In what was characterized by many journalists and political pundits as the ‘age’ or ‘year of the outsider’ (Brooks, 2015; Fehrnstrom, 2015; Sexton, 2015) there was widespread interest in US presidential candidates with a diverse set of professional experiences and affiliations, including some with no experience in the political sector. At the same time, a number of institutions of higher education have both hired and in some cases subsequently terminated senior leaders with ‘outsider’ credentials. Twenty percent of college presidents in the United States now come from fields outside academia, an increase from 13 percent just six years ago (Cook, 2012). The attraction of ‘outsider’ candidates for senior leadership positions may be inspired by the distinguished personal characteristics of a candidate, a perceived need for change within an institution or sector, or the emergence of a more generic view as to the nature of competencies required for outstanding leadership. Whatever the motivations and rationale underpinning such decisions, these actions raise interesting questions about the extent to which particular sectors and institutions within them, along with the set of competencies required to lead them, are truly unique. Considering these issues from the perspective of higher education, two questions are considered in this conceptual article: (1) are colleges and universities unique as organizations as has long been a widely-held view within the academy; and (2) to what extent are the capabilities that are necessary for effective leadership in higher education unique?

Keywords: leadership, college/university administration, leadership competencies
Contemporary context for studying leadership in higher education

As debates continue at the regional and national level about the merits of selecting leaders with little or no political experience, comparable questions are of increasing relevance within colleges and universities. The timing for this analysis is particularly appropriate given high profile hiring announcements of leaders appointed to US higher education leadership roles from the political sector, including former Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, at the University of North Carolina; the former governor of Indiana, Mitchell Daniels, at Purdue University; and the former Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, at the University of California. The recruitment of college and university presidents whose primary leadership experience is in business and industry is also becoming more common, as illustrated by the recent appointment of former businessman, Bruce Harreld, at the University of Iowa. The aspirations that may be brought to colleges and universities by ‘outsider’ leaders are promising in many ways. At the same time, a number of controversial actions and comments by some senior college and university leaders whose primary professional experience was acquired outside of higher education have drawn widespread criticism, suggesting that experience and knowledge of the culture of higher education may be a critical component for successful leadership. Some examples include the resignation of president and former IBM executive, Tim Wolfe, at the University of Missouri following his widely-criticized handling of racially-charged incidents on campus, and the decision to appear in a photograph wearing stereotypical Mexican costumes by the president and former Kentucky budget director and chief economist, James Ramsey, at Louisville University. Some recent comments by these ‘outsider’ presidents have also caused alarm, including controversial comments by President Bruce Harreld at the University of Iowa (i.e. ‘There was ‘one way’ to prepare lessons and any instructor who goes into a class without having done so “should be shot”’ – Woodhouse, 2015). In another recent case, comments regarding student retention by the president and former financial industry executive, Simon Newman, at Mount St. Mary’s University, contributed to his recent resignation (e.g. ‘You just have to drown the bunnies. Put a Glock to their heads.’). Such incidents led to a published debate by various scholars and authors in The New York Times (2016), with some defending the merits of hiring presidents with sophisticated business acumen, and others pushing
back against this notion of hiring senior leaders from outside of the academy.

**Conceptual rationale**
Stepping beyond the politicized debates regarding these controversies that stir strong sentiments from proponents and detractors, the larger and more enduring issues of concern point to the need for a nuanced exploration into organizations of higher education and the capabilities needed to lead them effectively. Specifically, in what ways, if at all, are colleges and universities truly unique as an organizational type, and if they are unique, are there specialized competencies required to effectively lead in higher education? This article considers these questions through an examination of the relevant scholarly literature, and concludes with a proposed two-dimensional leadership competencies framework that helps to identify critical concepts, and offers potential benefits as a research framework to address these important higher education leadership questions. In the spirit of pursuing an introductory investigation into an issue of both scholarly and applied importance, the framework proposed is exploratory in nature. For these reasons, our goal is to synthesize various theoretical foundations and existing lines of research, with the hope of framing a perspective that clarifies the issues involved and inspires future investigation on this topic. Put another way, the question of whether university presidents appointed from outside the academy without prior higher education experience can succeed – and the extent to which such appointments present significant benefits or challenges to their institutions – are of considerable importance for institutions of higher education. Providing a definitive answer to these questions lies beyond the scope of this article; rather, the goal here is to suggest a framework that may be helpful in delineating these significant issues and inspiring and framing future empirical research on this topic.

