Chapter 4
Increasing Failure Rates in Canadian University Leadership:
Causes and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

There is growing concern in Canada about the increasing failure rate of university presidents. Institutional boards invest significant time and money into presidential recruitment, engaging professional search firms and consulting with a vast array of stakeholders. Given this intense scrutiny, why are more and more Canadian university leaders failing? What changes can be made to reverse this trend? Based on his almost 20 years of experience as university president, a longitudinal study of presidencies in 47 Canadian universities and other current research, the author provides an overview of the issues involved, explores them in more detail through mini-case studies and identifies "institutional fit" as the key variable in presidential success. The chapter concludes with suggestions to Boards and prospective presidential candidates as to how they can increase the likelihood of success in such crucial appointments.

INTRODUCTION

There have been several recent high profile cases in Canada where a highly touted new president of a major university suddenly departed after only a year or two in office. Most recently (August, 2015), Arvind Gupta "resigned" as president of UBC after just over a year in the position. In 2014, Ilene Busch-Vishniac was forced to leave the presidency of the University of Saskatchewan after fewer than two years on the job. Earlier, successive Concordia University presidents Claude Lajeunesse and Judith Woodsworth, both of whom had been successful presidents elsewhere, left their posts under a cloud part way through their first terms of office.

The author's own research across 47 leading Canadian universities (Paul, 2015) and more extensive studies by David Turpin (July 2014, December 2014) and Julie Cafley (2015) have found that more than 27% of presidents appointed since 2000 have left their position prematurely. Perhaps most startlingly, this

has included several (Lajeunesse, Woodsworth, former Brock University David Atkinson at Carleton) who were apparently successful in a previous position as president of another Canadian university. This trend contrasts significantly with previous decades when the "failure" rate was below 10%. The impact of a failed presidency[1] can be huge, not only in the ensuing confusion about priorities and direction for the institution during the inevitable interim period following a derailment but also in the accompanying damages to an institution's profile and reputation and its compromised ability to recruit a more successful successor.

Why have presidential failure rates increased so significantly? What has changed in recent years? Most importantly, what can be done to reduce the failure rate?

BACKGROUND

The role of Canadian university president has evolved considerably in recent years. In the early 1960's, especially in smaller and regional universities, a university president typically "presided over the academy" (Paul, 2015, p. 11). He (and it was almost always a "he") spent most of the time on campus, knew most of the faculty and many of the students and probably taught a course or two. Only about three per cent of the age cohort (18–22 years of age) attended university and, except perhaps in the largest urban institutions, most students were full-time and living on campus. Universities were much smaller and they really were ivory towers, significantly displaced from the communities in which they were located, and seldom in the news. A university president of that era was more apt to have moral than ascribed line authority and faced significantly fewer challenges than are the norm for today's leaders[2].

Contrast that with today's much larger and more publicly accountable university. No longer elite institutions for the privileged few, they endeavour to meet the aspirations of the majority of the age cohort for enhanced employment opportunities and are seen as prominent instruments of economic development by local, provincial, and national governments. Research has displaced teaching at the centre of the university's mission and there is increased competition for scarce resources, both human and physical.

The impact on the expectations for and responsibilities of the university president are profound. Now CEO of large and complex organizations, today's president is expected to be a fund-raiser, negotiator, marketer, government and community relations expert, financial wizard and the university's face to a wide and diverse array of stakeholders. At the same time, he or she must continue to have academic credibility with the faculty and to know how to work effectively through the collaborative and sometimes cumbersome instruments of academic governance and to deal with increasingly demanding and often impatient boards of governors. Faculty now are almost always unionized and students have a much greater sense of entitlement as fee payers than did their earlier, more privileged counterparts. Small wonder that there is little time left over to "preside over the academy."

It would be easy to conclude that, given the extent of these changes and the demands they make of institutional leaders, the presidential selection processes would be significantly different from those of an earlier era. This is categorically not the case.

Notwithstanding the growing demands on presidents to lead and manage across a complex array of issues and for a plethora of stakeholders, there are few significant signs of change in the ways they are recruited and (not) trained (Paul, 2015, p. ix)

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