Lessons Learned from Former College Presidents of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America: A Phenomenological Study

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*This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of Lutheran college presidents leaving the presidency. The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of former college presidents who were associated with Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America (ELCA) colleges. The results of this research include significant and meaningful lessons learned by these former presidents that may be helpful for current and future college presidents. Implications for practice and future research are provided.*

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“Being a Lutheran college president is a noble calling.”  
Dr. Paul Dovre, President Emeritus, Concordia College, Moorhead, MN  
(June 20, 2002)

Rhodes (1998) suggested that the academic presidency is one of the most influential, most important, and most powerful of all positions, and there is now both a critical need and an unusual opportunity for effective leadership. “The college presidency is one of the most influential of all positions because the future leaders of the world sit in our classrooms” (Rhodes, 1998, p. 1). Future political leaders, academics, entrepreneurs, scientists, business executives, authors, and inventors are now our best and brightest students. What happens during their academic experience matters. How faculty members are led by administration is important. College presidents influence the experiences of both faculty and students on our campuses.

According to the Report of the Association of the Governing Board Task Force on the State of the Presidency in American Higher Education, “No leader comes to personify an institution the way a president does. A president must provide leadership in maintaining the institution’s academic integrity and reputation” (The Leadership Imperative, 2006, p. vi). Extraordinary challenges face higher education nationally, and leaders with exceptional capabilities are needed to help institutions meet these challenges (Rubin, 2004).


Little, though, has been written about presidents of religious institutions, and almost nothing has been written specifically about Lutheran college presidents. Four books have been authored by former Lutheran college presidents (Carlson, 1977; Dovre, 2005, Frame, 2006; Rand, 1996), but none of the four is specifically about their experience as a president or of
leaving the presidency. This study of Lutheran college presidents’ experiences can shed light on what it is like to leave a presidency. While there are only 28 Lutheran college presidents of the ELCA, the group serves as a microcosm of the 900 religion-affiliated college presidents in the country. These 900 colleges enroll more than two million students, employ upwards of 600,000 faculty and staff, and have operating budgets of more than $35 billion (Andringa & Splete, 2005). The president of each of the 28 Lutheran colleges has a complex leadership position that wields significant influence in terms of people and dollars managed (Tunheim & McLean, 2006). Such a study can help future religious college presidents understand their roles better, as well as what it means to leave a presidency. In addition, such a study can also help Human Resource Development (HRD) consultants in their work and consultation with these presidents and their institutions.

**Purpose, Need, and Justification of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of former college presidents who were associated with ELCA colleges. Past research on university and college presidents has focused mainly on those who lead large universities or small community colleges (Basinger, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002; Bornstein, 2002, 2003a, 2004, 2005; Evans, 1998; Gregg, 2004; McFarlin, 1999; Oglesby, 1996; Rhodes, 1998; Selingo, 2005). This research contributes to HRD by concentrating on the experiences of former Lutheran college presidents in higher education and their turnover. It focuses on an area that has not been sufficiently explored in HRD, that of turnover of college presidents in religious higher education. It will increase the awareness of HRD scholars and practitioners, as well as current and future Lutheran (and other) college presidents, about the workforce needs of such leaders in the future. In addition, presidential or employee turnover is important for HRD professionals who are assigned the organizational role of developing and maintaining the expertise of human resources within such organizations (Peterson, 2004).

**Phenomenological Research Design**

Phenomenology asks the question: What is this experience like? It allows the researcher to study a phenomenon to learn about it. According to van Manen, phenomenology is “the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (1990, p. 10). An underlying assumption of phenomenology is that humans seek meaning from their experiences and from the experiences of others (Gibson, 2003). Phenomenology studies the essence or the meaning of lived experiences that individuals often forget are present.

**Research Methods**

According to van Manen (1990), hermeneutic phenomenology consists of six research tenets. This is not a linear process but, instead, consists of “dynamic interplay” between and among these tenets (p. 30). The research tenets are:

1. turning to a phenomenon that seriously interests us and commits us to the world
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it
3. reflecting on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting
5. maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon
6. balancing the research context by considering the parts and whole (pp. 30-31).

These six research tenets serve as the basis of the research. An important assumption of this methodology is that, unlike natural sciences research, phenomenology is not a science of empirical facts for generalization. The findings of this study are not meant to be generalized. They are intended to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied as experienced by the participants.

**Research Participants**

There are approximately 25 former Lutheran ELCA college presidents who have exited the role in the last five years. Ten were selected to be research participants for this study, based on convenience. All but three were located in the Midwest. The participants included ten males whose racial/ethnic makeup is Caucasian. All are affiliated with the ELCA.