The outsider phenomenon in both contemporary political life and across higher education nationally comes at a time when leaders confront a myriad of complex challenges. Within higher education

---

1 The challenges facing college and university presidents are not limited to examples within the US. Rather, as pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers, more than 25 percent of Canadian university presidents have failed to complete their first term in office (Paul, 2016). Although these candidates do not hold ‘outsider’ credentials, the cases at the University of British Columbia and Concordia University point to the inherent difficulties of the presidential role and the challenges raised by Board of Governor appointments.
specifically, there is a need for senior leaders who can persuasively articulate higher education’s needs, purposes, and aspirations for increasingly questioning publics (Ruben et al., 2017). As Molly Broad, outgoing president of the American Council on Education, noted, this is a ‘very important moment in the life of American higher education where the rate of change, the velocity of change, and the forces of change are making it ever more challenging to find successful leaders’ (Eckel and Hartley, 2011). On campuses of all kinds, leaders often struggle to engage boards, legislators, faculty, staff, students, and the many other constituencies in efforts to create a shared sense of institutional priorities and agendas for future action. And at the unit, program, and department level, it is sometimes quite difficult to identify, attract, and retain faculty and staff who are motivated and prepared to assume the many needed leadership roles. As described by Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, former president of George Washington University:

‘An awful lot of presidents who are stepping down are doing so under pressure that is not visible to the public at large [contributing to his concern] that the next generation of presidents, concerned with job security, are going to be less entrepreneurial and less committed to change at exactly the time that we need those characteristics’ (Schmidt, 2016).

This article considers to what extent these leadership challenges and the competencies required to address them are unique, focusing first on the issue of whether and how colleges and universities – and the units within them – differ from organizations in other sectors. The article continues with a summary of the implications of this ‘uniqueness analysis’ for the selection and development of leaders based on a review of the scholarly literature that has examined leadership in higher education. The goal is not to analyze or critique the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of senior leaders with outsider credentials, but rather to interrogate and explore those characteristics that are and are not unique to higher education – characteristics that have the potential to significantly influence the way we think about, recruit, develop, and evaluate college and university leaders. Finally, through a proposed two-dimensional competency framework, we present one possible way of exploring the preparation, analysis, and selection of leaders in higher education based on this introductory analysis.

**The unique character of colleges and universities as organizations**

There is a widely-held view within the academy that colleges and
universities are unique as organizations in that they serve ‘higher,’ ‘special,’ and particularly ‘noble’ purposes. Frank Rhodes (2001: xi), president emeritus of Cornell University, captures this view in the following passage:

‘Higher education informs public understanding, cultivates public taste, and contributes to the nation’s well-being as it nurtures and trains each new generation of architects, artists, authors, business leaders, engineers, farmers, lawyers, physicians, poets, scientists, social workers, and teachers as well as a steady succession of advocates, dreamers, doers, dropouts, parents, politicians, preachers, prophets, social reformers, visionaries, and volunteers who leaven, nudge, and shape the course of public life.’

In an analysis of the nature of higher education institutions, Manning (2012) presents a thoughtful summary of organizational perspectives that reinforce a view that differentiates colleges and universities from other organizations. As indicated in Table 1, each perspective builds upon an existing theoretical foundation and offers a vivid image as a way of viewing higher education organizations. Furthermore, each of these perspectives might be coupled with alternative ways of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Perspective</th>
<th>Theoretical Foundation</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organized anarchy</td>
<td>Political philosophy</td>
<td>Anarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegium</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Carnival and theater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy</td>
<td>Modernist</td>
<td>Machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New science</td>
<td>Philosophy of science</td>
<td>Hall of mirrors, hologram, woven fabric, the “world as a great thought”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td>Feminist theory</td>
<td>Web</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Journey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Manning (2012)
understanding the dynamics of organizations and social behavior – such as constructivist approaches – in order to provide a more nuanced and holistic understanding of organizing and organizations.

Beginning with the organized anarchy metaphor, three properties of higher education fit into this perspective: problematic goals, unclear technology, and fluid participation among members (Cohen and March, 1986). The second frame, collegium, provides a perspective that highlights collegiality, cooperation, and equality within the organization. Manning explores the nuances of faculty culture from this perspective, including faculty rank and expert power, circular communication and consensus decision-making, leadership as ‘first among equals’, faculty socialization, academic freedom, and tenure. These concepts capture the flat, circular structure of colleges and universities (e.g. lack of a hierarchical structure, autonomous and independent members, dependence on expert power, rather than positional power).

