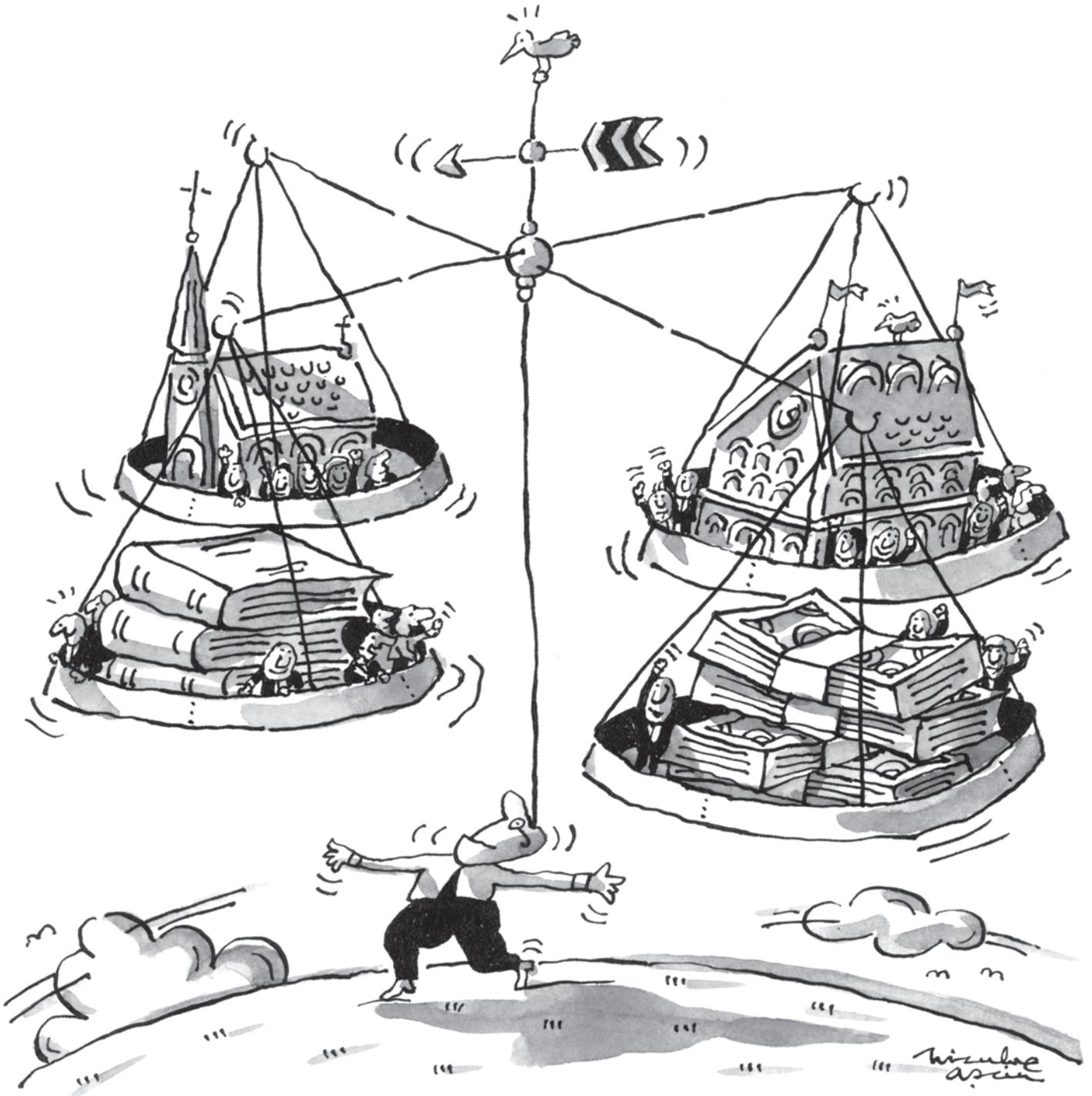


Auburn Studies



Leadership that Works

A Study of Theological School Presidents | December 2010

Barbara G. Wheeler, G. Douglass Lewis, Sharon L. Miller, Anthony T. Ruger, David L. Tiede

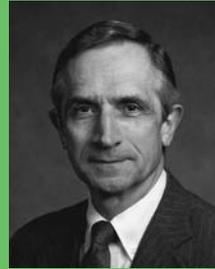
About this Issue

The effectiveness and quality of leadership in theological schools affects not only the institutions they lead, but also hundreds of people in the wider community and ultimately, the well-being of congregations, church agencies, and other organizations that employ theological school graduates.

What are some of the characteristics of effective leadership in these schools and how can boards and search committees ensure that they have the leadership they need for their institutions? This study of senior administrators of theological schools, with a primary focus on presidents, sought to discover the ingredients of executive leadership that make institutions durable and visionary. Presidents, academic deans, and financial officers were surveyed; ten presidents were interviewed yearly for the first three years of their tenure, and extensive interviews took place on six campuses that have reputations of being especially well run.

The report offers highlights of some best practices of theological school leadership and warnings about leadership patterns that do not work well. In conclusion, suggestions and recommendations are given for presidents, boards, and search committees seeking new leadership in their institutions.

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This report is dedicated to the memory of Leon Pacala.

(1926–2009)

LEON PACALA was the foremost leader of late twentieth-century theological education. After serving with distinction as dean of Bucknell University and president of Colgate Rochester Divinity School, he became executive director of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in 1980, a post he held until 1991. In that role, he created and led a process of reflection on the aims and purposes of theological education that came to be called the Basic Issues Project. The project enlisted many of the best theological scholars of the day and produced an extensive literature. It also established a tradition of critical and constructive theological thinking about the work of theological schools that still shapes their work.

Leon brought the perspectives of the Basic Issues Project and his wide knowledge of all aspects of theological education to the Auburn Center's Panel of Advisers, a group that began meeting in the year that he retired and on which he served until his death.

Leon began his work as executive director of ATS by traveling the country, interviewing nearly 100 seminary presidents. His reflections on the presidential role helped to shape Auburn's current research, which is dedicated to his memory, with admiration and gratitude for his lifetime of extraordinary contributions to the educational enterprise.

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A seminary president tells about the moment, many months after his appointment to the post, when he fully realized he was the president: “A few months ago I was walking across the campus with the building and grounds superintendent, and we had a photographer on campus taking pictures for our new Web site that’s coming online now. And I just made a comment, ‘Gosh, they could get a beautiful picture of the library if that tree wasn’t there.’ It’s about an 80-year-old, beautiful tree.

The next morning it was gone and I said, ‘What happened?’ And [my assistant] said, ‘[Someone] said you didn’t like the tree and you’re the president.’ And that’s [something] that I’ve had to learn. People take what I say seriously.”

The power to fell trees with a single sentence is but a small part of the influence that the head of a theological school yields. The decisions of the head of a theological school affect the livelihoods of the school’s employees and shape the views and values not just of the students who attend the institution, but also of hundreds of people in the wider community. Ultimately, the well-being of thousands of people in congregations, church agencies, and other organizations that employ a theological school graduate may be shaped by the tone and direction that was set by the school’s leader. It is important, then, that all seminary presidents and those who work closely with them perform their work as well as possible.

To learn more about theological education leadership, a team of researchers from the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education conducted a four-year study of senior administrators of theological schools, with a primary focus on presidents.¹ The goal was to discover the ingredients of executive leadership that make institutions both durable—as in fit for the long haul—and visionary—that is, moving forward in ways the future is likely to require.

The research included surveys distributed to seminary presidents, academic deans, and financial officers.² (Development officers had been surveyed in 2005 as part of a previous research project.³) In 2006 and 2007, members of the

The goal of this study was to discover the ingredients of executive leadership that make institutions both durable and visionary.

team also visited six schools that expert observers of theological education had identified as especially well run, not only by able presidents, but also by the high-functioning teams they had assembled. Finally, on the theory that the initial years of presidency set the patterns for the whole life of an administration, ten new seminary presidents who began work at the time the study began were followed for three years (2006 to 2008) via annual campus visits that included interviews with the presidents, board members or university officials, administrators and faculty. Among the sixteen schools in which case studies

were conducted (six in the “well-functioning” category and ten chosen because they had new presidents) were theological institutions of almost every type: US and Canadian, diocesan and order-owned Roman Catholic, mainline and evangelical Protestant, denominational and independent, free-standing and part of a larger institution, small and large, financially comfortable and financially stressed. Despite the variety, readers are advised that the schools that participated in this study are a small selection and the circumstances of other institutions may vary.

This report outlines five major findings about what constitutes successful theological school leadership—leadership that creates the conditions for institutional stability, productivity, and creativity.

Character Is a Better Predictor of Executive Leaders’ Success than Credentials and Interview Performance

Seminary presidents have a variety of backgrounds and prior experience. The majority entered their positions from academia (Figure 1). About two-thirds worked as faculty members or administrators in a seminary or college just before they became president, though previous position varies by religious tradition. More heads of mainline Protestant schools than others worked outside of higher education, and almost half of all presidents (45%) served in a paid ministerial position at some point in their career. Still, the top leaders in theological education are heavily academic: three-quarters of them have served on a seminary faculty at some time in their career, and forty percent have been academic deans.

Half of all presidents who responded to our survey were “insiders,” meaning that when they

were appointed, they had been working at the school of which they became president. There is considerable variation by religious tradition (Figure 2). Insider presidents are most common in Roman Catholic institutions and least likely to be found in mainline Protestant schools.

Educational backgrounds of presidents are far from uniform. Three-quarters hold Ph.D. degrees, but for one in five, the highest degree is ministerial—M.Div. or D.Min. (Figure 3). Women comprise one-tenth of the group of US and Canadian presidents, and one in ten is

Black, Asian, or Hispanic. In short, there is a lot of variety in background, experience, and training.

