The Changing College President:
Aligning Experience with Necessity

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The Changing College President:
Aligning Experience with Necessity

Nguyen Nguyen, Jan Greenwood, and Hollie M. Chessman

Contribution Statement

This report was prepared by Nguyen Nguyen, Jan Greenwood, and Hollie M. Chessman.

Nguyen contributed to the selection of quotations from president interviews and the analysis of the American College President Study data; authored the executive summary, introduction, conclusion, methodology, and all the text associated with the tables and figures; and prepared the tables for publication.

Greenwood identified the focus for the research; designed, conducted, and transcribed the interviews with the presidents; reviewed and offered feedback throughout the writing process; and wrote essays for further reflection from her experiences as president of both public and private universities, co-founder of a higher education search firm, and conductor of approximately 1,000 executive-level searches.

Chessman provided leadership and overall management of the project through to completion; contributed to the writing; synthesized insights and identified areas for future study based on key takeaways from the brief and Greenwood's reflections; and revised and reviewed the publication.

Executive Summary

Over the past 30 years, there has been a significant transformation in the responsibilities of college and university presidents. Their roles have grown to encompass a broader range of resource-development duties—including significant fundraising, state representative meetings, town-gown relations, and many external-facing responsibilities—and their professional backgrounds reflect this shift. This report explores the diverse pathways to the college presidency, with a particular focus on individuals who did not serve as provosts (or chief academic officers)—the role that was once considered the best training for a college presidency—compared with those who had. There are some differences between these groups, yet the ideal candidate is one who has the skills that are most needed for an institution's goals and success.

Drawing on data from the American College President Study's (ACPS) 2022 survey, which included 880 presidents who listed their career information—half of whom had never occupied provost positions—as well as insights from interviews with six successful university presidents without provost experience, this report affirms that the provost pathway is not the only one that creates the "ideal" candidate for the college presidency.[1] Other pathways also develop equally qualified and successful presidents who are able to meet the needs and demands of today's colleges and universities.

Some of the key takeaways include:

- **Demographics:** Men more frequently bypassed the provost route to the presidency than women did. Conversely, White women were more likely than men to have served as provosts before they rose to presidential positions. People of color were more represented among non-provost presidents.
- **Institutional Carnegie Classifications:**
    - » Presidents without provost experience were two times more likely than presidents with provost experience to oversee special focus institutions.
    - » Provost presidents were more likely than their non-provost counterparts to manage associate institutions.
    - » Notably, non-provost leaders were more likely than provost presidents to have previously worked at doctoral institutions before their current presidency, but a smaller share of non-provost presidents moved on to lead such institutions.
    - » Women, regardless of provost experience, predominantly led associate or baccalaureate institutions, whereas men without provost experience were more likely than non-provost women to lead doctoral institutions.
    - » Men with provost experience were more likely than women with provost experience to lead at master's and doctoral institutions.
- **Career Aspirations:** The aspiration to the presidency occurred at a slightly younger age for non-provost presidents, although the average time from aspiration to appointment was similar across groups. White men and women of color who did not serve as provosts had the longest average time in their current positions—at 6.8 and 6.2 years, respectively—when compared with provost presidents, regardless of gender or race and ethnicity. Also, non-provost presidents were more likely than provost presidents to stay in their current presidency for a longer time.
- **Search Process:** According to ACPS data, both types of presidents indicated that search consultants had been their primary source of encouragement when they applied for their current presidencies. The president interviews offered further clarity from non-provost presidents, who particularly valued and preferred confidential search processes. Interviewees also indicated the need to set themselves apart and distinctively present the advantages of their diverse backgrounds in order to navigate subjective screening criteria such as fit and match.

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1   Of the over 1,000 presidents who responded to the American College President Study's 2022 survey, 880 presidents listed their prior five roles leading up to their current president or chief executive officer roles. See the methodology for additional information.

- **Professional Development:** Non-provost leaders were more likely than their provost-serving counterparts to express that they wanted training in technology planning. Non-provost presidents were also more likely to state a desire for further training around shared governance, accreditation, and academic issues, but the share of presidents of any type who indicated that they needed this support was relatively small. Presidents with provost experience indicated more frequently than their non-provost counterparts that they wanted development in areas such as fundraising, budget management, and entrepreneurial initiatives.

As the duties of college and university presidents continue to change and the role demands new skills and capabilities, it becomes imperative for boards, search committees, and search firms to approach their selection processes with an open mind and to realize that most institutions are appointing individuals who have the specific experience that matches their institution's needs. This shift toward inclusivity and diversity in leadership reflects the evolving landscape of higher education, but it also empowers institutions with leaders who are capable of navigating contemporary challenges and embracing varied educational paradigms.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, the skills and experiences that college and university presidents need for their job have shifted. The focus of the president's role has evolved from academic affairs to more external-facing functions: the fundraiser in chief, the public face of the college, and other critical positions (Beardsley 2017; Aspen Institute Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency 2017). What many used to perceive as the "ideal" candidate—a person with specific educational criteria (i.e., PhD or EdD), as well as a particular career trajectory via the provost role—has been replaced by senior leaders who have a variety of backgrounds (Greenwood and Ross, 1996; Cohen and March 1974).

Indeed, boards and search committees realized that the "provost's role might not always be the best preparation for the presidency" (Selingo, Chheng, and Clark 2017). In accordance, 2022 data from the American College President Study (ACPS) indicated that only about 30 percent of presidents were provosts before their current position.

Surprisingly, however, the perception of an ideal candidate lingers. Search consultants—those in the room with board members and search committees—still report hearing a preference for a candidate who ascended through the ranks of faculty to become provost. An interviewed president put it well:

> "I find that some search committees (and even some consultants) can be very narrow-minded about the range of acceptable backgrounds for candidates and [they can] make assumptions about other types of candidates. Often this rationale is blamed on the faculty (i.e., the argument is that the faculty would never accept a candidate who did not come from an academic affairs leadership role)."

