

# Starting on Sound Footing

Advice to boards and new presidents.

BY DR. SCOTT D. MILLER AND DR. MARYLOUISE FENNEL



**T**he first 120 days are often a “make or break” time for a new college president. It’s when the critical foundation for future success is laid: town-gown relationships are created, and action agendas are outlined. During this “honeymoon” period — often before a president’s official arrival on campus — new CEOs are most vulnerable to missteps, many of which can be prevented.

Because receptivity to innovation can be at its highest at this time, the honeymoon period can also be a favorable time for productive team-building, enhancing campus image and conducting a comprehensive review of the institution.

Here are some time-tested recommendations that, in our experience, have proven to be valuable in ensuring a smooth presidential start.

**1. Hire a third party** to negotiate the initial employment agreement. A qualified third party can ensure overall integrity and represent presidential needs which boards are often unprepared to handle. In addition to negotiations about salary and benefits, a potential stumbling block is the president’s residence: it is crucial to his or her credibility that improvements to the president’s home, including renovations and furnishings, are approved and completed by the Board prior to the arrival of the new CEO.


**2. Plan strategic communications** with the new campus while being respectful of the sitting president. We suggest a limited number of personal visits, selected 30-minute “get acquainted” calls and some written exchanges.

**3. The Board and the new president should develop a transition plan** — including adequate time for the campus and community to become acquainted with the new president, and to observe his or her personal style, prior to the start date.

**4. The new president should have a detailed discussion with the independent auditors** and an assessment of the audit by a financial expert. Not being told the full story about finances before their arrival is a common complaint of new presidents. Likewise, we hear stories about presidents who fail because they either didn’t understand the financial statements or couldn’t deal realistically with financial issues. Bottom line: finance is absolutely critical, and there should be no surprises or misconceptions on the part of the new CEO.

**5. The Board should authorize an independent, comprehensive institutional review** by a national, respected firm. A team widely experienced in higher education and not having any present association with the college should review its general condition and provide a completely objective assessment to include: (a) Candidly identifying and addressing issues affecting the campus and serving to establish a tentative agenda for the immediate future; (b) Helping the Board and the new president assess overall conditions; (c) Providing the Board with a more accurate impression of the college and exploring specific and realistic expectations; and (d) Using a public report on the results as a vehicle for enhancing the awareness and visibility of the college in the community, region, state and beyond.

**6. Once in office, the new president should actively participate in national organizations** that will provide a support network. Among the liberal arts colleges, the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) offers the strongest support mechanism for the new chief executive through its annual New Presidents Workshop and the Presidents’ Institute. CIC also supports regional Presidential Forums to assist new as well as experienced presidents. Forums consist of groups of presidents from non-competitive institutions who meet periodically to talk and assist with personal and professional issues. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities provides similar services for public institutions.

Although none of these recommendations will ensure a fool-proof presidential transition, they can help a new college president to make the crucial leap from the honeymoon to a successful and happy, long-term institutional marriage. 

---

*Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of Virginia Wesleyan College. Previously, he was president of Bethany College, Wesley College and Lincoln Memorial University. He is chair of the Board of Directors of Academic Search, Inc. Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Hyatt Fennell, a higher education search firm. They have collaborated on 12 books, including President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education (Volumes I to III) and Presidential Perspectives (Volumes I to IX). They edit the popular higher education thought series “Presidential Perspectives” (Aramark Higher Education), now in its tenth year ([www.presidentialperspectives.org](http://www.presidentialperspectives.org)).*