

Assessing and Developing College and University Presidents

An Enterprise Leadership Approach

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AGB

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Foreword

The success of our colleges, universities, and systems depends on great presidential leadership. Governing boards can help develop these leaders with assessment practices that contribute to improved performance. This book is an excellent tool for presidents and board members who want to transform the assessment process from an unavoidable obligation to a worthwhile professional development experience that cultivates and keeps good presidents.

I first met the author, Terry MacTaggart, more than twenty-five years ago while working at AGB and writing my dissertation, *Assessing the Performance of Academic Presidents*, at the University of Maryland. We both participated in an AGB training session for consultants on comprehensive 360-degree presidential assessments, conducted at Wye Plantation. Back in the 1990s, there wasn't widespread support for conducting reviews of college presidents with input from stakeholders beyond members of the board. It has taken decades for practices to evolve in colleges as well as corporations, where most board members gain their C-suite experience. Since then, as head of AGB Consulting, I arranged dozens of comprehensive presidential assessments for which MacTaggart was the lead consultant. Now boards and seasoned presidents expect to engage periodically in thorough presidential performance reviews with an outside consultant, and many turn to AGB's consulting services, publications, and workshops for expert guidance.

Assessing and Developing College and University Presidents, the third title AGB has published on presidential assessment, breaks new ground by linking more effective presidential assessments, tailored to the needs of the presidency, with meaningful feedback and substantive professional development. The competitive environment, tenuous economic conditions, rapid rate of change in technology, communications, workforce needs, and social and cultural values all require nothing less. Colleges and universities are complicated enterprises, and leaders must understand the business of higher education as well as the requirements of academic leadership. That message was at the core of MacTaggart's publication, *The 21st Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise Leadership*, AGB's third decennial report on the state of the academic presidency. Here that message is woven into cutting-edge assessment and leadership development practices for the 21st century.

In the chapters that follow, MacTaggart argues that practices for assessing and developing presidents must change to recognize the unique blend of challenges defining the work of college and university leaders today. The disrupted and competitive higher education environment requires a different brand of presidential leadership—here called enterprise leadership. The day-to-day work of these executives has changed dramatically. While presidents still need to be versed in the culture and values of the academy, equally valuable is

their talent in the business disciplines of data-informed and market-oriented planning, marketing, and financial control. This includes making hard choices when it comes to continuing or discontinuing academic programs and services, and taking calculated risks to capitalize on opportunities for growth or revenue diversification.

The evolving shift from academy to enterprise leadership reached its inflection point during the Great Recession of 2007–2009 and accelerated again with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. These fundamental changes in the environment and the optimal leadership skills suited to it require a fresh approach to assessing presidential performance and a long overdue recognition that developing the skills of these leaders is a necessary part of this process.

To achieve this, MacTaggart adapts traditional assessment tools to meet the current realities. To be sure, the perennial practice of measuring performance against goals established jointly by the board and its executive continues to serve us well. However, “no market, no mission” is an axiom that leaders must embrace to enable their institutions to survive and thrive. This book takes that mandate seriously. Moreover, it recognizes that in the fast-changing world of the enterprise presidency, assessments, advising, and coaching need to occur in real time and happen more frequently. Annual assessments remain important milestones, but more frequent “check-ins” by the board chair and a coach or mentor can help prevent a problem from becoming a crisis. Comprehensive 360-assessments, historically undertaken every four or five years, now may occur much earlier in a president’s tenure, with the potential benefit of identifying and addressing blind spots before they become truly debilitating weaknesses. Lastly, presidential development, an established practice in the corporate sector, is emerging as a standard service for college and university presidents that is receiving financial support from the institutions.

Presidents coming from the corporate sector or the military benefit greatly from learning the values and taboos of academic culture. And first-time presidents who rose through the academic ranks may well fill out their leadership repertoire with development on the business side of the enterprise. With increases in presidential turnover and the rising costs of executive searches as well as the risk of lost institutional momentum, a development program that saves a good president is an investment with many positive returns.

