

# PROTECTING THE WELLBEING OF YOUR CEO

Hiring a president is the most significant investment a board can make for its college. Trustees need to ensure they are supported.

By George R. Boggs, Ph.D., and Maria Sheehan, Ed.D.

THE SHOCK OF THE RECENT UNEXPECTED DEATH of the president of Volunteer State Community College in Tennessee has focused attention on the increasing levels of stress faced by college leaders. Dr. Orintha Montague, who had previously served as president of Tompkins Cortland Community College in New York, passed away unexpectedly in September at age 56. *Choice*, a publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries, reported that “while the cause of death for” Montague and Temple University President Joanne A. Epps “have yet to be revealed...many people speculate that stress led to their untimely passings.”

Trustees see their CEOs project an image of strength and confidence as they guide institutions through challenging times, but CEOs are human beings, and they are affected by the

difficulties they face and the criticisms and microaggressions that are aimed at them. Visibly supporting the CEO and taking the time to personally acknowledge the leader’s work during a difficult time is an important role for trustees.

To be sure, these are challenging times for college leaders who may be dealing with enrollment declines, budget shortfalls, reopening campuses after the pandemic, improving student success rates, closing student achievement gaps, political issues regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and critical race theory legislation, employee bargaining, and academic freedom, free speech, and safety and security issues brought about by reactions to divisive issues such as abortion, gun control, civil rights for transgender people and other populations, or more recently, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Women leaders and leaders of color often face additional stress from microaggressions, sometimes involving doubts others have about their leadership abilities. The recent deaths of two female Black leaders, Montague and Epps, have raised concerns about the difficulties faced by leaders who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC), especially when they lead predominantly white institutions.

Trustees should be alert to today's leadership challenges and check to see how they are affecting their CEOs. Board retreats in which CEO evaluations or board self-evaluations are scheduled should include a discussion of how the board and CEO can support each other.

Chronic stress can negatively affect a person's health. Stress-related hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline initiate a "fight-or-flight" response that can help people to deal with a crisis. However, if the level of stress is sustained, it can lead to a range of health problems. Chronic stress can lead to cardiovascular issues, including hypertension, heart disease, and stroke. Stress can disrupt the natural balance of the digestive system, causing gastrointestinal disorders such as stomach or duodenal ulcers. It can also impact the immune system, increasing susceptibility to illnesses and prolonging the body's efforts to recover from them.

Prolonged stress is also related to mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. Sleep deprivation is another frequent symptom of high chronic stress levels. The release of cortisol, the primary stress hormone, plays a major role in fat storage, particularly around the abdominal wall. Excess cortisol, especially accompanied by "comfort eating," leads to weight gain and obesity, which can result in other serious health problems.

Trustees have made a significant investment in their college or district CEO. Losing a leader to a health-related problem or relying on a leader who is struggling with health issues can be very disruptive to a college. But there are things boards can do proactively to protect the wellbeing of its college CEO. Trustees need to remember that CEOs may not ask for any of these benefits. Leaders are often focused on the needs of everyone else at the college and may not want to be seen as getting special treatment. So trustees will likely have to initiate discussions about well-being.

The first document to review is the CEO employment contract. Is there a provision for a health and wellness benefit? Does the agreement cover the cost of an annual executive health physical? Is there a provision for sufficient annual vacation leave, and is there an administrator who can act as the leader so the CEO can really get away from responsibilities during vacation leave? The college could also cover the cost of a gym membership and trainer or a health coach. For new CEOs, covering the cost of a mentor or an executive coach can provide valuable support.

It is also helpful for college CEOs to know they are not alone, and that other leaders are struggling with many of the same issues. Attending leadership meetings and retreats at the state and national levels can be very helpful for leaders to share experiences and strategies. The Presidents Academy of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) hosts a summer institute each year, providing CEOs with a forum for support. Organizations such as the National Council on Black American Affairs, the President's Round Table, the American Association for Women in Community Colleges, the National Asian/

Pacific Islander Council, the National Community College Hispanic Council, and LGBTQ Leaders in Higher Education are examples of organizations that can provide support to college leaders. Boards can support their college CEOs by paying membership dues and the costs of meeting and conference attendance, and by encouraging their CEOs to participate in these and other support networks.

Chronic stress can take a toll on the health of all college employees. Including sessions on health, wellness, and wholesome nutrition as part of employee professional development programs can be a wise investment for any college. Programs to assist employees with weight loss or smoking cessation should also be considered. Hosting health and wellness speakers on campus can be an important benefit for the entire college community. Colleges are people places and are only effective because of a dedicated, caring, and healthy faculty, staff, and administration. Many of the benefits listed above for CEOs could be considered for other members of a college executive team.

Boards of trustees have significant responsibilities to ensure that colleges effectively serve their communities by providing students with access to quality education opportunities and student supports to help them to be successful in their learning. Their effective oversight is essential for the success of any college. Today's trustees are data-informed and make decisions based upon evidence and expected outcomes. They work to ensure a positive learning environment for students and a comfortable work environment for faculty and staff. They advocate for their colleges and their students. They establish fiscal policies to ensure that limited funds are wisely spent and invested.

But the most significant investment that a board makes is to hire a CEO. Equally important as monitoring the college budget and the physical infrastructure of the institution, trustees need to pay attention to their investment in the well-being of their CEO. Sometimes the pressures experienced by the CEO may not be visible. Navigating sensitive political issues, having to make unpopular decisions, dealing with student protests, worrying about enrollment trends, and absorbing criticism and microaggressions can take an invisible toll on a CEO's health. It makes good sense for a board to protect its investment by providing needed support and sensible health and wellness benefits. Doing so is also a way to develop an open and trusting relationship with the CEO, which is a primary characteristic of any excellent board of trustees.



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