Fish Stinks at the Head: Selecting University Presidents for the AI Era

Viktor Wang, California State University, San Bernardino, USA

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9557-0054

Abstract

This article proposes and analytically illustrates a presidential selection framework designed to reduce leadership misplacement and strengthen institutional learning capacity in the AI era. Using a theory-building analytic approach with structured document analysis, the paper examines presidential search signals, early-tenure leadership behaviors, and institutional indicators related to trust climate, shared governance functioning, and AI-era change readiness. The primary contribution is a practical, evidence-based Presidential Search Rubric that boards and search committees can apply to evaluate candidates using enacted evidence rather than prestige-only indicators.

Keywords: Presidential leadership, Leadership misplacement, Shared governance, Psychological safety, AI governance

Introduction: The Proverb Meets the AI University

A Chinese saying warns that "fish stinks at the head." In organizational life, the proverb functions less as insult than as diagnosis: when culture decays—when basic norms of integrity, competence, and reciprocity erode—the rot is often initiated, enabled, or tolerated at the top. Universities are not exempt. A president's decisions set the moral temperature for the institution: what is rewarded, what is ignored, what is explained, and what is imposed. In periods of stability, weak leadership can be partially buffered by routine, collegial workarounds, and the slow pace of institutional change. In the AI era, that buffering disappears.

Generative AI and adjacent technologies accelerate the speed, scale, and visibility of institutional decisions. Policies can be drafted overnight, analytics can reshape resource allocation in real time, and communication—good or bad—travels instantly. EDUCAUSE characterizes higher education as facing massive transformation and uncertainty, with AI reshaping how learning is designed, documented, and valued (Robert et al., 2025). This environment amplifies both excellence and error. A president who is indecisive, opaque, or procedurally careless will not merely drift; they can contribute to rapid breakdowns in trust, governance, enrollment, and reputation—because AI-enabled systems operationalize leadership choices at scale.

This urgency is intensified by a broader trust problem. EDUCAUSE reports a significant decline in public confidence in higher education over the last decade and frames "restoring trust" as a central leadership challenge for the sector (EDUCAUSE, 2025). Trust is not a branding exercise; it is institutional infrastructure. It determines whether students believe outcomes are fair, whether faculty accept change as legitimate, whether staff commit discretionary effort, and whether external partners invest with confidence. Wider societal signals point in the same direction: large-scale trust research continues to document grievance, polarization, and pressure on institutions to demonstrate competence and empathy rather than assume deference (Edelman, 2025). In short, the university president is now operating in a low-trust, high-velocity environment.

At the same time, presidents must navigate structural headwinds and competitive pressures. Even when national enrollment indicators show pockets of growth, institutions face intensified competition by sector, region, program type, and perceived return on investment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2025). In such conditions, small leadership mistakes—mishandled conflict, inconsistent messaging, weak academic governance—can become disproportionately costly. AI accelerates this effect by making institutional operations more datafied and more easily compared, surveilled, and contested.

The AI era also changes what "qualified" means. The president is no longer primarily a fundraiser-manager with occasional speeches about innovation. Instead, the president must be the trust architect and governance designer: the person who builds credible decision pathways, protects academic values, and ensures that AI adoption does not outrun ethical safeguards. Major higher education guidance emphasizes that institutional AI readiness depends on coherent governance, clear policies, workforce development, equity, and responsible use across teaching, research, and operations (Robert & McCormack, 2024). International guidance likewise urges a human-centered approach, highlighting privacy protection, capacity-building, and the risk of institutions being unprepared when regulation lags behind technology (UNESCO, 2023). In parallel, risk frameworks increasingly treat trustworthy AI as an organizational capability—requiring governance, oversight, evaluation, and continuous improvement (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2023, 2024). These are not side projects; they are leadership duties.

Yet governance cannot be reduced to "compliance." The classic principles of shared responsibility remain essential. The long-standing statement on university governance emphasizes appropriately shared responsibility among boards, administrations, and faculties—because legitimacy and educational quality depend on it (American Association of University Professors et al., 1966). In the AI university, shared governance becomes even more critical: AI policies that bypass deliberation may be faster, but they are less likely to be trusted, adopted responsibly, or sustained.

