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# The Critical Impact of Impending Retirements on Community College Leadership

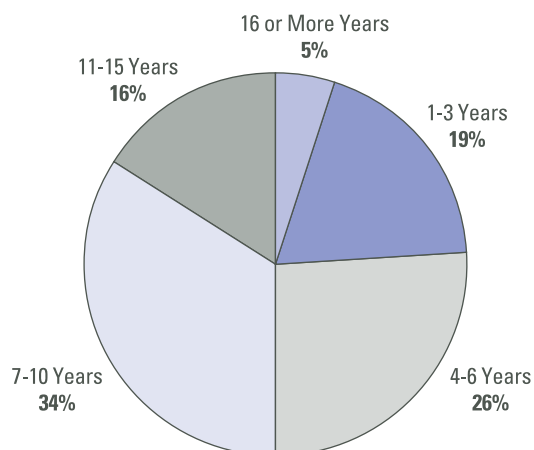
By Christopher Shults

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**C**ommunity colleges are facing an impending leadership crisis. College presidents, senior administrators, and faculty leaders have been retiring at an alarming rate—a trend that is expected to continue as baby boomers age. The average age of people in these positions continues to increase, and upcoming retirements in the positions are projected to be higher than normal. As a consequence, higher numbers of administrators must be trained to fill community college leadership roles. This brief synthesizes recent research on these trends; key findings include the following:

- Forty-five percent of current presidents plan to retire by 2007.
- Community college presidents are getting older: In 1986, their average age was 51; in 1998, it was 57.
- The number of advanced degrees conferred in community college administration decreased 78 percent from 1982–83 to 1996–97.
- Important skills identified for future leaders include the ability to bring a college together in the governing process, the ability to mediate, a good command of technology, and the ability to build coalitions.
- New community college presidents feel unprepared to deal with key aspects of their jobs, including fundraising, financial management, and working effectively with their governing boards.
- In 1984, the average age of senior community college administrators was under 50; in 2000, it was 52.
- In 1999, 52 percent of full-time faculty members aged 55 to 64 reported planning to retire by 2004.

**FIGURE 1** Years Until Retirement as Reported by Community College Presidents: 2001



Source: AACC 2001

## Background

The majority of community colleges were started in the 1960s and 1970s. The people who helped open the doors of these colleges and who, as leaders and presidents, helped transform this uniquely American invention into one of the premier education and training institutions in the nation, are now near retirement. Many other long-term administrators and faculty who began their careers in those decades and who have been integral to the culture and operation of community colleges are also planning to retire. With the retirement of these leaders, inestimable experience and history, as well as an intimate understanding of the community college mission, values, and culture, will disappear, leaving an enormous gap in the collective memory and the leadership of community colleges.

## Leadership at the Community College

“Leadership is found inside an individual. It is the innate ability to articulate a vision and get support from other individuals to carry out that vision.” According to Christine McPhail, director of the Morgan State University Community College Leadership Program, this is the vital role that presidents, administrators, and faculty play in the community college. At all levels within the college, leaders communicate with those around them to create a more effective learning environment.

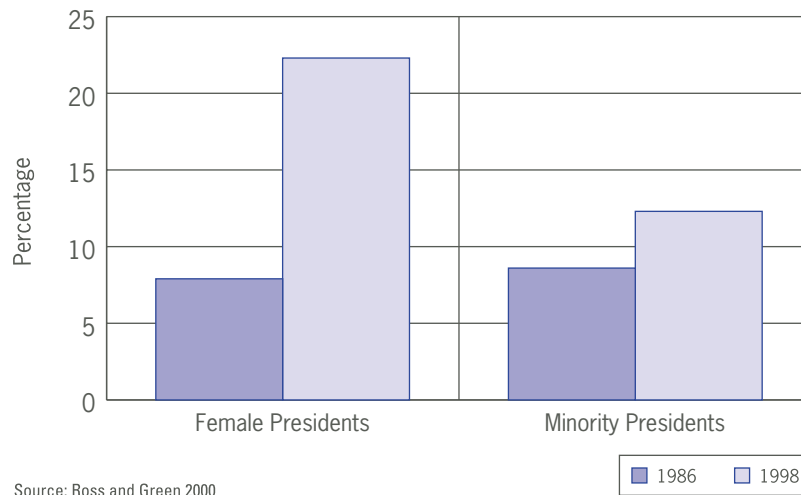
Recent studies indicate that community college leaders at all levels are going to retire at above-average rates over the next several years. McPhail believes that “while it would be easy to panic at the impending changes,” one must view them as “a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge to find qualified individuals to replace those individuals retiring, and an opportunity to identify people with a new vision that fits the needs of the community college.”

