



Chapter 14

Launching a New Presidency

“To lead effectively, the president will need to come to understand an entire new campus community.”

CONSIDER THE NEWLY APPOINTED college or university president: an able and experienced figure, with a strong claim on the good will of the institution, ready to go to work, and brimming with enthusiasm and ideas of what can be done to improve the place. In short, this person is a sight for sore board members' eyes—even more so considering the time, money, and hard work that have gone into the search.

But consider also what this welcome and reassuring figure faces. His or her job performance will be important and highly visible to many people—people who will not hesitate to pass judgment on it. The job requires, typically, meeting an array of stiff challenges in academic, financial, political, and other arenas. To lead effectively, the president will need to come to understand an entire new campus community. He or she will need to meet students, faculty, staff, board members, alumni, donors, and local citizens, impress them favorably, and hear their concerns. It will be critical to understand and analyze the institution and its options. Facts must be gathered and processes understood. Existing human, physical, and financial assets must be appraised. New networks of friends and allies will have to be created and new resources identified—and probably some agendas blunted or disarmed. The new president will need to win the commu-

nity's confidence and, ideally, its enthusiastic support for his or her initiatives. Typically, the president must achieve all this—and a good number of early successes—within a short period, a year or less, perhaps even six months. Moreover, during this early period, the new appointee must tread carefully to avoid costly missteps.

In the excitement of the announcement, which often comes after a complex and demanding search process and perhaps after a contentious relationship with the previous president, it is important to remember that the board's obligations continue. As a former president of the University of California, Clark Kerr, put it, "the responsibility of the board for a new president does not end with a sigh of relief and a crossing of the fingers."³⁹ If only because of the difficulty of the new president's charge, boards should do all they possibly can to facilitate an appointee's transition into office, and they should set the stage in the early months of the presidency for effectiveness over the longer term. If more boards did so, fewer presidents would have reason to report, ruefully, having been dropped at the gate, and more presidencies would survive the critical early years to meet the prodigious expectations boards and others invest in them.

Studies of the process by which new executives take charge of their organizations identify the first three to six months as particularly critical.⁴⁰ This is the entry phase, when impressions are formed, important relationships are established, the learning curve is steepest, and too often irreparable mistakes are made. A full year or more may be required for the appointee to become immersed in the new institution and fully assume the reins of power, and presidents need to be supported throughout. But the first three to six months demand special attention.

STEPS THE BOARD SHOULD TAKE

The board is responsible for much of the most critical early work. The board's leadership should first ensure clarity of expectations. Immediately after the appointment, the board chair and the president should begin developing performance goals for the term allotted.

³⁹ Clark Kerr, quoted in Patricia Stanley and Lee J. Betts, "A Proactive Model for Presidential Transition," in Martin and Samels, *Presidential Transition*, p. 84.

⁴⁰ Don Tebbe, *Chief Executive Transitions: How to Hire and Support a Nonprofit CEO* (Washington, DC: BoardSource, 2008), p. 64.

Built squarely upon the needs outlined in the position profile, goals should be ambitious, achievable, and have the strong support of both parties. These goals, expressed in terms of agreed-to metrics, can provide the benchmarks for subsequent evaluation.

Just as important is clarifying expectations of other sorts that affect board-president relations. Many of these go to questions of communications and decision making:

- What budgetary authority does the president have?
- What decisions (on legal or personnel matters, for example) need board approval?
- What issues should be discussed with, say, the full board, the executive committee, the chair?
- How should the president communicate between board meetings?
- What information needs to be shared with the board, and how does the board prefer to have it presented?⁴¹

Less clear-cut but equally important is the matter of building mutual confidence—a process that should have a good foundation in the board's audit of its own effectiveness. (See Chapter 7, page 70.) The relationship of the chair and the president is all-important and well worth special attention. The two should make every effort to spend time together in ways that will foster trust and productivity. Programs such as AGB's Institute for Board Chairs and Presidents provide structured opportunities for these two key figures to shape a close, productive working relationship. Board members collectively need to demonstrate early in a presidency that they will be strong allies and partners. They can make helpful introductions, provide contacts, give of their own resources and assist in fundraising, attend important campus events, stand behind the president whenever possible in controversial matters, be candid about their concerns, and not press personal agendas. One or two particularly experienced board members may be able to assist informally as senior counselors and ambassadors in ways that those reporting to the new president or less well-connected in the community cannot.

