

Surviving a Presidential Transition

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For most campuses, the arrival of a new president — especially one hired to be a change agent — ushers in a period of significant adjustment. Staff may be reassigned or released, strategic priorities are adjusted, initiatives announced, new funding campaigns launched, presidential dwellings renovated. For the new president (and spouse) the changes are no less dramatic, although they are often unseen by the wider campus community.

By the time the incoming president greets the faculty or grants a first media interview, he or she has probably experienced professional and personal upheaval. The transition to each new assignment can be just as daunting as the previous one, each with distinct challenges. Scott especially knows this because he's had four presidential transitions of his own — none easier than the preceding one.

Here are a few suggestions on navigating the challenges of a presidential transition.

Take control of the transition. As an incoming president, you should establish a firm timeline for arrival (the ideal transition time is four to six months), make sure all packing and moving expenses are reimbursed by your new institution and secure a transitional budget until you are settled in. That should include interim travel to and from the campus by you and your spouse, and incidental expenses incurred in becoming established at the institution.

Get it all in writing. Confirm all contractual obligations, expectations and administrative details pertaining to your presidency — both at the institution you're leaving and the one you will be reporting to. There should be no confusion on anyone's part about the transitional period, especially when it comes to your resignation from the previous college and your appointment at the next one.

Establish a transition team. Key transitional staff can acquaint you with the institution's organizational structure and traditions, outline community connections to make and help you identify operational priorities. Ask your board to commission an institutional review: an independent, in-depth evaluation of where the college is, where it needs to go and what strategic planning and resources will be required to achieve goals. Data and perspectives from the review will help direct and sustain your activities for the first six to eight months.

Learn all you can — before you arrive — about key areas. These include enrollment, campus technology and facilities, finance, academic policies and procedures, and cherished traditions. Because everyone will watch everything you do in the

early weeks, you want to hit the ground running with a working plan and as much practical knowledge about the institution as you can gather. For example, you'll need to know what strategic planning, if any, is in place; how the enrollment and advancement operations function; who the faculty opinion leaders are; and, if possible, what perceptions alumni, friends, community leaders, parents and others hold of the college.

Honor your predecessor — all the way out the door. You should understand completely the status and future plans of the outgoing president, especially if he or she is a longtime fixture on the campus, has been forced to resign or will remain at the institution in some lesser official capacity. (I would strongly discourage the latter through your board chair.) Similarly, beware of prior executive decisions made before your arrival that can tie your hands once you take office.

Take care of the home front. Presidential spouses frequently surrender careers, friendships and established connections to join you at the new campus. Keep your spouse's needs and interests in the forefront of your thinking. Today's college presidency is a 24/7 commitment, and no one can accompany you on the journey as faithfully as your life partner. Set aside private time to relax, recharge and reflect with your spouse and family.

Finally, remember that although college presidents seek control, they don't always have it. Expect the unexpected. Recognize that institutions tend to guard their secrets, and while you are expected to be a transparent leader, your followers may not return the courtesy. You are leading, and often expected to change, a campus culture not of your design. That's why you're paid well, often worked to exhaustion and assigned fame that is fleeting and a footnote in history that can be revised after you're gone.

Yet while the hours are long, the rewards can be great. There's no job like the college presidency, and that's probably a good thing!

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