

The Pathway to a College Presidency Is Changing, and a New Report Outlines How

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Baylor University's [newly named president](#), Linda A. Livingstone, has had a long career in higher education. But there's one position that's not on her résumé: provost.

Increasingly, that's not an unusual step to skip, according to a [report](#), released on Wednesday, that analyzed 840 college presidents' CVs. While serving as provost was once a clear steppingstone on the way to the president's office, many deans are now moving straight into the top job, according to the report, which was issued by Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence and the Georgia Institute of Technology's Center for 21st Century Universities.

That's what Ms. Livingstone will do. On Tuesday, [Baylor announced](#) that she would leave her current post, as dean of George Washington University's business school, and take office as president in June.

The report, which echoes [findings of a 2010 study](#) by the Council of Independent Colleges, also notes that a handful of institutions turn up regularly on presidents' CVs. Many are Ivy League institutions, but two surprised the report's authors: Georgia State University and Arizona State University. The report refers to them as "talent factories" that give faculty and staff members opportunities to gain a big-picture view of their institutions and higher education in general.



Georgia State U.

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Georgia State's president, Mark P. Becker, said the university hasn't specifically sought to develop leaders for other institutions. But he isn't surprised that many college presidents have come from his campuses, given its size and diversity.

"It's harder than it used to be being a leader in higher ed," he said. "The kind of people that are being recruited to universities have to be real problem-solvers. They can't just be spokespersons."

Michael M. Crow, president of Arizona State, said technology and an increasingly globalized world have made a president's role more dynamic and prone to change. It makes sense, then, that there is no longer one single career trajectory that leads to the top job.

"Any sort of normal pattern of movement to leadership — you do A, then B, then C — those are models that are largely likely to not be able to produce the types of changes at the rates needed," Mr. Crow said.

Arizona State holds two-day "leadership academies" to train faculty and staff members to look for new ways to run their departments, colleges, or centers, Mr. Crow said. Evidently, some also move on to run other institutions.

Breadth and Depth of Knowledge

But Mr. Becker said that some important experience may be lost when a campus leader bypasses the provost's office, moving straight from dean to president.

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"The provost is where you get the experience with the total richness of the institution," he said. While deans serve as the faces of their institutions, raising funds and advocating for their needs, provosts must learn the ins and outs of a group of very different constituencies, sometimes including hospitals, law schools, and liberal-arts colleges. The dean's skills may be more obviously transferable to the job of a president, but the provost's depth of knowledge is important too.

The ever-present risk of a campus crisis, the increasingly diverse nature of student bodies, and rolling debates about the value of higher education may tempt presidents to look for quick wins, the report warns. They shouldn't.

"This short-term thinking surfaces in a variety of ways," the report says. The risks include "academic programming tied to the current job market; technology purchases that simply patch rather than solve problems; enrollment plans that ignore demographic shifts among students; fund raising that focuses on immediate dollars rather than building a pipeline for future commitments; and strategic plans that are completely rewritten each time a new president is installed."

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Especially when they join an institution at a tumultuous time, "presidents need to resist the urge to rush," Georgetown University's president, John J. DeGioia, told the report's authors, who include Jeffrey J. Selingo, a visiting scholar at Georgia Tech and a former *Chronicle* editor. "It is very hard to guide these places through the disruptions."

The report recommends more intentional training for would-be presidents, whether a college adopts a national model, like the [Aspen Presidential Fellowship for Community College Excellence](#), or develops one internally. The authors also note that hiring committees need a better understanding of the complexity of the president's job and



should be willing to look outside the traditional pipeline for candidates.

And it predicts that many college and university trustees and executives will have to consider those suggestions soon if they aren't already: A sizable cohort of presidents is [now hitting retirement age](#), and many other campus leaders have been [ousted in the wake of public scandals](#).

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