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Potential New Leaders of 2-Year Colleges Face Higher Hurdles

By Katherine Mangan
San Antonio

During two decades of leading Miami Dade College, Eduardo J. Padrón has mentored dozens of promising educators, many of whom would make excellent community-college leaders.

But when he broaches the subject today, their response, more often than not, is thanks, but no thanks.

"Many of the people I have mentored who have tremendous potential don't want to be in my position," he said during a session here on Monday at the [annual meeting](#) of the American Association of Community Colleges.

Among the challenges scaring them off just when the nation faces what the association's president called a "tsunami" of presidential retirements are declining resources, needier students, and pressure to overhaul remediation while graduating more students.

To survive in the job today, said Mr. Padrón, "you almost have to be bionic."

The nation's 1,123 two-year colleges have had more than 700 transitions in presidential leadership since July 2011, with a similar turnover among vice presidents, deans, and senior faculty members, said Walter G. Bumphus, president and chief executive of the community-college association.

Not only are dozens of baby-boomer presidents retiring, but their replacements aren't sticking around long enough to accomplish the kinds of transformations being called for, according to the longtime presidents who shared the stage with Mr. Padrón.

New community-college leaders have the passion and enthusiasm their predecessors possessed, but the pressures they face are much more intense, said Terry O'Banion, chair of the graduate faculty at National American University and president emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College.

"Our doctoral programs have deteriorated and disappeared across the country, and without them we're going to be in trouble as new people stumble into these jobs and try to make sense out of them," he said.

Mr. O'Banion is working with John E. Roueche at National American University, where the Roueche Graduate Center, in Austin, Tex., now has about 80 doctoral students in a [program for aspiring community-college leaders](#). Mr. Roueche started the program after leaving the University of Texas at Austin, in 2012. He had spent 41 years as head of Texas' esteemed doctoral program for prospective community-college leaders, until financial support for the program was reduced.

Focus on Completion

One of the biggest hurdles the new presidents are likely to face is managing the shift from a focus on access to one of keeping students on track all the way to graduation.

"We've made college easy to get into but also easy to get out of," Mr. Roueche said. "The attrition rates have been atrocious."

The completion agenda is the latest in a series of major initiatives that consume higher education about once every decade: "It's like a 10-year locust," Mr. O'Banion said. Ever since the report "A Nation at Risk" served as a call to arms against what the authors called "a rising tide of mediocrity" in education, "every 10 years a new reform effort surfaces that's going to completely change the way we provide education."

With each effort, the nation has put millions of dollars toward ambitious goals, only to come up short, said Mr. O'Banion.

Colleges have made only [limited progress](#) toward the completion goals set by President Obama, major foundations, and college

associations.

Still, for community colleges, the completion push has created plenty of positive changes, Mr. O'Banion said. It has helped them scale up successful programs, improve advising, and begin creating clearer degree pathways so that students aren't overwhelmed by choice.

Another of the challenges that presidents will face is a lack of civility among both trustees and faculty members, said Mr. O'Banion, who has published a book about [curmudgeons who block change](#) in community colleges.

"There's no time you will ever be ready except in your own heart," he told aspiring presidents in the audience. "That's where you have to start."

While Mr. O'Banion would like to see changes happen more gradually, rather than in ambitious but perhaps unrealistic bursts, Mr. Padrón said the nation can't afford to take small steps.

Transforming higher education is "an economic and moral imperative," he said. "Going to college, until recently, was a choice. Today it's a necessity if you want to get out of the cycle of poverty and get into the middle class."

Another longtime president urged attendees to focus on the opportunities that a presidency presents to make a difference in the lives of students.

"You can't focus on the rogue trustees or the unions," said Jerry Sue Thornton, who served for 21 years as president of Cuyahoga Community College, in Ohio. "You have to focus on the mission and values of the institutions. The challenges are real, but as presidents, if you focus on the sand and the water — for those of you who are golfers — you are going to hit them."

Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter [@KatherineMangan](#), or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.



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