

Starting Out:

Lessons from the First Headship

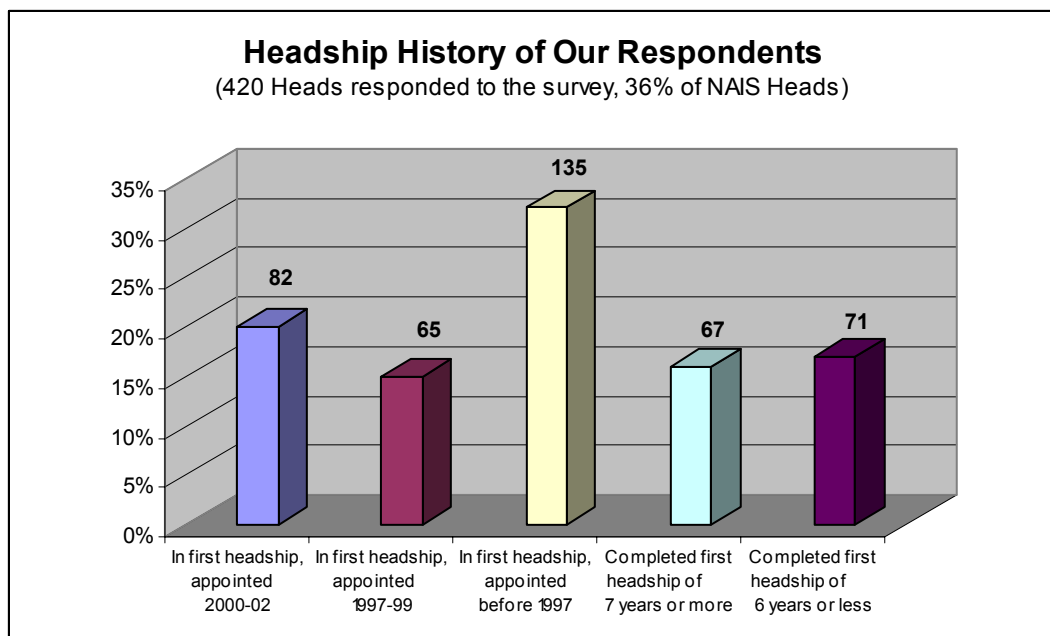
Highlights from the 2002-03 Wickenden Associates Research Project

Our latest survey of independent school Heads explored their entry into this demanding profession and found many paradoxes inherent in the first headship. Leaders' strengths do not immediately translate into successes; misgivings and missteps, tempered by experience, often give way to accomplishments and satisfaction.

The most recent newcomers to the headship differ in some significant ways from those who came before them, but they also have much in common with respect to their preparation for the position and their experiences in the early years. All of these leaders have a great deal to tell us about the predictable challenges of the first headship – and also about its considerable rewards.

James W. Wickenden

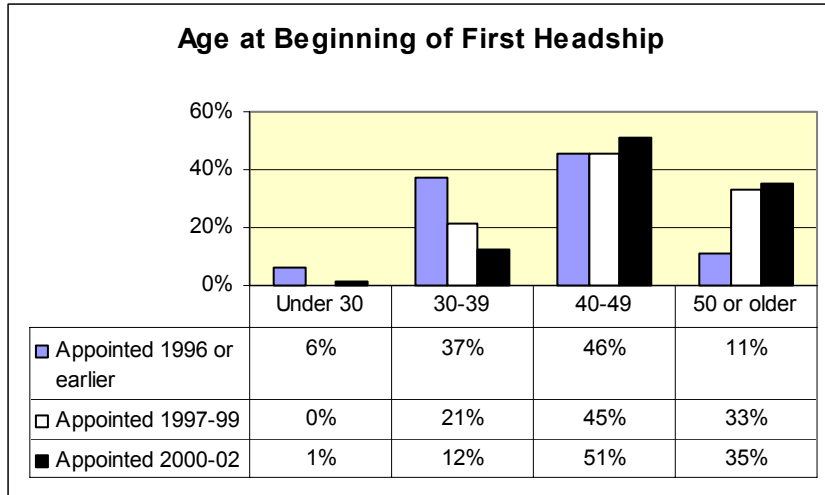
Among leaders still in their first headship and appointed prior to 1997, the average tenure is 13 years – and still counting. . .



