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## The Evolving Role of a College President

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# The evolving role of a college president

What does it take to lead a college in 2018 – a sage scholar or a strategic business person? In today’s higher education, the answer is probably both.

**T**he serene ivory tower was always more myth than reality. But it applies less now than ever, in an era of enrollment pressures and rising concern over affordability and the value of higher education in society. The role of a college president has shifted, too – paralleling the changing landscape in higher education.

A century ago, the top job at many universities fell to members of the clergy who served as teachers and disciplinarians, then morphed in later years to administrator as presidents dealt with increasing economic and social issues. Following the Great Recession a decade ago, which brought to the forefront issues of affordability and student debt, the role of a college president morphed yet again.

“The president sets the tone, sets the pace, helps to create momentum to keep an institution moving forward,” says Judith Block McLaughlin, chair of the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents. “It’s harder than it’s ever been.”

A well-spoken intellectual is no longer enough. Leaders are needed who have worldly and practical skills, who can read a financial statement, seek out financial support and navigate a kind of education that will meet the practical skills in high demand.

Today’s president raises both funds and supporters for the institution, takes on political battles surrounding education and oversees a complex campus organization. He or she must be accessible

yet measured in an era driven by round-the-clock news coverage and social media. It’s a grueling pace.

The average length of service for college presidents is seven years, according to the 2017 edition of the American College President Study, produced by the American Council on Education and the TIAA Institute. That’s down from 8.5 years in 2006.

The drop comes as no surprise to Stanley Katz, professor of public and international affairs at Princeton University. He has witnessed a dramatic change in the presidential profile over six decades.

“These are arduous jobs,” says Katz. “Presidents spend a significant amount of time raising money and raising enrollments to provide the wherewithal for high-level education. They tend to be very tired, working long hours and under pressure.”

Consider a typical schedule. Presidents meet with students, faculty, donors, legislators and trustees. They attend campus, community, alumni and fundraising events and advocate for educational issues. They answer calls and emails, read reports, consider strategy and vision, ensure institutional fiscal health, prepare for speeches and events – the list goes on.

With intense competition for students and resources, presidents find it increasingly difficult to devote themselves to the educational mission of the college. Budget and finance remain an area of primary focus, with state and federal funding anticipated to decline in the years to come.

## Linfield College presidents

NAME	YEARS OF SERVICE
George C. Chandler	1857-1860
John W. Johnson	1864-1867
J.D. Robb	1873
Mark Bailey	1873-1876
John E. Magers	1876-1877
Ep Roberts	1877-1878
J.G. Burchett	1878-1881
E.C. Anderson	1881-1887
Truman G. Brownson	1887-1896
Harry L. Boardman	1896-1903
A.M. Brumback	1903-1905
**Emanuel Northup	1905-1906
*Leonard W. Riley	1906-1931
**William R. Frerichs	1931-1932
Elam J. Anderson	1932-1938
William D. Everson	1938-1943
*Harry L. Dillin	1943-1968
**Winthrop W. Dolan	1968, 1974
Gordon C. Bjork	1968-1974
**Cornelius H. Siemans	1974-1975
*Charles U. Walker	1975-1992
*Vivian A. Bull	1992-2005
**Marvin C. Henberg	2005-2006
Thomas L. Hellie	2006-2018

\*Presidents emeriti

\*\*Acting or interim presidents

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– *Wim Wiewel, president of Lewis & Clark College*

Katz has studied higher education policy for 25 years and says colleges looked very different when he joined the Princeton faculty in 1978.

“Colleges were quiet places, able to cope with financial challenges and attract good students,” he says. “It wasn’t a high-pressure job. It was hard work, but manageable. Nobody would make a statement like that about today’s college president.”

Now in his second presidential appointment, Wim Wiewel, president of Lewis & Clark College, likens the job to being chief executive officer of a business. He said the role has become increasingly more externally oriented in terms of fundraising and visibility over the years.

“Presidents have to be very mindful of the budget and have to make much tougher decisions,” says Wiewel, who completed nine years as president at Portland State University before moving to Lewis & Clark last fall. “For most presidents, it’s become harder to be sufficiently present on campus because there’s a demand for fundraising.”

Wiewel says the 24/7 venture is a lifestyle, more than simply a job, but that the positives far outweigh the challenges.

“It’s incredibly demanding, but it’s also incredibly rewarding,” he says. “Providing an education is intrinsically good for society. The job is intellectually stimulating and has amazing variety. As president, you get a lot of bouquets thrown at you (and also some tomatoes).”

Still, he understands the weight of responsibility at the core of the presidential position.

“We are stewards of this enormous asset and we do the best we can before handing it off to someone else,” he says.

– *Laura Davis*