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This chapter examines the development of the AACC competencies by providing a historical backdrop of their development and the specific steps involved in their creation. Also, a review of current leadership demands offers an opportunity to reflect on the application of competencies for today's leaders.

Historic Overview of the AACC Competencies

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In summer 2003, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation awarded a grant to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) to address the national need for community college leaders. An extensive data-gathering process, part of the AACC Leading Forward project, resulted in the creation of the AACC competencies for community college leaders. This chapter examines the driving forces behind the initiative and the development of the competencies. Lessons learned fall into two domains: (1) designing and implementing a national project inclusive of a wide range of voices, and (2) current approaches and thinking about leadership in community colleges.

Driving Forces

Conditions. There were a variety of driving forces behind the Leading Forward project, not the least of which was the intense investment and pride in the community college segment of higher education found in those who work in and lead it. Occupying a distinct and important place in American higher education, community colleges have a culture of their own that is based on the democratic values of open access and community engagement. Retiring leaders wanted to assure a smooth transition of their institutions to those who did not share the history of their development, the culture of supporting second chances for students, and their passion of advocacy of the community college mission. While the desire of these

leaders to maintain this culture was never explicitly stated, an anthropologist could look beneath the surface and find that pride and continuance of institutional identity were major drivers. Another unarticulated driver regarding the creation of the competencies that emerged over time was the lack not only of a cohesive curriculum for aspiring community college leaders, but also of formal leadership training for those currently leading community colleges. Further influencing the Leading Forward initiative were some clear demographic, cultural, and AACC-related factors.

AACC is a presidential membership organization whose efforts are focused in five strategic action areas: Recognition and Advocacy for Community Colleges; Student Access, Learning and Success; Community College Leadership Development; Economic and Workforce Development; and Global and Intercultural Education (AACC, 2006, www.aacc.nche.edu/About/Pages/mission.aspx). The goal of leadership development was traditionally met through a series of leadership events such as the Presidents Academy Summer Institute and the Future Leaders Institute and through publications. As the AACC *Competencies for Community College Leaders* publication ultimately concluded, “proactive leadership development [is] a central focus of its mission” (AACC, 2005, p. 1). Prior to this time, however, the AACC had not stepped back and looked in a deeply reflective manner at its leadership agenda. The Leading Forward project offered just that opportunity.

Simple demographics predicted a leadership vacuum as the Baby Boomer cohort began to retire—at least from their traditionally structured work lives (Shults, 2001). The tenure of presidencies and upper-level management positions appeared, at least from anecdotal evidence, to be shortening. The causes were many: greater geographic mobility; a shifting in roles (for example, the increased emphasis on fundraising for community college presidents) leading to less job satisfaction for some; the expansion of the range of skills needed due to technology changes; increased accountability; the perceived challenges of serving a more diverse student population; and, more recently, the increased enrollment experienced by shifts in the economy. The predicted mass exodus of community college presidents has been somewhat abated by retiring leaders serving as interim presidents or consultants or by delays in retirement due to the downturn of retirement investments as well as to presidents’ desire to remain involved in an active work life. These factors might to some degree ameliorate the predicted leadership vacuum.

Beliefs and Values. The Leading Forward project employed a competency-based approach in describing leadership development needs. ACT, an organization well versed in competency assessment, in part because of their work with the American College Testing program and WorkKeys (a jobs skills assessment), was engaged by AACC to support the competencies development part of the project. One approach to leadership traditionally taken by many development programs was the anecdotal/modeling format in which guest leaders shared their experiences. Many of

these programs, however, while inspirational, suffered from a lack of a coherent curriculum based in the reality of the community college experience. It was believed that a competency-based approach could significantly strengthen leadership program curricula.

The final competency document itself was designed to be flexible, allowing for change as needed. This flexibility to conform to time and context was a core value held in the design and development of the framework. A continual challenge in the refinement of the competencies was balancing the degree to which they were to be defined as opposed to being broad enough to encompass many different circumstances. Hence, a three-part approach emerged to include: (1) having a general category of competence, accompanied by (2) a statement about an effective community college leader in that category and (3) examples to enhance understanding of it. The belief was that this level of broadness and detail would be helpful to individuals charting their career; to human resources departments hiring, firing, rewarding, and recommending professional development for personnel; and to leadership program developers designing programs.

