

## ***Factors Chief Academic Officers Consider in Deciding Whether to Remain in Their Positions***

**Shelley B. Wepner, Manhattanville College**

**William A. Henk, Marquette University Emeritus**

**Heba S. Ali, Marquette University**

Leaders of the academic affairs side of higher education institutions, usually referred to as Provosts, Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs (VPAA), Provosts and Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs, Chief Academic Officers (CAO), or some variation, are the principal stewards of their institution's academic programs and are directly responsible for initiating, implementing, and sustaining a college or university's academic priorities and allocating resources to support these priorities. The term Chief Academic Officer (CAO) is used in this summary to signify these central office leaders.

The average length of service for a CAO is 4.6 years, which is briefer than a President's average term of 6.7 years (Clayton, 2019). Along with Deans and Directors of Schools and College of Education, CAOs have the highest turnover rate (Higher Education Publications, 2018) because it is considered one of the most difficult jobs on college and university campuses (Carlson, 2019; Clayton, 2019; Jaschik, 2018). Some CAOs continue to serve in these challenging roles notably longer than the average term of office, while others fall short of this average (Bartanen, 2019).

This wide variation begs the question of what factors contribute to chief academic officers' interest and ability to remain in their administrative positions beyond relatively brief periods of time. In effect, responses to this question address the construct of *longevity* (i.e., the duration of time in the position of chief academic officer) and the potential impact that

endurance in the office exerts on the welfare, as well as the growth and development, of their institutions. This construct warrants study considering that: (1) resilience in such a vital role represents one indicator of sustained effectiveness whereas brevity could suggest the opposite; (2) lack of longevity in the role could be a reflection of the time-consuming and all-encompassing demands placed upon CAOs; and (3) there could be important benefits to institutions if those in positions to affect the tenure of CAOs, especially the most influential ones, better understand factors that contribute to their remaining in office (Authors, in press a).

### **Background**

A national survey of CAOs was conducted in partnership with ACAD, the Association of Chief Academic Officers (ACAO), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). The current survey grew out of a prior national survey related to the longevity of academic deans that was in partnership with ACAD and the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences (CCAS).

The findings from this latter study indicated that *Job Satisfaction* (and its converse, *Job Dissatisfaction*) emerged as the multifaceted, overarching factors that influenced deans' reasoning about continuing or discontinuing their service. Two reasons that appeared especially critical for deans both to stay in or exit from their positions were support from upper administration and support from faculty and staff. The study of CAOs' perceptions about their own longevity was a logical next step to help provide a better understanding of central administrators' success at higher education institutions.

### **Data Gathering**

Our instrument, known as the *Chief Academic Officer Longevity Survey*, included a series of demographic probes and 72 Likert style target items, split evenly between the 36 factors

associated with CAOs remaining in or vacating their positions. Two additional open-ended items asked for input on possible factors that were not addressed, and one Likert item queried respondents about COVID-19's impact on their responses. The core of the survey consisted of items derived from a prior survey of the longevity of academic deans as well as new items that resulted from telephone interviews with five professionals who were either currently in a CAO role or had served in that capacity recently.

With the assistance of the ACAD, ACAO, AASCU, and APLU, a total of 316 CAOs completed the survey. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents identified as female, 41% identified as male, and 1% identified as other. Eighty-five percent of the respondents indicated that they were 50 years or older and 32% indicated that they were 65 years or older. Eighty-two percent of the respondents identified as White, 10% identified as Black, 4% identified as Hispanic, 3% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% identified as Other. Eighty-six percent held a PhD or EdD. The average number of years that the respondents had served in their current position was 3.87 years, with a range of .5 years to 16 years. On average, they had served with their current president for 3.4 years. Previously, 58% had served as a dean or Associate or Assistant Provost, and for about 5.2 years.

For the basic analyses, percentages were calculated for each of the personal demographic prompts and means and standard deviations were computed for the 72 target items. Visual inspections were made of the item means for the purposes of comparing their magnitude and detecting any noteworthy trends. Exploratory factor analysis procedures were conducted separately for the Stay scale and the Exit scale. Open coding was used for the qualitative data.