Impending retirements affect not only current leadership but also the leadership pipeline. In the traditional progression, community college faculty members who exhibit leadership qualities become department chairs or members of the faculty senate or faculty union, then move on to an administrative position such as department dean. One report (Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown 2001) investigates six senior administrator positions that lead into the presidency:

- Chief academic officer
- Business/financial officer
- Chief student affairs officer
- Director of continuing education
- Business-and-industry liaison
- Occupational/vocational education leader

Not only are community colleges losing faculty leaders, administrative leaders, and current CEOs, but because people in the traditional leadership pipeline are aging and retiring, the future of presidential leadership is in a state of uncertainty.

**FIGURE 2** Percentage of Community College Presidents Who Were Female or Minority: 1986 and 1998



## Community College Presidents

The profile of the community college president has remained fairly consistent for many years. According to a study produced by the American Council on Education (ACE), the majority of community college CEOs are still white males (Ross and Green 2000). As with the American workforce in general, however, this profile is changing. In 1986, 8 percent of community college presidents were female; by 1998, 22 percent were female. Minorities in the presidency rose from 9 percent in 1986 to 12 percent in 1998 (Figure 2). From 1995 to 1998, 34 percent of presidents hired were female and 16 percent were minority, increases that demonstrate a commitment to diversity in community college leadership.

Multiple studies confirm that a substantial number of community college CEOs will be retiring soon. In 1986, the average age of community college presidents was 51, whereas in 1998 the average age was 57 (Ross and Green 2000). In 1996, 74 percent of presidents were over 50, and only 0.4 percent were under 40 (Vaughan and Weisman 1998). In an online survey of community college CEOs conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) in 2001, 45 percent of responding presidents indicated they plan to retire between 2001 and 2007. These retirements will create leadership opportunities for a new generation, but they will also create a leadership gap. To address the gap effectively, community colleges must identify new leaders and give them the opportunity to acquire and practice the skills they will need to lead colleges in the 21st century.