Much of the initial discussion in search committees concerns the formal credentials and prior professional experience that should be required of candidates. The findings of this study suggest that the focus on credentials is misplaced. There is no correlation between resumé and presidential success. Some of the highest functioning presidents entered their job

from the pastorate, some had a background in academic administration, and some entered directly from the classroom. They include insiders and those who were hired from other institutions.⁴ Presidents who perform very well include men and women, whites and minorities, Ph.D.'s, D.Min.'s, and some with no doctorate. Experience in the kinds of functions that presidents are expected to perform would seem to be desirable, but this study did not prove

Figure 1: Previous Position of Presidents

by Religious Tradition of School

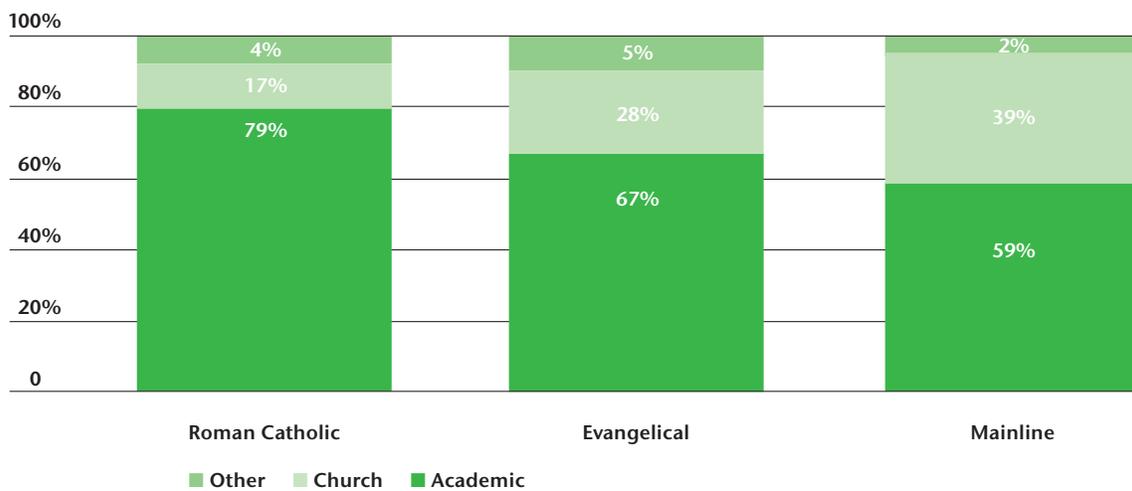


Figure 2: Where Presidents Come From: Inside/Outside Their Institution

by Religious Tradition of School

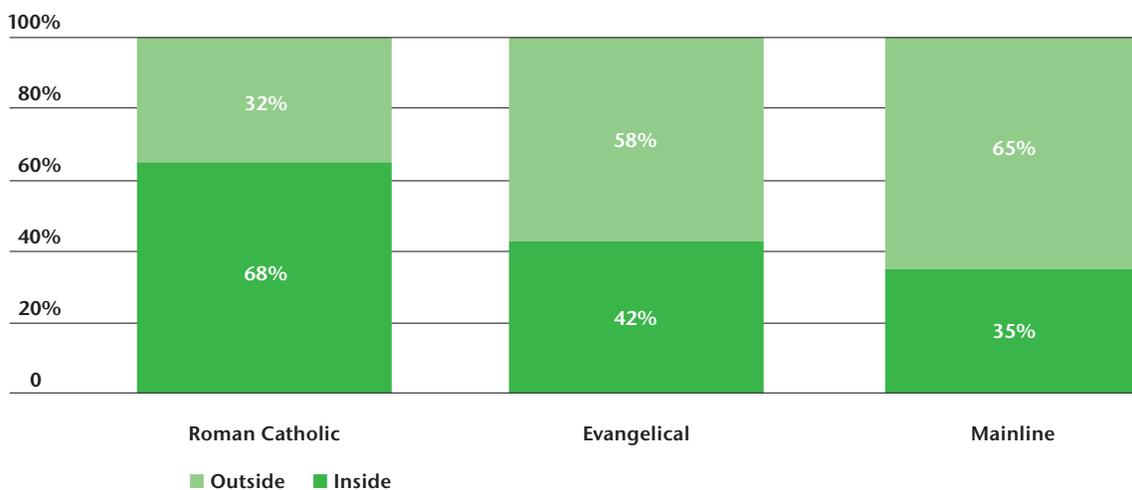


Figure 3: Highest Degrees of Presidents

Degree	
Ph.D.	73%
D.Min.	18%
M.Div.	3%
M.A.	5%
Other	2%

that presidents who had previously managed staff or raised funds in other settings necessarily do that work better when they become the head of a seminary than those with little or no practice at those tasks. Some of the ablest presidents we observed had never done the things the presidential job required. A board member said this about a president who had spent most of the years before appointment in the classroom but who quickly pulled a fragile seminary back from the brink of failure:

I certainly wouldn't recommend hiring a faculty member to take over the presidency in a situation like we were in. I think that's a terrible idea ... in principle. Maybe somebody that's not even an academic would be good in a situation like that but [it] turned out [well]— I think it was providential really.

Presidents who are struggling or have found that they are not a good fit for the job have very similar profiles to those who are doing well. They include some with extensive academic background and others whose major experience had been in the pastorate or church executive service. Some were outsiders, others were insiders; they are diverse in gender and race. **Formal qualifications and previous work experience are not a guarantee of leadership that works.**

Do effective presidents have anything in common? They do, though the common factors

are not as easy to pinpoint as the markers about which many search committees tend to have lengthy debates, such as a Ph.D. or prior administrative or pastoral experience. Presidents we observed who were doing an excellent job had many of the same four character traits.

The first of these traits is **personal strength**. The strength needed to do the presidential job well is two-sided. On one hand, the visible markers of strength—powerful intelligence, confidence, persuasiveness, and persistence—are part of it. A faculty member in a school that had been run happily and well for many years by a competent manager described the difference it made to have a new president who brought intellectual strength, and seasoned judgment to the job:

The image and the power that [the president] brings is—he just—he has blown the parameters of presidential leadership in this institution as far as I'm concerned. He is a powerhouse. I don't know how he does it. I don't know how he can do it all.... He is astounding.

The other dimension of strength—harder to see—is firmness and the capacity to withstand criticism. Every president who is doing the job well will eventually find himself or herself in a situation where the right answer is “No” and where that response will disappoint or even anger some powerful constituency, often the faculty or students, sometimes the alumni or even a particular donor. Those who are too thin-skinned

Presidents who are too thin-skinned or timid to make necessary unpopular decisions cannot succeed as president and often cannot endure in the position over the long haul.

or timid to make necessary unpopular decisions cannot succeed as president and often cannot endure in the position over the long haul.

Strength of character that displays as firm confidence must be balanced by a second trait, **humility**. This is what one board chair says of the school's president:

She's the leader, but she doesn't have to do it all. She has the strength of character to be firm in the school's mission. What centers the president is her deep faith, her confidence in God's providence.... She does what she thinks is right, without fear, but with a sense of humility. She can and does say no.

By contrast, leaders who are too needy to get their egos out of the way—who have to be either popular or feared—quickly lose the trust of those they are assigned to lead. Their followers are never certain whether a decision was made for the good of the whole or to cushion the leader's insecurities.

One way that presidents signal a mature capacity to put other priorities ahead of their personal need for approval or deference is by seeking constructive criticism. One asked his development officer to act as a coach and give feedback on how he relates to donors in conversations. Another, widely praised as a visionary, was criticized by the board for inattention to administrative matters. "I used [cabinet] meetings for thinking, for big ideas, and didn't realize it was a failure of leadership not to take care of the details," he admitted. Once he did realize this he reorganized the administration to correct the imbalance.

That some of the most effective presidents are modest and self-effacing contrasts with accounts of failed presidencies, in theological schools and elsewhere in higher education, where the president's downfall is associated

with arrogance. Presidents who think that they know it all, or act as if they do, have a hard time leading an educational institution.

A third common trait is **interpersonal skills**. The presidents who have staying power have the capacity to pay attention to other people, to form relationships with them, and to sustain and deepen those relationships through thick and thin. Presidents cannot be everyone's best friend—in fact, many would counsel that it is preferable for presidents to have no best friends within or even related to the institution. The goal is not a lovefest, but relationships of trust

One way that presidents signal a mature capacity to put other priorities ahead of their personal need for approval or deference is by seeking constructive criticism.

and mutual respect strong enough not to break when accountability is required or when hard decisions have to be made.

The interpersonal gifts that institutional leadership requires are different from the immediate attractiveness that translates into the ability to interview well and that sometimes dazzles search committees. Of course it is important that institutional leaders be presentable. Public presence and likeability are assets, and some gifted presidents have vibrant personalities. One president in this study, for instance, was widely known by people on campus and in the school's supporting denomination by first name, like certain celebrities. But surface charisma and charm can in some cases mask the absence of more important qualities: genuine warmth

and interest in others, the ability to listen carefully, and the drive to understand. One CEO with great relational gifts summarized his mode of operating this way:

- Relate to people; get them to work with you, help people see where the institution is going and to feel they are playing a part.
- Listen very carefully to what people are articulating about their needs and concerns.
- Say no when you have to but do it in an affirmative way.
- Develop a thick skin.

The last common feature of the effective presidents we studied is a carefully cultivated habit as much as a natural gift or endowment: **discipline**. Effective presidents do what the job requires in proportions that best meet the needs of the institution rather than emphasizing tasks that give them the most satisfaction.

Some of the most stringent discipline was exercised by presidents whose schools were in serious financial trouble. They withstood waves of anger and criticism when they made draconian

Effective presidents do what the job requires in proportions that best meet the needs of the institution rather than emphasizing tasks that give them the most satisfaction.

cuts and major changes to save a school.

One took the job without knowing how much difficulty the school was in. He set aside his image of what he would be doing—leading a comfortable academic community—and took the steps necessary to reinvent the institution. A colleague gives him high marks for the way he did it:

He's good at being a non-anxious presence on campus. He maintains a sense of humor. He is always intentionally building community. In thinking about the future, he encourages an active imagination among faculty, students, board, and staff. The visioning process has been good. It will mean a campus transformation.

All top leaders, however, whatever the state of their institution, must closely monitor themselves. When the job is as hard as presidency can be, the temptation of work avoidance can be great. It may be difficult for the president and others to recognize that certain functions are not getting enough attention, because those the CEO reports to—a board or university official—do not supervise the head of a school closely. The president may not recognize the problem either, because work-avoiding presidents are often very busy. They are immersed in activities they like and do exceptionally well. The tasks in which they take refuge are, in fact, usually part of their jobs, but they may not deserve the amount of time and attention being invested in them. Work avoidance can take the form of too much time outside the school speaking at or attending events that do not directly lead to benefits for the school. One president told us, “I came out of a local church, so what I do, I preach on Sunday mornings.” Almost every president has to do some preaching, but there was no sign, in this case, that doing it virtually every Sunday produced either students or dollars for the seminary, and it took a huge part of the president’s energy. Work avoidance can also present as a preoccupation with internal administrative matters. Presidents need a grasp

of the issues in every administrative area. They do not need to be immersed in the technical details of accounting, technology, facilities, communications, personnel administration, student life, or even curriculum. But some are, because that is their comfort zone.

