



Canadian University Boards Association

The Critical Role of Boards in the Success of the Canadian University President

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University Secretary, University of Saskatchewan

The Precarious Presidency

“Never has Canadian university presidential leadership been under greater scrutiny than it is today”

Peter MacKinnon, 2014

Ottawa

Carleton University president quits



Cape Breton University faculty contract

Wheeler to get negotiated severance package, but
By Susan Bradley, [CBC News](#) Posted: Dec 09, 2016 1:34 PM AT



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SIMONA CHIOSE AND FRANCES
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

How UBC lost a president

Dr. Arvind Gupta seemed the right man for the times, an innovator hired to connect academics with industry and students with jobs. But behind the scenes, the president was fighting political battles on multiple fronts. As [Simona Chiose](#) and [Frances Bula](#) report, it's been a month since his sudden resignation and UBC is still grappling with the

New Brock University president's departure raises gender issues

EDUCATION REPORTER

Aug. 31, 2016 9:04PM EDT
day, Sep. 01, 2016 7:51AM EDT

NEWS

Education | Labour + Industry

Upheaval at University of Northern BC: President on Leave, VP Resigns

UNBC head Daniel W...
confidence ma...

steps away as senate prepares non-

ident of

, Gazette

President of Yukon University resigns after starting the job on July 1

Canadian Press
20 | 1 min. read

Home > Canada > The rector of the University of French Ontario resigns
Canada

The rector of the University of French ns

EDUCATION

Athabasca University board of directors fires president, hires new one



Board of regents made announcement Thursday.



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U of R president resigns

CBC News Posted: Dec 21, 2006 5:11 PM CT | Last Updated: Dec 21, 2006 5:36 PM CT



Facebook



Twitter

The president of the University of Regina has resigned, just 15 months after he started the job.

Suspended FNUC president fired

CBC News Posted: Mar 19, 2010 6:17 PM CT | Last Updated: Mar 19, 2010 6:13 PM CT

CANADA

TRENDING

[Real estate](#) | [Lotto Max](#) | [London attack](#) | [Trump](#) | [Fast Food Week](#) | [Federal budget](#)

University of Saskatchewan fires president Ilene Busch-Vishniac amid controversy over professor's dismissal



THE CANADIAN PRESS

May 22, 2014 | Last Updated: Jan 25 12:34 AM ET
[More from The Canadian Press](#)



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UNBC President to early

Media Release

Dr. Florizone has a PhD in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has been serving on the Ideas Lab's board of directors for the past year. He began his term at Dalhousie in 2013. He had been approved to start his term in July, 2019, but will now end his term early next year.

Local News

University of Alberta president David Turpin leaving in June 2020

Janet French

at Gary Kachanoski to finish term

'Pandemic president' Jean-Paul Boudreau leaving Mt
A this summer

leaving Mt

By the Numbers

Up to

27%

The percentage of presidents who have left office before the end of their first term

8 to 4

“the average years in the [Canadian] president’s job has declined to roughly four today (2014) from eight in the late 1950s.”

8.5 to 5.9

The decline of average tenure of a university president in American between 2006 and 2022

10+

Chief executives in S&P 500 companies are staying in their positions for 10 years or longer