Accordingly, this paper argues that presidential selection must be redesigned for the AI era. It offers (a) an updated theoretical framework that links leadership legitimacy, shared governance, and trustworthy AI, and (b) an evidence-based screening model for presidential searches that prioritizes competence, procedural integrity, and trust-building capacity. If "fish stinks at the head," then the most practical institutional reform is upstream: selecting leaders who can keep the head healthy—before the entire body pays the price.

Problem Statement and Significance

Higher education is operating in sustained flux—enrollment volatility, intensified competition for students, modality shifts, and pressure to demonstrate workforce relevance and institutional value. National enrollment reporting shows continued, but uneven, growth that is concentrated in particular sectors and credential types (e.g., community colleges and certificates), while other areas remain fragile—conditions that amplify the consequences of executive decisions about programs, staffing, and strategy (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2025). At the same time, institutional legitimacy and confidence are under strain; "restoring trust" has become a defining challenge for higher education leaders navigating technology, data governance, and AI-era risk (Grajek & the 2024–2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10 Panel, 2024).

In this environment, presidential leadership is no longer adequately defined as fundraising capacity plus managerial competence. The AI era increases the speed, scale, and visibility of decisions, turning weak governance into rapid organizational deterioration: inconsistent policy, opaque decision-making, inequitable workload distribution, and credibility loss can cascade faster when amplified through digitized systems and AI-enabled operations. Responsible institutional AI adoption also requires explicit risk governance—structures for transparency, accountability, and mitigation aligned with widely used risk frameworks (National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST], 2023, 2024). Yet many presidential searches still rely on aspirational language and prestige signaling rather than evidence of enacted leadership behaviors under stress.

This gap is sharpened by a persistent paradox: leadership job descriptions often emphasize vision, shared governance, ethical practice, and strong conceptual/human/technical skills, yet institutions still select leaders whose records do not meet these thresholds in practice (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). Leadership misplacement can manifest as "installed" or politically selected administrators—chosen for proximity, "moldability," or alliances rather than meritorious achievement—undermining trust climates and accelerating disengagement and turnover (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). Because shared governance is a distinctive and necessary mechanism for inclusive, transparent decision-making and change capacity, misalignment between presidential behavior and shared governance norms becomes a primary institutional risk—especially during AI policy formation and rapid strategic pivots (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges [AGB], 2017).

Accordingly, the significance of this study is practical and preventive: it aims to produce an evidence-based screening and selection rubric that helps boards and search committees reduce predictable leadership failure modes (e.g., opacity, coercive governance, values-performance mismatch) and improve the likelihood of appointing presidents who can build trust, protect academic integrity, and lead AI-era transformation responsibly (AGB, 2025).

Research Questions

RQ1. What patterns of leadership misplacement appear in university presidential searches and early presidential tenures, and how are they justified by search narratives?
RQ2. How do presidents' observable behaviors (communication, decision processes, ethics) align

with learning organization characteristics versus static organization characteristics?
RQ3. In the AI era, what leadership capabilities are most plausibly linked to institutional indicators such as trust climate, shared governance functioning, and change capacity (e.g., responsible AI policy adoption, program adaptation, enrollment response)?
RQ4. Which selection signals are most misleading (e.g., prestige-only indicators), and which signals are most reliable (e.g., proven open communication, fairness, integrity, and enacted—not merely stated—values)?
RQ5. What practical, evidence-based search rubric can help boards and committees reduce the likelihood of hiring "puppet" or politically installed leaders?

Theoretical Framework

This study uses a leadership misplacement framework to explain why higher education can drift into governance dysfunction even when presidential searches publicly endorse strong ideals. Leadership misplacement begins with a theory–practice gap: well-reasoned leadership theories exist, yet in higher education they may not be enacted, especially when leaders lack technical skills and ethical grounding or are poorly matched to the institutional context (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

Misplacement is not only an individual failing; it is often a selection failure. When appointment decisions prioritize seniority or interpersonal/political connections over demonstrated expertise and credibility, institutions can produce "installed" leaders—described as "puppet" administrators—selected for "moldability" rather than meritorious expert or referent power (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).
The organizational effect is predictable: deception or misuse of position power can disrupt institutional flow, erode trust, and accelerate turnover and disengagement (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

To operationalize these dynamics, the framework uses a "learning organization vs. static organization" diagnostic lens as a measurable set of governance behaviors. Static organizations are characterized by rigid structure, task-oriented climates, coercive power, top-down/one-way communication, and low participation at the bottom—where decisions are treated as final (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

Learning organizations, by contrast, emphasize flexible structures, people-centered climates, supportive power, multidirectional communication, and participation at all levels (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).
This contrast is used here as an operational diagnostic: presidential behaviors (e.g., information sharing, decision pathways, procedural fairness) are coded as either learning-oriented (voice, adaptation, shared responsibility) or static (control, compliance, unilateralism).

