

First-Names, Campus Culture, and Institutional Leadership

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Are you on a first-name basis with your university president, provost, and deans?

Do they know your name?

This question may seem odd to those college and university employees who already enjoy a high degree of status and security. Norms of faculty culture and shared governance have, in my understanding, have usually encouraged a first-name familiarity among (tenure-track) faculty and institutional academic leaders. Faculty culture is one of flat hierarchies. *(Please share if you have experienced something different).*

Among staff, however (and maybe contingent faculty), being on a first-name basis with the president or provost is not a given. (How students refer to campus leaders - and their professors - is a whole different question).

I work at a small and intimate liberal arts college where staff are on a first-name basis with all of the academic leaders.

In the decade or so I've been working here, I've seen changes in how staff speak with campus leaders based on the personalities of those individuals in the top academic positions.

My conclusion is that the more confident, secure, and calm an institutional leader feels about her or his authority, the more likely they will want to be called by their first name.

There is something about the leveling effect of being on a first-name basis that encourages the flow of information. The names we use for each other can signal what is really important - our place in the hierarchy or the power of our ideas.

From what I've observed, those academic leaders who speak with all staff using first-names are also more likely to ask questions. The confidence to be curious - and to not have to act like you know more than everybody else in the room - may be a hallmark of those presidents/provosts/deans who don't want to be addressed by their job title.

I do understand why some presidents, provosts, or deans would want to be addressed by title. The life of an academic leader means managing a public persona. Each time they walk around campus, or go to a sporting event (or even the grocery store), they will run into someone who wants something from them. The scarce attention time of top leadership is among the most precious of commodities at any institution. You could come up with a good narrative about how formal titles should be used when discussing formal university business.

Still, I greatly value my own local campus culture - one where everyone seems to be on a first-name basis with everyone else.

Values such as modesty, listening, and collegiality seem to be reinforced when leadership, faculty, and staff all speak to each other using given names.

Do how people who work for colleges and universities address each other vary by institutional type?

Are small, liberal arts schools more likely to have a first-name culture than large universities?

How related is the culture of first names and visibility?

At my institution, we interact with campus leadership on a regular basis. They teach classes and regularly attend all sorts of campus events. At other institutions where I've worked, presidents and provosts were more remote - and

even as a faculty member I did not call these folks by their first names (if I ever saw them).

Should I be making a distinction between faculty and staff when talking about interpersonal communications?

What should I call you?