



Wheelhouse

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Tough Job if You Can Keep It

What California Community College CEOs Say About Their Challenges and Longevity

CALIFORNIA'S 137 COMMUNITY COLLEGE chancellors, presidents and superintendent-presidents (CEOs) are essential actors in the state's education and economic development arenas, yet they have become something of an endangered species. In recent years, the median job tenure of community college presidents has been just three and a half years¹ – half that of their counterparts at four-year institutions. This high rate of leadership turnover in the California Community Colleges, the nation's largest system of higher education, is a major concern with strong implications for students, faculty, employees and the regional economies that depend on the colleges' success.

In 2016, Wheelhouse administered its first annual CEO survey to hear directly from college leaders about their biggest professional challenges, the capacities and knowledge needed to succeed on the job, their backgrounds and paths to the profession. We also sought their opinions about why turnover has become such a problem statewide. This brief summarizes the survey results, which are available in full at education.ucdavis.edu/wheelhouse.

“The ‘new’ CEO needs a very different experience than is provided through the traditional academic pipeline. Leadership in today’s environment requires many more skills than previously needed to succeed.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

CEO Churn

Why do CEOs leave? When asked to select from a menu of potential reasons why college and district leaders leave their current jobs, respondents most frequently cited

TOPLINES

> In their own words, leaders of CA Community College campuses and systems believe that churn in their profession is largely due to **conflicts between CEOs and their boards of trustees or constituent groups**.

> They cite several essential capacities for both sitting and aspiring CEOs, including the ability to manage **internal relationships** with trustees,

faculty and other employees, and **external relationships** with regional business and K-12 sectors.

> They underscore the importance of sustaining strategy and vision by **building and managing effective administrative teams** that can handle the operational details of running their institutions.

“These are extremely difficult jobs that are getting harder in a climate of limited resources and competing interest groups.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

conflicts with the governing board, retirement, jobs with better pay/benefits, and conflicts with internal and external constituencies. (Figure 1)

Figure 1

Select the three most common reasons CEOs leave their posts, in your opinion.



“For the district CEO especially, the relevance and importance of local issues (board politics, relations with local entities, union issues, etc.) cannot be overstressed. This is a distinctive aspect of California community college districts, and they each have their own mix.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

Job Responsibilities and Challenges

Leaders of California community colleges must juggle multiple roles, tasks and audiences to be successful. They must set vision and strategy, attend to both internal and external constituencies and manage complex teams to achieve their goals. And they must do all of it in political and fiscal contexts that aren't always predictable.

Asked to identify the most important aspects of a CEO's responsibilities in providing effective leadership to their colleges – and those most important for aspiring CEOs to master – respondents focused primarily on four areas:

1. Working effectively with the local Board of Trustees (78%).²
2. Working effectively with internal constituent groups such as the academic senate, faculty union, classified employees, etc. (78%).
3. Leading and directing direct reports to develop their skills and build an effective and cohesive team (73%). Seasoned and stable CEOs were especially emphatic about the importance of this aspect, with all of those respondents who have been in their current job for a decade or more calling it “critically important.”
4. Building and implementing strategic plans that identify clear direction, metrics for success and alignment of resources (68%).

When asked an open-ended question about their biggest challenges upon assuming the leadership role, a number of respondents underscored the need to master the complex, demanding and political nature of the job. Several cited the particular challenge of understanding the “boundaries of decision-making authority” in the context of shared governance with faculty, relations with elected trustees and the necessity of responding to multiple directives from Sacramento (the Board of Governors, the Legislature, and the Governor).

Numerous other respondents cited the importance of building their fiscal acumen, managing their time more efficiently, communicating effectively both inside and outside the college/district, and achieving “clarity about the most salient priorities.”

Face of the Institution

We asked CEOs to identify the most important aspects of their responsibilities in representing the college to outside entities, such as the Legislature or business leaders in their communities. Two aspects resonated in particular with respondents:

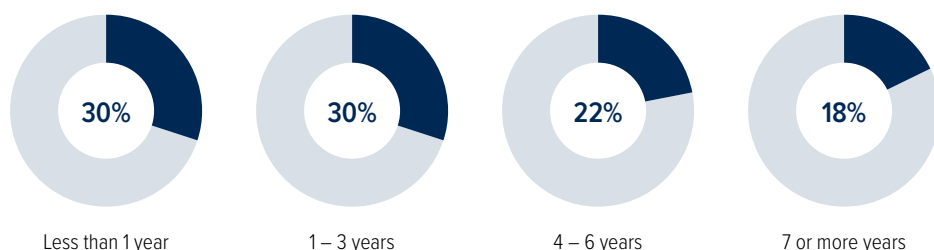
1. Building relationships and coalitions with stakeholders such as local employers and community organizations. (74%)³
2. Coordinating and collaborating with local K-12 schools/districts to ensure that graduating students are college-ready and informed about admission and financial aid. (61%)

Longevity

Six in 10 CEOs report having held their current post four years or less, with 14% in their first year on the job. At the other end of the spectrum, 27% have been on the job eight to 10 years, and 13% more than a decade. When asked how long they anticipate continuing in their current CEO role, a majority answered three years or less (Figure 2).