⁴¹ Susan Resneck Pierce, "Boards and Presidents—After the Hire," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 6, 2009, <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2009/03/06/pierce>.

An important way boards can support new presidents is by encouraging them to take advantage of opportunities to acquire skills and understanding they need to do their jobs effectively. Few successful candidates for presidencies spend time during searches calling attention to areas in which they are insufficiently prepared. But all new presidents have them. The 2011 ACE survey of presidents asked respondents whether they were sufficiently skilled in each of a long list of areas. These areas were most identified as weaknesses:

- Fundraising (*mentioned by 40 percent*);
- Technology planning (*34 percent*);
- Risk management/legal issues (*30 percent*);
- Capital improvement projects (*27 percent*);
- Entrepreneurial ventures (*27 percent*); and
- Campus internationalization (*25 percent*).

At least one in five cited deficiencies in these areas:

- Athletics (*24 percent*);
- Budget/financial management (*24 percent*);
- Government relations (*22 percent*);
- Governing board relations (*22 percent*); and
- Enrollment management (*20 percent*).⁴²

Relevant learning opportunities are available from established training programs for new presidents (for example, the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents) and the wide array of topical conferences offered by national higher education groups like ACE, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), and the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO).

As search consultant Ted Marchese reminds us, small but effective ways can smooth a transition. It is wise not to overload a president-elect; he or she is likely trying to wrap up current responsibilities in a professional manner. Moreover, the appointee needs some time off before starting at a new institution. So, if possible, allow some time

⁴² *American College President* 2012, p. 99.

for preparation, reflection, and recharging of energies. Another common-sense prescription is creating a presidential discretionary fund. It will be appreciated as critical marginal support for work on new initiatives. It creates a means for a president to signal what he or she values and can generate early forward movement.⁴³ This last objective is often served by the new president's coming to campus for focused periods before assuming duties. Meetings at these times with key people and groups can help a president hit the ground running on day one.

Board members should be alert—more in this early period than at any other time—to the possibility of major presidential missteps, however innocent. Board members know the institution's culture and with a well-chosen word or action may keep a new president from wandering or being led into trouble. Does the president's house or office require remodeling? The job should have been done, in quiet consultation with the next residents, well before the new president arrives. If renovation must go forward now, it may need to be done more modestly and paid for over several budget years. Is the president preparing to dismiss long-serving (and possibly much beloved) staff? Consider advising that such major moves be put off a while until he or she is better established. Are plans for an inauguration too lavish? Are commitments outpacing resources and planning? Is early rhetoric too grandiose? Are key donors or political supporters being neglected? If only because many presidents have fallen victim to these excesses and omissions, the board should be prepared to provide warnings and suggest new directions.

To provide additional support through the transition period, boards may want to secure for the new president the services of an independent executive coach. Answering only to the president, a leadership coach can provide professional guidance and counsel with the full assurance that discussions will be held close and not revealed to members of the board to whom the president ultimately reports.

The transition period is also the time to put in place a support structure for the new president's spouse or partner, designed to complement that individual's professional needs, while helping fulfill responsibilities related to the institution. Some boards

⁴³ Theodore J. Marchese, "Making the Most of Presidential Transitions," *Trusteeship*, January/February 2012, p. 29.

ask a member to serve as the spouse or partner's liaison to ease the transition while helping to shape the most productive role for the spouse or partner on campus and in the community.

Finally, as mentioned in Chapter 3, another valuable ally of the new president may in some cases be his or her predecessor. But this help should generally come in the form of a few substantive conversations, then a considerate absence from the scene that might stretch over the full three to six months. Ideally the departing president will be happy to be contacted and be helpful when advice is sought but otherwise will allow his or her successor to become established as soon as possible as the institution's only leader.

AN AD HOC TRANSITION GROUP

As explained in Chapter 1, presidential searches should take place within a larger framework of transition planning. Ideally, this function is ongoing and already has helped facilitate things at various points. It may be instrumental, for example, in ensuring good communication with the previous president about his or her plans for departure, providing guidance on the composition of the search committee and the search firms to be interviewed, and offering personal hosts to finalists' families during the on-campus interviews so that the latter could be introduced to the resources in the community. The board is always responsible for seeing that the function of transition planning is attended to.

