

Mentoring: A Prudent Investment in Presidential Success

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The first 100 days, the “honeymoon” period of a presidency, are critical. A single misstep on a crucial matter could not only set a negative tone for a president’s entire career, but also from a board perspective, the fallout could become costly and difficult for an institution to correct. Too short a presidency can leave constituents, especially prospective donors, confused, dissatisfied and perhaps even cynical about an institution’s ability to retain leadership and maintain organizational momentum.

The situation is fraught with risk because, throughout the search and hiring process, some unvoiced expectations have come into play. Unless a person has been a college president or in another 24/7 job, he or she can hardly know how much a college president needs to respond to many written, verbal, frequent, last-minute requests and unspoken demands.

Thus, it is common among new presidents to have someone outside of his or her institution – a mentor – just to talk with. The mentoring process can moderate or eliminate the negative force of these unvoiced expectations, producing a longer, healthier and more productive period for an institution.

A new president may benefit from the counsel of someone who has served in a senior capacity, both as an advisor and as a troubleshooter to resolve a potentially damaging situation. Other possible mentor roles include those of ombudsman, negotiator, constructive critic of major speeches and counselor. Typically, mentors assist new presidents in areas such as the following.

- **Providing transitional assistance.**
- **Serving as an independent set of eyes.**

At the most basic level, mentoring can help a new president to prioritize issues. Having a seasoned mentor at hand can reassure a new president about good decisions and provide a needed push when a change may be in order.

• **Understanding organizational structure.** Mentoring can help new presidents assess the effectiveness of an institution’s current organizational structure and revise an existing structure if needed, strengthening governance and communication procedures, and introducing or enhancing team building.

• **Maintaining board relations.** New Presidents often come to the office as novices where board relations are concerned. Mentoring helps them determine ways to strengthen their relationships with their Boards of Trustees. This may include revisions in the by-laws, committees and priorities.

• **Balancing priorities.** All too often, presidents are pressed to make decisions when rushed and tired. Mentoring assists in sorting out and getting a firm handle on setting realistic priorities.

• **Responding to controversial issues.** Critical issues needing a president’s attention and decisions are ongoing. A wise mentor can help a new president refrain from making an unwise decision that could jeopardize his or her presidency.

• **Balancing attention among constituents.** It is not at all uncommon for a president’s schedule to be dictated by people other than him- or herself. If a new president becomes immersed in putting out fires, he or she may overfocus on the needs of certain constituents while failing to address the expectations of others. When either or both of these

situations exist, a mentor can help a president remain viable with all constituents.

• **Responding to ad hoc needs.** When a mentor has worked with a president for a period of time, he or she may ask, “What are your really burning issues, and how are you handling them?” This opens up the give and take that enables a president to consider crucial issues from new perspectives.

For the president/mentor relationship to work effectively, the mentor needs to serve the president as a candid and confidential sounding board, while maintaining a high level of credibility. In the hiring of a mentor, the choice must rest totally with the president. Ideally, this will be someone who has served as a president at another institution.

The mentor/presidential relationship can be a win-win for both; an effective mentor helps to instill multifaceted skills in a new president. At the same time, enabling a president to hire a mentor reduces the risk of a newly hired president becoming a short-termer and supports the monetary investment a Board of Trustees has made in the search and hiring process.

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