The political frame offers a provocative image of colleges and universities as a jungle, contexts that are found to be ‘competitive, treacherous, and suitable only for the most fit’ (Manning, 2012: 68). Defining characteristics of the political perspective include conflict as normal, powerful interest groups and coalitions, the prevalence of inactivity, fluid participation, and the existence of attention cues to which politically astute leaders must attend. From this viewpoint, the knowledge of power, authority, and decision-making in higher education is critical to the success of academic leadership. The fourth frame presented by Manning, cultural, is grounded in anthropology and highlights the ways in which meaning is constituted by members of the organization. A number of definitions of culture exist, including an often cited definition by noted anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973: 89): ‘[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [sic] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life’. Or, as defined by Schein (2015: 287): ‘[Culture is] a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems’. Two images are portrayed by the cultural perspective, carnival and theater, reflecting an emphasis on performance. As Manning (2012: 93) indicates, ‘Carnivals and theaters have actors and audiences, performers and observers who exercise vital roles in culture building’. The cultural perspective highlights a number of characteristics associated with
colleges and universities, including values and assumptions, subcultures, history, tradition, and context, storytellers, language, organizational sagas, symbols, and architecture, all of which play an important role in shaping the experience of all organizational stakeholders and leaders.

Bureaucracy, the fifth theoretical point of view, explores issues of order and rationality in higher education. Drawing on the work of Weber, the key characteristics under consideration include a hierarchical structure, the appointment of staff based on expertise and credentials, the concentration of authority at the top of the hierarchy, formal vertical communication and informal horizontal communication, rational and top-down decision making, standard operating procedures, and a division of labor and specialization. Additional concepts include the span of control of direct reports, the stability of personnel, and the location of power and control on a centralized and decentralized continuum. The image of a well-oiled machine emerges from this frame of bureaucracy.

The final perspectives, new science, feminist, and spiritual, reflect more contemporary ways of approaching the organization of higher education. The images posited by these various frames include a hallof mirrors/hologram/woven fabric/the ‘world as a great thought,’ web, and journey. A new science perspective, also known as an emergent or quantum paradigm, calls for a new way of understanding organizations – an alternative paradigm that views organizations as ‘complex and interrelated; thoroughly connected to the context and environments in which they exist; concerned with process and product; and open to a wide variety of styles and possibilities’ (ibid.: 136). The images associated with this perspective portray connections and dynamism in organizational life. The feminist perspective views the organization as a web of inclusion – one that ‘conveys pervasive connectedness. Like a spider web, touching one part of the organization causes systematic tremors to pass through all other parts’ (ibid.: 161). This approach to exploring colleges and universities describes the organizations as adaptable, open, responsive, and characterized by inclusive collaborative leadership practices. The final frame, spiritual, invokes the image of a journey to describe the ways in which organizational members make sense of meaning and the ways in which organizations accomplish their missions. The soul and spirit of organizations, along with their leaders’ commitment to the spiritual growth of their followers, are considered in this frame.

Three classical theories, summarized by Manning (2012), help to categorize these and other characteristics that appear to be unique to
higher education. First, colleges and universities can be described as ‘organized anarchies’ (Cohen et al., 1972). This dimension captures the high degree of goal ambiguity, unclear decision-making processes, and fluid participation that is illustrative of contemporary colleges and universities. The second theory, attributed to Weick (1976), describes colleges and universities as ‘loosely coupled systems.’ Glassman (1973) describes this organizational quality as the extent to which departments in an organization are aligned. As a loosely coupled system, ‘any location in an organization (top, middle, or bottom) contains interdependent elements that vary in the number and strength of their interdependencies’ (Orton and Weick, 2011: 316). The elements of the organizational system are separate, yet interconnected, interdependent, and responsive to the other (Weick, 1976). This theory is particularly helpful as one considers the more tightly coupled processes in administrative and support divisions of colleges and universities, compared to the more loosely coupled academic departments (Hendrickson et al., 2012: 30). The third dominant theory captures the college or university as a ‘professional bureaucracy/adhocracy’ (Mintzberg, 1979). According to Hendrickson et al. (2012: 30), ‘Academic organizations have been commonly considered to be professional bureaucracies because faculty members are hired for the professional knowledge and have a high degree of autonomy to perform their work’. These three descriptions – organized anarchies, loosely coupled systems, and professional bureaucracies/adhocracies – summarize the classical ways of understanding institutions of higher education.

Each of these perspectives presents a way of viewing colleges and universities that individually and collectively point to their distinctiveness as organizational types. A similar point is made by Manning (2012: 1), when she notes that ‘Higher education is a complex enterprise open to a wide range of understandings and interpretations […] Those working in higher education can only make sense of this complexity by understanding and using a combination of theoretical perspectives through which to view their work’. Much of the contemporary writing on these unique characteristics of higher education build upon the foundational content presented in Birnbaum (1988) and Clark (1983).