A competency-based approach to leadership implies, by its very existence, that leadership can be learned. In addition, leadership can come from many different levels in the organization, and the relative weighting of skills can vary by different hierarchical positions within the college. The dichotomy of “management vs. leadership” was embraced, acknowledging that they often occur together and thus are presented together in the competency framework. The amount of emphasis on each of these areas will differ depending on the leader’s position in the institution and career stage. The process of learning leadership skills is lifelong and can flourish in a learning-centered college that embraces lifelong learning for faculty and staff as well as students. Finally, an array of strategies and delivery of leadership development should be used, including one strategy universally claimed to be important—an experiential component in which the learner has the ability to be deeply involved in a leadership experience, either at their own or at another college. That experience is to be accompanied by authentic reflection in which theories are applied and outcomes and personal reactions are examined.

The Development of Leading Forward

Even though leadership development had always been a part of AACC’s programming, the driving force behind the Leading Forward initiative started in March 2001 and resulted in AACC’s convening a leadership summit in that year. An AACC board-led Leadership Task Force emerged from the summit, providing the impetus for: (1) the establishment of a new Future Leaders Institute; (2) the creation of a web-based catalog of university-based community college programs and courses; (3) a series of research briefs on leadership; (4) a new CEO workshop; and (5) a series

of “how to” publications geared to community college administrators. In 2002, the AACC board of directors endorsed the following document (AACC, 2003):

Effective Community College Presidents

- First, an effective 21st century community college leader *understands and implements the community college mission*, understands how the college fits in its community, develops a strong positive orientation toward community colleges, values and promotes diversity, knows how to create a student-centered environment, and promotes teaching, learning, and innovation as primary goals for the college.
- Second, an effective leader is an *advocate* who can work with legislators, understand fundraising and development, and use data and research effectively.
- Third, an effective leader is a *skilled administrator* who can master board, union, and employee relations; who understands organizational development; who promotes diversity and is committed to implementing a campus climate that values diversity and assures a positive work environment for all; who can assume the role of chief executive officer (CEO) and understand trends in students and student learning; who understands professional development needs of faculty and staff; who can use research and data for planning, decision making, responding to accreditation standards, and assessing institutional effectiveness; who can manage finances and facilities, understand legal issues, and know how to use marketing programs; who can manage technology to promote innovation and success in teaching and learning and organizational efficiency; and who can manage relations with the media.
- Fourth, an effective leader must be skilled in *community and economic development*, able to build partnerships with business, industry, government, K–12 schools, and universities, and able to encourage civic engagement and develop strategies for community and workforce development.
- And finally, an effective community college leader possesses *personal, interpersonal, and transformational skills* that enable him or her to work with staff to promote the college’s vision, values, and mission; to maintain a code of personal ethics; to project the confidence and competencies of a leader; to model diversity and succeed in any environment; to interview and evaluate personnel effectively and fairly; to understand institutional politics and pick battles wisely; to possess flexibility and negotiation skills; to have public speaking and writing skills, including the ability to be articulate and circumspect with the media; and finally, to function in a way that demonstrates self-mastery and a high level of personal transformation.

(Adapted from report of the AACC Leadership Task Force, 2002)

The AACC argued that it was perfectly positioned to lead this work on leadership development because of its role as a “convener and catalyst”

(AACC, 2003, p. 4), due to its far reach through membership, commissions, and affiliate councils.

Leading Forward was funded as a planning grant and considered the first phase of a larger leadership initiative. The vision for the first phase of Leading Forward stated: “By virtue of their leadership excellence, community colleges will meet the needs of learners, communities, and the nation in academic, workforce, and community development” (AACC, 2003, p. 7). The goal of the initiative sought for “[p]lanning activities [to] produce an integrated plan, endorsed by all stakeholders, that addresses the national need for new community college leaders by putting into place by the end of 2005 training strategies that can annually move 1,500 individuals up one or more steps in their community college career ladder” (AACC, 2003, p. 7). The first objective of Leading Forward was to lay a strong foundation for leadership development by building consensus through the establishment of a national advisory panel and convening leadership summits. Developing, conducting, and synthesizing the data from the leadership summits was a story unto itself.