**Interviews**

Eight of the ten participants were interviewed face-to-face. The final two were interviewed by telephone. Permission was given to audio-tape the interviews, and transcripts were created. The study was conducted under the guidelines and approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university.

**Data Collection**

Each interview began with the research question, “What is the experience like of leaving the presidency of an ELCA college?” Probing questions, such as “Tell me more about that? What else did you experience? How did you feel during the process of leaving? What did you learn as a result?” were used.

**Data Analysis**

The interviews were subjected to hermeneutic phenomenological reflection to allow themes to emerge. Texts were read a total of four times. The first two times were to understand the data. Giorgi (1997) suggested that this is critical in assisting the researcher in understanding how the parts are constituted. The third time she read the texts through very slowly, highlighting important lines. Tesch (1987) described this step as one where the reader is looking for the material that is at the center of the experience. Barritt, Beekman, Bleeke, and Mulderij (1984) described it as looking for the “moments which fly up like sparks from the description” (p. 6). The fourth time the first author documented the highlighted lines from the texts and later categorized them by theme and participant.

Two Excel spreadsheets were then created: the first was a summary of the themes by former president and the second by the themes themselves. These documents served as the summary of the transcribed data.

Finally, after review of the themes by the second author and subsequent revision, she sent the theme and sub-theme list back to the participants. She scheduled a second, follow-up interview. She talked with nine of the ten participants one by one. One was in Africa for an extended period of time and was unable to participate in this validation process. The former presidents shared their thoughts with her about this list and how it resonated with their own experience. The presidents offered their validation and also their disagreement with some of the themes. This feedback resulted in a final list of themes and sub-themes.
Limitations

A number of limitations influenced this study. The first is not really a limitation, but those who do not understand the methodology may see it as such; it is about the purpose of the research. Van Manen (1997) reminded us that “Phenomenology does not problem solve” (p. 23). This study’s purpose is not to solve the Lutheran college turnover problem. According to Polkinghorne, 1989, “The objective of the phenomenological researcher is to help those who read the research findings come away with a better understanding of what it is like for someone to experience the phenomenon” (p. 41). Thus, The findings are not intended to be generalized.

Findings: Lessons Learned

An analysis of the interview transcripts produced four main theme categories and 13 sub-themes. This is the second of two papers from this study. In this paper, the last theme, lessons learned, is covered. Some verbatim detail from the former presidents will be shared to represent the data. Due to space limitations, only one or two texts per theme and sub-theme will be presented.

Role is Complex and Demanding

The role of a college president is complex and demanding. These ten former presidents validated that research. There are high expectations in the role, as stated by this former president:
If you go to an inauguration and you listen to the board chair describe this new president, you realize the expectations the institution has of you. You just recognize the stakes that the whole constituency has in you helping the institution to succeed. There are times it just rattles you to the core.

Another former president talked about how much one has to learn when new in the job:
It’s a very steep learning curve. You have a whole new culture to learn, a new tradition, a new history, a new set of players, new personalities.

Vocational calling.
The Lutheran church was born out of a university in Germany, the University of Wittenburg. Martin Luther, the theologian who inspired the founding of Lutheran colleges, wrote a great deal about vocation. His view, different from the Catholic Church at the time in 1522, was that everyone has a calling from God—not just religious leaders. And these Lutheran college former presidents validated that idea in the interviews. Half of them spoke about how being a college president is, indeed, a calling in life:
In some respect, now that I’m not in the role, I can see that it was a calling. It was Spirit-led. It didn’t always feel that way at the time, but I see it now.

Another former president described how he balanced his own feelings of incompetence with the call to be the leader of the institution:
I think that, for us Lutherans, it’s the understanding of our work as a calling that helps. The counterbalance to the feelings of inadequacy is that I have a call to be the president of this school. If this school is going to have a president, it has to be me. There may be smarter people on my campus. But if there’s going to be a president here, I have to be it because I have the call to be it.
Preparation. Nine of the ten former presidents had a great deal to say about the importance of preparation for the presidential role. A former president cited an example that described the overwhelming feelings he had as a beginning president:

I was a brand new president. I went to the first conference. It was sponsored by the American Council on Education. I was persuaded after the first day that I was absolutely the dumbest new president there, and by far the least prepared to be the president of a college!

Being overwhelmed as a new college president might be a common thought. From this study, the ten former presidents offered a long and varied list of knowledge areas or skills that would be helpful preparation for the role. The suggested list is as follows: telling the mission or story of the institution, strategic planning, fundraising, enrolment, financial aid, academic leader, personnel skills, and having a Ph.D. or not, as important credentials today.