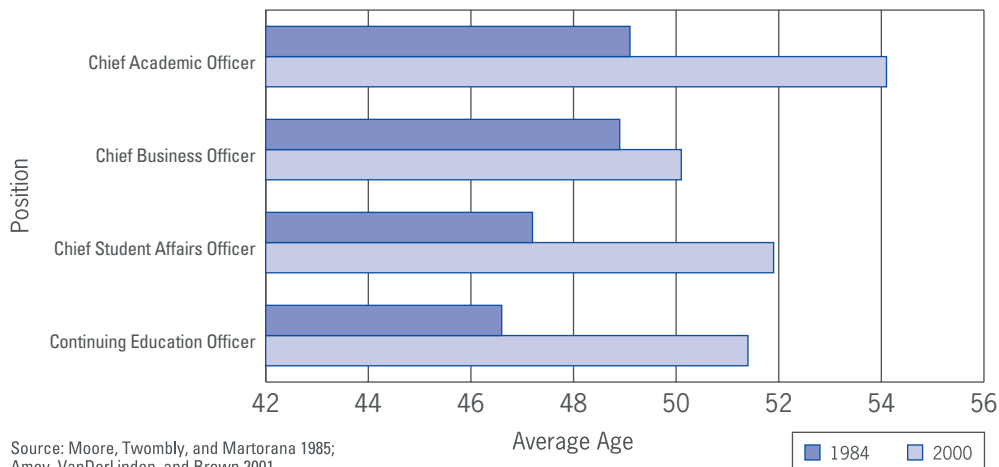
## Chief Administrators

Information related to senior-level administrators indicates there is a “graying” of people in those positions as well. A 2000 Michigan State University (MSU) study that examined career paths of community college administrators (Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown 2001) replicated a 1984 study of administrators’ career paths (Moore, Twombly, and Martorana 1985). These two studies asked many of the same questions, which permits trend comparisons. The 1984 study identified four senior administrative positions as among the most common for progression to the presidency. The

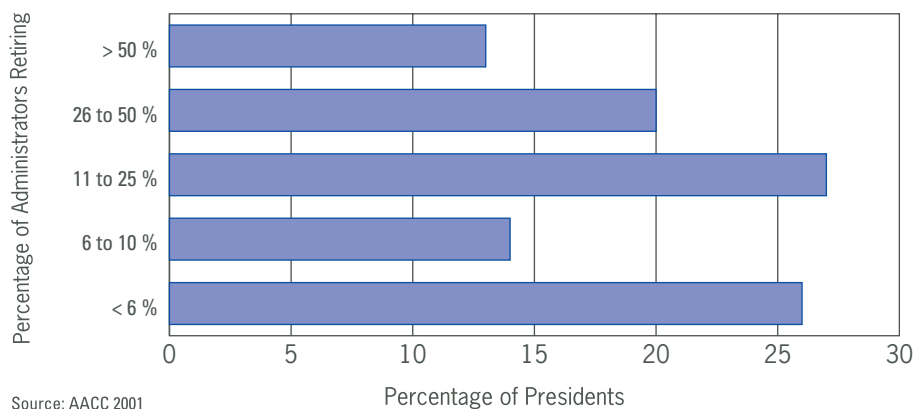
2000 study identified two additional “leadership pipeline” positions: business-and-industry liaison and occupational/vocational education leader. Both of these positions are geared toward nontraditional education, an area increasingly important to community colleges and an area in which current presidents believe future leaders will need to be proficient.

In 1984, the average age of administrators in the four senior-level positions identified as leading to community college presidencies was under 50; in 2000, the average age of administrators in the six senior-level positions identified was 52. In 1984, the average age of chief academic officers—the

**FIGURE 3** Average Age of Selected Senior Administrators: 1984 and 2000



**FIGURE 4** Percentage of Chief Administrators Retiring between 2001 and 2006, as Projected by Presidents



primary position leading into the presidency—was 49; in 2000, the average age was 54 (Figure 3).

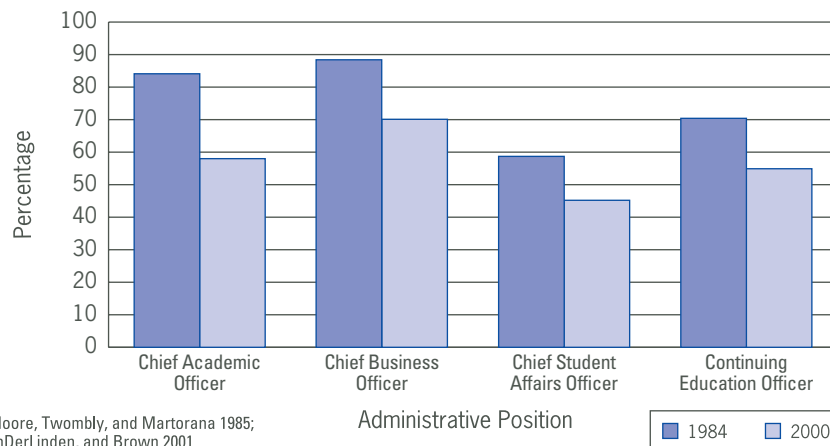
As with presidents, senior administrators are getting older and are projected to retire in growing numbers in the near future. In AACC’s 2001 online survey, 33 percent of responding presidents projected that at least one-fourth of their top administrative staff will retire by 2006 (Figure 4).