Figure 2

How long do you anticipate continuing in your current position? (n=63)



Day-to-Day Management

While keeping an eye on vision, strategy and external constituencies, college leaders must tend to the nuts and bolts of running institutions serving thousands of students annually, and employing hundreds of faculty and staff. CEOs identified these four aspects of managing day-to-day business as the most critical to the success of a sitting or aspiring leader:

1. Planning to improve institutional effectiveness and preparing for accreditation. (97%)⁴
2. Collective bargaining. (92%)
3. Enrollment management. (91%)
4. Ensuring campus safety. (88%)

In their open-ended responses, a number of CEOs pointed out the importance of, as one put it, “hiring and nurturing senior management in each of these areas,” so that the leader can stay focused on strategy and managing the team that handles the operational aspects and details identified above.

“One really must be agile and flexible and be able to move from being a lead academic officer in one moment to reviewing fiscal data the next to dealing with serious campus safety situations and then change into the face of the campus for external groups and businesses, all while not missing a beat.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

“The complexity of the California system coupled with locally elected boards makes for very unstable CEO positions.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

“The CEO must stay out of the weeds and lead the overall movement of the institution, providing vision for long-term planning.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

This survey was conducted electronically in Spring 2016 by Theresa Westover of the University of California, Davis, School of Education, with support from the Hearst Foundations, the Foundation for California Community Colleges and the California Community College Chancellor’s Office. Emails requesting participation were received by 135 sitting district chancellors, superintendent-presidents, and college presidents, with follow up emails to encourage online survey completion. Sixty-four CEOs participated for a response rate of 47%. It is important to note that the responses may not be representative of those CEOs who did not participate. Any conclusions drawn from the responses are representative only of those individuals who responded to the survey.

Fiscal Management

When asked about the most critical aspects of financial management and legislative/regulatory context for sitting and aspiring CEOs, respondents underscored the need for information about state funding formulas and budget trends, as well as evidence-based strategies for budget realignment to drive stronger student outcomes. Several CEOs cited the difficulties of dealing with uncertain state revenue – “the ongoing saga of feast or famine” – and the stress of instituting layoffs and other cost-cutting strategies during economic downturns.

Who Are They?

According to the most recent update of the *CEO Tenure and Retention Survey* conducted by the Community College League of California, college and district leaders are mostly male (61.8%) and white (66%). The CEOs responding to the Wheelhouse survey were demographically similar to the League’s statewide snapshot: 61% were male, 39% female, and 60% identified their ethnic/racial background as white, non-Hispanic. A significant majority of our respondents were 56 or older, (46 of 63); 12 were 65 or older.

Paths to the Profession

In terms of educational background, all respondents held advanced degrees, ranging from Ph.D. (28) and Ed.D. (20) to Masters (7), MBA (4) and JD degrees (3). Prior to assuming the CEO role, the great majority of respondents held both dean and vice president positions within the community college system. Several reported having served as vice chancellors and chief instructional officers. A few cited prior experience as leaders in the business or K-12 sector.

Looking Ahead

CEO turnover is a well-established, if not yet well understood, challenge in California’s community college system. The mission of Wheelhouse is to build knowledge about challenges facing the colleges and their leaders, and to provide leadership support to help CEOs succeed. Please engage with us: Visit our web site (education.ucdavis.edu/wheelhouse), share your views about the survey, sign up for our email updates, and tell us of your interest in the 2017 Wheelhouse Institute on Leadership.

This brief was prepared by Susanna Cooper, Managing Director of Wheelhouse, with helpful input from her colleagues at the UC Davis School of Education.

Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research was established in 2016 to support California community college leaders through annual professional learning institutes and independent, actionable research on relevant topics and trends. Wheelhouse is supported by the University of California, Davis, the Hearst Foundations, the Foundation for California Community Colleges and the U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences. Housed at the UC Davis School of Education, the Wheelhouse Institute on Leadership will welcome its first cohort of participants in January 2017.

¹ Community College League of California, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Tenure and Retention Study, 2013-14.

² Percentage of respondents who rated this aspect a “1” or a “2” on an importance scale of 1 to 10.

³ Percentage of respondents who rated this aspect a “1” or a “2” on an importance scale of 1 to 10.

⁴ Percentage of respondents who rated this aspect from 1 to 4 on an importance scale of 1 to 10.