AGB also supports boards and presidents in assessing executive performance and developing stronger leaders through thought leadership, events and programming, and assessment and coaching consulting services, including:

- A carefully selected group of consultant-assessors who themselves served as chief executives and who understand the job and its demands;
- Confidential advice to board leaders and presidents on matters of their working relationship and performance;
- Focused reviews, governance audits, and investigations to assist presidents and boards faced with special challenges such as no confidence votes, scandals, and allegations of misbehavior;

- Board and presidential development programs on leadership in an era of change and disruption, including AGB's annual Institute for Board Chairs and Chief Executives; and
- Other relevant publications, including *Crisis Leadership for Boards and Presidents: Anticipating, Managing and Leading Beyond Pandemics, Disruptions, and Ethical Failures* (2020); *The 21st-Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise Leadership* (2017); *Leading Change: How Boards and Presidents Build Exceptional Academic Institutions* (2011); and blogs, webinars, and numerous articles in *Trusteeship* magazine.

I'm struck by this book's relevance to higher education leadership challenges in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Colleges and universities with imaginative, future-oriented, and courageous presidents are emerging from the pandemic with brighter prospects than those whose presidents conceive of the future as a return to the past. In a sense, the fundamental message of this book is that enterprise-focused assessment and development will serve presidents and boards well as they lead their institutions in the post-pandemic environment. This new resource will be a valuable tool in helping transform presidential leadership from good to great.

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Introduction

Strengthening Presidential Leadership in an Era of Disruption

Why Should Board Members and Presidents Read This Book?

Here are three important reasons:

1. As a board member, hiring and keeping an able president is your most important duty. Evaluating the president's performance and enabling him or her to advance is central to this responsibility.
2. As a president, your most important asset is your ability to lead. Assessing your own performance, receiving an external appraisal, and taking steps to strengthen your leadership will combine to enable you to be even more effective.
3. For both board members and presidents, sustaining and advancing your institution rests on your combined leadership, which can only get better with honest self-evaluation and external evaluation and development.

The job of the higher education president* has become more challenging, the environment more complex and dynamic, and expectations for the exercise of leadership higher. The headwinds confronting most colleges and universities today create more stress for their leaders. The result is higher turnover and greater difficulty for governing boards in finding and keeping the best presidents for the times.

Ironically, these challenges pave the way for enterprising leaders to excel. The opportunity to build stronger, more resilient, and more competitive institutions has seldom been greater. Presidential assessment and development underpin the most important work of boards and presidents: strengthening the academic enterprise in today's environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath underscore the heightened challenges facing today's college and university leaders, the need to incorporate crisis leadership within presidential assessment, and especially the critical importance of leadership development. Crisis management and leadership have become essential parts of the president's repertoire.

*The title "president" is used throughout this book to refer to the chief executive of a college, university, or system of institutions. While "president" is a frequently used title for these leaders, "chancellor" and occasionally others are common.

If you are a board member, board or committee chair, president, or advisor to these leaders, or if you expect to assume any of these roles in the near future, reading this book will have five practical benefits:

1. For board members

If you are a board member, and especially if you chair the board, your most important task is to lead in recruiting, hiring, supporting, and retaining—or, if necessary, dismissing—the president. This guidebook will help you perform these tasks with greater assurance that you are making the most informed choices in each of these aspects of your work.

2. For presidents

If you are a president (or aspire to become one), this book will show you how to actively participate in your growth as a leader of one of society's most complex, challenging, and important enterprises.

No first-time president, whether rising from the academic ranks or from business or the military, comes fully prepared for the realities of leading an academic institution. This book provides guidance on filling the gaps in one's preparation for the presidency. At the same time, executives who are entering their second or third presidency will find valuable insights as they adjust to their new institution with its own set of challenges and cultural peculiarities.

3. For board members and presidents alike

Traditional guides to presidential assessment and development were written when disruptions to a once stable industry were still on the horizon. This book applies the broader set of competencies expected of today's college and university chief executives to the task of assessing and developing these leaders. Recognizing and fostering the skills necessary for managing the complexity and dynamism of our rapidly changing environment makes for more successful college and university presidents. Effective assessment and development enable presidents to serve longer and more ably, which may avoid the embarrassment of a premature departure and the related costs to both parties.

4. For advisors, mentors, and coaches

The full benefit of a rigorous assessment is realized when the president receives and embraces honest advice, coaching, mentorship, and other forms of constructive leadership development. Advisors, mentors, coaches, and others engaged in the work of helping able presidents become more effective leaders need to appreciate how the work of the president has changed.