Data indicate that many search committees have been persuaded, which is fortunate as a provost-only pipeline would result in a less diverse and less equitable college presidency. Recent data from CUPA-HR show that men and women of color were only 16.2 percent of current provosts, with 9.2 percent who identified as women of color (Fuesting 2023).

This shift toward leaders with diverse backgrounds—in professional experience, gender, and race and ethnicity—matches the unique needs and student populations of today's colleges and universities. To attain gender parity in the college presidency, nearly three out of every five (59 percent) presidential vacancies in the next eight years would need to be filled by women. For equity as represented by race and ethnicity in the student population, three out of every five (61 percent) new presidents would also need to be people of color.[2]

With robust ACPS data and qualitative insights, this report explores the backgrounds, experiences, and opinions of today's college presidents, debunking the notion that only provosts are suited to the role and affirming the shift in recent years to include a broader set of leaders.[3]

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[2]   The American Council on Education analyzed data from the National Center for Education Statistics and ACPS. See the methodology for more details.

[3]   This brief uses the term *president* to refer to chief executive officer–level leaders of college and university campuses and systems. Some participants who were interviewed for this report held the title of chancellor.

Rationale

This report analyzes 2022 data from the American College President Study (ACPS). ACPS, renowned as the most comprehensive and frequently cited source on the college presidency across American higher education since its inception in 1986, offers insights into the demographics, experiences, and challenges of college presidents. To understand whether substantive differences exist between presidents with and without provost experience, this report conducts a comparative analysis, supported by interviews with six successful university presidents who did not previously serve as provosts. All but one of these presidents identified as persons of color or women. All were also recruited by search firms, and the searches that yielded their positions were confidential. All served at public institutions that had their own governing boards, which had been appointed by the governors of their state.

The following sections delve into the career and demographic profiles of college presidents. Sections 1 and 2 employ ACPS data to present a holistic view of college presidents who did not serve as provosts and to compare them with their provost-serving counterparts. Using these two groups for the remainder of the report, section 3 investigates what compelled individuals to apply for the presidency. Section 4 details the search process, and section 5 explores the onboarding experiences of college presidents to shed light on their transitions and initial roles. Lastly, section 6 highlights the areas in which presidents indicated that they would like more training and development. Appendix A offers potential areas for future research and inquiry.

Additionally, there are short essays that lend insights, context, and reflections from Jan Greenwood, president emeritus at two institutions and the co-founder of the search firm Greenwood Asher & Associates. She has conducted approximately 1,000 searches for executives in education, health care, nonprofits, information technology, and *Fortune*-ranked corporate boards.

THE SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE OF THE "IDEAL" CANDIDATE
JAN GREENWOOD

In the 1980s, presidents began to spend more time away from campus to raise money and collaborate with legislators on behalf of their colleges and universities. This shift in presidential responsibilities, particularly for public universities, became a priority because of deep budget cuts and the need for additional resources. So, as presidents were spending more time externally, institutions needed to designate who would be in charge during their absence.

Most institutions turned to provosts to fulfill these responsibilities, and some colleges and universities empowered provosts to lead cabinet-level meetings and decision-making. Other institutions viewed the role as the first contact in a president's absence.

During this period, provosts understandably became prospects for presidential positions because they served as the direct report to the president at the institution. For presidential search considerations, however, their direct responsibilities were on internal workings, with few having responsibilities external to the university such as fundraising or legislative work. By 2000, the continued reduction in state funding led to presidents who spent even more time external to the university to build additional resources.

With a sizable percentage of presidents and provosts nearing retirement, the question became how to build presidential candidate pools with people who had experience in the responsibilities of the position. Deans were tracking approximately five years younger than the presidents and provosts, and sometimes their responsibilities aligned more with the presidents in that many had external resource development requirements.

An interviewee shared how their experience as dean led to a presidency:

> "**After serving as a faculty member and moving into administration, I served as an associate dean for five years and a dean for 12 years (at two institutions).** Toward the end of my deanships, I began to look at provost opportunities and interviewed for a few positions at AAU [Association of American Universities] public and private institutions. Over time, it became evident that I had developed the broad skills to move into a presidency. I was recruited and hired into a large public, four-year residential comprehensive institution."

Search committees realized that a position title does not indicate what the responsibilities really are—a dean at a major complex research university could have had similar responsibilities to the president, or a provost could have had a wide-ranging portfolio of responsibilities at their institution. Another benefit of looking at responsibilities rather than titles is that diversity increased. As a result, the description of the ideal candidate for presidencies shifted over these years from having been a full professor, department head, dean, and provost to including some of these expectations *without* also having been a provost.

Other changes occurred during this period. Vice presidents in charge of admissions were considered for institutions with enrollment difficulties, and vice presidents for development were evaluated as a match when fundraising was paramount.

It is often assumed that candidates who have been provosts understand shared governance; however, shared governance may be quite different from one institution to another. All candidates—but particularly those who have not been provosts—can instead demonstrate responsibilities that align with the hiring university's expectations of candidates' understanding of shared governance (e.g., earning rank and tenure; teaching; serving on committees focused on tenure and promotion, curriculum, accreditation, or budget; or being a member of the university senate). Even including the presidents of faculty senate, university senate, staff council, and student government on a reference list can indicate a candidate's understanding of the importance of shared governance.

