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## A Culture of Leadership ‘Churn’

California Community Colleges leaders say the pandemic has exacerbated already rampant leadership turnover in the system.

**By Sara Weissman, April 6, 2022**

Kindred Murillo, interim superintendent/president at Santa Barbara City College, came out of retirement in fall 2021 to help steady the troubled institution. Murillo, who previously headed the Lake Tahoe Community College District and Southwestern College, is the fourth person to occupy the role in the last three years.

The college’s last president, Utpal K. Goswami, resigned after less than two years in the position. His predecessor, Anthony Beebe, left unexpectedly because of health issues in 2019 after serving for three years. Helen Benjamin, former chancellor of the Contra Costa Community College District, stepped in as interim president and superintendent twice after Beebe’s and Goswami’s departures, [The Santa Barbara Independent](#) reported. The college hasn’t had a president stay more than four years since 2008.

For Murillo and other California community college presidents in similar situations, stepping in after the exits of several leaders has meant trying to bring consistency and constancy to institutions that are in various states of flux. That could mean implementing strategic plans that have had multiple starts and stops, overseeing neglected hiring processes, or correcting misaligned budgets.

“I think systems stopped being adhered to and planning stopped, and if you’re not planning for the future, then you just basically get stagnant and then you’re not really focused on doing really great work,” Murillo said of her experience. “And I think there became a level of internal division, which is what we’re trying to heal right now.”

Leaders in the California Community Colleges system say this continual leadership turnover is a big problem, and the pandemic has only exacerbated it.

The demands of the president’s job and the emotional toll of the pandemic have led to burnout and [prompted early retirements](#) across higher ed, including in California. At least 17 of 137 California community college leaders have retired between January 2020 and March 2022, said Larry Galizio, president and CEO of the Community College League of California, an association of 73 local public community college districts.

A [2020 study](#) by the association also found that the average tenure of a community college chancellor, superintendent or president in the system fell to 5.1 years in the last decade, from an average of 6.9 years from 2000 to 2010. Of those leaders, 46.1 percent retired or died during their tenure, 21 percent were let go or left for other reasons, and 31.1 percent took another position.

Keith Curry, who has been president and CEO of Compton College for 12 years, said some community college presidents find themselves [questioning whether the strains of the job are “worth it” amid a public health crisis and steep enrollment declines](#). He also believes presidents who are people of color, like himself, have felt extra pressure to tackle equity gaps and diversify faculty and staff ranks after the [national racial reckoning](#) that followed the police killing of George Floyd.

Curry said it’s easy for “work-life balance” to fall by the wayside when presidents are balancing so many responsibilities.

“When I talk to my colleagues about the work that we’re doing, it’s become overwhelming,” he said. “It’s a lot that we’re dealing with right now. And the question is, how long will you be able to do this type of work and sustain it? How do you continue the work that you’re doing and preserve your mental and physical health?”

State political dynamics also pose some unique challenges.

Galizio, of the Community College League of California, said some community college districts in the state have especially fraught relationships between their boards and chancellors. He and leaders in the system partly attribute these dynamics to vocal and active faculty and staff unions that tend to have strong alliances with boards of trustees. When union leaders, trustees and the chancellor [disagree](#) on district goals and policies, “it can be difficult to find consensus.” He noted that because community college trustees in California are elected and not appointed, as they are in other states, some may be using their positions as stepping-stones to run for other political offices and may not be as invested in leading their districts.

He believes these community college leadership roles are among “the hardest in the country” as a result.

Negotiating the politics can be “so challenging that people either lose their jobs or they get squeezed in a way that they no longer feel like they can be effective where they are, and so they start looking,” Galizio said.

Galizio said there are also often open superintendent, president and chancellor positions in the system -- there are currently about 18 openings -- because it’s so large, and that this fosters a culture of leaders moving from role to role and colleges regularly poaching one another’s administrators.

“We have a lot of churn,” he said. “We have a lot of people who, if they’re doing well in one district, they start getting calls very quickly.”

Sunita Cooke, superintendent/president at MiraCosta Community College since 2015, said she gets multiple calls and emails from headhunters every week. She worries that the ongoing scramble to fill job openings in the system means some administrators are stepping into president or chancellor roles before they’re ready.

She also believes that California community college presidents are in a state of heightened stress because of the impending rollout of California’s [student-centered funding formula](#), which is scheduled to go into full effect in 2024. The new formula bases state funding on various student success metrics, including enrollment and completion. Community college presidents worry declining enrollments will affect student outcomes, such as graduation rates, and put funding in jeopardy. California also has a law that requires community colleges to [spend at least 50 percent](#) of their budgets on classroom instruction, which means less money is available for academic supports, Cooke noted.

“There is a lot of anxiety about it,” she said of the funding formula. “It is the topic of conversation at almost any CEO gathering.”

While perhaps an extreme case, the California Community Colleges system isn't alone in struggling with leadership turnover. Presidential tenures have been [shortening over time](#) across the country. The average tenure of a college or university president in their current job was 6.5 years in 2016, down from seven years in 2011 and 8.5 years in 2006, according to the American Council on Education's latest [American College President Study](#). The average tenure for a community college president was 6.2 years, and these presidents tended to have shorter contracts. More than half of community college presidents had three-year contracts, while more than half of presidents at doctorate-granting institutions had contracts of five years or longer, said Hironao Okahana, ACE's assistant vice president for research and insights.

Judith A. Wilde, a research professor at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University who studies presidential hires in higher education, said the trend is partially due to an overreliance on search firms. She and a colleague conducted a study of job ads for presidential positions in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) and found that in 1975, only 2 percent of ads involved outside firms, but by 2015, 92 percent involved an executive search firm or consultant.

She said search firms tend not to make the names of candidates public or involve faculty members in the process, which can make it hard to hire leaders that are the right fit for institutions.

“If you really want to vet somebody, the best network available is the faculty network system,” she said. “If you ask me about somebody, I may not know that person, but I can probably find somebody who does. I'm not saying we need to look for dirt on people, but we do need to know enough about them to know if they'll make a good match for us.”

California community college leaders worry the turnover causes harmful disruption for institutions and students.

Curry said when leaders are constantly changing, “institutional knowledge” is lost and long-term plans grind to a halt.

“The impact it has on students—you won't see it in the short term, but you'll see it in the long term,” he said. “Because when new people come in, it's hard for them to be able focus on some of the core issues students are dealing with because they're trying to learn the organization.”

Murillo, of Santa Barbara City College, said abrupt leadership changes “can really hurt students” because leadership vacuums may lead to “toxicity” and “infighting.”

“On a daily basis, I would like 90 percent of my job to be making the world better for students,” she said. “And if a college is in turmoil, 90 percent of my job is going to be fixing the turmoil.”

But she said turnover isn't all bad. She believes most executive roles should change every five to seven years, giving those leaders enough time to “change the culture of the institution” but not enough time to “get complacent.” She also said faculty and staff members can often insulate students from the negative effects of leadership turnover by keeping campuses running smoothly.

“For me, if I'm comfortable, it's time to move on,” she said. “New leadership brings new eyes and new ways of doing things.”