

How Can Boards Assist an Incoming President?

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What can boards do to support a new college president to enable their success?

The best gift a board can give a new president is a set of very clear expectations, along with support and mentoring so that the expectations are achievable as well as clear expectations for trustees so they are not overstepping into management as they try, with the best intentions, to support a new president! Having clear expectations set early, that can of course be modified as conditions change, also makes the review process less stressful.

Professional development and creating peer-peer relationships are, I believe, critical to a president's success. It is easy for a new president to feel too over-committed to take the time to invest in their professional development or connect with peers, especially if that means leaving campus.

What can individual trustees do to welcome a new college president?

The presidency is a lonely job. I can't tell you how much it meant to me when a trustee couple, who had a great deal of experience as CEOs themselves, funded my attendance at the Harvard seminar for new presidents. Another sent me a big container of citrus and nuts from California every year, and another would check in via email regularly, asking if I was taking care of myself and if my husband was well. I guess the take-away is that welcoming a new president means the most when it comes from the heart, when it is authentic—and



when it is done in a way that recognizes the president's humanity, because when that happens, you feel less lonely.

What is support from the board so important to be an effective college president?

I don't believe a presidency can be successful without the support of the board. There has to be a respectful give-and-take between the board—responsible for setting the direction of the institution—and the president—charged with moving the institution in that direction. There can't simply be pronouncements about expectations without listening to what the CEO is seeing on the ground. And arguably as harmful is a board that does not set a clear direction, and then is frustrated when things don't seem to be moving forward. I have been

blessed to serve a board that has a clear sense of mission and a clear vision of what can be, *and* respects my expertise as an administrator, a manager and a leader, as I work to stay true to our mission while moving toward their vision of the future.

What is your best piece of advice for a new college president starting their tenure?

There are two things that I tell every new president (and every new administrator, from department heads on up), especially those that are beginning service at a new institution. First, it is easier to make an awkward mistake in your first few months than at any other time, because you are still operating under the culture of your last institution. So, you may say or do something that would be perfectly reasonable or even the best possible thing you could say or do *at your former institution*, but for one reason or another it is not taken well at your new institution.

The second thing I say to new presidents is "beware those who swim out to meet the boat." I wish I could remember where I read this, because it is so accurate. Anyone who has a concern or grievance (sometimes justified) that they feel has not been addressed by the previous president will attempt to schedule the earliest possible meeting with you in hopes you will resolve it for them. As before, beware assuming that you understand the context of the concern/grievance/request, convey non-committal expressions of concern, and find out more from a trusted source before making any decisions. Incidentally, this is an example of why I think it is critical to have at least one or two people with deep institutional knowledge in your cabinet. ■

—Interview by Elena Loveland,
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