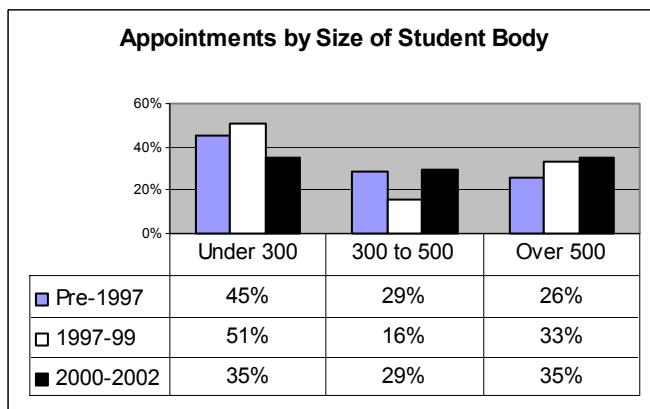
Changes over Time in the Path to Headship

The responses from the 420 NAIS Heads who returned our survey suggest the following trends regarding first headships:

- **First-time Heads are older at the time of appointment; new Heads in their 30s are increasingly rare.** The trend is particularly true for women, most of whom are now in their 50s when they assume their first headship. New Heads also are less likely to have children at home.



- **One-third of the Heads appointed since 2000 had a prior affiliation with the school they are heading, compared to only about one-quarter of Heads in earlier years.**
- **Despite recent publicity suggesting that Boards are increasingly seeking “non-traditional” candidates, our findings do not support that view.** Over the past six years, the percentage of first-time leaders coming to the headship from a position outside of independent schools has actually *declined*. Only 10% of the Heads appointed since 1997 were drawn from public schools, higher education, business, the military, or other nonprofit organizations, compared to 21% in previous years.
- **The path to headship included a stint as an independent school teacher for nearly 90% of our respondents.** The most common positions held immediately prior to the headship have been and remain the Assistant/Associate/Interim Headship and the Division Headship.
- **Nor has the level of education reported by Heads changed significantly.** About three-quarters of all first-time Heads report having a master’s as their highest degree. The percentage with a doctorate has declined slightly, from 20% among earlier Heads to about 18% in recent years. Despite much conversation about the headship becoming an increasingly corporate position, the MBA remains a rare credential among first-time Heads, with only about 2% holding that degree.

