

Exploring Involuntary Presidential Turnover in American Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

fulfill expectations” (Eckel & Kezar, 2011

organizational culture create fluctuating perspectives on what constitutes acceptable behavior within the organization (Alvesson, 2013). A number of higher education observers—including presidents themselves—have questioned the feasibility of leading institutions with high-profile athletics programs (Duderstadt, 2000; Green, 2012; Nocera, 2013; Woodhouse, 2015). Given the

experiences of presidents (Duderstadt, 2007; Fisher, 1984), faculty perceptions (Birnbaum, 1989), trustee perspectives (Levin, 1992), and in-depth qualitative analysis of presidents (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Birnbaum, 1992). However, these studies have generally failed to draw from longitudinal data or a large sample of institutions.

More recent research has considered the challenges leading to the instability of the presidency since the 1990s. Specifically, Martin and Samels (2004) cited five pressures on university presidents: to raise extraordinary amounts of money; to do more with less; to decide about distance education; to compete with and outperform for-profit competitors; and to overcome deprofessional-

ways quite different from other chief executives. The nature of shared governance constrains a president's ability to generate quick and direct changes (Eckel & Kezar, 2016).

In addition to organizational context, universities and presidents operate within a larger environmental context. Presidents face pressures from government regulation, statewide coordination and state system efforts, and political constraints from governors and legislators in the public sector (ACE, 2012). Moreover, presidents operate in a hypercompetitive environment within which the pursuit

Methods

In this study, we systematically examined the causes of presidential turnover in higher education to contribute to the ongoing research regarding college presidents. We selected 343 institutions that participated in NCAA Division I athletics in 2013. We selected Division I institutions to limit our sample size to a reasonable number and examine some of the most complex, well-known, and publicly scrutinized institutions in all of higher education. Helpfully, information on these institutions was readily available and highly reliable. Eighty-seven of the 343 institutions were excluded for one of three reasons: (a) We were unable to secure a complete presidential history (primarily due to inaccessible records from early in our time period; 68); (b) presidents served fixed terms outside of the norm of most higher education institutions (i.e., some religious institutions and military academies; 7); and (c) major institutional or system changes prevented a comparison (i.e., mergers or changes in governance that created or replaced the position of a campus executive; 12). The institutions excluded were broadly representative of the sample as a whole. The final sample consisted of 256 institutions and 1,029 presidential terms of office.

For each university, we created a record that listed each president permanently appointed to the position, their term of office, and the cause for turnover. Given their specific short-term basis, interim presidents were excluded. In an instance where a president served both as interim and permanently in the position, only the permanent appointment years were included. The selected time period of 1988 to 2016 covers an epoch of change within higher education and the role of the presidency (Martin & Samels, 2004). The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) How have the terms of office for college presidents changed from 1988 to 2016?
- (2) Why do college presidents leave their roles?
- (3) What are the major causes of involuntary turnover?
- (4) How has involuntary turnover varied from 1988 to 2016?

an online source reported an involuntary turnover, an additional source was obtained to confirm. In the event where official reasons for turnover conflicted with those reported in unofficial sources (i.e., “spend more time with family” vs. “loss of board confidence”

for turnover had to be the primary reason for presidential turnover. Although a president may have faced numerous controversies, we categorized the turnover based solely on the reason primarily responsible for the president's turnover according to online sources.

Findings

Before addressing our analysis and answering this study's research questions, we identify three major findings of our work.

turnover differ, each case can be neatly categorized with causes comparable to those found in other industries. Van Velsor and Leslie's (1995) work and our own suggest that institutions and presidents need to consider the causes of turnover to inform decision making.

This study advances the number of presidencies ending in involuntary turnover as a preferable metric of the challenges facing presidents. Although measures of average term of office can provide some insight, the use of involuntary turnover

The implications of our study for presidents are many. Although presidents undoubtedly have some understanding of the challenges they face, our data provide evidence of the issues that most often lead to involuntary turnover. Presidents of course have limited ability to influence external events, but we believe our data can provide useful to navigating those issues that remain in their control. One of our recommendations is that presidents take special care in responding to the issues outlined here because of their job-ending potential. Moreover, presidents should foster relationships with board members and the campus community to build social currency that may temper crises occurring during the normal life of an institution.

Beyond these recommendations, our analysis of involuntary turnovers since 2008 holds additional importance for presidents. Because the Great Recession of 2008 caused substantial funding challenges for higher education institutions, including state funding decreases and changing cost shares (Barr & Turner, 2013), one might have expected an increase in involuntary turnover related to issues of finance. In contrast, the category of financial controversies was the only category in which more involuntary turnovers occurred since 2008. Thus, our findings suggest that something beyond financial issues occurred in these institutions. To examine this aspect of our analysis in more detail, we return to the theories frequently used in the literature related to derailment and presidential turnover. Our data suggest that both of the primary research traditions for CEO turnover may have utility in examining involuntary turnover among university presidents in the wake of the Great Recession.

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Incorporating Van Velsor and Leslie'

that various causes are static or mutually exclusive. In considering the extant scholarship on presidents (ACE, [2012](#); Birnbaum, [1989](#); Birnbaum & Eckel, [2005](#); Birnbaum & Umbach, [2001](#)

leadership team cohesion, and donor perceptions of presidents influence the likelihood of a voluntary or involuntary turnover? For environmental factors, how do institutional revenue, rankings, incoming student profile, or faculty salaries predict a successful presidential tenure? These factors and other performance metrics would help to justify and evaluate overall trends driving involuntary turnovers.

Conclusion

The findings of this study and our overall understanding of today's highly complex presidency (Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Martin & Samels, 2004) suggest that campuses would benefit from heightened awareness of the challenges facing presidents. In particular, presidents may face issues in their first 2 years in office that present particular dangers for a successful term. Increased awareness of the trends and causes of involuntary turnover can enable colleges currently seeking new presidents to better anticipate problems and attempt to proactively respond to concerns before they become irreparable. For college presidents (current and aspiring), an

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