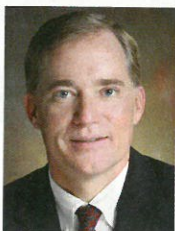


Strategic Succession Planning

Having a plan in place is the key to continuity of leadership.

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



ALTHOUGH COLLEGES AND universities are rapidly catching up with the for-profit business sector in best practices for transfer of managerial and strategic skills, they continue to lag behind in succession planning. While many campuses have invested heavily in institutional reviews, feasibility studies, communications audits and the like, they've too often given limited thought to planning for continuity. Rare is the campus with a strong such process in place.

Because recruiting, hiring and retaining skilled campus leadership is a priority for institutions of higher education, no other process has such vital long-term fiscal and other implications for a college or university.

Planning for Presidential Transition

Scott Miller recently transitioned to his fourth college presidency. His boards at prior institutions have been well prepared for succession because each year, in Executive Session, they have a discussion centered around "What if?" Such discussions focus on:

- **Identifying a successor** — Is there a logical second-in-command who could be pressed into action in the short or long term? The American Academic Leadership Institute (www.americanali.org), in collaboration with the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), offers an Executive Leadership Academy and Senior Leadership Academy to grow talent.
- **Adequate transition time** — Most presidential contracts require at least a 120-day transition period, a reasonable timetable in case an external search is required.
- **Interim services** — If no logical interim is available from within, Boston-based The Interim Registry is an efficient way to provide skilled leadership at the senior-staff level.

Planning for Board Succession

Board chairs don't serve forever and not all board vice chairs desire to be chair. It is therefore important to engage the board in a similar discussion of succession planning.

A written, strategic process of identifying the knowledge base, talents and experience of current volunteer leaders and replicating it in newer members is essential to an institution's long-term success.


Community advisory boards or young alumni advisory boards can identify potential leaders and groom them for future board roles.

Further, cross-training of volunteer leaders is sound practice for boards as well as staffs. Volunteers will appreciate the professionalism and opportunity to enhance skills. Death, retirement, job mobility and a change in personal circumstances are commonplace, but without forethought and planning devoted to cross-training, these events may prove disruptive.

Additional Strategies

Here are some additional strategies for continuity of volunteer board leadership:

- Stagger terms so that only one-third of their members cycle off their boards at any given time. This practice helps to create a blend of new and experienced members.
- Rotate committee chair and membership periodically. The institutions benefit from fresh thinking, while the cross-training adds depth and breadth.
- Offer incoming members a chance to broaden their skills and experience by serving on committees outside their areas of expertise. This practice creates a "win-win" for everyone; the institutions benefit by being able to attract and retain talented leaders who embrace continued professional growth and development. At the same time, volunteers add to their knowledge base.
- Engage younger alumni and other friends at another level of leadership first before placing them on the board, giving both parties a chance to test the fit.
- Utilize outside counsel to provide orientation for new board officers and committee chairs, and to do a "wellness check" of board practices.

The current philanthropic environment requires that colleges and universities demonstrate sound stewardship, clear accountability for outcomes and leading-edge business practices. Our stakeholders — and ethical leadership — demand it. 

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.