Disciplined presidents described a variety of practices they employ to keep on task. One told us how he schooled himself to face personnel problems:

Early on in my career when I was learning how to be an administrator, there was one department I had that ... had it in for administrators ... and didn't want to see anybody. If I didn't understand their issues, I couldn't support them. And it was a growing organization and they were pivotal..., they were going to be a roadblock for all of us. But what I found was I avoided them. I found every excuse not to go down there to that department, and I cringed whenever I had to talk to anybody about them. And it dawned on me one day that it would be to their detriment if I allowed them to keep me out. And so I made it a point to force myself to walk through that department just so they could see me. Then I started talking to them a little bit. Tried to do it informally, and then I would try to gauge a little bit what their real issues were. And that taught me the lesson that I have to look for the places in my organization where I feel uncomfortable, because that's a pretty good sign that there's something there that if I'm going to do my job well, I'm going to need to understand. And then I had to force myself, steel myself sometimes just to roll up my sleeves and interact when everything in me said that's the last thing I wanted to do is to talk to those folks ... I've really learned that that's a sign for me that something else is wrong there, something else is going on. And if I will force myself to understand, then I'll learn something about my organization.

For the best presidents like this one, who disciplined himself by paying attention to what might be called his “discomfort zone,” the job is sometimes a kind of ascetic practice. Another president says that he is a “better person”

For the best presidents, who discipline themselves by paying attention to what might be called their “discomfort zone,” the job is sometimes a kind of ascetic practice.

because he is doing this, though if he had not become president he would be “way ahead career-wise..., but I don't know where I would be as a person.” He describes the struggle:

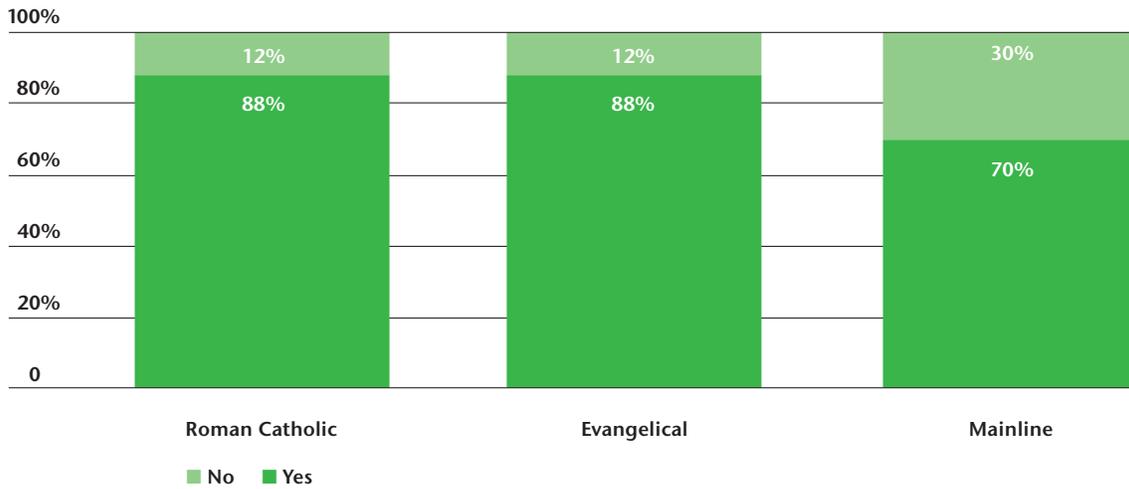
There are days where the academic introvert writer in me says, 'What am I doing here? I'm tired. Just give me a room.' It is interesting. It's interesting work, particularly the fundraising, which I thought I was going to resent to no end..., [but] sometimes I'm tired and there's long hours or there's frustrations, but it's growing. I always try to keep the big picture. It's growing in terms of the big picture.

Another president, who headed a national religious organization before taking the job of leading a hard-pressed institution, put it this way:

[I went] from a national stage to unplugging toilets. After the first two years, it took me seven or eight years to resolve it, seven or eight years of drudgery, the most unhappy years of my life. I was driving around ... thinking about Jack Hayford's sermon on Abraham's unalterable need for altars, and my wife asked me what were my vocational altars? What is the Spirit calling me to now? It was that clarity that held me; ultimately there is joy in obedience, not enjoying myself. That insight was an anchor for many years.

**Figure 4: Prior Knowledge of School:
President was “well acquainted with the school before the search.”**

by Religious Tradition of School



Seminary presidency is not, of course, only ascetical practice or hard-won “joy in obedience.” Anyone who persists in the position over time will find in it a combination of activities they relish and things that they do only because they need to be done. Most job descriptions published by search committees include every feature and function associated with the post. No one is prepared to do all of these things well, but in the glow of a new appointment, that is often forgotten. Both new presidents and their

Presidents must learn to love carrying out parts of the role that are new to them and, sometimes, to steel themselves to perform tasks they may never come to like.

institutions would do well to acknowledge that presidents must learn to love carrying out parts of the role that are new to them and, sometimes, to steel themselves to perform tasks they may never come to like. Seminary presidency is not easy, even in schools that have resources and other advantages. Like other important forms

of religious life, however, theological school leadership rewards faithful service with satisfaction and, ultimately, a deep joy.

Can search committees discern in candidates qualities such as selflessness and discipline that theological school leadership requires? There are no foolproof methods for determining which candidates have the necessary strengths and are free of the most undesirable weaknesses. Theological school search committees do, however, have one advantage. In almost all cases, as Figure 4 shows, their candidates are well-acquainted with the school and therefore well known to key inside figures. This means that with care and discretion it is possible to ferret out information about a candidate’s character, habits, and capacities that may not be evident in formal application materials or interviews. The Recommendations section of this report suggests steps that search committees can take to improve the chances of getting the right person for the job.

Presidents Usually Do Not Get the Help They Need as They Begin Their Work

The first years of an administration are critical because as time goes by, established patterns become increasingly difficult to change. Yet few new theological school leaders get much direction from those they report to, whether boards or university administrations. Nor do many get useful guidance from peers.

As Figure 5 shows, almost two-thirds of the presidents we surveyed said that no direction for the school had been set before they arrived. At first glance that may seem to signal welcome degrees of freedom to make of the job and the institution whatever they like. Presidents are hired in part for their creativity, and no new executive will be satisfied if the only assignment is to follow a detailed strategic blueprint devised before her or his arrival. But there are, in fact, always expectations about the shape of the

institution's future, often conflicting ones. The board or university administration that gives no direction at all has failed to state those expectations and, where necessary, adjudicate among them. Further, different institutional directions require different skill sets. Even the ablest leaders have limitations. Neglecting to set a strategic direction before a search begins increases the chances that the person hired will not be able to do the job the school wants and needs to have done.

Three schools in this study had dire institutional problems when the new president arrived. Amazingly, in two cases, the board was only dimly aware of how serious the situation was, either because the previous president had concealed information from them or they had neglected to do due diligence. "They threw

Figure 5: CEOs' Reports of Orientation to Job

The governing board had set a clear direction for the school before I was elected.

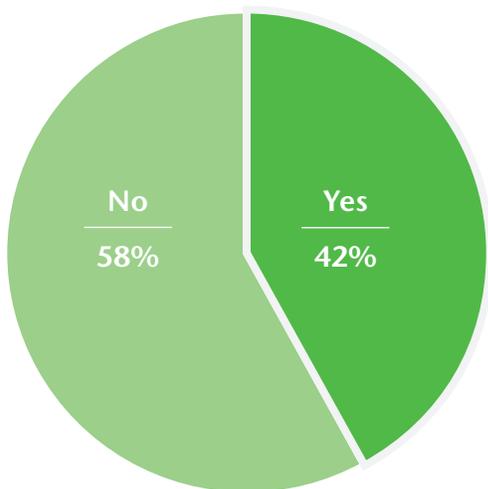
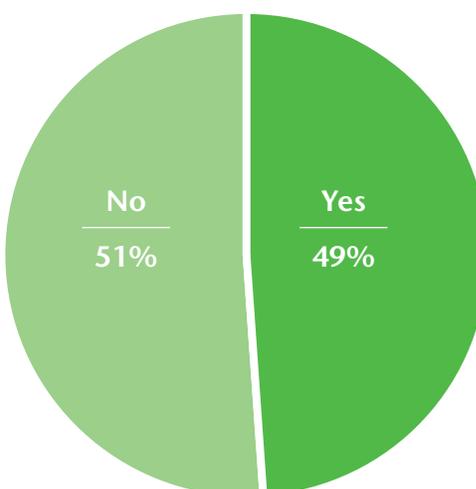


Figure 6: CEOs' Reports of Orientation to Job

Expectations for first year performance were clearly communicated by the board.



me the keys to the Titanic,” said the president of one school. The presidents of failing schools were not alone. One-quarter of those surveyed said that before they took the job they were underinformed about finances, enrollment, fundraising, and other challenges.

Nor do new presidents receive much direction once they arrive. As Figure 6 shows, half did not have clear goals set for their first year. Unlike new presidents in other sectors of higher education,

The absence of guidance and oversight leaves even a very able new president in a lonely position.

most of whom have had prior executive leadership experience as chairs of large departments, deans, provosts, or presidents of other schools, theological seminary leaders often have not performed in a job in which they supervise a significant number of people and have heavy responsibility for an institution and its constituencies. Among the case-study schools, only one gave the new president structured help during the transitional period. That transition plan was impressive. An ongoing committee that included the board chair and other board members helped the new president manage a variety of new challenges, including the removal of a toxic faculty member, an issue that had remained from the previous administration. It was, said the president, “one of those things that everybody knew had to be done but were frightened to death of the ramifications. And rightly so.” A resolution was reached. There were reverberations, but the new president felt upheld: “I didn’t feel that I was all by myself. I was taking a lot of hits, but that’s what you sign up for. But I felt *we* were pretty united.”

Most new presidents, and for that matter, many experienced ones, do not have occasion

as they start their jobs to use the first person plural, as in: *We* are in this together. The board chairs (or university officers) who assiduously courted them did not give the presidents much attention during their first year. Most new presidents did not even have a substantive review at the end of the first year. And few had peers early in their presidencies who could offer advice, a pattern that continues through most presidencies, as noted later in this report.