The AACC convened four summits to understand current and diverse thinking in the field about approaches to community college leadership. Summits were designed and facilitated by *AmericaSpeaks*, an organization highly regarded for providing interactive meetings on a wide range of topics. The summits included personnel from the following groups: (1) AACC-affiliated councils, (2) universities offering graduate studies in community college administration, (3) colleges or consortia offering “grow-your-own” leadership development programs, and (4) underserved community colleges. The goal was to reach the following outcomes:

- Understand how to work collaboratively to develop a more comprehensive and integrated national road map of leadership development offerings and curricula that will assist future community college leaders of all types in charting out their leadership paths.
- Inventory the offerings and map knowledge, skills, and values for effective leadership.
- Design strategies to create or modify existing leadership development programs (AACC, 2003, p. 9).

The first summit conducted to achieve these goals was the AACC Leadership Summit of Affiliated Councils, held in Washington, D.C., on November 18, 2003. The following description of the process and products of the AACC affiliated councils summit is used as an example and demonstrates the process used with all four summits.

Prior to the summit, attendees submitted their thoughts concerning leadership development by responding to the following prompts:

- What is leadership development? What does it encompass?
- How can leadership development be delivered?
- How can leadership development be measured?

Attendees also reviewed and commented on a description of their group's leadership development program, if they had one, taken from the affiliated council's website. The collective responses to all of the above requests were sent as "pre-meeting" materials for all to review prior to the meeting and thus allowed the group to begin the face-to-face summit with some grounding in their own as well as others' leadership development thinking and programming.

The actual summit was divided into small- and large-group work focused on four areas of inquiry and discussion:

1. Knowledge, skills, and values for effective community college leaders.
2. A working definition of leadership development and the most effective ways of developing leaders.
3. A reflection upon the inventory of council leadership programs, including an examination of the niches served, who was served, and any overlaps or gaps between the programs that might provide fertile ground for collaboration.
4. A discussion concerning creating a national framework for community college leadership built on the guiding principles of comprehensiveness, real choices, and usefulness.

The evaluation of this summit revealed that the participants were quite satisfied with the thoughtfulness and organization of the meeting and regarded it as a good and timely start to a national community college initiative on leadership. Questions concerned not only lessons from the day but areas of possible collaboration between the groups and thoughts concerning the role of AACC in leadership development for the community college sector.

On January 9, 2004, the AACC Leadership Summit of Grow-Your-Own Programs was held. This summit focused on short-term, noncredit programs offered by colleges or state/regional consortia, often addressing local or regional needs. The same "pre-meeting" information as in the affiliated councils summit was collected, compiled, and distributed to all attendees before the meeting. The same question protocol was followed for the actual summit. Evaluations were collected and compiled.

On January 21, 2004, the AACC convened the Summit on Leadership in Underserved Areas. It was originally conceptualized as a summit for rural and tribal community colleges but was deliberately expanded to include the voices and thoughts of those community college leaders dealing with issues of place—often impoverished place. The same protocols were followed.

On March 16, 2004, the fourth and last summit, the AACC Leadership Summit of University Programs, was held. It focused on graduate-level programs offered by universities. As in the previous summits, the pre-meeting materials were disseminated prior to the meeting and the format of the day remained constant. Discussions concerning the role of AACC were rich and touched upon one of the areas of ongoing discussion throughout

the project—credentialing, a natural for this group. To provide some degree of closure to the summit part of the process, ACT submitted an AACC-commissioned report in 2004, *A Qualitative Analysis of Community College Leadership*. The broad picture of the competencies culled from reams of data generated from the summits was refined and contextualized to fit more closely with the community college environment.

In December 2004, the AACC distributed a survey to all summit participants and the Leading Forward National Advisory Panel to ensure that critical leadership competencies for community college professionals had been addressed in the first draft of the leadership competencies. Out of 125 surveys, 95 were returned, a response rate of 76 percent. All respondents noted that each of the six competencies was either “very” or “extremely” essential to the effective performance of a community college leader. Respondents also provided suggestions for minor modifications in wording. A lower response was given to the question regarding how well the respondents had been formally trained to apply each competency. Leadership program designers also gave a low response regarding how well their program prepared participants to apply the competencies. In other words, the survey respondents, who make up a significant percentage of U.S. community college leaders and leadership development program personnel, felt that each of the six competencies was essential to community college leadership but that the integration of these competencies was not as well established. These findings supported the need to promote the competencies in the curricula of community college leadership programs.