Section 1: The Most Immediate Past Position Before Current Presidency

This section uses 2022 data from ACPS to delineate the professional trajectories of college presidents and illuminate distinctions between those who ascended from provost roles and those who took alternative paths before assuming the presidency. Out of 1,075 respondents, 950 answered the career pathway question, and table 1.1 reveals the most recent positions candidates held before they embarked on their presidential journey.[4] Notably, only about 30 percent of respondents were provosts prior to their presidency, while other common past positions included academic dean (8.6 percent), senior campus executive in business or administration (7.5 percent), or interim president, chief executive officer, or chancellor (7.3 percent). Also, 18.0 percent of respondents cited diverse roles (e.g., other) that spanned management and administration in K–12 and higher education, in both the public and private sectors, and that included experience in superintendent, consultant, pastor, or government relations roles, to name a few.

Table 1.1: Presidents' Most Recent Positions Before Current Presidential Roles, 2022

Presidents' Most Recent Position	Percentage of Sample
Academic dean	8.6%
Chief academic officer or provost	29.9%
Department chair/program director	1.6%
Interim president/CEO/chancellor	7.3%
Interim president/CEO/chancellor of a system	1.0%
Non-tenure-track faculty	0.8%
Other senior executive in academic affairs (not including dean)	4.0%
Outside of higher education—business sector	6.2%
Senior campus/system executive for advancement or development (e.g., VP/AVP of development)	4.1%
Senior campus/system executive for athletics	0.1%
Senior campus/system executive for diversity (e.g., chief diversity officer)	0.2%
Senior campus executive in business and/or administration	7.5%
Senior campus executive in student affairs	6.4%
Tenure-track faculty	0.5%
Tenured faculty	3.8%
Other	18.0%
Total	**100.0%**

Note: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey.

One interviewed president talked about their position before becoming president:

> "When I was a senior VP [vice president] and general counsel, **the president for whom I worked told me that I had the skill sets needed for a president and that he would help me pursue this possibility. His mentorship and support encouraged me** to consider applying for such roles. I was able to prepare by being engaged in many aspects of senior leadership that were outside the four corners of my job description (e.g., by leading university-wide task forces on issues such as diversity, compliance, and athletics)."

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4   The participants chose the option that most closely aligned with their career pathways and then indicated the immediate past position they had held.

Section 2: Demographic Profiles of Those Who Were Provosts and Those Who Were Not Provosts

In the 2022 data from ACPS, 880 out of 1,075 respondents listed their five most recent positions leading up to their current presidencies. Subsequently, they were categorized into two groups: individuals who had served as provosts or chief academic officers in any of their prior five positions and those who had alternative roles such as academic deans, campus executives, or positions outside of higher education.[5] Among these, just greater than half (458 respondents) did not hold provost positions before ascending to a presidency. Already, such diverse trajectories indicate a shift from the traditional expectation that a candidate must have been a provost to be a president.

One interviewed president shared their trajectory:

> "Throughout my career, I engaged in several activities and experiences that truly prepared me for a college presidency, from my administrative roles to teaching, earning tenure, and fundraising. **All of this positioned me to be prepared. I did not decide that I was going to pursue a presidency until I was contacted by a search firm to consider an opportunity.** I had become comfortable with the thought of concluding my career as a vice president for student affairs and enrollment management."

In terms of gender, men were more likely than women to come from a non-provost background (see table 2.1). When examined at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender, White women were much more likely to serve as provosts before becoming presidents, while White men were more likely to serve in other positions than the provost role before becoming presidents.[6] Men and women of color were slightly more likely to come to the presidency through non-provost positions (see table 2.2).[7] Notably, presidents without provost experience were more likely than those who served as provosts to identify as people of color (see table 2.3).

Table 2.1: Gender Demographics of Presidents Who Previously Served as Provosts, Compared with Those Who Had Not, 2022

Gender	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
Men	65.5%	57.0%
Women	34.5%	43.0%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Note: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey.

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5   See the methodology for an explanation as to how these categories were created with 2022 data from the American College President Study.

6   Throughout this report, respondents who selected only "Caucasian, White or White American (non-Middle Eastern descent)" are referred to as *White*.

7   Throughout this report, the term *men and women of color* is used to encompass those presidents who responded that they identified as Hispanic or Latino, Middle Eastern or Arab American, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Asian American, Asian Indian, or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Presidents who selected more than one racial identity were grouped as *multiracial*.

Table 2.2: Race and Gender of Presidents Who Previously Served as Provosts, Compared with Those Who Had Not, 2022

	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
White men	48.2%	42.2%
White women	21.5%	33.1%
Men of color	17.2%	14.1%
Women of color	12.9%	10.4%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Notes: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey. | Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 2.3: Race and Ethnicity of Presidents Who Previously Served as Provosts, Compared with Those Who Had Not, 2022

Presidents' Race and Ethnicity	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
Caucasian, White, or White American	69.9%	74.8%
Middle Eastern or Arab American	0.7%	0.7%
Black or African American	14.7%	12.7%
Asian or Asian American	2.3%	3.9%
Asian Indian	1.1%	0.0%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.2%
Hispanic	6.3%	4.6%
Multiracial*	3.4%	1.7%
Race not listed	0.0%	1.0%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

* Presidents were asked to select any race with which they identify. Any president who identified as more than one race was included in this created variable.
Notes: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey. | Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Where Presidents Serve, by Provost Status: 2022

With data broken out by Carnegie Classification, only associate institutions and special focus institutions showed notable differences in whether their president had been a provost (see table 2.4). Presidents who were provosts were more likely to lead associate institutions, while presidents who were not provosts were twice as likely to lead special focus institutions. Notably, there is not much difference in the share of doctoral, master's, or baccalaureate presidents who were or were not provosts.

