed slightly from the

national picture. Nationally, the highest degrees held by 71% of community college presidents

are in education (Weisman & Vaughan, 2007), compared to only 50% of the presidents in this

study. In addition, 88% of community college presidents nationwide have a doctorate (Weisman

& Vaughan, 2007) compared to only 60% of the presidents in this study. Newly hired presidents

in this study were more likely to have a doctorate, with longer-serving presidents possessing

masters' degrees instead. Table 1 illustrates the comparison of the rural participants to national

averages for gender, degrees, and promotion patterns.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Understanding the pathways to leadership creates a portrait that helps explain how

leaders approach the task of leading their campuses. This portrait of development pathways

helps illuminate how past experiences guide leadership. It is important to understand the path to

leadership because it is on these paths that leaders develop the cognitive schemas (Harris, 1994)

or mental maps that guide their understanding of how to lead.

Table 2 outlines the portrait of the leaders in this study using key categories regarding

previous positions held, educational backgrounds, leadership development, and out-of-state

experiences. Differences are evident for presidents compared to vice-presidents or deans. Those

in the second-in-command positions possessed broader experiences, which may typify shifts in

career development for those in the pipeline. The majority of the vice presidents or deans were promoted from within the college (60%), and 20% held previous professional ties to the president. The vice-presidential candidates possessed strong networks due to their knowledge of the college and past experiences with the presidents. The remaining vice-presidents relocated from out of state to assume their positions. This portrait sets the stage for understanding how these leaders developed skills outlined within the AACC competencies.

[Insert Table 2 About Here]

Rural Leadership Development

The leaders noted that they learned best on the job, acquiring skills as they gained experience in a variety of leadership positions along the career pathway. Participants sought formal leadership training on a regional or state level, though a minority of leaders participated in nationally recognized programs as well. Yet, it was not this training that leaders referenced; rather, they spoke of their work on the ground at their colleges. Finally, relationships and mentoring provided a central role in the development of the leaders in this research. Most of the leaders did not begin their career with the intention of seeking a presidency. As a result, there was no specific planning involved for developing their leadership repertoire or any of the specific competencies. As noted above, promotions for the majority of vice-presidents or deans occurred from within the college or because of ties with the president. The network within the rural college community serves as a basis for identifying future leaders and places an emphasis on connections that affect how leaders interact with their constituencies as well.

Learning on the job—trial by fire. The participants in this research held a variety of positions throughout their careers. It was through learning on the job that most leaders honed their leadership skills. One president noted, "I learned a lot by trial and error. I made a lot of

mistakes and of course, you know, you learn from your mistakes." A high level of tolerance of these errors at their institutions meant that the leaders did not feel their jobs were in jeopardy. The small size of the rural colleges meant that individuals concurrently performed multiple jobs. One president reflected the outcome of this fact, stating, "I think leaders in a rural environment wear many hats. And that limits them in terms of opportunities they have to learn new skills or grow upon the strengths they have." On the one hand, the variety of job functions provided a wide foundation of learning experiences, but on the other hand, the sheer volume of the work meant less ability to focus or specialize in one area alone. Another price was having less time for reflection.

The career pathways for most of the leaders in the study moved along an academic track. As such, leaders were quite familiar with the instructional leadership demands. However, the administrative aspects of budgeting and strategy were newer. One president stated, "The budget and supervisory things were new to me and it just took practice making a couple mistakes." For the president who had moved to the college from a superintendent position, this previous experience provided the best preparation. He stated, "I think the experience [of] on-the-job training at the K-12 [level] with that budgetary problem was really the best training I had because I felt coming in here I was not a rookie administrator." Knowing what to expect from past experience is a good learning aid, but most prior positions did not expose these leaders to all that would face them in new roles, particularly in the area of resource management. The military experiences of one president provided him with a different type of leadership foundation, one that was grounded in operating within a hierarchy.

The willingness to step forward and take on new responsibilities often provided learning beyond the individual's assigned job. One vice-president received recognition from her president

regarding her willingness to take on new tasks. She recalled that during an accreditation visit, her president was asked how something got done, and he candidly replied, "I just give it to [name] and it gets done." The leaders in this study did not start their careers in the community college with a goal of a top-level position; thus, the majority of their learning occurred on the job rather than through leadership development programs. As one vice-president noted, "I didn't think of myself as an administrator by nature." However, learning about the multiple facets of college operations occurred more easily given the smaller size of the institutions these leaders worked in and the need to wear multiple hats.

