

Like a diver poised at the end of a diving board, the new president can make a graceful dive or do a belly flop during the period of entry into the presidency.

Entering the Presidency

Judith Block McLaughlin

To describe the mind-set of the college or university president embarking on his or her first presidency, I often use the analogy of a person standing at the end of the high diving board for the first time. This person has probably dived off lower-level boards many times before, and has mounted the ladder to the high dive enthusiastically and energetically, eager to take on this new level of skill and thrill. Yet, as anyone knows who has ever stood at the end of a high diving board, the water below seems very deep and very far away. For the diver now sees not only the surface of the water, but all the way down to the bottom of the deep end of the swimming pool.

At that moment, poised to dive, the diver feels both excitement and fear. While realizing that the sensation of soaring through the air can be exhilarating, the diver is also aware that this flight can be frightening. The possibility of a belly flop looms. And not only will an awkward dive draw attention because of the size of splash (whereas a smooth dive will go largely unnoticed), a belly flop off the high dive can be painful.

New presidents find themselves in much the same situation as this diver. Although the great majority of presidents have risen through the ranks of academic administration, and the remainder have been appointed because they have demonstrated talent and skills in other arenas, in assuming the college or university presidency they are taking on a greater challenge, with both increased opportunities and heightened personal risks. They were selected as presidents precisely because they had been successful. Yet, as new presidents, they find themselves at much greater risk for failure than ever before in their careers. For, as they certainly realize, many presidents are not beloved, and some leave their posts not entirely by choice.

Furthermore, postpresidential appointments can be difficult to find. Whereas vice presidents or deans—no matter how lackluster their performance—can

usually locate other positions, in moves up, down, or sidewise, ex-presidents find their prospects more severely constrained. Presidents who are perceived to have failed (or, almost as damaging, to have been controversial) will find most doors to other presidencies closed. Even a return to the vice presidential level is often difficult to negotiate, as many college presidents are reluctant to hire a former president out of concern that this person will behave like he or she still is the chief executive.

But if the risks facing new presidents are daunting, the prospective pleasures of the job beckon. For most new presidents, the presidential post represents the pinnacle of a career. Although it is not a job prospect they entertained until well along in their careers (after all, not many grammar school youngsters answer "college president" to the question of what they want to be when they grow up), the job of president, once considered, becomes increasingly enticing. It represents an opportunity to assume responsibility for an entire educational enterprise, to make a difference in a world which they value. As the presidents who have contributed to this volume attest, the presidency is an invigorating, rewarding, and always interesting post.

Presidents face their new venture, then, not unaware of the perils before them, but eager for this challenge. The institutions that receive them have similarly mixed reactions. In the first part of this chapter, we will note what is at stake for each partner in this interplay between individual and institution. Next, we examine several reasons presidencies sometimes don't work, examining the most common causes of belly flops. Finally, we will identify some practices that can increase the likelihood of presidential success. The data for this chapter are drawn from formal interviews, informal conversations, and correspondence with new presidents and the trustees and campus constituents who work with them.

New Partnership

For new presidents, the period from their first consideration of the presidential post through the first year in office is a time of considerable adjustment. New presidents must adjust to the new role, acclimate themselves and their families to new surroundings, and acquaint themselves with the institution and its diverse personnel. There is no shortage of people willing and eager to advise them; but the new presidents don't yet know whose advice to trust. Similarly, new presidents do not lack things to do; their calendars fill up all by themselves if the presidents don't intervene. Yet, how do they judge what is important, what deserves the *president's* time and attention and what events or items do not require their presence or involvement?

Even if new presidents come from inside the institution, the presidency gives them a new vantage point and perspective. As Marjorie Bakken, president of Wheelock College, explained in a memorandum to her senior staff early in her first year:

I have been a member of the Wheelock community for 25 years. Yet my new role as president makes this a transition year for me and, consequently, to some degree, for many other people at Wheelock. For me, the challenge of the transition lies in listening responsively in new ways to messages and voices I may have heard before. Transitions are both smooth and bumpy. The smoothness lies in the familiarity and the support and encouragement from the community. The roughness comes from my newness at making certain decisions, my changing perceptions of the College and the community's changing perception of me in a new role. [M. Bakken, Wheelock College memorandum, Sept. 1993]

In our conversations, new presidents have reported many surprises during their first year in office. These include surprise at the nature of the president's job—the pace one must keep, the number and range of demands, and the issues brought to the president's attention. Others concern the institution itself; as with any new relationship, there is a great deal to be learned and some of the initial impressions, assumptions, and assurances disappear under closer scrutiny. Finally, many of the surprises are related to the fact that the post of president differs in many ways from any other job in academe.

