The Mark of a Leader

Longevity, strategic planning and vision bring academic and financial success to Xavier

By Kenneth J. Cooper
How much has his longevity as president of Xavier University contributed to the success of Dr. Norman Francis? In what ways?

Higher education leaders say his 43 years at the Catholic HBCU in New Orleans is an increasingly rare example of the benefits possible from a lengthy presidency. It takes time, they say, for a president to build good will and confidence on campus, solidify relationships with faculty members and implement a vision for the institution, all accomplishments of Francis.

“He’s an icon in American higher education,” says Dr. Molly Broad, president of the American Council on Education.

Dr. Karl W. Reid, senior vice president of academic programs and strategic initiatives at the United Negro College Fund, dubs Francis “the North Star” for the current generation of leaders at private HBCUs.

H. Patrick Swygert, former president of Howard University, agrees with Reid and also compares Francis to the pantheon of long-serving Black presidents from the 20th century, including Dr. Benjamin E. Mays at Morehouse College and Dr. Mordecai Johnson at Howard.

As reflected in Francis’ leadership at Xavier, an extended tenure can produce advances in academics, fundraising, enrollment and other measures of a college’s or university’s strength, the higher education leaders say. Conversely, they add that turnover in the president’s office can hinder institutional progress.

Fewer campus executives are getting the chance to stay in office long enough to accomplish what they set out to do.

A 2005 survey by the American Council on Education found that the average tenure of college presidents nationwide was seven years, eight years for African-Americans. In 2009, another survey the UNCF did of nearly all its 38 members put that average at seven years.

Francis has guided Xavier for more than six times the average length of a college presidency. The leaders interviewed for this article attribute his success also to the quality of his leadership, which they describe as steady, energetic, dynamic and shaped by his faith and the power of education. Still, they say longevity does matter.

“It takes time for university presidents to build good will among university constituents, and it can be difficult to keep it over a long period of time, given conflicting interests within an institution,” says Dr. James T. Minor, an expert on HBCUs who directs higher education programs for the Southern Education Foundation in Atlanta. “Dr. Francis’ ability to keep an ‘approval rating’ for more than 40 years, accompanied by support and buy-in, is a remarkable demonstration of leadership.”

Broad says Francis kept “a steady eye on the prize, mainly to create a fine university for African-Americans to attend.”

Swygert was president of Howard University for 13 years, making him the school’s third-longest-serving leader, after Johnson with 34 years and Dr. James Cheek with 20. Before Swygert arrived, Howard had five presidents in seven years. When he left in 2008, the school had more than tripled its endowment, completed the largest capital campaign in HBCU history and upgraded campus technology.

“When you have served some number of years, I think there’s a kind of rhythm in terms of your administration — the expectations of the trustees, the faculty, the students and alumni — and a kind of confidence that is generated,” says Swygert, who has known Francis for two decades.

Reid has visited the campuses of nearly all of UNCF’s members, including Xavier, and has tracked the results of the organization’s grants to the schools to build their institutional capacity in fundraising, curriculum and faculty, financial management, physical infrastructure and enrollment management.

“What I take away from those visits is a clear correlation — and I have no data to prove this, other than anecdotal — between the longevity of the presidency and the academic and financial success of the institution,” he says. “Progress is inhibited and interrupted when there is a change in presidential leadership, progress on any indicator — in many cases on enrollment, fundraising, alumni-giving.”

Broad, a former president of the University of North Carolina system, says it takes time to build relationships with the “independent artisans” on campus — tenured professors.

“When there is turnover in leadership at an institution, you have to start those relationships all over,” she says. “It’s the benefit of having the same captain at the head of the ship year in and year out. You get to understand the people and the institution in a much deeper way.”

With the support of senior faculty, a president can reshape and improve academics, as Francis has done at Xavier.

“In higher education, if you can articulate a vision and a strategic plan to make that vision a reality and you can lead long enough to see it come to fruition, that’s a great thing,” Swygert says. “Clearly, Dr. Francis has earned the right to have the time and, generally, you look at the success of Xavier — obviously he has a correct vision.”

Fundraising also benefits from a long tenure, Swygert says. “It does aid fundraising because one of the principal places you go to is your alumni. In Dr. Francis’ case, it’s hard to imagine that there are many alumni of Xavier who don’t
know him. He was there when they were there.”

Meanwhile, having the time to build up academics, Minor adds, has made it easier for Xavier to generate donations.

“The sheer production of medical professionals has been a real mark of excellence, and it makes it quite easy to protect the financial health of the institution when you have exemplary programs that people feel they need to support,” he says.

Francis, however, has had more than longevity working for him. It’s the quality of his leadership too, the higher education leaders say.

“What is remarkable about Dr. Francis is his energy, his continued vision that does not stagnate but that continually innovates and adapts,” Reid says. “Typically, when you get someone in leadership for the length of time that he’s served, you can get to an atrophied leadership style. What I find with him is just the opposite.”

Minor agrees Francis has been dynamic by exhibiting “multiple leadership styles” over the years. “One strand I think that has always been consistent is he is able to incite this enthusiasm about human potential and the transformative power of an institution of higher education,” Minor adds.

Broad believes his Catholic faith has influenced the core values that have guided Francis at Xavier. He is only one of a few lay presidents of a Catholic university in the country.

“When I think about Norm and have seen in other leaders, especially from religiously-based institutions, is a deep commitment to taking those who might not come with the best advantage and making the opportunity for them his life’s work,” Broad says. “It’s so huge.”

Also cited is Francis’ steadiness, a quality Broad says Francis displayed during the Civil Rights Movement. Four decades later, he led in the same way after Hurricane Katrina’s devastation, Minor and Swygert note.

“You had a person, a steady influence grounded in many, many years of dealing with and overcoming various challenges,” says Swygert, a law professor at Howard.

Swygert compares Francis to other longtime HBCU leaders: Johnson at Howard; Mays at Morehouse, Dr. Jerome Holland at Hampton University and Dr. Horace Mann Bond at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

Like members of that generation, Francis has produced leaders “not just in New Orleans but so many folks in health-related fields. So much in the way of leadership is attributable and traceable back to Xavier,” Swygert says.

Of Francis, Swygert concludes: “Clearly, he has been an incredible success story — not simply longevity. You can hang around a long time but not do anything. Sometimes that’s how you hang around a long time. But in his case, he’s been an incredible success.”

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**TAKE FIVE: Tips for Presidents**

Dr. Norman Francis, president of Xavier University of Louisiana, knows a little about running a college. He’s done it for 43 years, longer than any sitting president in American higher education history, and is still considered on top of his game. Here, he shares five thoughts about what it takes to be a successful college president:

**Serve before you lead.** Don’t take this job because it has that great big title on it. It’s a job that demands that you serve before you can lead. The people who serve at your colleges must be given the fullest respect for what they do.

**Delegate.** No one man or woman can make all the decisions. So, you have to delegate. I can delegate authority but not the responsibility for the decisions. I’ve got to make a good decision.

**Trust your team.** I have put trust in the people I have chosen to work with. I’m going to follow the judgment of the people who made a decision, if it’s in their field, and I don’t know it. Now, there comes a time when we have to have a “come to Jesus” talk. I can look back and say I have won more than I lost, because I trusted people and they responded.

**Explain yourself.** There are very few times when I say, “I’m just not going to do it.” When I do, I explain why.

**Take educated risks.** It takes courage to risk. Risking does not mean willy-nilly. It means you have to look at all your options. There will be times when you can’t know it all. But, if you have evaluated it to the extent you can live with it, that it’s the right thing to do, it’s worth the risk.

-Reginald Stuart