



AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION
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PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

IT'S NOT JUST THE POSITION,
IT'S THE TRANSITION

PATRICK H. SANAGHAN
LARRY GOLDSTEIN
KATHLEEN D. GAVAL

ACE/PRAEGER SERIES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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*Foreword by
Stephen Joel Trachtenberg*



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FOREWORD

It is good news that Patrick H. Sanaghan, Larry Goldstein, and Kathleen D. Gaval have written *Presidential Transitions*, yet it would have been better had it not been necessary. One would imagine, with all the brainpower routinely available on college and university campuses, that their helpful and thoughtful observations by now should have become part of the fabric of any institution of higher learning. Simply stated, we should all know this.

Obviously, we do not. It is a melancholy fact of university life in America today that the typical tenure of a president is merely about seven years. That is barely enough time, as Derek Bok of Harvard famously stated, to “get a handle on the madness.” Bok speaks an important truth—specifically, that the arrival of a new president and the departure of the old one are not momentary points in time, but part of a durable process. Moreover, any transition, as the authors wisely note, is difficult, even when it is managed with grace and intelligence. To face repeated transitions every few years is not merely painful for the individuals involved, but leaves the institution itself rudderless or at least without a firm and known hand at the helm.

It is hard to believe, for example, that Harvard would enjoy the wealth and prestige it has if three presidents—James Bryant Conant, Nathan M. Pusey, and Bok—had not served for nearly 60 consecutive years for roughly equal terms. And one can only imagine, and mourn, the loss of morale at Trinity College in Hartford, a fine school, which had four presidents and one acting president between 2000 and 2006.

Why things go awry and how to prevent them from doing so are the subjects of this compact and highly informed book. The authors did their homework (or

rather fieldwork), having interviewed dozens of men and women involved in university governance, including presidents, chancellors, trustees, and other senior academic bureaucrats. Thus, the book you have in hand is based on research among those who have succeeded and failed in managing presidential transitions. This is how organizational theory and of course practice ought to be developed.

Perhaps the most common pitfall in presidential transitions is that the candidate and those recruiting him or her simply do not know each other or understand each other adequately (complete knowledge and understanding being unlikely). Why this happens is obvious enough; while a presidential search may take a year or more, the actual time the final candidate and the recruiters actually spend together is often ridiculously brief. They don't have a full opportunity to get acquainted.

This book deals with the problem straightforwardly and practically by suggesting two techniques. The first is a strategic audit. This report should detail all the issues the new president will be facing, be they matters of finance, personnel, culture, admissions, student behavior, and so forth. Nothing is out of bounds.

Obviously, this tells candidates what they can expect and what will be expected of them. It also provides the institution with a more comprehensive report on the state of the college than would normally be undertaken by anyone. In this way, the candidate and the institution have equal or symmetrical information, a distribution that assures the fairest transactions (and an idea that won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2001).

The companion piece, a report on future challenges, takes the gathering and, most critically, the sharing of information even further. It defines the various qualities and skills that the entire constituency of stakeholders—students, faculty, alumni, trustees, donors—believes the new president will have to possess in order to take on the looming issues and adapt to the particulars of his or her new institution's culture. It helps create a context for the criteria to be used when selecting the next president.

Both endeavors are clearly time-consuming and painstaking, but the time spent gathering, distilling, and applying the information will be returned when the transition to the new president goes smoothly and does not have to be repeated in a couple of years. And as for taking pains, it is more painful to have the wrong person in the job than to spend some long evenings reviewing reports and thinking about the institution's future.

This is more a book about process than results since process can be managed, but results only intended. The importance of process in this book is underscored by its subtitle: *It's Not Just the Position, It's the Transition*, and that, in all its many parts, is the subject the authors pursue with clarity and persuasive "personal observations." In August I will end a run of 30 years as a university president.

Thus the utility of *Presidential Transitions* will not apply to me. However, when I am newly a University Professor and President Emeritus, if someone asks me to serve on a search committee, I will be glad to know this book is here.

Stephen Joel Trachtenberg,
President and Professor of Public Administration,
The George Washington University
Washington, DC
May 2007

PREFACE

The impetus for this book was a discovery made by two of the authors during their annual effort facilitating a training program for 50 new chief business officers. During each program they conduct a horizon thinking activity referred to as the Future Timeline. During this activity the participants share their perspectives on the issues, events, and trends that are expected to impact higher education in the coming years. The outcome of the activity is a prioritized list of impacts that higher education is likely to experience over the coming ten-year period.