Like community college presidents, senior administrators reflect America’s demographics better today than in the past. According to the 1984 career pathway study, administrators in the main leadership positions were predominantly male and more than 85 percent white (Moore, Twombly, and

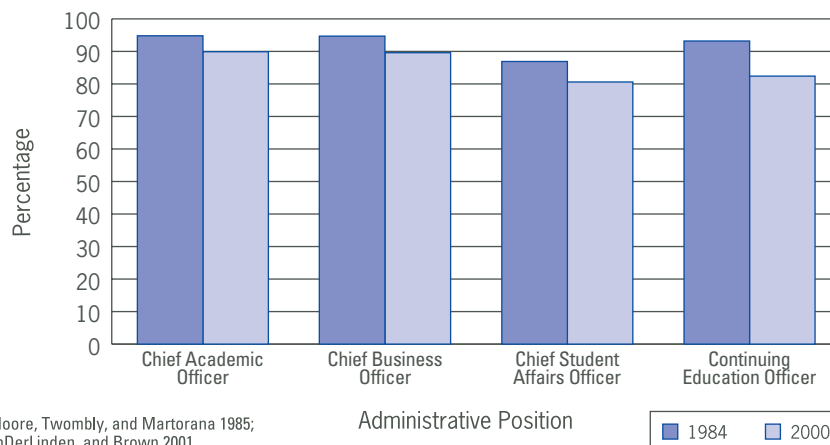
Martorana 1985). By 2000, administrators in one of these positions, chief student affairs officer, were predominantly female (Figure 5), and in none of the positions were more than 90 percent of the administrators white (Figure 6).

The aging and impending retirements of senior administrators are important not only because these administrators provide leadership but also because the positions they occupy are among the most common stepping-stones to a community college presidency. According to the ACE presidents study, the immediate prior position of 56 percent of current presidents was a senior administrative position (Ross and Green 2000).

**FIGURE 5** Percentage of Selected Senior Administrators Who Were Male: 1984 and 2000



**FIGURE 6** Percentage of Selected Senior Administrators Who Were White: 1984 and 2000



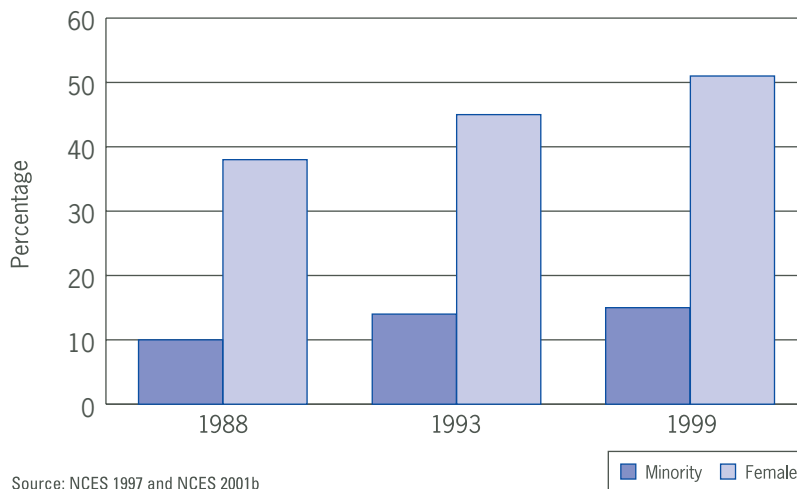
## Community College Faculty

The profile of community college faculty is changing. According to the 1993 and 1999 National Studies of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF), female faculty increased from 38 percent in 1988 to 51 percent in 1999 (NCES 1997, 2001b). During that period, minority faculty overall increased from 10 percent to 15 percent (Figure 7).