Uniquely, one of the vice-presidents in this study had been a president at a rural private 2-year college located out of state prior to taking his vice-president position. His experience was quite telling. He reflected, "I found out I was ill-prepared for the challenges of that position…. My main mistakes were fundraising and board relations." Thus, despite background experiences and participation in training activities, the shift to a leadership role involved learning on the job and correcting mid-stream. As one leader underscored, "[A]dministrator priorities are not the same as faculty priorities." Learning what it meant to be a community college leader often occurred on the job in the face of new challenges. As one leader frankly reflected, "I don't think the college got its money's worth the first couple years. It was a real strong learning curve—I was in over my head, I'll admit that to anybody."

Relationships—a helping hand. Mentors played a central role in the learning process as well. As one president said of his mentor, "He has never failed to be there when I needed him for anything." The leaders in the study noted how they could readily call on their mentors to ask questions or work with professional contacts to help figure out new challenges. One dean noted the valuable advice he received from a mentor:

My mentor said, "I don't expect you to make mistakes, but I'm going to be

more negative if you make no mistakes." He told me that if you're not

making mistakes, you're not trying anything different…. That is one of

the best lessons I've had.

The process of observation was also central to the learning process. One long-serving president

stated, "Some of the valuable things that I've observed were about what not to do from people

that I really respected and liked, but I saw them do things that hurt them and hurt the

organization and they were really good people." Thus, learning from the mistakes of others

provided a good learning opportunity.

Most participants indicated that they did not plan on becoming community college

leaders. Pointedly, one commented,

I never started my career thinking that in five years I was going to be this

or ten years I'd be a president. No, that's not the way I functioned. These

opportunities just came about. I was not looking for them.

Several noted that they took advantage of interim positions or stepped up when asked by a senior

leader to fill a position. These initial experiences planted the seeds in some regarding the

possibility of seeking a presidency. One person candidly stated, "I thought I could be a

reasonably good president." When asked about presidential aspirations, another president stated,

"Anybody who would know me would say that I have an unbending need to be in charge, so the

answer's yes." Unlike the majority of presidents in this study, these two participants intentionally

sought out administrative positions and training opportunities to prepare for a presidency.

Likewise, both of them moved from another state to take on their current positions and were

ready to move nationally to obtain a presidency. These individuals, however, were in the

minority, and their intentions to seek a presidency did not occur until they had some administrative experiences. Yet, their pathways suggest another role of rural community colleges. Namely, those seeking out their first college presidency may find rural colleges a welcoming site.

Most of the vice-presidents and deans said they had no intention of seeking a presidency. Indeed, one vice-president—the individual who had previously served as the president of a private 2-year college—took a demotion in giving up a presidency to come back to his home state. With few exceptions, all the leaders in this study did not state intentions of seeking another position. Pointedly, many did not even seek their current position with any forethought or planning. As one president commented, "I was kind of invited to take the position and so I didn't solicit the position. I assume part of the reason I was invited was my financial background and legislative contacts." Over half of all the leaders in this study received internal promotions or had ties to the president. At times, their selection occurred without a formal search. Thus, mentors provided a crucial role along the career pathway; the tap on the shoulder often moved a person into a leadership slot that he or she did not initially seek.

Encouragement by mentors or top-level leaders to seek upper-level positions served as a catalyst. One vice-president commented:

> I could have been happy teaching until I retired. But the president talked
> me into taking the step to administration and I'm glad he did. I am
> extremely happy. It showed me things that I never would have seen
> before. It expanded my opportunities.

The view from an administrative perch was different from the view that the interviewees had

experienced as faculty members. Leaders in top-level positions could recognize the individual

abilities and skills of others and nurture potential future leaders.

One dean spoke of the role of leadership identity as she reflected on her career pathway:

As you can tell, I kind of fell into all of these [leadership] positions, so it

wasn't anything I aspired to or tried to work towards. Once I found myself

in the role of chair and at the Chair Academy, it helped me find my

identity.

The new role shift involved crafting a leadership identity distinct from being a faculty member,

in particular for those who did not intentionally seek a leadership position. One vice-president

noted, "That first year I moved from being a part of the group to being part out of the group. I no

longer had a comrade or a friend." Relationships shifted. One president noted of the role change,

I don't think I thought that people would watch so closely everything I do

or say. I'll make a comment off the hand and by the time I even make it

back to my office it's around campus that we're putting up a fountain, all

because I said to someone off hand, "Yeah, a fountain would look nice

here." I don't make those off-hand comments anymore.