Table 2.4: Where Presidents Are Currently Serving, by Provost Status, 2022

Carnegie Classification*	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
Associate	30.8%	39.3%
Baccalaureate	17.0%	16.8%
Master's	22.7%	21.1%
Doctoral	16.6%	16.3%
Special focus	12.8%	6.4%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

* Population is from the 2021 Carnegie Classifications.
Notes: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey. | Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Some of the presidents who had not served as provosts, however, experienced a shift in Carnegie Classification when they took their current presidencies. For example, 27.8 percent of non-provost presidents had worked at doctoral institutions before their current presidencies (see table 2.5), but only 16.6 percent later became presidents at doctoral institutions (see table 2.4). Also, about one in five (23.9 percent) non-provost presidents had worked at associate institutions before their current presidencies, and 30.8 percent later became presidents of these institutions. It is also notable that 13.5 percent of non-provost presidents came to the presidency with their most immediate past positions outside of higher education. In short, non-provost presidents were more likely to move to an institution with a different Carnegie Classification than that of their previous position, potentially indicating a search committee's willingness to think more broadly about background and experiences with non-provost candidates.

Table 2.5: Where Presidents Worked Before Taking Presidential Positions, by Provost Status, 2022

Carnegie Classification*	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
Associate	23.9%	38.6%
Baccalaureate	13.3%	16.4%
Master's	13.7%	21.1%
Doctoral	27.8%	16.1%
Special focus	7.2%	6.4%
Outside higher education	13.5%	1.4%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

* Population is classified using the 2021 Carnegie Classifications, with the exception of the presidents who indicated that their immediate previous position was outside of higher education.
Notes: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey. | Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Women, whether they had been provosts or not before becoming presidents, were more likely than men to serve as presidents at an associate or baccalaureate institution (see tables 2.6 and 2.7). Men who were not provosts before becoming presidents were more likely than women who were not provosts to serve as presidents at doctoral institutions (see table 2.6), while men who were provosts were more likely than women who were provosts to serve at master's and doctoral institutions (see table 2.7). It is worth acknowledging that master's and doctoral institutions have historically been considered more prestigious than their undergraduate counterparts. When combined with gender discrimination, these data indicate some correlation between prestige and sexism in leadership appointments.

Table 2.6: Where Presidents Who Were Not Provosts Are Serving, by Gender and Carnegie Classification, 2022

Carnegie Classification*	Women	Men
Associate	35.3%	28.5%
Baccalaureate	18.3%	15.5%
Master's	21.6%	23.7%
Doctoral	13.1%	18.9%
Special focus/other	11.8%	13.4%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

* Population is from the 2021 Carnegie Classifications.
Notes: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey | Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 2.7: Where Presidents Who Were Provosts Are Serving, by Gender and Carnegie Classification, 2022

Carnegie Classification*	Women	Men
Associate	43.5%	36.6%
Baccalaureate	19.2%	15.3%
Master's	16.4%	24.3%
Doctoral	12.4%	19.2%
Special focus/other	8.5%	4.7%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

* Population is from the 2021 Carnegie Classifications.
Notes: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey. | Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

While women are still underrepresented in the presidency, slow progress is being made. In the past, women presidents predominantly led institutions that conferred bachelor's degrees rather than those that offered doctoral or master's degrees (Cozza and Parnther 2022). They were more likely to be presidents of either nonprofit or for-profit private institutions rather than public ones (Cozza and Parnther 2022). They were also more likely to lead religiously affiliated colleges or universities as well as institutions with hospitals that were often located in towns or rural areas.

Average Age of First Presidential Aspiration, Application, and Appointment; Time in Current Position; and Stepping Down

The ACPS 2022 survey asked presidents to indicate the ages at which they first aspired, applied, and were appointed to their presidencies (see table 2.8). Presidents, regardless of their provost background, took an average of approximately 6.8 years from aspiring to the presidency to their actual appointments.[8] Presidents who did not serve as provosts tended to aspire to this position at a slightly younger average age, compared with that of their counterparts who had served as provosts.

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8   This data was calculated by subtracting respondents' average age of when they decided they wanted to be presidents from the average age of when they were appointed.

Table 2.8: Average Age of Presidential Aspiration, Application, and Appointment for Presidents Who Served as Provosts and Those Who Did Not, 2022

	Aspiration	Application	Appointment	Aspiration to Appointment Time Difference
Provost president	45.7	50.5	52.6	(+) 6.9
Non-provost president	44.5	49.7	51.3	(+) 6.8

Notes: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey. | These are averages within the sample.

Survey data revealed a gap between non-provost and provost presidents related to time in their current presidential roles. Non-provost presidents averaged 6.6 years in their current role, whereas their provost counterparts served for an average of 5.4 years in their current presidencies.[9] On average, presidents who had served as provosts were newer to their current positions than leaders who had not been provosts.

Examining average time in current presidencies by gender, race, and ethnicity, White men (6.8 years) and women of color (6.2 years) who had not served as provosts had been in their roles the longest (see table 2.9). Men of color who had served as provosts were more likely to have been in their position a year longer on average than men of color who had not served as provosts.

Table 2.9: Average Time in Current Presidential Position, by Gender and Race and Ethnicity and by Provost Status, 2022
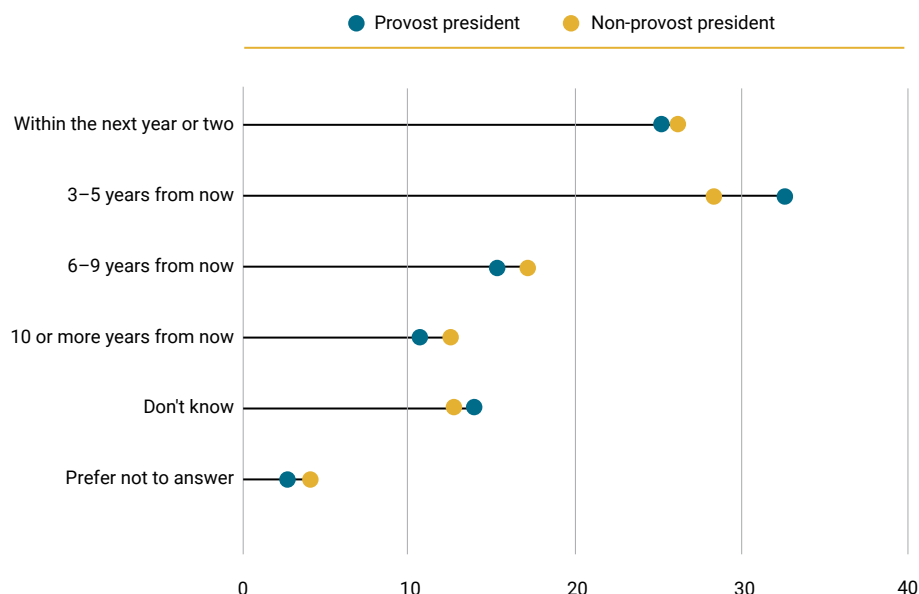
	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
White men	6.8	5.9
White women	5.8	4.9
Men of color	4.8	5.8
Women of color	6.2	4.4