Although new presidents have previously held demanding jobs and many have worked closely with other presidents, they report surprise, even shock, at the schedules and pace of their first year in office. The job is "extremely stimulating, but it's also exhausting. I am going to have to learn to pace myself," commented one new president after a few months in office. Said another: "A normal pace is in fact very *abnormal* in terms of human need and endurance." The extraordinarily long hours, filled with an unrelenting series of appointments and appearances and an overflowing in-basket, mean that the president must always be "on"; there is little time for reflection, much less for self-renewal. The problem of managing a schedule is exacerbated by the fact that during the first year in office, the new president is under pressure, both external and self-imposed, to be everywhere, to take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about the institution, to meet key constituents, to see and be seen. The situation is complicated because, in the absence of knowing what the new "boss" wants sent his or her way, senior administrators and others err in the direction of sending everything to the new president. In Thomas North Gilmore (1988, p. 138) calls this phenomenon the "cycle of overloading the leader," noting that it is especially common in the early days of new administrative relationships. Hence, new presidents find that they are asked to deal with an extraordinary number of topics, ranging, as Arthur Rothkopf, president of Lafayette College, commented in his inaugural speech on October 21, 1994, "from lofty issues of institutional policy and strategic planning to only slightly less urgent matters concerning beer kegs and flex dollars."

Still other surprises for new presidents have to do with situations and issues they discover at their institution. Although these surprises differ from place to place, the lament of the new president is the same: "Nobody told me

about . . ." or "They didn't let on how serious the situation really was." Sometimes, the bad news (for it is invariably bad news that wasn't shared!) was not conveyed to the new president prior to his or her arrival on campus because the institution wanted to present its best face in the courting process so as to attract the most attractive prospect. This is a not uncommon but unfortunate behavior, which results in the new president, quite understandably, feeling misled or outright deceived (McLaughlin and Riesman, 1990, p. 300). Not infrequently, presidents discover that senior administrators in their cabinet had sought the presidency and are displeased at being passed over for the job. Sometimes, the "things that no one told me" were not shared because the board of trustees did not know about them. Thus, the new president is placed in the unenviable position of having to be the one to relay the bad news to the institution.

By far the greatest surprises have to do with the realization that the presidency, unlike any other position in higher education, is not simply a job. It is a role that defines how an individual is perceived by others. New presidents enjoy the veneration that greets them on their arrival, and they are stunned by the vilification that also inevitably comes. Despite the fact that higher education is essentially anti-authoritarian, the focus is on the president. The president speaks not as an individual but as the representative of the institution.

David Riesman has put it succinctly—presidents serve as the "living logo" of their institution. This symbolic role is both a heady and a burdensome proposition. Referring to the headiness, one new president commented, "I am still working on the task of determining who exactly I am in this new presidential role, in getting my ego under control." But the burden is also substantial. The president cannot delegate the symbolic role. The presence of the president lends an aura of legitimacy, even significance, to an event. In Chapter Four, Paul Risser describes an open forum at Miami University during which individuals expressed their arguments and passions concerning the question of the athletic teams' name, the Redskins. Risser stayed at the forum for the entire day, a sizable commitment of a president's time. In so doing, he made a powerful statement that this issue, and the diversity of opinion about it, mattered to him, and to the institution.

For many new presidents, it comes as a surprise that their words are taken far more seriously than they ever imagined. Many have reported having to curtail their typical "extrovert" (to borrow a word from the Meyers-Briggs inventory of types) style of thinking aloud. What they say, no matter how wistful or quixotic, is perceived as the president's, and thus the institution's, policy. New presidents learn quickly that they can no longer speak and act only as individuals. To many people, the president is the institution.

Campus Perspective

The experiences of the first year make the leadership transition both exciting and stressful for new presidents. This period is also exciting and stressful for

the other people connected with the institution. The status quo has been disrupted, and the old rules do not necessarily apply. There is a sense of instability, as individuals wonder if they will be winners or losers under the new regime. Who will be "in" and who will be "out"? Even for those whose tenure is secure, the changing political alliances and the maneuvering for position and power are disruptive factors. The new environment affects everyone in the institution.

The arrival of a new president necessarily means change for an institution. However, the exact innovations, emendations, or permutations that will result from the new leadership are unpredictable. And since on every campus, many different visions of the institution compete for hegemony, campus constituents experience both hope and wariness.