This creation process for the competencies culminated in the unanimous approval of the competencies document by the AACC board of directors on April 9, 2005. The summit participants were acknowledged on the Leading Forward website and the AACC publication *Competencies for Community College Leaders* was made available online (www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/leadership/Pages/publications.aspx; AACC, 2005). This work was then available to all for the wide range of users stated above. It was also hoped that even further validation of the competencies would occur as doctoral students and faculty researchers integrated the competencies into their research on community college leadership. As program designers began building curricula with the competencies in mind, evaluation of the use of the competencies in practice could occur.

Lessons Learned

Inclusion. Designing and implementing a national project that included a wide range of voices and perspectives was complex. A metaphor of a living, breathing organism helps to visualize the process. The development of the competencies for community college leaders, like living systems, involved the notion of taking in information, pushing out findings, taking in feedback, and pushing out revisions—a very iterative process. As

described above, the Leading Forward effort began with the taking in of the AACC board's Leadership Task Force information as well as the thinking of current leaders in the field. Those thoughts, beliefs, and values were pushed out to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation in the form of a grant proposal. Upon receipt of the grant and of Kellogg feedback, a National Advisory Panel was established that provided feedback at regular intervals on the project. A plan was made for the summits, the major "taking in" part of the grant. After each summit, information was collected not only on leadership in community colleges but also on the summit process itself. This assessment helped inform subsequent summits. The massive amount of data collected at the summits was pushed out to the attendees and to the public through the ACT report of July 2004, presentations, and articles of the next time period (Ottenritter, 2006). An online survey then followed. Tweaking and adjustment of the competencies occurred during every step of the process. Finally, the AACC board of directors unanimously approved the final list of competencies and associated examples on April 9, 2005. Built within the document was also the dynamic nature of the competency framework that included flexibility in application and openness to changes over time. Not only was this reiterative process used in the development of the competencies, it was also built into the life of them. Indeed, this *New Directions* publication reflects on the recursive nature of the competencies.

The Leading Forward project dovetailed into and benefited from the already energized mission of the AACC around leadership: aligning a national project inclusive of a wide range of voices into current strategic initiatives of the association. Synergy resulted due to the coordination of these processes focused on leadership development. The Leading Forward initiative also did its best to consider and involve as many stakeholders in the field as possible. Key players involved with university programs, affiliate council programs, grow-your-own programs, and programs in underserved areas were invited to participate. If particular leaders could not come, their representatives were welcomed. Attendees were involved in a well-articulated and organized data-gathering and community-building summit that treated the information provided by each group as equally valuable. The question protocol and agendas for each summit were the same. The goal of the process was clear—to sustain the community college mission through the development of competent, caring, and college- and community-focused leaders.

The value of outside consultants cannot be overstated here. External consultants were used to guide the overall competency-development part of Leading Forward as well as the summit process. Attendees were very satisfied with the summits and appreciated the organization and facilitation of these meetings. The mission of the project, as well as the goals of the summits, was clearly articulated and very inclusive. For example, attendees responded to several questions before the summit began and their responses were collected into one document (which included not only their responses but names and affiliations) and shared with the entire group a week prior

to the summit. This underscored the role of inclusivity and community building as well as good meeting management. When the summits were started, the thinking “pump was primed,” thus saving time in creating shared understanding and allowing participants to reach a greater depth of discussion in the limited time available at the summits.

Additionally, the process was transparent, a critical factor in building buy-in among all stakeholders. The use(s) of the competencies was left open to the field. For example, a discussion about credentialing and the possible role of the AACC in a credentialing process emerged. Any competency framework can be used on a continuum of weighting, ranging from “low-stakes” to “high-stakes” use. A low-stakes approach, for example, would involve recommending the use of the competencies to leadership program developers; a medium-stakes approach could involve using the competency rubric in an employee evaluation process; while a high-stakes approach could require an employee to obtain a particular score on a validated instrument that assesses the competencies. The AACC could have taken any one of these approaches and, ultimately, took a low-stakes approach in providing the competencies as guidelines versus dictating any type of requirements associated with the listing. Even though this stance clearly builds more buy-in from the field, it also ultimately risks the low use and marginalization of the competencies. Part of the purpose of this *New Directions* publication is to examine the effects and impact of that low-stakes choice.

