

# HIRING EXCEPTIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

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**TOOLS FOR HIRING LEADERS WHO ADVANCE  
STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS**

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

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#### **THE ASPEN INSTITUTE'S COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM**

The Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes in four areas:

- **COMPLETION.** Do students earn degrees and other meaningful credentials while in college?
  - **EQUITY.** Do colleges work to ensure equitable outcomes for minority and low-income students, and others often underserved?
  - **LABOR MARKET.** Do graduates get well-paying jobs?
  - **LEARNING.** Do colleges and their faculty set expectations for what students should learn, measure whether they are doing so, and use that information to improve?
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## INTRODUCTION:

# AN ERA OF CHANGE DEMANDING IMPROVED LEADERSHIP

The community college sector is facing a dramatic turnover in leadership that, with the right response, presents a tremendous opportunity. The American Association of Community Colleges reports that, in each of several recent years, hundreds of community college presidencies became vacant, and that *nearly 50% of all current presidents are likely to retire over the next five years.*

While many strong presidents have emerged to guide community colleges over the past few decades, the challenges now facing the sector require a new commitment to improve leadership. A recent report released by the Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream, *Crisis and Opportunity*, documents the array of skills and attributes that presidents will need in the coming years to lead institutions to high and improving levels of student success.<sup>1</sup> At a time of great change marked by increasing accountability for student success, diminishing government contributions to higher education, and changing student demographics, community colleges will increasingly be expected to deliver more credentials of greater value to a more diverse population at a lower per-pupil cost.

To lead community colleges that can meet these growing expectations, presidents will undoubtedly need to be strong fundraisers, effective communicators, and successful administrators. But doing so will also require that presidents have an unshakable commitment to student access and success and know how to boldly translate that commitment into positive results by improving institutional cultures, strategies, and actions.

## ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This guide contains an integrated set of hiring tools designed to help boards of trustees, search committees, search consultants, and others with a role in selecting community college presidents identify and hire community college presidents with the full range of qualities and abilities needed to lead their institutions to high and improving levels of student success.

**Who should use these tools.** For simplicity, this guide refers to “boards of trustees” as responsible for hiring presidents, but the tools contained in this guide are meant also for everyone engaged in hiring presidents.<sup>2</sup> Every hiring authority can find something in these tools capable of strengthening their presidential search process. Some elements of this toolkit, however, are designed for colleges that have taken time to explore gaps and set institutional goals related to student access and success. For example, the first tool—“Set Strategic Priorities and Hiring Criteria”—assumes that an institution has defined student-related goals prior to the time a presidential search begins. Boards that have not previously engaged in the goal-setting process may need to modify the first tool in this guide to make it useful.

**Modifying these tools.** These tools are designed so they can be altered to accommodate the different contexts within which institutions operate. For example, if labor contracts and rules play a central role in operations, the sections on “planning lasting change” and “financial and operational ability” might be changed to include more questions designed to assess a candidate’s ability to lead in such a context. Or, if an institution faces severe financial challenges or a threat to accreditation, much greater emphasis may need to be placed on the operational portions of the candidate criteria and scoring sheets provided in this toolkit. Finally, we note that questions and other elements in the tools will need to be modified to apply to candidates with backgrounds outside of academia.

**Making time to use these tools.** Using the hiring tools in this guide may necessitate board members spending more of their time than they typically allocate to the presidential search process. Simply put: It is worth it. There is no more important job for a board than hiring the individual who will lead the community college in the years to come.

1 The *Crisis & Opportunity* report is available online at <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/ccprize/Final%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>

2 For more information about the varying governance systems for community colleges, see ACCT’s report *2012 Public Community College Governing Boards: Structure and Composition*. This report is available for purchase at <http://www.acct.org/acct-bookstore>.

# WHAT ARE THE QUALITIES OF PRESIDENTS WHO ENSURE EXCEPTIONAL LEVELS OF STUDENT SUCCESS?

The *Crisis and Opportunity* report sets forth characteristics that have enabled exceptional community college presidents to lead their institutions to high and improving levels of student success.<sup>3</sup> Combining these characteristics with several traditional functions of presidents, this guide is organized around ten essential presidential qualities that every board should consider in the hiring process.

## QUALITIES:

# 1

### **Committed to Student Access and Success**

A persistent drive to ensure student access and success, manifested in long-term work to create lasting change on community college campuses and with external partners.

# 2

### **Takes Strategic Risks**

The willingness to take data-informed risks—such as admitting gaps in student success and visibly reallocating resources—that signal a deep commitment to student-oriented change.

# 6

### **Results-Oriented**

Ensures effective implementation, routine assessment of progress, and continuous data-informed improvement.

# 7

### **Communicates Effectively**

Communicates and listens in ways that foster strong relationships, develop shared priorities, and inspire trust and action.



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**Builds Strong Teams**

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The capacity to develop and maintain outstanding leadership teams and to consistently engage leaders, faculty, and staff in ways that significantly improve student access and success institution-wide.

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**Establishes Urgency for Improvement**

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Understanding how to make the case for change so that the entire college is motivated to accelerate the pace of improving student outcomes.

**5**

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**Plans Lasting Internal Change**

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Ability to strategically lead inclusive planning processes that result in focused, concrete, college-wide plans to significantly improve student access and success.

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**Financial and Operational Ability**

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Ensures the fiscal strength and sound operation of the community college.

**9**

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**Entrepreneurial Fundraiser**

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Raises substantial resources from multiple sources, and aligns fundraising to student access and success goals.