It is, of course, the case that there can be substantial variability among institutions, considered collectively. While the three-fold mission of teaching, scholarship and service that guides activity for most colleges and universities differentiates higher education institutions from organizations in other sectors, it is also the case that each
institution has its own unique approach to this mission, and the interpretation and weighting of these elements varies considerably from one institution to another. As Carpenter-Hubin and Snover (2013: 27) describe it, ‘American colleges and universities are like snowflakes, with structures that appear similar to the casual observer, though in fact no two have been found to be exactly alike’. If higher education is understood to be a unique and special type of organization, then each institution, school, department, and program may also be seen as distinctive and special – a point of view often voiced by faculty and staff within the academy.

Pursuing this line of thought further, one can expand the list of defining characteristics that at the outset may appear to be unique to the sector of higher education. These include:

- Multiple, sometimes blurry purpose(s)/mission(s);
- Unclear ‘bottom line’;
- Structural complexity;
- Loosely coupled elements, decentralization, and ‘shadow systems’, whereby individual departments and units create their own structures and services (e.g., technology and accounting functions) because the central systems do not provide adequate or necessary services;
- Extensive array of stakeholders and cultures;
- Distinctive internal administrative and academic units with (often vastly) different structures, cultures, accountability requirements, core values, and leadership traditions and practices;
- Differing core values among administration, academics, staff, and students;
- Decentralized decision making;
- Traditions of autonomy, self-direction, academic freedom, and collegial decision making;
- Absence of attention to succession and transition planning.

This initial constellation of characteristics may not apply equally well to all types of universities, and one might also point to similarities with some other types of organizations based on these characteristics. That said, the list is meant to highlight various aspects of higher education organizations that many perceive – and are often described – to be unique to colleges and universities. Such a list contributes to a perspective in which higher education institutions can be viewed as distinctive organizational entities. Reinforcing this distinctive perspective are comments by a professor at the University of Iowa commenting on the appointment of Bruce Herrald, who as noted earlier,
acquired most of his organizational experience in a business environment. In her recent piece in *The New Yorker*, Vara (2015) analyzed the extent to which businesspeople make good university presidents. A critic of Herreld’s appointment and professor at the University of Iowa, Kembrew McLeod, suggested the following in Vara’s essay: ‘Universities are one of the few areas of American culture – and, really, Western culture – where market logic doesn’t trump everything else.’ As these comments suggest, when challenging the appointment of presidents with ‘outsider’ credentials, the argument that higher education is unique is attractive and – and, of course, that leads quite naturally to the position that the required competencies needed by its leaders are also unique.

**Similarities between colleges and universities and other organizations**

As compelling as the ‘uniqueness’ perspectives seem to be, it can also be argued that colleges and universities may not be as distinctive as they are often assumed to be. At a very general level of analysis, it is certainly the case that colleges and universities – and their constituent units – share several general characteristics in common with other sectors and other organizations, including:

- Organizational structures are often composed of sub-units or component parts, and interactions between and among these units is necessary to the functioning of the whole;
- A wide array of internal and external stakeholders who influence and are influenced by the activities of the organization;
- A dependency on a variety of resources, including financial, human, and material, are necessary to establishing and sustaining the organization;
- Decision making across organizations take on a number of different dimensions, including both strategic and operational, with differing levels of engagement by members of the organizations depending on the topic and circumstance;
- The traditions and culture(s) play critical roles in shaping both what is expected and accepted across the organization;
- Both formal and informal leadership functions are necessary for pursuing a shared direction, for organizational cohesion, and for advancing planned change;
- Organizations operate within a larger environment, and this system imposes constraints and creates opportunities;
- Bureaucratic work structures and processes are necessary for the accomplishment of routine tasks.
Additionally, other organizations – such as many in government or healthcare – are often extremely complex, are composed of numerous subcultures, and serve multiple stakeholders that often have competing or conflicting needs. Moreover, the ‘loosely coupled system’ label that describes higher education may also be used to describe government, healthcare, and virtual organizations. Like democracies or republics, colleges and universities have traditions of collective governance and the modern multi-versity is particularly like government, with diffuse mission(s) and multiple stakeholders (Lawrence, 2015). Much like cultural/artistic organizations, government, and civic organizations, among many others, multiple mission(s), blurry purpose(s), and competing bottom line(s) call into question measures of productivity, value, and performance in higher education. It is interesting to note in this connection, that the widely cited and highly influential Malcolm Baldrige framework identifies the same seven components as critical to excellence in organizations of all types across all sectors (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2016; Ruben, 2016). The many similarities that transcend organizational types suggest the need for caution when making assumptions about the uniqueness of higher education as an organization. As we will discuss in more detail later, these similarities also can be seen as challenging the view that leaders with credentials from outside of the academy may not be as appropriate or well-prepared to lead within higher education as those leaders with academic credentials.

