Leadership Instability as a Systemic Barrier to Institutional Capacity in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher education institutions increasingly rely on interim leadership appointments to maintain continuity during periods of organizational transition. Although interim appointments are intended to provide stability, limited research has examined how prolonged interim leadership affects institutional capacity and organizational effectiveness. Drawing upon a qualitative study of mid-level administrators who served in interim leadership positions at four-year colleges and universities, this paper explores how temporary leadership status influences authority, decision-making, organizational cohesion, and institutional performance. Findings revealed that interim leaders frequently operated under conditions of role ambiguity, constrained authority, differential treatment, and conditional inclusion within leadership structures. Participants described expending significant effort establishing legitimacy, navigating uncertainty, and managing organizational strain. These conditions extended beyond individual experiences and created broader institutional consequences, including slowed decision-making, weakened leadership cohesion, and reduced strategic effectiveness. The findings suggest that leadership instability should be understood as a systemic institutional challenge rather than solely a personnel issue.

Recommendations are offered to strengthen succession planning, leadership continuity, and institutional resilience within higher education.

Keywords: Interim leadership, institutional capacity, leadership instability, organizational effectiveness, succession planning, higher education leadership

Introduction

Leadership transitions have become an increasingly common feature of higher education administration. As institutions confront presidential turnover, retirements, budgetary constraints, enrollment pressures, and organizational restructuring, interim leadership appointments have emerged as a frequently used mechanism for maintaining continuity. While these appointments are often viewed as practical and temporary solutions, their organizational implications extend beyond filling vacant positions.

Existing scholarship has primarily examined interim leadership from the perspective of individual leaders, focusing on identity, legitimacy, role ambiguity, and professional development. Research consistently demonstrates that interim leaders frequently encounter unclear authority structures, limited institutional support, and heightened scrutiny while navigating temporary appointments. However, relatively little attention has been given to how these leadership arrangements affect broader institutional functioning.

This omission is significant because leadership stability serves as a foundational component of institutional capacity. Effective leadership influences organizational decision-making, strategic planning, partnership development, workforce stability, and institutional responsiveness. When leadership structures become prolonged in a state of uncertainty, the effects may extend beyond individual leaders and influence organizational effectiveness itself.

This paper argues that leadership instability functions as a systemic barrier to institutional capacity. Drawing on qualitative findings from interim leaders serving at four-year colleges and universities, the study examines how temporary leadership status affects authority, organizational cohesion, decision-making, and institutional effectiveness. Rather than viewing interim appointments solely as personnel decisions, the findings suggest that prolonged leadership uncertainty may undermine the organizational capacity institutions need to pursue long-term goals and respond effectively to evolving challenges.

Methods

This paper draws upon findings from a qualitative study examining the experiences of mid-level administrators who served in interim leadership positions at four-year colleges and universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who had held interim appointments across a range of academic and administrative units.

Participants were selected because of their direct experience navigating leadership responsibilities under temporary appointments. Interviews focused on leadership authority, organizational relationships, legitimacy, belonging, decision-making processes, and perceptions of institutional support. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and shared experiences across participants.

While the original study was grounded in Social Identity Theory and explored questions of self-worth, legitimacy, and professional identity, the present analysis reinterprets the findings through an institutional capacity framework. This approach allows examination of how leadership instability affects organizational effectiveness, strategic operations, and institutional performance.

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Findings

Theme One: Leadership Uncertainty Constrains Institutional Capacity

Participants consistently described operating within environments characterized by unclear authority boundaries, shifting expectations, and inconsistent decision-making authority.
Although formally appointed to leadership positions, many reported uncertainty regarding their authority to initiate change, allocate resources, or make long-term decisions.

Several participants described assuming full leadership responsibilities without receiving corresponding institutional endorsement or clearly defined authority. As one participant noted, responsibilities often expanded while authority remained unclear. Rather than serving as a brief transitional inconvenience, ambiguity became an ongoing feature of interim service.