Contemporary Thoughts. Community college personnel have always prided themselves on the individuality of their institutions and community-directed missions. One way this individuality is reflected is through their workforce and credit program offerings’ alignment to local culture and community needs. Leadership is no exception. Programs to develop, support, and sustain leaders must take this individuality into account. This leadership orientation is one reason for the low- to medium-stakes approach in using the competencies for leadership development. The guiding thought behind the recommended competencies was that they were critical for all community college leaders to either possess themselves or take into account when forming their college leadership team. The list represents a comprehensive core of functions required of community college leaders. However, how they become operationalized, their use, the weighing of one over another, and their relative importance are unique in each situation. This balance of unique (context) to universal (core elements transcending context) must be carefully navigated.

Both leadership and its delivery are highly contextualized. Modalities of delivery should be multiple and opportunities abundant. As the world moves to 24/7 delivery, perhaps community college leadership development could move that way as well. Specifically, people want what they want when they want or need it. It is conceivable that a community college leader might encounter a crisis in the organizational strategy domain and, in some sleepless hours, might want to learn more about how to think about it. An online

module could meet that need versus general surfing of the Internet. Not only are online resources accessible 24/7, but focused modules could save time by targeting needed information in an approachable format. In this case, the leader's learning can have depth through authentic reflection, rich case histories, and other tools providing a detailed exploration of the situation and not necessarily breadth. In our Internet-dominated world, individualized content and individualized learning become paramount.

Contemporary society supports the value of collective learning, hence the popularity of cohort-based models of leadership development programs. In this case, leadership development is enhanced through collaborative learning and networks and strategic alliances are formed. These cohort programs also tend to cover the entire range of competencies, fulfilling the hope stated above that the competencies will be used for curricula in these programs. In this face-to-face delivery of leadership development, there is more breadth and less depth, with the social aspect of learning being prominent. The value of the collaborative learning and of the professional relationships that continue long after the program has ended cannot be understated.

Institutional and national mentoring programs are also helpful, although they are more difficult to organize and maintain. The social affiliation and modeling parts of these programs are powerful and often mitigate the isolation that leaders, particularly upper-level leaders, sometimes feel. The AACC encourages connections between graduates of their leadership programs through reunions at the national convention and by sharing updated contact information and tracking and publicizing participants' career advancements. These mentoring programs can also provide links with peers not available on an individual leader's campus, and these connections can provide an opportunity for authentic personal reflection. In the same way an external consultant can provide a more objective view, a mentor who is external to the institution often provides objectivity as well as knowledge about practices at other institutions.

This chapter has deliberately not focused on the career/job seeking aspect of leadership development. Good interviewing skills, presentation of self, and professional ties and networks are all important, of course, and should be found in the range of leadership development opportunities. During the creation of the competencies, there was also some discussion about the use of electronic portfolios to present one's work to others, a form of presentation of self. However, it is the stance of this author and the focus of this chapter that leadership development should focus primarily on leadership itself and not on how to acquire positions of leadership, hence the focus on the competencies themselves.

Takeaways

In addition to the uses previously described, the AACC competencies for community college leaders can be most useful as a practical and deep

reflection tool to guide systemic change on an organizational level, as well as career development on an individual leader level. They could be used as a framework for environmental scanning or as a rubric for self-assessment. They provide an anchor for periodic assessment as well as a common language for discussion, networking, and shared problem solving. To name something is to give it life. The naming of the competencies ultimately serves to provide focus, direction, and, ultimately, success to the community college mission, students, and communities.

Conclusion

In summary, and in acknowledgment of the paradoxical importance of leadership development programs, I'd like to pay heed to Dwight D. Eisenhower's comment, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." Eisenhower had no way of knowing that the seas would be choppy on the night of June 5, 1944, but his planning for D-Day paid off. Likewise, a community college leader has no way of knowing what the next phone call will bring, but understanding the lay of the land, having a firm foundation in the range of skills needed, having good problem-solving abilities, being fully engaged in the experience, and having the necessary confidence will serve leaders well. It is the most and the least that we can expect from our community college leaders.

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