The Leadership Competency Value: A Primer for Business Officers – Part I

By: Cynthia Teniente-Matson

The higher education sector has faced countless challenges and calamities in its history; however, according to Kirshten & Wellman the “situation in which colleges and universities find themselves at the moment is indeed different,” disruptive innovation is knocking at the collective doorstep. Chief business Officers (CBO) play an important role in setting future direction and advising the president and other senior leaders about business models and administrative activities that may guide and shape the University of the Future. The identification of competencies may play a significant role in defining the behaviors and skills necessary to develop competency models for aspiring business officers. CBOs must embody and actively portray characteristics, competencies and traits that catapult them to the level of strategic campus leaders in this transformative period.

Why are competencies important? Because business officers must progressively add value to all that we do. We continually build on an individual competency level gaining meta-competencies as we come to understand the skills, characteristics and traits that make us more effective in the work place. These meta-competencies are recognized by other campus leaders as the CBO portfolio of responsibilities progressively grow into other areas of campus innovation and economic development.

What does an aspiring CBO need to know and do to achieve excellence on campus? Generally we have come to recognize a few important definitions in the eco-system of CBO’s professional learning and value-added contributions to the campuses they serve. Aspiring CBO’s would be well served to create strategic learning plans that incorporate relevant competency development frameworks. The following are generally accepted definitions recognized in the sphere of higher education and relevant to current and aspiring CBOs.

- Competency: an underlying characteristic that leads to superior performance in a job, work objective or work situation. Some competencies may be visually observed as an ability, capability, skill, knowledge or behavior, others are deeper or intrinsic self-concepts like attitudes, value and self-beliefs. Competencies can be learned and when mastered tend to endure and become meta-competencies over long periods of time.  

- Competency model: Is a tool or system used to: (1) identify competencies important for proficiency and (2) align or group competencies necessary for effectively performing in a job profession or campus community. Competency models should be empirically based and offered across professional organizations or specific to a campus or profession.

- Generic competencies: Are competencies that can be generalized across various positions, job types or the higher education sector. These competencies do not distinguish superior performance.

- Threshold competencies: are the essential functions or characteristics necessary to be minimally capable to perform a job. These competencies do not distinguish superior performance.

A simple analogy to solidify competency development in the development of your learning plan follows:

Competencies are similar to the core elements in a periodic table of human behavior. The “atoms” in such a model are behavioral indicators. These behavioral indicators can be grouped into competencies, or “elements.” Finally, several competencies can be combined to form other competencies or “molecules.” (Russ-Eft p. 329)

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1 Boyatzis, 1982; Chen & Naquin, 2006; Green, 1999; Klemp, 1980; Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Spencer & Spencer 1993).
2 Boyatzis 1982; Chen & Naquin 2006; Gayeski, Golden, Andrade, & Mason, 2007; Green, 1999; Spencer & Spencer, 1993
3 Grezda, 2005; Le Deist & Delmare, 2005; Spencer & Spencer, 1993
4 Boyatzis, 2008; Spencer & Spencer, 1993
Competency Development: the Leadership Implications for Chief Business Officers – Part II

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Presidents and governing boards are demanding more from their senior leaders as they face pressure to enhance institutional accountability and transparency in areas such as the fiscal impact of fluctuating student enrollments, capital and operational budgeting and endowment management, to name a few. The current state of higher education is more competitive and complex and the operating rules, culture and expectations for higher education management are markedly changing creating new expectations at the senior levels, for example:

To be effective, presidents need colleagues in senior positions who do in fact think institutionally, not functionally, and who think and act strategically rather than just tactically. In other words, these vice presidents and deans need to approach all problems as if they were the president, charged with the well-being of the entire institution and not just the areas for which they are formally responsible.

Understanding and responding to the current issues facing higher education is an important prerequisite to determining leadership competencies necessary to address the evolving demands. The changing landscape has significant impacts on colleges and universities with keen attention focused on propelling institutions forward through these tumultuous times, “the future of higher education is intimately linked to the capabilities of its leaders.”

Chief business officers should be strategic leaders and yet be capable of collaboratively developing a financial plan, managing administrative compliance and operations for a wide span of critical activities that ensure the necessary business functions of the institution are maintained. Failure to adeptly respond to legislative mandates, audits, policy changes or issues of public concern may cause irreparable harm to the institution short-term goals and longer term reputation or financial standing.

There is a high sense of urgency for universities of all sizes to develop diverse and qualified leaders who possess the skills necessary to effectively lead wholesale changes to sustain the strategic and U.S. presidential demands placed on contemporary postsecondary institutions. Identifying leadership competencies for effective performance are an appropriate means to aid in the development of competency models suitable for chief business officer positions.

The higher education community should seize the opportunity to respond to public rhetoric about escalating tuition and to improve responsiveness to constituent cries for accountability in the academy. Christensen and Eyring argued that to survive and flourish strong and stable universities must build on, not abandon, what they do best; however, leaders must confront the escalating disruptive innovation and lead from within the institution to strategically drive change. They further stated that, establishing evidence-based leadership competencies can aid in providing transformational leadership to lead the future of higher education. The challenges suggest that leadership, from within the academy, is a necessity to move postsecondary education beyond disruptors and to usher in a new period in higher education. Some evidence exists to suggest that competency models may be a useful method to develop leadership capacity that will guide the American higher education system, in its many forms, to meet the overwhelming transformation that is necessary in 2014 and beyond.

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5 Pierce 2012 On being presidential: A guide for college and university leaders
10 Christensen, C. M., & Eyring, H. J. (2011). The innovative university: Changing the DNA of higher education from the inside out.
Like parenthood, leadership will never be an exact science not should it be an enigma to those CBO’s who practice it. In recent years, research has provided data to understand the behavioral skills and competencies that affect job performance. With research and evidence higher education leaders, too, have an enhanced understanding of what competencies are necessary to lead effectively within the academy. The higher education environment is continually changing, and as aspiring business officer we must respond in kind. Hour to hour, day to day, week to week, business office administrators must adjust their leadership competencies and styles using the right one at just the right time and in the right measure. The payoff is in the results and higher education is waiting.11 (p.90)
