



## Exploring Involuntary Presidential Turnover in American Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

University presidents face a variety of competing demands and pressures to successfully lead their institutions. We sought to better understand these issues by studying unsuccessful presidencies ending in an involuntary turnover. We collected data on 1,029 presidential terms across 256 institutions with Division I athletics from 1988 to 2016. Our findings revealed 7 causes of involuntary turnover including athletics controversy, financial controversy, loss of board confidence, loss of faculty confidence, loss of system confidence, poor judgment, and poor fit. In addition to identifying trends in presidential involuntary turnover, we propose a presidential turnover framework to explain the causes of presidential turnover.

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Due to its prominence at colleges and universities, presidential turnover and derailment represents an area of necessary research within higher education. Currently, the management literature has examined high-level executive turnover by focusing on the causes and organizational implications of turnover within the executive ranks of companies and organizations (Fredrickson, Hambrick, & Baumrin, 1988). In higher education, institutions as diverse as Association of American Universities members and community colleges have recently seen disruptive presidential changes (Kiley, 2013b). The expected wave of retirements from the baby-boomer presidents (Skinner, 2010) and the occupational pressures of the presidency often lead to turnover among presidents (Tekneipe, 2014).

A president at any institution embodies its values and goals while serving as the key administrative leader (Fisher, 1984; Fisher, Tack, & Wheeler, 1988). As the administrative head of campus, the university or college president plays pivotal roles in fundraising, budget management, strategic planning, and working with the local community, state, and governing boards (Eckel & Kezar, 2016). It is not easy to succeed in all of these roles: “The organization of colleges and universities, the influence of the external environment, the multiple roles that presidents must play, and the constituencies they must please make it challenging for presidents to

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fulfill expectations” (Eckel & Kezar, 2011, p. 280). Seeking external funding despite broad funding declines (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002; Geiger, 2004; Heller, 2001; McLendon & Mokher, 2009; Morphew & Eckel, 2009) and fostering entrepreneurialism (Fisher & Koch, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) have proven to be critical for a president to garner needed resources for his or her campus.

In addition to playing important functional roles, the president plays a vital symbolic role for internal and external stakeholders as well (Tierney, 1988, 2004): “Presidents, by virtue of their hierarchical positions and legitimacy, are believed by others to have a coherent sense of the institution and are therefore permitted, if not expected, to articulate institutional purposes” (Birnbaum, 1992, p. 154). Beyond these functional and symbolic roles, college presidencies are additionally shaped by the confluence of contexts from within and outside the institution (Eckel & Kezar, 2011). The ability for outside events and circumstances to influence presidential terms remains quite profound (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005; Cohen & March, 1974; Meyer & Scott, 1983), and social, economic, and political pressures substantially influence the leadership and effectiveness of presidents. Combined with institutional culture and saga (Clark, 1972), presidents may be overwhelmed by circumstances outside of their control, whether from internal or external sources.

## The present study

How do the challenges facing college presidents today impact a presidential term? To examine successful and unsuccessful presidencies, we considered presidential turnover and whether presidents leave voluntarily or involuntarily. As noted in the management literature (Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998), voluntary turnovers are those that can reasonably be expected to occur during the lifetime of a presidency or for reasons outside the control of the institution, including retirement, taking a position at another university, accepting a new position outside of higher education, and health problems/death. Involuntary turnovers are those instances in which the institution terminates or forces the resignation of the president.

Colleges and universities participating in high-profile intercollegiate athletics offer a rich setting to consider the issue of presidential turnover due to their complexity (Buer, 2009) and prominence in American higher education. Supporters of athletics tout the educational and external relations benefits of athletics (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Toma, 2003), while critics raise concerns regarding its detrimental impact on academic mission, student welfare, and costs (Duderstadt & Womack, 2003; Shulman & Bowen, 2002; Sperber, 2001; Thelin, 1996). The competing cultures and inconsistent logics (Seo & Creed, 2002) of high-profile athletics and higher education present immense challenges for institutional leaders. Moreover, such contradictory ideals within an

organizational culture create fluctuating perspectives on what constitutes acceptable behavior within the organization (Alvesson, 2013). A number of higher education observers—including presidents themselves—have questioned the feasibility of leading institutions with high-profile athletics programs (Duderstadt, 2000; Green, 2012; Nocera, 2013; Woodhouse, 2015). Given the lack of research on involuntary turnover and the complexity of National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Division I universities, we believed this sample would provide a fruitful context for considering the current state of presidential turnover.

Further, our study explored how the usual measures of presidency complexity inadequately illuminate the job's true challenges. We posited that the causes of involuntary turnover present a clearer picture of presidential challenges and imply that presidents are not simply struggling but are losing their jobs as a result of problems they and their institutions are facing. Many discussions exploring the presidency, starting with Clark Kerr's (1991) work, have considered decreased average presidential tenure—not involuntary turnover—as the primary indicator of problems confronting presidents. Kerr (1991) found that college presidents in 1899 served an average of 10.9 years in office; this average dropped to 5.9 years by 1969. Cohen and March (1974) suggested a number of ways to calculate average tenure. Kerr (1991), Selden (1960), and Ferrari (1970) used completed tenure, or the average number of years served as of a particular date. Much of the literature on the changing presidency has focused on this measure (Padilla, 2004), as using the years served as of a given year provides a more accurate snapshot of presidential terms. Our findings suggest that although these traditional measures of presidential terms in office offer some insight, they may yet fail to fully illuminate the pressures facing presidents. Instead, our data point to involuntary turnover specifically as an indication of the concern many have raised (cf. Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005; Martin & Samels, 2004; Tekneipe, 2014) regarding the challenges facing presidents. More importantly, the increased frequency in involuntary turnover noted post-2008 demonstrates the mounting pressures facing presidents, as well as the extent to which these pressures lead to turnover, with more precision than either average presidential term or completed tenure.