**During pandemic rate of presidential departure remained the same;
CEO departures went from 11% to 0%**



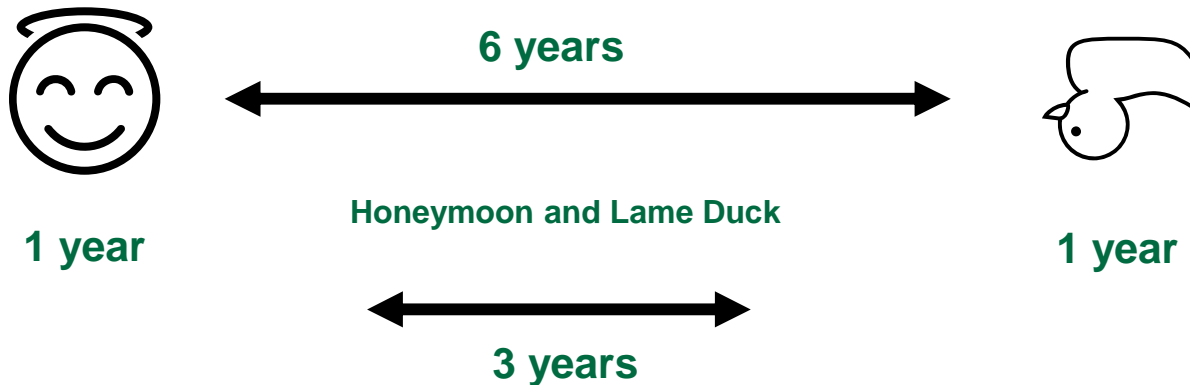
Is it a problem they are leaving earlier?

Financial considerations

Avg. Canadian Salary -- \$171,000; U15 Avg. \$479,000

Search Firm fees – \$75,000 to \$100,000 (every 5 years instead of every 8)

Performance Considerations

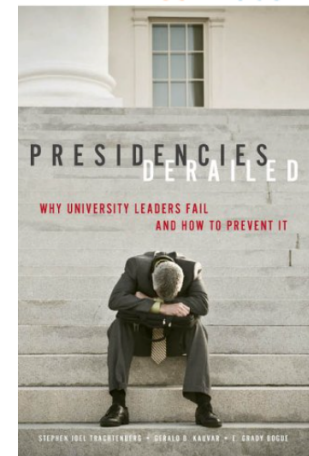


Why The Shorter Terms?

- Greater pressure to perform (burn out)
- Too much political pressure and polarization

Why The Early Departure?

- Ethical Lapses
- Poor Interpersonal Skills
- Inability to Lead Key Constituencies
- Difficulty Adapting to Institutional Culture or Community Context
- Failure to meet Goals
- Dysfunctional Board Dynamics



Why The Early Departure?

(according to the presidents)

- Experienced a significant level of distrust with at least one member of their executive team;
- Experienced communications challenges with some members of the board;
- Felt that the board members were misinformed or unaware of their role and responsibilities;
- Found that vital information was not disclosed to them by the board during recruiting;
- Felt they received little transitional support from the board.

Why have so many Canadian university presidencies failed?

Stories of six unfinished mandates raise concerns about governance.

By JULIE CAFLEY | September 8, 2015

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“All reflected on their troubled relationships with their board, in particular, the chair.”





Demkiw Research

Purpose of Study

To explore how Canadian university presidents experience success and understand how those presidents perceive the role a university board plays in that success.

Description of Participants

- Currently are or recently were presidents at 9 Canadian universities
- Across 6 different provinces from coast to coast
- ½ from U15
- 60 years of experience as university presidents between them

Board – President Connection


“the role of a university board has become increasingly critical as universities have grown in size and complexity” (Chan and Richardson, 2012)

“a symbiotic exchange of reciprocal authority, neither fully functioning without the other.” (AGB, 2006)

“when you don’t have a strong board chair-president relationship, it can cause significant issues to ripple through the institution for years” (Beyer, 2013)

“If you don’t have the board with you, it doesn’t matter what else you do.” (Paul, 2012)

“A board can be a president’s best friend, worst enemy, and anything in-between” (Papp, 2009)



Unique Role of the Board Professional

“The university secretary plays an important linking role between the office of the president and the board. This position can be invaluable in the success of a presidency” (Paul, 2014)

Themes from Demkiw Research

Board's best contribute to a President's success by....

...Understanding the university and how universities work.

...Having empathy for the complexity of the president's role

...Strategically investing in the relationship with the President



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Understanding the University

“The board needs to know about far more than the financial functioning and sustainability of the institution. In fact, what it needs to know is almost endless and very, very broad.”

“my top recommendation to both would be to get to know the university so that, as leaders, you both have a real good sense of the ethos of the university and on all levels as it relates to governance, as it relates to students, as it relates to academic mission and the research priorities. If you don't know your institution, you can't then help to enable your institution to be successful.”