The absence of guidance and oversight leaves even a very able new president in a lonely position. As one said, “There was no one to in-service me” as he learned the job. There is a great deal to learn in the initial period. One, whose rule for the first year was, “Don’t change anything but your underwear,” gave this account of learning the subtleties of communicating as an authority figure in a small community:

First there’s the faculty and the staff getting to know you and you getting to know them. So it’s basically facilitating their comfort in each case—in my comfort with them and their comfort with me, and the consequent confidence that we have in dealing with each other. And their ability to read me and I them.

The power of the presidency is another reality most presidents encounter on their own. The president, whose story opened this report, whose offhand remark resulted in the death of a tree, learned this lesson, as did another president who moved into the job from the school’s faculty:

I had to learn that my words had a completely different level of impact. As soon as I stepped into the office of president..., I had to be much more careful about what I said as president than in any other role because people invest much more in what a president says.

One especially delicate issue in many transitions involves the predecessor. Some of the people who preceded the presidents in our sample disappeared from the scene because they had left under a cloud, taken a job at another institution, or made a retirement plan that did not include continued contact with the school. Others, however, remained in the vicinity. One or two were somewhat intrusive, continuing to relate to staff and donors, but most kept a distance, appearing only when invited and giving their successors space to begin their new job. The new presidents would have been helped by receiving advice from board leaders about the appropriate

Many presidents eventually learn to do the job, but the process often takes much longer than it might have if they did not have to find their way almost entirely on their own.

role for the previous president. Several highly effective presidents who had strong predecessors discovered that the predecessor could be very helpful in creating a bridge between administrations and in turning the interests of friends of the school toward the new directions in which the successor was taking the institution.

Several presidents in our sample—those who had many natural gifts—quickly figured out for themselves how to work through the challenges of transition: how to relate to constituencies and their predecessor, to structure time, and to

balance the functions described in the next section. Some knew as soon as they arrived how to operate. One person we interviewed noted that the presidency requires a balanced combination of deliberate speed and patient persistence:

I've got to sell the vision to the people on the ground [faculty and staff]—get them to be the players. I have my own word for that. I call it progressive gradualism. It's almost like a paradox. You've got to always be pushing a little bit and you can't get impatient. If you don't push, it'll stop. If you get impatient, you're gonna start meeting massive resistance.

Start-up was a gradual process for some presidents. One said, “I saw the first three years as my introduction, and that’s exactly what happened. Beginning right around May [of the third year], I just felt like the whole thing was getting easier.” Others faced a crisis early in their tenure (e.g., the death of a beloved community member, the arrival on campus of outside activists angry about the position of the school on a social issue) that proved a catalyst for leadership. At the other end of the spectrum, those who were not a good fit for their schools took initial false steps that proved very difficult to correct later. Many presidents eventually learn to do the job, but the process often takes much longer than it might have if they did not have to find their way almost entirely on their own. The Recommendations section outlines ways that the transition into presidency might be better structured than it is in most institutions.

The Most Effective Executives in Theological Schools

Master Five Core Practices

This study identified five functions that are essential ingredients of mature theological school leadership that works. Three of these occur inside the school and take up the most time during a president's first years of service.

Team building. The first practice is to build a senior team to administer the work of the school.⁵ The best presidents forge strong teams that are a combination of the best staff they inherited when they took the job and some key new appointees. They know—or they learn—how to manage people to get the best performance from the team they have assembled.

Building a team is a delicate balance between conservation and change. Here is one example from our study of new presidents. The head of a freestanding school brought in a deputy who, if necessary, could take his place. The deputy was an administrator with a national reputation in

The best presidents forge strong teams that are a combination of the best staff they inherited when they took the job and some key new appointees.

the school's religious constituency. His decision to join the president helped raise the school's reputation and visibility. "You know, with [the deputy], it makes me sleep more secure at night. I'm flying on an airplane tomorrow. If the airplane stops short of the runway, he can take the school over." The president decided to retain the academic dean until the dean's term expired even though the dean's style did not mesh with his own, but, at the same time, he terminated a financial officer whose tactics didn't fit the ethos of the school and hired an able replacement

who is committed to the values of the seminary. Finally, he developed and encouraged a number of staff members who were already in place. "My idea as an administrator," he said, "is you don't come in with a broom. You work through retirements and try to find a few bright young people."

A faculty member described the effect of the president's approach:

I think that for me a key piece of leadership is to be able to draw the gifts from within the group that you're serving and I think all of those that are in leadership right now are quite good at that. They're good at allowing people to do things and not sort of squeezing the life out of the place but rather letting it grow and develop, and we have a very good solid group..., they're people that can mentor. They have their own gifts and they're happy to use them and they are good quality... but they really let people do their jobs well, and I think that's a key piece.

In one school we reviewed, part of a university, the president made the most of the staff already in place. Several predecessors had stumbled, especially in human relations, and he used his considerable interpersonal skills to improve low morale. He brought virtually everyone he worked with to a higher level of functioning, including his secretary, who eventually became a manager. Several others on the staff became more productive. He also skillfully managed his superiors in the university administration, securing recognition and rewards for subordinates who performed well. A member of his faculty

said, “He is an excellent leader, and he’s the best team builder I’ve ever seen.... I consider [him] a Level 5 leader in the Jim Collins kind of way.”⁶

Other highly effective presidents in our sample garnered similar comments. An academic dean said the following:

I have the utmost respect for [the president]. He allows people to work to their strengths. He allows me to work at the speed and ... in the way in which I work. I keep him constantly informed and I’m willing to put the brakes on anything that doesn’t fit with his vision. It’s not my vision. It’s the community vision but it’s the vision that he leads and he leads it well.

And from the financial officer of the same institution:

He is who I want to be when I grow up. I want to be like [him]. He is eloquent.... He brings the team together. He maneuvers the direction without making people feel they don’t matter. You can’t help but want to work harder for him.... This job is one of the best moves I ever made.

The spirit of a collegial, cooperative, and competent administrative team can infect the entire institution. A faculty member in a school where this happened made the following comment:

We are all very committed to being congenial and to having and maintaining collegial relationships with each other. The faculty is working together for a common goal. Deep down there is a personal connection which makes people part of the team. This is solely [the president’s] work, the connectedness. This connectedness begins at the top and works its way down through all relationships. Once people come here to work, they don’t leave. It’s organically a very healthy place to work. We share a common vision of how we serve the church.... The president is gifted at building relationships;... she listens and places things in the larger context [with] so much integrity, clarity, and professionalism.

There are other management styles that work fairly well. Sometimes, especially in schools embedded in a larger institution, it is not possible to make the changes necessary for a fully-functioning team. In these cases, some leaders who have great relational abilities use them to compensate—in effect, they manage around

The spirit of a collegial, cooperative, and competent administrative team can infect the entire institution.

their less-than-effective subordinates, sidelining them and encouraging others to form small groups that work together. Many presidents prefer to relate to subordinates individually—the president is the hub, with strong spokes to each key staff member, but without a rim to connect them. Both this and the “manage around” pattern are second-best management options. For one thing, both are president-dependent. Take the president out of the equation and very little coordinated administration remains. And the lack of teamwork creates uncertainty and unease. This is the comment of a senior staff member in a school where the president hired strong colleagues and relates well to them, but the colleagues relate chiefly to the president rather than work together:

The senior administration shows that [the president] can recruit good people. I’m not sure he develops them well. I have full confidence they all know their jobs and do them well.... A couple of months ago, there was a staff-faculty survey that revealed a lack of trust by the community in the senior staff. It hit [the president] hard. ‘What did they mean? We do work together well. There is fairly high trust among the cabinet....’ He would say he loves his cabinet and his team, but we don’t feel so much we are the team.

Evidence from our study suggests that more schools do not have effective teams than have them. As Figure 7 shows, the majority of financial officers who responded to the Auburn survey reported the absence of meaningful signs of teamwork, including candor about strengths and weaknesses, willingness to support decisions of the group, and unselfish behavior toward other members of the team.

Team building is not easy. Presidents told us what experienced managers everywhere know: that choosing and managing staff is one of the trickiest parts of the job. Even the interpersonally gifted agonize over personnel matters. “They are the ones that get into my gut,” said a highly

Team building is not easy. Presidents know that choosing and managing staff is one of the trickiest parts of the job.

effective president. A president soon learns that there is no magic formula for choosing personnel. Most will make some wrong choices.

But some of the mistakes that are obstacles to team building are avoidable. Our study suggests that presidents who want to form strong teams should *not* do the following:

- *They should not leave less-than-effective staff in place too long.* One president made some brilliant hires and succeeded in retaining a key staff member who had been offered a better job but, by his own account, had a dysfunctional cabinet until he steeled himself to fire a non-performing staff member.

- *They should not form alliances with some senior staff that exclude other staff.* Particularly when things are tough, it is tempting to choose one trusted associate as a confidant. But other

staff members become alienated, the president is cut off from diverse views, and the president may become too dependent on a particular associate and be bereft if that person leaves.

- *They should avoid hiring friends or importing past associates.* These actions send a signal that the president does not trust the new staff and thinks more highly of the president’s previous institution than of the present one.

- *Presidents should not bully.* We heard about presidents who lose their temper and intimidate those around them with angry behavior. In more than one case, a president was charming and amiable with the powerful—board members, senior faculty and donors—but short-tempered with others, even with clerical and maintenance staff who were powerless to defend themselves. This created an atmosphere of fear and lowered morale in the entire school community.

Faculty relations. The second core practice that effective presidents must master is faculty relations. The best relationships have several dimensions. One is mutual respect. Effective presidents both honor the faculty and gain their respect. We observed an example of this in the relationship between a faculty and a president who had no academic doctorate and no background in seminary teaching or administration before becoming president. This president had high regard for the faculty:

I want each faculty [member] to be strong, not weak. Disagreements don’t frighten me. It doesn’t bother me to be working hard—we’ll be better with all the rubbing up on each other. The world is counting on us—we need strong faculty.

Figure 7: What CFO's Say About the Senior Administrative Team in Their Schools

- 49% say members usually are willing to make sacrifices in their department for the good of the team.
- 49% say team members usually leave meetings confident their peers are committed to the decisions that were agreed upon.
- 37% say members usually end discussions with a clear resolution and calls to action.
- 37% say members usually challenge one another about their plans and approaches.
- 29% say members usually admit mistakes and weaknesses.
- 28% say members usually are slow to seek credit for their own contributions.