Presidential qualifications are treated as minimum thresholds rather than aspirational preferences. Wang and Sedivy-Benton (2016) show that higher education job descriptions commonly claim to seek leaders who are visionary, committed to shared governance, strong in conceptual/human/technical skills, expert in their field with excellent teaching/scholarship/service records, and ethically steadfast.

This “stated threshold” is aligned with shared governance principles that call for appropriately shared responsibility among boards, administrations, and faculties as a condition of institutional legitimacy and effectiveness (American Association of University Professors et al., 1966). It is also consistent with competency-based understandings of the modern presidency that emphasize trustworthiness, communication, and accountable leadership capacities (Burmicky et al., 2024).

The AI-era extension of the framework elevates trust, transparency, and “no fear” from cultural ideals to operational necessities. In the proposed model, fear is described as a corrosive organizational emotion that suppresses contribution and spreads across units; when faculty fear job consequences for not complying, trust diminishes and learning-organization functioning weakens (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

This maps directly onto psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking—an empirically supported precursor to learning behavior and error correction (Edmondson, 1999). In AI governance, these climates are not optional because responsible adoption requires transparent risk management, evaluation, and accountability structures (NIST, 2023, 2024) as well as human-centered policy approaches for education systems (UNESCO, 2023).

Working model: Presidential selection quality → leadership behaviors (ethics, communication, governance) → trust/no-fear climate → learning-organization functioning → institutional AI-era adaptability.

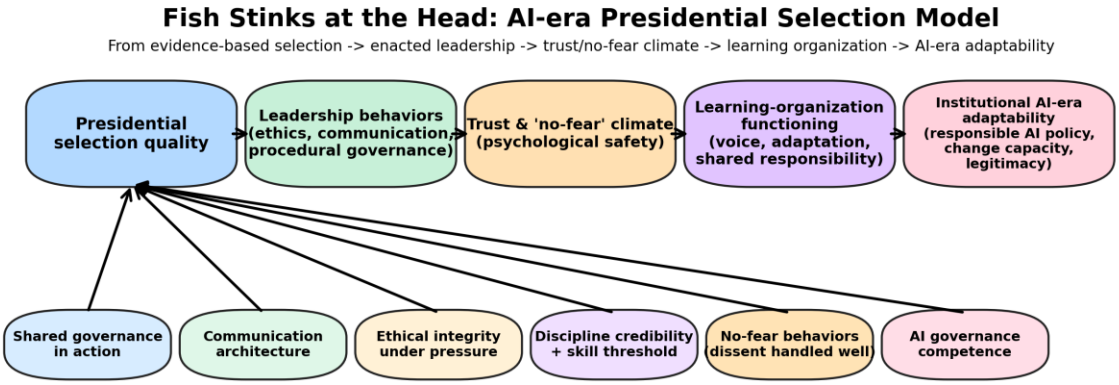

Figure 1. AI-era Presidential Selection Model.

Interpretations

1. Presidential selection quality: Upstream leverage point. Selection choices set the institution’s operating norms for governance and legitimacy.

2. Leadership behaviors (ethics, communication, procedural governance): What stakeholders experience day-to-day: transparency, due process, fairness, and how decisions are made and explained.

3. Trust and no-fear climate (psychological safety): Safety to raise concerns improves information quality and adaptation; fear suppresses voice and hides problems.

4. Learning-organization functioning: Multidirectional communication and participation enable learning and improvement; top-down control produces rigidity and low engagement.

5. Institutional AI-era adaptability: AI amplifies culture. Strong governance and trust enable responsible AI policy, implementation, and legitimacy; weak governance accelerates breakdown.

6. Six rubric domains feeding selection quality: The screening domains function as evidence checks that prevent leadership misplacement before it spreads systemwide.

Methods

Design

This paper is a theory-building analytic study that develops an AI-era presidential selection model and an evidence-based Presidential Search Rubric.

