



**SHEEO**

State Higher Education  
Executive Officers Association

# ***SYNOPSIS***

## **Effective Leadership in State Higher Education: Advice from the Field**

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This synopsis previews key findings from the full report based on nearly 40 in-depth interviews with current and former State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEOs) from across the country. The full report offers the detail, nuance, and hard-won stories this brief only gestures toward. Read the [full version here](#).

## WHAT DOES A SHEEO DO?

Most people who pursue the SHEEO role believe they are signing up for a policy job. A chance to make the postsecondary education and workforce development systems better, move the needle on affordability, close attainment gaps, or align institutions to workforce reality. But it is not a higher education job with some governmental responsibilities attached.

The role is more akin to a complex state government job that includes a higher education portfolio. SHEEOs who succeed understand this early. Those who don't often discover it under pressure, in public, and sometimes too late.

The SHEEOs interviewed for this report hold or have held some of the most demanding, under-supported, and chronically misunderstood roles in state government. There is much we can learn from SHEEOs about leadership: how authority in the public sector actually works, what culture demands, how relationships either hold you up or let you fall, and what it costs if that happens.

If you are considering this role or working alongside SHEEOs to support, advise, or appoint them, you should first level-set on seven truths about the job.

### SEVEN TRUTHS

1. **The entry path shapes the risk profile.** Whether you came from inside the agency, landed from a governor's office, leapt from philanthropy, or inherited an interim title, your background doesn't protect you. It reshapes the specific challenges faced.
2. **SHEEOs are not hired to "fix higher education."** Some may think they are, including sometimes the people who hire them. They're wrong. The first job is to run a state agency inside a full-contact political system where the SHEEO has limited direct control over the outcomes everyone expects from them.
3. **Authority is not what you think it is.** Statutes describe authority, but they don't guarantee it. Real authority is conditional, situational, and often entirely different from what the organizational chart and state law imply.
4. **This job is mostly people, not policy.** On most days, less than 20 percent of a SHEEO's time is spent on higher education policy. The rest is personnel, board dynamics, legislative relationships, budget negotiations, crisis management, and narrative control.
5. **Capacity and behavior are strategies.** Vision statements and strategic plans get judged by how consistently a leader behaves, especially under pressure. Credibility isn't built by ideas. It's built by follow-through.
6. **Legitimacy is constructed, not granted.** An appointment is a fractional part of legitimacy. It must be earned through visibility, consistency, procedural fairness, and coalition investment. It can also be lost, fast.
7. **This role will take as much as you allow it to.** SHEEOs spoke openly about burnout, family strain, geographic isolation, and shortened tenures despite doing everything right. The costs aren't evenly distributed. They're higher for outsiders, first-time SHEEOs, women, leaders of color, and leaders in highly politicized states.



The following sections outline the key lessons learned from the interviews and correspond to the main sections of the full report.

## SECTION 1: THE MYTH OF THE FIRST 90 DAYS

The “first 90 days” concept is deeply embedded in leadership literature. For SHEEOs, it’s helpful, but incomplete, given most SHEEOs enter into motion, not orientation. They inherit obligation and scrutiny from day one. It may be during a legislative session, amid audits, into agencies with vacancies or morale issues, or with authority that is fragmented or contested. Every pause may be interpreted as indecision, and every statement treated as a signal. The first 90 days are not a runway; they are exposure.

Three fables persist about early tenure that experienced leaders dismantled:

### **FABLE 1: YOU CAN LISTEN QUIETLY BEFORE ACTING.**

Silence is not neutral. Internally promoted leaders who leaned too hard into continuity found that others filled the vacuum. Presidents assumed nothing would change, legislators read quiet as weakness, and staff assumed authority hadn’t shifted.

### **FABLE 2: YOU SHOULD LAUNCH YOUR AGENDA EARLY.**

Being right too early can be indistinguishable from being wrong. Leaders who launched fully formed reform agendas before understanding statutory constraints, staff capacity, or political sensitivities found that technically sound ideas hardened opposition rather than built momentum.

### **FABLE 3: RELATIONSHIPS WILL STAY THE SAME.**

They will not, because past colleagues become subordinates, and/or peers become skeptics. One leader put it simply – that people don’t change, their incentives do. Effective leaders signaled their identity before direction, diagnosed authority in real time, stabilized the agency before expanding its work, and controlled the narrative or accepted the one others built for them. Early leadership in the SHEEO role is less about speed and more about calibration.

## SECTION 2: DIAGNOSING AUTHORITY BEFORE EXERCISING IT

A thing about authority in this role is that you don’t have it because of your title. You have it because people decide it’s in their interest to listen to you.