## Literature review

The college presidency is as a well-studied aspect of higher education with extensive analysis and investigation since the 1950s (Birnbaum, 1992; Fisher et al., 1988; Martin & Samels, 2004; Smerek, 2013). Some researchers have suggested that college presidents have limited impact on institutional activity (Birnbaum, 1989; Cohen & March, 1974), while others have contended that presidents can exert positive change on their institutions (Fisher, 1984; Kauffman, 1980). This scholarship has drawn on evidence such as the personal

experiences of presidents (Duderstadt, 2007; Fisher, 1984), faculty perceptions (Birnbaum, 1989), trustee perspectives (Levin, 1992), and in-depth qualitative analysis of presidents (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Birnbaum, 1992). However, these studies have generally failed to draw from longitudinal data or a large sample of institutions.

More recent research has considered the challenges leading to the instability of the presidency since the 1990s. Specifically, Martin and Samels (2004) cited five pressures on university presidents: to raise extraordinary amounts of money; to do more with less; to decide about distance education; to compete with and outperform for-profit competitors; and to overcome deprofessionalization. In his study of how 1st-year presidents navigate their new campuses, Smerek (2013) found that even fairly stable institutions seek rapid action from their new presidents. Moreover, new presidents are often overwhelmed by the pace of their positions and the range of issues they must address (McLaughlin, 1996). These competing, increasing demands have led to diminished interest in pursuing a presidency among chief academic officers—the historical training ground for presidents (Hartley & Godin, 2010).

Often, presidents directly manage budgeting, personnel decisions, student issues, fundraising, and board relations; they also represent the university with external constituents (Eckel & Kezar, 2016). A president's priorities among these various areas and time commitment to them may depend to a great extent on the nature and mission of his or her institution (Cohen & March, 1974), and much of the work of the college president is akin to managers and executives in other industries (Mintzberg, 1973). Thus, research on college presidents has examined their backgrounds, personal qualities, career paths, and leadership styles (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001). In the most comprehensive ongoing analysis of college presidents, the American Council on Education (ACE, 2012) collects data on presidential background, experience, and challenges. The council's findings have shown that women make up 26% of all presidents and racial and ethnic minorities comprise 13%. The average age of presidents is 61 years, but the percentage of those who are older than 61 years has grown. In 2006, 49% of presidents were older than 61 years, but by 2011, this number rose to 58%. Of particular relevance for this study, public university presidents cited legislators/policymakers, faculty, and system office/state coordinating boards as presenting the greatest challenges to a president. Private university presidents cited the majority of challenges were with faculty, governing boards, and donors/benefactors.

The differing opinions between these two groups highlight the importance of organizational context as noted by Cohen and March (1974). The fundamental difference between college presidents and chief executives in other industries is the nature of dual authority within a shared governance model (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005). A president must involve multiple stakeholders and share responsibility in

ways quite different from other chief executives. The nature of shared governance constrains a president's ability to generate quick and direct changes (Eckel & Kezar, 2016).

In addition to organizational context, universities and presidents operate within a larger environmental context. Presidents face pressures from government regulation, statewide coordination and state system efforts, and political constraints from governors and legislators in the public sector (ACE, 2012). Moreover, presidents operate in a hypercompetitive environment within which the pursuit of prestige, rankings, and desirable students often drives perception and resources (Brewer et al., 2002; Harris, 2009; Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004); "the organizational and environmental contexts in which presidents must operate create a complex set of rules" that effective presidents must master and navigate (Eckel & Kezar, 2011, p. 293).

### Conceptual framework

Despite substantial work examining college presidents, the literature lacks an empirical understanding of presidential leadership through the lens of specifically *unsuccessful* leadership. Few higher education studies have examined this issue, yet the business and management literature has proven useful with studies of failed chief executive officers (CEOs). In the business setting, CEO involuntary turnover is used as a mechanism for management to remove individual leaders in attempts to align the organization with external demands (Shen & Cho, 2005, p. 844). Further, research suggests that poor performance and environmental changes result in executive-level changes (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Tushman & Rosenkopf, 1996; Wiersema & Bantel, 1993).

Within management and organization literature, research on turnover has tended to focus on determinants of turnover and largely has fallen in two research traditions. The first considers organizational context as a driver of CEO turnover and has explored relationships between general economic and environmental conditions (Wagner, Pfeffer, & O'Reilly, 1984), organizational characteristics (Becker-Blease, Elkinawy, Hoag, & Stater, 2016; Salancik, Staw, & Pondy, 1980), and organizational performance (Gilson, 1989; Hotchkiss, 1995). For example, Jenter and Kanaan (2015) found that poor performance of an organization or the broader industry leads to an increase in CEO turnover. Relatedly, Farrell and Whidbee (2002) described how media coverage puts pressure on the board of directors to make a change in their CEO.

The second tradition of turnover research has been to focus on individual attributes of a CEO such as age and other personal characteristics (Jackofsky & Peters, 1983; Rosse, 1987). Within this tradition, a substantial line of inquiry proffers the notion of ritual scapegoating, or the turnover of a CEO for symbolic benefit (Gamson & Scotch, 1964), in which an organization may decide to use

involuntary turnover as a symbolic signal to outside constituencies—regardless of whether CEO or organizational performance justifies it (Pfeffer, 1983). An early example of this research is Gamson and Scotch's (1964) work on managers in baseball, which revealed evidence of power, influence, and symbolism in executive turnover.