The illustrative component is a structured document-analytic illustration: the study uses a transparent, standards-aligned document analysis procedure to ground and exemplify the model's mechanisms (leadership misplacement signals → governance behaviors → trust/no-fear climate → learning-organization functioning → AI-era adaptability).

Data Sources and Document Corpus

The analysis draws on publicly available and obtainable documentary artifacts relevant to presidential selection, early-tenure leadership behaviors, and AI-era governance. Sources include presidential search announcements and profiles, board communications, presidential messages, strategic plans, AI policy memos, governance documents (e.g., senate/staff council materials where public), system-level guidance, and higher education risk/governance frameworks. Documents are selected to represent the kinds of evidence a search committee can realistically request, verify, and compare.

Structured Document Analysis Procedure

Documents are reviewed using a structured extraction template that captures: (a) selection signals (e.g., prestige indicators, claims of shared governance, prior crisis leadership), (b) enacted governance behaviors observable in artifacts (communication architecture, due process signals, responsiveness to dissent), (c) trust/no-fear signals (psychological safety cues, retaliation/non-retaliation norms, openness to bad news), and (d) AI governance readiness signals (decision rights, risk processes, transparency, and implementation evidence).

Operationalization of Key Constructs

Leadership misplacement constructs are operationalized using Wang and Sedivy-Benton's theory–practice gap and misplacement mechanisms, including selection for "moldability" rather than meritorious expertise or referent power.

Learning-organization versus static-organization functioning is operationalized as an observable governance pattern (not a personality trait) and coded from artifact evidence (e.g., multidirectional vs top-down communication, supportive vs coercive power signals, participation vs unilateralism).

AI-era adaptability and institutional change capacity are operationalized as a set of specific indicators: (a) AI governance maturity (clear decision rights; documented risk processes; implementation artifacts), (b) deliberative change execution (stakeholder participation; published rationales; feedback loops), and (c) stability/implementation proxies observable in records (follow-through on policy; documented corrections; discontinuities or churn signals where observable).

Analytic Approach and Rigor

The analytic approach is pattern-based and theory-informed: extracted evidence is organized in a matrix (constructs × evidence types) and used for pattern matching to the working model. The purpose is analytic generalization—clarifying mechanisms and producing a defensible screening rubric—rather than statistical inference.

Rigor is supported through transparent sourcing, an audit-friendly extraction log, triangulation across document types, and conservative claims calibrated to the nature of documentary evidence (Yin, 2018; Miles et al., 2019). No interviews or surveys are claimed or required for this paper's evidentiary standard.

Illustrative Evidence Snapshot (Structured Document Illustration)

To clarify what "structured document-analytic illustration" means in practice, Table 1 provides an example of how the extraction template maps constructs to verifiable artifact evidence. The intent is illustrative (showing the type of documentary evidence a search committee can request and evaluate), not a report of a bounded case dataset.

Table 1. Illustrative mapping of constructs to verifiable documentary evidence

Construct / Domain	**Documentary Evidence Types**	**Illustrative Artifact Examples**
Shared governance in action	Governance records; decision rationales; consultation timelines	Senate agenda/minutes showing deliberation and changes made after input; published decision memo with rationale

Communication architecture	Campus messages; Q&A logs; decision logs; policy memos	Regular campus updates with a documented feedback loop; accessible decision log; memo acknowledging constraints and tradeoffs
No-fear climate signals	Non-retaliation norms; public responses to critique; transparency signals	Policy statements protecting dissent; documented response to faculty/staff concerns without punitive framing
AI governance competence	AI policy; decision-rights documentation; risk/assessment artifacts; implementation evidence	AI policy with accountable owners; procurement transparency; governance charter or documented risk assessment

Proposed "Presidential Search Rubric" (Practical Payoff)

This rubric is designed to reduce *leadership misplacement*—including the selection of "installed" or "puppet" administrators chosen for connections or "moldability" rather than merit and enacted leadership competence (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

It operationalizes the learning-organization versus static-organization lens (rigid/coercive/top-down vs flexible/supportive/multidirectional) into observable behaviors and verifiable evidence (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

How to use it (scoring + evidence rule)

Score each domain 1–5 (1 = absent/high risk; 3 = mixed/inconsistent; 5 = consistently demonstrated). Require triangulated evidence primarily from verifiable artifacts (messages, decisions, policy memos) and reference checks that probe for specific incidents rather than general praise; when feasible and appropriate to the search process, committees may add structured stakeholder input/interviews as an additional evidence stream. This "enacted evidence" approach is essential because leadership success depends on what is practiced, not merely what is stated (Rose & Bergman, 2016).