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**Develops Effective External Partnerships**

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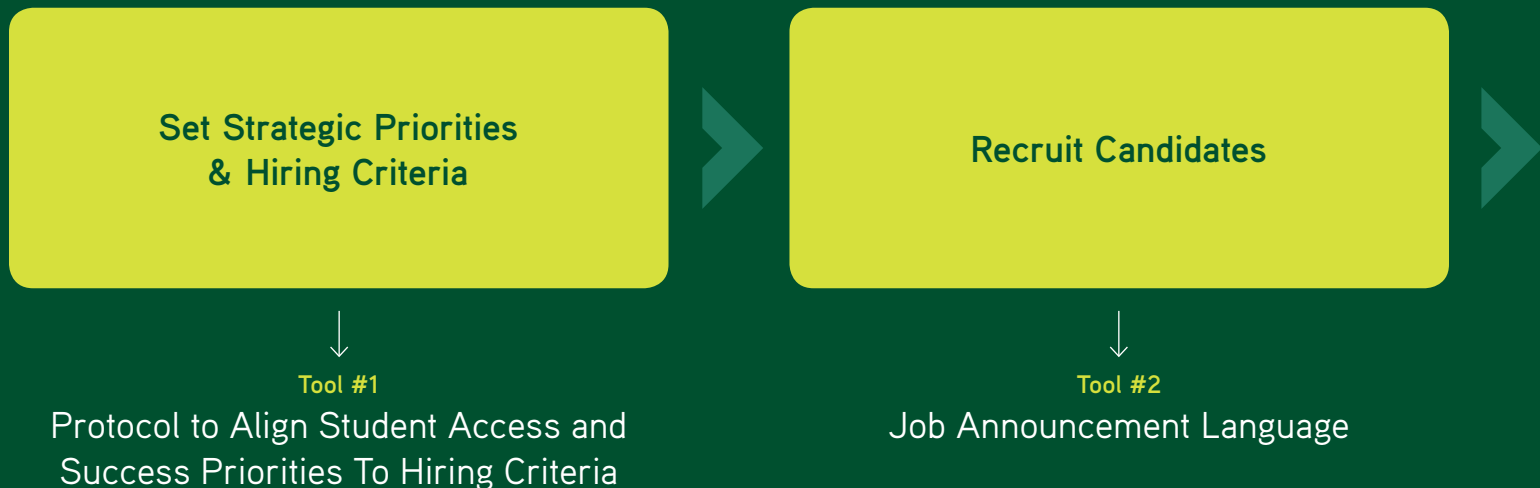
Possesses a vision that extends beyond the college to achieve broader aims for student success that the college alone cannot achieve, such as improving college readiness and post-graduation success.

## THE ASPEN COLLEGE EXCELLENCE HIRING TOOLS:

# A PROCESS FOR IDENTIFYING AND HIRING EXCEPTIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

The following seven hiring tools can help boards identify and hire presidents who can lead an institution to dramatically improved student outcomes. The tools are meant to support the four stages of the hiring process:

### Presidential Hiring Process





Assess Candidates

Confirm the Choice

↓  
Tool #3

Scenario-Based Writing Exercise

↓  
Tool #4

Questions for In-Person Interviews

↓  
Tool #5

Rubric for Evaluating Candidates

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Tool #6

Scoring Sheets to Aggregate  
Assessments of Candidates

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Tool #7

Protocol for Reference Checks

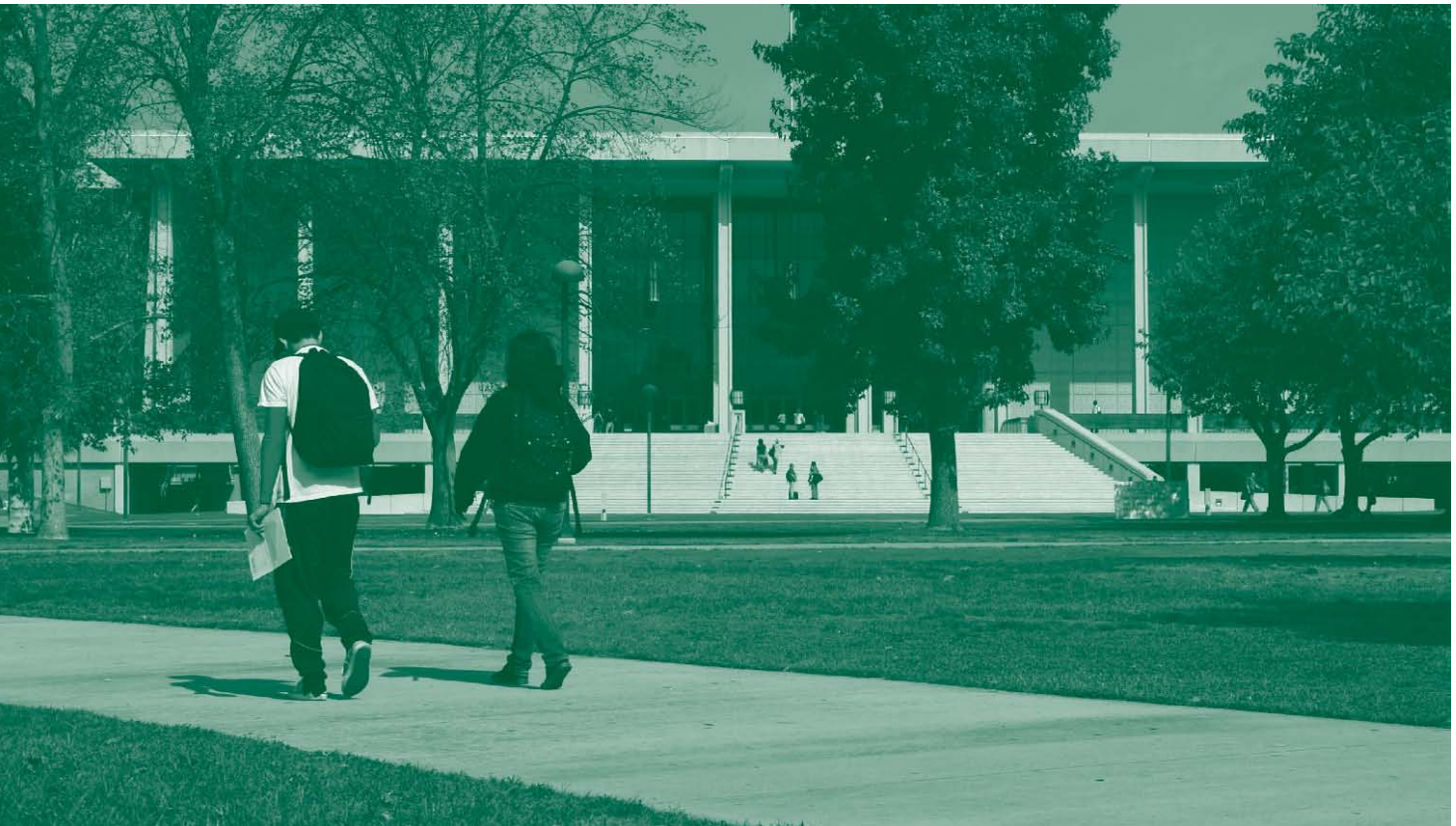


## TOOL #1

# PROTOCOL TO ALIGN STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS PRIORITIES TO HIRING CRITERIA

Prior to starting a presidential search, a board needs to agree upon specific goals for the community college so the search can be focused on candidates with the qualities needed to achieve those goals. In many cases, boards will have set such priorities through strategic planning and other processes well before the search process begins. Regardless, we recommend that the entire board (and the selection committee) set aside time to meet, discuss, and review student access and success outcomes, affirm goals for the institution, and then define expectations for the new president accordingly.

To be clear, we do not recommend that boards use the process described in this tool as a substitute for strategic planning; it is intended only to relate previously agreed-upon student access and success goals to the specific qualities sought in the new president. Often, an external consultant can be helpful in facilitating such conversations and presenting appropriate data.





# CRITICAL TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

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## 1. WHAT ARE THE COLLEGE'S STRATEGIC GOALS RELATED TO STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS?

- Regardless of how much work the college has done to define such goals prior to the moment of presidential turnover, it is important that the board set aside time to review its student access and success goals to ensure that all parties engaged in the search process share core expectations that guide their consideration of the question: "How do we find a president who will help us achieve our strategic goals, especially as they relate to student access and success?"
- What are our student access and success goals over the short term? Over the next five to 10 years?

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## 2. HOW WELL IS THE COLLEGE ACHIEVING STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS?<sup>4</sup>

- What are the college's current rates of student access and success?
- What are the past trends in these indicators—are they going up, down, or staying the same?
- How do the rates for your college compare to those among peer institutions? How do recent trends in those rates compare?

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## 3. WHAT KINDS OF CHANGES WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE INSTITUTION WILL THE NEW PRESIDENT NEED TO ACCOMPLISH TO ACHIEVE THE STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS GOALS?

- What is currently preventing the institution from achieving its student access and success goals?
- Which three institutional attributes do we most want the new president to preserve? Which three do we most want to change?

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## 4. WHAT ARE THE FIVE-TO-TEN MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES WE MUST IDENTIFY IN OUR NEXT PRESIDENT TO ACHIEVE OUR STUDENT SUCCESS GOALS?

- You may wish to start by considering the ten qualities of exceptional community college presidents outlined above. How would you tailor this list to the student success goals for your college?
- What qualities must the ideal candidate exhibit to overcome challenges and build the internal culture and external partnerships needed to attain student access and success goals?
- What qualities must the new president have to form and strengthen relationships with internal actors, including faculty and staff? With external actors, from legislators to corporate executives to community members?

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## 5. WHERE ARE WE MOST LIKELY TO FIND A LEADER WHO WILL DEMONSTRATE THESE QUALITIES?

- From among those currently serving in leadership within the institution? From another higher education institution?
- If from within higher education, will they be found in traditional presidential-pipeline positions (e.g., provosts and academic vice presidents) or less-traditional feeders (e.g., student services, enrollment, finance)?
- If from outside higher education, how seriously are we willing to consider these candidates? If so, from where?

**Responses to the above questions should be summarized as succinctly as possible immediately after the meeting so they can be shared with everyone involved in the search process and reflected in presidential selection criteria, along with a prospectus, that convey the board's vision. The criteria and prospectus are important ways to communicate priorities to all stakeholders in the process, including faculty, staff and, perhaps most importantly, candidates themselves.**

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<sup>4</sup> Often, college leaders can be relied on to gather such data from a college or system institutional research office. If not, consider whether the college has engaged with organizations like Achieving the Dream, the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, or ACCT's Governance Institute for Student Success, from which student success reports can be gathered. In addition, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program can provide nationally comparable, publicly available data on student outcomes for community colleges (email [AspenCCPrize@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:AspenCCPrize@aspeninstitute.org)). In 2014, Aspen published a guide for using Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence metrics to improve student success on any campus. You may download the Aspen metrics guide via our website [www.aspeninstitute.org/cep](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/cep).

## TOOL #2

# JOB ANNOUNCEMENT LANGUAGE

Job announcements and descriptions are central vehicles for a board to communicate broadly to potential candidates what it values and is looking for in its next president. The challenge is to craft job language that conveys to candidates and networks the board's interest in hiring a president with particular change-oriented qualities. To assist boards (and those with whom they work) in this process, below is specific language that trustees can incorporate in their job announcements and descriptions—and should feel free to use verbatim or otherwise. In addition to language about each of the ten key student success qualities, we include sample first lines of the job announcement that can be used to signal to candidates right away the board's commitment to student access and success.

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### SAMPLE FIRST LINES OF JOB ANNOUNCEMENT

- The college President is responsible for improving the quality of life and the economic well-being of citizens and communities in the college's service area by providing access to a quality learning environment and fostering high levels of access and success for all students.
- The President leads the institution in advancing students toward attainment of their educational and career-readiness goals by effectively marshaling its instructional and support resources to improve student outcomes.

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### LANGUAGE RELATED TO "COMMITTED TO STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS"

- The President will have a deep commitment to student access and success, for students enrolled in the college, for those who have not yet arrived, and for those who have graduated and/or transferred to a four-year college or university.
- The President must effectively and sensitively connect the institutional strategy of achieving high levels of student access and success with the operations of administrative and academic units.

