PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

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

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Foreword by
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interested in getting to know me and also was very curious about the depth and breadth of changes I was envisioning for the institution. For this reason I felt it was desirable to contact my predecessor to solicit an invitation to the campus. I sought the identification of a staff member from the president's office to work with me to develop the itinerary for my initial visit. I made sure that I talked with the public relations staff and received a briefing on the local media and the issues that would be of greatest interest to them. I also reminded myself that I was merely the "president-select" and that I needed to be mindful and respectful of the fact that there still was an incumbent person at the helm of presidency. I recognized the need to ensure that I did not interfere with her final months in office.

When I arrived on campus for my initial post-selection visit, I first met with the incumbent. My goal was to establish a rapport and a set of ground rules that would facilitate the transition. One of the important ground rules that I set for myself was not to make any judgments or public statements about prior decisions made on the campus. As a new president, my goal was to forge the university's future rather than attempt to deal with the past. I wasn't there during the previous period and I didn't know what factors influenced the decisions that were made. As such, it would have been inappropriate for me to offer opinions on them.

The initial meeting with my predecessor was held off campus and away from the eyes of the media. In addition to meeting with my predecessor, I used the initial campus visit to meet with the academic senate leadership, members of the president's cabinet, student government representatives, union leadership, and a few other key campus groups. In these first meetings I sought to give people assurance that there would be an orderly transition. I also used this opportunity to share my general collaborative philosophy.

As one would expect, I was faced with a variety of questions. I tried to ensure that they were answered consistently with each group. I knew that the campus newspaper and local media would be anxious to meet with me. I asked the public relations office to arrange for visits with them. I also ensured that my schedule was flexible enough to allow time for walking around the campus and dropping in at the student union and a few other campus buildings just to meet and greet people.

Once my schedule was set for visits to the campus, I asked for a temporary office in which I could meet with people and begin to conduct business focused on the future. I thought it best to have an office away from the administration building. As suggested above, I didn't want to interfere with my predecessor's efforts. Conducting my meetings away from her office helped with this. One of my goals was to have my office in a more public building—one in which I was likely to encounter faculty, staff, and students in a more informal way. An ideal building for this was the university library. I believe there was symbolic value from this decision that built positive capital for me at the earliest possible stage.

There was an extensive amount of preparation needed to make my campus visits successful. It was critical to plan the trips and meetings with clearly focused predefined objectives. The planning for the visits was well worth the investment of effort because it allowed me to gain the maximum benefit from them.

One of the key considerations for me was the fact that I was involved in two transitions, one at my new institution and another at my previous campus. As soon as my appointment was formally announced, I became a lame duck at the former institution. I began discussions there about the transition from my previous role and we established a timetable for handing many of my day-to-day activities to key subordinates and the individual who was stepping into my former position on an interim basis. I was glad to have laid the groundwork for this because it enabled me to concentrate more of my efforts on the upcoming challenges.

In an ideal situation I would have liked to have inherited a transition team at my new institution. It would have helped me prepare more effectively before I assumed the presidency. Instead we identified one individual to serve as the coordinator of my transition. This individual coordinated the key briefings that were needed prior to my official start date.

Prior to each visit I asked for data on pertinent issues so that I could be prepared for meetings once I was on campus. I also identified key questions that needed answers prior to my visits to help the staff prepare for the initial meetings. Examples of the issues that I focused on included enrollment, budgets, labor negotiations, and pending legal issues. These meetings and campus visits helped me develop a working agenda for my initial hundred days and, hopefully, laid the foundation for a great start to my presidency. With this preparation I believe I have assembled the basic ingredients to elevate the institution to new heights.

Hayward, California
May 2007

HOW LONG CAN I LAST?

JOHN V. LOMBARDI, CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

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.

Amherst, Massachusetts
April 2007

THE BSU BUDGET SURPRISE
MICKEY L. BURNIM, PRESIDENT, BOWIE STATE UNIVERSITY

After day-long campus interviews, I stayed overnight to meet with the system chancellor. He was quite affable and confirmed my impression that Bowie State University (BSU) is a fine institution lacking only the appropriate leadership for the challenges that it faces. He proudly pointed out that, during the last session, the Maryland General Assembly had added a 40 percent increase—$8.84 million—in the university’s state appropriation. This was seen as a result of growing legislative support for BSU, political influence by BSU supporters in the state legislature, and some impact of the desegregation agreement between the Maryland Higher Education Commission and the U.S. Office of Civil Rights.
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