The President-CAO Working Relationship

Top Challenges Facing U.S. Presidents and CAOs —

and Three Ways Presidents Can Aid Their Chief Academic Officers

Kent Devereaux, President, Goucher College

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Five Challenges Facing Chief Academic Officers

1

Workforce & Staff Turnover

44% report higher-than-usual staff turnover • Down from 64% post-pandemic

Administrative operations strained; departmental bottlenecks across academic affairs.

2

Faculty Retention

64% of faculty leave to secure more competitive salaries elsewhere • 33% cite burnout

Instructional talent pipelines have tightened markedly since the pandemic.

3

Budget & Program Viability

39% say the job is now more financial than academic

The role is shifting from academic stewardship toward fiscal triage.

4

Board & Legislative Program Pressure

NEW: 21% cite board/political pressure to change the general education requirements

External actors increasingly dictate the academic portfolio and climate.

5

AI Readiness & Curricular Redesign

51% of CAOs cite faculty/staff resistance as major obstacle to adoption • Meanwhile, 89% of CAOs use AI in their daily work

An urgent, unfunded mandate arriving faster than governance can respond.

Five Challenges Facing Presidents

1

Financial Constraints

25% call finances the single hardest part of the job

Deficits and viability pressures displace strategic planning and innovation.

2

Enrollment

20% cite enrollment hardest part of job • 46% rank it a top-three concern

Sustainable student numbers remain the defining institutional scoreboard.

3

Workload & Scope of the Role

56% doubt one person can reasonably manage the role

The modern presidency has outgrown a single person's span of control.

4

Political Interference

Rising external intervention in governance decisions

State scrutiny of academic freedom, autonomy, and institutional strategy.

5

Student Mental Health

61% report moderate or extreme concern

Well-being pressures driven by social media, loneliness, reduced socialization.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Same Storm, Different Altitude

Dimension	CAO's Frame	President's Frame	Relationship
Money	Academic budgets; program viability	Deficits; revenue diversification	**Same pressure, different altitude**
People	Staff and faculty turnover	Personal span of control	**Shared capacity crisis**
Students	Curriculum, AI readiness, program mix	Enrollment and mental health	**Interdependency**
Politics	Program pressure; free-speech stress	Managing the Board	**The President is the firewall**
Technology	AI policy vacuum; redesign	Rarely a presidential top five	**The clearest disconnect**

The structural pattern: the president's challenges are external and existential; the CAO's are internal and operational.

External shocks arrive in the president's office — then convert into internal work in the CAO's office, often without a transfer of authority.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Three Areas Where Presidents Can Help CAOs Succeed

01

Absorb Board & Political Pressure

Be a shock absorber, not a transmission line

02

Match Authority to Accountability

Budget discretion equal to budget responsibility

03

Own the Enrollment-Academic Handoff

Joint ownership of the levers that drive the metrics

Each addresses the same root cause: "accountability flows downward faster than authority does."

AREA ONE

Act as a Political Shock Absorber

01

CAOs report increased board and legislative preference for professional programs over general education. When that pressure passes through unmediated, faculty interpret the CAO — not the legislature — as the author of the threat.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

- President owns the board and legislative relationship on program questions, with the President and CAO in sync on academic rationale.
- Explicit agreement on which external demands the president absorbs, negotiates, or passes through.
- Defend academic freedom publicly and first; 39% of CAOs report free-speech stress is due to an unaddressed incident.

WHY IT WORKS: It restores the provost's credibility with faculty — the only real currency the position has.

AREA TWO

02

Match Budget Authority to Budget Responsibility

39% of provosts say the job has become more financial than academic. Many describe a cut target with no discretion over how to meet it — full accountability for the pain, no authority over the design.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

- Multi-year academic budget rather than annual reactive cuts, enabling strategy instead of triage.
- Delegated reallocation authority within academic affairs — including protecting strategic investments while cutting elsewhere.
- A shared program-review framework the president co-signs, so sunsetting a program is institutional, not personal.
- Presidential air cover on the staff/faculty turnover problem: compensation, search flexibility, and backfill authority.

WHY IT WORKS: It converts the CAO from a cost administrator back into an academic strategist — the role they were hired for.

AREA THREE

03

Own the Enrollment–Academic Handoff Jointly

Enrollment is one of the president's top-three concerns, and the academic portfolio is the primary lever on it — so the CAO and the president must be in alignment with one academic vision.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

- A standing joint accountability structure across academic affairs and enrollment management.
- Treat AI readiness as a presidential priority with dedicated budget and board-facing narrative, not an academic-affairs side project.
- Connect student mental health (83% CAO concern; 61% presidential concern) to faculty workload and course design.

THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE

Presidents who close the gaps keep CAOs five to six years; those who don't run a search every two to three years.

Notes:

1. Colleen Flaherty and Sara Custer, eds., *2026 Survey of College and University Presidents* (Washington, DC: Inside Higher Ed / Hanover Research, 2026).
2. Colleen Flaherty and Sara Custer, eds., *2026 Survey of College and University Chief Academic Officers* (Washington, DC: Inside Higher Ed / Hanover Research, 2026).

Kent Devereaux, President
Goucher College
1021 Dulaney Valley Rd.
Baltimore, MD 21204
kent.devereaux@goucher.edu