Notes: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey. | These calculations were done by subtracting the year and month the presidents were appointed to their current position from the survey close date of June 2022.

Regardless of previous provost status, more than half of presidents indicated that they intended to step down from their current position within the next five years. A higher percentage of presidents who had been provosts planned to step down during this time frame, whereas non-provost presidents indicated they were more likely to stay in their current presidency for a longer time (see figure 2.1).

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9   These calculations were done by subtracting the year and month the presidents were appointed to their current position from the survey close date of June 2022. The average time in position across the two groups was reported.

Figure 2.1: Time Frame of When Presidents Planned to Step Down from Their Current Positions, by Provost Status, 2022

Among all options for next steps after stepping down from their current position, presidents with prior provost experience (40.8 percent) showed a higher likelihood of retiring after their current presidencies, compared with their non-provost counterparts (33.8 percent) (see table 2.10).

Table 2.10: Next Steps Presidents Are Considering After Leaving Their Current Positions, by Provost Status, 2022

	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
Retire, hold no other position	33.8%	40.8%
Move to another presidency	25.3%	29.2%
Consultant—other	24.0%	26.1%
Consultant for higher education search firm	18.3%	19.0%
Nonprofit or philanthropic work outside of higher education	16.8%	17.1%

Notes: Data represent the most commonly selected responses; presidents were able to select all options they are considering in their next steps. | Data from the 2022 American College President Survey.

Section 3: Origin of Encouragement to Apply for Current Presidency

Respondents were asked to consider the individuals or entities that influenced or motivated them to pursue their current presidential positions. Presidents who did not serve as provosts most frequently identified search consultants or search agencies as their primary source of encouragement, accounting for close to half (48.7 percent) of this group (see table 3.1). That source was closely followed by trusted friends or mentors (22.9 percent), member(s) of the board or governing group (21.6 percent), and former presidents or chief executive officers at their current institution (17.5 percent).

An interviewed president captures the different entities that encourage one to apply:

> "**At least three colleagues familiar with the institution and familiar with me engaged [with] me about the job, and one actually engaged the search firm recommending me.** In addition, I had developed a good relationship with the search firm who contacted me about this search. They knew my experience and encouraged my application."

Notably, compared with presidents who had not served as provosts, a higher share of presidents with provost experience (54.3 percent) indicated that search consultants or search agencies played a large role in encouraging them to apply for their current roles.

Table 3.1: Entities That Encouraged Presidents to Apply for Their Current Positions, by Provost Status, 2022

	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
Search consultant/search agency	48.7%	54.3%
Past president/CEO at my current campus	17.5%	19.4%
Another president/CEO outside of my current campus	13.5%	16.6%
Current or previous supervisor	13.3%	15.6%
Sponsor	2.2%	3.3%
Trusted friend or mentor	22.9%	17.5%
Peer or colleague	15.1%	16.8%
Partner or spouse	9.0%	10.7%
Family member(s)	3.5%	1.9%
Member(s) of the board or governing group	21.6%	17.3%
Others	6.3%	5.0%

Note: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey.

Section 4: The Search Process

ACPS data primarily offer a descriptive overview of the hiring process for college presidents, with a series of questions about the search process, as detailed in table 4.1. The questions in the survey focused on the information and disclosure received by presidents during their interview process.

There was not much difference in how presidents experienced the disclosure of information in the search process; however, a slightly higher share of presidents who previously had not served as provosts found the information disclosed during the search process to be clear. Also, a slightly higher share of presidents who had been provosts found the information disclosed during the search process to be realistic, full, and accurate.

Table 4.1: Perception of Disclosure in the Search Process, by Provost Status, 2022

The disclosure in the search process provided:	Non-provost Presidents Who Said Yes	Provost Presidents Who Said Yes
A realistic assessment of the current challenges facing the institution/system?	66.3%	69.0%
A full and accurate disclosure of institution/system's financial condition?	66.0%	68.0%
A clear understanding of the board's expectations?	74.8%	71.6%
A clear understanding of the institution/system expectations?	76.2%	75.0%

Note: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey.

Additional insights from interviews highlight the critical role of active engagement in a presidential search, complementing the survey's findings. While most respondents found the search process to disclose a full, accurate, and clear picture of an institution, other nuances should be considered. An interviewee emphasized their desire for confidentiality as they searched, as well as a preference to participate in a confidential search process, especially now as a sitting president:

> **"It was very important to me that presidential searches be confidential.** I did not want my colleagues [to be] worried about whether and when I might be leaving, and I also wanted to be respectful of my spouse's career and the impact at school on our child. As a sitting president, **I would never participate in a process that was not confidential** due to the impact on my current institution and colleagues. I also think that public searches can lead to interference in searches from people or groups who do not have complete information or who might have their own agendas."