Building from research on the role of individual CEO attributes, Van Velsor and Leslie (1995) identified four broad derailment factors across the literature: problems with interpersonal relationships, failure to meet business objectives, inability to build and lead a team, and inability to develop or adapt (see Table 1).

Useful for the purposes of our study, this framework built on similar work that offered a longitudinal and cross-cultural view of unsuccessful senior leadership (Lombardo & McCauley, 1988; McCall & Lombardo, 1983; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987). Collectively, this research provides broad categories useful for understanding what disrupts senior leaders across industries and proves a foundation for understanding involuntary turnover among college and university presidents.

Within higher education literature, research by Birnbaum (1992) and Cohen and March (1974) on the college president has provided additional support for utilizing Van Velsor and Leslie's (1995) categories as a framework. These studies described a president as being influenced by social norms and expectations and provided a spectrum of models through which to interpret their roles, make decisions, and provide leadership. Birnbaum (1992), similarly to management derailment literature, noted the power of a president's individual communication and consultation with and support from campus constituencies. Additionally, the broader institutional context may impact turnover: "[T]he vitality of the administrative organization might require a relatively rapid turnover of presidents" (Cohen & March, 1974, p. 191).

This study sought to understand the precursors to involuntary turnover of college presidents to provide empirical findings for recent discussions around the challenges within higher education leadership generally and for presidents specifically (cf. Duderstadt & Womack, 2003; Trachtenberg, Kauvar, & Bogue, 2013). Through a large sample of presidents, these data provide evidence useful to understand the broad challenges facing presidents and institutions beyond the particular circumstances of each case.

**Table 1.** Themes from the derailment literature.

Cause of derailment	Examples
Problems with interpersonal relationships	Poor relationships, insensitive, cold, aloof, authoritarian, isolated
Failure to meet business objectives	Poor performance, performance problems, too ambitious, lack of hard work
Inability to build and lead a team	Failing to manage staff, poor hiring decisions, difficulty developing subordinates
Inability to develop or adapt	Lack of strategic thinking, conflict with upper management/board, unable to adapt to culture

## Methods

In this study, we systematically examined the causes of presidential turnover in higher education to contribute to the ongoing research regarding college presidents. We selected 343 institutions that participated in NCAA Division I athletics in 2013. We selected Division I institutions to limit our sample size to a reasonable number and examine some of the most complex, well-known, and publicly scrutinized institutions in all of higher education. Helpfully, information on these institutions was readily available and highly reliable. Eighty-seven of the 343 institutions were excluded for one of three reasons: (a) We were unable to secure a complete presidential history (primarily due to inaccessible records from early in our time period; 68); (b) presidents served fixed terms outside of the norm of most higher education institutions (i.e., some religious institutions and military academies; 7); and (c) major institutional or system changes prevented a comparison (i.e., mergers or changes in governance that created or replaced the position of a campus executive; 12). The institutions excluded were broadly representative of the sample as a whole. The final sample consisted of 256 institutions and 1,029 presidential terms of office.

For each university, we created a record that listed each president permanently appointed to the position, their term of office, and the cause for turnover. Given their specific short-term basis, interim presidents were excluded. In an instance where a president served both as interim and permanently in the position, only the permanent appointment years were included. The selected time period of 1988 to 2016 covers an epoch of change within higher education and the role of the presidency (Martin & Samels, 2004). The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) How have the terms of office for college presidents changed from 1988 to 2016?
- (2) Why do college presidents leave their roles?
- (3) What are the major causes of involuntary turnover?
- (4) How has involuntary turnover varied from 1988 to 2016?

To determine the reason for a president leaving office, we first conducted an online search of institutional records and archives. Using the Internet offers advantages by providing a way to easily and quickly compile a larger sample of institutions (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Next, we searched online media reports and news archives. Given our primary focus on involuntary turnover, we made additional efforts to validate the information regarding these records. We classified an involuntary turnover as an instance in which a president left office after the employing institution terminated or forced the resignation of the president (e.g., although University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan resigned, she was not counted in our data because she did not leave office). If

an online source reported an involuntary turnover, an additional source was obtained to confirm. In the event where official reasons for turnover conflicted with those reported in unofficial sources (i.e., “spend more time with family” vs. “loss of board confidence”), we sought at least two additional independent sources to clarify any contradictions before coding a turnover as involuntary. In the case that a second source could not confirm the reason for the president leaving, we coded the turnover based on the official documentation (i.e., university online archive or press release).

Once compiled, the database included 1,029 presidential terms containing a total of 775 turnovers. The difference between presidential terms and turnovers was the number of presidents (254) still in office at the end of 2016, including 2 presidents who turned over at the end of 2016 with no permanent replacement announced before the end of the year. Each presidential term record was examined using content analysis, during which the two authors independently classified each presidential turnover as voluntary or involuntary. The authors discussed the 69 involuntary turnovers and placed them into initial categories based on the derailment factors from our conceptual framework (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). We then adjusted categories to be more specific to higher education and added categories as needed to fully capture the involuntary turnovers, while refining the categories until we reached consensus. Ultimately, each involuntary turnover fell into one of seven categories: athletics controversy, financial controversy, loss of board confidence, loss of faculty confidence, loss of system confidence, poor judgment, and poor fit. Table 2 describes our definitions of the causes for the involuntary turnovers.

