

# PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

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*It's Not Just the Position,  
It's the Transition*

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AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION  
PRAEGER  
Series on Higher Education



## **HOW LONG CAN I LAST?**

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Every new university president or chancellor asks this question. For some the answer does not matter much because they are on a career track that anticipates three or four years of activity before the next move up the administrative ladder. For others, however, a particular institution may have great personal attraction and the new leader may harbor the hope

of lasting forever (or at least until retirement looms). With some few exceptions, this is not a reasonable assumption. Rare special circumstances can indeed make a college or university leader immortal, but usually these involve very large amounts of new revenue, no crises, no significant changes in the trustees, and almost always, a private institution. If none of these conditions prevail, the new academic executive is in a more or less normal set of circumstances, and the real time frame will usually run somewhere between five and ten years.

This time frame responds to the peculiar characteristics of the academic environment where no one (well almost no one) ever leaves. A university president arrives to an audience of faculty (by far the most important constituency) who think of a career as 30 to 40 years. Most of the faculty have been around for 20 and expect to be around for another 20, give or take a decade here or there. They are not in a hurry, they have time, they have already outlasted several presidents, and the most significant of them cannot be fired. Consequently, new presidents, who receive a short honeymoon, must always be mindful of their own shorter administrative time frame.

Upon hiring, the new president is given what we can think of as a bucket of goodwill coins. Beginning the next day, the president begins to spend these coins. One is spent for turning down a budget request from a powerful dean; another for failing to appoint the favorite candidate of a trustee for department chair; a third because the football team found itself with a significant corruption scandal; a fourth coin when a donor's favorite cousin has a total SAT of 800 and a high school GPA of 1.7, and the president refuses to overrule the admissions office denial; and multiple coins because the state budget came in with no faculty salary raises. On occasion, the president can earn a goodwill coin back with a basketball championship or a very successful fund raising year. By and large, however, a president's life is consumed in spending the goodwill coins by making choices among multiple very good alternatives. Rarely do presidents worry about making choices between the good and the bad, because the bad choices are easy to reject. Instead, most choices are between very good alternatives for which the institution has only sufficient revenue for one.

Additionally, many decisions involve personnel, and some faculty members almost always care about every personnel decision. As a result, any negative personnel decision produces unhappy faculty. Unhappy faculty stay unhappy. They do not leave or find alternative employment and the president cannot fire them. In addition, although in theory the new president has the opportunity to clean house and start out with fresh campus leadership by replacing the provost and deans, usually those replaced retreat to the faculty where they form a nucleus of discontent. Each dismissed academic administrator or unpopular decision about

faculty or other personnel costs the president a number of goodwill coins which can rarely be recovered, even if the replacements are better.

After a time, the president will reach into the bucket to spend another goodwill coin and touch the bottom. That is the moment to think about returning to the faculty, retiring, or seeking another administrative position.

How can a president extend the time purchased by the bucket of goodwill coins? One tactic is to do as little as possible, as charmingly as possible. This is the presiding posture in which the president says all the right things, delegates any unavoidable issues to others, and moves from place to place, on and off campus, continually articulating a persuasive and buzz-word loaded vision. The skill of appearing-without-doing is a finely honed administrative talent, and those who have it, will extend the life of their initial allotment of goodwill coins well beyond the normal.

Similarly, the president who drives change, seeks a challenge, never shrinks from a potential conflict, suffers fools poorly, or speaks clearly will spend the coins quickly, finding the bottom of that bucket within a few dramatic years. Change is especially expensive, for while universities are change agents for the societies that support them, they are highly resistant to changing themselves. Nothing spends goodwill coins faster than intense, driven internal university change.

Understanding the function of the goodwill coin bucket offers a frame of reference for new presidents and chancellors to measure their time and plan their exit. One always wants to leave while a few goodwill coins remain in the bucket.