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THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY: WELCOME TO THE FUTURE

by Scott D. Miller and Marylouise Fennell

On the heels of the Presidential Panel session at our 2008 Summer Seminar, which forecast the road ahead from the perspective of college and university presidents, The Lawlor Review solicited the views of two more presidents about the new set of skills necessary for success at the top of an institution of higher education.

College presidents are no longer your father's CEO. Tenures are dropping in duration, while challenges mount. Although they came well qualified and highly recommended, too many new and promising first-time campus CEOs are derailed in the early months of their presidencies because they did not understand the expectations and new rules of the office. Still others lack one or more basic skills critical to all successful presidencies. The costs of failure are enormous, both to the institution and to the individual.

What can we do to boost the odds of success?

Let's start with basic ground rules, which have changed enormously in the last 30 years. In the presidency of 1978, most presidents were educators who came from an academic background and viewed themselves as academic leaders, and they spent most of their time on campus managing internal affairs. The paradigm today represents a 180-degree shift.

In 2008, most successful presidents come with a business background or a good sense of the business world, and they focus on activities related to external affairs and advancement.



Effective presidents now spend upwards of 70 percent of their time off-campus, “friend”-raising and fund-raising. Today, presidents are the “face” of the university to diverse outside publics, including government officials, the media, corporations and foundations, the business community and the community at large.

A basic understanding of this expectation is critical to success, and it must start with the search process. New presidents frequently comment that they came to the presidency from a specialized area and did not fully realize its comprehensive nature until they had actually assumed the office.

Even before the boxes in a president's new office are completely unpacked, he or she will likely be beset by various constituencies, each with its own unspoken needs and agendas.

AN INADEQUATE SUPPLY

Moreover, there are not enough qualified candidates, especially women and minorities, in the pipeline. One simply can't start at the top, and there are many talented individuals who could benefit from mentoring and a broader exposure to disciplines crucial to a successful presidency.

A 2006 *Chronicle of Higher Education* profile of college presidents' experiences and attitudes is telling. For example, almost a quarter (22.8 percent) of college CEOs said they felt “inadequately prepared” for fund-raising in their first presidency, while more than a third (37.7 percent) said this activity occupies “most of their time.” The numbers are similar for budget (14.7 percent versus 34.8 percent), capital improvement projects, risk management, entrepreneurial ventures and others. The discrepancy between preparation and areas of need is striking, highlighting the ongoing need

for stronger mentoring and continuous encouragement of potential CEOs.

AVOIDING ROCKY RELATIONSHIPS

A significant number of individuals fail despite having these requisite skills, because they do not understand board-CEO relationships and the vital necessity of “soft” people skills as well as “hard” knowledge to a successful presidency. In our experience, it’s rocky relationships that sink more promising presidencies than any other single factor. While competent performance is a given, it must be accompanied by equally solid relationships with key constituencies.

Over-familiarity with board members may not breed contempt, but it may guarantee a short presidential tenure. Here are some “no-nos” we’ve too frequently observed in relationships between short-term presidents and boards:

- CEOs who view themselves as equal to board members and forget that they work for the board
- CEOs who over-socialize with the board off-campus
- CEOs who do not recognize the value of educating board members because they want to be the sole authority
- CEOs who let untrained staff make appointments with board members for them, giving the appearance that they are “too good” to call trustees themselves
- CEOs who keep the board in the dark about important matters affecting the institution, forgetting the “no secrets” rule

In all presidential interactions with others, common courtesy and common sense are, all too often, uncommon. More “no-nos,” regardless of the audience, include the following gaffes:


- Failure to return phone calls and e-mail messages promptly
- Forgetting to *listen, rather than talk*
- Neglecting to share credit
- Trying to go it alone: Presidents should hire the best people they can find, support them, delegate and not micromanage.
- Not keeping appropriate social distance with faculty and staff: The college presidency can be a lonely profession, but too many presidents have caused undue problems for themselves by developing friendships among their key constituents.

WHAT DOES WORK

Finally, while presidential leadership styles differ as much as individual campuses, there are several commonalities we’ve seen in all effective presidencies:

- **Leadership and High Energy**—Hit the ground running or else is the advice of *Right from the Start* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2000), noting that two-thirds of presidents appointed since 1993 have left their positions within four years because they didn’t take charge and move from the get-go.
- **Taking Calculated Risks**—Effective leaders must take calculated risks to move the organization ahead. Continuous reinvention is the key to dynamic leadership.
- **Communicating a Passionate Vision**—The highest presidential priority is to develop and communicate an overriding plan. Without a passionate vision, a presidency risks gradually deteriorating into a mindless set of ad hoc adjustments to emerging circumstances. Too many presidents fall into the trap of managing from crisis to crisis, exhausting resources, staff and themselves in the bargain.

The stakes of a failed presidency are too high to continue this turnover in the top campus spot. With stronger mentoring, training and clear expectations on the part of volunteer leadership, the search committee and the entire college community, we can begin to reverse this unproductive trend. So while we will not return to the 1978 college presidential model, we can equip today’s campus CEOs with the skills and resources to succeed in 2008. It’s a whole new ballgame, and presidents must play by the new rules to thrive!

Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of Bethany College (Bethany, West Virginia). He is now in his 18th year as a college president. Dr. Marylouise Fennell, a former president of Carlow University (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), 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. 

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