A former president from a financially strapped institution discussed the difficulty in preparing for the job:

I am convinced today that there is absolutely nothing that prepares you for this experience of being a president. Nothing.

The majority of former presidents, however, did feel that a future presidential candidate could do some things in order to be prepared for success in the role. These presidents discussed the individual areas in which they would have liked to have been better prepared or at least shared what they thought would be important for aspiring presidents to know prior to taking the role.

Separating oneself from the role. Some of the presidents in this study struggled with keeping themselves separate from the role. After some time, it was as if the line blurred between them personally and the institution. One president discussed how public his position was and how that affected him personally:

I suddenly was very well known. You’re on the television news. You’re in the newspaper. You’re now a public figure. I didn’t know who was recognizing me when I go to the store or when I drive to a local city to do whatever. I had this constant feeling that someone was watching me. I was the college. Everything I did represented my college. It was kind of a strange feeling.

The presidential role can provide confusion for some constituents and the president himself. Is the president speaking for himself or for the entire college?

The Institution

The former presidents had a lot to say about the lessons they learned relative to institutions as a whole. Three sub-themes emerged from the data: culture, mission, and fit, team development, and relationship with the board chair.

Culture, mission, and fit. These former presidents advised new or current Lutheran college presidents to embrace carefully the culture of the institution. In some cases, leaders have been hired to come in and change things, per the board’s direction. These former presidents recommended that a new president study and learn from the culture first.

I think the president has to embrace the culture that exists when you get there. Culture in an academic institution does not change unless there’s a long period where there is a crisis. A real crisis. If you walk into a situation like I did where things were going pretty
well, and you start saying, “This is all wrong, we need to change.” What you have is 200 faculty looking back at you saying, “What’s wrong with what we’re doing here?” Along with culture, articulating the mission came up as an important factor relative to lessons learned. One former president offered this example:

I think the president has to be the chief storyteller of the mission of the college. Part of the president’s job is to make everybody the storyteller about your place. Someone has to mind the saga. It’s important for the president to understand the saga and be a storyteller.

Fit was also a word often used by the former presidents, suggesting that, if the president doesn’t fit with the place, the match between the two will never work out. This former president talked about the match between the president and the institution:

I really think that, when a college makes its final cut to the top three people, almost any one of them possesses qualities to be a president. The question is whether they fit. And so you can be very qualified and judged not to be the fittest. Fit matters. It needs to be considered by the board and the top candidates before a presidential selection is determined.

Team development. Seven of the ten former presidents commented on the importance of crafting and developing a successful team of vice-presidents. This team is often called the Cabinet, Administrative Council, or the President’s Council. A few of the former presidents spoke about the importance of assembling a strong team from the beginning:

Always try to hire the best people available. If they’re not available, don’t hire them. It took us a complete year to find the right vice-president of development. Get the best people possible.

Team development did not just happen naturally. It was an intentional, formative activity that took work and skill.

Relationship with the board chair. Four former presidents talked about the relationship with the leader of the board, the board chair. Another former president highlighted the criticality of the chair:

What was really affirmed for me was that the relationship between the president and the board chair is the most critical relationship in the university. That relationship sets a tone for the full board, and I think the board does set a tone for the institution because the executive team is so involved with the board. That stuff filters down.

The Individual

Presidents shared that they learned things about themselves while in the job and also while exiting a presidency. Three sub-themes emerged: self-awareness and a healthy ego, mentors, and presidential spouse.

Self-awareness and a healthy ego. Half of the former presidents talked about the importance of having self-awareness and a healthy ego to do this job well. They also commented on what happens when a president’s ego gets out of line. One president highlighted the bottom line:

The best presidents quickly figure out, “It’s not about me! It’s not about being president. It’s about the mission of the college and the students. We are here for them.”
The former presidents said that in different ways. Here are two examples: “This was never about me. It couldn’t be.” “And when it is about me is when I get into trouble. My focus is on the wrong thing.”

**Mentors.** Four former presidents spoke about the importance of mentors. Three mentioned needing or having a mentor while they were in the position. One talked about how helpful it was to have a peer mentoring session. The first indicated that a wise mentor would have made a difference during the difficult days:

If I were to do this again, I would absolutely have a mentor...an older, more experienced president to talk to through some of the difficult times.

**Presidential spouse.** Nine of the ten former presidents brought up the important partnership of their spouses during the interviews. It became clear that, when a president tells a board of regents, “yes,” the spouse’s life will be forever changed, too. “You get the whole package,” said one former president. One of the most meaningful comments shared was the essential support role that the spouse offers to the president:

For the president, whether male or female, you quickly realize that your spouse is the only one you can talk to. And that’s something you learn the hard way.