We developed these classifications by finding common themes across causes for turnover. Fourteen initial categories were collapsed to seven to provide greater clarity and ease for analyzing data. To be categorized singly, the reason

**Table 2.** Definitions of involuntary turnovers.

Transition	Definition
Athletics controversy	Any instance in which a president’s motivation for leaving was a direct result of an issue related to an institution’s athletics program
Financial controversy	Any situation explicitly dealing with finances serving as the reason for a president’s departure (i.e., lavish spending, mismanagement of funds, impropriety)
Loss of board confidence	Includes a breakdown in the relationship between the president and the board, the board being difficult, or a series of controversies that have reached critical mass pushing the board to remove the president
Loss of faculty confidence	Instances when a president departed shortly after a vote of no confidence from the institution’s faculty or the faculty routinely and outwardly expressed dissatisfaction with the president
Loss of system confidence	When a president left an institution either at the request of state system leadership or because of a breakdown in the relationship with system leadership
Poor Judgment	Situations in which a president exercised poor judgment related to his/her own personal or professional conduct in a situation that resulted in dismissal or resignation (i.e., plagiarism, inappropriate political favors)
Poor fit	Times when the president served 2 or fewer years in office and the campus broadly (faculty, board, or even president personally) felt the policies, practices, and leadership style of the president were not a fit for the institution

for turnover had to be the *primary reason* for presidential turnover. Although a president may have faced numerous controversies, we categorized the turnover based solely on the reason primarily responsible for the president's turnover according to online sources.

## Findings

Before addressing our analysis and answering this study's research questions, we identify three major findings of our work.

- (1) The duration of presidential terms has remained largely unchanged from 1988 to 2016.
- (2) Many more presidencies have ended in involuntary turnover toward the end of the time period, with more than half of all involuntary turnovers occurring since 2008.
- (3) There has been no single cause—rather, many diverse causes—for the increasing number of involuntary turnovers since 2008.

Although the specific circumstances behind a president's dismissal were particular to each individual case, the broader causes that led to the creation of our seven categories were remarkably similar.

To begin our analysis, we considered presidential terms. We calculated the number of years that a president had served in office as of a given year, which is the most widely used empirical measure in the university president literature (Padilla, 2004). To perform this calculation, we averaged the number of years that all presidents had served in office in each year in our study. For example, the 2016 average is the average number of years that presidents had been in office as of the end of 2016. In using this metric, we were able to measure longevity before a president leaves office and give a more accurate representation of how long presidents are serving at a given point in time. It is important to note that this metric differs from average length of term, which represents the average of the actual lengths of term that a president served an institution prior to turning over voluntarily or involuntarily. Table 3 shows the average number of years that a president had served in office each year by control (e.g., public or private institution).

The average number of years presidents had served in office remained remarkably consistent during the time period examined, with presidents serving

**Table 3.** Average number of years in office by year and control.

Institution	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
Private	8.37	8.45	7.77	8.05	7.36	7.43	7.85	7.02
Public	5.32	5.40	5.57	6.30	5.99	6.48	5.64	5.25
Total	6.39	6.40	6.30	6.89	6.44	6.78	6.36	5.85

an average of 6.39 years in 1988 compared with 5.85 years in 2016. During the years of our study, private university presidents consistently served in their roles for longer than their public counterparts.

For the institutions in this study, 9% of the total presidential turnover occurring was involuntary. Only 5% of private university turnovers were the result of involuntary turnover; for public universities, the percentage was higher at 10%. In addition to a higher percentage of public university presidents leaving involuntarily, the causes of turnover varied between the two sectors (see Table 4).

Table 5 provides descriptive statistics for the length of presidential term for involuntary presidential turnover by control. Again, presidents at public institutions served less time ( $M = 4.6$  years,  $SD = 3.3$  years) than their private institution counterparts ( $M = 7.2$  years,  $SD = 3.9$  years).

A total of 69 presidents left office due to involuntary turnover as detailed in Table 6. The best represented cause of involuntary turnover was financial controversy (23%) followed by loss of board confidence (20%). This result is not surprising considering the significance of financial management (Birnbaum, 1992; Massy, 1996) and the importance of positive relationships between a president and the board (Cohen & March, 1974; Levin, 1991).

However, the breaks between of the causes of involuntary turnover by control reveal particular challenges for presidents within each sector. Obviously, the small number of private turnovers exaggerates the percentages, yet the frequencies reveal that private university presidents faced challenges primarily from loss

**Table 4.** Presidential turnover by type and control.

Institution Type	Number of Presidents	Number of Turnovers	Number of Involuntary Turnovers	Percentage of Involuntary Turnovers
Private	297	214	11	5%
Public	732	561	58	10%
Total	1,029	775	69	9%

**Table 5.** Involuntary turnover length of presidential term in years by control descriptive statistics.

Variable	<i>N</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total Involuntary	69	5.0	3.5
Public	58	4.6	3.3
Private	11	7.2	3.9

**Table 6.** Presidential turnover by cause and control.

Turnover	Public <i>n</i> (%)	Private <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i> (%)
Financial Controversy	14 (24%)	2 (18%)	16 (23%)
Loss of Board Confidence	14 (24%)	0 (0%)	14 (20%)
Poor Judgment	10 (17%)	2 (18%)	12 (17%)
Athletics Controversy	8 (14%)	2 (18%)	10 (14%)
Loss of Faculty Confidence	3 (5%)	4 (36%)	7 (10%)
Poor Fit	5 (9%)	1 (9%)	6 (9%)
Loss of System Confidence	4 (7%)	0 (0%)	4 (6%)
Total	58 (100%)	11 (100%)	69 (100%)

Note. *n* = number of involuntary turnovers.