An evolving organizational paradigm

The perspective that higher education is wholly unique as a sector may well have its roots in a time when differences between colleges and universities and other organizations were more apparent. As McGettigan (2009) notes, however, when one considers the ways higher education institutions, schools, and departments are described today, increasing commonality has become apparent:

‘In recent years, colleges and universities have encountered increasing pressure to operate like businesses. As the logic goes, businesses must survive in a cutthroat climate of unfettered competition and thus these organizations need to be leaner, more efficient and more responsive to the needs of their customers than not-for-profit organizations, such as colleges and universities. In the unforgiving crucible of free market competition, only the fittest businesses (e.g., those that deliver the highest quality products at fair market value), will survive.’

Higher Education Review, Vol 49, No 3, 2017. ISSN 0018-1609. 37
Extending this way of thinking, colleges and universities may be understood to be more than just one business; rather, each institution might be viewed as consisting of many businesses, including, but not limited to, research centers, hotels, hospitals, athletic programs, recreation centers, dining halls, and parking venues. As Bruce McPheron (2015), vice president of agricultural administration and dean at Ohio State University, succinctly noted, ‘Higher ed is a business, I’m a CEO, our product is the future’. No matter how they are described, the similar trends across organizational types, including business and higher education, are worthy of observation and analysis.

**Vertical and horizontal approaches to studying higher education leadership**

As is apparent from the foregoing discussion, one can reasonably conclude that colleges and universities – and each of the units that compose them – are indeed unique in some respects. At the same time, they are also very much like other organizations from other sectors in a number of regards – and likely becoming increasingly more so. Given this conclusion, another question arises: Is effective higher education leadership fundamentally different from effective leadership in other sectors and other organizational contexts? The existing research in this area is instructive, especially given the ongoing debate regarding the recruitment and hiring of ‘outsider’ candidates as senior leaders in higher education.

Many, if not most, efforts to address the issue of leadership in higher education begin with a focus on colleges and university leadership roles and current leaders and leadership practices within colleges and universities (Birnbaum, 1988; Gmelch, 2013; Gmelch and Buller, 2015). The aim of what might be characterized as *vertical* studies (Ruben, 2012; Ruben *et al.*, 2017) is to study a particular institutional context (e.g. higher education) in order to identify specific characteristics or competencies associated with effective leadership. A vertical approach begins with the assumption that a unique set of competencies is essential for effective leadership within a specific context – higher education, in this case. This approach may presume, for instance, that effective senior leadership requires knowledge and skills specific to higher education and to an individual discipline or technical area and position.

**Vertically-oriented studies**

Robert Birnbaum (1988: 308) presents the rationale for vertical studies of higher education leadership in the following extract:

---

‘If a “typical” business organization and “typical” university were compared, the university would exhibit less specialization of work activities, a greater specialization by expertise, a flatter hierarchy, lower interdependence of parts, less control over “raw materials”, low accountability, and less visible role performance […] The differences between academic institutions and business firms are significant enough that systems of coordination and control effective in one of these types of organization might not have the same consequences in the other. In particular, it might be expected that colleges and businesses might require different approaches to leadership.’

TABLE 2
Five major vertical studies in higher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qualitative:</strong> Used a critical incident technique; Surveyed senior administrative leaders, participants of University of Wisconsin’s Extension Administrative Leadership Program (EALP).</td>
<td><strong>Qualitative:</strong> Thirty ACE fellows were surveyed and asked to describe core higher education leadership competencies. Feedback of about 100 senior administrators and college presidents was considered before the final HELEC list was developed.</td>
<td><strong>Quantitative:</strong> HELEC inventory was developed consisting of 59 core leadership competencies based on McDaniel’s model. 295 participants (athletic directors, senior student affairs officers, and chief academic officers) rated the importance of each statement on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5.</td>
<td><strong>Quantitative:</strong> A mixed-methods replication study to compare leadership competencies between the original sample applied to a national sample of chief business officers (CBOs).</td>
<td><strong>Qualitative:</strong> Interviews with senior executive leaders to examine presidential leadership in higher education based on the identification of critical incidents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Agnew (2014)
Consistent with the vertical approach, Birnbaum, referring to the Commission on Strengthening Presidential Leadership (1984), goes on to discuss the unique factors in higher education that significantly limit the discretion and flexibility of academic leaders, including institutional and environmental constraints, decentralization of academic decision making, inflexibility of resource, confusion of organizational levels – technical, managerial, and institutional (Thompson, 1967), and two polar types of faculty: cosmopolitans and locals.

