From the Classroom to the Boardroom:  
A Look at Community College Leadership

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It has been said that the community (junior) college is an American innovation. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), this innovation dates back to the early 1900s when Joliet Junior College in Joliet, Illinois became the first junior college in the United States. However, there is another notable innovation, the state system of community and junior colleges. Only one state can lay claim to this innovation, the state of Mississippi. Not that this system was planned or expected in the beginning, but it was the first. The Mississippi State Board for Community Colleges is charged with the statutory governing and oversight of the state’s fifteen community colleges. However, the Mississippi community college system is designed for each community college to govern itself; therefore, each, while having many like qualities, is very unique and future leadership needs to be aware of the specifics of this uniqueness. It is widely accepted that community colleges nationwide are facing a crisis in leadership with 50% of the current leadership being eligible to retire within the next ten years (AACC, 2005). Mississippi is no different from the national landscape in this sense. This begs the question, if we know that the current leadership is more than likely going to turn over at this rate, what are we doing to meet future leadership needs?
One Mississippi Community College

At the community college where I have worked for the past seven years, there is a practice of promoting employees from within to leadership positions. As a newly promoted administrator, I can attest to the fact that this practice gleams loyalty to the institution and imparts a sense of value to the employee. However, what specific steps are being taken to train these individuals who move into these roles? Further, what plans, if any, are laid out so that there is a natural progression through the levels of leadership? Is there a need to train these individuals or is moving up the ranks sufficient training in and of itself?

For the purposes of this article, I chose to look at the community college where I am currently employed. A brief and informal survey of administrators was conducted. The survey addressed total years of service which were used to determine years until retirement eligibility, current leadership position, and previous positions and years of service in each. A total of 20 administrators, one president, six vice-presidents, nine directors, and four deans responded to the survey. Of the 20 administrators who responded - 45% will be eligible for retirement within five years, another 20% will be eligible for retirement within six to ten years, and only 35% have to wait eleven or more years for retirement eligibility. As a side note, seven of the 20 administrators have a combined total of 27 years over the retirement eligibility. With that potential retirement rate, it is clear that leadership training needs to be in the forefront.

One might ask what we did to train our current leadership and did they work their way up through the ranks? Further review of this administration reveals that 55% came up through the ranks, having begun their community college career as an instructor. In terms for training, of the 20 that responded - 45% have attended the Mississippi Community College Leadership Program (formerly known as the Mississippi Community College Fellowship Program), which specifically trains future community college leaders in the state of Mississippi. Another 15% have attended other leadership training opportunities that while beneficial are not specific to community colleges. Formal education which lends credibility to the pursuit of attainment of leadership roles in higher education was not considered for this article. While formal educational credentials are a worthy and necessary requirement for upper-level leadership positions, a case can be made that effective leaders at other levels simply need institutionally focused training to be effective leaders. Deans, directors, and department chairs at the community college level can be taught leadership skills through sound, intentional mentoring. This opinion was verified as training was discussed with various respondents. One theme many of the current leaders have in common is they feel that they had at least one mentor that led them by example and encouraged them to grow. Therefore, it is imperative that mentoring be a part of any grow-your-own leadership program.

Options for Training Community College Leaders

There are many options available for training future community college leaders. Of course, one can take the formal route to degree attainment and take not only leadership classes, but statistics, curriculum, and research classes. This route takes an enormous amount of dedication and is not for the faint of heart. In addition, it takes much time and money and may not be feasible for everyone wishing to become a leader. Another option for training future
community college leaders in Mississippi is the Mississippi Community College Leadership Academy, formerly known as the Mississippi Community College Fellowship Program. Just as its predecessor, The Leadership Academy is tied to earning optional graduate credit at Mississippi State University. As a graduate of the Mississippi Community College Fellowship Program in the spring of 2000, I can attest to the quality of the program and its focus on specifically training Mississippi community college leaders. This is where I first became interested in community college leadership development. The Leadership Academy, sponsored by the Mississippi Community College Foundation, was developed in the spring of 2009, and addresses the projected need for future upper-level leaders in the Mississippi community college system. The goal is to provide practical knowledge, experience, and theoretical instruction to assist the participants in becoming effective community college leaders. The program involves 66 hours of instruction during the summer in addition to extensive reading and research assignments during the rest of the year. While the Leadership Academy is valuable and much needed, I would like to note one drawback. Each college sends only two participants a year which simply will not keep up with the possible turnover rate. Not to mention that many, if not all, of the participants are already serving in leadership roles at their respective colleges. Each community college would benefit greatly from training their leadership and reaching outside the current administration to do so. However, I recently shared this opinion with the longest serving community college president in the state of Mississippi and he had a word of caution. While he too believes this is a worthy idea, he said to be ready for those newly trained leaders to be lured away to other institutions. I would further advance that just as hiring from within promotes loyalty, so would a ‘grow-your-own leadership program’, since a portion of the program is directly related to the history of the school.

