

The Value of Institutional Reviews

A review will serve as a transformational vehicle for the entire institution.

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



A NEW PRESIDENT OFTEN arrives to find the line already forming outside the office door — so many demands, so many constituencies seeking attention, so little time. Because the honeymoon of a new presidency is ever shorter, the first six months of an administration must lay a firm foundation for success. Often, we've seen missteps in this pivotal stage prove fatal to a fledgling presidency, even with well-qualified candidates.

How to make sense of competing priorities?
How to evaluate proffered advice?



In our more than 40 executive searches, the single most effective tool for a smooth

presidential transition is the institutional review — preferably conducted before the new CEO arrives on campus or within the first six months. Not only will an outside review benefit a new president, but it will also offer an objective overview of the institution — warts and all — for boards.

"Increasingly, governing boards choose to commission institutional reviews as a first step toward establishing or re-establishing more legitimate premises for the president. Boards and search committees often find these reviews indispensable during presidential searches," says Dr. James L. Fisher, author of *Presidential Leadership: Making a Difference* (ACE, Washington, DC, 1996) and *The Entrepreneurial College President* (ACE, Washington, DC, 2004).

Even a model presidential search will provide limited perspective on an institution; an outside review can provide a reality check. This is true even if the new CEO was an internal candidate. When a former dean or vice president moves up, the campus is often still viewed through the same lens. A good outside review affords clearer focus.

Conducted by an external team over two to four months, reviews should evaluate every dimension of the institution, with a special emphasis on strategic positioning. A final report, based on interviews and data, should include an institutional profile with observations, analysis and recommendations for academic programs, faculty, students, administration, finances and governance.

Conducting a review before a new president is named is especially valuable. A review prepared prior to a search, Dr. Fisher suggests, can result in changes in governance policies that will make a presidency more attractive to candidates. For a newly

appointed president, the review can also:

- ensure a better informed, more enlightened board;
- establish a working agenda for the institution;
- provide an objective foundation for strategic planning;
- objectively evaluate the administration, quality of academic programs, faculty and students; and
- gauge attitudes of key constituencies and donors.

Other sound reasons for an outside institutional review immediately before or early in a new president's tenure. It will:

- disclose potential minefields, enabling the new CEO to avoid costly missteps at a time when the all-important first impressions are being formed;
- provide a full and objective knowledge base from unbiased individuals with no vested interest from which a new president may then proceed to mold an institutional vision; and
- help the president handle sensitive issues which, if left undisclosed, could derail a new presidency. Moreover, it will help protect a new president from costly early mistakes.

The cost of a professional outside review varies according to the complexity of the agenda and the size of the institution. We have found, however, that it is money well spent as an investment in the institution's success. In addition to helping prevent costly mistakes and premature turnover, a review will serve as a transformational vehicle for the entire institution.

"A good review is usually far more valuable than even the most thoughtful self-assessment," Dr. Fisher says.

Strong beginnings start with sound planning at the outset, and we urge boards and new presidents to begin this institutional review process sooner, rather than later. Except for building a strong cabinet, no other first steps will serve a new CEO so well throughout his or her tenure. **DM**

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