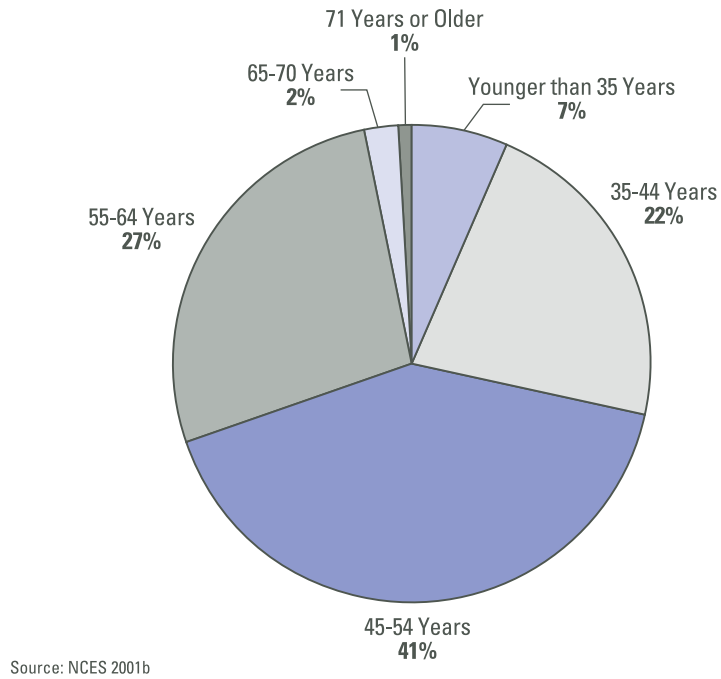
The graying of presidents and chief administrators is mirrored within faculty ranks. In 1999, 30 percent of full-time faculty in community colleges were at least 55 years old (NCES 2001b) (Figure 8), and 52 percent of respondents between the ages of 55 and 64 planned to retire by 2004. According to AACC's 2001 online survey, 36 percent of presidents expect at least one-fourth of their faculty to retire by 2006 (Figure 9).

Faculty members are a vital component of community college leadership through their involvement as department chairs and as members of faculty senates and faculty unions. Lower-level administrators, such as department chairs and deans, often become upper-level administrators and presidents. According to the ACE study, many current community college presidents were faculty members at some point in their career. Faculty member, department chair, or dean was the position nearly 14 percent of current presidents had held just before assuming the presidency, and nearly 38 percent of current presidents had held one of those positions two jobs before becoming president. With the aging and impending retirement of large numbers of faculty members, voids in community college leadership will appear from faculty positions all the way up through the presidency.

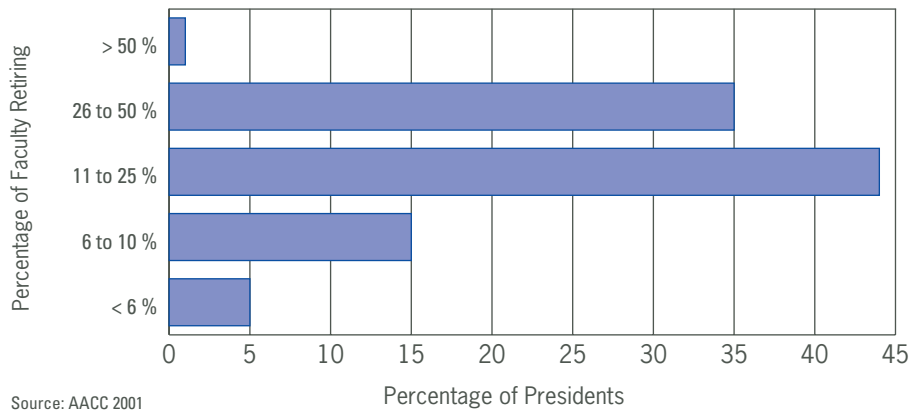
**FIGURE 7** Percentage of Faculty Members Who Were Minority or Female: 1988, 1993, and 1999



**FIGURE 8 Full-Time Community College Faculty by Age: 1999**



**FIGURE 9 Percentage of Faculty Retiring between 2001 and 2006, as Projected by Presidents**



## Trustees

No discussion of community college leadership would be complete without considering boards of trustees, who are responsible for hiring CEOs, and the importance of the relationship between the president and board. Nearly 95 percent of trustees rely on the president and his or her staff for information about the college. More than 86 percent of trustees state that the president is the single greatest influence on the board's decisions (Vaughan and Weisman 1998).

