

Knowing When It's Time To Go

The presidential search process is one part science — that is, best practice — and 99 percent art. Thus, we know of no formula for determining when to stay and when to go. Before beginning to pursue other opportunities, though, there are considerations to keep in mind.

Timing

While there is no ideal time to leave an institution, some times are better than others. Obviously, a short-term presidency is costly for an institution in terms of not only search and hiring expenses, but in credibility with outside stakeholders, particularly donors and prospects. No single factor hurts institutional advancement as much as rapid turnover of CEOs, who represent the outside face of the institution to its publics. Foundations and corporations, as well as individual major donors, want to see success, momentum, and stability.

Many CEOs leave at the end of a successful capital campaign, one of the more ideal junctures at which to depart. Leaving during the “quiet” or early public phases could easily derail the entire campaign, damaging the institution for years to come.

Reasons for Leaving

There are bad and better reasons for seeking a change. Though tempting, leaving in response to problematic campus situations may not only damage your own reputation, but it may also deprive the campus of leadership at a pivotal time in its history. Staying the course until the

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crisis is over will not only enhance your own credibility, but also provide you with even stronger credentials for recruiters and future search committees.

Among the most positive reasons for leaving is the fact that you are seeking new challenges, having accomplished most of that which you had set out to do. Both external and internal stakeholders will respect that. If, for example, you are in the eighth year of a 10-year strategic master plan, having completed 90 percent of the action steps, then it may be time to move on. On a college campus, there is always more to do, but an astute leader will recognize the fragile balance between continuity and the need for infusion of

fresh energy and innovation. When the balance begins to tip in favor of the latter, it's time to leave.

Perhaps the best reason for seeking other opportunities, however, is when being president of your institution ceases to be fun. Today's demanding, high-burnout campus environment requires a 24/7 commitment, high levels of fitness and energy, and extraordinary multitasking. Your institution depends upon your zeal. The day that you wake up and find the position is no longer challenging and requiring your very best is the day you should begin to look at other options.

Smooth Transitions

When you do decide to seek a change, other considerations include mentoring your successor and assisting in a smooth transition in any way possible. While looking over his or her shoulder is not helpful, offering to introduce your successor to top campus and community leaders, and even accompanying him on key prospect visits, if appropriate, may help to ensure institutional credibility and continuity. 

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