1) Shared governance in action (not slogans)

Shared governance is a defining feature of higher education governance, requiring distributed authority and meaningful engagement (AAUP, ACE, & AGB, 1966, 2017, n.d., 2025). The rubric asks whether the candidate can show documented patterns of (a) consulting appropriate governance bodies before consequential decisions, (b) honoring due process, and (c) correcting course when process gaps occur (AGB, n.d.).
High-score indicators: minutes reflecting deliberation, evidence of transparent rationale, and examples where faculty/staff input changed the decision.

Red flags: governance framed as “messaging,” token listening sessions, or “decision already made” culture.

2) Communication architecture (multidirectional vs top-down)

In the AI era, decisions propagate faster and reputational damage becomes more visible, which makes communication design (cadence, channels, feedback loops) a core presidential competency (Grajek et al., 2024).
High-score indicators: standing structures for two-way communication (senate/staff council/student leadership), consistent Q&A practices, and accessible decision logs.
Red flags: information withholding, late-stage announcements, or punitive reactions to questions—patterns associated with coercive power dynamics (Rose & Bergman, 2016).

3) Ethical leadership and integrity under pressure

Because presidents face conflicting stakeholder demands, the rubric requires “stress-test” evidence: cases involving budget cuts, personnel conflict, compliance issues, or public controversy, with documented reasoning and fairness. In higher education, effective leadership is repeatedly linked to fairness, integrity, and open communication (Rose & Bergman, 2016).

High-score indicators: consistent principles across constituencies; willingness to disclose constraints; no “special rules” for insiders.
Red flags: favoritism networks, retaliation narratives, or “ends justify means” rationalizations.

4) Discipline credibility + conceptual/human/technical skill threshold

This domain treats core qualifications as minimum thresholds rather than “nice to have,” consistent with the expectation that higher education leaders must understand the academic enterprise and demonstrate conceptual/human/technical competence (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

High-score indicators: credible academic standing *and* demonstrated management competence (e.g., budgeting, operations, conflict navigation).
Red flags: prestige-only signaling, thin track record of scholarly/academic credibility, or overreliance on positional authority.

5) No-fear climate behaviors (how dissent is handled)

A “no fear” climate is not cosmetic; it is an operating requirement for institutional learning, trust, and change capacity (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

Psychological safety predicts learning behavior in teams, which is foundational for innovation and reliable information flow (Edmondson, 1999).
High-score indicators: dissent is welcomed, mistakes are treated as learning signals, and whistleblowing/protected activity is handled with clear non-retaliation norms.

Red flags: “loyalty tests,” silent meetings, grievance spikes, or high turnover tied to leadership interactions.

6) AI governance competence (policy, data integrity, academic freedom, transparency)

Presidents now must govern AI as a socio-technical risk and trust issue, not merely as an IT upgrade. The rubric evaluates competence in adopting a *trustworthy AI governance approach* aligned to established risk-management guidance (NIST, 2023; NIST, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). High-score indicators: clear AI decision rights, documented risk assessments, safeguards for privacy and academic freedom, and transparency about procurement, model use, and data handling.
Red flags: AI policy by fiat, opaque vendor relationships, or “innovation” talk without governance mechanisms.

Discussion: Why “Fish Stinks at the Head” Is an Actionable Leadership Test

The proverb “fish stinks at the head” becomes actionable in higher education when it is treated as an accountability lens rather than a moral insult. A campus culture marked by fear, silence, and distrust rarely emerges spontaneously. It is typically produced by what leadership does (e.g., coercive power, opaque decisions, favoritism) or by what leadership allows to persist (e.g., procedural irregularities, retaliation norms, “everyone knows not to speak up”). In leadership-misplacement terms, the key claim is not that every problem originates in the president’s office, but that the president sets the boundary conditions for organizational behavior—how conflict is handled, how truth is surfaced, and whether governance is a real process or a ceremonial performance (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

Psychological safety research offers a complementary empirical explanation: when people do not believe it is safe to take interpersonal risks, they withhold concerns, avoid admitting mistakes, and stop engaging in learning behaviors that help organizations correct errors and adapt (Edmondson, 1999). In presidential leadership, the “head” test is observable: do people bring bad news upward, and does the institution treat that information as a resource for improvement—or as a threat to be punished?