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### LANGUAGE RELATED TO "TAKES STRATEGIC RISKS"

- The President will be willing to take significant data-informed risks to inspire changes in how everyone at the college thinks and acts to improve student outcomes.
- The President will be committed to identifying gaps in student outcomes on the basis of factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender, and then mobilize the college to improve results.

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### LANGUAGE RELATED TO "BUILDS STRONG TEAMS"

- The President will build an effective and cohesive leadership team with a common commitment to and focus on student access and success.
- The President and his/her senior team will foster among faculty and staff a culture of innovation and effective implementation driving toward common goals of improving student access and success.

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### LANGUAGE RELATED TO "ESTABLISHES URGENCY FOR IMPROVEMENT"

- The President will work to establish and maintain among leaders, faculty, and staff a healthy sense of urgency to improve student access and success.

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### LANGUAGE RELATED TO "PLANS LASTING INTERNAL CHANGE"

- The President will have strong strategic ability to plan for change in ways that ensure broad buy-in and action that, in turn, significantly improve student access and success.
- The President will work to ensure that the culture of the college is built around continuous improvement in learning and the completion of valuable credentials for all students.

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### LANGUAGE RELATED TO "RESULTS-ORIENTED"

- The President will bring a results-oriented approach to the institution, leading the entire college to agreed-upon student outcomes and aligning plans and implementation efforts to measurable goals.



- The President will develop a culture of inquiry and evidence to support a results-oriented approach across the institution.

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**LANGUAGE RELATED TO  
“COMMUNICATES EFFECTIVELY”**

- The President will effectively engage with the college’s internal and external stakeholders, strategically communicating in ways that advance student access and success.
- The President will work to communicate with the Board in ways that ensure shared goals, an understanding of strategic objectives, and a common understanding of the college’s progress toward achieving student access and success objectives.

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**LANGUAGE RELATED TO  
“FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL ABILITY”**

- The President will lead the institution to achieve significantly improved results in student outcomes by implementing well-designed institutional changes at scale, and ensuring they are sustained over the long term.
- The President will work institution-wide to align expenditures with strategies for student access and success.
- The President will ensure the community college’s fiscal stability, securing sufficient resources to fund operations and providing adequate controls to prevent fiscal mismanagement.

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**LANGUAGE RELATED TO  
“ENTREPRENEURIAL FUNDRAISER”**

- The President will be an entrepreneurial and highly effective fundraiser, with a particular capacity to raise revenue and develop resources that support strategies for improving student access and success.

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**LANGUAGE RELATED TO  
“DEVELOPS EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS”**

- The President will have a vision for student success that the college alone cannot fulfill, and will actively engage with entities outside the college to develop partnerships to access resources, reach underserved populations, and achieve student outcomes in new ways.
- The President will use the institution’s influence and resources to pave the way for ongoing student access and success by forging partnerships with outside entities, including K-12 school districts, four-year colleges, community-based organizations, and employers. These partnerships will focus on helping large numbers of students, including those from historically underserved populations, make successful transitions into and out of the community college to achieve prosperity through employment or continued education.

## TOOL #3

# SCENARIO-BASED WRITING EXERCISE

In order to elicit responses from candidates regarding real-world problems, we recommend a scenario- or case-based writing assignment during the interview process. This approach presents to candidates an example of a problem, and asks the candidates to then apply his/her experiences, attitudes, and aptitudes to solving it.

From the reviewer's perspective, think about how you rate the quality of the response in terms of comprehensiveness, feasibility, and relevancy to the scenario posited. It is critical to frame scenario-based questions in terms that will draw responses directly related to fostering student access and success.

**Following are examples of scenarios designed to elicit consideration of student outcomes. These are only examples, and we encourage the development of alternative scenarios that reflect realities at your institution.**

### SCENARIO 1:

You are starting as president of a college that has (1) completion rates below both the national average and the rates of similar community colleges and (2) sizable completion gaps by race, ethnicity, and income level. Recently, your state legislature has stepped up pressure for public colleges to produce more graduates. It is becoming increasingly likely that the college will lose funding in future years if it cannot significantly improve completion rates—which will put critical college operations at risk. How would you lead the college in addressing this critical challenge? What steps would you take, and whom would you involve? How do you ensure that efforts to increase attainment do not result in decreased access for and success among the student populations who traditionally have performed at the lowest levels?

### SCENARIO 2:

You discover soon after assuming your presidency that surveys of the college's recent graduates and data from the state about post-graduation earning and employment rates reveal that (1) 20% of graduates are unemployed and (2) graduates' average salaries are significantly lower than salaries of others with associate's degrees in the college's service area. How would you as president respond? With whom would you share the data and how? What steps would you consider to improve these outcomes? How quickly can things be turned around so outcomes for graduates improve?

### SCENARIO 3:

Documents at the community college where you have recently become president show that, consistently, three-quarters of incoming students name attaining a bachelor's degree as their goal, and most are enrolled in liberal arts associate's programs. Yet the college's combined three-year graduation rate for associate's degrees plus four-year transfer rates has remained at 36% for many years. And, based on reports from a few four-year partners, it appears that most of the college's transfers never actually finish their bachelor's degrees. The board agrees that this needs to change, and sets as a target 50% of entering students attaining an associate's degree and transferring to a four-year institution within four years of entering the community college. And, the board would also like to improve bachelor's degree attainment rates. As president, how do you go about making these improvements happen? How would you do so in a way that ensures full participation and strong levels of completion among historically underserved populations?

**We recommend asking the candidates to respond to scenario-based questions in writing, at three to four pages per scenario, within a week of receiving the assignment. It is also important that instructions be provided to the candidates that reflect the criteria against which their written submissions will be evaluated, which should be drawn from the rubric. Finally, we recommend that reviewers include each candidate's submissions as they complete the rubric scoring sheet (see Tool #6).**

## TOOL #4

# QUESTIONS FOR IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

Our *Crisis and Opportunity* research reveals that boards sometimes gravitate toward candidates with charismatic personalities, seeking someone who can develop good relationships with the many stakeholders with whom presidents must work and communicate. In the process, we found that boards often neglect or overlook two critical qualities found in presidents who have led their institutions to high and improving levels of student success: risk-taking and change management.