**Table 7.** Causes of involuntary turnover by year of term.

Turnover	< 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	16	Grand Total
Financial Controversy		2	2	1		3	2	1	1		1	1	1			16
Loss of Board Confidence		1	1	4	2	1	1	1		1		1		1		14
Poor Judgment		2	1	2	1	2			1		1					12
Athletics Controversy				3	2	1	2			1					1	10
Loss of faculty confidence		1		1		1		1	2		1					7
Poor Fit		2	3	1												6
Loss of System Confidence					1	1	1				1					4
Total	2	7	11	11	5	9	5	3	4	3	3	2	1	2	1	69

of confidence from the faculty, financial controversy, athletics controversy, and judgment. In contrast, public university presidents faced slightly different challenges, with loss of board confidence, financial controversy, and judgment representing the top causes of involuntary turnover.

Table 7 shows the cause of involuntary presidential turnover by the year of a president's term. A number of involuntary turnovers occurred during the 2nd and 3rd years of a president's tenure, with 22 of 69 turnovers (32%) occurring during this point in the term. However, once a president survived Year 5, the prevalence of involuntary turnover dropped dramatically. This finding was particularly true when the cause of turnover was losing board confidence, as 64% of these instances occurred during the first 5 years of a president's tenure. Of particular note, the number of presidents declined over time as they left office through voluntary or involuntary turnover. The absolute count, as noted in Table 7, represents only the frequency of involuntary turnovers and not the probability of such an event occurring.

The period of 2008 to 2016 boasts the highest level of involuntary turnover in the past 28 years. As noted in Table 7, 2008, 2013, 2009, 2012, and 2015 were the highest involuntary turnover years in our sample and represented 42% of total involuntary turnover since 1988.

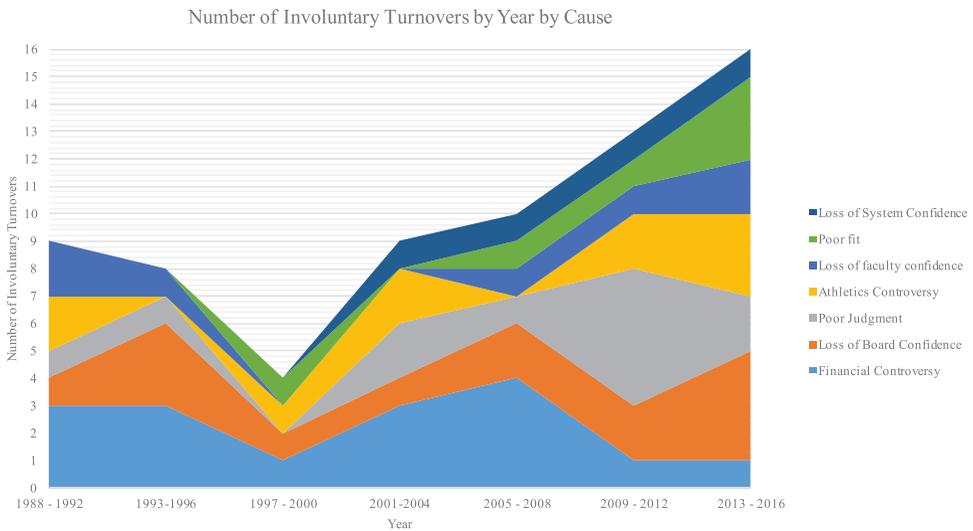
Six categories of involuntary turnover increased since 2008 (see Table 8). Financial controversy was the only category that did not increase as it represented only 5 of 16 involuntary turnovers. Poor fit (5/6), judgment (8/12), and loss of system confidence (3/4) saw relatively higher frequency after the recession. Overall, the years from 2008 to 2016 saw an increase in involuntary turnover across the range of categories with no single cause standing out (see Figure 1).

## Limitations

There were several limitations that impacted our findings, mostly in the area of limited data. Relatively little information exists regarding presidential turnover and the motivations surrounding such turnover across a large number of institutions. In efforts to capture a wider array of universities, we were only

**Table 8. Causes of involuntary turnover by year.**

Turnover	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Grand Total
Financial Controversy			1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1		2	2			1	16
Loss of Board Confidence			1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1			1							1	1			2	2			2	14
Poor Judgment			1			1	1							1			1				1	4			1	1	2		2	12
Athletics Controversy		1	1							1						1	1							1	1	2		1		10
Loss of faculty confidence		1		1		1											1	1						1	2				7	
Poor fit													1								1			1	1			2	6	
Loss of System Confidence											2	0	1	2	2	2	3	3	0	0	7	5	1	1	5	7	0	1	4	
Total	2	1	2	3	1	1	4	1	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	2	3	3	0	0	7	5	1	2	5	7	0	5	4	69



**Figure 1.** Number of involuntary turnovers by year by cause.

able to obtain online sources. No individual perspectives or firsthand accounts regarding the turnover of presidents were obtained; thus, we solely relied on third-party accounts of presidential turnover (i.e., local newspapers and press releases). Such limitations may have caused us to undercount the actual number of involuntary turnovers. Additionally, we adhered to a fairly conservative test for categorization that required at least two sources of information before we coded a turnover as involuntary. There were likely instances, unknown to the public, in which a president left involuntarily; in other cases, a president may have anticipated an imminent firing and chose to leave of his or her own volition. This concern may be relevant to presidential turnovers at private institutions, which lack transparency or can limit the access of media and outside sources to institutional decision making.

