Why Colleges Should Consider Co-Presidencies

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One of us, Karen Gross, recently wrote an article about how co-presidencies could improve higher education, and it received no shortage of concern and criticism. To be clear, the article didn't suggest that this type of governance was the ultimate solution for all that ails our educational institutions and their governance. It did not even hint at the idea that co-presidencies are optimal or ever workable for many colleges and universities.

Meanwhile, let's be honest here. It is not as if institutional presidents and chancellors are doing such a stellar job that we can avoid changes in governance approaches. Hardly a week goes by without reading about a leadership kerfuffle on some campus somewhere. And, the missteps are not minor. We also know that few want to follow a successful long serving president, making hiring successors difficult. Perhaps of even greater relevance has been the recent statement from the departing chancellor of the University of Texas system, a former military leader, who stated unabashedly that "the toughest job in the nation is the one of an academic- or health-institution president."

The most common critiques proffered of the idea of co-presidencies (despitemovement toward system consolidation in states which could foster co-leadership) -- whether in writing, emails, other online communications and in conversations galore -- revolve around ego. College and university presidents are unlikely, so the argument goes, to be able or willing to curb their apparently outsized egos enough to share power.

This ego problem would lead to several undesirable outcomes: shared decision-making would be difficult if not impossible; employees would be confused as to who the "real" leader is, leading to delays and uncertainty; and bickering between the co-presidents would prevail. One commenter even contended that co-presidencies resembled all the downsides of a marriage and parenting, including the potential for divorce.

We respectfully disagree and have begun asking people with experience inside and outside academe to share examples of effective co-presidencies or their equivalents, including among individuals known to have sizable egos. Those examples proffer a wider lens through which to view co-presidencies in academe. They also serve as a reminder that, within the academy, we sometimes fail to explore options outside our particular sphere or specialty -- and that our siloed approach means that we fail to transport workable ideas into new contexts, even if some tweaks and adjustments are needed.

As we reflect on the plausibility of co-presidencies in the academy, we'd like to offer two analogies that may at first seem somewhat surprising but that pave a pathway for reflecting more positively on co-presidencies in general. They demonstrate the capacity of actual leaders to park their egos in place for the sake and safety of others and to provide guidance, stability and direction. Succession is also a topic worthy of note – not only within these two examples

but also in academe.

Fighter Pilots

The experience of another co-author of this piece, Chris, who has long served as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force, is highly relevant to the concept of co-presidencies. He's seen first-hand that, in two-seat jet fighters, it is imperative that both people in the plane work together to ensure mission accomplishment and survival in the air-to-air arena. Despite ego, rank differential and experience levels, the pilot in command in the front seat and the weapons system officer, or WSO, in the rear seat must work as a team toward a common goal.

The pilot is in charge of the aircraft and has direct and constant input to the flight controls to maneuver the jet in time and space in order to deliver the desired weapons to the target or to defeat an enemy aircraft in air-to-air battle. That person's job, however, is done in concert with the weapon systems officer who operates the radar and all air-ground weapons systems. While the pilot gets the jet to the right point for weapons' release, it is the WSO who guides the weapons to hit the target or directs the pilot how to maneuver defensively if attacked from an enemy aircraft from the rear. To fight and win, it is imperative that both the pilot and the WSO communicate and operate as one -- each reliant on the other to perform their assigned tasks effectively and efficiently.

It is not unusual in two-seat fighters to encounter pilots and WSOs with varying skill, experience level and rank who are paired together. In fact, it is common to "combat pair" an inexperienced pilot with an experienced and higher ranking WSO -- thereby creating a situation where the seemingly superior pilot has less experience and rank than the WSO in the rear seat. Yes, really.

To help alleviate some of the human ego factor concerns and interpersonal dynamics that can hinder performance in this type of pairing, the military aviation community has long since adapted concepts and teaching that are common in civilian aviation. Cockpit resource management, as it is termed, aims to foster effective communication among crewmembers.

Ego and hubris are trademarks of the cartoon version of the fighter pilot, but those characteristics can lead to devastating results in the air. Cockpit resource management teaches active listening, leadership and followership; encourages direct communication; and fosters a culture where "rank comes off in the briefing room." Indeed, this military approach has been recommended for use by surgeons, noting the similarities between pilots and surgeons in terms of personal characteristics (i.e. ego).

As a young major, Chris regularly flew as a pilot with a wing commander, then a one-star General. During the brief, flight and de-brief, they were flight-lead and wingman, and the General did what Chris directed. After the flight, they reverted back to their rank structured roles, and Chris sharply saluted the General as they parted ways. In other words, even without being "co" anything, the senior person in rank listened to the junior person in rank. If that can happen, then co-leadership seems possible.

The essence of pilot-WSO relationship in military aviation is to pay attention to the higher goal: protecting our nation. The phrase “steel sharpens steel” is the perfect descriptor. In colleges and universities, isn’t the role of leaders to protect the students under their watch, including overseeing faculty and staff members?

Co-Regencies

One can also find parallels to co-presidencies as far back as the co-regencies of Ancient Egypt. During this time period, two pharaohs were known to rule together, although the nature of the co-regencies was remarkably varied. Some were installed simultaneously; in other situations, one leader was added during the reign of another. Some involved family members co-serving; others involved people with expertise. There is even evidence of co-regencies of a man and a woman.

Those co-regencies served multiple purposes. One such purpose was to create economic and political stability in order to ensure a healthy transition from one ruler to another -- a form of succession planning. That type of co-regency usually occurred towards the end of one pharaoh’s rule and the beginning reign of his successor. It was an overt way of balancing youth with experience and enabling knowledge to be handed down smoothly. The more youthful ruler, added at a time after a pharaoh was ruling solo, was then able to garner firsthand knowledge of leading a government as well as its economics and religion.

Although not a traditional co-regency, a pharaoh with little diplomatic or military experience might choose to ally himself and co-lead with an individual having vast military experience and strategic knowledge to ensure “balance” within the empire. An example of that type of relationship is Horemheb under the reigns of both Pharaohs Tutankhamun and Ay. Although Horemheb is not officially listed as a co-regent, he provided crucial knowledge and balance for both rulers, eventually leading to his becoming a pharaoh himself.

Further, some of the co-regencies overtly allowed for the important interplay of both rulers’ strengths and weaknesses, thereby providing improved governance. That balancing of strengths and weaknesses ultimately provided a more stable leadership environment. And in modern day, given the complexity and number of tasks needed to be a successful college president, such balancing of leadership makes sense. Perhaps then it wouldn’t be the toughest job on the planet.

Conclusions

We can find a plethora of historical and present day examples of shared leadership. What seems to make these co-leaderships work is the recognition of a “higher goal” by both parties -- which works to curb egos and enables coordinated efforts.

Is it so difficult to imagine that college presidents could also be effective co-leaders, navigating egos and other difficulties of sharing power because they care about the well-being of their institutions and the people within it?

Many observers refer to college leaders as "servant" leaders. While that nomenclature often makes us uncomfortable (servants are often not positive images), there are characteristics of servant leaders that apply to pilots-WSOs, co-regents and college presidents. The American father of servant leadership, Robert K. Greenleaf, notes that servant leaders express "concern with the success of all stakeholders, broadly defined -- employees, customers, business partners, communities and society as a whole -- including those who are the least privileged," as well as "self-reflection, as a counter to the leader's hubris."

We think the capacity of individuals to co-lead educational institutions is undersold. Using examples outside academe and through history, we can see co-presidencies between people of different ages and stages. We can see co-presidencies between individuals with different skill sets. We can see co-presidencies as a means of preparing for succession with a long-serving leader paired with a younger leader.

What is holding us back? We have ways of reflecting on the expanded role of leadership as being something well beyond self-serving activity. And, we have abundant examples of how academic leaders are failing miserably and with frequency.

Leadership failure is hard on institutions and their students, faculty and staff. If we have an approach that can lessen the number of failures and provide benefits in times of remarkable institutional challenges, why not try?

Co-presidencies offer one, among many possible, approaches to bettering higher education leadership. Learning requires risk-taking. It's time for college trustees and others within the academy to consider co-presidencies. The potential benefits outweigh the risks.