Reconnecting to leadership misplacement sharpens the mechanism. Presidential searches often declare commitments to shared governance, ethical practice, and competence, yet misplacement occurs when institutions select leaders for political alignment, seniority, or “moldability”—what Wang and Sedivy-Benton (2016) describe as “installed” or “puppet” administrators lacking meritorious expert or referent power.

The institutional pattern that follows is the drift from a learning organization toward a static organization: rigid structure, coercive power, top-down communication, and low participation at the bottom rather than flexible structure, supportive power, multidirectional communication, and participation at all levels (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

In practical terms, the proverb becomes diagnostic. When leaders are misfit or mis-selected, the institution becomes more political and brittle: decisions are less contestable, processes become less transparent, and compliance replaces genuine engagement.

Shared governance provides a concrete arena where the proverb can be tested early. The foundational governance statement jointly formulated by AAUP, ACE, and AGB emphasizes that effective university governance rests on appropriately shared responsibility among boards, administrations, and faculties (AAUP, ACE, & AGB, 1966, 2017, n.d., 2025). AGB later reinforces that "in higher education's volatile environment, shared governance is essential" and adds value to progress and innovation (AGB, 2017). When presidents bypass governance bodies, treat consultation as symbolic, or punish disagreement, the "head" is effectively training the body to stop speaking. That silence is not neutral; it is a direct reduction in the institution's sensing capacity. Over time, the campus loses the information needed to detect student risk, academic-quality problems, compliance concerns, and reputational vulnerabilities.

The AI era intensifies this dynamic because technology magnifies culture; it does not replace leadership competence. EDUCAUSE describes higher education as experiencing massive transformation and uncertainty, with AI reshaping teaching, learning, and organizational culture (Robert et al., 2025). At the same time, EDUCAUSE argues that restoring trust is a defining leadership challenge, requiring "competent and caring institutions" and strong stewardship of technology and data (Grajek & the 2024–2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10 Panel, 2024). These claims align with broader trust research showing that confidence in institutions and leaders is under strain and that perceived misinformation and unfairness deepen grievance (Edelman, 2025). In this environment, a president cannot rely on positional authority alone. AI-enabled systems scale decisions instantly—resource allocation formulas, automated messaging, surveillance-like analytics, and GenAI policies that affect classroom practice. If the underlying culture is coercive or politicized, AI will accelerate the harms: people will comply superficially, hide problems, and resist quietly. If the culture is psychologically safe and participatory, AI can accelerate learning: feedback is surfaced, risks are flagged, and policies become more legitimate because they are co-constructed.

This leads to an AI-era leadership implication: presidential competence must now include AI governance competence—not as technical novelty, but as a trust and accountability discipline. NIST's AI Risk Management Framework emphasizes managing AI risks and promoting trustworthy AI through governance and continuous evaluation (NIST, 2023), and NIST's GenAI Profile extends these principles specifically for generative AI use cases (NIST, 2024). UNESCO similarly urges a human-centered approach to generative AI in education and research, emphasizing policy readiness and capacity-building (UNESCO, 2023). None of these frameworks can function in a fear-based organization, because risk management depends on honest reporting, transparent deliberation, and ongoing correction. In other words, AI governance makes the proverb even more actionable: a president's willingness to support voice and transparency becomes a prerequisite for safe, legitimate AI adoption.

Ultimately, "fish stinks at the head" is an actionable test because it directs attention to measurable signals that appear before crises become irreversible: the directionality of communication, the reality of shared governance, the handling of dissent, and the presence or

absence of psychological safety. When leaders are well-selected and well-fit, institutions behave like learning organizations—adaptive, participatory, and capable of ethical innovation (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

When leaders are misplaced, institutions become static—political, brittle, and increasingly reliant on coercion rather than trust. In the AI-powered university, the consequences arrive faster. The practical conclusion is not fatalism; it is prevention: the most cost-effective reform is upstream—selecting presidents whose enacted behaviors demonstrate trust-building, governance competence, and "no fear" leadership, because the culture that follows will either enable responsible AI-era transformation or accelerate institutional decay.