These conditions created operational inefficiencies that extended beyond individual leaders. Participants frequently reported spending significant time clarifying authority, managing uncertainty among staff, and negotiating decisions that would otherwise be addressed through established leadership structures. Organizational energy was redirected toward maintaining stability rather than advancing strategic priorities.

Theme Two: Legitimacy Challenges Reduce Leadership Effectiveness

A second finding involved the continual effort required to establish legitimacy.

Participants consistently reported that legitimacy was not automatically conferred through appointment to interim leadership positions. Instead, authority was described as something that had to be repeatedly demonstrated and earned.

Leaders reported engaging in heightened preparation, increased communication, impression management, and continuous performance monitoring. Participants often felt compelled to prove competence beyond what would typically be expected of permanent leaders.

These findings suggest that organizational resources are diminished when leaders must devote substantial effort toward validating authority rather than executing strategic objectives.

Leadership effectiveness becomes constrained when organizational credibility depends on continuous performance demonstrations rather than institutional endorsement.

Leadership instability influences how decisions are made, how authority is exercised, and how organizational members respond to leadership directives. Participants' experiences reveal that ambiguity, constrained authority, and temporary status create

conditions that limit institutional responsiveness and strategic momentum.

Theme Three: Temporary Status Creates Structural Barriers

Participants described the interim designation as more than a title; it functioned as a social and organizational category that shaped access to leadership spaces and decision-making networks.

Many participants reported exclusion from strategic planning conversations, executive discussions, and informal leadership networks despite carrying responsibility for operational outcomes. Access to institutional influence was often conditioned upon perceptions of permanence rather than actual responsibilities.

This categorization created structural barriers that limited participation in long-term planning and institutional development. Participants noted that stakeholders frequently delayed decisions, withheld commitments, or questioned authority because of uncertainty surrounding leadership permanence.

These patterns suggest that leadership instability affects not only leaders themselves but also institutional access to available expertise and talent.

Theme Four: Leadership Instability Weakens Organizational Cohesion

Participants consistently described organizational consequences associated with prolonged interim leadership arrangements. Uncertainty regarding leadership status often created confusion among staff, slowed decision-making processes, and weakened alignment across organizational units.

Several participants reported spending substantial effort reinforcing decisions, managing questions regarding authority, and addressing concerns about future leadership transitions. In some cases, ambiguity produced tension among departments and reduced confidence in organizational direction.

The findings indicate that leadership instability creates both structural and relational challenges. Organizational strain emerged not only from unclear authority but also from uncertainty regarding institutional priorities and future leadership trajectories.

Discussion

The findings suggest that interim leadership should be understood as an institutional capacity issue rather than solely an individual leadership experience. While interim appointments are designed to provide continuity during transitions, prolonged leadership uncertainty may inadvertently create organizational barriers that reduce effectiveness.

These findings have particular relevance for institutions operating within

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resource-constrained environments, including many HBCUs and regional public institutions. Leadership continuity influences an institution's ability to pursue funding opportunities, cultivate partnerships, maintain workforce stability, and execute strategic initiatives. When leadership structures remain uncertain for extended periods, institutional capacity may be diminished.

Recommendations

Three recommendations emerge from this study.

First, governing boards should establish clear timelines and expectations for interim appointments. Extended periods of uncertainty contribute to organizational instability and reduce leadership effectiveness.

Second, institutions should provide interim leaders with formal authority, onboarding, mentorship, and inclusion in strategic decision-making processes. These supports can reduce ambiguity and strengthen organizational performance.

Third, succession planning should be treated as an institutional capacity strategy rather than an administrative exercise. Leadership continuity planning can reduce disruptions and strengthen organizational resilience during transitions.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions increasingly depend upon interim leadership appointments to address organizational transitions. However, the findings of this study suggest that leadership instability carries consequences extending beyond individual leaders. Ambiguity, constrained authority, differential treatment, and organizational uncertainty can weaken institutional capacity and limit effectiveness.

Understanding interim leadership as a systemic organizational issue provides a framework for developing more intentional succession planning, leadership development, and governance practices. Institutions that invest in leadership continuity may be better positioned to sustain effectiveness, maintain organizational cohesion, and achieve long-term strategic goals.