

Planning For Growth: Making the Most of a Transitional Period

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Presidential transitions often precede campus transformation, ushering in new periods of growth and visibility for the institution. Effective presidents and their teams take full advantage of a new CEO's arrival, the "honeymoon" period of good will and excitement, and opportunities to prepare for success while evaluating current conditions.

Under a new president's leadership, sound planning can translate into major gains for enrollment, fundraising, and internal and external relations.

Having extensive experience in managing successful transitions, we recommend the following key steps:

- *Recognize that the transitional period offers unique opportunities for valuable independent perspective.* We highly recommend that the board chair authorize an objective institutional review, preferably prior to the president's arrival or within the first few months. The review should be conducted by an external team experienced in institutional governance, planning, and finance. In addition to establishing a working agenda for the new administration, the review will disclose potential pitfalls to avoid; evaluate perceptions of the institution by alumni, friends, and other key constituencies; assess the strengths and weaknesses of internal organization; and provide recommendations for academic programs, faculty, staff, students, finance, and long-range planning.
- *Start the planning process with consulting partners who can offer expert guidance -- and open the door for funding.* Arriving at his fourth presidency at Virginia Wesleyan, Scott engaged the campus-services company, Aramark, and campus master-planning consultants, Derck & Edson, to conduct a comprehensive plan for facilities assessment, enhancement, and future growth. The yearlong process, which benefited from extensive evaluation of facilities and interviews with faculty, staff, and students, ranked improvement projects by priority, offered creative ideas for campus aesthetics, and addressed programmatic needs and growth potential for academics, student life, and athletics. Shared selectively with top donors of Virginia Wesleyan, the plan inspired their interest in funding new construction, including needed entrances and roadways and renovation or expansion of existing academic and athletic facilities.
- *Work with your donors on a vision for future success - and tell your story often.* As projects are funded through private giving, share updates with the funders while giving them the "insider's" view of how the campus master plan can increase enrollment and public visibility. Other elements of the plan may spark their philanthropic interest, too. And because nothing signals institutional prominence like new construction, showcase key components of the campus master plan with prospective students and their families during campus visitation days. Supervised hard-hat or virtual tours of construction sites also build excitement toward the day of dedication. Invite trustees, alumni councils, parents, public officials, the media, and other key constituent groups.

- *Maintain valuable working partnerships with your vendors.* Virginia Wesleyan University has benefited tremendously from a long-term working relationship with Hourigan Construction. The firm built the award-winning, state-of-the-art Greer Environmental Sciences Center, Opened in 2017 and housing a flagship academic program of the University. It was also chosen for the new Susan S. Goode Fine and performing Arts center project and has contributed to other key components of the campus master plan - 13 major construction initiatives in all. In addition to hosting countless tours, working with the administration on cost efficiencies, and maintaining on-time, on-budget success, Hourigan shared the University's vision for inspiring donors and recruiting students. The company's enthusiasm for showcasing new campus facilities and its sensitivity to the mission, strategic direction, and regular business of campus life make it a premier construction partner.
- *Make sure your communications keep up with your growth.* Don't keep your institutional success a secret. During the transition period or shortly thereafter, evaluate your marketing and communications operation and make needed changes in personnel, budget, or strategy. We recommend a thorough identification and cultivation of specific audiences -- internal as well as external. Remember that your on-campus partners such as faculty and students are vital to driving messaging and branding; they can help a new president build excitement for the planning and initiatives that will benefit them, too.

Presidential transitions -- and ultimately the new administration and the institution it serves -- benefit greatly from careful planning. Although not all colleges or universities are poised for success in the same kinds of ways, effective planning can spur new energy, growth, and transformation. Amid ever-increasing competition for students, dollars, and resources, no campus can afford a leisurely transition. Used well, those months will set the stage for the kind of growth and stability that help to ensure the survival of the institution.

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