Implications

Implications for boards and search firms: evidence-based screening that reduces "prestige theater"

Practically, search committees can operationalize this by using (a) structured behavioral questions tied to governance and integrity under pressure, (b) "incident-based" reference checks that probe specific decisions, and (c) document requests that reveal how the candidate handled dissent, bad news, and process constraints. This approach directly targets the misplacement mechanism in higher education—leaders selected for "moldability" and connections rather than meritorious expert/referent power (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

It also supports the growing trust mandate in higher education technology and data leadership: restoring trust requires competent and caring institutions, not simply better tools (Grajek & the 2024–2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10 Panel, 2024).

Implications for faculty and staff: governance safeguards that prevent misplacement

Faculty and staff can strengthen institutional resilience by advocating for governance safeguards that make misplacement less likely and less durable. The foundational shared-governance statement frames governance as appropriately shared responsibility among boards, administrations, and faculties (AAUP, ACE, & AGB, 1966, 2017, n.d., 2025). AGB likewise positions shared governance as a foundational tenet that distributes authority and strengthens institutions through meaningful engagement and inclusive, transparent decision-making (AGB, n.d.). Practically, this implies (a) codified consultation and documentation requirements for high-impact decisions, (b) transparent workload and program-change processes, and (c) standing climate "sensing" (e.g., periodic trust/psychological safety checks) that alerts governance bodies when fear and silence are rising. These safeguards align with Wang and Sedivy-Benton's warning that coercive, politics-driven leadership can widen the theory–practice gap and produce faculty disillusionment and fear of repercussions for "not conforming," accelerating mistrust and organizational dysfunction (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

Implications for presidents: behaviors that build learning organizations and prevent "static" drift

For presidents, the proverb becomes a **daily operating standard**: if fear and silence increase, leadership must treat it as a signal of governance failure—either caused or tolerated. Wang and Sedivy-Benton's learning-versus-static framework provides concrete behavioral targets: learning organizations use supportive power, multidirectional communication, flexible structures, and broad participation; static organizations rely on coercive power, top-down communication, rigid rules, and low participation at the bottom (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016).

The AI era raises the stakes because presidents now also need credible AI governance competence. NIST's AI Risk Management Framework emphasizes voluntary, rights-preserving risk management to promote trustworthy AI (National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST], 2023), and the NIST Generative AI Profile extends this guidance for GenAI use (NIST, 2024). UNESCO similarly urges human-centered guardrails and institutional capacity-building for GenAI in education and research (UNESCO, 2023). In practice, presidents can prevent "static drift" by institutionalizing open feedback loops, publishing decision rationales, protecting dissent and academic freedom, and building transparent AI policies with clear accountability for data integrity and risk mitigation—because technology amplifies culture; it does not substitute for leadership competence (Grajek & the 2024–2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10 Panel, 2024).

Limitations and Future Research

As a result, the study relies primarily on public and obtainable artifacts (e.g., job announcements, campus communications, strategic plans, governance and AI policy documents). This reliance can introduce availability bias and limits the granularity of claims (Yin, 2018). Accordingly, conclusions are framed as pattern-based and theory-informed, and the rubric is presented as an evidence-guided screening tool rather than a causal estimator.

Second, the paper does not make causal claims. Structured document analysis can generate strong analytic explanations and plausible mechanisms, but outcomes (e.g., trust climate, turnover, governance stability) are influenced by many contextual factors such as budget shocks, external politics, union dynamics, and enrollment shifts (Yin, 2018). Therefore, claims are calibrated to documentary evidence and framed as mechanism-based and preventive rather than deterministic.

Third, measuring "AI-era adaptability" presents construct challenges. AI governance is evolving, and institutions vary widely in readiness, policy maturity, and implementation capacity. Even when risk frameworks exist, local practices may not map cleanly onto standardized categories, and self-reported readiness can overestimate actual governance capability (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2023, 2024). Consequently, outcome indicators should be treated as descriptive unless the study includes robust, validated measures and longitudinal tracking.