The faculty has responded well; one says that the president knows that power is not a zero-sum game, that one side does not necessarily have more if the other has less. Rather, power expands as it is shared.

Another president, one who was a faculty member and academic dean, had an equally good relationship:

I have made it a practice to be pretty accountable to the faculty, that the faculty knows where I am and knows what major gifts I'm working on, because that's an encouragement to them.... You may think you're doing well if you've got board support but if you have lost faculty support, then your goose is cooked as a leader and so I probably have leaned more toward board than toward faculty because I thought I could assume that.... I cannot. Even though I was one of them, I cannot assume that credibility and that loyalty and so I am trying to balance that.

Again, the faculty responded well: "The president is very accessible, present at faculty meetings and doesn't undercut the dean. [The president sees his role as] promoter and lets the dean do the dean's job."

Mutual respect does not, however, mean that presidents and faculty always agree. It is

important for presidents who have been faculty members to realize that they now play a different role. Here is how one president who had served on the faculty of the school he now leads made the transition from faculty status:

I was very conscious at the very beginning about changing my relationship to the faculty when I came into this office, and I could not socialize with the faculty outside of official kinds of things. I have been very careful to—one of the things I had to learn early on was to be very careful in faculty meetings when I'm there, that I didn't answer questions. [The academic dean] said to me at some point during the year..., 'You're really responding like a president now in the faculty meetings and not like someone who's wanting folks to like you.' My natural inclination is to want to be a pleaser and that's dangerous in this kind of position because there's no way to please everybody all the time. I'm learning how to make difficult decisions that are going to upset folks, even folks I care about deeply—I think that I am learning to do that but I think that it's an ongoing challenge for me to do that and do it well.

Good presidents avoid head-to-head confrontation when they can. One talks with faculty members in a friendly, informal setting. He believes that his job is to lead the faculty, but also that he can't lose them:

First of all, faculty are always the most powerful players in a place like this, and should be.... If you have a football team, they're the players. But I find if they're bucking you through every kind of passive aggression it's not going to go anywhere. Somehow—I mean you have to have the majority—their ethos has to be onside, but it simply means you're going to move a lot slower in a lot of areas, and maybe it's the price I'm paying. I have an agenda with a lot of big pieces and I like what Obama said.... He says, "They can happen and they will happen, but they're not happening nearly at the speed that I want them to happen." And partly because I'm trying to run a harmonious ship.

It is not always possible to keep the crew and captain of the ship in harmony. Sometimes it is necessary to say no, and effective presidents do so when they must. This president decided that an appointment backed by the faculty was not right for the school:

I just came to a moment of clarity for myself when I was awake at four in the morning and said, "This is not the thing to do for us at this point in time at this institution," and so I called a meeting of the faculty for three days later. I told [the dean] immediately that this is what I had decided, and I was not going to take that recommendation forward. [The dean] was fully supportive of that. I called the meeting of the faculty on a Friday morning, sat down with them, and told them that I had decided that I was not going to take this recommendation to the board. There's a provision in the faculty

handbook where ... they can override the president and send a recommendation to the board over the president's objection, and they did not exercise that prerogative to do that, but I allowed for them, that they had the right to do that. I [also] told them that I was absolutely confident that if they did that, the board would not accept it.

It is important that the president exercise presidential authority when necessary, but only when necessary. We saw instances of presidents violating the established procedures of the school. These efforts usually did not succeed, and the presidents suffered major setbacks in faculty relations. The slow process of re-establishing mutual respect and laying the groundwork for the exercise, where necessary, of presidential prerogative, had to begin all over again.

Faculty relations are a special challenge in theological school settings. In large educational institutions, the president's contact with faculty is limited. School policies that affect the faculty are mediated by a provost and deans who are

A relationship of trust and respect between the president and faculty is essential if the school is to continue to function smoothly through inevitable differences about policy matters.

full-time administrators. Most seminaries are small and have only a single senior academic officer, often a dean who teaches as well, and as Figure 8 indicates, seminary chief academic officers identify strongly with the faculty. This means that policy issues are often negotiated by the president with the faculty. A relationship of trust and respect is essential if the school is to continue to function smoothly through inevitable differences about policy matters.

The purpose of creating mutual respect between president and faculty is not only to

Figure 8: Chief Academic Officers and the Faculty

	Percentage who agree/strongly agree
■ The dean should be a strong advocate for faculty concerns.	99%
■ I consistently consult with faculty on institutional matters.	96%
■ Decisions should reflect the majority of the faculty rather than the judgment of the academic dean.	85%
■ The continued appointment of the dean should be subject to faculty review.	68%
■ The primary allegiance of the dean should be to the faculty rather than with the administration.	57%
■ I have made significant decisions that were opposed by faculty members.	47%
■ On difficult decisions, I am more likely to confer with the administration rather than the faculty.	43%

keep the peace. The president and faculty must take each other seriously if the president is to carry out two critical parts of the job: building the faculty the school needs and shaping its self-understanding in ways that align with the mission of the school. To accomplish the first, presidents need leverage. Most seminary governance systems give the president a pivotal role to play in faculty appointments. In many schools they appoint search and review committees and can veto the committee's recommendations for new hires, promotion, and tenure before they reach the board. The best presidents we observed, however, did not force or impose appointments; rather, they collaborated with the faculty to find and promote the best candidates. This collaboration, along with the second task of motivating the faculty to apply their creativity to forward the mission of the school, was possible only if both the president and the faculty thought highly of each other and treated each other well.

Financial Management. The third major internal challenge of new and maturing presidents is to establish and maintain fiscal responsibility. The best of the presidents we observed imposed fiscal discipline during their first year, if the institution's finances were out of balance, and insisted that it be maintained in every subsequent year.

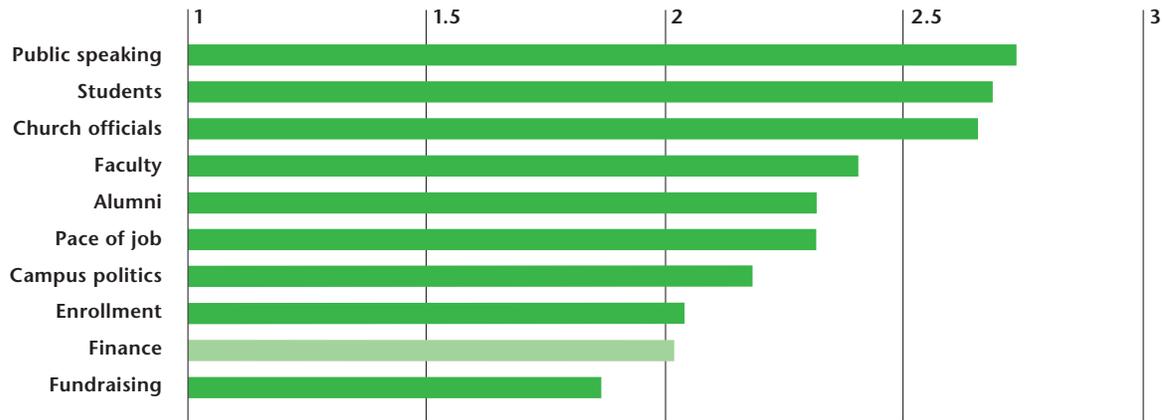
These presidents did not settle for the appearance of balance, as some institutions do. In this and other studies, Auburn researchers have identified techniques that many seminaries

The best presidents imposed fiscal discipline during their first year and insisted that it be maintained in every subsequent year.

use to produce budgets in which revenues and expenditures appear to match but which actually mask financial imbalance. Sometimes losses are papered over by overdrawing on endowment or by borrowing. Sometimes expenditures are reduced by moving some off budget or deferring

Figure 9: Presidents' Start-Up: Confidence Levels

1 = Not Confident 2 = Moderately 3 = Very Confident



necessary spending (for instance, for building maintenance). The Association of Theological Schools reports that when just one of these masking techniques (overdrawing from endowment) is removed, nearly two-thirds of freestanding seminaries were running deficits before the recession began. After the recession, some of the deficits escalated to high levels—

Many new presidents did not have confidence in their fiscal management skills when they started the job.

over a million dollars a year in one-third of the institutions that run a deficit.

Many new presidents did not have confidence in their fiscal management skills when they started the job (Figure 9). Often they do not know enough about institutional finance to ask probing questions as they interview for the job.

One president told about the shock of discovering, after only a few days in office, that the school was in a state of financial crisis—a fact that never surfaced when he was being recruited.

Nevertheless, several of the new presidents we studied cut budgets back to balanced size in their first year. In some cases, the cuts had to be draconian. Programs and positions, including faculty positions, were eliminated, and the president, board, and financial officer had to stand firm amid sometimes explosive reactions to the measures necessary to save the life of the school. Less dramatic but also difficult were the measures that new presidents took in schools that had fallen into the habit of smaller deficits. These presidents knew that little bits of overspending now can create crippling weaknesses down the line. If a school must borrow, liabilities will escalate. If it is raiding its own endowment, it will eventually run out of expendable funds. In either case, institutions may slowly move into territory in which they will not be able to sustain operations. But because that day is difficult to foresee, the political pressure not to make cuts can be intense. So presidents in this position have to stand firm.

On the other hand, responsible spending now is the best guarantee of future strength. Figure 10 is based on the financial data from the six well-functioning schools we studied. When the schools were chosen, only their reputation for educational quality and management competence was known. Their financial records were not examined at that point, although care was taken to choose schools that were not rich and some that had overcome major financial challenges.

Figure 10 shows financial results from those schools over eight years. Eight years of data for six schools equals forty-eight fiscal years of data. In forty-four of those fiscal years the six schools had balanced budgets or surpluses. No school ran a chronic deficit. Anytime a deficit occurred it was eliminated—and repaid—within two years.

The lesson from this analysis of the well-functioning schools in this study is that quality and fiscal responsibility go hand in hand. The connection was also clear in visits to these schools.

Quality and fiscal responsibility go hand in hand. Disciplined financial practices create a solid base for the work of the school.

Disciplined financial practices created a solid base for the work of the school. Faculty and staff were confident about the institution’s future, and the fact that the president and senior administrative team could manage finances gave them an extra measure of credibility in other policy areas.