Leaders faced adjustments given changes in how others viewed them on campus after their

promotion. Rural leaders are "a big fish in a small pond."

On reflection, the leaders in the study noted that they would have more patience when

first assuming their new roles. One noted candidly, "The first year seems like such a blur. I've

looked back and I think, oh my goodness, I have learned so much. I think that I went in a little bit

naïve." The view and perspective from the actual seat of leadership was different than expected.

The role shift experienced by one of the interviewees helps to underscore the issues inherent in assuming a new position. This president noted:

> One big thing for me to get used to is working all my life before coming
>
> here for one boss. I could figure out what that person needed and deliver.
>
> It's much more complex to report directly to an elected board.

Moving into high levels of leadership meant learning new patterns of relating, and it also required new modes for evaluating performance. One president added his thoughts about taking over the job:

> It's a lot of fumbling around, getting the lay of the land. I think most
>
> people, if they're honest about it, will say that in a new job, a new type of
>
> position. It takes you about a year, maybe a little bit more to understand
>
> the current state of the organization to really start.

Moving into a new role required the leaders to expand their schemas and incorporate their new responsibilities into their existing mental maps.

Even though the leaders had a variety of experiences in previous positions, being the top-level leader at the college required a different set of skills and competencies. One vice-president noted that he did not necessarily change his leadership; rather, he interpreted situations differently in his new role. He explained, "You become very strategic in your thinking, knowing that these politics are a little different, so you learn to work within that…. You just become more careful and more cognizant of certain things." One way leaders acquired this new way of thinking was by listening and observation. The next section reviews how development parlayed into the application of the competencies in practice.

AACC Competencies in Practice

The participants noted the central role of relationship building for their positions. The context of the rural locale meant that the network of relationships within the community was tight and that access to state policy makers, though important, was difficult because of the college's distance from the state capital. Scant resources drove much of the organizational planning, but past practices and the influence of the board of trustees also entered into decision-making. Ultimately, collaboration was central for the rural leaders as they sought to fulfill the missions of their colleges. Initially, leaders often felt ill-prepared for the demands of the job, in particular in the areas of resource management and organizational strategy, which supports previous research findings (Duree, 2007). The earlier experiences of the leaders and their development influenced how they approached the challenges now facing them and how they were developing others within their organization. A brief summary of how the rural leaders in this study put the AACC competencies into practice highlights how their development pathways influenced these actions.

Organizational strategy. When it came to strategy development, the leaders in this study considered the context of the needs of the college and drew from their past experiences in creating plans. Central to planning efforts were the limitations facing the colleges that affected the ability to be successful. College leaders needed to make choices about what programming to offer and which areas of emphasis the college would stress. A president shared, "I think in a small college you have to recognize you have limitations. You can't do everything." These limitations resulted in a focus on what could not be done.

The leaders in this study did not face the challenge of trying to promote the college to the community; rather, they faced the opposite challenge of helping the community understand that the college could not solve all community problems. A president commented:

> In the earlier years, I think there was an exaggerated expectation of what
>
> the college could do for the community. Are we going to somehow be the
>
> engine of community development and economic development? And the
>
> answer is no.

Even though there was an awareness that the college could not solve all the region's problems, a vice-president was still committed "to find the magic bullet to help the economy of the area." She came from the region and felt that the community needed solutions. Another president noted the need to advocate in the community, reflecting,

> I'm not a Southern Baptist in inspiring them, you know, out in the streets
>
> slapping folks on the back. But, personal belief that our mission is so
>
> important—and it is so simple and it's so simple to convey and it's so
>
> valuable to the community.

Leaders tied organizational strategy to advocacy of the college mission, in particular recognizing the needs of their rural communities.

Academic study in specific disciplines helped inform practice for some of the leaders in this research. A vice-president spoke of an epiphany he had during a master's program in organizational development.

> My second master's [degree] is in public administration, with an emphasis
>
> on organizational development and psychology. So I'd say in terms of
>
> career, formative career moves, what I learned inside that program was
>
> critical to change thought for me. I actually point to that program as much
>
> more formative and significant than the doctorate in higher education.