Future research can address these limitations in three directions. (a) Larger-N studies across systems (e.g., CSU, UC, multi-state consortia) can test whether the proposed rubric is associated with measurable outcomes (trust climate, retention, governance functioning) with greater external validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). (b) Longitudinal designs can examine how presidential behaviors shape trajectories over time, improving causal plausibility (Shadish et al., 2002). (c) Development of AI governance maturity models tailored to

higher education can connect presidential competencies to institutional capability benchmarks aligned with trustworthy-AI guidance (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2023, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

Conclusion

"Fish stinks at the head" is not merely a proverb; it is a diagnostic principle for institutional accountability. When fear, silence, and distrust spread across a campus, the evidence often points to leadership behaviors that either produced those conditions or tolerated them long enough to normalize them (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). In higher education, this risk is heightened by leadership misplacement—when presidents are selected for prestige, politics, or "moldability" rather than demonstrated competence, ethical grounding, and context-fit—because misplacement pushes institutions toward rigid, coercive, top-down governance characteristic of static organizations (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). In the AI era, the consequences arrive faster: AI systems scale decisions, accelerate communication cycles, and amplify reputational effects, making trust and shared governance even more essential (Grajek & the 2024–2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10 Panel, 2024; AAUP, ACE, & AGB, 1966, 2017, n.d., 2025).

This article argues that presidential searches must be redesigned around enacted evidence: shared-governance practice, transparent communication architectures, ethical integrity under pressure, and "no fear" behaviors that sustain psychological safety and organizational learning (Edmondson, 1999; AGB, 2017). Finally, AI governance competence—aligned to trustworthy-AI risk management guidance—must be treated as a core presidential qualification, not a technical add-on (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2023, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). Selecting the right president is upstream prevention: it protects culture, strengthens legitimacy, and enables responsible AI-era adaptation.

References

American Association of University Professors, American Council on Education, & Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (1966). *Statement on government of colleges and universities*. American Association of University Professors. https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/topical-reports/statement-government-colleges-and

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (n.d.). *Shared governance*. https://agb.org/knowledge-center/board-fundamentals/shared-governance/

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (2017, October 10). *AGB Board of Directors' statement on shared governance* (Updated October 17, 2025). https://agb.org/agb-statements/agb-board-of-directors-statement-on-shared-governance/

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (2025, December 10). *Presidential search: The board professional's integral role*. https://agb.org/blog-post/presidential-search-the-board-professionals-integral-role/

Burmicky, J., McClure, K. R., & Ryu, W. (2024). *Competencies for the college presidency: A national study of effective leadership in higher education*. Academic Search. https://www.presbyteriancolleges.org/wp-content/uploads/Competencies-for-the-College-Presidency-Study.pdf

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2022). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Edelman. (2025). *2025 Edelman Trust Barometer global report*. https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_01.23.25.pdf

Edmondson, A. C. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 44*(2), 350–383.

Grajek, S., & the 2024–2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10 Panel. (2024, October 23). 2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10: Restoring trust. *EDUCAUSE Review*. https://er.educause.edu/articles/2024/10/2025-educause-top-10-restoring-trust

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). SAGE.

National Institute of Standards and Technology. (2023). *Artificial intelligence risk management framework (AI RMF 1.0)* (NIST AI 100-1). https://doi.org/10.6028/NIST.AI.100-1

National Institute of Standards and Technology. (2024). *Artificial intelligence risk management framework: Generative artificial intelligence profile* (NIST AI 600-1). https://doi.org/10.6028/NIST.AI.600-1

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2025, November 11). Preliminary fall report shows steady undergraduate enrollment growth. National Student Clearinghouse. https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/news/preliminary-fall-report-shows-steady-undergraduate-enrollment-growth/

Robert, J., & McCormack, M. (2024, May 23). *2024 EDUCAUSE action plan: AI policies and guidelines*. EDUCAUSE. https://library.educause.edu/resources/2024/5/2024-educause-action-plan-ai-policies-and-guidelines

Robert, J., Muscanell, N., McCormack, M., Pelletier, K., Arnold, K., Arbino, N., Young, K., & Reeves, J. (2025, May 12). *2025 EDUCAUSE Horizon Report: Teaching and learning edition*. EDUCAUSE. https://library.educause.edu/resources/2025/5/2025-educause-horizon-report-teaching-and-learning-edition

Rose, A. L., & Bergman, M. E. (2016). Organizational communication. In M. G. Rumsey (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of leadership* (pp. 437–459). Oxford University Press.

Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized causal inference*. Houghton Mifflin.

UNESCO. (2023, September 7). Guidance for generative AI in education and research (Last update January 16, 2026). https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/guidance-generative-ai-education-and-research

Wang, V., & Sedivy-Benton, A. L. (2016). Leadership misplacement: How can this affect institutions of higher education? *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development, 28*(3), 14–25.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.