After conducting the program for several years with fairly predictable results such as facilities renewal, rising fringe benefit costs, and increasing demands for technological upgrades, there was a dramatic change at the top of the list. Leadership transitions had never been mentioned before; yet, when the topic surfaced four years ago, it was the top concern of the vast majority of participants. The issue remained in the number one spot in the subsequent year and has not fallen from the top of the list yet. Transitions are taking place in huge numbers each year and we know that some are not going well. “Ample evidence suggests that many presidential transitions are poorly managed, personally dissatisfying, and in some cases even demeaning for the primary players—the presidents themselves.”¹

The results from the Future Timeline intrigued the authors because of their past experiences with transitions. One of the authors had prior experience facilitating transitions for incoming presidents, as well as assisting one president when he transitioned out after many years of service on one campus. Although the consultant was well prepared for these engagements, he relied mostly on his general organizational development experience and knowledge of the principles

involved. It wasn't until later that he began studying higher education transitions as a separate topic.

The other consultant previously served on four college campuses. During his 20-year career, he experienced four presidential transitions on three of the campuses. It didn't strike him at the time but, looking back, it is interesting to consider what had worked well and what had been problematic for those presidents—both those departing and those starting a new position.

In recent years he has consulted with several new presidents to help with aspects of their transitions. As an objective third party, he has visited their campuses to conduct operational assessments focused primarily on administrative areas. These engagements were designed to generate the information that would be helpful to the president as he established initial priorities for action.

There was an interesting convergence for the two consultants. As they were learning about the impact of leadership transitions among the participants in their training program, they were experiencing firsthand the impact of transition difficulties. The first consultant was shocked as he watched a highly successful president fail miserably when he was recruited to a new institution. How could someone who, by all accounts, had been a rising star, find himself in a position in which he was anything but successful? What type of cultural mismatch could account for such a shocking outcome? Similarly, what were the factors that resulted in another long-serving president reaching the conclusion that he had better step down quickly because he had lost his enthusiasm for the position.

The situation for the other consultant was related more to the number of presidents calling on him for assistance because the situations they inherited were considerably different from what had been described during the search process. The situations he uncovered include, among others, a structural deficit requiring significant budget cuts to bring it under control; underperforming senior managers and/or incompetent executives who should have been removed years before; and dysfunctional relationships between major operational units. In each case, these were major issues that consumed a considerable amount of the new president's time and energy. Clearly these situations had to be known to many participants in the search process. Yet no one shared them with the candidates.

The third author has a somewhat different background. After spending more than 20 years at the same institution, she has experienced transitions from a completely different perspective—that of an insider with direct involvement in the process. She served as the transition manager with responsibility for overseeing the process to help the incumbent president make a graceful exit, and followed this by assisting the new president and the institution with a smooth transition into the position. Through these processes she successfully followed many of the practices recommended in this book.

Our differing perspectives are supplemented by the dozens of interviews we conducted with presidents, board members, and other higher education leaders as well as the extensive research we undertook. Our goal in this book is to share practical advice that has been proven to work for both presidents and their

institutions. Beyond advice about positive steps to be undertaken, we also caution about the factors that have led presidents to be unsuccessful in their attempts to take over the reins at a new institution and survive once they had done so.

The authors wish to express their appreciation to the many colleagues who contributed to this effort through their willingness to participate in interviews on the higher education presidency and especially transitions. Those individuals are listed in appendix C. Several of these individuals also reviewed early versions of some of the book's chapters. Special gratitude is expressed to the individuals who invested their time and effort to write first-person accounts to amplify some of the issues addressed in the book. These can be found at the ends of most chapters.

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Larry Goldstein wishes to acknowledge two higher education leaders who have influenced him in a variety of ways. Donald C. Swain, president emeritus of the University of Louisville, exhibited outstanding leadership and business skills as a president and modeled a graceful and productive transition to retirement. John V. Lombardi, chancellor of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has been a wonderful resource on numerous matters related to higher education and particularly the presidency.

Patrick H. Sanaghan is especially grateful to Michael DiBerardinis, secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and James "Torch" Lytle, practice professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. These individuals have shared invaluable insights on leadership issues and contributed to his understanding of transitions and their implications for individuals and organizations.

