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Retaining a Peak-Performing President

By Terry O'Banion

It is widely accepted that the most important task of a board of trustees is to select the right president for the job. It follows that the second most important task of a board is to hold on to a president when it has a good one.

Various reports and commissions conclude that the presidency of a college or university is a difficult, if not impossible, job, and the presidency of a community college is even less attractive than others. Given this picture, a board would be well- advised to make every effort to hold on to a president who is a peak performer.

If the institution is functioning efficiently and effectively, if the climate of the college is positive and all constituents are committed to enhancing student learning, if the president and board work well together, if the resident is well- established in the community, a good board will not allow a good president to get away and take a chance on a replacement.

Challenge and Support

A board that wants to hold on to its excellent president must build a balanced climate in which the board both challenges and supports the president in leading and managing the college. If challenged to be the very best president possible, a peak performer will view the college as a place worthy of loyalty and commitment.

Challenge

Challenge should come, however, as part of a climate in which support is a key element. Board members can challenge a president to expand vision, take risks, build community, and explore new approaches when the president knows the board also supports these efforts. If challenge is petty- questioning small expenditures, reviewing appointments in too much detail, directly administering programs or activities- it will be difficult for such a board to keep an excellent president or attract a good replacement. Challenge must come in a carefully constructed climate of mutual trust and respect in which a president can take joy in accomplishments. Presidents will not usually be looking around for other positions in the presence of healthy challenges.

Support

Support from the board is crucial both to maintaining the president's commitment to the institution and ability to serve the institution effectively. Even in the best of colleges, situations will arise that require the board to express, sometimes publicly, its support of the president. Personnel problems and controversial programs are often flashpoints for conflict in the institution or community, and a president is the most visible target.

During collective bargaining the president is a clear target for the tensions and frustrations that can accompany negotiations. Board members and union members find safety in numbers or in offices temporarily held, but a president must bear the full brunt of attack. More than one president has left a position because of lack of board support in such

situations. If the board does not support the president when he or she is correct or carrying out board consensus, the bond between board and president will quickly dissolve. Quality presidents have many job options, and few will work for a nonsupportive board.

Boards should also support outstanding presidents in performing the multiple and complex tasks of leading and managing colleges by providing highly competent administrative staff and secretaries; up- to- date office equipment; and special services from speech writers, public relations experts, and political consultants.

Professional Development

A board can prevent a president from leaving the institution out of boredom by paying attention to his or her need for continuing personal and professional development.

Affiliation and Peer Support

Presidents often lead lonely lives. Conventional wisdom has admonished them not to develop close personal relationships with board members, faculty, or staff. In the community, they almost always live behind their public masks as representatives of the college at the cost of authentically rich personal relationships. Presidents, then, need and should be encouraged and supported to develop affiliations with state and national professional organizations and to form peer networks for support.

Growth and Development

Boards should also grant peak performers administrative leaves to foster their growth and development. Three months paid leave every three years or six months leave every five years are popular models. Some top presidents may wish to teach in a local university or provide key leadership for developing a local museum or symphony orchestra. They may want time away from day- to- day demands to reflect and to write about their experiences and their ideas. Support for such activities can help secure a president's allegiance.

Change and Contribution

Quality presidents thrive on new ideas and projects. The daily administrative routine wears them out, but they are revived when able to plan a new building, organize a new program, or develop a liaison with college leaders from another country.

Outstanding community college presidents often wish to serve as mentors, advisers, and teachers of the next generation of leaders, and they do so with immense satisfaction. Boards should encourage their peak performers to make these contributions for the good of community colleges and for the satisfaction that accrues to the president from service well given.

Salary and Benefits

The board that is highly satisfied with its president should have a long-range plan to support that president to retirement and beyond, always with the contingency that the president continues top- quality performance.

Salary

Some great presidents have been lost by boards on a margin of \$10,000. Yet, the search process to replace the president lost will cost from \$10,000 to \$50,000, not to mention the increase in salary probably required by the next president plus relocation costs. The other costs of change- expended time and energy, increased internal stress, adjustments to style differences, loss of continuity and community contacts, and program disruption- can be even more substantial. It usually takes an institution two to three years to stabilize when presidents change, and if the replacement does not work out, the institution can be harmed immeasurably.

Salary should seldom be the reason for losing a good president. The board must deal with the realities of the local environment- limitations placed by salaries of other local and state officials, faculty salaries, and perceptions of fellow board members who may earn low salaries. A board that wants to keep its president will recognize and deal with these limitations. Board members can assure themselves of the value of their president by studying the compensation packages of other leading community college presidents and by becoming knowledgeable of their president's national marketability. They should attempt to educate local and state officials, faculty, and others of the value of their investment in the president and their intention to maintain and enhance that investment.

Benefits

If local and state circumstances do not permit the \$100,000 plus salaries top community college presidents command, boards will need to design creative benefits to hold on to a leader of proven quality. Boards can enhance base salary with supplements from the college's foundation; pay \$9,500 at the beginning of each year into a 403(b) plan for retirement; pay the president's contribution to the state retirement plan; provide special annuities and insurance policies; commit to an annual supplement of \$5,000 to \$10,000 for each year served to be paid following retirement; and commit to lifetime health benefits for a return commitment of years served. Boards can grant long- term contracts, increase vacation days, support annual physicals, provide consulting days, - purchase automobiles, pay for liability and disability insurance, pay professional and club membership dues, provide spouse travel. When salary increases are politically impossible, a home or housing allowance can help keep a peak performer. Top community college presidents receive most of these benefits in addition to an attractive salary.

Help From the Board Chair

A peak-performing president deserves a peak performing board chair, one that can establish a finely honed working relationship between the board and president and can foster an effective culture and style for doing college business. The selection of the board chair, then, can be critical to retaining a top president.

Most community college board chairs are elected for one- year terms, and many colleges rotate board chairs based on seniority. While these approaches may seem fair and politically sound, they do not guarantee that the best board chair will be selected. Changing board chairs every year can be as disturbing to the institution as changing presidents every year would be. An outstanding board that wants to hold on to an outstanding president should consider changing its policies to allow for the best board chair to be elected, even if that means the same person will hold office as chair for a number of years.

One of the chair's primary responsibilities is to manage other board members, and only the best board chair can do this effectively. An effective board chair frequently reminds other

members of the difference between policy and administration; forcefully reminds the occasional transgressor that the president works for the board as a whole and not for any individual member; and understands splits, personality clashes, and political divisions within the board as his or her primary responsibility to resolve, rather than the president's.

Board members must also take an active role in orienting new members to the special style and culture of the board. A retreat, early in the tenure of new board members, can signal the value continuing board members give to their membership. It can provide opportunities for all participants to review programs and to make and renew commitments to the special bonds and culture that have proven effective. A special feature should be a frank discussion of the value of the president to the institution and the board's responsibility for maintaining and enhancing that value. The board chair or other respected board member must lead this discussion and help new board members understand the rationale behind the president's salary and benefits, staff development opportunities, and challenge and support from the board.

Almost every major study of leadership in higher education points to the president as the key to an institution's effectiveness and reputation. In community colleges, there is not a surplus of these peak-performing presidents. A board that wishes to retain the services of an outstanding president or wishes to attract such a president must itself be a special board, a board that is willing to exercise leadership by supporting its president in some or all of the ways suggested here. An excellent board will pay attention to the second most important role of the board: maintaining and holding on to an outstanding president. If the board does not pay sufficient attention to this role, it will spend an inordinate amount of time on the most important role of the board: employing a president, employing a president, and employing a president.

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