A number of significant and frequently-referenced studies of higher education leadership have utilized the vertical approach in recent years. These studies focus on current higher education leaders and study what these leaders identify as the characteristics most associated with effective academic leadership, as shown in Table 2. The first of these studies surveyed senior administrative leaders in the University of Wisconsin’s Extension Administrative Leadership Program (Wisniewski, 1999). In the second study McDaniel (2002) developed a list of higher education leadership competencies (HELC) thought to be necessary for effective leadership by fellows in the American Council on Education (ACE), and then assessed the importance of those competencies in a survey administered to senior administrators and college presidents. In the third study noted, Smith (2007) developed an inventory based on the earlier HELC model, and used it in a survey of athletic directors, senior student affairs officers, and chief academic officers. In a 2013 study sponsored by the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), Teniente-Matson (2013) applied the HELC model in a survey of chief business officers. Finally, Agnew (2014) conducted a study to identify the competencies associated with critical incidents in the tenure of university presidents. In addition to these studies, one may look to a wide array of scholarly projects that one could argue are vertical in their orientation, particularly as the authors explore the following specific topical areas of higher education leadership: change (Kezar and Eckel, 2002; Kezar et al., 2015; Lueddeke, 1999), accountability and assessment (Alexander, 2000; Fuller et al., 2016), diversity (Williams, 2012); planning (Dooris et al., 2004), and crisis (Garcia, 2015; Jacobsen, 2010).

Each of the five studies identified a series of competencies that were deemed important in the various higher education leadership groups considered, as depicted in Table 3. This approach to focusing on current leaders and leadership practices in various higher education roles offers many advantages. By studying current leaders and leadership practices in higher education, research on this topic maintains face validity, has
the potential for being comparable and useful across institutions, and focuses on leadership positions and leadership settings that are both familiar and readily accessible to researchers. Furthermore, seeking answers to effective higher education leadership from current leaders is logical due to growing interest in the topic and the expansion of leadership development programs designed for present and aspiring leaders in colleges and universities.

The vertical approach to understanding leadership in higher education is not without limitation. For example, given the numerous criticisms of higher education leadership and leadership practices, research that focuses solely on the perceptions and experiences of existing leaders as a point of reference may produce a limited view of the ideal competencies and practices necessary for effective leadership. College and university leaders are often criticized for their limited capabilities in vision setting, creative problem solving, crisis
management, expeditious action, cost containment, efficiency, adaptation to change, strategic perspective, revenue generation, and market analysis, for example – often said to reflect the lack of leadership training provided for academic leaders (Gmelch, 2013; Gmelch and Buller, 2015). If current leaders and leadership practices have significant limitations, would not studies of the perspectives of current leaders produce findings that incorporate, reflect, and reify those limitations? To say this differently, vertical studies which focus exclusively on current higher education leaders and leadership practices as guides to leadership recruitment and development efforts may well have the unintended consequence of validating frameworks for leadership recruitment, development, and evaluation that reproduce the current state of affairs, rather than helping to define the competencies needed to significantly advance the work of colleges and universities.

In addition, focusing exclusively on current practices in higher education to inform future academic leaders contains some additional limitations. Most notable among these, is that such research fails to benefit from the extensive and potentially relevant generic leadership literature beyond higher education. Moreover, as Smith and Wolverton (2010) found in their project, the functions and competencies which initially seem to be higher education-specific may actually be manifestations of more general leadership characteristics. For instance, might competencies such as ‘external relations,’ ‘student affairs,’ or ‘facilitation and collaboration’ more accurately be viewed as instances of broader and more general ‘communication competencies,’ ‘relationship-building competencies,’ or ‘emotional/social intelligence’ competencies?

Higher education–specific research initiatives may fail to take account of those leadership behaviors that are not job, position, or sector-specific, an increasing limitation as the scope of responsibilities for many leadership roles in higher education broadens. Thus, the focus on current leaders in higher education may have been more appropriate at a time when higher education functions – and the challenges confronting leaders – were more siloed and discipline- or specialty-focused than they appear to be now.

**Horizontally-oriented studies of leadership**
The vertical approach to conceptualizing and studying institutions of higher education contrasts with what might be characterized as more horizontal – or generic – approaches that proceed from the presumption that a general set of competencies is needed for effective leadership...
across a range of sectors, positions, and settings, of which higher education is but one example (Ruben, 2012; Ruben et al., 2017). Based on a horizontal view, effective academic leadership requires generic knowledge and skills that transcend specific disciplines, technical areas, or positions. This section will describe three examples of horizontal research frameworks and studies that explore the diverse, non-sector-specific competencies needed for effective leadership, recognizing that one could draw on any number of additional leadership studies that reflect this approach.