Other leaders had academic backgrounds in philosophy, history, counseling, and law, which informed their approaches to acquiring information on how best to strategize. Their rural experience contextualized their academic knowledge and informed their leadership. The lessons learned about what worked in previous positions, as well as observations of past leaders, yielded a variety of strategies from which the leaders could draw.

Resource management. The portrait of rural leadership presented above reinforces the difficult fiscal environments in which the leaders operated. Size also presented resource constraints. One leader described,

> Financially, we have the same basic expenses. You have to have a library,
> you have to have classrooms, you have to pay heat, light, and electricity.
> So, it doesn't matter if you have 10 students or 10,000 students, you have
> to have all of those things. That's one of the challenges for the smaller
> community colleges.

The political arena provided one means of acquiring additional resources. One long-serving president noted that he worked with a local representative to arrange a campus visit by the state senator. Ultimately this senator helped sponsor a capital outlay project to construct a new building. Another president was not so fortunate, as evidenced by the frustration she expressed in getting funding for any campus expansion. She noted that the location of her college four hours from the state capital presented a limitation, "I have colleagues that drive down there [the state capital] to give a 2-minute testimony all the time on issues.… I would love to be more political in the process, but I can't be away from campus that much." Despite the recognition of strategies to parlay more resources, the rural leaders faced challenges given their location and size.

Communication. Communication competencies grew as individuals advanced in

administration. One vice-president reflected, "What I learned most from those mentors was to

help my understanding of how to interact with people and how to get people, especially faculty-

type people, to move in certain directions that would be good for the organization." Another

vice-president commented, "I'm an academic vice-president, but I can walk down the hallway,

students will address me by my first name. They know who I am." This level of connection was

a reality at these rural colleges and often a reason the leaders chose to lead in these areas. But for

those not familiar with rural living, the "fish-bowl" experience was not as enjoyable. As one

president noted with frustration, "There isn't a place I can go in the county without someone

knowing me." For those moving to the rural area for the first time, this feeling of close

connection was a surprise. The role shift to a higher-level leadership position added another

spotlight on the individuals. Several leaders noted their ties and commitment to their college's

location: "My whole life was rural"; "this is home for me"; "I've lived within 10 miles of this

college all my life." Indeed, several of the leaders came back to their home communities, or

never left, to work at the college.

Leading in a rural environment meant tight links found within the community,

particularly with the board of trustees. One president noted, "The trustees will not hesitate to say,

'So and so called me and they said that their son wasn't able to register for classes,'…. The

trustees really do have close connections with the community that we service." A vice-president

recalled how his college added a program in physical therapy when a board member had a

daughter seeking this career. The trustees play a critical role in the relationships with the college

leadership and are often prominent local business owners and community leaders. The quick

access to rural leaders and varied communication routes meant that rural leaders needed to be

aware of how communication occurred on multiple levels.

      Collaboration. The feeling of accountability for the community was palpable during the

interviews. These leaders knew their community and staff on a very personal level. One vice

president summed up the environment as follows,

> A smaller institution takes on the flavor of a smaller community. It takes on those same
>
> cultural criteria, like sense of community. You find it's a much closer knit community,
>
> we're members of the community and family members are working at the college—it's
>
> brothers and sisters, or husbands and wives.

Community and college ties were inseparable, and the role of collaboration an assumed

necessity. One president saw it as a matter of trust. He stated,

> I mean it is a public trust. It is a great responsibility. When I was 22 I was
>
> in charge of half of the American sector of the Korean demilitarized zone,
>
> so I don't shy away from the responsibility. The great thing at a rural
>
> community college is matching that responsibility with the authority that
>
> you need.

The tight coupling of the collaborative relationship between the college and the community

allowed rural leaders a mechanism for readily seeing the outcomes of partnerships.

> One president brought in links to his personal background, sharing that
>
> > I am one of eleven children, but I was one of the oldest. And so parts of
> >
> > leadership to me are not being separate from or out or above, or any of
> >
> > that. It's being part of an understanding and being supportive of a unit or
> >
> > a group because that's how we did things [as a group when growing up].

Collaboration in the rural community college arena became expected, and those coming up through the ranks of the college had experience with these types of relationships.

