

Is It Time to Leave the Presidency?

by Terry O'Banion

At some point in his or her tenure, every community college president considers whether it is time to leave. George Vaughan, in a provocative article in the Spring 1990 *Trustee Quarterly* asks, "How long is too long to remain in a given presidency?" The trick, of course, is for the president to ask this question before the faculty, the administrators, the students, community leaders, or trustees ask it first.

In *The Power of the Presidency*, James Fisher suggests that "there appears to be a point of diminishing returns for most leaders—a point in time beyond which they lose effectiveness." A number of key leaders believe that the time is relatively short. Fisher notes that six to ten years is maximum for presidents to exert effective leadership.

Clark Kerr, in *Presidents Make a Difference*, observes that the average tenure of a university president is seven years, but the average term of a community college president is only five years. For the professional educator who plans for a 30- to 40-year career, with perhaps 20 years or more spent in the presidency, most will change presidential positions several times. Unfortunately, in far too many instances presidents will change their positions at the request of others because they have stayed too long and have failed to read the warning signals regarding the need for their exit.

Clark Kerr has said, "Exits are almost as important as entrances but, while the latter are sometimes well staged, the former are usually improvised." Exits do not have to be improvised. If presidents and trustees will openly recognize what is commonly known about the limited leadership life span of presidents, they can better prepare for the inevitable and



Terry O'Banion is executive director of the League for Innovation in the Community College.

BOARD/PRESIDENT RELATIONS

respond more gracefully when the inevitable occurs.

The following questions have been designed to assist presidents and trustees in addressing the issue of when it is time for the president to leave. The questions were critiqued in a workshop with presidents and trustees in New Mexico community colleges conducted by the author and were reviewed by the presidents and chancellors who constitute the board of directors of the League for Innovation in the Community College. The questions appear to be appropriate for the task, but the list is certainly not exhaustive.

While the questions have been cast here as an approach for reviewing when it is time for the president to leave, they can also be used in annual evaluations and in retreats as a way to prove some of the more prickly points in trustee/CEO relationships often not addressed. Selecting from this list and adding others appropriate to the situation, a special questionnaire could be devised around these issues. Completed by the president and by the trustees in terms of how the trustees believe the president will answer, the responses can provide very rich data for substantive discussions. Most of these questions could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" because of the way they are framed. If viewed as warning signs, however, each question should stimulate considerable introspection. Presidents and trustees who feel the climate at their institution does not allow for an open review of these questions may want to consider the implications of those perceptions for their situation.

PERSONAL FACTORS

1. Am I still enjoying my work?
2. Do I look forward to getting up in the morning and going to work?
3. Am I taking more days off?
4. How is my physical health? Mental health? Stamina?

5. Is my family happy with me in my position?
6. Do my family and I enjoy living in this community?
7. Does my family enjoy the role of being a spouse and children of a community college president in this community?
8. Is the position challenging for me?
9. Have I become defensive about certain issues, people, and programs or certain aspects of my personal behavior?

Board members must capitalize on their investment in the president by ensuring as best they can that the president is personally satisfied with the challenges and opportunities at the institution.

10. What major projects did I complete in the last two years that made a difference?
11. What projects am I currently working on or planning that will keep me challenged for the next few years?
12. Do I ever get bored in this position? If so, how often and under what circumstances do I get bored?
13. Have I started telling the same stories to the same people, offering the same solutions, and seeing the problems as repetitive?
14. Do I lose patience answering the same old questions from new constituencies?
15. Does this job challenge my special strengths and needs?

16. Do I delegate too much to staff?
17. Have I continued to grow in this job? If so, in what ways?
18. Am I making a difference? If so, for whom and in what ways am I making a difference? Do I really believe in what I am doing?
19. Is the ecstasy worth the agony?
20. Am I able to organize my work so that I can do the things I most like to do? The things I am best at?
21. Do I have a vision for the future of the college?
22. Am I appropriately compensated for the leadership I provide the college?
23. To what extent is my self-identity reflected in my work? Am I primarily my work? What are my other interests? How do I express these?
24. If I am not eligible for retirement but am weary of the stresses and pressures in this job, what are my options?
25. Am I in demand elsewhere? What would make me move if offered another position?
26. Do I want to finish my career at this college?
27. If I resigned today, how long would it take for the college to phase into a new era?
28. How do I want to be remembered at the college?

KEY CONSTITUENT FACTORS

Board of Trustees

1. Do I enjoy working with my board of trustees?
2. Do I have the full confidence of the board?
3. Do I have a good board? Do I respect the majority of individual trustees?
4. Are board members becoming involved in administration?
5. How many votes can I count on for a controversial issue or program that I favor?

BOARD/PRESIDENT RELATIONS

6. Has the voting pattern of the board changed in the last two years?
7. Do I dread board meetings?
8. Has there been a change in the board in the last two years in expressions of appreciation and support for my leadership?
9. Have there been any changes in patterns of compensation and benefits over the last five years that should cause me concern?
10. Has the chemistry between me and the board changed?
11. How many members of the original hiring board are still on the board? Do I have the confidence of the trustees who have been added since I was hired?
12. Have there been any discussions or subtle hints about retirement or a change in my duties?
13. To the extent I can determine it, what is likely to be the culture (political, social, economic, educational) of the board from now until my retirement?
14. Can I operate successfully in that culture? Do I want to?
15. Do I have special friends on the board I can count on to tell me the truth about any concerns members of the board might have about my leadership?
16. Can I discuss openly and candidly with the board a plan for my retirement that will be mutually beneficial? How and when do I initiate this discussion?

Faculty and Staff

1. Are faculty and staff proud of me as the president of their college? How do I know?
2. How many faculty and staff members do I know on a first-name basis? How many of these people do I dislike?

3. Do faculty and staff feel that my door is open to them? How often do they open it?
4. Am I in touch with the basic issues that trouble faculty and staff members at this institution? Have I tried to address these issues? Do I plan to? Do I care much anymore?



5. How well am I trusted by faculty and staff? How do I know?
6. Is there a core group of faculty members who are my antagonists?
7. To what extent can I trust my key administrators and support staff? How loyal are they to me? Can I count on some of them to tell me the truth about my leadership?
8. Am I too closely aligned with one group in the college? Have I stayed in touch with all constituent groups?
9. How many faculty and staff members view me as their professional and personal mentor?

10. How often do I make decisions based on my need to be liked by faculty and staff?

Community and State Leaders

1. Am I respected by community and state leaders for my leadership of the college?
2. Am I called on by these leaders to make speeches, join commissions and boards, and advise on issues?
3. Do I receive phone calls from community and state leaders seeking my opinions and views on issues of local and state concern?
4. Have any of these leaders and colleagues inquired about my plans for retirement?
5. Have the demographics of the community changed, and has the college responded appropriately to these changes under my leadership?
6. Are community contacts and relationships leading me in a direction away from the college?

The president of a community college is in a key position to reflect the major values and goals of a community college and also to serve as a lightning rod to illuminate an institution's turmoil. In these increasingly complex times, it is more and more difficult for presidents to serve in leadership positions. Board members must capitalize on their investment in the president by ensuring as best they can that the president is personally satisfied with the challenges and opportunities at the institution. The questions in this article are designed as an audit of the president's satisfaction, and if the answers are reviewed by board members and the president before major problems are irreversible, they can assist in guiding an institution to an appropriate answer to the question: Is it time to leave the presidency? ■