

Leadership 101: The Vision Thing

By Dr. Marylouise Fennell and Dr. Scott D. Miller - *College Planning & Management, April 2010*

New presidencies are more often derailed by “the vision thing” than by almost anything else, but not in the manner that many may think. We suggest that too much vision too soon can be damaging and should be deferred. If this counsel sounds counterintuitive, please bear with us.

Under pressure from search committees to create momentum even before their terms begin, new presidents often lay out big plans without taking time to listen, learn, study institutional history and culture, and reflect.

We advise that new presidents:

- Resist making big decisions too soon,
- listen actively and inclusively, and
- capitalize on opportunities.

Resist Making Big Decisions Too Soon

Presidents are, by their nature, men and women of action. Introspection tends not to come naturally or easily to some. Coupled with external demands from many directions, this internal pressure is hard to resist. Yet, we urge taking the time to settle into your new role and the organization before locking in a long-range plan. Our colleague Kent Chabotar, the first non-Quaker president of Gilford College in North Carolina, used his first two years in office to develop the College’s current strategic plan. He says the time was essential in improving content and community buy-in of the plan once it was unveiled. The more involved the college community is in development of a strategic plan, the more engaged it will be in its successful execution.

H.L. Mencken wrote, “There are many simple solutions to complex issues – and all

of them are wrong.” Resist the impulse to resort to “obvious” solutions to the challenges facing your campus.

Listen Actively and Inclusively

Presidents coming into office with the benefit of recent or ongoing institutional research may be able to save time in the planning process. However, there is no substitute for face-to-face communication with key constituents, especially students and faculty. Holding regular office hours; using committees to recommend annual budgets, fringe benefit programs, and facility renovations; and championing annual surveys of community climate builds support. Though time-consuming, they build a strong base on which a new presidency can flourish. Short-circuit the planning process at your own risk.

New CEOs should also recognize that there are few secrets on college campuses. Never say anything in a private meeting that, as they say in Boston, could not be shown on the CITGO billboard overlooking Fenway Park or on the front pages of your local newspaper.

Capitalize on Early Opportunities

To paraphrase the acronym of a well-known fundraising organization for women candidates, “early opportunities are like yeast.” They help a presidency to succeed. To establish credibility and momentum, therefore, we urge new presidents to defer “the vision thing,” but to actively seek individual opportunities – synergistic partnerships, alliances, and niches consistent with the institution’s mission and culture. Early in our presidencies, we were able to establish some “quick wins” with like-minded community organizations such as regional

arts alliances that dramatically impacted our ability to recruit students and faculty while raising our community profile. These windows can close quickly; often, if one president doesn’t strike while the iron is hot, a peer institution will. Be alert to opportunities as the present themselves and act on them decisively. *Carpe diem.*

“A successful life is not something you simply pursue; it is something that you create, moment by moment.” Bill Strickland, who is president and CEO of Manchester Bidwell Corporation and its subsidiaries and a true lion of Pittsburgh industry, delivered these remarks about building a meaningful life at the 2009 Bethany College of West Virginia commencement. Substitute “successful presidency” for “successful life,” and you have a recipe for longevity. By making neither small or ill-considered plans while seizing opportunities moment by moment, you will create possibility, enthusiasm, and enduring success.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of the College and M. M. Cochran Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College in West Virginia. Now in his third college presidency, he has served as a CEO for nearly 20 years. **Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM**, a former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, PA, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Marylouise Fennell, Higher Education Services. They have collaborated on five books, including *Presidential Perspectives* (2009) and *President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education* (2010). Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.