

Starting on Sound Footing: Advice to Boards and New Presidents

by Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller

The crucial first 100 days are often deemed a "make or break" time for a new president.

The crucial first 100 days are often deemed a "make or break" time for a new president, whether he or she is the president of the United States or an institution of higher learning. It is this period in which the critical foundation for future success is laid: town-gown relationships are formed, initial perceptions are created and the outlines of action agendas are sketched out. In our experience, it is during this "honeymoon" period - even before their official arrival on campus - when new presidents are most vulnerable to preventable missteps. Conversely, it represents a favorable time for productive team, image and agenda-building when receptivity to innovation is at its highest.

Here are some time-tested recommendations that, in our experience, have proven to be valuable in ensuring a "happy" and productive honeymoon, and may be implemented before the new CEO ever arrives on campus.

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

2. The Board and the newly selected president should develop a transition plan. This should include adequate time for the campus and community to become acquainted with the new president prior to the start date. It will also enable leadership teams on the new campus the opportunity to learn his or her preferred style from the new president's former campus.

3. The new president should have a detailed discussion with the independent auditors and an assessment of the audit by a financial expert. Often, we hear stories of presidents indicating that they were not told "the full story" about finances before arriving. Likewise, we hear stories of many presidents who fail because they either didn't understand the financial statements or couldn't deal realistically with financial issues. This is one critical area in which there should be absolutely no surprises or misconceptions on the part of the new CEO.

4. The Board should authorize a comprehensive Institutional Review. There is one national, highly acclaimed firm that has been praised for its work, as well as some smaller firms. One such firm is James L. Fisher, LTD., of Vero Beach, Fla. 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 that should include:

(a) Candidly identifying and addressing issues affecting the campus and helping establish a tentative agenda for the immediate future; (b) Helping the Board and the new president assess and illuminate overall conditions; (c) Providing the Board with a more accurate impression of the college and approving more 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.

5. Once on board, the new president should actively participate in national organizations that will provide a support network. Among the small 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 and experienced presidents. Forums are composed of groups of presidents from non-competitive institutions who meet periodically to talk and assist each other with personal and professional issues. Harvard conducts a program for new presidents as do some other national associations.

6. Every executive should have a mentor. "Coaching" in the private and public areas of life has been proven to assist successful leaders. Boards should budget funds for this purpose before a president arrives.

While none of these recommendations will ensure a foolproof presidential transition, following them goes a long way toward helping a new college president to make the crucial leap from the "honeymoon" to a successful and happy long-term institutional marriage.

Dr. Marylouise Fennell is the former president of Carlow University, Pittsburgh, Pa. and the Coordinator of the Council of Independent Colleges'(CIC) New Presidents Program.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of Wesley College, Dover, Del. Now in his 14th year as a college president, Dr. Miller chairs the CIC New Presidents Program.

Source: *College Planning & Management*, July 2004