PUBLIC AND CONFIDENTIAL SEARCHES: THE DIFFERENCES

JAN GREENWOOD

In a confidential search, only the final selected candidate is officially announced. In contrast, all applicants may be subject to public disclosure in a public search—though this disclosure can occur at various stages, from the initial application to the final selection process. While the desire for transparency may prompt a public search, it tends to deter potential candidates from participating fully due to privacy concerns.

Since the 1990s, confidential searches have been favored to mitigate the potentially negative effects on the institutions looking for new presidents as well as on the candidates—primarily those who held presidential positions elsewhere. For candidates, the concern of public exposure and the perception that their attention is divided have deterred many individuals from engaging in such searches. In some cases, presidents lost their current positions simply for exploring opportunities elsewhere and vice presidents, provosts, and deans lost their jobs for looking at presidency positions.

A public search also potentially affects the candidate's current institution. There are examples of donors who have rescinded committed donations upon learning of a president's interest in another position. One institution saw a withdrawal of a gift of over $20 million, while another institution's legislative funding was jeopardized when lawmakers hesitated to commit resources without certainty about the institution's leadership.

Public searches also pose equity challenges, including superficial judgments and biased assessments based on initial impressions. The public process has been viewed by some as a beauty contest in which the initial impressions of the candidates formed during meet-and-greet sessions can heavily influence perceptions of their suitability for the presidency. Despite extensive confidential referencing, multiple interviews, and background checks conducted by the search firm for the search committee and board, these first impressions along with biased opinions from acquaintances within the candidates' current institutions can exacerbate the risk of misperceptions.

Therefore, while transparency is valued, the negative impacts of public searches underscore the importance of maintaining confidentiality to ensure the integrity of the presidential selection process and safeguard the interests of candidates, institutions, and the responsibilities of the governing board. As one interviewee put it, "Before becoming a president, I participated in public and confidential searches. As a president, I participated in one search that was public. At this point in my career, I will not consider a president search that is not confidential."

One of the limitations of ACPS data is that it does not reveal in detail what the search processes were like for presidents in their current roles. There are many nuances around search processes, and opaque terms such as *fit* and *match* are used by institutions, search committees, and boards as they are screening candidates. The interviews with presidents who did not serve as provosts can bring additional insight to this process.

> "Search committees need good briefings to understand how to assess qualifications and that the search firm typically has more insight into candidates than the brief exposure on paper and in short encounters with the committee. Selection of the search firm is critical in this work to ensure that there is a good understanding of the university, mission, and leadership. S**earch firms can help search committees understand the importance of match and leadership style of candidates.**"

Regardless of their background, candidates must set themselves apart and introduce the benefits of their specific experience. In many cases, the non-provost presidents have expertise that is a match to the institution's strengths and challenges.

> "There are several day-to-day experiences around **crisis management, conflict resolution, community relations, and intercollegiate athletics that you gain coming from a nontraditional route** that a traditional provost or academic dean would not have. Displaying those skills and being able to articulate that background provided clarity that diverse candidates can bring unique experiences to the table."

> "I think the **breadth of experience** is the most important component. **Understanding all aspects of the university** matter[s], such as **demonstration of excellence in working with boards, budget, finance, and fundraising**. Creating an identifiable brand is a consistent aspect of all higher education institutions. AAU [Association of American Universities] and non-AAU institutions have the same requirements to establish clarity in the mission and demonstrate to the campus community and the community external to the university the brand. For public institutions, the ability to positively interact and impact legislators is a key part of the strengthening of the institution."

> "You must know how your skill sets and experience align with various types of institutions and to be well aware of the natural biases of search committees at different types of institutions. If you anticipate such questions and proactively address them, you can help to draw out assumptions or concerns that a search committee might have."

> "**If you point to how presidents spend their time, strengths should be in setting the vision, bringing along the governing board, and holding top leadership accountable for executing on the strategy**. A president should be strongest in these areas."

> "Experience in the business sector, [as] many universities are being measured using business metrics. Similarly with politicians, in public institutions the advocacy needed with legislators to get funding is critical for innovation and growth."

Section 5: Onboarding

Reflections on the onboarding activities of presidents who had previously served as a provost, compared with those who had not served as a provost, were fairly similar (see table 5.1). Yet four notable differences emerged between these groups—former provosts were more likely than those who were not provosts to indicate that they had an introduction to elected officials and were almost twice as likely to have participated in public affairs or media training. In contrast, presidents who were not provosts were more likely to receive onboarding on institutional history and to conduct a campus listening tour. However, these activities could be related to the types of institutions led by these presidents.

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10   The term *diversity* is used here in its broad definition, capturing experiences, identities, backgrounds, qualifications, etc.

Table 5.1: Onboarding Activities Experienced by Presidents Who Had Served as Provosts, Compared with Presidents Who Had Not Served as Provosts, 2022

Onboarding Activities	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
Transition meetings with their predecessor	55.5%	53.6%
Campus listening tour	55.5%	50.7%
A meeting with the governing board	45.0%	45.5%
Introduction to key donors	45.0%	47.2%
Campus tour	43.9%	46.2%
Introduction to elected officials	38.7%	46.2%
Meeting with faculty senate	42.6%	43.6%
Presidential residence review	23.6%	23.5%
Meeting with staff senate	30.6%	27.5%
Institutional history overview	26.2%	21.1%
Public affairs/media training	7.6%	14.2%
Other	10.3%	9.2%
Opportunities for physical, mental, and emotional wellness	2.6%	2.8%
Dress code review	0.2%	0.2%

Note: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey.

Interviews further illuminated the onboarding activities experienced by presidents who did not serve as provosts. Interview participants confirmed that receiving clear communication from different constituencies and participation in various meetings were key to successful onboarding.