Just as leadership training is beneficial to CEOs, board members benefit from effectiveness training. North Carolina considers board development so important that in 1999 the state passed a law requiring that community college trustees attend orientation or face being removed from their positions. A solid relationship between the board and the president is vital to the success of an institution; therefore, learning to collaborate and work together effectively is of the utmost importance. The Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) recommends that boards engage regularly in retreats to learn how to build strong partnerships with CEOs and how to govern responsibly, and to hone the skills board members need (ACCT 2001).

According to ACCT data, trustees generally live in the communities in which they govern and are professionals, business owners, and managers. More than that, they act as community leaders in their role as trustee. Board members are responsible for ensuring that their college is serving the needs of the community and for adopting, following, and enforcing standards of conduct that respect the public trust (AACC/ACCT 2000). It is imperative for a college's welfare that its trustees understand that

they speak as one voice, and that it is the board that has authority, not individual members.

The trustee profile tends to resemble the profile of community college presidents: In 1997, 67 percent were male and 87 percent were white (AACC/ACCT 1999). As with presidents, senior administrators, and faculty, more women hold trustee positions now than in past years: In 1987, 29 percent of trustees were female; by 1997 the number had increased to 33 percent (Vaughan and Weisman 1998). In 1996, the average age of community college trustees was 57, and 45 percent were 60 years or older (Figure 10).

## Presidential Skills

Although there is no specific blueprint for college leadership, certain skills have been identified as important for effective presidents, including the ability to bring a college together in the governing process; the ability to mediate; having a good command of technology; maintaining a high level of tolerance for ambiguity; understanding and appreciating multiculturalism; and the ability to build coalitions (Vaughan and Weisman 1998). In AACC's 2001 online survey, community college presidents indicated their belief that future presidents will need an even more entrepreneurial spirit, a greater command of technology, and a more adaptive approach than presidents need today.

Although many presidents receive leadership training before moving into a presidency, they are not prepared for all aspects of the job. The AACC survey asked presidents to identify aspects of the job for which they had not been prepared. The most frequent response was that they had not fully understood the overwhelming nature of the job. Presidents also reported being unprepared for the



level of politics involved, fundraising, budgeting, and the amount of relationship building they were expected to accomplish. These results are similar to what the 1998 ACE survey found. In that survey, community college presidents hired between 1995 and 1998 indicated they would have liked further training in fundraising, financial management, and working with their governing boards (Ross and Green 2000).

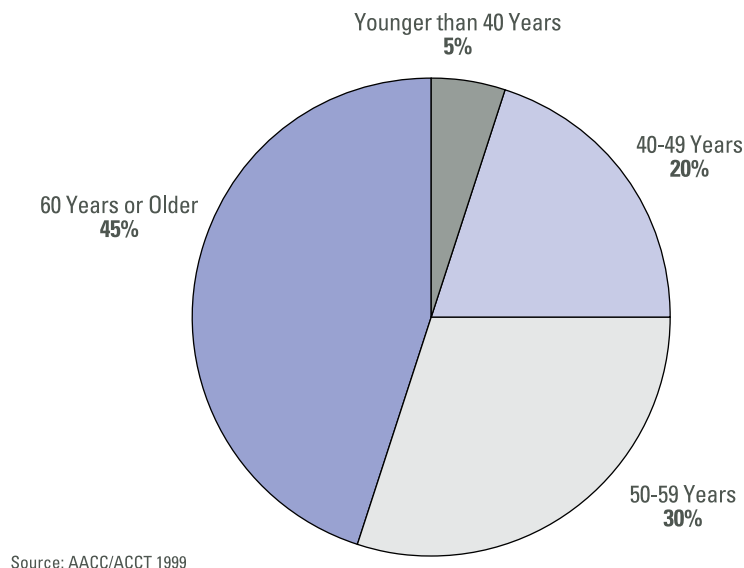
Other studies of community college leadership have looked not at skills but at the traits a president must have to be effective. *Community College Leadership in the New Millennium*, a paper commissioned as part of the AACC New Expeditions project, examined this issue and identified important traits for community college presidents, including the ability to develop a vision of where the college should go, integrity, confidence and courage, technical knowledge, a collaborative spirit, persistence, good judgment, and a desire to lead.