## **Findings**

*Job Satisfaction* emerged as a major factor that influenced CAOs' reasoning for continuing their service. This multifaceted conceptualization encompasses a constellation of elements related to a capacity to be effective and being trusted to do so, enjoying constructive relationships, especially with the President, as well as faculty and staff, and the garnering of necessary resources to do the job. If, however, the relationship with the President is not healthy, CAOs likely feel that they cannot make a difference, and find that the work is taking a personal toll, they would consider leaving.

*Job Dissatisfaction* surfaced as one of the organizing factors for CAOs' reasons for exiting their positions. Elements that appeared to contribute appreciably to a CAO's decision to exit the position were lack of support, a belief that one's leadership is no longer trusted, ineffective work with faculty and staff, increased workload, and above all, a disappointing relationship with the president.

The means of the target items reinforced what was especially critical for CAOs to stay in and/or exit from their positions: (1) support from the president, (2) input valued by president, and (3) confidence and trust in the president. Support from presidents was perceived as important for the CAOs to remain in their positions, just as the perceived absence of those three circumstances served as reasons for departing the position. Staying power in the role seemed to be dependent on these feelings about this important source of support.

Three items that were not rated as important for either staying or exiting were dealing with concerned parents, work benefits from major donors, and relationships with students and student associations. While the CAOs in general did not seem to envision that their interactions with parents, donors, or students would affect their longevity in their positions, female CAOs did rate student relationships as important for staying in their positions. Moreover, CAOs of color

rated the work benefits of major donors as important for staying in their positions. The differences in means between staying and exiting the CAO's role indicated that there were three items that were important for staying in the position: can still make a noteworthy difference; still have goals to accomplish; and the leadership team works effectively. Conversely, one reason influenced exiting more so than staying, which was an unmanageable workload. The pandemic did not exert a noticeable impact on their reported longevity perceptions, even with its impact on their need to make major if not unprecedented curricular, instructional, and financial adjustments in their academic areas.

A major takeaway from this study is that, while the CAOs, on average, would not be considered long-serving, they communicated that their job satisfaction and eventual longevity would be largely dependent on a mutually rewarding relationship with their president. They needed to feel supported and valued by the president, and at the same time, have confidence and trust in their direct report. They also needed to believe that they were making a noteworthy difference for an institution that they still believed in, and that they were seen as leaders who were trustworthy and instrumental in providing stability for the oversight of the academic enterprise. Their effective work with faculty and staff and their own leadership team, coupled with their own physical and mental health, appeared to be critical reasons for remaining in their positions.

Similarly, if these CAOs were to perceive a diminution of mutual support and respect from the president, a loss of confidence in the institution, or a belief that their leadership was no longer valued, possibly because of a lack of support from their faculty and staff, they would be predisposed to exiting their positions. As they work hand in glove with the president to ensure that the institution's academics are adequately supported and celebrated, they also must work

with their own constituents to align initiatives with the president's vision. Unlike the corporate world, their decision making, especially if seen as objectionable by faculty and staff, can cost them the trust they need from their stakeholders to maintain their credibility (Martin & Samuels, 2015).

A notion that emerged is that CAOs need to understand how their leadership characteristics affect their decision making so that it is easier for them to lead proactively and flexibly, rather than reactively. In addition to CAOs' reflection of and development of their own leadership capabilities, presidents need to realize the criticality of their endorsements for empowering their CAOs to lead. They need to be willing and able to support, mentor, and guide their CAOs so that they are positioned for success.

### **Conclusion**

The leadership that CAOs bring is essential to the success of the heart and soul of institutions of higher education, namely the quality of academic programming (Carlson, 2019; Clayton, 2019; Jaschik, 2018). CAOs must navigate up, down, and sideways by engaging regularly with the president, their own leadership team, faculty, staff, students, and other senior officials so that they have the necessary resources and support to sustain current initiatives and cultivate new opportunities. If CAOs feel satisfied with their positions because of support from all directions, and especially the president, which most likely reflects their own leadership acumen, they will endure in their positions to the benefit of all parties concerned.

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