

## Transitions 101

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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 adjusted, initiatives announced, new funding campaigns launched, presidential dwellings renovated.

By the time the incoming president greets the faculty or grants a first media interview, he or she has likely experienced professional and personal upheaval. Nothing actually prepares you for being a president except surviving to tell about it. Accordingly, the transition to each new assignment can be just as daunting, each with unique challenges, but there are ways to make it all go smoother. Here are a few suggestions:

**1. If at all possible, don't take a mid-year appointment.** 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. This should include interim travel to and from campus by you and your spouse, and incidental expenses incurred in becoming established on campus.

**2: Appoint a transition team.** Key transitional staff can acquaint you with campus 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.

**3: Learn all you can --before you arrive-- about key areas, such as 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. You'll need to know what strategic planning, if any, is in place; how well the enrollment and advancement operations function; who the faculty opinion leaders are; and, if possible, what perceptions are held by trustees, alumni, friends, community leaders, parents, and others.

**2. During the transitional period, make fact-finding and meet-and-greet visits to campus.** Ask questions and gather insights, but defer making final judgments, major changes, or key appointments until you're in charge. You should understand completely the status and future plans of your predecessor, especially if he or she is a long-time fixture on campus, has been forced to resign, or will remain at the institution in some lesser official capacity.

**5. Beware of prior executive decisions made before your arrival.** We've heard countless stories of significant financial commitments, granting substantial raises and multi-year contracts to close friends, and even establishing new program centers, all on last days in office. Before you report, ask penetrating questions of board and alumni leaders, senior staff, and others.

**6. Set and keep priorities on the home front.** Presidential spouses frequently surrender careers, friendships, and established connections to join you at the new campus. Respect this loyalty to your career and the partnership you share. Keep his or her needs and interests in the forefront of your thinking. The college presidency today is a 24/7 commitment, and there is no one who can accompany you on the journey as faithfully as your life partner. Set aside private time to relax, recharge, and reflect with your 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.

The hours are long and the rewards can be great. But there's no job like the college presidency, and believe us, that's a good thing!

### About the Authors

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