Larry Goldstein and Patrick H. Sanaghan wish to express appreciation to Susan Jurow, senior vice president for professional development and communications at the National Association of College and University Business Officers, and Nicholas S. Rashford, S.J. These individuals were co-authors of articles that subsequently grew into two of the chapters in this book—chapter 2 and chapter 5.

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NOTE

1. Moore, John W., and Joanne M. Burrows. *Presidential Succession and Transition: Beginning, Ending and Beginning Again*. Washington: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2001.

CHAPTER 1

The Journey Begins

Approximately one-fourth of all institutions “in any year are preparing for a presidential change, are in the midst of one, or have just selected a new president.”¹

In the life cycle of every college and university there are changes in leadership. Some institutions have time to prepare; others have it thrust upon them suddenly. Many presidents carefully plan their departure while other presidents decide quickly (or boards of trustees decide for them). The individual circumstances of their transitions may vary, but the steps that institutions take to identify a new leader, adapt to a new leadership style, and continue the forward momentum of the institution have similar challenges.

As of 2005, the latest year for which data are available, there were 4,216 degree-granting institutions in the United States.² Each of these institutions is led by a chief executive officer. Depending on the type of institution, this individual’s title might be president, chancellor, or something slightly different. Each of these individuals experienced a transition when he or she first took office and, barring unforeseen circumstances, will experience another when each leaves the position.

Based on a recent survey by the American Council on Education, the average presidential tenure in 2006 was 8.5 years, significantly longer than five years before, when the average was 6.6 years. Presidents of private institutions tend to have longer average tenures (9.1 years) than presidents of public institutions (8.1 years).³ Based on these numbers, it is clear that there are a significant number of transitions occurring in any given year. The individuals directly affected by these transitions number in the tens of thousands while those indirectly affected reach into the hundreds of thousands.

There are significant implications from these data alone. However, we combined these data with information from various media sources about the number of presidents who leave their positions involuntarily, or at least under a dark cloud. What accounts for the fact that, in almost every weekly issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, there is a report of another president who is

under fire? Recent examples include several presidents operating under votes of no confidence by their faculty, others fired because of financial mismanagement, some removed because of sexual impropriety, and still others who have left with little or no notice due to philosophical differences with their boards. One of the more unusual situations in recent months was a faculty vote of no-confidence in a *candidate* for a presidency. This individual had not even been hired and the faculty already were organizing against him. The situations we encountered have affected both great higher education institutions, including some Ivy Leaguers, and those of less renown. These obviously are very serious situations. We believe that many of them are completely avoidable. And, even when they are unavoidable, there are steps that can be taken to soften the impact on the campus.

Any leadership transition has the potential to be disruptive and derail the institution's forward progress. Even when managed well, transitions at the top create uncertainty for those working in the institution, as well as those served by the institution. The greatest impact, however, is on the person experiencing the transition firsthand. This book is intended to serve the needs of everyone involved in a transition. It provides guidance to those affected most dramatically—the departing and incoming presidents—and others who must ensure that the institution continues to operate smoothly despite the change in leadership. There are several groups in the latter category, starting with the boards of the institutions experiencing the change. Much of this responsibility falls on their shoulders and it must be handled well. Next is the senior leadership team, which will both assist the departing president with winding down her tenure and help the new president get her feet wet, most likely starting even before her first official day on the job. And then there are the many other individuals who must play key roles in managing the transition process so that momentum is not lost and it is as minimally disruptive as possible.

We start in chapter 2 with the many issues to be considered when a president is about to take office at a new institution or moves up within his current institution. This chapter addresses all the details—both large and small—that must be managed if the president is going to hit the ground running—but not so fast that he misses some important checkpoints. It covers issues that should be attended to before the president even arrives, such as gathering information about the institution, establishing learning and support networks, and connecting with the senior management team. It also provides suggestions about the specific issues that every new president should address. Things such as engaging with people, listening well, investing effort to build trust, and seeking feedback from multiple sources all contribute to the likelihood of a successful transition.

Chapter 3 builds on the foundation established in chapter 2 by focusing on the critical relationships that must be maintained by a new president. As with elements in the second chapter, the relationship-building process does not wait for the president's arrival on campus. There are four groups in particular whose relationships with the president will determine whether he is going to

be successful. We start with the board, even as early as during the interview process. From then on it must remain a top priority for the president. The relationship with the board is the most important of all because disconnects at the top will derail the presidency, no matter how smart or charismatic he may be.

Second only to the board is the faculty. At the end of the day, the institution's faculty is its most valuable resource. The president must establish a genuine connection with faculty members early on and continue to nurture it to keep the institution moving forward. He must demonstrate his care for this critical constituency by consulting faculty on important matters, bringing them into the conversation when strategic plans are being developed, and paying attention to their concerns.

The next critical relationship is with the senior management team. No president can do it all alone. She must be supported by a team of colleagues who are pushing in the same direction while at the same time protecting the president from ambushes. The team members must support one other and the president. She must have authentic relationships with each member of her cabinet and have effective mechanisms for interacting with them. The president must develop appropriate processes for working with the team members and leverage their strengths both individually and collectively.

The fourth critical relationship is with the president's immediate staff. These people have the ability to polish his image to a high gloss, or cause it to appear to be tarnished. Their attention to details relating to calendar, communication, entertainment arrangements, and other similar themes will influence how the institutional community views the president. The impact of the presidential staff extends to others as well, such as local officials, alumni, and community leaders. The president must form a partnership with his staff, relying on them for guidance and advice, and respecting them for their contributions.

In the next chapter, chapter 4, we deal with the unpleasant reality that all too many presidents are unable to serve out their terms and leave on a high note. The data are somewhat ambiguous in this regard. Some suggest that as few as 15 percent of presidents leave their positions involuntarily. Our research indicates that the number is considerably higher—certainly no less than one-third, but possibly as high as one out of every two presidents.

Clearly this number of presidents are not being fired. We realize that. But we also know that many presidents' departures are strongly negotiated behind the scenes. In other words, the change is made before the president is ready to leave. The departure may be announced as a resignation or retirement, but it is commonly understood that it was not completely voluntary. What are the factors that cause that to happen and what can be done to prevent it? Suggestions for avoiding this fate are provided, along with some warning signs to be monitored.

Even if the statistics referenced above are as high as we believe they may be, there still are a large number of presidents who wrap up a successful tenure

and approach their departure in a planful manner. The emphasis in chapter 5 is on these outward transitions. Advice is offered for reaching the difficult decision that it is time to move on, making the announcement, and managing all of the farewell activities that attend to the end of an administration. Additionally, we describe actions that a president should take to help her successor be as effective as possible. This includes tasks such as preparing strategic audit and future challenges reports and engaging in relationship mapping. We also provide a number of suggestions for boards as they deal with these complex issues. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the unique issues that arise with a sudden and/or unexpected departure of a president. Such transitions occur when there is a serious transgression, a situation that forces a president to abandon her position due to a family crisis, or something as traumatic as the death of an incumbent president. There are special considerations related to these events and care must be taken to address them.

Chapter 6 addresses an issue that receives very little attention, yet is fairly common—interim presidencies. Numerous institutions are faced with the need to engage someone on a temporary basis while they search for a permanent president. Interims come from within and outside the institution. And it makes a difference which approach is used. Internal interims have a leg up on the externals because they know the institution, how it works, who the key players are, and the issues currently being addressed. On the other hand, internal interims also are known to the institution. And it is possible that they have made some enemies along the way. This chapter addresses the multitude of factors that an interim must deal with, and provides advice for the board that seeks to hire or promote an interim. It also tackles the dicey issue of the interim as a candidate for the permanent position.

In chapter 7, we highlight the lessons we have learned during our journey through the transition landscape. It includes key messages and summarizes the things that we feel are most important to remember. It cautions about the pitfalls and potholes to be avoided. It also highlights the many positive actions that a president and the board can take to enhance the likelihood of a successful experience for all parties involved. It closes with thoughts about areas of further investigation and research. We learned a great deal throughout our journey. We have addressed much of it here, but we realize there is much more to be explored.

There is one other thought readers should keep in mind as they explore the complex world of higher education transitions. Numerous anecdotes, examples, and suggestions are presented. Although some may seem extreme, they are actual situations that have been reported in the media or represent situations in which the authors were involved or have learned about directly from the participants. In addition, numerous first-person stories, provided by presidents, board members, or others are included to illustrate some of the key concepts in the chapters.

NOTES

1. Keller, George. "Foreword." In *Presidential Transition in Higher Education: Managing Leadership Change*. Edited by James Martin, James E. Samels & Associates. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

2. National Center for Education Statistics, "Degree-granting institutions, by control and type of institution: Selected years, 1949–50 through 2004–05." http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/tables/dt05_243.asp (accessed April 2, 2007).

3. American Council on Education. *The American College President*. Washington: American Council on Education, 2007.