To assist boards in finding candidates with these two qualities, as well as the others identified in our research, we offer the following sample interview questions. Please note that these questions are aligned to the rubric in tool #5. In combination with the rubric, trustees can use these questions to help discover a candidate's true commitment to—and capacity for—acting in ways that lead to improved student outcomes.

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### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “COMMITTED TO STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS”

- Why do you want to lead this college?
- What, in your view, are the three most important responsibilities of the president?
- How should a college president view student access and success relative to other priorities?
- What troubles you most about current student outcomes at our college? At the college where you currently work (or one at which you have recently worked)?
- Please provide a specific example of something you have done that had a significant positive impact on student outcomes at a community college or higher education institution.
- Please provide a specific example of when you have overcome a significant obstacle to advancing student access and/or success. What was the obstacle? How did you assess the situation and decide what to do? What happened? In hindsight, would you have done anything differently?

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### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “TAKES STRATEGIC RISKS”

- Please discuss the need for a college president to take data-informed risks. In your mind, what are the most likely scenarios in which a college president might need to take risks to advance an important goal?
- How would you characterize your attitude toward risk-taking as a leader?
- What 2-3 specific examples from your past would you cite where you took a risk to advance student outcomes? Please discuss the situation, the reasons for your actions, and the results for student success. Looking back, would you have done anything differently?
- Can you think of a time when you took a significant risk to improve student access and/or success that did not succeed? What happened? What (if anything) would you have done differently?

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### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “BUILDS STRONG TEAMS”**

- Please discuss your philosophy about building a senior team.
- Please discuss how you think about systematically bringing about change in a college culture to improve student access and success. How does your experience inform your understanding of how change processes work at community colleges?
- Please discuss the role of faculty and staff in achieving institution-wide student access and success goals. How have you worked with faculty to improve student access and success? Did you encounter challenges and, if so, what were they and how did you address them? How have you worked with staff to improve student access and success? Did you encounter challenges and, if so, what were they and how did you address them?
- Please describe how you have worked to engage in institutional reform efforts with members of a faculty council, faculty senate, or union executive committee, as applicable.
- Please provide specific examples of what you have done to simultaneously build strong, trusting leadership teams and maintain accountability. Can you think of a time when these goals conflicted? How did you handle the situation? Looking back, what (if anything) would you have done differently?

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### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “ESTABLISHES URGENCY FOR IMPROVEMENT”**

- Please discuss 2-3 specific examples of how you have built urgency among disparate campus constituencies to rally them around a strategic change initiative.
- What is a president’s role in acknowledging institutional shortcomings to pave the way for progress? What are specific examples of when you’ve done this effectively in the past?
- How have you used data to build urgency for change?

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### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “PLANS LASTING INTERNAL CHANGE”**

- Please discuss how you typically engage in planning major campus change initiatives, including whom you include, how you involve them, how you communicate, and how much time it takes.
- What are the hardest things to change on a college campus that, in your view, need to be changed to improve student access and success?
- What are the most important components of a plan to confront those challenges?
- What role should the president play in setting goals for, and leading improvements in, student learning? How can you know if those objectives have been reached?
- Please name one or two of the most important things you do during planning processes to ensure that plans actually lead to the achievement of desired results.

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### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “RESULTS-ORIENTED”**

- Discuss large-scale change initiatives you have led. How did you know if they were effective? What evaluation processes did you put in place?
- What kinds of student access and success results do you think you would be able to achieve within five years at this institution?
- Please describe a situation in which data revealed failure of a major initiative in which you were involved. How did you know? What did you do in response?
- Can you think of a time when your institution (or department or division) defunded significant programs or initiatives? How were these decisions made? What did you do to build support for the decisions? How were they communicated to faculty and staff?





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#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “COMMUNICATES EFFECTIVELY”

- Provide a specific example of when you had to win over someone who was unresponsive to your message. What did you do to achieve your desired outcome?
- Describe a situation where you were able to influence lawmakers or other public policy figures on an important issue. What approaches or strategies did you use?
- Describe a situation when you did not communicate appropriately and the consequences that ensued. What lessons did you draw from the experience that will serve you in this role?

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#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL ABILITY”

- Please describe 2-3 complex implementation challenges that you have led.
- What dimensions of implementation pose the greatest challenge for a community college? Can you provide an example? How did you handle that challenge?
- Please describe the greatest threat to fiscal stability facing an organization or unit you have led. How did you respond to the threat? What was the result?



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#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “ENTREPRENEURIAL FUNDRAISER”

- Please discuss your fundraising capabilities and 2-3 biggest accomplishments, providing specific examples of gifts raised or revenues increased and for what purpose(s).
- What student access and success priorities guide your fundraising and other revenue-raising activities? How do those priorities influence your revenue-raising activities, in practice?
- In the past, how have you gone about raising significant funds to drive major improvements in key student access and success indicators? What were the results? How many students were helped?

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#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO “DEVELOPS EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS”

- Are there areas in which our community college cannot, acting alone, achieve significant student access and success outcomes? If so, what areas are those? Why?
- To what extent should our college hold itself accountable for the outcomes of students before or after they are enrolled, such as college readiness in K-12, baccalaureate attainment, and labor market outcomes?
- Please provide 1-2 specific examples of your experience building effective partnerships with third-party organizations, especially with K-12 schools or school districts, other colleges, community-based organizations, and/or employers. How did the partnerships yield measurable results for students? How did they grow over time? What did you do to sustain them?
- What is your vision for our college in terms of partnering with outside entities? What would you hope to accomplish via these kinds of third-party partnerships?