Many complex factors may contribute to the removal of a president, and our data do not allow us to parse the impact of the multidimensionality of a president's role. The data in this study were not based on actual presidential performance or institutional metrics, and we were unable to determine if an involuntary turnover was justified by performance or other measures. The inclusion of institutional metrics and other organizational data would help gauge and expand the picture of the professional performance and campus culture surrounding a president's term in office and could provide useful context for involuntary turnovers. Currently, however, we were limited to information available in the public domain. We are confident in our categorization of the turnovers, yet we cannot be absolutely certain that other causes not publicly revealed led to involuntary turnover. Finally, the nature of our data collection limited the number and type of institutions included in the study. It is certainly

possible, if not likely, that other causes of involuntary turnover are at work at colleges and universities that do not participate in Division I athletics.

## Discussion and implications

This study examined the terms of university presidents, the causes for involuntary turnover, and how these two metrics have changed during 1988 to 2016. Our findings are largely consistent with existing empirical research on the challenges facing university presidents (Birnbaum, 1992; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Martin & Samels, 2004; Padilla, 2004). Along with earlier work, this study strongly supports the complexity inherent in the modern university presidency as well as the competing demands presidents face. Our work reveals the most common reasons presidents at NCAA Division I universities are dismissed. Additionally, our research complements the work of scholars of the college presidency and adds an additional perspective to the ongoing debate regarding the college presidency and the escalating challenges and complexities facing presidents today (Eckel & Kezar, 2011).

One of our major findings was that, among our sample, the number of years that a president had served in a given year was largely unchanged during 1988 to 2016. By considering the numbers of years that a president served as of a given year, we were able to consider presidential longevity more accurately than only being able to calculate an average at the end of a president's term. Given the sample size, average length of term becomes a problematic measure vulnerable to substantial fluctuation by noise in the data. Public university presidents' average completed tenure was shorter than their private counterparts, but these differences were largely consistent during the time period.

Instead, the most dramatic change was the recent rise in the number of involuntary turnovers. More than half the involuntary turnovers that we identified occurred in the post-2008 period as they increased across almost all the categories and demonstrated the diverse pressures on modern-day presidents. These challenges extended beyond financial considerations to imply concerns about commercialization (Bok, 2003), politicization of higher education (Mettler, 2014), public mission (Marginson, 2011), and external pressure on institutions (Bowen & McPherson, 2016). Although the discourse of competing demands on university presidents often tangentially references the difficulties facing presidents (ACE, 2012; Eckel & Kezar, 2016), our findings confirm that successfully ending a presidency is less likely now than at any time in recent history.

In examining presidential turnover, the causes of involuntary turnover can be similarly categorized across institutions via our conceptual framework, suggesting that turnover follows familiar patterns across organizations (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). In line with this framework, our data showed that presidents faced common causes of involuntary turnover despite vast differences in organizational culture and particular context. Thus, although the people, facts, and history of each

turnover differ, each case can be neatly categorized with causes comparable to those found in other industries. Van Velsor and Leslie's (1995) work and our own suggest that institutions and presidents need to consider the causes of turnover to inform decision making.

This study advances the number of presidencies ending in involuntary turnover as a preferable metric of the challenges facing presidents. Although measures of average term of office can provide some insight, the use of involuntary turnover provides a clearer picture of the challenges facing presidents today. Indeed, our data support the concerns raised by researchers and presidents themselves regarding the problems presidents confront and the impact on their longevity in office. College presidents, similar to chief executives in other fields, must manage challenges that can bring about derailment. Van Velsor and Leslie's (1995) framework and our data show that common derailment factors exist across institutions. In addition, our findings provide empirical data to demonstrate that popular perceptions about the causes of presidential turnover are unfounded, including the notion that athletics scandals present challenges that are among the most common causes of involuntary turnovers. Managing Division I athletics presents a great challenge for many presidents (Kiley, 2012; Nocera, 2013), and athletics controversies have recently impacted several high-profile universities (Penn State, Ohio State, North Carolina, etc.). However, the number of these incidents has not escalated as dramatically as popular rhetoric contends. Rather, involuntary turnover has increased across the range of categories identified in this study. While simple athletics controversies may resonate more in the public consciousness than poor fit, judgment, or loss of board confidence due to the media coverage of athletics (Kiley, 2013a), a broader conceptualization of causes for involuntary turnover is paramount to draw a full picture of a president's term, challenges, and success.

### ***Implications for practice***

This study argued that the challenges facing presidents are escalating and culminated in more frequent involuntary turnover in recent years. Indeed, while no single cause accounted for the increase in involuntary turnover, our data demonstrated how a range of presidential challenges are now more likely to end a presidency. The modern university presidency presents a proverbial minefield that future and current presidents must survive. The hierarchical power and legitimacy of their roles magnifies many presidential decisions (Birnbaum, 1992), while presidents are also buffeted by external events that may dramatically influence their power and decisions, as well as the perceptions of various stakeholders (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005; Meyer & Scott, 1983). As if these challenges were not enough, presidents must also lead institutions in the face of significant pressures confronting higher education as a whole (Brewer et al., 2002; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

The implications of our study for presidents are many. Although presidents undoubtedly have some understanding of the challenges they face, our data provide evidence of the issues that most often lead to involuntary turnover. Presidents of course have limited ability to influence external events, but we believe our data can provide useful to navigating those issues that remain in their control. One of our recommendations is that presidents take special care in responding to the issues outlined here because of their job-ending potential. Moreover, presidents should foster relationships with board members and the campus community to build social currency that may temper crises occurring during the normal life of an institution.