> "**The transition of the president** is key to moving the university forward. **Multiple activities and interactions with the board, faculty, administrators, students, staff, and community stakeholders are important. Greeting events, town halls, university events including convocation, opening of the semesters with faculty and staff, external community events, legislative visits to the capital and bringing legislators to campus, et cetera**. Holding events at the university residence has been especially appreciated by the community. Obviously COVID-19 had a profound impact on the institution and continuing engagement with the community. Multiple Zoom meetings during COVID allowed for connection and creating innovative ways to stay in touch."

> "**An onboarding plan should be carefully developed** as part of the search process so that the actual announcement is part of the plan, and the successful candidate is culturally aware of the university and surrounding community and effectively introduced to both."

> "**Spent early days visiting with leadership team in one-on-one meetings and as a group**. Initiated a strategic planning process that had been put on hold and that worked to bring the leadership team together. **Spent a great deal of time in the community, getting to know those groups**, as well. After being president for 10 years, I think that approach worked!"

> "**I conducted an extensive listening tour with constituencies both on and off campus** (e.g., faculty, staff, students, alumni, community members) when I first began the job, which was tremendously successful and laid the groundwork for our strategic planning process. I also think an onboarding committee is a great idea—people who will stay in touch with the president for several months after that person has started the job."

Section 6: Areas for More Training or Development

Even with significant experience, presidents arriving in the role identify areas in which they would like more training or professional development to better lead their institutions. As table 6.1 shows, both presidents who were provosts and those who were not provosts shared some similar areas for professional development.

However, those who served as provosts were more likely than those who did not serve as provosts to have indicated that they needed further training or development in fundraising, budget and financial management, and entrepreneurial ventures.

While the assumption might be that those presidents who did not serve as provosts might need more development in academic issues, accreditation, and shared governance, only a little over one in 10 presidents who were not provosts indicated academic issues and accreditation and 14.0 percent indicated shared governance as areas for further training. Non-provost presidents were also more likely than those presidents who had served as provosts to indicate that they would like more training or development in technology planning. Not included in the list were president-board relationships and political processes; these areas appear to have become more prominent needs for presidents during the training process.

Table 6.1: Areas in Which Presidents Indicated They Would Like More Training or Professional Development, by Provost Status, 2022

	Non-provost Presidents	Provost Presidents
Academic issues (i.e., curriculum changes)	13.3%	3.6%
Accreditation	10.3%	3.6%
Athletics	9.4%	8.3%
Budget/financial management	23.8%	28.9%
Capital improvement projects	21.8%	26.1%
Crisis management	21.8%	22.0%
Diversity/equity issues	24.9%	21.6%
Enrollment management	23.8%	23.7%
Entrepreneurial ventures	31.2%	37.2%
External communication	20.3%	20.9%
Fundraising	25.6%	36.0%
Personnel issues (excluding faculty)	6.1%	7.8%
Risk management/legal issues	20.3%	25.1%
Shared governance	14.0%	8.5%
Spousal role	5.9%	5.7%
Student life/conduct issues	4.8%	4.0%
Technology planning	24.2%	19.2%
Using institutional research to inform decision making	21.6%	20.4%

Note: Data from the 2022 American College President Survey.

Presidents who did not previously serve as provosts further illuminated why there may be differences as to the areas in which presidents would most like additional development.

> "**Dealing with past crises and personnel matters** at my previous institutions served me well in this role. Having national contacts in the field also provided me with mentors, role models, and colleagues with whom I could exchange ideas and best practices."

> "As a dean of arts and sciences, I brought the liberal arts and sciences perspective to my new position, which was critical to gain credibility with the faculty. I didn't realize it at the time, but my research record was intimidating to the faculty. We worked to enhance faculty scholarship, but my approach was to be open in discussing scholarship—including scholarship in pedagogy, civic engagement, and other peer-reviewed work. My initial wins in raising funds for the college were important and afforded opportunities to use funds to support new projects."

> "From my experience as a dean, **fundraising** has helped me significantly. Since deans engage faculty on a myriad of problems, it has helped me there as well."

> "My legal training has taught me to ask a lot of questions to **elicit facts, evidence, and research**. This has been very valuable in addressing difficult and uncertain situations."

> "When an institution is looking **at a major expansion or contraction** that will require skills that most traditional academics don't have. In addition, there are times when one needs in-depth experience in the business sector."

Conclusion

This report sheds light on the varied pathways to higher education presidencies, with a specific focus on those leaders who had not previously served in provost or chief academic officer positions. They have a broad range of experiences, particularly in areas such as budget management, fundraising, vision-setting, working with boards, and crisis management. This group has become the majority of presidential appointments, which brings a diversity of backgrounds to the role.

Nonetheless, continued open-mindedness of boards and search committees in presidential searches is essential, particularly in regard to gender and racial diversity. Search firms play a key role in urging stakeholders to look beyond preestablished notions of the ideal candidate. Search consultants' roles are crucial in helping search committees and boards of trustees broaden their perspective, understand the depth of candidates' qualifications, and appreciate the varied experiences of candidates.

As college and university landscapes evolve, so too must the strategies to identify and support presidents accordingly. A holistic approach ensures that leadership is not only reflective of a community's diversity but also equipped with the broad perspective necessary to guide institutions through evolving educational paradigms.

As one president participant stated:

> "To survive this dynamic, you must be willing to make decisions and lead. Anyone can sit in the seat, never make a decision, and have everyone love them. But if you are going to effectively lead a university, you must be willing to make decisions. Several of them will be popular and some will be unpopular, but you have been hired by the board to be a responsible steward of a public or private asset. Therefore, you have a duty to lead . . ."

Appendix A: Areas for Further Study

This report not only contributes to our understanding of the diverse pathway to higher education presidencies but also raises ideas for further research and inquiry. As we worked on this report, several questions arose that could be areas for exploration beyond presidents who have or have not served as provosts.