Institutional Advancement. Figure 11 illustrates a progression in the balance of presidential functions. After the initial period in which the president’s attention is focused on the internal working of the school, effective presidents turn increasingly toward building relationships with external constituencies, and especially toward those whose financial and other support the institution needs to survive and grow. For most seminary leaders, that means raising money

Figure 10: Surplus (Deficit) as a Percentage of Expenditures in Well-Managed Schools
With Investment Revenue Set at 5 Percent of Investment Opening Value

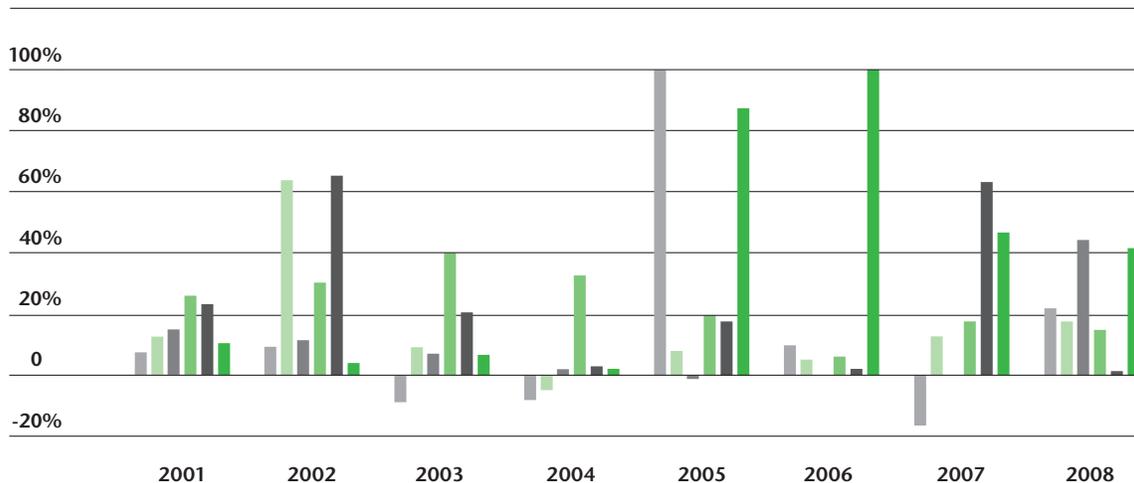
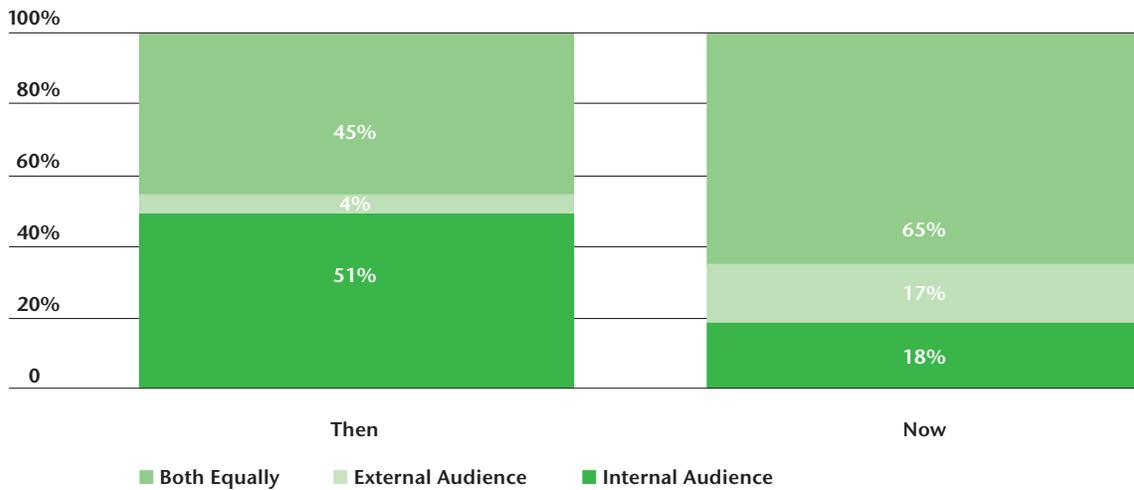


Figure 11: The President's Job: Changes in Focus Over Time



chiefly from individuals who give to the school from their personal resources. For some—for deans of schools that are part of a larger institution and for many Roman Catholic seminaries—it means working effectively with the persons who make decisions about funding the school from the university budget or the coffers of the diocese or religious order. Despite these variations, the core task is the same: making the case for the institution to those who have a major impact on the school's welfare.

Figure 12 shows that a large majority of those who answered our survey reported that fundraising is the function that they felt *least*

The core task of the president is to make the case for the institution to those who have a major impact on the school's welfare.

prepared to exercise when they first took the job; it ranks below even financial management. This is not surprising: most people are reticent about asking for money, even for the best of causes. And yet, among our presidents were some who had never raised a dime before

becoming a seminary president but who were good at it by the time we completed our three-year study. How did they do it?

One, whose only prior experience was as a faculty member, read a few articles, talked to some experienced colleagues, and then plunged into the work:

The only way to learn this is to do it, and the only way to raise money is to ask people, and you're going to get turned down, and if you're not getting turned down, you're not asking enough people for enough money.... If you don't have experience or expertise in fundraising, you can do it, just learn all you can about it. Educate yourself. Talk to people who have been experienced at it [and] who can provide mentoring and encouragement.

Another, who had been a denominational official and a faculty member, says that it is mostly a matter of allocating the time. He spent at least an hour a day on fundraising from the beginning and then more when a campaign began:

But when it's going full—it is probably 60 percent of my time and has been for the last year easily. Now it's been quite rewarding because we've got a lot of money and we've set up a lot of contacts and cultivated a lot of people and the long-term dividends [are that] we're going to double the endowment [and] ... build some new buildings.... It's a big piece, but it's taking a lot of time.

A third president, who came from academic life, regrets starting slowly and still worries “about my skills and performance in fundraising more than I worry about anything else....I think the degree to which a president can get a running start at fundraising is essential,” she said. “I feel like I did not start as quickly in effective fundraising....” Her board chair, however, said the president was doing “a terrific job.” By the third year of presidency, donor cultivation was a major activity and the president had figured out a regimen to make it effective:

I'm out quite a bit more.... [The focus is] basically the top twenty-five donors.... I read that if you spend time with the major donors, and you work that kind of relentlessly, and you get close to folk, good things happen.... You can only see so many people. You ought to see those folk who have the biggest impact.

This president uses the discipline developed earlier in life as a scholar:

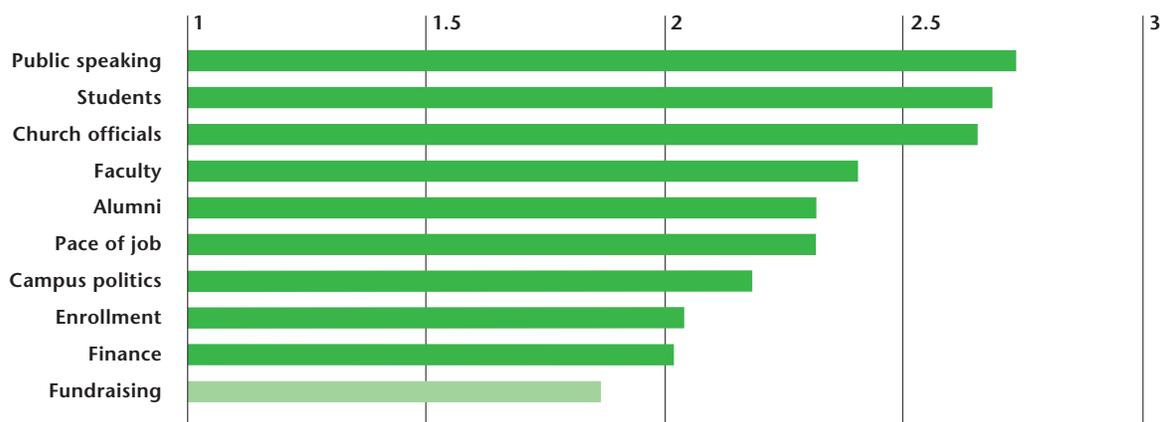
There are some people who still terrify me to ask them. There's one grumpy old [person] that I can't get to return e-mails or return calls, and he's kind of a curmudgeon, and I have to get my courage up to give him a call. He's given us fifty thousand dollars the last two years. And I'm a pretty ... scheduled, methodical kind of person, and so [I] take it on much like I would take on a writing assignment. I can get this much done in this day. I can make this many phone calls or this many letters before I have to ... go lie down.

Willpower goes a long way toward fundraising success. Where it fails, the kind of spiritual discipline described earlier can fill the gap. “My own theology of how God works,” says the president just quoted, “is ... primarily an incarnational means. I dare not ask the Lord to provide for [my institution] if I'm not willing to go and sit in some living rooms....” These examples suggest that anyone can, with sufficient application and a little help from the Holy Spirit, be a highly effective fundraiser and even come to enjoy it.

There was a similar division among presidents whose schools depended on the good will of

Figure 12: Presidents' Start-Up: Confidence Levels

1 = Not Confident 2 = Moderately 3 = Very Confident



superiors who made the major decisions about funding. Some viewed the cultivation of university or religious officials to whom they reported as the least pleasant part of the job and minimized the amount of time spent in such activities. Others understood from the start that the school's future depended on good relationships and put major effort into creating them. Raising the status of the school in the eyes of those who had the most power to determine its future

It is critical that heads of theological schools find ways to develop their fundraising aptitude.

was, for this second group, one of their most satisfying accomplishments.

It is surprising, then, how many presidents remain skittish about the area of advancement. This is a major area of the work avoidance described earlier. Some presidents become enmeshed in internal operations and seem to be unable to propel themselves outside the school to develop relationships with supporters and ask for financial support. We heard reports like this:

There has been some unevenness in where his energies have been. Only a couple of new trustees have been recruited. In fundraising, things haven't quite jelled. He blocks out Thursdays for it, but he hasn't been able to schedule donor visits, unlike his predecessor, who was always in a campaign mode.

Even more common than hiding inside the school are skewed perceptions of the likely payoff from the ways a president spends time outside the institution. Presidents can easily convince themselves that activities that they like and at which they can shine—attending denominational conferences, preaching, or giving academic talks—are key to constituency

development and fund-raising. There are sound institutional reasons to do all these things, but they do not count as fund development. Research shows that cultivation of a limited number of individuals, whether donors or influential institutional funders, produces most of the financial results. Auburn's research also shows that fundraising for theological schools is president-dependent.⁷ Development officers raise millions on their own for colleges and universities. This is not the case in theological education: few big gifts are made to seminaries unless the president is personally involved in seeking them. Therefore it is critical that heads of theological schools find ways to develop their fundraising aptitude. We suggest some in the Recommendations section of this report.

