

# The Successful President: Presidential Public Relations

By Dr. Scott D. Miller and Dr. Marylouise Fennell - *College Planning & Management*, February 2009

Former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill had it right: all politics is local. It follows, then, that successful public relations start at home, right on campus.

The axiom is perhaps obvious in theory, but with most college CEOs spending more than two-thirds of their time on the road, it is extremely difficult to execute. External stakeholders increasingly tug presidents in many different directions, and if anything, the challenge is becoming greater as all institutions compete for a larger slice of a shrinking pie. When we are away, it is far too easy for faculty and staff to view an absent president as an unproductive leader and when on campus, for CEOs to hole up in their offices, compounding the perception.

In our last article, "The Successful President: A Seamless Transition," (December 2008), we emphasized the need for presidents, especially new CEOs, to learn and benefit from institutional history, to foster visible relationships with former and current campus leaders, and to cultivate internal audiences. The latter may seem impossible when a new president is continually in transit, but it is absolutely vital that campus CEOs learn to be visible, responsive, and proactive when on campus, making every second count.

Dr. James L. Fisher, president-emeritus of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (C.A.S.E.) and noted scholar on the board and college presidency, states, "From the presidential platform, the college or university president has the ability to mold public opinion, influence key internal and external constituents, and place the institution as a key to the improvement of society."

We offer three specific recommendations for college CEOs:

- Manage internal issues before they become external issues.
- Manage your time.
- Manage your identity.

**Internal stakeholders are your front line:** ignore them at your peril. Properly valued, educated, and motivated, they can be your best friends in a crisis, an "early-warning system" as useful as a smoke detector in putting out small blazes while still manageable. Disregard them, and no amount of external goodwill matters.

The value of an engaged on-campus community cannot be overstated. As some CEOs have learned to their lasting regret, small, internal issues have a way of ballooning into huge, external crises when not effectively managed. The fallout can ruin a promising presidency.

**Be seen. Be visible on campus.** In their eagerness to promote their colleges, new presidents may miss critical opportunities for visibility on their own campuses. "We never see him (or her) is a frequent refrain among staff below the Cabinet level at such institutions. At the other end of the spectrum is the new president who is quickly exhausted running hither and on to every sporting event, every departmental get-together, each student organizational meeting. To reach a happy medium, a former mentor and college president coined the term, "tasteful fly-bys," referring to his habit of attending as may on-campus events as humanly possible, but not staying for the entire activity. By being neither the first to arrive, nor the last to leave, you will be noticed and visible without burnout.

**Be focused and thoughtful in managing your own identity.** In their haste to make their mark off-campus, too many presidents attempt to brand their institutions externally before establishing their own personal "brand" internally. For better or worse, presidents are the institution off campus. Donors, media, and other opinion-leaders gain their chief impression of the institution from its president. It's vital, therefore, that you know who you are and how you want to be perceived on campus before becoming overly visible to external stakeholders. Internal and external identities should be complementary and consistent if your leadership is to be perceived as authentic.

Biographers of both President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton note their focus on strategic identity management when first elected to the U.S. Senate. Each spent considerable time deliberately determining how they wanted to present themselves to Senate colleagues, i.e., "as a show horse" or "as a workhorse" early in their first terms. New presidents would do well to emulate them in this respect.

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