Future investigations could include analyzing the career trajectories of individuals who have served in interim president roles to see if their demographic profiles are unique, as well as the likelihood of them transitioning to official presidency positions. A part of this area of study could ask what considerations interim presidents were given if they accepted the interim position. Some are told they cannot be a candidate, while others are told they can apply. How do the demographics and experiences differ between these two groups?

If an internal or interim president is selected for the role of president, what does their onboarding look like? How is it the same or different for external candidates? Such research would build on this report's finding that non-provost presidents tend to stay in their positions for a longer time when compared with their provost counterparts. This investigation could qualitatively delve into the underlying factors that influence this trend, such as age, demographics, aspirations, and individual career backgrounds. Further mixed-methods exploration could analyze why women of color who did not serve as provosts have been in their current positions longer than most other groups.

Additionally, qualitatively exploring the motivations and profiles of presidents who arrived at the role from outside higher education could yield insights into the changing landscape of leadership in higher education. For example, it would be helpful to uncover how presidents from business and industry, politics, foundations, or government arrive to the presidency.

Several presidents in our sample—not including those interviewed—had held multiple provost positions during their careers. A mixed-methods approach could look at the profiles of these presidents and what led them to apply to college and university presidencies. Additionally, another study could explore the reasons why some provosts elect not to become candidates for presidencies.

Search firms and searches also present an area for further inquiry. Historical and qualitative research is needed to understand the evolution of higher education search firms and their current and future landscape. Also, examining the impact of search consultants' profiles on candidate recruitment processes could lend further insight into recruiting a diverse candidate pool.

Finally, further inquiry is needed around governing boards and when or how they become involved in presidential search processes. The varying roles of boards in presidential searches across different states and sectors is another area for exploration and could offer valuable perspectives on challenges and opportunities in higher education succession planning.

If you are a researcher or graduate student who is interested in exploring these questions or who has an inquiry of your own, please contact research@acenet.edu to find out how you can contribute to American College President Study research.

Appendix B: Methodology

The 2022 American College President Survey, conducted via Qualtrics from mid-February to June 2022, garnered 1,075 responses from a pool of 3,901 presidents who had been approached via outreach emails. These presidents were from both ACE member and nonmember institutions within ACE's database. The survey instrument and subsequent analysis contained over 500 variables. *The American College President: 2023 Edition*, which contains an analysis of the 2022 data, the survey instrument, tables, figures, and methodology, can be found at acenet.edu/acps23.

Various analytical approaches were employed throughout the sections of this report. In the introduction, the analysis of parity and equity used a newly created variable that combined a respondent's race and ethnicity and gender for analytical purposes explained herein. The analysis then examined the annual growth rate in women's representation—as well as representation by race and ethnicity—within the college presidency across all American College President Study (ACPS) data. To project the year when parity will be reached in American college presidency, we ran projections using a constant average annual growth rate that ranged from 2 to 6 percent, while keeping all other variables constant. For analysis specifically about race and ethnicity, we referred to projections from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System for the demographic distributions of students at 4,060 Title IV, degree-granting institutions by the year 2031. This future benchmark acted as our threshold for achieving parity and equity distribution, thereby allowing us to determine the necessary average annual growth rate.

Section 1 involved the 1,075 respondents to the 2022 American College President Survey. They were asked to select the career pathway option that most aligned with their journey, such as faculty/academic or administrative leader, and to disclose the immediate past position they had held.

In sections that mention Carnegie Classifications, ACPS respondents' institutions were classified according to the 2021 Basic Classification.[11] Institutions that did not have a classification were classified into institutional groups based on the level of degrees they predominantly offered. These five institutional groups were defined as follows:

- Doctoral Universities: Institutions that awarded at least 20 research or scholarship doctoral degrees, and institutions that awarded fewer than 20 research or scholarship doctoral degrees but at least 30 professional practice doctoral degrees in at least two programs.
- Master's Colleges and Universities: Institutions that awarded at least 50 master's degrees and fewer than 20 doctoral degrees.
- Baccalaureate Colleges: Institutions at which baccalaureate or higher degrees represent at least 50 percent of all degrees conferred but fewer than 50 master's degrees or 20 doctoral degrees were awarded.
- Associate Colleges: Institutions at which the highest level of degree awarded is an associate degree.
- Special Focus Institutions: Institutions at which a high concentration of degrees are conferred in a single field or set of related fields. This category excludes Tribal Colleges and Universities.

For the subsequent sections, targeted analyses and variables were used to inform the distinctions between provost and non-provost presidents. The analysis drew upon data from the 1,075 presidents who were asked to share the five most recent roles held before their current presidencies, resulting in 5,375 entries. A binary variable was created to distinguish presidents who had served as provosts in any of their five previous roles from those who had not. Duplicate entries were eliminated using unique respondent identifiers, which led to a refined dataset of 880 presidents who detailed their past five positions before becoming president. It is important to note that if presidents had multiple provost roles in their recent career history, only the latest provost role was counted and included in the analysis.

The provost variable played a crucial role in the analysis conducted throughout this study. In certain analyses, such as those examining gender or race and ethnicity, the total number of observations might not align precisely with the aforementioned

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11   For more information, please visit https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/.

880-president dataset due to missing demographic variables. Also, it is important to note that the sample might not fully represent the population if any presidents served as provosts prior to their past five positions, which could introduce a bias in the representativeness of the findings.

The race, ethnicity, and gender variable (e.g., women of color; men of color) was created for two reasons. First, the data included very small sample sizes of certain racial or ethnic groups. By combining the race and ethnicity and gender variables, those presidents' experiences could be highlighted while their anonymity was maintained. Second, researchers have a responsibility to interrogate the nuance of experiences by race and ethnicity as well as by gender. In short, the creation of this variable allows for a point of contrast relative to that of the majority of presidents—White men. For further explanation, please read the methodology in *The American College President: 2023 Edition*, which is available for download at acenet.edu/acps23.

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