Vision. Vision, a last key function of "leadership that works," vision knits together the other functions, internal and external. Vision is what prevents the other functions from devolving into mechanical operations that keep the school running well in place but headed in no particular direction. The president's job is not to supply a vision but to discern one that is rooted in the school's heritage, alert to the needs of the church and the world, and expressive of high aspiration for the future. The effective president then articulates that vision and motivates the institution's other leaders—board, faculty, donors, graduates, students—to support the vision and move the school in that direction.

The best presidents do this by lifting the sights of others. As one put it, "You have to radiate life and hope for your institution.... 'Without vision, the people perish.'" Both by what they say eloquently and what they do, excellent

presidents portray the identity of the school and make it attractive to others.

Visionary leadership is positive, but it does involve some risk. As one observer told us, it takes courage. He described how his boss, the president, works hard at keeping the school, a flagship institution in its stream of religious tradition, firmly rooted in that tradition while also “stretching the boundaries.” Boundary stretching has perils: “He’s on a tightrope,” says the observer. “It is easier to be too conservative or too open. It makes me proud, but I’m glad the gun is not pointed at me!” Nor are vision and high purpose luxuries available only to institutions with resources. A president whose school was on the verge of closing when he took over said this: “I grow things—vision—out of... troubles.... [I] craft a vision from catastrophe.”

Discerning a vision is only the first step. Able presidents also know how to move the institution in the direction of its highest hopes. They lead in creating strategic plans and setting priorities that implement the vision. Sometimes this

The effective president articulates the vision and motivates the institution’s other leaders—board, faculty, donors, graduates, students—to support the vision and move the school in that direction.

leadership includes the difficult and usually unpopular step of terminating activities that are peripheral to the vision and priorities. They set the gauges for institutional performance, and they find the means to support the effort. One noted that the president is both architect and developer: You “have to raise the money to make the vision work.... You can have ... vision and no money or ... resources.”

And money is only part of what is needed to realize a vision. Motivation is just as important,

and deft presidents supply it by example, precept, personal encouragement, and by keeping all constituencies and segments of the school engaged and playing their roles. That last element—all constituencies—is critical. The president must deal evenhandedly with all those who have a stake in the school’s well-being. One of the most skillful leaders we observed underlined the importance of this: “*Remember you’re president for the whole institution.*” It took me a while to learn that because I was an academic, and I realized after awhile I’m not just president for the faculty. I’m president for ... the staff, for everybody, for ... the board.”

Presidential envisioning can go awry. Some presidents go too far. They galvanize the hopes and goals of some constituencies but alienate others. In some cases, they may promote the boldest ideas of faculty and other insiders but put the school at odds with its outside supporters. More than one president has left office early in such situations. Difficulties can also arise in the other direction. Presidents may make common cause with venturesome, entrepreneurial donors but fail to incorporate the values of the faculty or administrative team into the plan. Both versions of going too far are recipes for trouble.

Another serious mistake is for a president to import and impose a vision that has few points of congruence with the mission and values of the school he or she has agreed to lead. “Visions” should orient schools to new possibilities but must also be rooted in the school’s own traditions as it moves forward and outward. An effective president champions the *institution’s* vision. Trying to make a school into something very different from what it has been, is now, and hopes to become, rarely succeeds.

The Most Effective Presidents Attend to Their Own Needs for Rest, Recreation, and Spiritual Renewal

How do effective presidents survive in jobs that are hard under the best of circumstances and demanding in the extreme when adversity strikes?

The fourth major finding from our study is that effective presidents take adequate care of themselves while they tend to the needs of the institution they serve. They bring to the task of self-care the same discipline they apply to other facets of their job. One president has a pastor of the same age and gender with whom she can “commiserate ... over coffee” about the “significant leadership roles” each occupies. The president also belongs to a Sunday school class. “I’m out about three Sundays a month,” she says, “but they are always interested in what I’m doing and [they] find ways to raise scholarship for students as class projects.... They believe in what I’m doing and kind of see it up close, so there’s support.”

Several presidents described travel and speaking as a kind of recreation. They are aware that some of this time away from campus is not directly relevant to their job and they limit the amount they do to fit into the time they have available for personal recreation and renewal, but they deliberately schedule some for its restorative benefits.

Most presidents, however, have not developed these salutary habits and find presidency disruptive to their personal and religious lives. They do not take adequate time for rest and recreation. They lean too heavily on family or colleagues in their religious order and find it difficult to maintain a balance between their work and personal lives. Several presidents

noted that the lack of time for exercise and the constant round of meals with seminary constituents caused them to put on weight. They failed to locate personal support where one might think it would be most readily available: from pastors and local congregations. The fact that seminary presidency is often a Sunday job disrupts relationship with any single congregation. Few presidents reported having a pastor on whom they rely: “Our family’s had a hard time finding a church home.... At this point, finding myself in this place, it may sound odd that here I am giving some leadership to a seminary, and I don’t find a lot of spiritual resources. Chapel is important here on campus for me ... relationally. I—to be honest, I’m not fed a great deal by it.”

Many said they were lonely in the job. Appreciation is expressed for events organized for presidents by the Association of Theological Schools, but most do not form on-going relationships in these settings. Some meet from time to time with colleagues—other seminary and college presidents in the region—but few count this as a major source of guidance and support: “I don’t feel like I have sufficient mentoring as a new president in terms of working with another president close at hand.”

For almost all presidents the family is the major source of personal support, and most worry about the toll that is taking, especially on spouses who are the sole repositories of stories about the stresses of the job: “There are very few people I can talk to and my wife gets tired of hearing [it],” says one president. “I don’t have a lot of peers. I’ve been building a friendship with the new president at the college next door here, but his world’s very different. So part of it is just that loneliness, not really having people that I have a lot in common with.”

Most Presidents Do Not Receive Adequate Guidance and Oversight from the Boards or University Officials to Whom They Are Accountable

The last major finding of our study was in many ways the most sobering. Our data show that boards of trustees and university administrators—the people to whom the president reports—fail to provide what schools and their leaders need at almost every point in the cycle of institutional leadership.

Boards and their university equivalents often fail before the president arrives on campus. A large majority of presidents say that no clear direction for the school was set before they arrived, and half had no clear goals even for

A large majority of presidents say that no clear direction for the school was set before they arrived, and half had no clear goals even for their first year.

their first year. One president who came from the school's own faculty and who knew individual board members was, nevertheless, shocked when he assumed the presidency to discover the lack of governing capacity in the board as a body and the low level of commitment of time and resources by the board members.

Once the president is in place, the excuse for board inaction is often that a board does not wish to overstep its bounds and insert itself into management issues. There are instances of this happening. In one school we observed, the dean

said that the board “thinks it has a ‘policing mandate’” and another administrator complained that board meetings were occasions to “beat up on staff.” More often, however, boards are passive or even derelict in their duties. Some restrict their roles to cheerleading and rubber stamping. One president had been hesitant to dive into fundraising, but the board chair saw no reason to intervene:

We want [the president] to take the lead. We do not interfere.... As board chair, I want to make sure he has free will to develop as he needs to in his role. I try not to [encourage him to grow in certain ways]. I support his style, and his interpretation. I never say, ‘The expectation is....’

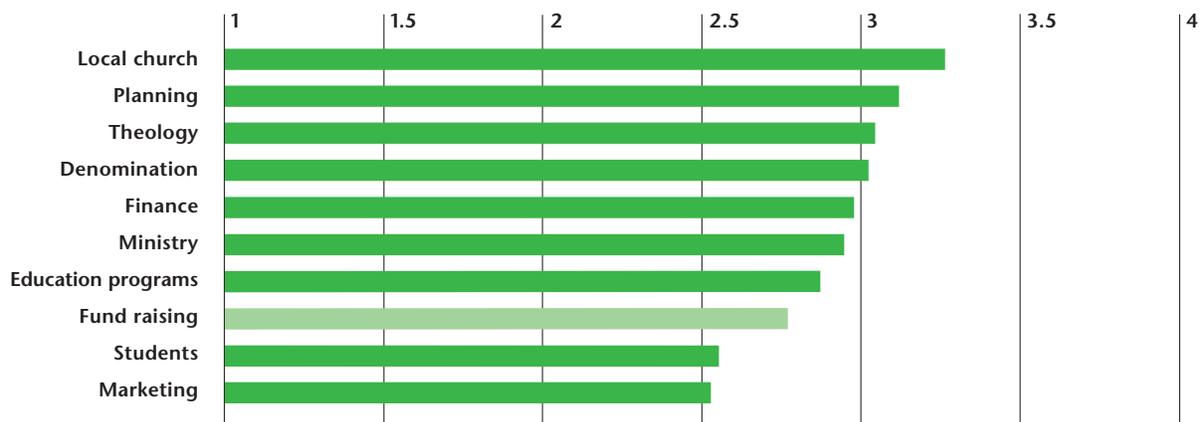
One highly competent president reported receiving too little critical perspective on the part of the board:

My relationship to the board ... is charmed.... It is really good. Probably much better than I deserve. The board likes me. The board affirms me. The board gives me license. They eat up everything I say to a point where it would probably be good if they even were more critical. But see the difference is the board—the board and people in the building see different things. The board only sees the big pieces, and they only see what I'm doing externally.... They don't see my shortcomings inside the building. So the relationship is excellent, but it's better than I deserve.

Seminary boards, roughly half of whose members are clergy, are especially hesitant to hold a president to fundraising benchmarks, particularly

Figure 13: Board Members' Self-Reported Expertise

1 = None 2 = Little 3 = Some 4 = A Great Deal



Source: Auburn survey of theological school board members in 2000

when they also feel unprepared for this task (Figure 13).

Not all boards or board members fall down on the job. Some give the right kind of constructive critical attention. Some boards do take note of inadequate presidential performance that puts the school at risk and then make corrections in time. But we also saw cases where board members who voiced their concerns about presidential performance were sidelined and board colleagues were reluctant to call the president to account. The bent of seminary boards is to do what the president wants. Critical board members typically leave after their first failed attempt to raise legitimate questions.