Beyond these recommendations, our analysis of involuntary turnovers since 2008 holds additional importance for presidents. Because the Great Recession of 2008 caused substantial funding challenges for higher education institutions, including state funding decreases and changing cost shares (Barr & Turner, 2013), one might have expected an increase in involuntary turnover related to issues of finance. In contrast, the category of financial controversies was the only category in which more involuntary turnovers occurred *before* 2008. Thus, our findings suggest that something beyond financial issues occurred in these institutions. To examine this aspect of our analysis in more detail, we return to the theories frequently used in the literature related to derailment and presidential turnover. Our data suggest that both of the primary research traditions for CEO turnover may have utility in examining involuntary turnover among university presidents in the wake of the Great Recession.

In particular, we believe that factors of organizational context can aid our understanding of involuntary turnover. For example, why does a particular crisis or controversy lead to one president's departure while another president facing the same issue remains in office? The literature examining organizational performance (Hotchkiss, 1995) and organizational characteristics (Becker-Blease, Elkinawy, Hoag, & Slater, 2016) may offer useful conceptualizations of this issue, but more research in these areas would help further frame the organizational context of presidential tenure. Our view of the data leads us to believe that press coverage may play a substantial role in how campus constituencies view a president, especially in times of crisis; inquiries along this line could echo the work of Farrell and Whidbee (2002).

Organizational context provides a critical theoretical approach to helping researchers understand the larger themes and trends related to involuntary turnover. However, this tradition fails to fully capture the variety of challenges that we found in our data. For this study, we did not consider if causes for turnover were appropriate or even necessary. The theoretical research on ritual scapegoating, for instance, proves quite useful for evaluating involuntary turnover as a symbolic activity (Gamson & Scotch, 1964) for either internal or external constituencies (Pfeffer, 1983). Several of the presidents that we identified as leaving because of involuntary turnover left or were forced out in an attempt to move the institution

past a controversy. This finding would suggest that in at least some cases, the symbolic benefit of involuntary turnover was evidenced in our data.

Our study has implications for institutions and other institutional stakeholders. The interpersonal dimensions of the presidential search process must be considered. For example, five out of six involuntary turnovers for poor fit occurred after 2008. Once a president is hired, there is only so much that can be done about poor fit. University decision makers and most notably trustees should put far more time, effort, and attention into the search process to better identify potential fit issues prior to a new president's arrival. Therefore, there is a need to further explore research on personal characteristics and behavior of presidents as noted by Leslie and Van Velsor (1996). In some instances, the presidential search process ought to be restructured to provide more opportunities for interaction and feedback among all campus constituencies. Presidential candidates also need to invest significant time and resources to ensure campus fit from their end. Of all the causes of involuntary turnover, poor fit may be the most damaging to the institution and president because of the rapid turnover and controversy that often occur. If due diligence could minimize its likelihood, presidents and boards would be well served to do everything in their power to ensure fit.

Based on our findings, we contend that trustees have a particular and under-examined role in impacting presidents' success or failure. While prior research has considered trustee decision making in areas of evaluating presidential performance (Fisher, 1996; Michael, Schwartz, & Balraj, 2001), managing, policymaking, and decision making (Bok, 2003; Pusser & Turner, 2004), and composition and relationships (Pusser, Slaughter, & Thomas, 2006; Woodward, 2009), our study illuminated how boards should manage presidents and decision making. Selecting a president is considered one of the most significant roles of trustees (Chait, Holland, & Taylor, 1996; Plinske & Packard, 2010), but as noted in the discussion of poor fit, some involuntary turnovers are rooted in initial hiring decisions. Our findings suggest that a focus on potential causes of involuntary turnover during hiring may reduce turnover. Moreover, we identified board members as significant players in several causes for involuntary turnover as they were involved in nearly every instance of presidential turnover. Boards directly determine whether many issues, such as financial controversy, athletics controversy, judgment, and of course, loss of board confidence meet the threshold of involuntary turnover. The case of loss of board confidence especially holds implications for boards. We did not attempt to place blame or responsibility for turnovers as a result of board confidence; clearly, loss of confidence can occur due to issues related to presidents, boards, or both. Regardless of who is responsible, however, trustees are ultimately responsible for judging the severity of problems facing a president. In the end, the findings of this study identify the key areas that threaten a successful presidential term and warrant substantial attention from the board should they arise.

### Conceptual model of presidential turnover

Incorporating Van Velsor and Leslie's (1995) framework and our findings, the broad categories of involuntary turnover between higher education and other industries exhibit similarities to literature in business and higher education that are sufficient for us to offer the following conceptual model of presidential turnover (see Figure 2).

Our presidential turnover conceptual model attempts to clarify the complex phenomenon of presidential turnover by identifying significant concepts and simplifying reality. While the extent to which the model can help explain turnover across all colleges and universities remains uncertain, this model offers researchers a set of causes, aligned with the literature and empirical findings, to guide future investigation. In particular, we suggest that additional examination in other institutional contexts will help advance the "analytic generalizability" (Yin, 1994) of what we propose here.