When seeking direction, community colleges often turn to the AACC. This organization has addressed the issues surrounding future leadership nationwide. Since the summer of 2003, with the awarding of a W. K. Kellogg Foundation Leading Forward Grant the American Association of Community Colleges has made community college leadership development a priority. According to the AACC, community colleges are usually considered alike since they have many traits in common. Among these traits are diverse populations, a commitment to open access, and a sense of service to their communities. In spite of these similarities, there are vast differences in size, governance, financial resources, specialized staffing, and local involvement with business and industry, and student characteristics. Therefore, the AACC takes the position that community college leadership development should be the responsibility of each individual institution and deserves a concentrated and focused effort. Unfortunately, a blueprint for developing leaders does not exist. However, the AACC believes that there are at least six competencies, outlined below, necessary for effective community college leadership. At the heart of each competency is a commitment to promoting the success of all students and sustaining the individual mission of the community college.

According to the AACC (2005), effective community college leaders have the following six competencies:

- Effective community college leaders have an organizational strategy that improves the quality of the institution and protects the long-term health of the organization. This strategy is based on knowledge of the organization, its environment, and future.
• Effective community college leaders are able to manage their resources equitably and ethically while sustaining their people, processes, and information. Resources are both the physical and financial assets used to fulfill the mission, vision, and goals of the community college.

• Effective community college leaders are excellent communicators. They are capable of using clear listening, speaking, and writing skills. They promote and in engage in honest, open dialogue at all levels of the college including the surrounding community.

• Effective community college leaders depend on collaboration and work to develop and maintain responsive, cooperative, mutually beneficial, and ethical internal and external relationships that nurture diversity.

• Effective community college leaders understand the history and philosophy of the community college and are committed to advocating the mission, vision and goals of the community college institution (AACC, 2005).

• Effective community college leaders work ethically to set high standards for themselves and others. They work to continuously improve not only themselves, but their surroundings. They demonstrate accountability to and for the institution and ensure the long-term viability of the college and community.

Further, the AACC advocates the common sense approach that continued success of community colleges and their students is dependent upon the development and availability of well-prepared leaders. In terms of growing leaders, the AACC advances the thought that leadership can be learned. In fact, it is a life-long process which is a combination of effective management and shared vision. There are many strategies that can help fill the impending leadership gap. One such strategy, which I believe is very much worth looking into is a grow-your-own approach.

Grow-Your-Own Leadership Thoughts

Ideally, a grow-your-own leadership program would be individualized to meet the needs of a specific community college. However, using the aforementioned guidelines is a good place to start. Potential leaders could be tapped for mentoring and grooming to become the leaders their institution needs. Such a program would promote self-discovery and professional growth, while perpetuating a shared vision already established by the institution.

As mentioned previously in this paper, little, if any, research exists as to the effectiveness of grow-your-own leadership programs. However, I believe the effort may well be worth it, especially if a community college intends on hiring its future leadership from within the institution. If, as the AACC believes, many people at the community college are capable of being leaders, then grow-your-own makes perfect sense. Further, this would alleviate the strain on community colleges to recruit high quality leaders due to the often rural location of the institutions. Through this effort, each community college can tailor their leadership programs to focus on their individual missions and communities. Growing the current leadership is part of the life-long process; however, grow-your-own leadership strategies should start with instructors and staff who are interested and dedicated to leading their community colleges into the future.
References