Community college advocacy. A central leadership component for the rural leaders was advocating for their college's interests, both in the community and within the state. Thus, the AACC competency of advocacy was the most salient for these individuals and the one most often practiced while climbing the career ladder. These rural leaders spoke of their reliance on relationship building in promoting the college and how this connected them on an integral basis to the community and those who live in it. One president coming from out of state noted that "People are deeply rooted to the community, very enmeshed with families, and the college is looked to for educational and career opportunities." The level of responsibility for the community was apparent as another president stated,

> I like these people, we have developed a relationship, and I love this
>
> county because I feel like they're mine. And I am really responsible for
>
> their higher education needs. I feel that I am partly responsible to improve
>
> their quality of life.

The leaders readily advocated for their colleges within the community and clearly saw the college's role in helping to maintain rural living options.

Professionalism. The majority of the research participants lacked any formal training for leadership. Some participated in training as a result of their faculty positions, most often in the Chair Academy or Higher Learning Commission, whereas others came from a business background and felt that this training aided them in their development. Two of the participants had advanced degrees from the community college doctoral program at the University of Texas at Austin. Interestingly, both of these presidents had rural roots and intentionally sought out a

small-college setting. Though not a formal leadership development program per se, the Higher

Learning Commission was cited by several participants as an organization that helped inform

their leadership. The exposure provided by this program to individuals from multiple states and

the investigation of national trends served as a good source of learning for participants. More

leaders in the vice-president or dean role participated in formal leadership development than did

the presidents. Part of the reason for this might be that several of the presidents were long

serving or had moved up within the college ranks to their current position. In contrast, some of

the vice-presidents sought support to better understand their current roles or were contemplating

presidencies of their own.

Mentors were a critical linchpin not only in tapping individuals for leadership positions,

but also in modeling behavior. Even those participants who did not identify a mentor per se

noted how role models contributed to their understanding as they crafted their own orientation to

leading. One male president commented that he sought out a female mentor in his previous

position: "I didn't want to get caught in the 'good ole boys' club, which is a problem in

leadership, I think." Most often, however, the mentors noted were all men. It is not clear how this

may have affected their leadership development or influenced the ways in which the participants

viewed leadership.

Others noted how they learned by watching others as opposed to having formal mentors

per se. One president commented, "Some were good role models and some were bad role

models. I didn't want to replicate the bad role models, so that helped me too." The specter of

bad leadership was as valuable to the participants as the opportunity to observe exemplary

leadership. Knowing what not to do or seeing the outcomes of poor leadership decisions allowed

the participants an opportunity to learn without having to make the mistakes themselves, though some noted how they also learned best from their own mistakes.

Summary

The leaders participating in this study had multiple responsibilities and wore many hats. Their rural locale meant that they received closer scrutiny due to the small size of the college and to the tight relationships the participants developed within the community and with their boards. Many were accustomed to this lifestyle given their rural roots, but the move to higher-level leadership positions shifted the focus even more squarely on them. For leaders moving from urban areas or from out of state, the stakes were higher. One vice-president noted the politics in small communities, observing that "smaller communities don't take kindly to strangers." Having an outsider status was initially detrimental to building collaborations and relationships. One new president related, "I had to work hard in establishing relationships with board members and it was very, very, time consuming." Leaders who had served for longer periods of time were able to reap benefits from years of working with community members and building relationships over time.

The rural locations of the colleges also meant that many of the staff, faculty, and students the study participants worked with had limited exposure to differing modes of organizational operation. One president coming from out of state offered the following assessment: "The other thing is that a high percentage of the people here have never been anywhere else. They have such a limited perspective." This lack of other experience, coupled with the high number of family members working at and attending the college, challenged leaders in initiating change. The leaders in this study focused on what it meant to be rural, pointing out that every rural setting is different. For some, a one-hour drive to cultural activities was easy, but those leading rural

colleges located in more isolated regions with high levels of poverty faced a much different experience. Indeed, some of the rural leaders described their locations as sought-after tourist destinations, whereas others noted the destitution that was evident in their communities. The varying definitions of rurality affected how the leaders framed issues on campus.

As noted above, fewer resources meant that rural leaders needed to make choices about what type of programming to offer and how much outreach could occur. Several factors influenced these choices, including the leader's approach and past experiences, the board of trustees, regional and state politicians, and the availability of financial backing.

Time presented a constraint because the participants needed to hit the ground running when beginning their new roles. One leader shared that one of the most difficult aspects of leading at a rural community college is that he had "to be a firefighter basically," and he expressed disappointment at not being able to take time to look at how to "prevent the fires or even to become a better firefighter." Thus, even when leaders recognized limitations in their development, there was scant time to address or learn more about potential solutions. Little time was available for reflecting on their leadership.