Across states, formal SHEEO authority varies wildly. Some leaders sit behind powerful governing boards. Some operate inside a governor’s cabinet. Some lead small agencies with expansive mandates. Most rely more on persuasion than enforcement. The common thread is that while statutes may describe what authority looks like, they don’t enforce or deliver it.

Effective SHEEOs learn to distinguish between authority (what they are formally allowed to do) and influence (what others are willing to accept from them) and build the latter before assuming the former.

In states with limited formal authority, the most durable strategy is to become indispensable. Leaders who invested in high-quality data, neutral analysis, and trusted research helped build agencies that stakeholders came to depend on and defend. Influence accumulates through usefulness, not directives.



### SECTION 3: RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE WORK

Nearly every SHEEO interviewed offered some version of the same warning: “If you don’t like relationships, this is the wrong job.” Relationships are not the prerequisite for effective leadership. They’re not something you build so you can get to the “real work.” They are the real work.

In state higher education systems, formal authority is fragmented by design. Boards govern. Presidents lead. Legislatures control budgets. Governors set priorities. Agencies coordinate, convene, and persuade. Relationships are not soft skills in this environment. They are operating infrastructure.

Effective SHEEOs are strategic about which relationships they invest in and are not equal opportunity relationship builders. They identify which relationships are mission critical, which are symbolic, which are transactional, and which must be managed at arm’s length. Time spent on the wrong relationships delays progress and creates false expectations.

Presidents must be respected as peers and held as accountable partners simultaneously. Boards cannot be managed; they must be aligned. Legislative relationships are structurally asymmetric, and trying to equalize them may prove a losing strategy. The proximity of the Governor’s office is not protection. Effective SHEEOs build parallel coalitions so they won’t be exposed when executive attention moves on. And internally, if your own staff doesn’t trust you, no one else will.

### SECTION 4: CULTURE EATS STRUCTURE

Culture doesn’t wait for strategy to form. By the time leaders feel ready to articulate a vision, staff have already drawn conclusions. According to the interviews, within weeks of entry, staff are asking themselves: Does this leader follow through? Do they change direction suddenly? Are mistakes punished or addressed? Who gets access and who doesn’t? Culture, in this sense, is the accumulation of small signals, not formal announcements.

In smaller agencies with limited formal authority, culture is strategy. What leaders say matters far less than what they do repeatedly. Inconsistency, even from well-intentioned leaders, erodes trust faster than disagreement does.

Almost every leader identified at least one personnel decision as culturally decisive. They were not primarily about competence, but about whether leadership could tolerate internal tension in exchange for external expertise. Delaying difficult personnel decisions consistently costs more later.

When political pressure intensified, agencies with strong internal culture survived. Staff who trusted leadership filtered noise, maintained operational discipline, and protected leaders from unnecessary exposure.

### SECTION 5: CONFLICT, CRISIS, AND STAYING STANDING

Every SHEEO encounters conflict. Most encounter crises. What differentiates durable leaders from short-tenured ones is how a crisis is handled when it appears.

Most crises don’t begin that way. The full report reveals that they often begin as misaligned expectations, unclear authority, delayed decisions, quiet resentment, or unspoken disagreement. Silence, leaders learned, is not stability; it is likely unexpressed opposition consolidating elsewhere.

Unfortunately, technical precision offers little protection once issues become political. Audits, compliance findings, and miscalculated financial aid allocations, all technically manageable, can become existential threats when stakeholders feel surprised, explanations sound defensive, and responsibility is deflected. Leaders who survived learned to treat technical errors as political events with technical content, not the other way around.

In crisis, following procedures meticulously, inviting third-party oversight rather than resisting it, documenting decisions, and slowing down when outside pressure demanded speed was described as defensive leadership. Finally, long-standing relationships don’t automatically translate into public support. What saves leaders during a crisis is the credibility built before the crisis arrived.



## SECTION 6: DURABILITY AND KNOWING WHEN AND HOW TO LEAVE

Longevity and durable effectiveness are not the same thing. Several long-serving SHEEOs described periods when they still held the role but were no longer truly leading. Authority had narrowed, relationships calcified, risk tolerance declined, and innovation gave way to maintenance.

Durable leaders share few traits related to personality or ideology. What they share are disciplined practices: managing expectations relentlessly, building coalitions that don't depend on their personal presence, choosing fights carefully, maintaining personal boundaries, and planning for exit even while leading.

Leaders indicated that staying too long can become a liability. Signs include overly familiar relationships, increased conflict avoidance, declining appetite for risk, and an identity increasingly entangled with the role. Leaders remain competent administrators but become less effective change agents.

