

If Your New President



Needs a Mentor...

Mentoring can diminish the negative impact of unvoiced expectations between trustees and chief executives, encouraging a longer, more productive presidency.

CONSIDER THIS COMMON SCENARIO: A board of trustees has just hired a new president—a senior administrator from the ranks of academe who has never before served as chief executive of a college or university.

In today's world of the high-pressure, high-turnover presidency, this choice is completely understandable. Boards often hire someone new to the presidency both to benefit from fresh thinking and to avoid tapping someone who has done the same thing in the same way at multiple institutions.

And yet, the decision to take a chance on a rookie chief executive creates one of the riskiest situations in higher education. The stakes are high: The board has invested a great deal of time and money to find the best person for the position, but the individual it has hired is embarking on a maiden voyage in one of our society's most multifaceted and demanding roles. Moreover, during the "honeymoon" period of a presidency, a single misstep on a crucial matter not only can set a negative tone for a president's entire career, but from a board's perspective the fallout could become

costly and difficult for an institution to correct.

Even if things go well for the new president in that critical first year, he or she will be lucky to last another five, if the average length of presidential tenure is an indicator. A shortened presidency can leave constituents, especially prospective donors, confused, dissatisfied, and perhaps even cynical about an institution's ability to retain leadership and maintain organizational momentum.

One reason the situation is fraught with risk is that the search and hiring process nearly always forces some unvoiced hopes into play. For its part, a board may expect a new president to be a commanding figure and an expert on every detail of institutional operations. Likewise, a new president also may harbor unstated expectations, ranging from assumptions of universal board support to confidence in the belief that his or her presidency will be successful.

Rarely, however, will a new president let the trustees or anyone else on campus know what knowledge may be lacking. Admitting shortcomings would prompt people to question his

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or her ability to lead. In such situations, the board of trustees and the new president will have entered into collusion by tacitly agreeing to leave some of their mutual expectations unstated. And together, they have created a sure recipe for disaster.

Welcome a Mentor? Having worked with numerous boards and new presidents, we have found that the practice of hiring a presidential mentor or an executive coach—with *the president's blessing*—can moderate or eliminate the negative force of these unvoiced expectations and produce a longer, healthier, and more productive presidency for an institution. Some in higher education, of course, quickly dismiss the concept of a hiring a mentor for a new president. Even considering such a mentor is a sign that the board has committed itself to the wrong candidate, they reason.

But we believe the practice comes from a base of strength, not weakness. The fact is, a chief executive who “has all the answers” often can benefit from an outside perspective, one that is beyond the expertise or time commitment available from the board itself. One president with more than 20 years’ experience shared with us that his most trusted confidant of 15 years is the retired president of another college. Our colleague brings his mentor to campus periodically just to “test the waters” and to ensure that as president, he is “hearing” the right issues.

Similarly, a new president who formerly served as a chief academic officer confided that although he has managed a large budget, he never before had to deal with complex financial and audit information. He welcomed experienced outside counsel to help him sort through and analyze these detailed issues to free his time for other matters.

Mentoring arrangements may take various forms. Some last a few months, while others exist for years. Compensation may be on a per diem, monthly, or annual basis. Some arrangements are funded through foundation grants

or discretionary funds; in other cases, mentors are paid through institutional funds. In some situations, a president may need only to speak to a mentor by telephone; in others, the president may need to spend a half-day or entire day of private consultation to examine an issue, exploring options and the potential consequences of decisions.

The President's Choice. The admittedly tricky decision of whether to hire a mentor must rest totally with the president. Ideally, the person who provides this service will be someone who has served as president of another institution. Under no circumstances should a board of trustees ever attempt to hire a mentor on behalf of a president. The board should, however, support such a decision if the president is interested and provide the budget to support the service. Although this is a highly sensitive area, a suggestion from a board chair, who as a former corporate CEO has benefited from the counsel of a mentor, is sometimes well received. Such a discussion might be framed as an additional “perk” or presidential benefit from the board, while also advancing the institution.

Were a board to hire a mentor against the president's wishes, this would preclude candid interchange with a mentor and would destroy the mentor's credibility with a president. Further, once a mentor is hired, the board never should ask the mentor to divulge information he or she has discussed with a president. Doing so would violate the confidentiality of the president-mentor relationship.

For the president-mentor relationship to work effectively, the mentor needs to serve





the president as a candid and confidential sounding board while maintaining a high level of credibility.

An Array of Roles. Most new presidents who find mentoring helpful value it because their early days on a new campus can be overwhelming. Some come to the presidency from specialized areas and do not fully realize the comprehensive nature of the presidency until they actually face the day-to-day pressures of the office.