In the absence of information about who the new president is and how he or she will behave, people try to read their new leader. One president reported that, despite the fact that she repeatedly told people on her campus that "her agenda was to work together with the state college to build a mutual agenda," many people did not believe her and suspected that she had her own strategic plan tucked into her back pocket. "She may say that she doesn't have an agenda yet, but does she *really* mean that?" Another president's request to be given a list of faculty committees was questioned; his appearance at a philosophy department colloquium was variously interpreted. Did this signify his interest in philosophy, which could be good news for that department, or did it suggest that he was looking at the department with an eye to budget cuts or reductions-in-force? The new president is observed and interpreted, and these perceptions and interpretations develop a meaning and reality of their own. As experienced presidents know all too well, "hearsay realities" have a real life; that is, the rumor is often much more powerful in its impact and duration than the actual facts.

Early Exits

The new president's tenure starts with great excitement and anticipation. Happily, in the great majority of cases, new presidents develop support for themselves and their ideas, and are able to establish effective partnerships with their institutions. But, occasionally, the presidency does not work out, and the president exits early from office.

These early exits are costly, both to the individuals and to the institutions who suffer them. Over the past decade, I have studied these presidential departures in an effort to understand what has caused them. Although each situation is unique and complex, defying easy characterization, most early exits appear to fall into three categories: appropriateness of the choice of president for an institution, events occurring at an institution, or relationships between the president and others.

I call the first category of early exits "admissions mistakes" or "rejection of alien tissue." The president's departure typically occurs within the first eighteen

months and is traumatic for all concerned. It results from an inappropriate selection, the appointment either of a person who should not be a president, or, more often, of a person who does not belong at that particular institution.

In the first instance, the mismatch of person and presidential office, it is discovered that someone who has performed capably in other posts nevertheless lacks the talents, skills, or personality required for the presidency. As discussed earlier, the president's job differs significantly from other jobs; thus, a strong performance in a previous position does not guarantee success as president.

More often, however, the early exits in this category result from a perceived mismatch between the new president and the institutional setting. It is not that the new president is a failure, *per se*; rather it is that the individual seemingly does not fit the particular context. The mismatch usually becomes obvious quickly; the appointment is a graft that simply won't take.

Sometimes these mismatches are the result of faulty searches. In the court-ing process, the information gathered about the candidate, or the information shared with the candidate about the institution, was insufficient. If either party had known more, the disparities would have been apparent. But, ironically, not infrequently these mismatches were intentional—the new president was chosen precisely because he or she represented significant change. In the abstract, the change seemed highly desirable; in reality, it was disastrous. The institution comes to appreciate the aphorism: "Be careful what you ask for, for you may get it."

The second category of early exits can be called scapegoating or—in Thomas North Gilmore's phrase—"industrial accidents." Here, an event at the college or university propels the individual out of the presidency. Even though the crisis may not be of the president's making, he or she becomes the fall guy—the person forced to shoulder the blame.

In difficult situations, there is a human need to affix responsibility. Because of their prominent position, presidents are invariably made the scapegoats when things go awry. New presidents are especially at risk if they do not have a well-developed base of support that allows them to survive the assault.

I call the third category of early exits "irreconcilable differences" or "the accumulation of straws." These are also common reasons for departures much later in the presidency. Rather than the dramatic explosions often found in the first two categories of early exits, these departures result from the gradual accretion of small, unresolved grievances. Although the precipitating event may appear relatively minor and the campus or trustee reaction far out of proportion, it is the final straw for the institution, which has been displeased with the president for some time.

"I didn't see it coming. I had no idea there was such dissatisfaction with my performance," remarked one president in a lament not uncommon among presidents whose exits fall into this category. Because the new president and the board wanted to get along well, small concerns and dissatisfactions had

remained unexpressed. Over time they accumulated until the differences were too many and too long-standing to be easily reconciled.

Smoother Entry

While failed presidencies, especially early exits, draw considerable attention, smoother passages receive considerably less notice. Yet the differences between the belly flops and the graceful dives are revealing. When examined closely, smooth entries typically include certain practices that have helped the new presidents establish themselves in their new position and have laid the groundwork for effective institutional leadership. These include an explicit entry plan, a reasonable pace of change, a few priorities for presidential action for the first year, and the development of key relationships.

From the moment of accepting the offer of the presidency, the new president is expected to make presidential decisions and appearances. New presidents' calendars are full even before they set foot on the campus; included are many requests for presidential action. Some of these requests are new proposals; others are ideas that the previous incumbent never acted upon; still others are problems that seem to require immediate attention. And because new presidents have been effective problem solvers and decision makers in their past positions, they feel the urge to plunge headlong into this arena of action.

But the reality is that they do not yet know enough to make informed decisions. They are not well acquainted with current practices, are not fully apprised of alternative options, and cannot adequately assess the consequences of new policies.