In his work on the topic of leadership development, John Maxwell (1993) offers ten leadership qualities that distinguish managers from leaders. These competencies comprise the following:

- Creating positive influence;
- Setting the right priorities;
- Modeling integrity;
- Creating positive change;
- Problem solving;
- Having the right positive attitude;
- Developing people;
- Charting the vision;
- Practicing self-discipline;
- Developing staff.

According to Maxwell, these ten qualities – or what we would characterize as leadership competencies – may be learned and cultivated over time. Maxwell’s work has inspired much research on the topic of leadership development and has further advanced the distinction between management and leadership.

A second horizontal approach to leadership is provided in the ongoing work on emotional intelligence. A number of scholars have contributed to current thinking about emotional intelligence, many building upon Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) and Goleman’s (1995, 1998, 2000) work in this area. According to Goleman (1998: 317), emotional intelligence is understood to be ‘The capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships’. Others have defined emotional intelligence as ‘The ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others’ (Mayer et al., 2000: 396) and ‘The ability to purposively adapt, shape, and select environments through the use of emotionally relevant processes’
These three definitions begin to capture why emotional intelligence may be labeled a horizontal competency – in order to excel as a leader, regardless of context, one must demonstrate an understanding of self, other, and context in order to effectively manage and express emotion.

Emotional intelligence is seen as an important competency for leaders in a variety of organizational settings – a competency that can be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
<th>Five major competency themes (Ruben, 2012)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analytic</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Assessment</td>
<td>Character, Personal Values, and Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Definition</td>
<td>Cognitive Ability and Creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder Analysis</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems/Organizational Analysis</td>
<td>High Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Technology to Support Leadership</td>
<td>Personal Conviction and Persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving</td>
<td>Self-Discipline and Self-Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review and Analysis of Results</td>
<td>Role Modeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
learned and developed over time (Goleman, 2004). In his work on the topic, Cherniss (2010: 184) acknowledges that success in work and life is often dependent upon more than one’s cognitive abilities; as he indicates, ‘it also depends on a number of personal qualities that involve the perception, understanding, and regulation of emotion’. Related to the process of social influence, Goleman (1998: 5) describes emotional intelligence as ‘the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he [sic] still won’t make a great leader’. Intellect alone will not predict effective leadership. This is an important idea to consider as we think more carefully about the development of leaders in American higher education – a context that contains some of the world’s best thinkers, scholar-teachers, and subject matter experts.

A third example of a horizontal approach is provided by Ruben’s
Leadership Competency Framework. As a result of completing a review and thematic analysis of approximately 100 academic and professional writings on the topic of leadership, Ruben created a competency framework and scorecard that identifies five thematic areas, or leadership competency clusters, each composed of a number of more specific competencies (see Table 4). The five competency areas and the sub-competencies are of importance to leadership effectiveness across multiple sectors and organizational types.

Proposed two-dimensional leadership competency framework

While these frameworks are limited in some ways because of their focus solely on the competencies of individual leaders, when appropriately analyzed, interpreted, and applied, vertically-oriented studies can provide extremely useful insights into the work associated with particular roles and positions. However, of the many writings that focus on the more generic and cross-cutting competencies required for leadership effectiveness – including the leadership competencies framework (Ruben, 2012) and emotional intelligence (Cherniss, 2010; Gignac, 2010; Goleman, 1995, 1998; Mayer et al., 2000) – a horizontal approach offers a valuable perspective into the broader competencies needed to excel in higher education leadership. Given the strengths and limitations associated with both vertical and horizontal studies of leadership effectiveness, we propose a two-dimensional leadership competency framework, as illustrated in Figure 1 – a framework that accommodates both the general and unique nature of higher education organizations and higher education leadership. The proposed conceptual framework, based on the Ruben (2012) model described in the previous section, may be useful for higher education leadership scholars and practitioners as they consider the types of competencies that may be uniquely important within a particular sector or specific position, while simultaneously recognizing the value of cross-cutting competencies that are characteristic of leadership across diverse sectors and positions. The proposed framework recognizes the strengths of both horizontal and vertical perspectives, illustrates the need to learn from within higher education, and points to the value of looking at competencies that are traditionally valued in sectors other than higher education, as well. Additionally, given our summary of the existing research and our own experiences working with a wide array of leaders in higher education, the proposed model has been designed to highlight the role of communication as especially critical among the horizontal competency areas. We suggest that this model can also be used as a component of a more comprehensive framework, such that specific competencies of
senior leadership candidates in higher education may be considered in the context of the broader ‘environmental’ factors, including culture, organizational structure, institutional values, and college and university goals. For example, the various competencies needed for a large public research institution may be vastly different than a smaller religiously affiliated institution. In fact, the competencies needed for leading two similar college or university-types may also be remarkably different based on the culture and norms of the given institution. From this perspective, it is important to not only consider the vertical and horizontal competencies of a specific candidate, but to also think about the institutional context and the ways in which competencies align with – or fail to align with – the needs, goals, and expectations of specific positions for which a leader is being recruited, as well as of the institution at large.