Some of the very best presidents we had the privilege to observe had inherited board or administrative superiors who were weak, lazy, or irresponsible. The presidents' first impulses were to work around the board or administration, but they soon realized that their superiors are also their primary constituency—"They are 'my people,'" said one brilliant president—and the job is too big to do without the board's active partnership and support. These presidents concluded that more than any other institutional feature—more than a competent and cooperative

administrative team, a balanced budget, a vigorous development program, more even than a constructive and productive faculty—what is crucial is an empowered board or a well-informed university administration.

So the best presidents gave priority to managing upwards. They took an active part in recruiting strong board members and orienting them to the work of the school. They deftly educated university officials about issues in theological education and the special role their schools play on the wider stage. They recognized that an active and well-informed board or university administration that gives substantive oversight is not a threat to their autonomy but, rather, their most valuable asset. It is also—a key point for those whose presidency is maturing into its final phase—a president's most valuable legacy. A board or administration that understands the nature, purpose, potential, and needs of the school is far more likely to pick a worthy successor. Such a board or administration will have the capacity to offer that person the wise guidance and helpful oversight that the predecessor, at least initially, had to do without.

Recommendations

The foregoing report offers highlights of some best practices of theological school leadership and warnings about leadership patterns that do not work well. The following points are reminders of the suggestions and admonitions in the body of the report.

For search committees. This study suggests that the chances of finding an effective president will increase if those who conduct the search incorporate the following elements in their process:

■ *Ask for strategic direction.* A successful administration has clear goals. A new president will usually be expected to develop a detailed strategic plan, but setting a general strategic direction is the job of those who have ultimate responsibility for the school and its mission. Therefore, before a search committee begins its work, those who commission the committee—a board, church authorities, or university administrators—should provide a statement of strategic direction based on a realistic analysis of the institution’s condition and prospects. The profile and other materials the committee develops should be based on this statement. The best choices of presidents are made when those making the selection know what the president is expected to accomplish.

■ *Focus on character and capacity.* This study found that certain qualities of mind and spirit and interpersonal skillfulness are better predictors of presidential success than formal credentials. Within the limits set by the school’s bylaws, which may specify the president’s denomination, ecclesiastical status, or educational background, the search committee should consider a wide range of candidates, looking for the qualities and

capacities the job requires. Background checks should be made with persons who have worked closely with candidates, including some who are not identified as recommenders by the candidate. These persons should be asked to describe the candidate’s decision-making style and relationships with colleagues and subordinates. Narratives of actual events are more telling than abstract descriptions. Some committees drew on professional counsel to assess the working styles, abilities and motivations of finalists and found the process gave them more confidence that the candidate was right for the office.

■ *Get involved.* This study showed that institutions that employed professional search firms did not make better or worse choices than those that did not work with consultants. Because most presidents were known to the schools that hired

Certain qualities of mind and spirit and interpersonal skillfulness are better predictors of presidential success than formal credentials.

them before the search began, the principal usefulness of consultants is not the discovery of candidates who would not otherwise surface but the consultants’ availability to do the groundwork for the search—drafting materials, performing reference checks, and so on. Committees that performed some of these functions for themselves, whether in tandem with a consultant or on their own, testified to the value of getting deeply involved in the search operations. They learned a great deal

about how their institution is viewed by outsiders and obtained nuanced views of candidates by interviewing references. The lesson is that, whether or not a school employs a consultant, it is valuable to spend time doing the search, especially for board members who have previously had limited involvement with the school.

For presidents. Nothing about seminary presidency is simple, but the findings of this study about what kinds of leadership “work” in theological schools are the outworking of four principles.

■ *Forge and tend relationships.* The most successful seminary leaders build strong administrative teams by developing the talent they inherit, removing staff members who are ineffective, and hiring competent persons who make good colleagues. As a presidency matures, increasing amounts of responsibility for internal operations fall to the team, whose members are rewarded

Exemplary presidents treat all those with whom they interact, from the most generous donor to the most problematic students and employees, with the care and consideration that models religious leadership.

not only for individual performance but also for their willingness to work together. At the same time, the strongest presidents establish relationships of genuine respect with faculty members and the faculty as a body. They do not interfere in the legitimate work of the faculty, and they try to negotiate when they and the faculty differ on significant issues. When necessary, they make decisions despite faculty opposition while working to maintain a relationship that

can be the basis of future cooperation. Finally, exemplary presidents treat all those with whom they interact, from the most generous donor to the most problematic students and employees, with the care and consideration that models religious leadership.

■ *Make the school’s way in the world.* This study shows the importance of the president’s role in discovering the seminary’s vision and articulating it beyond, as well as within, the institution. If the vision is blurred when the president arrives, it is her or his job to create conversations in which the school’s aims and purposes become clear. Then, from the first year on, increasing amounts of time should be spent outside the school, cultivating relationships with persons and groups who send the school its students and provide financial support, and telling and showing them the significance of the institution’s mission. By the time the presidency reaches a mature stage, the bulk of the president’s time will be spent on external activities, projecting the school’s perspective and values, and securing the various kinds of support the school needs to do its work.

■ *Exercise discipline.* The presidents whose work most benefits the institutions they serve are highly disciplined. They create measurable goals and structures of accountability for themselves and others. Staff and faculty are asked to meet performance benchmarks. They work with the board to create structures in which they report often and in detail about their own activities and accomplishment of pre-set goals. They track their own use of time and listen to the voice of conscience to help themselves determine whether they are investing effort where it is most needed rather than where it is most satisfying. Finally, they steel themselves to do the things that most people find difficult and are tempted to avoid: setting and enforcing educational and financial

policies that serve the long-term good of the school but that may be immediately unpopular; terminating employees and students for cause; accepting and acting on legitimate criticism; and asking for money and other forms of support.

■ *Maintain personal equilibrium.* Survival in the presidency requires that discipline be extended to the task of making the job survivable. Presidents should set regular patterns of exercise and recreation, get good medical care, protect time with family or religious community, and

As a presidency matures, so should the relationship between the president and his or her board or superiors. It should be the president's closest partnership.

find persons outside their immediate family in whom they can confide. Peers in other institutions can sometimes play this role, listening to accounts of pressure and problems and sometimes helping in problem-solving. Equally important are congregations or religious communities that can offer spiritual fellowship and a pastor or spiritual director who can give confidential guidance and support.

For boards. The most striking finding of this study was the failure of many boards and other supervisors of seminary chief executives to hold up their part of the partnership with the president. Boards could improve if they paid more attention to their relationship with the president at the following points in the cycle of a presidency:

■ *Before the search.* The most productive searches are provisioned with a statement of strategic direction for the institution. To devise such a statement, a board must analyze the institution's strategic position and decide on a direction for its development. Boards that rely heavily on presidential guidance in strategic thinking and planning may need outside help to take a fresh look at the school and to think about its future.

■ *After the search.* Good start-up, this study found, is a key to success. Too many boards back off as soon as a president is appointed. Rather, they should set goals for the first year of the presidency and then appoint a transition team to help the president achieve them. Though the transition team might cease to operate after twelve to eighteen months, an oversight and support group should meet frequently with the president during the first five years of presidency. Annual evaluations of both presidential and board performance should be substantive and continue for the duration of the presidency.

■ *In the middle of a presidency.* As a presidency matures, so should the relationship between the president and his or her board or superiors. It should be the president's closest partnership. In the healthiest relationships and strongest institutions, there is two-way disclosure of problems and difficulties; candid criticism, in both directions; warm collegiality and personal support; and firm backing as the president performs the most difficult tasks—asking for large donations, handling public relations and personnel problems, imposing financial discipline, and asking faculty and staff to change their patterns of work in the interest of the school's future. As a basis for wise decision-making on all these dimensions, the president must provide the board with full information

about the challenges and opportunities the school confronts. The board or other supervisors must give the president time, attention, and tangible support.

■ *As a presidency nears its end.* When the possibility of transition first appears, the board or the president's supervisors should take stock. They should ask whether the board or supervisory structure is as strong as it could be. If it is not, then is a good time to add strong new members or restructure for the critical process of transition. Is the board aware of the condition of the school and its needs for the next period? If not, an

assessment, perhaps with independent consultants participating, is in order. Is the relationship with the outgoing president positive? Whether or not the presidency ended at the president's initiative, it is in the school's interest for the board and president both to speak well of the school and the best features of the outgoing administration. If the president has made a substantial contribution, the entire board should join in recognizing and celebrating that. And then the cycle, beginning with the setting of a strategic direction for the administration to come, should start again.

Notes

1. Regardless of title (president, rector, principal, dean [the latter in Episcopal seminaries and in departments and schools that are part of larger institutions]), the term *president* is used in this report to designate the chief executive of the accredited Christian theological schools in the United States and Canada.
2. Chief executive officer survey (2008): N=166, 66% response rate; chief academic officer survey (2008): N=163, 65% response rate; chief financial officer survey (2009): N=89, 35% response rate.
3. Sharon L. Miller, Anthony T. Ruger, Barbara G. Wheeler, *Great Expectations: Fund-Raising Prospects for Theological Schools*, Auburn Studies, No. 14 (2009).
4. One of the surprises of this study was the high percentage of highly effective "insider" presidents who were considered, at least by some, as likely candidates before the search began. In most cases, there was an energetic search and the outcome was not a foregone conclusion. One of these searches, for instance, included personality testing of the finalists, including the inside candidate, before the job was offered. In all cases, the insider president was remarkably good at using prior knowledge of the workings of the institution as leadership capital. Sometimes insiders are reluctant to make necessary changes (this was the case at one of the sites we studied), but more often they seem to use the leverage and credibility they have as insiders to move faster and more decisively than an outsider might be able to. Insider presidents seemed to be especially effective when they followed successful predecessors who had created momentum that faculty, board, and other supporters were eager to sustain.
5. The makeup of the senior administrative team or president's cabinet varies from school to school. It almost always includes the chief academic officer, the chief financial officer, and the chief development officer, plus a provost or executive vice president if there is one. The dean of students, director of continuing education, seminary chaplain or pastor, president's executive assistant, and other key officers and staff may be part of the team.
6. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. (HarperCollins Publishers, 2001). A Level 5 leader is the most effective of Collins's types. The leader is respectful of others, selfless, but dedicated to achieving results. Collins finds this approach brings out the best in subordinates and is therefore a variable in making a great institution.
7. Miller, Ruger, Wheeler, *Great Expectations*, p. 19.

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