Finally, the participants noted several ways in which they tried to address their high-stress positions, often adding that they were not always successful in achieving balance. Several leaders used various forms of exercise and an active spiritual life to deal with their demanding positions. Reading and music provided additional outlets for managing stress, and family often provided a source of comfort and a reality check for participants (although one vice-president was recently divorced, and a president recently widowed). Leadership is demanding and requires renewal for leaders. Getting away from it all is difficult in a small community.

Discussion and Conclusion

Continually learning on the job reflects the theme of lifelong learning advocated in the AACC competencies. Amey (2005) underscored the need to promote leaders as learners, emphasizing in particular the cognitive orientation of leadership and the creation of a supportive culture that allows for active participation and leadership by followers. To illustrate leadership as a learning endeavor, Amey (2005) posited that leadership development occurs along a continuum. She identified three stages, with the first stage relying more on traditional, hierarchical types of leadership and the second stage eventually shifting to more reliance on inclusive participation in leading. Ultimately, the third stage results in a web-like model of leadership, which relies more on elements supporting transformational leadership. The latter stage requires leaders to become facilitators as opposed to relying on singular, hierarchical-based leadership. The leaders in this study were located at various points on this leadership continuum, and they used their learning opportunities to develop in ways that best served their rural communities. What Amey's (2005) continuum did not fully address, however, was the concept of role shift due to promotion, in particular within the college.

Promotion to the presidency from within the same institution exacerbated role shift for the rural leaders in this study. Individual relationships often changed as a result of the promotion, even when leaders operated from a collaborative framework. Inherent in the position was a responsibility to the board of trustees and the community, as well as an acceptance of ultimate responsibility for the college--the idea that the buck stops at the president's doorstep. These leaders took responsibility for decisions, despite the fact that they often solicited input from others on campus. Moving from a group of peers, such as other vice-presidents or deans, to the position of president was more isolating. Role shift meant that the presidents' new peer group now included other presidents within the state, leaders of the public school system, or business

and community leaders. The small-town nature of the rural locales caused dissonance at first for leaders as they maneuvered into these new positions and relationships. A rural location puts a spotlight on the leaders of community colleges. Leaders in remote areas have less anonymity and a smaller resource base from which to draw (Eddy, 2007; Leist, 2007).

The participants did not seek out specific types of experience with the thought that they would gain any particular competency or skill. Central to their experiences and their leadership practices, however, was a focus on advocacy of the community college. The focus on relationship building also served to make them more competent in collaborations and more conscious of the need to effectively communicate. What was absent from their experiences were opportunities to gain skills that provided a diversity of options for resource management and organizational strategy. When participants mentioned these areas, it was within the context of a past experience or of mistakes made when first on the job. As noted, rural community colleges have lower population bases, fewer resources at their disposal, and stagnant economies (Eddy & Murray, 2007). This situation requires leaders of these institutions to rely on collaborations. Partnerships help create tenable approaches to challenges through joint work and the pooling of resources. Providing fiscal guidance to make the most use of limited resources is central to a rural leader's survival. The need to stretch limited resources provides a great motivator for creating and maintaining collaborative partnerships.

Working in a rural area with low population density means by default that people know one another. Many families and community members have long roots in the region. Thus, a chance encounter at a hockey match may plant the seed for a partnership opportunity or foster the building of an important relationship. The nature of a small town suggests that the college president is well known—the president represents the college wherever he or she goes. A high

level of professionalism is the end result as leaders make difficult decisions and take calculated risks, often to accommodate limited resources.

Analyzing how rural community college leaders make meaning of their development experiences highlights several key conclusions. These leaders often have rural roots and are familiar with the pros and cons of rural living; thus, they make great advocates for their campuses. The most common development experience was learning on the job. The variety of positions held by the study's leaders and the multiple job functions within each position provided the most standard form of development. The lived experiences generally covered the competencies promoted by AACC, with the exception of resource development and organizational strategy. The positions held by the participants along the career pathway to upper-level leadership did not include responsibility for large budgets or for organizational-level decision making or planning. Thus, entering the top-level positions required the quick acquisition of a skill base not fully developed.