“A president needs to understand how to value what a board made up of people who don't really fully understand a university can bring to the board, the university, and your own leadership.”

“My goal is to engage the board because a lot of them don't necessarily even know the questions they should be asking.”

“Since most board members come from outside the university it is up to the president and other management to help them understand their role in order to have a win-win partnership”

“board members [need] to recognize that these are very, very complex organizations, and the multistakeholder nature of it, the bicameral system of governance, [and] that the levers of power are not in any one persons or one organization's hands. They have to be comfortable with the ambiguity and complexity of universities”

“my advice is actually to try to know the community that you serve, because both are serving a community which is [a] *university community*”

Understanding the University

Concepts Boards Should Understand Fully

- Shared Governance
- Bi-Cameral Systems
- Academic Freedom
- Tenure

Relationship Building with other Governance Leaders

Empathy for the Role of the President

“A board can best position a president for success when a board has an understanding of the breadth of responsibilities that a president has”

“I have had huge successes that a board otherwise thinks is a misstep or doesn't quite know how much value to place on it...but that value is huge.”

“Having an empathy for the president for the extraordinary demands placed on the president president that go far beyond the purview of the board.”


“University President is the captain appointed to keep a firm grip on the tiller that may or may not be connected to a rudder”

What does a University President do? “I don’t know but if anything goes wrong, it’s my dad’s fault”

Empathy for the Role of the President

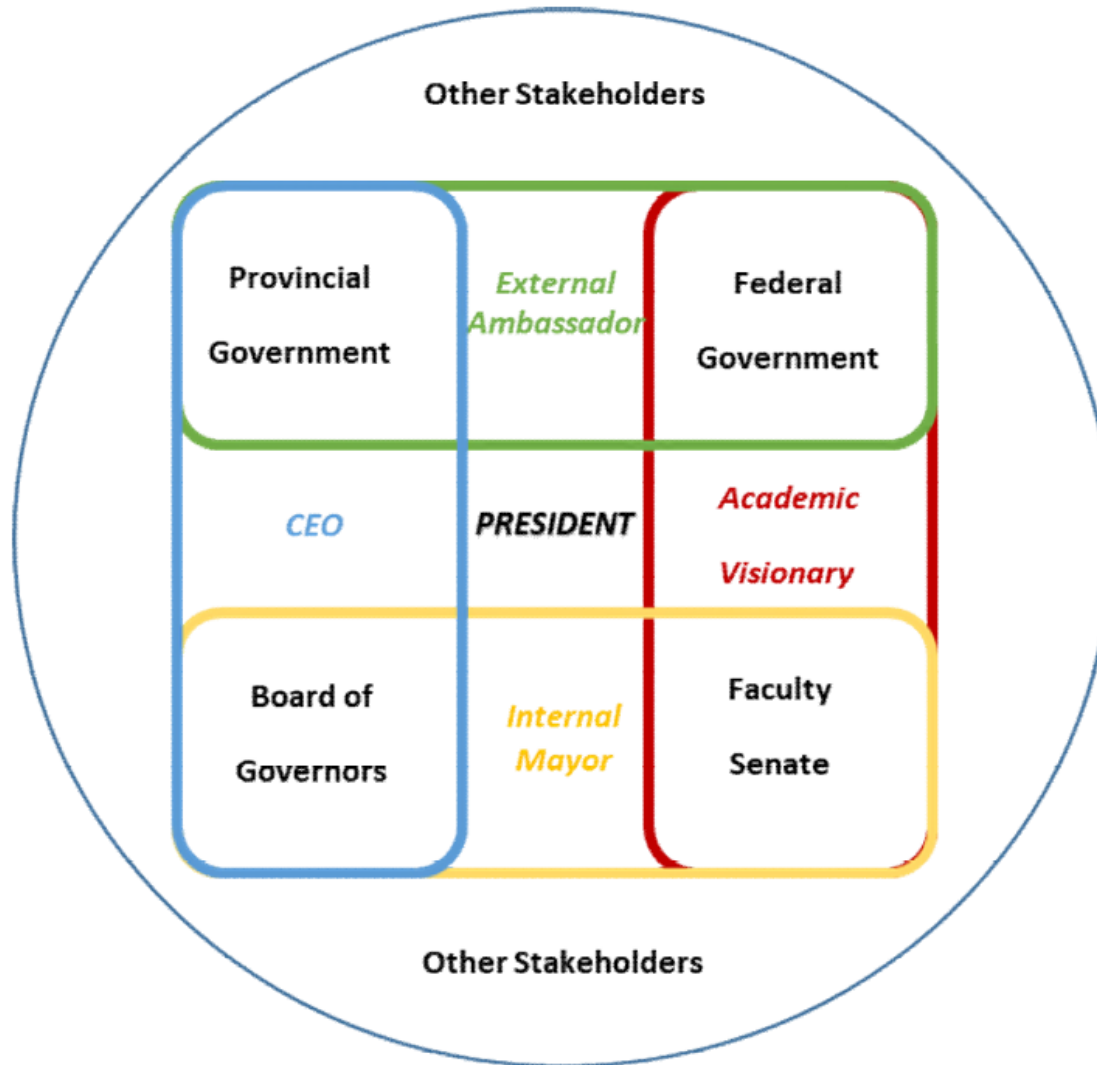
“When there are cases around academic freedom, where the board isn’t backing the president, it becomes extraordinarily challenging. I explained to the board, I said, “Look, if I do what you ask, next week, you’re *gonna* have to fire me. Because the faculty will go into meltdown, and I will be unable to run the institution.