Voluntary turnover has a strong base of empirical support in the literature (Dess & Shaw, 2001; Park & Shaw, 2013; Shaw et al., 1998; Stovel & Bontis, 2002), as evidenced in the model. This study concentrated on providing additional data to thematically organize the causes for involuntary turnover. Our findings revealed four broad causes of involuntary turnover: controversy, loss of confidence, poor judgment, and poor fit. In providing this model, we do not assume

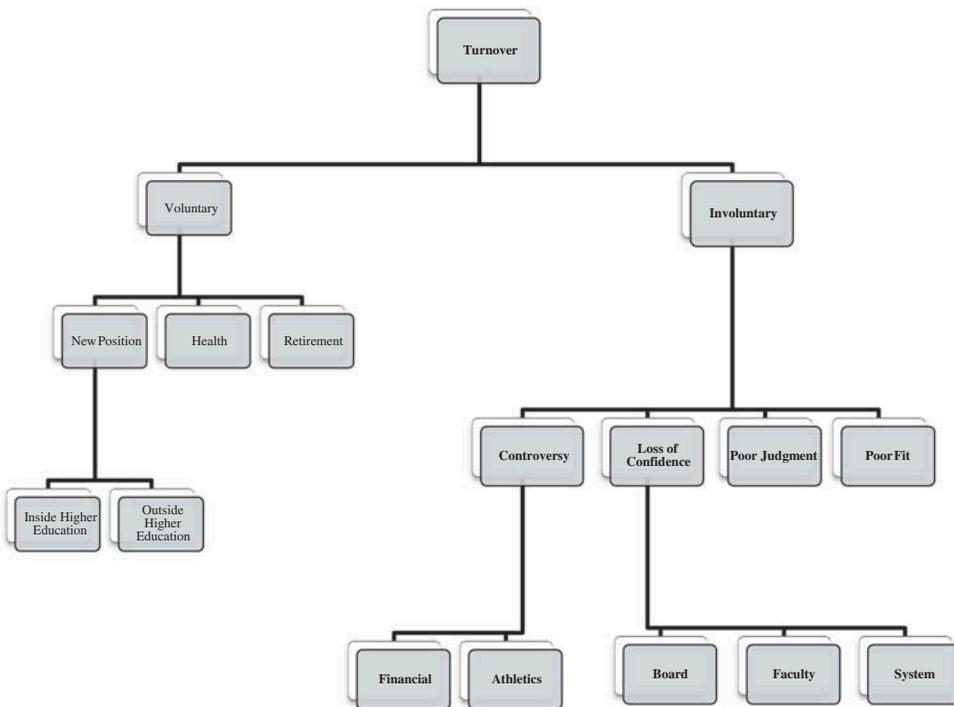


Figure 2. Presidential turnover conceptual model.

that various causes are static or mutually exclusive. In considering the extant scholarship on presidents (ACE, 2012; Birnbaum, 1989; Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Eckel & Kezar, 2011, 2016; Green, 2012; Levin, 1992; Martin & Samels, 2004; Padilla, 2004; Tekneipe, 2014), the complexity of the presidency indicates that over time, categories may change, overlap, and connect with one another. Given this reality, developing this model must be an iterative process that will benefit from additional scholarship to refine and extend our work.

### ***Proposed research agenda***

Many possible avenues exist for further investigation of presidential turnover. Our study serves as an initial inquiry into the evolving motivations for presidential turnover in American higher education. Although our findings revealed some remarkable trends, it may be useful to look at a broader array of institutions and presidents. We focused on Division I institutions, yet other patterns may emerge from considering institutions of different types, trustee characteristics, statewide or institutional political environments, or regions. Moreover, we did not focus on presidents or institutions with multiple involuntary turnovers, but these special cases may prove especially revealing. While we focused specifically on the causes of turnover in higher education, similarities to business and management industries may provide useful comparisons and avenues to explore further. Simply put, if presidents and other chief executives get derailed for similar reasons, strategies for success may prove transferable between higher education and other industries.

Additional research should explicitly examine whether the increase in involuntary turnovers—particularly at the high-profile institutions included in this study—are influencing this trend. Our study provides evidence that certain issues may cause presidents to be forced out of their roles; however, additional data and analysis are needed to evaluate whether these turnovers are justified. First-person accounts, such as direct interviews with participants and decision makers in a turnover, would additionally clarify the role presidential performance played in a leadership turnover.

Finally, there exists an opportunity to understand the role of an institution's external environment in a president leaving office. For example, our findings illustrate an increase in the number of presidential turnovers since 2008. Understanding the roles of the faltering economy, the challenging political environment, and external calls for accountability at this time would be useful for researchers and practitioners alike. Furthermore, management research suggests that poor performance and environmental changes serve as catalysts for executive-level leadership turnover (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Tushman & Rosenkopf, 1996; Wiersema & Bantel, 1993); future research should consider to what extent these metrics predict and explain involuntary turnover in higher education. For personal characteristics, how do communication styles,

leadership team cohesion, and donor perceptions of presidents influence the likelihood of a voluntary or involuntary turnover? For environmental factors, how do institutional revenue, rankings, incoming student profile, or faculty salaries predict a successful presidential tenure? These factors and other performance metrics would help to justify and evaluate overall trends driving involuntary turnovers.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study and our overall understanding of today's highly complex presidency (Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Martin & Samels, 2004) suggest that campuses would benefit from heightened awareness of the challenges facing presidents. In particular, presidents may face issues in their first 2 years in office that present particular dangers for a successful term. Increased awareness of the trends and causes of involuntary turnover can enable colleges currently seeking new presidents to better anticipate problems and attempt to proactively respond to concerns before they become irreparable. For college presidents (current and aspiring), an understanding of the causes of involuntary turnover can serve as a warning signal when dealing with career-threatening issues. As a result, presidents can better anticipate challenges and make decisions to increase the likelihood of a successful term.

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