



UBC President Santa Ono. An “accessible, bow-tie wearing peacemaker with 74,000 Twitter followers.” Paul Joseph/UBC photo.

Can the Role of University President Really Be that Easy?

Julie Cafley

In an age of instant social media infamy, when every moment a university president spends managing the hourly crises that come with managing a small city full of academic egos, newly liberated youth, overworked staff and demanding parents can ignite into a career-ending Twitter storm, character counts. Julie Cafley writes that UBC’s Santa Ono may have the job down.

Could Dr. Santa Ono really turn the oft-failed job of a Canadian university president into a campus stroll on a sunny day?

Ono is just beginning his mandate as UBC’s 15th president, yet he is already doing the one thing that few Canadian university presidents have been able to accomplish to date. He’s looking in control of the situation, easing his way through the preliminaries of a job that is as impossible as it is prestigious.

After months of media commentary and critique, of outrage and anger, of frustration and embarrassment over a UBC presidential appointment that lasted just over a year, the news of Ono's appointment is being met with unmitigated praise and excitement in Vancouver, and across the country. The mood on campus, the media commentary, and the Twittersphere is forward-looking and positive. And the applause isn't even tentative. Meanwhile, students, faculty, parents, and community members in Cincinnati, where Ono had been both provost and president of the University of Cincinnati over the past six years, are publicly airing their sadness and disappointment over his imminent departure.

So, who is this accessible, bow-tie wearing peacemaker with 74,000 Twitter followers? Ono's keen understanding of universities, his skills, abilities and background, and his optimistic approach are a welcome refresh to the Canadian university landscape. In recent years, the role of Canadian university president has often looked—and for many, felt—like a slog. Over the past decade, no less than 18 presidents have departed their jobs prior to the expiry of their terms and, in many cases, within a year or two of assuming office.

So, is this too good to be true? What's his secret ingredient? When examining Ono's leadership, albeit from a distance, within the lens of my research on unfinished mandates of Canadian university presidents, it paints a telling picture of Ono's unique approach to university leadership and governance. And, unlike many aspects of the academy, it actually seems quite simple.

1) Ono has social capital. In spades. Ono is from Vancouver, a Canadian coming home. He is an academic, a musician, and a scientist. He has a PhD in Experimental Medicine from McGill, and has studied at Harvard, and the University of Chicago. He has solid research credentials, advancing important work in the area of age-

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related macular degeneration. He is a proven provost and a celebrated university president. Within a campus community, all of these factors create an important level of credibility and build trust. He connects with many stakeholders in a very natural way. He is seen as “one of us” from the outset. This opens the way to strong and deep campus relations. He values the role of relational leadership and is exceptionally apt at maintaining networks and communicating with stakeholders.

2) He is authentic.

His first job was as a janitor. He has also been a waiter. He talks about his parents. He recently opened up about his two suicide attempts as a young adult. He doesn't take pay raises and invests his annual bonuses in student scholarships. He hugs. He laughs at himself. He doesn't always have the answer, but he will do everything in his power to find it. And, there seem to be no tweets that are prepped by the communications department. You trust the guy. Our society no longer gives blind trust to its leaders. We crave authenticity, and that, he has.

3) He is masterful at shared leadership.

His speeches, tweets, and commentary speak volumes of his understanding of collegial governance, servant leadership, and shared decision-making. He discounts competition on campus and talks about “lifting each other up.” More importantly, he lifts others up. Daily. He praises his predecessor, Martha Piper. He likely has or will sit down with his less successful predecessor, Arvind Gupta, whose five-year term lasted just 13 months. He builds bridges and teams that trust.

4) He can manage through a crisis.

A skilled communicator, Ono has proven his leadership during times of crisis. In 2014, University of Cincinnati student Brogan Dulle went missing for eight days and was later found dead. Ono supported the family in their “eight days of greatness” campaign, creating a day of selflessness on campus, and encouraging the campus community to perform random acts of kindness. After the shooting of Samuel Dubose by a former campus police officer, he made changes. He apologized to the family, he held open forums, he reformed the policing on campus, and he created a leadership position to ensure that safety was a top priority. Ono is vocal on issues of diversity. He communicates openly on tough issues. He is transparent through difficult times.

5) He has grit.

Ono works hard. Grit. Courage. Endurance. He has all of that.

6) Did I mention that he's cool?

As I wrote that, I could feel a collective cringe from academics across the country. *Ivory towers aren't supposed to be cool!* However, secretly, some might like his active social media presence, congratulating grads, recruiting students, solving issues as they arise, and celebrating professors. It is extremely cool that he raised \$100,000 selling his legendary bow-tie to friends of the university. And you can't help but like that he coined the hashtag #hottestcollegetinAmerica. We might even wonder what UBC might become? He does Twitter surveys to connect, celebrates national doughnut day (in honour of his Canadian heritage?), and plays both Bach and Prince on his cello. He encourages students to

take selfies with strangers during orientation week. For a role that can appear intimidating and even pretentious, cool is a refreshing quality in the academy. Call it cool, or being of the times, he's there.

Of course, many of the cynics are waiting for the honeymoon to be over, and even predicting its demise. In such complex institutions, is this simply gloss, and is it really enough to succeed in one of the country's toughest jobs?

In my research on Canadian university presidents with unfinished mandates, six areas of concern emerged as having played a role in undermining presidents' ability to lead. These include: board governance and communication; trust within the executive team; mentorship; the role of the predecessor; the effectiveness of the transitional process; and issues relating to diversity.

In the history of failed university presidencies, there have been

bumpy roads for some US university presidents coming to Canada. Others have had some difficult times when "coming home," returning to a university or a city where they had spent time earlier in their life or ca-

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reer. In both scenarios, high expectations were not helpful.

However, early signs of Ono's leadership provide optimism and excitement for UBC, and for higher education more broadly. Canadian universities need to be centres of leading-edge research and creative teaching. They need to be global yet rooted in their communities; bold and ambitious, while being responsive and accessible; disruptive yet willing to be disrupted; innovative and entrepreneurial, while remaining caring and connected. Ono's performance to date sets high expectations for what is to come. **P**

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