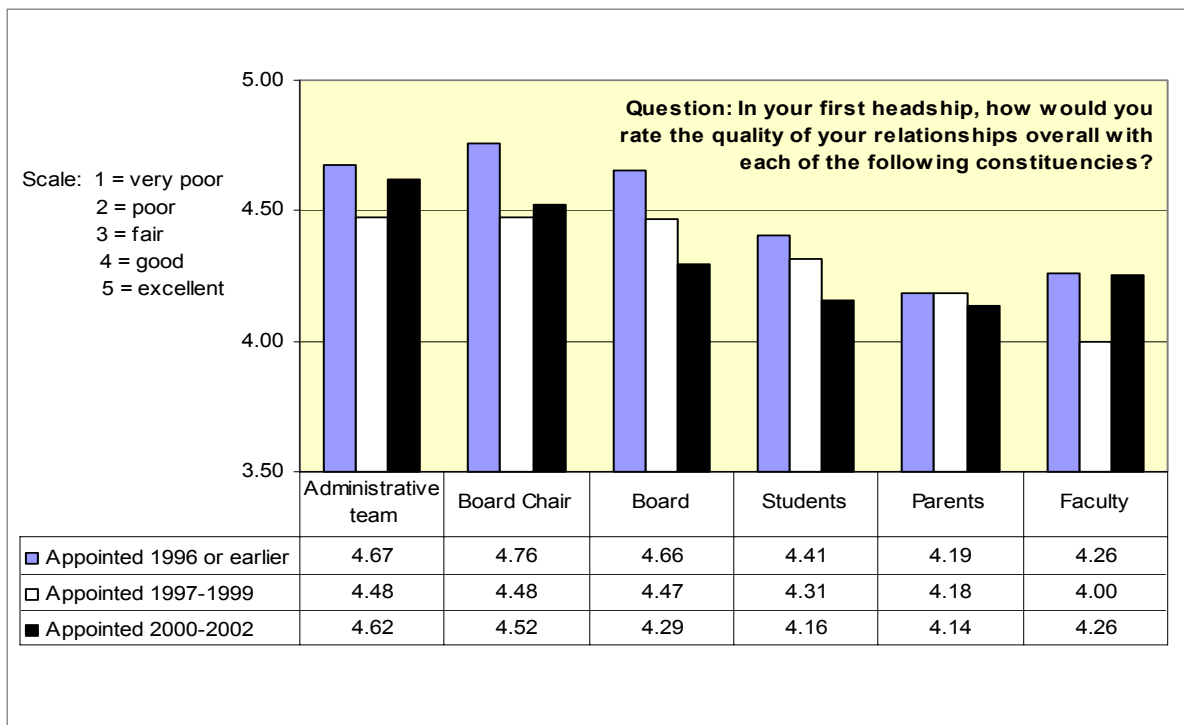


- **Heads appointed in the past six years are more likely to be heading schools of 500 students or more.** Even more importantly, recently appointed Heads rate the conditions of their schools at the time they assumed their headships as healthier than Heads appointed earlier. This finding applies across a range of categories, including the quality of the educational program, faculty, and Board, as well as the condition of the facilities and finances.

Preparation & Performance: Surprising Findings

Perhaps because they have waited longer to undertake a headship, Heads appointed in recent years are more confident than Heads appointed earlier about the quality of their preparation to tackle virtually all areas of school leadership. What has not changed significantly over time is the Heads' perceptions of their *relative* strengths and weaknesses:

- Heads still feel most confident about their preparation in the areas of:
 - Providing moral leadership
 - Public speaking
 - Communicating with parents
 - Making final disciplinary decisions
 - Managing the educational program
- Heads from every cohort say they were least well prepared in the following areas:
 - Strategic planning
 - Managing the budget
 - Managing the plant
 - Managing the Board
 - Fund-raising
- We found very little relationship – and in fact sometimes an inverse relationship – between the areas in which Heads feel best prepared and the areas in which they encounter the most success. Asked to describe their greatest accomplishments, leaders in their first three years of headship most frequently offered responses that fell into one of the following three categories:
 - Strengthening the school culture or climate
 - Improving school finances or the budgeting process
 - Fund-raising success
- Although managing the Board is a daunting challenge for new Heads – and often the source of their greatest missteps – they nonetheless report that they have forged stronger relationships with their Boards and Board Chairs than with students, parents, or faculty:



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

If You Have What It Takes, the Rewards Are Great

What does it take to be a successful Head? Among the many skills, qualities, and experiences described by our respondents as “essential” to success in the first headship, the following topped the list:

1. Strong communication skills, both oral and written.
2. The ability and willingness to listen.
3. Abundant emotional intelligence – also known as “people skills.”
4. A visionary, strategic, “big-picture” orientation.
5. Equanimity – including patience, an even temper, a calm manner, resilience, and a thick skin.

Perhaps the most encouraging finding of our survey was the extent to which school leaders – particularly those in long-term first headships – describe their efforts as both rewarding and successful.

The job is difficult, to be sure, but certainly not impossible for leaders who are also learners. The message to aspiring independent school leaders is clear:

Prepare to be surprised and to surprise yourself.