In a study of second-time presidents, Estela Bensimon reports that experienced presidents were more likely than first-time presidents to get to know their institutions before "making any pronouncements." They "approached learning about their institutions more aggressively and more systematically" (Bensimon, 1989, p. 2). Many successful first-time presidents do likewise. They design a carefully constructed plan to learn about their new institution. They do not just assume that getting acquainted will happen "along the way," or can be dispensed with in a few introductory meetings with administrators and faculty groups. Their plan for transition is intentional and explicit. That is, they think carefully about how they want to learn about their new institution and they explain this process to their governing board and campus. Additionally, as they listen and learn, they share their observations and insights and test their emerging theories with others. (For a comprehensive entry plan, see Cheever, 1982. Developed for a school superintendency, this same process also served Cheever well when he assumed the presidency of Wheelock College and the interim presidency of Simmons College.)

Some new presidents have initially reacted with strong reservations to the suggestion that they set aside a considerable amount of time to enacting an entry plan. "I don't have the time to wander around; I am expected to hit the

ground running," said one president, while another wondered if the board and campus would "see me as not doing anything." New presidents who have successfully implemented entry plans have found that these have been well received when the board and institution understand the purpose of this transition period, participate in drafting the transition plan, and take part in discussions about what the president is learning about the institution. A carefully planned and executed entry becomes the new president's first act of leadership.

Of course some presidential decisions have to be made right away; some problems have to be addressed early on. But there are probably far fewer of these than may first appear. As part of the planned entry, the president, in conjunction with the senior staff and board, can identify which of the many items on the presidential agenda are of highest priority. The temptation is to make this a long list; the hard work is in being selective, in reducing the longer wish list to a few essential items.

New presidents will want to communicate these priorities to the campus and to ensure that the board agrees that these are, indeed, the items of highest priority. There is nothing worse for a new president or a veteran than to discover at the time of the board's evaluation that the president's list of priorities is at variance with the list on which the board is making its judgment about presidential performance!

Keeping focused on these few priorities helps the president and others to avoid a common pitfall of the first year—attempting to take on too much. New presidents report that among their hardest decisions are those having to do with the appropriate pace and timing of change. How fast should changes be made? When should new programs, personnel changes, reorganizations, and so on be introduced? My research suggests that new presidents are at greater risk of moving too rapidly than of proceeding too cautiously.

New presidents are often confronted with what appears to be an outright contradiction: on the one hand, they experience strong calls for presidential action; on the other hand, they encounter considerable resistance when they heed these calls. On closer examination, this paradox is explained by recognizing that administrators and faculty members are insecure and anxious about what change will mean, and hence are reluctant to give up the familiar, no matter how dysfunctional. Institutions, like people, can only absorb so much change at a time, no matter how desirable the change might be. In some of the cases where new presidents have lost their jobs because of a bad fit, this leadership casualty has probably been caused as much by the rapidity of change attempted by the new president as by the content of the changes or the person of the president. The president has badly misjudged the pace of change that was reasonable for the college or university.

Decisions such as the appropriate pace of change or the identification of priorities obviously cannot be made by a president in isolation. Hence, a critically important task of the presidential transition is the development of relationships with key institutional players. In higher education, relationships are the coin of the realm; the president's authority (and security) comes not from

raw power but from the strength of his or her relationships with others at the institution. One of the ironies of presidential transition is that the new president supervises people who know far more about the college or university than the new president, but they defer to the president out of respect and insecurity. Thus, the responsibility falls to the new president to take the lead in becoming better acquainted with the expertise of staff members and their former modus operandi as individuals and as a group, and to discuss with them their new leader's preferred working style. In so doing, the president models the desired behavior of communication. Presidents who have made it clear early on that they value feedback are less likely to be overwhelmed later by an accumulation of straws of discontent. They are also more likely to have supporters who assist them in weathering the inevitable storms. As veteran presidents know well, while it is difficult to build trust, it is even more difficult to overcome distrust once it has been engendered.

This chapter began with the analogy of the new president as a diver standing alone at the end of a high diving board. Indeed, in many cases, the new president is left alone to find the way in the transition. Members of the search committee, pleased with the choice they have made, return to the responsibilities they put on hold during the extraordinarily time-consuming search process. Members of the governing board, equally happy to have the search concluded successfully, look to the new president to take charge.

But new presidents do not have to remain alone. Those presidents who work with their boards and campuses to make their entry to the presidency a time of active learning for themselves and their institutions find that they have accomplished a great deal in this transition period. In the process, they have adopted a style that allows for learning, one that will serve them well throughout their presidential tenure.

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JUDITH BLOCK MCLAUGHLIN chairs the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents. She is director of the field experience program and lecturer on higher education at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.