



CHIROPRACTIC (GENERAL)

## **Lessons Learned in the Presidency**

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On the eve of announcing my intended departure from the office of president of the Southern California University of Health Sciences (SCU), I felt it fitting to reflect upon wisdom gained through 16 years of experience. Undoubtedly, others who have served as long in this demanding role in chiropractic education have had similar experiences.



First, a few generalities from my experiences as president of SCU's Los Angeles College of Chiropractic (LACC): Chiropractic education is predominately tuition-dependent. As such, it is generally underfunded. There is simply more demand for resources than tuition can cover. Even with supplemental sources of revenue through postgraduate education, clinic services, fees in excess of tuition, research grants, investment income and gifts from benevolent benefactors, the need for revenue to support the operating costs of a chiropractic educational institution is greater than all revenues generated.

Chiropractic educational institutions are "presidential-centric" in nature. As an undergraduate at the University of Utah many years ago, the only time I ever saw the president was at graduation. In contrast to large universities, chiropractic educational institutions are small in population and size. It is common for the president to be seen walking about campus, participating in an occasional classroom discussion, having lunch in the cafeteria, greeting new students at orientation, and handing them diplomas at graduation a short time later. Nearly every student, and certainly every faculty and staff member, know their president by name.

Not unique to chiropractic education is the principle of shared governance. The president, as the chief executive officer of a chiropractic educational institution, has the authority to make final decisions, in accordance with policy set by the board, about the operation of the institution. However, rarely does a president make a unilateral decision without extensive consultation with the president's cabinet, other line officers, the faculty, the chair of the board, student leaders, and even members of the community, depending on the nature and scope of the decision to be made.

Somewhat unique to the educational institutions associated with complementary and alternative medicine is the divisive lack of internal consensus within each profession. In chiropractic, the "philosophical" divide within the profession gnaws away at the foundation of good educational practices and undermines the confidence of the students. Are we "mixers" or are we "straights?" Are we "subluxation-based," "faith-based" or "science-based?" Are we "principled" chiropractors or are we "chiropractic physicians?" The debate echoes within basic, clinical science and chiropractic technique courses.

While students are getting good educations, they also are faltering over where their "good educations" are leading them. They need not worry. There is a bevy of practice management peddlers awaiting the descent of newly minted graduates from the stage of commencement ceremonies. They cry that 50 percent of their classmates will never succeed in practice, that their educational institution has taught them nothing about how to "get rich in practice," and that all the young and inexperienced have to do is sign on the dotted line for 20 percent of their annual income, for life, to learn everything their school failed to teach. I have always been amazed how some chiropractors manage to make more money telling other chiropractors how to get rich treating patients than they ever made taking care of their own patients.

The following are some specific examples of moments of truth; learning moments I experienced as the president of LACC/SCU.

1. I hadn't been in the office of the president for more than a month when my predecessor paid me a visit. In my naiveté, I queried, "There are so many problems to deal with. What

did you do for the 10 years you were president? Didn't you fix anything?" He offered me a calm smile and changed the subject of the conversation. I suspect my successor may speculate a similar question.

*Lesson learned:* There will always be problems requiring presidential attention. They may not always be the same problems, but there will be problems.

2. Early in my years of service, while implementing the ADVANTAGE program at LACC, we were experimenting with a variety of teaching styles. One professor in particular was celebrating his birthday, and I presented him with a personal copy from my own library on ways to improve one's teaching skills. I never mentioned the student concerns related to his style in our discussion. The following week, I was berated in a faculty senate meeting for attempting to infringe upon the academic freedom of this particular faculty member.

*Lesson learned:* The faculty and the president will have differing perspectives on what constitutes "academic freedom" as well as "quality teaching."

3. A former chair of our board said, "There are three things expected of a university: one, more sex for the undergraduates; two, more parking for the faculty; and three, a winning football team for the alumni." I was only successful in providing the parking for the faculty, but in spite of this success, other faculty desires often went unfulfilled. The adage attributed to Clark Kerr, the first chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, persisted with some: "Faculty morale is always at an all-time low."

*Lesson learned:* The needs of the faculty, and the entire campus, will likely not be satiated during the tenure of any president.

4. In light of the inadequacies of resources to meet everyone's needs, the president often feels like a ball in a "ping-pong" machine, constantly being bounced from one constituent to the next, each pinging for more resources. It is a constant juggling act between the needs of the faculty, students, staff, facilities, technology, alumni, endowments, community service and the professions we serve.

*Lesson learned:* While the president must be diplomatic in dealing with all constituents, he must also carry the burden of limited resource allocation to excessive unmet needs.

5. I close with my perspective on "privacy." Presidents and their families live in glass houses. Since the president is usually one of the five top salaried employees, IRS 990 forms provide complete compensation details for public consumption. Most presidents receive some sort of housing allowance, resulting in the perception, in the minds of some, that the "president's home" is school property.

Many on campus make a daily ritual of observing whether the president's car is in the president's special parking place. If not, it is automatically assumed that he is probably off on some exotic trip - attending to school business, of course. Regardless of whether the president is on campus or off campus, his whereabouts are a topic for campus discussion. Family and personal life make for good campus gossip. Moreover, to many, the president is overpaid.

*Lesson learned:* The president and family must live above reproach, be resilient to public comment and dissent, be available 24/7, and be in more than one place at the same time.

As I reflect upon the past 16 years, many events come to mind. One particular high point was the day we received notification of being accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges after 12 years of effort. We became the first and only chiropractic educational institution to ever achieve such high acclaim and remain so distinguished, even today.

Losing a student to premature death is always a low point for any president. I recall traveling in Japan and listening to CNN news when they mentioned a chiropractic student who fell to his death while bungee jumping from a hot air balloon. I knew from his name that he was an LACC student.

One very special event was the passing of an alumnus who left us in excess of 2 million dollars in his estate. What made this special was learning of his girlfriend of 54 years, who was ailing in a local nursing home. Caring for her in his absence resulted in an additional \$2 million gifted to the school. You would have considered her a pauper and would have stepped around her had you met her on the street. Her miserly ways had netted her years of savings, but with her boyfriend preceding her in death, she had no one to share her wealth with, and thus we became the beneficiary of her generosity. It is rewarding when someone cares enough about you and your school to leave all that they have to your benefit.

The life of a president is very demanding, but it also can be very rewarding. Certainly there is no boredom in the office of the president. Daily routine is minimal and major challenges are common. While the power of the president's office is often shared with all campus constituents to varying degrees, the president does have the power to set the tone and the direction of the campus. The impact of a president on an institution cannot be fully measured until after - perhaps some time after - the president has relinquished the reins and another stands in their stead.

I thank all who have entered my life during the past 16 years and who have contributed to the experience I have gained and the lessons I have learned while serving as president of LACC/SCU.

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