## TOOL #5

# RUBRIC FOR EVALUATING CANDIDATES

The candidate evaluation rubric has been developed to provide a way for reviewers to rate candidates' abilities in each of the ten essential presidential qualities. We have designed the other tools—including questions for candidates and the writing exercise—to provide hiring authorities all of the information they will need to use this rubric to assess candidates. We recommend that each person with responsibility for hiring the president use the rubric to complete a scoring sheet (see Tool #6) on each candidate, considering answers to interview questions, the writing exercise, and other aspects of the evaluation process.



# COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES: RUBRIC FOR ASSESSING QUALITIES NEEDED TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS

## COMMITTED TO STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS

- What specifically has the candidate done to demonstrate dedication to improving student access and success?
- What most motivates this candidate to want to lead the community college?
- How important are student access and success as compared to other motivators, such as salary and status, which come with the position?

*Consider the emphasis the candidate places on different accomplishments, as well as the degree of specificity he/she uses to describe student access and success challenges and accomplishments.*

## TAKES STRATEGIC RISKS

- How willing is the candidate to take significant risks (especially relative to the prevailing culture) to improve student outcomes?
- Does the candidate present as risk-averse, risk-tolerant, or risk-taking?
- When the candidate has taken risks, what steps did he/she take to assure that the risk would yield the desired outcomes?
- Is this a resilient person who learns from past mistakes to improve?

## BUILDS STRONG TEAMS

- Has the candidate built a team of leaders that shares his/her philosophies and extends his/her reach across the institution and community?
- Does the candidate have a history of collaboratively working with faculty and staff (including the faculty senate and union leadership) to improve student learning and completion?
- How has the candidate collaborated—and, beyond that, created a culture of collaboration—to ensure broad agreement about reforms?
- To what extent does the candidate take most of the credit, versus sharing credit, for success? Who gets the blame when something goes wrong?

## ESTABLISHES URGENCY FOR IMPROVEMENT

- What in the candidate's experience suggests an understanding of the need to create urgency for executing strategic plans and the capacity to build a shared sense of purpose across the college or the community?
- Does the candidate embrace the need to disrupt the status quo by acknowledging serious shortcomings in student access and success, without laying blame?
- Does the candidate have a history that suggests a willingness to consistently rally people around a major goal for improvement?

## PLANS LASTING INTERNAL CHANGE

- Does the candidate have the ability to develop a successful strategy for change likely to result in college-wide improvements in student access and success?
- What plans has the candidate helped lead or develop that have resulted in scaled, sustainable improvements in student outcomes?
- What does the candidate perceive are the key steps to effecting culture change within a complex organization? What has the candidate learned about how to lead large-scale change initiatives?

*Look for evidence that the candidate understands the dual need for focused, clear, actionable plans and broad buy-in for change. Primary contexts within which candidates might pursue such goals are strategic planning and reaccreditation efforts.*



Unaligned (Score 1 of 4)	Minimally Aligned (Score 2 of 4)	Mostly Aligned (Score 3 of 4)	Completely Aligned (Score 4 of 4)
Improving student access and success is not a top priority for the candidate.	Improving student access and success is among the candidate's top stated goals, but the candidate's record of achievement suggests other, more important priorities.	Improving student access and success is among the candidate's top three goals, and the candidate has demonstrated as much success in achieving that goal as others.	The candidate is passionate about and committed to student access and success above all else, and has a record of consistently taking specific actions that reflect a student access and success orientation.
Candidate is risk-averse, almost always choosing not to "rock the boat".	Candidate understands the need for prudent risk-taking, and can offer a few examples of having done so to benefit relatively few students.	Candidate not only understands the need to take risks, but can point to significant examples of doing so to advance the access and/or success of significant numbers of students.	Candidate has taken strategic risks in multiple cases that ran counter to common practice, were strategically designed to accomplish goals, and were successful in improving student access and success at broad scale.
Candidate has little strategic vision for building a senior staff or engaging faculty and staff as partners in achieving student access and success goals.	Candidate demonstrates open-mindedness toward other leaders, faculty, and staff, but has a record of generally working with "true believers," rather than helping to shape and collaborate with leadership, faculty and staff broadly.	Candidate has the ability to understand the concerns of other leaders, faculty, and staff and work with them to create and execute plans in ways that improve student access and success.	Candidate has exceptional ability to build a senior team and to work with faculty and staff to create an institution-wide culture of involvement and collaboration that, in turn, regularly results in significant improvements in student access and success.
Candidate has very limited or no understanding of the need to build and sustain urgency in order to lead institution-wide or community-wide reform.	Candidate understands the need to build urgency, and can demonstrate limited accomplishments in doing so within an institution or across a community to facilitate modest change.	Candidate understands the need for urgency, and has effectively done so on more than one occasion to inspire and achieve significant change at the institution and/or community level.	Candidate understands the need to build and maintain urgency and has consistently demonstrated the ability to lead efforts that quickly led to significant improvements in student access and success.
There is very limited or no evidence that the candidate's efforts to lead strategic planning resulted in significant improvements in student access and success.	Candidate has engaged in strategic planning aimed at improving student access and success, but can provide few concrete examples of those plans resulting in improved student outcomes.	Candidate has engaged in strategic planning that has, at times, resulted in significant improvements in student access and/or success.	Candidate has a history of strategic planning that has in multiple instances resulted in large-scale reform leading to significant improvements in student access and success.

## RESULTS-ORIENTED

- Does the candidate have a history of ensuring that solid evidence/data on student outcomes as well as program and institutional effectiveness are collected and acted upon?
- What measures would the candidate use to evaluate student access and success?
- Look for specific examples of how he/she has evaluated the success of major initiatives and has used information to inform changes in course, especially when evaluations suggested ineffective, unsustainable, or non-scalable programs.

## COMMUNICATES EFFECTIVELY

- Can the candidate boil down complex issues to convey their importance to stakeholder groups with divergent perspectives and interests?
- Can the candidate provide significant examples of having successfully communicated the importance of a change agenda to secure support from diverse stakeholder groups?
- Does the candidate's communication ability include a willingness and ability to listen?

## FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL ABILITY

- What are the candidate's strengths and weaknesses in ensuring the fiscal stability of an institution? In leading organizations (or units) that effectively implemented programs and processes?
- Consider whether the candidate has faced complex implementation challenges and can articulate steps he/she took that led to success—and which ones led to failure—in the face of such challenges.
- What has the candidate's record been for ensuring the sufficiency of resources for operations?

## ENTREPRENEURIAL FUNDRAISER

- Does the candidate have a strong track record/capacity to secure public funds for his/her institution?
- Does the candidate reveal a strong entrepreneurial capacity to raise or generate funds and other resources from private entities (e.g., corporations, foundations, and individuals)?
- Does the candidate align their fundraising and resource development with student access and success goals?

*Look for concrete examples of specific and successful fundraising efforts. Also look for those that resulted in improved access and success for large numbers of students.*

## DEVELOPS EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

- Does the candidate define student success in reference to goals like success in employment or transfer/attaining a bachelor's degree, or solely according to what happens while students are on campus?
- What specific experience does the candidate have in building successful initiatives with organizations essential to students' fulfilling their goals (i.e., K-12 schools, employers, community-based organizations, four-year colleges)?
- Does the candidate have a vision for building partnerships with outside entities likely to result in scaled and sustainable opportunity for many more students to succeed? What is that vision, and how has he/she taken steps to make that vision a reality?

*Determine the candidate's capacity to build new partnership structures that engage the community college in ways designed to improve access and success for large numbers of students.*



Unaligned (Score 1 of 4)	Minimally Aligned (Score 2 of 4)	Mostly Aligned (Score 3 of 4)	Completely Aligned (Score 4 of 4)
Candidate demonstrates little facility with using data and evidence and little interest in rigorous assessment of program/institutional effectiveness.	Candidate demonstrates some facility with using data and evidence, has some history using data to assess program or institutional effectiveness, and has used assessments to inform modest change.	Candidate is drawn to using evidence and has on multiple occasions intentionally changed large-scale efforts as a result of strong evaluation practices.	Candidate has a mature and advanced understanding of evidence and evaluation and knows how to use data and evidence to drive continuous improvement in major initiatives.
Candidate did not demonstrate effective strategic communication abilities.	Candidate demonstrates reasonably strong communication skills but cannot provide many good examples of strategically communicating to achieve goals.	Candidate has strong communication and listening skills and can demonstrate some evidence of using those skills to advance strategic interests.	Candidate is a very strong communicator and can demonstrate consistent ability to communicate effectively with multiple stakeholder groups to advance strategic interests.
Candidate is not able to articulate examples of having led successful implementation of change efforts.	Candidate can point to limited success in implementation of change efforts, but cannot effectively identify why or how they worked.	Candidate is committed to, can intentionally guide, and has examples of successful large-scale change implementation efforts.	Candidate has an advanced capability to implement change initiatives, and provides multiple examples of having done so.
Candidate is not able to provide examples of successful fundraising efforts.	Candidate is a reasonably good fundraiser but rarely (if ever) raises funds with student access and success in mind.	Candidate is a good fundraiser and at times targets fundraising at student access and success goals to impact large numbers of students.	Candidate is an entrepreneurial fundraiser and has used that ability to make large, demonstrable impacts on investments in student access and success.
Candidate's vision is campus-centric, such that he/she does not believe the college is responsible for student readiness or for outcomes after graduation and lacks a vision that includes working with external stakeholders on student access and success.	Candidate is willing to engage in partnerships with outside entities to improve student success, but expectations of and investments in those partnerships have been limited.	Candidate has a vision and some concrete experiences that reveal a capacity to build new structures and partnerships to improve student success.	Candidate possesses the vision and track record needed to create and sustain new structures and partnerships with multiple entities that enable dramatically higher numbers of students to achieve their educational goals.

## TOOL #6

# SCORING SHEETS TO AGGREGATE REVIEWER ASSESSMENTS OF CANDIDATES

We include two aggregate scoring sheets: The first, for a single reviewer of a candidate, summarizes his/her ratings across all ten key factors in the rubric. This scoring sheet can be filled out by each reviewer based on all documents he/she has reviewed and each process in which he/she has engaged, including the writing exercise, the interviews, and the reference checks. Each of the 10 criteria is equally weighted. Of course, as with every element of this toolkit, institutions and boards can customize weightings to suit their own sense of relative value. The second scoring sheet aggregates all reviewer scores for a given candidate and allows users to calculate a global average score for that candidate, enabling each candidate to be ranked against the other candidates.



**Note:** In the course of research for this guide, we became aware of another practice that trustees and others hiring presidents might wish to adopt and incorporate into final candidate evaluations: Site visits to colleges at which candidates currently work. One leader interviewed has consistently found that a site visit provides a unique window into the culture a candidate has built. This information, in turn, can serve as a real-life check on the candidate's capacity to build a healthy

culture, as well as a way to assess the degree to which there is a match between that culture and the one trustees aspire to create or maintain. However, other experts cite the potential for negative consequences that could result from conducting site visits, including drawing unwanted attention to a candidate's interest in leaving their current campus. Perhaps due to such concerns and/or the resource-intensive nature of site visits, this practice is not commonplace.





# PROTOCOL FOR REFERENCE CHECKS

Often the final stage in selecting a new president, reference checks are centrally important to picking the right leader. Before the reference check, the presidential search is heavily influenced by each candidate's communication abilities, which can cause board and search committee members to place too great an emphasis on how much they personally like a candidate rather than his/her proven track record.

A strong reference check process can serve as an important counterbalance. By gathering enough high-quality information, a reference check can enable a rigorous assessment of whether a candidate has a record that demonstrates the specific leadership attributes needed to lead significant improvements in student access and success outcomes. Among the things a board should consider during the reference-check process are the following:

## 1

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There are two broad kinds of information being gathered in the reference check process: (1) a candidate's record of clear accomplishments that involve (or relate to) student access and success, and (2) the particular skills a candidate has that are critical to achieving significant improvements in student access and success.

