

## Presidential Public Relations: A Seamless Transition

**T**he historic inauguration of our 44th U.S. President is an apt metaphor for college leadership. Just as President-elect Barack Obama initiated a transition team within hours of his election, college presidents are also faced with shortened “honeymoons” as demands upon them multiply. Never before has a seamless transition become more critical for future success.

The famous “100 first days” metaphor often used to describe the first three months or so of a presidential tenure applies equally to the campus setting. Miscues here may doom the presidency of even the most talented candidate.

This is where a president must thoroughly assimilate the history, culture, and traditions of the college before making decisions that will affect the rest of his or her tenure. We’ve seen promising and experienced new presidents take missteps at this stage from which they’ve never recovered. Resist the pressure of acting too fast in a reactive mode; act expeditiously, but with due diligence and deliberation. A mantra for new presidents could be Stephen R. Covey’s “fifth habit:” “Seek first to understand, then to be understood,” from his bestseller, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

This is the stage, during the “honeymoon” period, in which new CEOs must do three things:

- Build relationships,
- listen and learn, and
- re-engage key players.

All presidents arrive with high — and often unrealistic — expectations that also come with enormous pressure to act quickly. Our advice: resist this response

until you have completed the above steps. While it’s important to identify early “easy wins,” a new president must move strategically, with laser-like focus. This means fostering relationships with *all* stakeholders, external and internal. Quick moves without buy-ins from these key audiences often turn out to be fatal.

Talk to those with institutional history. Walk the campus. Show up unannounced and unexpected. Get to know those whose opinions are often unsought — those with “frontline” contacts with families and prospective students. Housekeepers, servers, maintenance workers, and support staff have valuable stories to tell — if you will listen. Many have deep roots in the community; they were there before you arrived and will likely be there after you depart. As Roger H. Hull, former president of Beloit and Union Colleges and president of the Help Yourself Foundation, notes, “Getting out of the office and interacting with staff and faculty on their own turf can provide a very different understanding of the institution than the one gained in the President’s office.”

### Learn From the Past

Capitalize on the knowledge base of former leadership. While Gen. Douglas MacArthur famously said, “old soldiers... just fade away,” that’s not necessarily the case with former college presidents. Too many institutions fail to engage key stakeholders in a meaningful way after their official service ends. If an immediate past president or chair is not available, look to his or her predecessor for invaluable history and introductions. In our presidencies, former CEOs have been enormously helpful in accompanying us on

early fundraising calls, opening doors and building credibility with major donors. We have returned the favor with our successors. If your campus does not already have an active presidents emeriti/former board members advisory group, consider constituting or revitalizing it.

### Ride the Wave

Finally, utilize the goodwill and human capital that come with your first 100 days as campus CEO. Never again in your presidency will you enjoy that level of support. Go to others; don’t expect them to come to you. Be an active listener, remembering that those who “have all the answers” often aren’t asking the right questions. Don’t mistake quick action for progress. Resist the urge for “quick fixes” that are not in the best long-term interests of the institution.

Never before have the stakes been higher for campus CEOs, and the penalties for missteps greater. By using the “honeymoon” period to build a long lasting “marriage,” you will position yourself for long-term success.

*Note: This is the first in a series of articles on “Being a Better President.” The quote from Roger H. Hull appeared in “A Primer for College Presidents,” in the September-October 2008 issue of AGB’s Trusteeship.*

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