



Business Practices (Achieving Administrative Excellence)

Presidential Transitions

By **Dr. Scott D. Miller, Dr. Marylouise Fennell** April 1st, 2016

A presidential search takes six months or more. As the process nears its end and an announcement about the selection is imminent, timing is all-important. Make it too soon, and you may upstage the new president (as well as offend the current one); too late, and you miss an unparalleled opportunity for visibility.

Timing is also critical for the future of the new presidency. Many institutions fail to capitalize on this key element with internal and external stakeholders — a big mistake.

Some dos and don'ts to follow in the transition.

Do:

Coordinate the notification and announcement process on both campuses.

Assuming the new CEO is currently a president or senior administrator elsewhere, arrange timing of the announcement simultaneously on both campuses, with official media spokespersons alerted to manage media inquiries.

Even before the new CEO is named, an announcement timetable should be agreeable to the hiring institution and to the finalists — after campus visits and reference checks, but before the final search committee (and Board of Trustees) decision. This will include an announcement date and when the successful candidate would agree to be on hand on the hiring campus.

Make sure, too, that the campus community is notified shortly before the media are.

Prepare media releases in advance.

The hiring institution should prepare a draft media release on all finalists in advance of the announcement date — vetted beforehand and ready for release immediately after the announcement is made.

Clear the decks for the new president.

As a professional courtesy, we've found it symbolically important for the outgoing president to be off-campus when the announcement is made, and for a day or two thereafter. This properly places the spotlight on the new president, and signals the beginning of a successful transition.

Leverage future strategic opportunities.

The announcement and media conference will be the first of many opportunities for the incoming president to meet the future stakeholders and to set the tone for the coming administration, even before officially assuming the presidency. The occasion can also be used to cultivate important alumni and other donors while outlining a vision and preliminary institutional objectives. Institutions and new presidents who do not take advantage of these early opportunities miss a critical part of the "honeymoon period," when both town and gown audiences will be most receptive.

We reiterate the importance of a formal transition plan, which begins with the official announcement and culminates in an inauguration or installation.

Don't:**Jump the gun.**

We've seen professional careers destroyed and unsuccessful candidates embarrassed when hiring institutions make premature announcements or allow the names of finalists to leak out before a contract is signed.

To prevent such gaffes, search committees must strictly honor "do not call" reference requests until a final offer has been made and accepted; after final checks are made, delay a public announcement until all details are in place.

Prolong the transition.

Best practice dictates that new presidents assume duties as soon as practicable after the announcement, when momentum is at its peak. In an ideal world, a sitting president would depart campus for a few days before his or her successor arrives. While preexisting commitments do not always make this possible, and depending on the circumstances of the departure, a former president would strike a balance between hovering and being available for counsel and perhaps key media or advancement calls with the successor. An unwillingness to relinquish day-to-day leadership of the campus can send conflicting messages, dooming a new presidency.

When managed well, a presidential announcement can successfully launch a new presidency. When botched, it often wreaks havoc with formal planning, placing the hiring institution on the defensive and the incoming CEO in a weakened position.

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