So, if you think I have to do this, I won’t do it, and if you’re telling me to do it, I’m not gonna do it. So, you can fire me if you want. If I do do it, you’re gonna have to fire me. So, I’m gonna focus on my principles. And I’m gonna do what I think is the right thing”





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Invest Strategically in the Connection with the President

“You have to start building the board chair/relationship right from the beginning.”

“The relationship between the president and [the] chair of the board has to be [in] perfect alignment in terms of the strategy of the university.

“I see the chair as a partner with the President”

“There can be no light shining between the board chair and the president, it needs to be a strong and constructive relationship”

“You want a strong relationship, not a distant one but also not a friendly one, you want a managerial relationship.

The role of the board, when you look it up anywhere, it is to hire mentor, coach, and support the CEO, the president. And then they have the role, and that’s critical. And to challenge and encourage, and to push.

[The board chair] got so invested in my success and I felt that. I could feel his investment in me and investing in my success.

“Many of my success are related to the support and trust I get from the board.”



Invest Strategically in the Connection with the President – Practical Considerations

Chair/President Connection – Do you know how often your president and board chair connect? Given the critical nature of this relationship why should it be more formalized?

Weekly – Monthly – Before board meetings – Whenever there is a problem


Onboarding – How formal and structured are your presidential orientation processes?

“My orientation was so bad I actually really thought hard around Christmas of my first year about why I needed to leave this place”

Terms – Given the critical nature of the board/chair connection, do your board terms and presidential terms align? Will you be getting a new board chair when you get a new president? Who is running your presidential search process?

“unfinished presidential mandates are a failure in board governance – they either hired the wrong person or they fired the wrong person.”

David Turpin, former president UVic, UofA



Presidential Evaluations and Reviews

“I take ownership of my evaluation and review, not my board.”

*“At the most [my review] was that attaboy,
atta girl sort of thing and it wasn't even in
writing”*

“[My board] requires you to write a small dissertation of what you did this year and then they go, "Gold star!"

I would say to the board chair first of all, “This is your only employee. Your job is to support this person to be successful.”



Recap and Conclusions

- The Precarious Presidency
- Critical Role of Boards
 - *Understanding the University*
 - *Empathy for the President's Role*
 - *Investing strategically in the relationship*
 - *Evaluations*

QUESTIONS