

The Role of the Provost in U.S. Higher Education: Common Functions and Institutional Variations Across Six Universities

Research Overview

This study investigates the role of the provost in U.S. higher education. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with provosts at six diverse universities and analysis of institutional documents, it explores the common functions, institutional variations, and career pathways of the provost as chief academic officer.

Purpose of Study

Although the provost has long served as the chief academic officer (CAO) in U.S. higher education, the role remains under-theorized in international comparative literature. As universities in Japan and elsewhere increasingly adopt the provost title without a clear understanding of its functions, authority, or required preparation, systematic empirical examination of the U.S. provostship is urgently needed. In Japan, the recent Excellence Initiative for Research Universities (Kokusai Takuetsu Kenkyu Daigaku) explicitly requires the institutional placement of provosts and chief financial officers as a condition of designation, making this question especially important.

This study addresses three research questions:

- (1) What functions are commonly performed by provosts across U.S. universities of differing missions and sizes?
- (2) How does institutional context—including governance structures, faculty unions, and strategic priorities—shape variations in the provost role?
- (3) What career pathways and forms of professional preparation lead individuals to the provostship?

By documenting both the common core and contextual variations of the role, the study contributes to international scholarship on academic leadership and provides empirical grounding for higher education systems that are introducing or reforming the provost position.

Research Methods

The study employed a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) combined with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Six U.S. universities were selected through purposive sampling

to capture diversity in size, control (public/private), religious affiliation, mission (research-intensive vs. teaching-focused), and multiple geographic regions including the East and West Coasts. The six cases comprise two public universities and four private universities representing varied institutional types across the United States.

Data were generated through two different sources. First, semi-structured interviews of approximately sixty minutes were conducted with the sitting provost (or equivalent chief academic officer) at each institution. Interview protocols covered duties, decision-making authority, strategy engagement, office organization, and career trajectory. Second, public documents—including organizational charts, strategic plans, provost biographies, office staffing rosters, and presidential communications—were systematically collected and analyzed to triangulate interview accounts and understand each provost within their institutional context. All interview data were anonymized, and findings will be member-checked with participants prior to dissemination.

Interview transcripts and documents were coded both within-case and across-case. Themes were developed through repeated examination, focusing on both the recurring core of the role and patterns of contextual variation. Researcher self-awareness was maintained through analytic memos and comparison with prior literature.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary cross-case analysis identifies a stable common core to the provost role and significant institutional variation in how that core is enacted.

Common core: the CAO function. Across all six cases, provosts described their role in convergent terms: as the chief academic officer responsible for faculty (recruitment, retention, tenure), curriculum and academic programs, student success, allocation of academic resources, supervision of school deans, and stewardship of strategic planning. One research-university provost noted that major peer associations convene their members as “chief academic officer’s meetings,” signaling the institutionalization of this identity.

Institutional variations. Despite this common core, the role varied substantially with institutional context. Title combinations varied widely, from purely academic titles to dual roles combining academic and operational responsibilities, reflecting the scope of authority assigned to the position. At a large public research university, faculty self-governance constrained the provost’s direct authority over curriculum, with influence channeled through resource allocation.

At a unionized private university, collective bargaining agreements structured both faculty hiring and program restructuring, requiring the provost to lead an academic prioritization process grounded in enrollment, financial, and labor-market data. The configuration of the provost's office (from a small executive team to a structured hierarchy of vice and associate provosts) further shaped how the CAO function was distributed.

Career pathways. All six provosts reached the role through a progressive trajectory—typically faculty member, chair, dean—rather than by direct appointment. Participants emphasized the necessity of prior experience in hiring and releasing staff, managing budgets, and leading through institutional crises. Most had also undertaken formal preparation through programs such as new-provost academies and sustained engagement with denominational, regional, or disciplinary peer networks. Notably, internal promotion within the same institution emerged as a prominent route into the provostship, alongside externally recruited national searches. Several provosts also continued active engagement in teaching or research alongside their administrative duties. Future career aspirations varied widely, from returning to faculty roles to seeking university presidencies or remaining until retirement.

The U.S. provostship emerges as a stable functional role enacted through flexible institutional arrangements and sustained by structured career pathways, offering implications for higher education systems seeking to introduce or reform the position.

Keywords

provost; chief academic officer; higher education leadership; academic administration; multi-case study

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