**Shorter-Term Presidencies**

Four of the ten former presidents walked into situations where the institutions were strapped financially. In light of the 3.86 years of average tenure for Lutheran college presidents (Selbyg, 2007), it seems important to write about the unique issues these former presidents faced. This next president shared a story of shock and surprise about what he learned about the dismal finances of his institution after taking the job:

Before I started working at the college, I went down there once a week and worked with the team. One day I was having lunch with the controller who was the VP of Finance. This was in early May. Our fiscal year went through the end of June. During the conversation, he casually said, “We have $25,000 in the bank.” I said, “Okay. Well, what does that mean?” He replied, “Well, payroll is the 10th of the month.” He then told me that payroll cost $650,000. I had been elected one month before. I said, “So, what’s going to be done about that?” He said, very matter of factly, “I don’t know.” This is the kind of stuff new presidents walking into financially strapped places face.

This former president reflected upon the hidden surprise and added his conclusion about his shorter-term role at the college. This was clearly different from what he had expected when hired:

After a short period of time, the reality set in fairly quickly that, however long I stayed in the presidency, it was going to just be an interim. There was no fun in my job after that. I knew my job was to get the place turned around. I had to be an agent of change.

**Search Firms**

Four of the ten former presidents mentioned the use of search firms when selecting a new president. All four of the responses were critical of search firms’ behavior during the selection process of a college president. One former president reported:

In most searches, I do think the pool the search firm gathers could use some work. Boards don’t always know if it’s a good pool or not.
Volunteer boards may not be specifically equipped to make this once in a lifetime, important decision for the college. If a search firm does its job well, they will sift through the candidates and select the best three possible. If the top panel is not of high caliber, then the search firm and board should agree to discontinue the search and make a plan to move forward in a different direction.

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study offers a number of possible recommendations for consideration. First, current presidents and boards need to get even more intentional about Lutheran college presidential preparation and succession. They need to send high-potential staff and faculty to the American Council on Education or Thrivent Fellows Leadership Development programs that are available. In addition, they need to develop these high-potentials in the areas of finance, fundraising, and the personal side of being a president. Academia needs to be more intentional building the pipeline inside each institution and among the 28 Lutheran colleges.

Second, presidential finalists need to do a thorough job of learning about the finances at the institution before they accept the position. Eighty percent of new presidents are surprised about something when they get the job (Moore & Burrows, 2001). The literature reports that it is usually in the area of finances (Sanaghan, Goldstein, & Gaval, 2008). Doing as much due diligence as possible will help reduce the number of surprises, which, in turn, could help new presidents be more successful and turnover less.

The third recommendation is that board development needs to continue to be a top priority for presidents and board chairs. Presidents need to encourage their board chairs to go to AGB (Association of Governing Boards) seminars and learn from other successful board experiences. Getting a board engaged with “their noses in and fingers out” (R. L. Torgerson, personal communication, June 24, 2006) is often touted as the key to success.

Fourth, former Lutheran college presidents need to be tapped more to mine their wisdom and expertise. This group could serve as an advisory or type of consulting group. They could vet presidential finalists for search committees or assist with performance evaluations for boards. Their expertise is rich. It needs to be utilized more than it currently is.

Another recommendation is that presidential evaluations be conducted after the first year of a presidency, so that the new president can learn what is going well and what is not going well. Most boards wait until the third year and sometimes these formal evaluations do not happen until the fifth year of a presidency. Presidents need to know what is working and what is not, so that they can make adjustments.

Finally, more former Lutheran college presidents need to write about their presidential experiences. Passing the institutional and presidential stories down could be important history lessons that should not be lost and need to be preserved.

**Recommendations for Research**

This study suggests that presidential fit with the institution is a key area for more research. In addition, we need to know more about the needed skill sets for presidents who take on leadership roles at financially-strapped. More needs to be researched on presidential spouses, especially as more females become presidents. Female and minority presidents need more research attention, as well, as both are slowly increasing in the presidential role. Finally, more research needs to be conducted on the job satisfaction of Lutheran college presidents. Surveying this group as a whole would be an interesting and informative study. The use of engagement surveys for faculty and staff could also
be helpful in leading change in these colleges. We also suggest conducting this same study with other groups of college presidents. It would be interesting to see if the same themes emerged with a group of Jesuit or Methodist or other denominational college presidents. Repeating this study in other small, liberal arts colleges could affirm themes or identify new experiences while leaving the presidency.

Conclusion

Even though the job of college president is an incredibly challenging and complex one, college presidents still claim that it is worth experiencing. The key, then, to having a successful presidency is to provide the support mechanisms to improve the possibility of success.

References