Because advancement was more a matter of happenstance than planning, participants did not always have the vision others had of them regarding their leadership potential or abilities. The typical route to top positions still involved the traditional advancement pattern leading from faculty member, to chairperson, to dean, to vice president, and to president. Thus, it is critical to consider the training that leaders are receiving along the career pathway that may influence how they would lead in top-level positions. In addition, the proportion of women leading in the rural colleges included in this study was less than the proportion of women leading colleges nationwide. Therefore, current leaders should pay particular attention to creating internal leadership development programs that foster women candidates for upper-level positions.

Identifying potential women leaders is critical in light of the fact that most leaders in this study, regardless of gender, are not contemplating advancement.

The AACC competencies more frequently mentioned by the participants when describing their leadership development were advocacy, collaboration, and communication. Reflecting on leadership development highlighted the role of professionalism for the participants. The experiences of the leaders centered on the critical role of relationship building, working with their community, and communicating their mission and vision. The dilemma uncovered was that the rural leaders were most pressed by the need to create organizational strategies to position their colleges for the future and to manage resources in light of their colleges' tight budgets. However, the participants' descriptions of their professional development pathways indicated that these two competencies were the least cultivated. The implication is that leadership development for rural community college leaders should focus on developing budget skills and strategic planning expertise. Identification of potential leaders earlier in the pipeline aids in succession planning and provides the greatest opportunity for developing all of the AACC competencies.

In filling leadership vacancies in rural areas, it is important to identify critical competencies and to understand the application of these required skills in this environment. In particular, it is important to think of how to prepare leaders for rural leadership. Leist (2007) argued for truth in advertising when informing potential candidates of required demands, and Clark and Davis (2007) advocated for grow-your-own programs. Knowing that resource issues will plague rural leaders and that leaders need high self-efficacy during professional development can guide leadership preparation. Recognizing succession planning may be a key component in planning. The planning and development process should include strategies to deal

with role shifts and focus attention on what a promotion in a small organization might mean regarding changes in relationships. Tapping individuals earlier in the pipeline and allowing them to experience some of the demands required of rural leaders can create good learning opportunities. Early exploration in administration may help individuals develop requisite competencies prior to assuming key leadership roles. The need to replace retiring leaders is becoming more critical, and the AACC competencies can provide a development roadmap for potential leaders.

A concern remains, however, if the competencies are perceived merely as a checklist of required traits. Early investigations into leadership theory have attempted to distill particular traits that are critical to successful leadership. For instance, Stodgill (1948) came up with a list of five prominent characteristics for leaders. Like Stodgill's list, the six competencies are not all inclusive; rather, they are a starting point for continuous learning. New community college leaders require preparation to help identify the priorities within their college context and culture. Thus, it is important to understand what competencies are most prevalent in rural areas and how this information might be used to prepare leaders. A focus on the practical skills of running a college and on the relationship building required to develop partnerships is central. The leaders in this study often viewed their leadership as a process of coming home to help their communities. They wanted to make a difference. The pending leadership turnover in rural community colleges provides an opportunity to help these communities. The challenge is to better prepare these future leaders for the difficulties they will face.

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RUNNING HEAD: Developing Leaders

Table 1

Comparison of Study Leaders with National Statistics on Community College Leaders

Characteristic	Study participants (10 presidents and 10 vice presidents or deans)	National population of community college leaders
Gender: % who are women		
Presidents	20%	29%[a]
Vice presidents or deans	20%	39%[b]
Prior employment: % who were promoted from within		
Presidents	50%	35%[a]
Vice presidents or deans	60%	41%[c]
Education: % with a terminal degree		
Presidents	60%	71%[a]
Vice presidents or deans	50%	72%[c]

[a]ACE (2007). [b]McKenny & Cejda (2000). [c]Eckel, Cook, & King (2009).

Table 2

Leadership Development Pathways

	Previous position (*n*)	Highest degree held (*n*)	Degree major	Experiences
Presidents	Vice president or dean (9)	Doctorate (6)	Education (6)	Out of state (3)
	Other (1)	All but dissertation (1)		National training (3)
		Master's (2)		University of Texas-Austin degree (1)
		Prof Degree (1)		
Vice presidents or deans[a]	President (1)	Doctorate (6)	Education (5)	Out of state (4)
	Vice provost (1)	All but dissertation (1)		National Trainings (2)
	Dean (4)	Master's (3)		Chair's Academy (3)
	Associate dean (1)			Other (2)
	Other administrative post (2)			
	Faculty (1)			

[a]Six of the vice presidents or deans had been promoted from within, and prior to assuming their current administrative positions, 2 of the vice presidents or deans had had close ties to the president.