

# Continuing Relations with Former Presidents: A Delicate Balancing Act

by Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller

Asked what he planned to do after leaving the U.S. presidency, Woodrow Wilson remarked, “I intend to teach other presidents how to behave.” Tragically, President Wilson had just three years to live after leaving office in 1921. Today’s college CEOs typically will enjoy much longer life spans.

The sensitive issue of a role for former presidents – be they heads of state or leaders of academic institutions – remains as much of a dilemma today as it did in the early 20th century. Then as now, there is no formalized role for presidents emeriti.

We’ve known both extremes in these ongoing relationships, neither helpful to the new president or to the institution. On the one hand, we remember a former president who built his retirement residence directly across the street from the home of his successor. On the other, we know of many presidents – even those with tenures of a decade or more – who never again set foot on campus after saying their final “good-byes.”

What constitutes a healthy balance? Much depends, of course, upon the circumstances of the presidential departure – whether the former CEO left on good terms, whether he or she retired, left for another institution or, in some cases, remained on campus in another capacity. In general, though, presidents and presidents emeriti need to follow common courtesy and common sense in such matters.

That means resisting the temptation to give unsolicited advice on day-to-day operations, as well as to stay in frequent online contact with faculty and staff. Tough as it may sometimes be to just walk away, it is a necessary part of a successful transition for a new president. He or she deserves a honeymoon period without having a predecessor breathing over the shoulder. On the other hand, a popular, long-time president who

represents the institution to alumni and other donors can often facilitate a smooth transition by making introductions and opening doors. At Wesley College, for example, a president emeritus accompanied me on major prospect calls for my first six months in office – by mutual consent. It gave me a foot in the door with those who respected him, and it allowed my predecessor to feel valued and useful as well as productive for us.

Lacing the extensive institutional history of a president who has spent many years cultivating faculty, alumni, and donors, promising presidents frequently doom themselves early on by a seemingly benign remark or action that, in the wrong context or with the wrong person, may prove devastating. In most cases, the guidance of a savvy emeritus could have prevented this early misstep.

Following are some suggestions for incoming presidents who feel comfortable maintaining ongoing relationships with a retired president.

**Be tasteful and conservative in your comments about the past.** Realize that during the honeymoon period (and even beyond), everyone is listening to and repeating what you say. Thus, seemingly innocuous remarks may be magnified and interpreted as critical of your predecessor, current staff, or faculty when no negatives are intended.

**Treat your predecessor well while precluding a decision-making role.** Provide him or her with a “free pass” to athletic events and performances. When appropriate, recognize him/her as a part of your remarks. Invitations to campus events are usually beneficial to ensure a sense of continuity.

**Invite the former president to your inauguration.** Some veteran presidents will decline the invitation, saying, “This is your day,” but at least the invitation has been extended.

**Develop a list of external contacts that the former president might assist you with in the transitional period.** These could be donors, legislators, newspaper publishers, or other opinion leaders.

**Continue to include the former president on a broad mailing list for publications, e-letters, and special events of a general nature.** However, invitations to Board meetings, or similar non-public affairs, would not be advisable.

The care and feeding of presidents emeriti who want to remain involved is similar to the challenge confronting a tightrope walker. By walking a balanced course, you will navigate the path calculated to land you safely on the side of a long and successful presidency.

*Dr. Scott D. Miller is in his 10th year as president of Wesley College in Dover, DE. He is now in his 16th year as a college president. Dr. Marylouise Fennell, a former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). She is also a partner in the executive search firm of Gallagher-Fennell Higher Education Services. Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.*

College Planning and Management,  
March 2007