**Conclusion**

To refer back to the opening theme of this article, the growing number of senior leaders in higher education coming from sectors outside of higher education, coupled with the unique – and perhaps not so unique – challenges facing colleges and universities across the country, point to the importance of scholarly investigation into the uniqueness of higher education, particularly with regard to the requisite competencies for effective leadership.

A number of the controversies that have plagued ‘outside’ leaders can seemingly be traced to a lack of familiarity with the culture, traditions, and language of higher education – factors typically associated with a vertical knowledge and skill-set which one typically acquires through socialization (Tierney, 1997), formal preparation (Bryman, 2007), and transitions into leadership roles (Smerek, 2013) within higher education. At the same time, the socialization process that equips one with positional competencies, may do little to enhance or may even inhibit the acquisition and appreciation of cross-cutting competencies – such as communication and change leadership – which are arguably critical to leaders of all kinds in all sectors and organizational settings, particularly where innovation and change are desired attributes.

Based on current theory and research, we would argue that higher education is *not* wholly unique as an organization, and neither are the requisite capabilities for leadership excellence. While there may have been a time when the uniqueness case could be made in a compelling manner, this seems to be no longer true. Building upon the existing theory and research, it works to the detriment of higher education if our
idealized conception of leadership focuses too much attention on
disciplinary and technical competence in the selection, preparation, and
recruitment of leaders, particularly if that attention comes at the expense
of attention to horizontal capabilities. While it would seem to be a
mistake to dismiss the important role of disciplinary and technical
knowledge and skill, cross-cutting competencies are increasingly
essential. These competencies might include those necessary for
communicating and collaborating effectively with a broad array of
internal and external constituencies, dealing effectively with colleagues
representing an array of interpersonal and multicultural styles, leading
change, building effective teams and fostering successful teamwork,
promoting innovation and translational applications from other sectors;
and anticipating and dealing effectively with crisis and conflict. These
horizontal competencies – particularly communication – may also
enable ‘outside leaders’ to more readily and effectively detect, integrate,
and apply the cultural and institutional insights need for successful
leadership in a new and unfamiliar setting. To the extent that this
characterization is accurate, a recalibration and greater precision in our
ways of thinking about leadership are needed, along with changes in the
way we recruit, prepare, develop, and prepare leaders in higher
education.

In any case, there is little question that the extensive writing on
leadership within and beyond higher education – both horizontal and
vertical approaches – can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of
the various competencies needed for effective leadership across higher
education, and at the same time, points to the need for additional
qualitative and quantitative research in this area. In light of the current
challenges and opportunities facing higher education, coupled with the
widespread debate over the hiring of senior leaders from outside of the
academy, the time is right for increased scholarly research in this area.
Further empirical research that focuses on the similarities and
differences between the leadership competencies needed in higher
education compared to other sectors, as well as the predictable attributes
and limitations associated with each, can greatly contribute to the
advancement of both theory and effective practices.

It is our belief that future research might focus greater attention on
identifying the unique and general leadership competencies required for
effective leadership in higher education. Additionally, further empirical
study of the proposed two-dimensional leadership model offered in this
article may provide a useful framework for identifying the multiple
dimensions of successful leadership in colleges and universities. There
may be value in future research that offers a more comparative and
extensive review of vertical and horizontal studies of leadership and leadership behaviors, particularly within higher education – and may inspire new lines of creative research into these dynamics. Finally, future research may explore the preparation of presidential candidates to see which disciplines from within or outside of academia offer adequate preparation for the requisite knowledge and skill-set needed in a college or university president. This topic meets the needs of the contemporary ‘age’ or ‘year of the outsider,’ while also remaining relevant for the future of higher education – a future that will likely demand the leadership expertise to incorporate a number of key competencies in order to address and shape the future of our institutions.

Address for correspondence
Brent D Ruben, School of Information and Communication, Rutgers University, US. E-mail: bruben@rutgers.edu

References


Geertz, C (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books


Lawrence, SE (2015) *Personal Communication*, 11th June


Affairs Officers, and Chief Academic Officers, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nevada