5. For all those with a stake in presidential effectiveness

The most resilient and effective institutions are the product of many talents. But the one most under the control of boards is the vector from recruiting the right president to assessing his or her performance over time to supporting further development of

the individual's leadership talents. Top-notch leadership assessment and development are pillars of building stronger and more resilient institutions.

Pursuing assessment without development is like seeking a diagnosis, then ignoring the cure. By the same token, launching leadership development without a thorough understanding of the qualities that need development will miss the mark. Assessment and development go hand in hand as underpinnings of high-functioning leadership.

A Fresh Approach to Assessment

Performance evaluation and leadership development in the business world today combine “the best of the traditional performance management process” with “new thinking and ideas.”¹ The book you are reading presents a similar synthesis of the traditional and the new. The “new” is not introduced for the sake of novelty, but because the day-to-day work of presidents has changed dramatically at least since the Great Recession of 2007–2009.

Today's challenges call for agile, relevant, and continuous evaluation and development strategies. These new techniques are integrated with those traditional approaches that still make sense in today's contentious and competitive environment. Both the newer approaches and time-tested ones can be customized to match the competitive realities surrounding particular institutions.

Assessment models recommended here are fresh in that they strongly emphasize:

- Presidents as leaders of the total enterprise who must be more engaged in the business side of their institutions than in more stable times;
- Greater personal participation by the executive in his or her evaluation and in developing leadership capability going forward;
- Future performance in a challenging and uncertain environment, viewing past performance primarily as a guide to future potential;
- A less stressful process that not only engages the president more in the retrospective assessment but also concentrates more prospectively on problem solving and leadership growth;
- Deeper knowledge in such areas as technology applied to learning and operations, metrics and other measures of institutional performance, the importance of brand and rankings, talent development within the enterprise, and strategies for improving student success;
- Matching assessment and follow-on development to distinct institutional missions, competitive market position, strategic directions, and aspirations; and
- A highly collaborative relationship between the president and the board, defined as “integral leadership” in *The Leadership Imperative* (Association of Governing Boards, 2006).²

Perennial Reasons for Assessing Leaders

Goal-centered annual and comprehensive assessments (referred to as “comprehensive 360 evaluations” in this book to underscore their multidimensional scope) serve important purposes:

- Confirming that important goals are actually being accomplished underpins public support and confidence in the enterprise. This is a major board responsibility.
- Ensuring accountability to students, the academic community, donors, government agencies, and the public in general through regular formal evaluations duly recorded and acted upon.
- Assuring that presidents are compensated fairly based on peer comparisons, the size and complexity of the institutions they lead, and the quality of their performance. Reporting the compensation of the highest paid employees is also an IRS requirement.
- Uncovering weaknesses, errors, and other concerns, which may help remediate subpar performance and save a presidency.
- Interrupting a cycle of less-than-successful presidents followed by expensive, time-consuming searches while the institution is in limbo.

“Integral Leadership” by Boards and Presidents

The integrated approach recommended in this book rests on the belief that an able president coupled with an adroit and engaged board presents an optimal leadership combination. A board beset with an ineffective president can do little beyond electing its own officers and committee members. A superior president with a passive, unengaged board can actually do a lot to advance the institution but courts the dangers that come with unchecked power. By contrast, a highly competent president working with a capable, engaged board represents a model of what the Association of Governing Boards calls “integral leadership,” which is a powerful force for positive change. Integral leadership characterized by mutual respect, shared goals, and the ability to converse honestly with one another through unbiased assessment is the exemplary process envisioned in this book.

Evolution of Presidential Assessment

The art and science of presidential evaluation has evolved as the nature of presidential leadership has changed in response to the realities of the times. The turbulent years of student unrest in the late 1960s and 1970s, partisan divides over the Vietnam War, and conflicts between academic leaders and government leaders such as that between University of California President Clark Kerr and conservative Gov. Ronald Reagan

shaped the first modern guide to presidential assessment. John Nason's seminal work, listed in the resources section, made the case for systematic assessment in the face of skeptics who preferred informal approaches such as private conversations with the chair. Nason underscored the centrality of the president-board relationship in gauging executive performance while calling for a more systematic approach.