The kind of hands-on transition work that happens post-appointment is often delegated and ad hoc. It is not so much handled directly by the executive committee or a standing committee of the board as by a wider, more representative group (formed by the board) to ease the new president's entry as the search approaches its conclusion. At their best, transition groups help presidents-elect understand campus culture and serve as sounding boards and occasionally counselors for new leaders.

One or more board members (perhaps ideally ones who have served on the search committee) do need to be appointed to this group and report back on its activities. But its membership should probably include representatives of the faculty, staff, student body, and possibly alumni and community.

On-Campus Support and Activities

Any ad hoc transition group might meet with the president—if only by phone—soon after the appointment to introduce itself, clarify its responsibilities, and get his or her thoughts and suggestions. Presidents may, for example, find it helpful for a transition committee to design, distribute, and compile the results of a survey of the community, organize focus groups, or take the lead in arranging introductions to significant campus groups and/or brief visits prior to the move to campus. Such steps can help orient a new president to different constituencies' hopes and concerns and help demonstrate a wish to know the institution and listen carefully to the insights of those who understand it best. The ad hoc group can also assist by highlighting and helping to shape events during the early months that present good opportunities for the president to show interest and support for ongoing work and be welcomed and more widely introduced. Student members may serve as liaisons to student organizations. Board members should help ensure that the president meets all members of the board, either at their homes or businesses or over a meal or in some other social setting. The group may take the lead in structuring a set of early meetings of the president-elect with senior administrators and staff in the president's office. It may want to ensure that the president gets a systematic tour of the institution's physical plant from the staff responsible for each facility.

The transition group may want to coordinate a series of retreats involving key administrators, faculty leaders, and members of the governing board. These can serve an important social and trust-building function and, especially when spaced out over a period of several months, allow for the building of a very serviceable consensus about the institution's situation and the priorities that must be addressed.

External Constituencies

An ad hoc transition group should focus on external constituencies as well, setting up meetings with alumni, donors, business leaders, and business groups (such as Rotary

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clubs and chambers of commerce). Meetings with system leadership are essential for presidents of public institutions. Meetings with national, state, and local government officials, leaders of public and independent schools, and the leadership of sponsoring religious denominations may be appropriate. The new president should certainly be scheduled to meet with local and regional media. Not every conversation warrants a separate meeting or appointment; receptions, breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners can all provide the kind of occasion needed. What's important is that the president be seen as reaching out, make the acquaintance of those whose support is needed, and—ideally—make a good first impression.⁴⁴

Spouses, Partners, and Families

Other tasks for such a group might include giving special attention to the personal needs of the new president and his or her spouse, partner, or family. Timely help linking them up with appropriate employment opportunities, schools, doctors, and other community resources can prevent the new leader's having to deal with major distractions. Such gestures greatly increase the chances that these newest members of the community will settle happily in.

Key Points

- **In the critical first three to six months of a new president's term, an ad hoc transition group can help the new president learn about the institution, meet and hear from internal and external constituencies, and in other ways assume his or her leadership responsibilities with growing effectiveness.**
- **In a friendly transition, the outgoing president might counsel and assist the successor when requested but otherwise step aside and mostly stay out of view for a period so that the successor can more easily establish himself or herself as the institution's only leader.**

⁴⁴ Stanley and Betts, "A Proactive Model," pp. 90-92, and Zimpher, "Presidential Turnover," pp. 123-31 in Martin and Samels, *Presidential Transition*.

- **The board works with the president during this period to set clear expectations and metrics** and clarify questions of communications and decision making.
- **Building the working relationship between the board chair and new president deserves special attention** during these early months of a presidency.

Additional Articles from *Trusteeship*

Artman, Richard B. and Mark Franz. "Presidential Transition Teams: Fostering a Collaborative Transition Process." *Trusteeship* pp. (July/August 2009): p. 28.

Fennell, Marylouise and Scott D. Miller. "If Your President Needs a Mentor..." *Trusteeship* (May/June 2005): pp. 25-28.

Kunkel, Thomas. "The Education of a Freshman President." *Trusteeship* (March/April 2010): p. 29.

Riggs, Janet Morgan and Robert Duels. "The Chair and the New President: Getting the First Months Right." *Trusteeship* (January/February 2012): pp. 30-33.

Thornburgh, John K. "360 Degrees Support for the 24/7 President." *Trusteeship* (March/April 2007): pp. 23.

For more recommended reading, please see Resources at the end of this book.