How a leader leaves teaches people as much as how they led. Those who left with intention (protecting staff, preserving credibility, enabling renewal) left something worth preserving. Also, leaders who focused only on policy and vision sometimes left fragile agencies vulnerable to reversal. Those who invested in people, norms, and decision discipline, in addition to policy and vision, left institutions capable of adapting without them.

## SECTION 7: WHEN THE JOB COMES FROM THE INSIDE

Many SHEEOs emerge from the agency or are known within that state's higher education systems and institutions. The full report generated deep insight into these kinds of candidates. Internal promotion is widely assumed to be the safer path into the SHEEO role. In practice, it carries distinct and underestimated risks, especially around legitimacy, authority signaling, and role redefinition.

The familiarity trap is real. Internal leaders inherit not just knowledge, they inherit expectations. Colleagues expect continuity. Presidents expect access. Staff expect protection. Boards expect stability. Taken together, these expectations may quietly constrain authority before it is ever exercised.

One of the most counterintuitive findings was that internal leaders are often less insulated politically than outsiders. Outsiders expect to be tested, and internal leaders frequently don't. Long-standing goodwill can evaporate faster than expected when political pressure arrives. Internal leaders who succeed treat the transition as a reintroduction, not a continuation. They make explicit what's changing, what's not, and how decisions will now be made. They make this deliberate reintroduction even when doing so feels uncomfortable among former peers.

Insider knowledge can be a strategic asset when used intentionally. Deep institutional history, board dynamics, and legislative pattern recognition allow effective internal leaders to anticipate resistance, sequence decisions more effectively, and avoid symbolic fights that produce little gain. The difference between success and stagnation is how that knowledge gets deployed.

Coming from the inside reduces the learning curve but increases the legitimacy challenge. According to leaders interviewed, the job doesn't simply expand; it changes shape. In this environment, authority must be claimed; familiarity must be managed, not indulged; and relationships must be redefined.



## WHAT THE FIELD SHOULD UNDERSTAND

After nearly 40 interviews across states, entry paths, political contexts, and tenures, one truth is now empirical: the SHEEO role is far more fragile, complex, kinetic, and consequential than it is often treated. It is one of the hardest jobs in state government.

What follows restates the previously outlined truths but opens the aperture to help the broader higher education industry see itself in the advice and important contextual lessons. So, these truths are not just for future SHEEOs, but for the “field” that appoints them, supports them, advises them, and too often misunderstands what it’s asking of them.

1. **This is a governance role, not a reform platform.** Successful and enduring reform follows operational competency, not the reverse. Hiring and evaluation should prioritize governance skills, political judgment, and leadership discipline alongside policy vision. The field’s expectation setting needs serious recalibration.
2. **Authority is conditional and must be diagnosed continuously.** Those who assumed authority based on title, structure, or statute learned its limits. Honest pre-appointment conversations about where authority actually resides would serve everyone better and set new SHEEOs up for success.
3. **Relationships are the work.** Relational labor is not a soft skill, but a core requirement. The field needs to recognize this and give leaders time, support, guidance, and legitimacy to do it well.
4. **Culture is the most underestimated leadership instrument.** Organizational charts get tremendous attention, but operating norms, especially during transitions, get far less. That sentiment needs to change in order for needed reforms to have any chance of gaining purchase and thriving.
5. **Crisis is not exceptional. It is the test.** Leaders who survive crises aren’t those who avoid conflict; they’re those who slow down under pressure, maintain procedural discipline, and protect staff credibility. That is the point where the field needs to enthusiastically assume the “phone a friend” role.
6. **Durability is discipline.** Stewardship should be valued over heroism. Knowing when to leave is itself a leadership act. The field needs to normalize planned transitions and reduce the stigma of voluntary departure.
7. **Entry path shapes risk more than capability.** No background is inherently safer. Each path carries different vulnerabilities and requires different preparation. The field should move away from “best background candidate type” thinking toward risk-aware selections, tailored support, and adequate onboarding.

## FULL REPORT PROVIDES ADDITIONAL DETAIL AND INSIGHT

This synopsis introduces effective leadership concepts, but the **full report** carries the real weight of the research. It includes the specific stories, the more difficult lessons, and the candid reflections of leaders explaining how challenges unfolded, where missteps proved costly, and what effective stewardship required in practice. It also features a Leadership Self-Assessment for current and aspiring SHEEOs, intended to help them assess the current environment and identify blind spots before they are exposed in public or under pressure.

For those who lead a state higher education institution or system, serve on a governing board, advise senior leaders, or support state higher education reform through policy or philanthropy, the full report is worth sustained attention. It will likely sharpen, and in some cases fundamentally change, how you view this unusually demanding leadership role.



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