## 2

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Ask for and receive a written waiver from the candidate to check references both on and off the list provided. Check at least five references. Include at least two that were not listed by the candidate. Additional names can be gathered from a candidate's listed references.

## 3

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If resources allow, consider using an external expert not from the search firm to check references. This will provide a level of objectivity as a check against the board and the search firm having already drawn a conclusion.

## 4

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Remember that community college presidencies are complicated, multi-faceted jobs, and nobody is excellent at every aspect of those jobs. Seek information on how the candidate has capitalized on strengths and addressed weaknesses. If the board/search committee starts from this premise, uncovering relative weaknesses will be viewed not as finding reasons to reject candidates, but rather as a critical way to ensure that they have enough of the leadership qualities the institution needs.

## 5

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Conduct a criminal and financial reference check.

# OPENING CONVERSATION

Begin reference-check conversations with an expression of strong interest in—and admiration for—the candidate. This will help make clear that you are looking for a good fit rather than trying to discredit a candidate.

**Please note:**

For candidates with professional experiences outside the community college setting, some questions will need to be changed to reflect experiences that do not have direct impacts on “student access and success.”

## SPECIFIC SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK REFERENCES (MAPPED TO THE RUBRIC)

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### COMMITTED TO STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS

- What three things motivated the candidate most in his/her work? What leads you to that conclusion?
- What in the candidate’s work do you believe brought the candidate the greatest satisfaction? What leads you to that conclusion?
- How does the candidate respond when data show that students for whom the candidate has some responsibility are not succeeding at high levels? Does he/she readily accept the data? What has he/she done to close success gaps?
- What were the three things the candidate was most likely to say about his/her institution in public?
- How often did the candidate spend focused time with students? In what contexts?

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### TAKES STRATEGIC RISKS

- What was the biggest challenge the candidate successfully faced during his/her tenure? How did the candidate deal with the challenge?
- What was the biggest challenge the candidate was unsuccessful in overcoming during his/her tenure? How did the candidate handle the challenge? What could the candidate have done differently?
- What was the most significant change the candidate brought about during his/her tenure? How did the candidate accomplish that?
- What was the biggest program/division/initiative the candidate played a role in closing (or stopping) during his/her tenure? How would you describe the candidate’s handling of that situation?

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### BUILDS STRONG TEAMS

- How cohesive was the candidate’s senior team? On what aspects did they collaborate best? Where were they least effective?
- How would you generally characterize the candidate’s relationship with college faculty? How often did the candidate spend time in close collaboration with faculty? How would you characterize his/her relationships with staff?
- With which three individuals at the college did the candidate have the most contentious relationships? How would you describe those relationships and the way they evolved over time?

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### ESTABLISHES URGENCY FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Did the candidate create urgency for change among people at the institution? If so, how?
- Relative to others in similar leadership positions whom you know, how effective would you say the candidate was in effectively motivating people to change?

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### PLANS LASTING INTERNAL CHANGE

- What was the candidate’s role in the strategic planning and/or reaccreditation processes? Was it run out of (or through) the candidate’s office?
- To what extent would you say the candidate has contributed to positively changing the college’s culture? How deep has change led by the candidate run?
- Were strategic plans the candidate led (or participated in) successful? Why or why not? What was the candidate’s role in that success?



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## RESULTS-ORIENTED

- How did the candidate's major change initiatives stand up to evaluation? Were they effective? If not, how did he/she respond?
- What is the candidate's record of ensuring that his/her major initiatives continuously improved? What leads you to that conclusion?
- How did the candidate use data to focus others on ongoing priorities? In what contexts did the candidate use them?

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## COMMUNICATES EFFECTIVELY

- Relative to college presidents you admire, how would you rate the candidate's communication abilities? As a communicator of ideas? As a listener?
- Was the candidate able to communicate in ways that influenced stakeholders to support key strategic objectives?
- Can you point to specific successes and shortcomings the candidate had in communicating with college faculty and other internal stakeholders? With board members? With policymakers and members of the community?

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## FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL ABILITY

- Relative to others in similar roles, how would you rate the candidate's ability to lead organizations to effective implementation of programs and policies?
- Please provide an example of a role the candidate played in leading implementation of a complex project or difficult change. Did the initiative succeed? Did it create lasting success?
- How did the candidate fare in keeping budgets balanced? Did he/she succeed (or struggle) more on the revenue-raising or expenditures side? How so?
- How did the candidate allocate resources to achieve student access and success priorities?

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## ENTREPRENEURIAL FUNDRAISER

- What were the biggest fundraising/revenue-generating goals that the candidate had during his/her tenure? To what extent did the candidate achieve them? Relative to community college leaders most successful at fundraising, how successful is this candidate?
- Are there examples of fundraising strategies that related directly to student access and success goals? How successful was he/she?
- How creative was the candidate in his/her revenue-raising? Can you provide an example?

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## DEVELOPS EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

- Who were the most important external partners to the candidate? What did the candidate do to develop and sustain those relationships?
- What steps did the candidate take in developing relationships with outside organizations, including K-12 schools, employers, 4-year colleges, and community-based organizations? How did those partnerships impact attainment of student access and success goals?
- Among the external relationships the candidate developed, which had the greatest positive effect on student access and/or success? What was that effect? How was it accomplished?

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## SUMMARY VIEWS ON THE CANDIDATE

- On a scale of one to 10, how was the candidate at his/her job as compared to others in similar jobs?
  - If answer is "10," prod a bit and say, "Everyone has some attributes that are stronger than others. Are there any areas that are less than perfect for this candidate?" If answer is less than 10, say something like, "That is quite a recommendation. Thank you. What would it take for this candidate to become a 10? In what ways could the candidate become even better?"
- If we were to hire the candidate, what advice would you have for the board in terms of how to relate to him/her? What should we do to ensure that we have the strongest working relationship possible? What should we do to ensure his/her success?



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