The authors point out that these traits need not be inherent but can be learned or developed (Hockaday and Puyear 2000).

## Professional Development

In order to gain the skills and traits important to effective leaders, those in the community college leadership pipeline must have access to appropriate professional development. AACC's 2001 online survey asked current CEOs to identify the professional development activities that were most influential in their attaining their current position. Presidents reported a variety of activities as having been influential, including formal degree programs such as community college or higher education leadership/administration programs. While advanced degrees conferred in general higher education administration increased by 13 percent from 1982–83 to 1996–97, there was a decrease of 78 percent in the number of

**FIGURE 10** Community College Board Members by Age: 1996



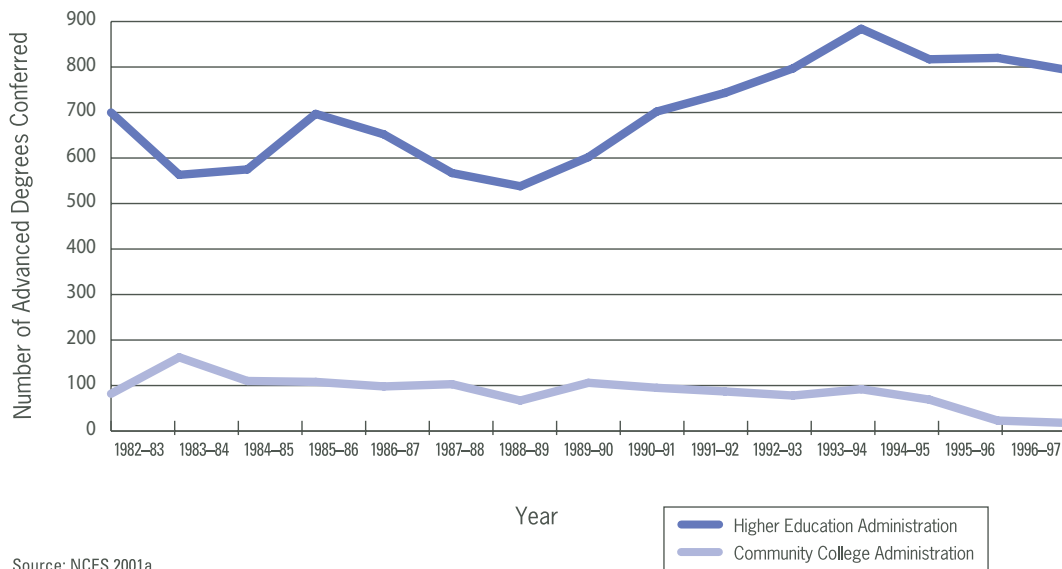
advanced degrees conferred in community college administration over the same time period (NCES 2001a) (Figure 11). Other avenues that respondents cited as important for preparing for a community college presidency included short-term leadership programs and seminars offered through universities; association leadership programs such as those offered by ACE, AACC, and AACC-affiliated organizations; the League for Innovation in the Community College; state and local leadership programs; and higher education conferences.