In 2001, Merrill P. Schwartz contributed a practical, research-based guide to annual assessment, drawing upon her insightful doctoral thesis on the topic.³ Around the same time, Richard Ingram and William Weary further developed Nason's attention to the role of the board with their groundbreaking guide titled *Presidential and Board Assessment in Higher Education* (2000). They focus on the comprehensive assessment at five-year intervals and the interdependent relationship of boards and executives.

The most philosophic and wide-ranging treatment of the classic approaches to assessment in the modern context comes with Richard Morrill's *Assessing Presidential Effectiveness: A Guide for College and University Boards* (2010). Morrill's comments on the value of presidential assessment for boards are worth noting. "A periodic evaluation of the president can become a decisive opportunity for the board itself to reach higher levels of performance," he points out. This is so because the evaluation provides "the occasion for the board to deepen its understanding of the president and the organization, to connect and integrate elements of its own responsibilities, to intensify its engagement with the institution, and to broaden its influence in shared leadership."⁴ Morrill's work remains exceptionally useful reading for trustees and presidents interested in the subtle aspects of evaluating chief executives in an academic environment.

The 21st-Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise Leadership (Association of Governing Boards, 2017), written by this author, adds a decidedly contemporary flavor to the discussion. It emphasizes the president's "vigorous exercise of authority in guiding an institution through a comprehensive adaptive process that positions it to prosper in a competitive fast-changing environment."⁵

Assessment has come full circle since Nason conducted his pioneering work in the midst of social and educational disruptions 50 years ago. Evaluating and supporting the leadership growth of presidents today occurs in a time every bit as tumultuous, disruptive, and ripe with opportunity for change. The shift from in-person to online communications, instruction, conferences, board meetings, executive searches, and many other forms of heretofore personal communications has accelerated as a result of COVID-19. It comes as no surprise that virtual presidential assessment and development has arrived as well and may continue when the pandemic recedes.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One: "Assessing Presidents for Enterprise Leadership"

Higher education has migrated from an era of stability to a time of disruption, instability, and change. This chapter summarizes the new or intensified disruptions that punctuate the work life of today's presidents, ranging from plummeting enrollments to partisan divides

disrupting campus life, the COVID-19 pandemic, and deepening skepticism over the value of a college degree. Under the heading of “The New Business of Higher Education,” it calls attention to the importance of presidential competence and comfort with artificial intelligence, metrics, data-driven decisions, branding, and the drivers of student success.

Chapter Two: “Continuous and Annual Assessment”

Drawing on the “enterprise leader” model for presidential assessment, this chapter argues that the traditional annual assessment based on 12-month-old goals and conventional definitions of executive competence are out of sync with today’s fast-changing environment. It proposes early and frequent “check-ins,” mini-assessments at board meetings, and rigorous “after-action” appraisals. These reviews offer the advantages of closer to real-time analysis and intervention. This chapter updates traditional understandings of executive competence.

Chapter Three: “Comprehensive 360 Assessment”

The two- to five-year review defined as a “comprehensive 360” assessment is intended to be a multidimensional examination of presidential performance within the context of enterprise-wide expectations. It outlines the questions boards should ask themselves *before* starting the assessment, the criteria for recruiting and selecting a consultant, ten steps in the 360 process, and what to do with the results. The chapter itself and the related appendices present sample survey instruments, questions to ask, report outlines, and other documents that boards can adapt to their own institutional needs. This chapter identifies the benefits associated with virtual assessment and development, notes the drawbacks, and recommends techniques to render virtual reviews more effective.

Chapter Four: “Focused Assessments”

This chapter describes assessments focused on crucial pivot points in the life of institutions and their presidents. Subjects include assessing a president’s capacity to turn around a beleaguered college, lead it to a higher level of prominence, recover from a crisis like COVID-19 or no-confidence vote, and respond to other pivotal moments calling for exceptional leadership.

Chapter Five: “Developing Enterprise Leaders”

Boards, presidents, and the institutions they govern become stronger and more effective when intentional leadership development is the destination of assessment. The challenge is to match the right forms of development to areas of greatest need identified by the assessment and other observations. This chapter highlights the importance of development, especially in the first months of a new presidency, describes many of the formal and informal options available, and outlines what a comprehensive development program looks like for the modern presidency.