

The Changing Role of the Chief Academic Officer in American Higher Education: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract : The landscape of higher education in the United States has undergone significant changes in the last 25 years. What was once a domain of competition among prospective students for a limited number of college and university seats has become a marketplace in which institutions vie for the enrollment of educational consumers. A central figure in this paradigm shift has been the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), whose institutional role has also evolved beyond academics to include such disparate responsibilities as strategic planning, fiscal oversight, student recruitment, fundraising and personnel management. This paper explores the scope and impact of this transition by, first, explaining its context: the intersection of key social, economic and political factors in neo-conservative, late 20th Century America that redefined the value and accountability of institutions of higher learning. This context, in turn, is shown to have redefined the role and function of the CAO from a traditional academic leader to one centered on the successful application of corporate principles of organizational and fiscal management. Information gathered from a number of sitting Provosts, Vice-Presidents of Academic Affairs and Deans of Faculty is presented to illustrate the parameters of this change, as well as the extent to which today's academic officers feel prepared and equipped to fulfill this broader institutional role. The paper concludes with a discussion of the impact of this transition on the American academy and whether it serves as a portend of change to come in higher education systems around the globe.

Keywords : academic administration, higher education, leadership, organizational management

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