Mentoring also plays a key role in preparing people for leadership positions. Fifty-seven percent of respondents to the AACC survey indicated that a mentor had been either valuable or very valuable in helping them obtain their current presidency. Sixty-two percent reported that a mentor had been either valuable or very valuable in preparing them for the daily challenges and tasks of the presidency (Figure 12). As further evidence of the value placed on mentoring, 76 percent of CEOs who had been

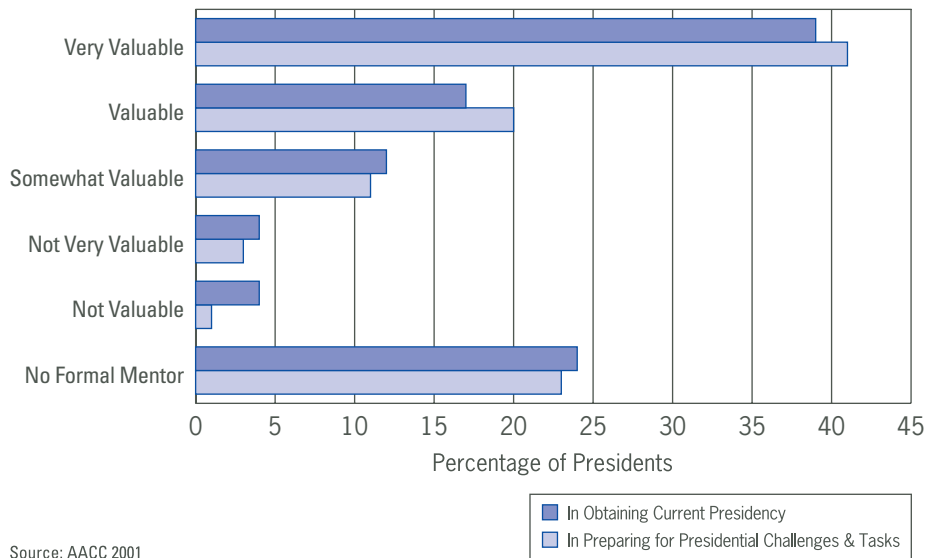
on the job for more than three years indicated they had served as a formal mentor in developing the career of another community college professional. In the 2000 MSU survey, 55 percent of senior administrators in the six “presidency pipeline” positions reported currently having a mentor, while 65 percent reported currently serving as mentors to one or more people (Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown 2001).

Professional development remains important for community college presidents even after they assume office. In AACC’s 2001 online survey, sitting presidents reported attending a wide variety of professional development activities offered by many different providers, including state and local leadership programs; AACC-based programs such as Presidents Academy functions; AACC-affiliated councils; programs offered by colleges or universities; professional conferences; and programmatic retreats. Respondents indicated that an additional benefit of professional development activities is the

**FIGURE 11** Advanced Degrees in Higher Education and Community College Administration Conferred: 1982-83 to 1996-97



**FIGURE 12** Presidents' Perceived Value of a Mentor



opportunity to network. Many reported that they were not able to attend as many professional development activities as they would like.

The 1984 and 2000 career pathway surveys examined the participation rate of senior administrators in a variety of external and internal professional development activities. Participation in external activities such as leadership programs, fellowships, and internships was below 20 percent in both 1984 and 2000 (Moore, Twombly, and Martorana 1985; Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown 2001). Conference participation, which was not examined in 1984, received a 68 percent participation rate in the 2000 survey. Participation in internal activities was significantly higher than participation in external activities. In 2000, 97 percent of senior administrators had been involved with institutional task forces, committees, or commissions; 91 percent had been involved with in-service staff development programs; and 86

percent had had a formal written performance review (Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown 2001). This is a slight increase over the same factors examined in 1984, which indicates that the emphasis on internal promotion and leadership preparation has grown.

## Conclusion

The research shows that upcoming retirements among community college leaders and those in the leadership pipeline pose a critical challenge to community colleges. The skills community college leaders will need in the future have been identified, however, and professional development activities exist to help teach those skills. By using the resources available to them and developing new strategies, community colleges can ensure that qualified leaders are ready to fill senior faculty positions, administrative positions, and the presidency.

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