



April 1, 2015

ISSN 1094-5296

Trachtenberg, S. J., Kauvar, G. B., & Bogue, E. G. (2013). *Presidencies derailed: Why university leaders fail and how to prevent it*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

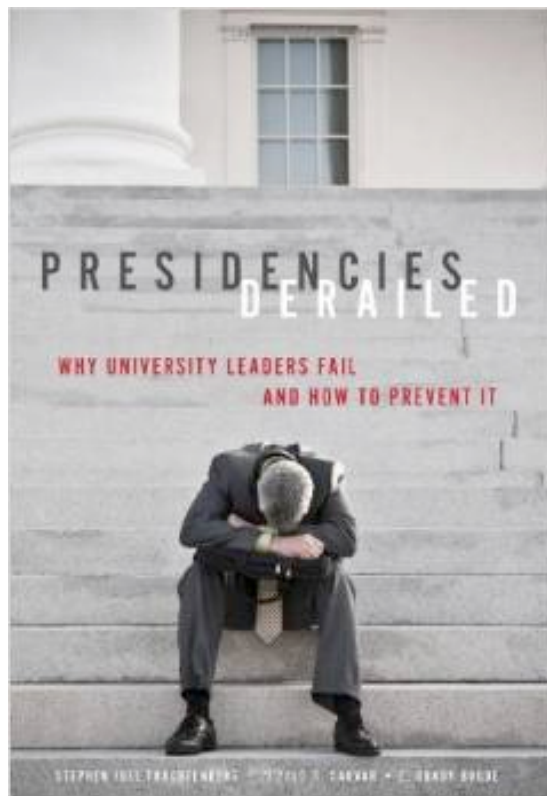
Pp. xiii + 163

ISBN 978-1-4214-1024-1

Reviewed by Adam Wear
University of North Texas

In academe, the rate and means of presidential turnover have become something of a concern. Shortly after coming to the University of North Texas, I was able to watch the rapid and messy turnover of the leadership at my previous university. There were many hurt feelings in the community and in the university over the bad press created by the interactions between the board and a president who had been in place for nearly twelve years. The situation even led to potential sanctions from Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the regional accrediting body for the university.

That politics have become so central to academia that the core mission of universities can be pushed aside is unfortunate. That the publication of a book about leadership failures within a university does not create a general outcry in academia is extremely unfortunate. That this particular book could be published based on derailments, defined by the authors as “when a president is terminated or forced to resign prior to the end of the term of the first contract,” is tragic (p. 1).



The disappointment over the necessity of this work aside, Trachtenberg, Kauvar, and Bogue have provided a valuable and necessary resource for everyone involved in the presidential search process at universities of any type. By focusing on derailments at various types of institutions (private liberal arts colleges, public master's level colleges, public research universities, and community colleges), the authors have reminded readers that derailments can happen throughout higher education. This level of inclusion extends not only through the discussion of the derailments, but also into the lessons learned about derailment and the suggestions provided to prevent derailments.

In order to effectively discuss derailments, the authors introduce six themes that presage derailments. While any of the six themes certainly carries the potential to cause a derailment, any one of them could as easily cause the resignation or termination of a president in his or her fourth or fifth term. The overarching theme of these missteps, as well as the overarching theme for the work and a lesson learned by the authors is that most instances of presidential derailment are caused by human imperfection. Whether this imperfection exists in the president (inability to lead key constituencies, difficulty adapting to culture, failure to meet business objectives), the board (board shortcomings), or both (ethical lapses, poor interpersonal skills) are discussed throughout the work. In the case of derailments, it is very rarely one party that is completely at fault.

It is therefore at this intersection of human imperfection and group dynamics that the authors' most valuable points are made. The suggestions provided by the authors aim to minimize the possibility of introducing any of these themes into a presidential search and/or hiring. The suggestions essentially allow the board and search committee to first get out of their own way and then remove a significant portion of the expectations attached to a presidential search. The authors admit that an understanding that the search will not be perfect and may not result in the hiring of a perfect candidate allows for a more successful search, "if only because unreasonable expectations of perfection

arising from a necessarily imperfect activity can be put aside” (p. 110). Although most of the suggestions seem like common sense when encountered, the obvious lack of their employment in the situations detailed in the work indicate that a reminder would not go amiss to anyone serving in the search process.

In addition to pointing out common themes to avoid in a search and providing a list of suggestions as to how to avoid those themes, Trachtenberg, Kauvar, and Bogue have addressed the often legally-mandated secrecy surrounding derailments, terminations, and resignations in a creative and extremely helpful manner. By presenting the material as case studies of fictional colleges and universities, the authors are able to avoid the problem of non-disclosure portions of contracts.

This approach also provides readers with the ability to compare his or her institution to institutions of comparable size. Rhetorically, this allows search committee members, board members, and potential presidents to avoid the pitfall of “It happened at [specific university], but it cannot happen at [university at which I serve on this committee/sit on this board/am a candidate for].” This is also a pitfall on which the authors blame derailments at some level. In a discussion of lessons learned, they raise the question as to why presidents are still losing their jobs for the same reasons that presidents previously lost their jobs. As they say,

It cannot be that they don’t know
what behaviors lead to derailment.
But, they act as though the lessons
apply only to those not as clever or
talented as they are. “I’m too smart
to get caught” supplants ethical
judgments and abnegates the super
ego. (p. 138)

Recognizing the potential for human imperfection is a major focus of this work, and the inability to do so sets a university board, committee, or president up for failure. The inclusion of the wide-ranging fictional case studies provides anyone who may have need of this work with the tools to actively avoid that problem.

As an acknowledgement that theoretical discussions may not accurately represent what occurs in a derailment, the authors have also chosen to include what is, perhaps, the most fascinating chapter of the book. Chapter six, “Firsthand Experiences of Derailed Presidents,” provides two examples in which William Frawley and Michael Garrison discuss their hiring and short tenure at the University of Mary Washington and West Virginia University respectively. Their personal accounts and admissions add the reminder that these situations are not figments of the authors’ imaginations.

While this is the most interesting section, it is also the least complete. It would be very informative to hear as many sides of each of those stories as possible. Any statement from the board president, the university, or the search committee would add a significant level of weight to the section, as it would allow the reader to compare the public stories with the private reflections of both sides. It is a minor shortcoming, and perhaps an irreconcilable one, but it would have made the book even more relevant.

In the grand scheme of things, this being the work’s only detraction speaks very well of the authors and the work. With a stated goal of improving “the probability of appointing and keeping presidents of academic institutions who serve with competence and integrity,” Trachtenberg, Kauvar, and Bogue have presented a book capable of accomplishing just that. It should be read by anyone undertaking a search, regardless of their familiarity with the process.

About the Reviewer

Adam Wear

Ph.D. Student, Higher Education

University of North Texas

adam.wear@unt.edu

Mr. Wear is a PhD student in higher education at the University of North Texas. He holds a Master's of Arts in English Literature from the University of Alabama and a Bachelor's of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies from Mississippi State

University. He currently serves as an instructional consultant for the Center for Learning Enhancement, Assessment, and Redesign at UNT.




education review // reseñas educativas

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

editors: gustavo e. fischman /
melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview