



Executive Leadership Transitioning at Community Colleges



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Background

The urgency attached to the board's role in selecting, supporting, and positioning their institution and new presidents to thrive and excel cannot be overstated. In 2016, more than 50% of the presidents of colleges that award associate degrees reported that they anticipated stepping down within the next five years¹, yet only 21.2% of these colleges report having a succession plan in place. Of course, good intentions alone will not yield the caliber of results demanded by higher education's consumers and the competitive global marketplace in which the nation now competes. Moreover, the enlarged demands placed on the higher education sector are not expected to abate any time soon, and the urgency and speed of change in the sector already are accelerating in quantum leaps that were unfathomable just a few years ago. If these variables were not sufficiently daunting, community colleges are facing intense competition from for-profit schools and certification programs. As such, the roles and responsibilities of boards and presidents will continue to be increasingly challenging.

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Adding to the challenges above are the reports of unplanned and unflattering presidential transitions which are often the result of boards that do not sufficiently understand either their own institution or the complexities across the higher education sector, and the skills required of college presidents and chancellors to successfully lead transformational change.

Given these factors, the responsibility for reversing the revolving doors of presidential leadership and choosing the right individual to lead will fall heavily on the shoulders of informed, competent, and courageous boards. To help governing boards fulfill their stewardship mandates, this monograph outlines crucial factors, variables, and issues concerning presidential transitions. This outline will inform the thinking and planning that board members should consider along with their fiduciary responsibilities to safeguard their institution's integrity, assets, momentum, and reputation. Ultimately, anticipatory thinking, thorough preparation, and the right legal advice will bolster the board's efficacy, in selecting their one employee: the college's/district's chief executive officer.

Introduction

College presidential transitions are inevitable. A successful transition, as measured by (a) an effective and orderly transfer of executive authority and influence between the outgoing and incoming chief executives, along with (b) the continued advancement of the college, can never be guaranteed. Conceiving, developing, and managing a deliberate and detailed strategy for changing presidents—which necessarily and concurrently encourages engagement and collaboration between the board and senior leadership team—in most instances can mitigate disruptions and pave the way for the new chief executive to become quickly acclimated and informed relative to his or her new role and responsibilities, the college's existing culture and challenges, and the direction it should be heading.

As such, the absence of comprehensive succession and transition planning is problematic and puts the institution's immediate future and health at avoidable risks, particularly when unforeseen events or emergencies arise in which leadership continuity is disrupted. Additional reputational risks also occur when rumors of internal disagreements and contentious behaviors by board members or the outgoing president seep into the public domain and distract the college from focusing on its central mission: educating students and preparing them for a knowledge-based economy that will impact or dominate virtually every sector of American society. When institutions become branded by their internal discord, corporate, community, and even political support may be jeopardized. If this happens at a crucial time during a capital campaign or when the college is trying to enhance its value proposition

¹ "American College President 2017," American Council on Education, p. 58.

for constituents and stakeholders alike, the damage may reverberate for several years until confidence is restored in the institution's governing and administrative leadership. Lingering negative publicity about internal dissonance can deter well qualified candidates from applying for the leadership position.

Further, the perceived quality and effectiveness of a college's presidential transition present a distinct opportunity to strengthen the institution's brand and its relationships with community and corporate partners, faculty, staff, and both current and prospective students. Because such transitions are governed by the board, they also present unique opportunities for the board to coalesce and refine their clarity of purpose and commitment relative to supporting the institution's direction, mission, and values.

Essentially, *effective* and *impactful* leadership transitions are considerably more involved and intricate than merely swapping or replacing one executive with another. This monograph provides insights and recommendations for boards to consider as they plan for the many tasks associated with their responsibilities and the intertwined tasks associated with effective presidential changeover. In addition, it clarifies the roles and tasks of the board in overseeing and implementing an orderly, effective, and transformational presidential change.

Executive Summary

The tectonic shifts in the structure of the American economy, globalization, and the ever-growing demand for a more technologically sophisticated and well-educated domestic labor force during the last quarter of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st century have placed significantly more pressure on the nation's 1,103 community colleges. Increasingly, they are being asked to enhance their role across multiple platforms—from workforce development and serving as students' higher education gateways to community development, proactively addressing equity and diversity social mandates and economic development. The overall cost, health, and efficacy of higher education in general, and specifically at these institutions, cannot be over-emphasized in today's highly charged and competitive workforce. Alongside these developments are the questions being asked with greater frequency: Is higher education truly worth the costs? Are there alternative ways to produce a skilled labor force?

“Hence, boards should treat the presidential transition as a strategic imperative which supports and protects the college's well-being, assets, reputation, value proposition, and integrity, all while advancing the institution toward students' success.”

The quality and engagement of a community college's board of trustees and its executive leadership are indispensable, regardless of its location, organizational structure, access to external funding, or the condition of its local economy. This is true even when occasional tensions enter the dynamics between boards and presidents. Fostering and maintaining strong, competent chief executive leadership and having a solid, mutually supportive relationship between college boards and their presidents are hallmarks of operationally successful and strategically effective colleges. Because the chief executive's position is so foundational to a college's overall success, boards must routinely reexamine and update the components of their presidential transition and engagement policies and strategies.

Hence, boards should treat the presidential transition as a strategic imperative which supports and protects the college's well-being, assets, reputation, value proposition, and integrity, all while advancing the institution toward students' success. With this North Star in sight, boards will be well-advised to resist assuming that their work involving presidential successions and transitions has ended when the new chief executive has been selected and installed. To the contrary, beyond identifying and selecting the ideal candidate to become the next chief executive, trustees must make concerted and well-coordinated efforts to support both the outgoing and incoming presidents in ways that keep students' success in full view and above all else. They will be entering into a new partnership

with their incoming president, and as is the case with all partner relationships that are mutually valued, they will need to invest time, energy, and commitment to help the relationship thrive and become meaningful and productive for everyone involved.



The primary lenses through which this monograph presents its recommendations relative to this objective are the *transition* of the departing president and the *onboarding* of the incoming chief executive. These two strands of the same objective and process are occasionally grouped under a single umbrella: presidential transition. Indeed, along with the search process, it is nearly impossible to have a sustainable presidential leadership change without all three steps or stages being well-integrated with the others. While this is not based upon a documented leadership theory, it reflects the experiences and opinions of community college presidents who were interviewed for this project and who have a total of more than 50 years of experience as chief executives.

Transitions

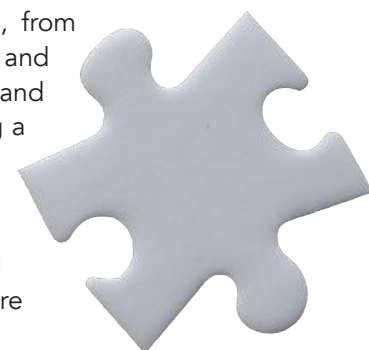
Transitioning is the process of coordinating the current president's departure in a civil, prescribed, respectful, and orderly manner. Exiting presidents are typically reservoirs of knowledge, information, and pertinent material about the college's condition and overall strategy. In too many instances, their wisdom, insights, and experiences are summarily dismissed as boards become enamored with the idea of replacing them with a charismatic prospect. One current community college president acknowledged that this approach often finds colleges paying a heavy price for having conducted a misguided search. Such short-sighted behavior likely will occur, and continue occurring, whenever boards regard presidential searches and the subsequent new president's onboarding as stand-alone or mutually exclusive stages of presidential transitions.

Transitions also can provide a strategic window for the institution to accelerate progress and act upon politically and sometimes emotionally charged decisions that are in the institution's best interest, but would likely damage the new president's early success. Repurposing the college's assets or eliminating a costly program with declining demand exemplify the types of strategic decisions an outgoing president could make to advance the college as he or she is leaving office. This could be particularly helpful in readying the college for the incoming president whose mandate from the board is change and transformation. To leverage such unparalleled opportunities, the sitting president and board can and should continue to exhibit mutual respect and collaboration on behalf of the college's and the students' best interests.

Onboarding

In conjunction with the exit of the sitting CEO, onboarding encompasses empowering, informing, and orienting the incoming president during the period immediately following his or her selection and up to at least the first 12 to 18 months in office, or the initial performance reviews by the board. Having an atypically lengthy onboarding process helps to ensure a tighter alignment between the new president and the board. Also, a longer runway that incorporates periodic (even casual) and consistent discussions with board members and informal feedback outside of board meetings can minimize the prospect of having a major personnel course correction during the president's first few months in office.

Thus, presidential transitions involve a continuum of interwoven steps and activities, from searching for and identifying the optimal candidate to overseeing the departing president and onboarding the incoming president. Among these steps are creating a comprehensive and tailored communications strategy for the public and important stakeholders; conducting a strategic assessment of the institution's needs, opportunities, and challenges before the search begins; appointing a competent, diverse, and experienced presidential selection committee; conducting a fair, open, and evidence- or criteria-based selection process; preparing and organizing the senior leadership team for the presidential handoff and transfer of authority; and ensuring that the board and its search parameters or goals are directionally aligned.



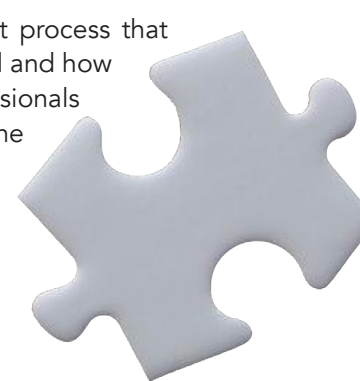


Board Responsibilities

Responsibility for developing, codifying, and monitoring the presidential transition lies directly with the college's board of trustees, with significant day-to-day and operational support coordinated through the board chair with the support of the board liaison. Trustees, specifically the chair, are responsible for creating and advancing a culture among themselves in which trust, respect, probity, confidentiality, and active engagement are all normative. Though responsible for governing versus micro-managing the college's day-to-day operations, which is the chief executive's province, boards should set an overarching tone for how the institution defines acceptable and best-practice behavior when conducting its affairs. If they fail, for example, to prevent whatever disagreements or negative concerns they may have from spilling over into the media and the public domain, they could easily and regrettably create harmful reputational risks for their institution.

Working closely at the direction of the board and chair, the college's board liaison should assist in managing the transition's operational parameters. These activities should include working with the college's communications department, which is responsible for overseeing strategic communications; facilitating the departing president's exit strategy in a respectful manner that publicly recognizes the president's contributions to the institution and broader community; working with and supporting the board's presidential search committee; and coordinating, with input from the board chair, the compilation of crucial operational performance data about the college's current position financially and academically, and across core functions, such as academic and student services, administrative services, and development or advancement. Whether it is through a dashboard or some other tool, the board should have real-time access to these data to ensure that the college's critical success factors are not jeopardized during the transition. In addition, having these metrics readily available will enable both the interim president, if one is appointed, and the incoming president to more quickly grasp and assess the college's overall condition.

Presidential transitions are perilously incomplete without a formal and structured assessment process that allows for qualitative and quantitative feedback and an impartial evaluation of what worked well and how the process could be improved in the future. Whether this is managed through external professionals or facilitated internally, the lessons learned from a combination of the search process and the transitions and onboarding of the respective presidents should produce an objective cross-section of ways to enhance the college's governing practices, communication strategies, executive leadership succession planning and execution, and above all else, the college's mandate to provide exceptional educational opportunities for students.



I. The Board of Trustees: Where It All Begins and Ends

This section begins with a brief outline of board responsibilities and dynamics. More than any other stakeholder group, boards are ultimately responsible for protecting and overseeing an institution's condition and future.

Roles and responsibilities. Perhaps because they operate largely away from public view, boards of trustees often are overlooked and their contributions (beyond monetary support) downplayed as being essential to a college's overall performance. Only boards are charged, above all other stakeholder groups, with the fiduciary responsibility to protect and preserve the college's assets; approve or disapprove management's strategy for advancing the institution's outcomes; evaluate the president's leadership and performance; and govern the institution in all its facets without inserting itself into management's domain. As noted in a Harvard Business Review article:

[B]oards should be: seats of challenge and inquiry that add value without meddling and make CEOs more effective but not all-powerful. A board can reach that destination only if it functions as a team...The high-performance board, like the high-performance team, is competent, coordinated, collegial, and focused on an unambiguous goal. Such entities do not simply evolve; they must be constructed to an exacting blueprint².

² "Building Better Boards," by David A. Nadler, Harvard Business Review, May 2004.

An experienced advisor, to multiple boards throughout higher education, summed up trustees' responsibilities as falling into three principal duty areas: determining the college's destination, or deciding where it should be heading; selecting the proper chief executive as the best qualified candidate who can lead the institution to its mutually agreed-upon destination; and regularly and formally assessing the chief executive's performance. All their related functions and activities—including the board's committee structure—should, by extension, flow directly from these three responsibilities, including fundraising or advancement, auditing, approving appointments and capital expenditures, reviewing and sanctioning policies, and most importantly, assessing their own performance. Board members must then be purposeful and intentional about adopting an objective of being high-performing to enhance their effectiveness.

Board Assessment

A learned teacher once remarked that, "If a person thinks more highly of himself than he ought to think, he can never know what is perhaps the most important truth: the truth about himself."³ The same axiom about self-awareness is applicable to boards of trustees, which is why they should periodically and carefully assess—preferably using metrics and an outside team of professionals—their own governance practices and performance, and conduct routine strategic audits of their assets, i.e., subject-matter skills or expertise, exposure, and experience within the context of the college's urgent needs and the culture that best suits the institution's vision for itself. It is essential for high-performing boards to ensure that the right people have been recruited and are onboard and in the right roles. However, when members' appointments are primarily politically motivated, this can complicate board dynamics and impede members from achieving the necessary balance and chemistry to achieve peak performance. Such scenarios, however, do not preclude the college from voicing to political powers its interest in appointees with specific skill sets and experiences that reflect and support the college's mission.

“The board–president partnership is a shared leadership role and perhaps the single most crucial ingredient to institutional success.”

Although boards typically confine their roles to governing and policymaking tasks exclusively, circumstances may arise, such as a sudden leadership crisis or other catastrophic event, which require trustees to become significantly more engaged in the college's day-to-day operational decisions—at least temporarily until the situation stabilizes. The point here is to emphasize that board practices and behaviors are not cast in stone, but should be sufficiently nimble and adaptive depending upon an institution's current and anticipated condition. This also explains why boards should be careful about being so strictly compliant that they fail in aspiring to, and working toward, higher levels of performance and efficacy.

The board chair has an added leadership responsibility in helping to shape the board's culture, social dynamics, level and tenor of engagement with the college's president and management team, familiarity with best practices and data-driven performance metrics (both internal and relative to the college's direct and aspirational competition and sector), and meeting preparation. Invariably, the chair works most closely with the college's president to support management's goals, objectives, and the institution's value proposition(s) for critical stakeholders by offering counsel and input on strategic issues and setting board meeting agendas.

Board chairs invariably find themselves engaging in a form of shuttle diplomacy as they relay the board's concerns to the college's president and share the president's issues with board members. This is not to suggest that presidents and board members should not speak with one another, but often, the board chair has the best grasp on board members' concerns and is in the best position to broker strategic matters or misunderstandings; to play

³ Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press), 79.

disciplinarian, when needed, with colleagues while at the same time coaching the president to reach the kind of collegial consensus that will reinforce shared leadership and governance—all of which should lead towards definitive improvements in the college's outcomes.

The board-president partnership is a shared leadership role and perhaps the single most crucial ingredient to institutional success. Both parties must steward the board-president partnership, always being mindful of their respective roles, attuned to each other's perspective; committed to continuous and sometimes contentious, though respectful, dialogue; and laser-focused on advancing toward the institution's aspirations.

Board culture. Board culture cannot be legislated, nor codified and implemented solely by relying upon written rules and policies, regardless of how well-conceived they are. Throughout higher education, a board's culture plays a vital role in influencing its own and the organization's overall performance. There is no one-size-fits-all style or single model suitable across every college.

In general, high-performing boards govern themselves in ways that help them to remain focused on: (a) the college's destination, (b) the chief executive's performance, and (c) how aligned their related activities are in supporting these objectives. Some of the activities that can facilitate the board's success in reaching these objectives are being well-versed and -informed about salient issues that both come before the board and apply to higher education more broadly (i.e., the institution's ecosystem); understanding and adhering to the boundaries between governance and management; being candid and constructively inquisitive and critical of management's performance; allotting adequate time for their own work and preparation, including attending and actively participating in board meetings; listening attentively and courteously to both fellow board members and management; working collegially, collaboratively, and respectfully with others; welcoming change (even if it means their own departure from the board!) when appropriate; and being sufficiently self-aware to acknowledge their limitations or lack of expertise, yet comfortable with periodic assessments of their individual and collective performance as board members.

Along with the activities outlined above, members' interpersonal behavior patterns can define or influence the board's culture, too. Such examples include whether they are cliquish, or if the executive committee acts as if they alone constitute the board versus taking an inclusive approach regarding their decision-making, or if the board's communication channels and the flow of relevant information are confined to select members. Boards that routinely and conscientiously work on their internal communications and rapport when there is both disagreement and unanimous consent are better positioned to handle the rough patches that almost every board eventually encounters.

Developing the right board culture for a college takes considerable leadership, time, energy, and effort—usually lots of these investments coupled with a customized set of both quantitative and qualitative data that measures and tracks where and how interventions and improvements should be introduced to achieve better results.

II. The Presidential Search Process

Presidential changes can occur for countless reasons and when least expected. For this reason, the board's transition-planning processes should be agreed upon and already in place long before a presidential transition begins⁴. A sampling of the systematic action steps the board should codify as part of its larger, comprehensive planning for a presidential succession and transition include developing and codifying an explicit plan that addresses the entire process, from "A" to "Z"; having transition and management protocols; establishing a comprehensive communication strategy; and maintaining access to pertinent data and relevant facts in real time through an electronic dashboard. Above all else, the trustees must be unequivocally clear among themselves, in advance, about where the institution is heading, or should be heading, before launching a presidential search. Within

⁴ "As will become clearer throughout this paper, presidential "transitions" cover a wider swath of time than just the new president's onboarding or orientation. Depending on the new president's background and whether he or she is coming from the inside or outside, the transition period can last up to 18 months. Moreover, select components of the transition are ongoing throughout the president's tenure.

this context, the board should be clear and in agreement about the college's three-to-five strategic priorities they expect the incoming president to address, and more importantly that this person will have the requisite skill set and leadership traits to succeed in their efforts.

Determining the institution's direction should be closely aligned with conducting a strategic audit of its current condition. This analysis is not simply a fact book; rather, it is a straightforward assessment of the college's position relative to its competition and its existing productivity or outcomes. Indeed, without these two markers—the college's direction and a fact-based awareness of its current strengths, limitations and opportunities—the search process likely will be skewed toward the most enchanting candidates and not necessarily the candidates optimally suited to lead and move the institution toward its goals.

Inviting and welcoming disparate input into conversations about the prospective candidate's profile, skill sets, experiences, and character traits should also be consistent with the leadership direction in which the board believes the college should be heading. Special attention should be paid to capturing this feedback and sharing it in confidence with the search committee and the board. In addition, enlisting input from valued stakeholders and detractors alike can reinforce a constructive image of the board and signal that the search is open and not prewired for a favorite son or daughter. Moreover, the presidential search provides an opportunity to get everyone under the tent without regard to their position on key issues.

“Failed presidencies are costly, and not just financially. Momentum and the valuable, irreplaceable time it takes to move the college forward can be lost along with the board's reputation as competent trustees.”

The action steps outlined above can and will serve as an all-important signal to the campus community and its broader stakeholders just how seriously the board takes its fiduciary duties of care, loyalty, and obedience to ensure and protect the institution's stability during a transition period. These are tone-setting steps designed to (re)define and support a college's overall culture. And the board will be better positioned to make an informed, carefully examined, and analytically based decision about the college's next leader.

During the finalist stages of interviewing the presidential candidates, it is usually a good idea to invite their spouses or partners to attend an informal event or meeting to give board members another opportunity to observe candidates' social skills and the likely impressions they might make with stakeholders in similar settings. It is also prudent for trustees and the chair of the search committee to visit a finalist's campus to assess a finalist's previous or current campus culture.

In an era of revolving-door presidents,⁵ boards that treat the search, selection, and transition stages through a longer lens and a structured ongoing process are better poised to identify and establish the critical success factors and conditions within their ecosystems that will help the new president succeed. The recommended approach to presidential searches discussed above has the added advantage of ensuring that the board and incoming president are both on the same page regarding the school's condition and its goals, the combination of which should serve as baselines for evaluating the president's performance. Also, it lessens the chances of misunderstandings between the board and the administration about the college's critical success factors.

As noted by Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, “[Leaders] start by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats. And they stick with that discipline.”⁶ Beyond this quotation's emphasis on making intelligent decisions about the optimal person(s) to become president is Collins's emphasis on taking a **disciplined approach** to this crucial task. Presidential selections and transitions, therefore, cannot be accomplished successfully if these responsibilities are regarded as cumbersome, short-term, or finite tasks.

⁵ According to the American Council on Education, the average number of years for all college and university presidents fell from 8.5 in 2006 to 6.5 in 2016, almost 24%.

⁶ <https://www.kinesisincl.com/first-who-then-what/>



Due to the many facets of succession planning and presidential transitions, they afford boards an opportunity to examine closely their college's senior management talent pipeline—its quality and depth, for example, when a crisis calls for selecting the best candidates to serve as an acting or interim president. The mechanics associated with the search process also should exist within a larger framework of succession planning that reaches deeper into the organization and includes middle managers and senior executives. As such, the board and senior management team should always keep watchful eyes on the institution's bench strength in much the same way most provosts and heads of academic affairs monitor closely the retirement timetables of their college's tenured ranks. Under this frame of reference, the presidential search operates within a more comprehensive talent-management system versus as an isolated episodic event.

A community college system with 30 colleges has an answer for the challenge described in the preceding paragraph. It has devised a multi-tiered leadership development program for junior-, mid-, and senior-level managers to acquire additional skills and exposure to assist them with moving up the organizational ladder toward higher rungs of responsibility, and as an administrator in the system remarked, to “grow [our] own talent.” In conformation of this strategy's success, 12 of their community and technical college presidents participated in the system's leadership development program.

Failed presidencies are costly, and not just financially. Momentum and the valuable, irreplaceable time it takes to move the college forward can be lost along with the board's reputation as competent trustees.

III. Presidential Transitions

In the two best-practice scenarios provided from interviews during the preparation of this monograph, the common denominator was the outgoing presidents' strong and several months-long commitments to mentoring their successors. In each instance, the exiting presidents were remarkably astute and sufficiently self-aware to want to provide the incoming presidents with a combination of latitude, trust, and independence to create their own styles of leadership, all without interference. Yet, they remained appropriately accessible as listening counselors. Additionally, they expedited the new presidents' learning curves and acclimation to the institution's culture, and they facilitated early introductions to valuable local corporate, political, and community leaders and influencers.

A constant theme throughout this monograph has been the importance of treating the transition process as a structured system that encompasses the search process, presidential transition, and onboarding of the new CEO as interconnected parts of a greater whole. This is particularly applicable during the stages of a presidential transition as voiced by a seasoned community college president:

One of the lessons, as new presidents, is we have to learn ‘not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.’ The college did not start when [we] came in [as the new president] and so we should, when possible, build on the institution's existing foundation and, where appropriate, build on the legacies of our predecessors...No matter how bad the previous leader was, there are usually some areas where one can acknowledge their predecessors' contributions to the institution...The board has a role and responsibility to play to ensure that the [departing and new presidents] connect with each other. [Emphasis added]

Along with the obvious emphasis on approaching due diligence thoughtfully and comprehensively, this president's comments suggest that all parties, including the board, the departing president, and the incoming chief executive, should exhibit high levels of emotional intelligence throughout the transition and especially during the outgoing president's departure by staying focused on the college's overarching needs, and not their respective pride or sense of self-sufficiency.

Of course, the board's relationship with the outgoing president will depend on multiple factors, including the circumstances surrounding the departure, the lead time associated with their transition, and their overall relationship with the board, especially the board's chair. Some colleges or boards provide financial incentives for outgoing presidents to prepare, in advance of their separation, a formal transition report outlining critical information to assist with the successor's onboarding and to facilitate continuity of the college's core functions, operations, and



strategic direction. In these instances, some portion of the outgoing president's severance pay would be withheld until the transition report is produced. Absent such arrangements, boards may consider developing and updating a formal list of the data and related information they deem essential from the outgoing president or their management team as the school enters the presidential search process, which should provide ample time to gather and vet the information.

To optimize everyone's time and to maximize the gathering of useful information, it helps if the board chair and departing president can develop in advance a checklist of specific issues to address during the latter's "exit interview" or data download. For example, the list might include principal-gift prospects who have already been contacted and are being cultivated; existing at-risk grievances and potentially litigious situations; "the management team's effectiveness and ideas for improvements"; critical operating and talent decisions that will be awaiting the new president's input; and pending external (corporate and other) partnerships, agreements, and contracts above a specified threshold.

A proper presidential transition process also should include saying good-bye to the soon-to-be former president by publicly acknowledging his or her contributions and successes while in the position. Similarly, allowing the exiting president to leave gracefully creates lasting goodwill for the board and the college within their communities and among stakeholders, and it suggests that they value treating others respectfully with dignity and civility. This can serve, too, as a strong message about the board's values to the incoming president and to new hires.

In situations when departing CEOs are unwilling or unable, regardless of the reasons, to share pertinent information with their successor, the board should already have other options in place to guide the incoming president's grasp of the college's true condition, norms, culture, challenges, constraints, and its distinct opportunities for making course corrections.

IV. Presidential Onboarding

Board responsibilities. The board is responsible for establishing a procedurally sound, documented, and agreed-upon process for the formal offer and related contract negotiations to address such issues as policies regarding the incoming president's outside directorships, independent consulting, resources for professional development, faculty status, paid speaking engagements, involuntary and voluntary separation, and employment benefits, along with matters pertaining to their living or residential arrangements, travel expenses, and their eligibility for bonuses, etc.⁷ There should be zero ambiguity between the board and the president-elect concerning the three-to-five strategic priorities the board expects the president to address during the first 12–18 months. How and when progress will be measured in addressing these priorities should be perfectly clear and explicitly stated so all parties can agree. The employment contract negotiations also should address, as appropriate, the spouse/partner's needs or concerns and related family relocation matters, along with the college's expectations about the spouse/partner's availability and participation in select events in the life of the college.

Shortly after the president-elect has been selected and the contract negotiations have been completed, the board chair, along with previously identified board members, e.g., committee chairs, and the incoming president, should hold regularly scheduled (monthly) discussions about the board's expectations and the president's performance-evaluation process (the criteria, frequency, components, relative weight for each variable, etc., should have been discussed during the contract negotiations⁸), related timelines, internal communication preferences, the college's culture, and other issues that emerged from the board's and search committee's initial Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analyses (before the search was launched), especially around the college's core functions, and financial, operating, and academic condition. Appropriate time should be allotted for these periodic meetings and conversations, which should extend throughout and beyond the new president's first year. After the first year, the frequency could be adjusted, but regularly scheduled non-board meetings should occur throughout the new president's tenure to build and reinforce the much-needed trust between the board and the president they both will need to strengthen their relationship and to advance the college. In concert with the

⁷American Council on Education, American College President Report 2017, p. 28.

⁸Contract negotiations fall within the purview of the board's attorneys and the incoming president's lawyers and, ideally, the new president will not participate directly in these discussions.





incoming president's early meetings with board members, trustees have a related responsibility to introduce the new president to key networks along with making sure the new president attends major social, political, and business events.

As discussions regarding onboarding and contract negotiations evolve, the incoming president should identify, with board approval, a plan for professional development which could include executive coaching or travel and participation in meetings on special topics, within budget.

Although executive coaching is more widespread in the corporate world, it is becoming increasingly acceptable in higher education. A coach can be helpful to both experienced and new presidents as a thought partner and confidential sounding board who serves as a subject-matter resource and a mirror. Coaches can also be helpful to board chairs, in strengthening the chair-president partnership. Given the importance of effective governance, the chair's role in the president's success and the board's effectiveness is practically irreplaceable.

A current community college president with more than 25 years of presidential experience offered the following insight:

It is unfortunate in some instances as I have watched new presidents come in and not get past the first 90 days before they experience difficulty. And I think the problem is we do not have a reliable leadership system that new presidents can learn from or that they can lean on during their first year. And we have to do a better job of helping them identify systems of leadership that are more capable of helping them with their efforts... They also need a board that is unanimously supportive of them during the early stages and will allow them to make a mistake before openly castigating them.

I have seen a number of presidents get into trouble early on because they don't have a mentor or a coach, someone they can work with [early in their presidency] to help them get through the process of developing their priorities. Coaching for the president during the first six to nine months or a year of their tenure is essential... I think the responsibility of the board, or the board chair or the executive committee, should be to go through the coaching process, too, with the president for up to a year, and maybe the president will feel more comfortable about having a coach.

To provide the incoming president with an independent assessment of the college's condition, at least one large state community college system hired an independent consultant to prepare a report for the incoming president. An administrator familiar with this practice before it was discontinued remarked that their system,

[u]sed to have an independent consultant meet with the retiring or departing president and their cabinet to assemble a report on the things to be aware of and the challenges and status of the college's condition for the incoming president. It was discontinued, however, probably for budget or cost reasons and the person who filled this role was retiring from this line of work also.

Incoming president's role. Virtually every new president, even those with previous experience in similar roles in higher education, will encounter a learning curve whose trajectory will be determined by a combination of his or her due-diligence strategy; access to accurate and unvarnished information and data; the cooperation of and access to the outgoing president and the current management team; and the condition of the institution's primary "core functions, drivers, and enablers." One chief executive offered this cautionary lesson: "You never find out where all the skeletons are from the inside. I often get more insights into the culture and politics of an organization by talking to [external stakeholders]."⁹

This comment stresses how valuable the combination of independent and external input can be during presidential transitions. It also suggests that incoming presidents should consider employing a 360-degree scan of the college's condition and culture that is benchmarked through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Compiling,

⁹ "Managing CEO Transitions," Tsun-yan Hsieh and Stephen Bear, The McKinsey Quarterly, 1994 No. 2

vetting, or analyzing these data—if they are not currently and readily available—are time-consuming tasks and may entail allotting a small budget and identifying an independent or third-party to oversee this data collection and analysis.

A sampling of additional advice the college presidents interviewed for this report provided are the following comments:

It takes a lot of effort to ensure the success of a president and not any one entity or initiative, person or activity or program can make that happen. The president should make sure that they are visible in the community and that they treat everyone with respect regardless of where they fit within the organization.

Unlike their counterparts at four-year institutions, community college presidents must always clarify and communicate their institution's value propositions, which are often misunderstood by the public.

Early on, the president should develop a vision for the institution...[Although] the institution's strategic direction should include input from the community, framing the college's vision is an important task that the new president should be prepared to address [to create a shared vision].

The board liaison. In support and at the direction of the board chair, a senior college executive should be identified and designated to coordinate and navigate the president-elect's onboarding and integration process. No hard rules exist when it comes to staffing the community college's search and transition committees. In some instances, this role may be assigned to the college's general counsel, secretary of the college, or to the executive leader of its foundation. For the purposes of this monograph, we are using board liaison to refer to the person responsible for supporting the board and the board chair, and coordinating and managing the board's affairs and work during the transition's various stages.

“ *A solid communications plan is essential during times of transition.* ”

Under the auspices of the board liaison, the board should maintain a repository of its decisions, actions, reports, preferences, evaluations, preferences, and the materials or data from which its search and transition decisions are based. With changes in the board's composition as inevitable as changes in the college's executive leadership, preserving the governing board's institutional memory will strengthen its own ability to oversee orderly and effective leadership transitions going forward. Indeed, a best practice is for the board's presidential succession planning and oversight activities to receive as much attention and care as its standing committees on academic affairs (educational policy), finance, annual audits, development, governance, and student affairs.

A solid communications plan is essential during times of transition. In addition to managing the operational aspects and stages of presidential transitions, the college's communications staff will typically have the added responsibility of coordinating strategic communications and messaging, both externally and internally, with the college's communications executive, critical stakeholders—such as alumni/ae, donors, local and state politicians or legislators—accrediting bodies, faculty, staff, students (current and prospective), and community and corporate partners. In tightly knit communities, this likely will require hosting public town hall meetings, inviting input from various stakeholders, and keeping all constituents appropriately informed as the search, selection, and onboarding stages unfold. Leadership transitions not only offer an unparalleled opportunity to showcase the college on local, regional, and national stages; they also presents an opportunity to engage key patrons and to bridge shared aspirations for the institution.

Above all else, having a robust, well-executed, and proactive messaging strategy can create positive momentum and facilitate the new president's agenda and ability to move more quickly, yet strategically, toward addressing their vision and when necessary, course corrections. It also can catalyze prominent and influential detractors whose discontent could otherwise spoil the incoming president's arrival and onboarding and harm the college's reputation. In the absence of a strong messaging strategy, innuendos and false rumors will fill this void and could cast the board and the administration in a negative light, or worse, create a time-consuming distraction that impairs the college's posture among its valued and critical stakeholders.

Closing evaluation. Boards that embrace continuous improvement will want to conduct a postmortem or formal assessment of the effectiveness of their succession plan or strategy and each stage of the search, presidential transition, onboarding, and integration stages of its presidential transition policies and plans. Presumably, with objective feedback, the institution's model for this process will be fittingly tweaked and improved when the next occasion arises.

V. A Botched Handoff

A reader might assume that most of the recommendations in this monograph are based purely on hypothetical and theoretical assumptions. That would be grossly inaccurate. The authors have witnessed firsthand presidential searches and handoffs that ended disastrously, and not always because board members or the presidents were incompetent. Unfortunately, in almost all of these situations, a combustible combination of factors loomed, just waiting for a spark to ignite the dysfunction: severe breakdowns in internal communications between the board and president; a lack of consensus and clarity about where the institution stood in terms of its value proposition and mission, especially as compared with its peer group; cliquishness; a meekly engaged board that was insufficiently versed about what peak performances looked like for their institution or the board itself; a total failure to embrace aspirational standards; an almost allergic reaction to adopting data analytics and assessments or evaluations as tools for driving change; a lack of discretion and confidentiality regarding internal matters and discussions; and a daunting hubris that betrayed their individual and collective insecurity. These ingredients are almost always causes for deep concern and if they go unchecked or unexamined at an institution, the college may survive, but if it does, it is usually guaranteed to become stagnant until a courageous board and president team up to drive the college toward its North Star.

It almost does not matter, therefore, whether a specific institution is named as a proxy for the organizational shortcomings described in the preceding paragraph because if these symptoms are already present, the college is assured to find itself on the road to becoming marginally useful in helping students to reach their full potential.

Summary

The nation's entire higher education sector finds itself in a precarious predicament as America's economy clamors for a more skilled and educated labor force to maintain its leadership in a heated race for global GNP dominance. Many community colleges are therefore being tasked with ever-increasing responsibility for helping to educate the U.S. workforce when, at the same time, internal disruptions brought on by dwindling resources for higher education, a fractured pipeline for leadership prospects, and an absent or flawed succession planning and implementation structure are all distracting many colleges from remaining focused on their primary missions: educating and preparing students for successful careers and rewarding, productive lives. Not all presidential departures are necessarily avoidable or counterproductive, but they are problematic and expensive whenever poor decisions are made or good decisions are poorly managed.

There is no question that hiring decisions, especially for executive leadership roles, are always fraught with risks. These risks, however, can be mitigated by developing and implementing a structured system for aligning each stage of presidential transitions within the context of the institution's existing performance and the aspirations or direction it has chosen for itself. The responsibility for overseeing this process and ensuring its effectiveness through

a smooth, orderly, sustainable, and impactful process belongs exclusively to the college's board of trustees with input and support from the exiting chief executive and his or her successor. The good news is that multiple resources are available for boards and chief executives to help them to get it right: other community college trustees and chief executives, higher education associations, subject-matter and organizational-change experts, research articles and other materials about high-performing boards and board assessments, such as William Bowen's thoughtful rendering of board dynamics in *Inside the Boardroom: Governance by Directors and Trustees* (1994).

Getting the "it" right begins with dissecting the presidential transition into its primary stages: maintaining directional alignment within the board and with the president; fostering a culture of performance and outcomes assessment, and continuous improvement across the college; formalizing a presidential succession plan that focuses on the leadership skills and profile the organization will need for its next chapter; and tastefully and respectfully bidding farewell to the outgoing president yet engaging him or her in the systematic preparation of the president-elect as new responsibilities are assumed.

Further Reading:

Managing as a Performing Art: New Ideas for a World of Chaotic Change, by Peter B. Vaill. (Published by Jossey-Bass, 1991)

The 21st-Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise, Leadership, from the Association of Governing Boards. (Available at: <https://www.agb.org/reports/2017/the-21st-century-presidency-a-call-to-enterprise-leadership>)

American College President Study 2017 from the American Council on Education. (Available at: <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/American-College-President-Study.aspx>)

Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations, by Thomas L. Friedman. (Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016)

"Building Better Boards," by David A. Nadler, *Harvard Business Review*. (Available at: <https://hbr.org/2004/05/building-better-boards>)

"Onboarding Isn't Enough," by Mark Byford, Michael D. Watkins, and Lena Triantogiannis, *Harvard Business Review*. (Available at: <https://hbr.org/2017/05/onboarding-isnt-enough>)

"After the Handshake: Succession Doesn't End When a New CEO is Hired," by Dan Ciampa, *Harvard Business Review*.

"Succession Planning: What the Research Says," by Eben Harrell, *Harvard Business Review*. (Available at: <https://hbr.org/2016/12/succession-planning-what-the-research-says>)

"7 Tenets of a Good CEO Succession Process," by Victoria Luby and Jane Stevenson, *Harvard Business Review*. (Available at: <https://hbr.org/2016/12/7-tenets-of-a-good-ceo-succession-process>)

"What Sets Successful CEOs Apart," by Elena Lytkina Botelho, Kim Rosenkoetter Powell, Stephen Kincaid, and Dina Wang, *Harvard Business Review*. (Available at: <https://hbr.org/2017/05/what-sets-successful-ceos-apart>)

Inside the Boardroom: Governance by Directors and Trustees, by William G. Bowen. (Published by Wiley, 1994)

"Problem Boards or Board Problems," by William P. Ryan, Richard P. Chait, and Barbara E. Taylor, *Nonprofit Quarterly*. (Available at: <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2017/05/08/problem-boards-or-board-problem/>)



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