A new president may benefit from the advice of an experienced hand on administrative decisions or from a troubleshooter who can help resolve a potentially damaging situation. He or she may need another set of eyes on the first few speeches or wise counsel to avoid knee-jerk reactions. The roles will vary depending on a new president's needs, but mentors typically assist new presidents in the following ways:

- *Providing transitional assistance.* At the most basic level, mentoring can help a new president sort things out and gain needed clarity.

New presidents frequently need advice on how to assemble a transition team and what issues to address during this period. Given that senior staff will work with the new president in communicating and advancing the vision of an institution, the chief executive's ability to work

well with the senior management team can spell success or failure.

A new president also may need to resolve relatively simple matters or potentially "hot" issues such as improvements to the president's house or relations with the former president. And of course a new president will need time and opportunities to become acquainted with the board, staff, faculty, students, community leaders, and local media. A mentor can guide a new president in relating to each constituency by offering subtle advice on their needs and histories.

- *Supplying an independent set of eyes.* Newcomers quickly must assimilate an overwhelming amount of information and will be expected to make clear and timely decisions. A mentor can help a new president prioritize in a context of information overload, offer reassurance about good decisions, and provide a needed push when a change in decision making may be in order.

- *Explaining the jargon.* Contrary to popular presumption, many presidents can manage an academic budget but cannot read a financial or audit statement. Many do not understand depreciation, mandatory transfers, and current accounting practices. They may lack the experience and expertise to manage an endowment or work productively with a chief financial officer or the board's finance committee. Still other new presidents lack familiarity with the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, often referred to by its acronym, IPEDS, simply because their past positions did not require them to have this knowledge.

- *Shedding light on organizational structure.* A mentor can help new presidents assess the effectiveness of an institution's current organizational structure and recommend potential revisions aimed at strengthening governance, communication, and team building.

- *Maintaining board relations.* New presidents often come to the office as novices where board relations are concerned. A mentor can

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recommend ways to strengthen relationships with the board. This may extend to revisions in bylaws, committee structure, and priorities.

- *Negotiating a presidential contract.* A sound presidential contract clearly defines many important matters—salary, term of service, annual performance reviews, retirement, faculty rank, tenure, sabbatical, and relocation expenses, to name just a few. Some contract provisions may be obvious, while others may require more finesse to discern. Few new presidents have the wherewithal to effectively negotiate these delicate issues. A mentor can work with a president and the board on certain of these awkward issues.

- *Balancing priorities.* Unless a new president has held another 24/7 job, he or she is unlikely to know the extent of last-minute requests and unspoken demands. A new president might lack the experience to separate what is important from what is unimportant, what needs to be dealt with immediately and what can be pondered. A mentor can help sort out realistic priorities. Too often, rushed and tired presidents are pressed to make decisions that require thought and reflection. A mentor can assist by offering tempered advice.

- *Responding to controversial issues.* Political issues simmer at all campuses, and it is highly unusual for a new president to arrive during a period of absolute calm. In fact, the opposite is more often the case. Regardless, the arrival of the new president can be unsettling, especially for senior staff, who may wonder about their job security. A wise mentor can help a new president refrain from making a consequential decision in the early going that could jeopardize his or her presidency and harm a career.

- *Balancing attention among constituents.* It is not uncommon for a president's schedule to be dictated by those clamoring for time and attention. A new president who becomes immersed in putting out brushfires risks focusing inappropriately on the needs of certain constituents while failing to address the expectations of others. A mentor can help keep

a president honest with all constituents.

- *Responding to ad hoc needs.* When college presidents gather at national or regional conferences, a sure-fire conversation starter is the query "What keeps you up at night?" When a president asks this question, all the other presidents gather to trade war stories. To be sure, what keeps one president preoccupied and sleepless may not concern another. Issues may seem similar, but the nuances of each situation may require different approaches for different presidents. Moreover, some presidents can become distracted by the wrong things and inadvertently ignore major issues. Helping a president reach clarity at such times is one of the responsibilities of a mentor.

- *Suggesting when it's time to go.* There is a beginning, middle, and end to every presidency. Inevitably, there comes a time when a president has achieved everything he or she is capable of achieving for an institution. Staying too long can hurt the institution as well as the president. Some presidents possess an innate sense when it is time to go; others may not. For the latter group, a keen mentor, in the context of a well-developed president-mentor relationship, can then diplomatically suggest when that time has come.

On balance, then, a mentor can help instill multifaceted skills in a new president and may reduce the risk that a new hire will fail to realize his or her potential. The financial investment of the institution in searching for and hiring the new chief executive is considerable. ♦

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