

## A New President's First 120 Days

Observations on and advice for the start of a new presidency.

BY DR. SCOTT D. MILLER AND DR. MARYLOUISE FENNELL



**A** PRESIDENT WILL NEVER again have as much political capital as in the first 120 days in office.

During this critical “honeymoon period,” he or she must make sound decisions and set the right tone. Promising presidencies can be derailed by overspending, overpromising and under-delivering; by listening to the wrong people, or worse, failing to listen at all. Critical errors can doom a new CEO, irrevocably damaging prospects for long-term success.

Scott Miller, a veteran of presidential transitions, is one of 22 presidents extensively interviewed in the book *The First 120 Days:*

*What a New College President Must Do to Succeed* by Jerold Panas (Institutional Press: Chicago). Now serving in his fourth college presidency over a 24-year period, Miller offers guidelines for surviving the tests imposed by the first 120 days, while emerging with strong leadership ability intact.

### Schedule an Institutional Review

New presidents are besieged with requests and counsel from faculty, staff, donors, volunteer leadership and alumni; not all advice is valuable. James L. Fisher, president-emeritus of Maryland's Towson University and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and a noted author on board/presidential leadership, urges boards to commission an institutional review as a first step toward establishing a solid foundation. “Presidents, particularly newly appointed presidents, find that institutional reviews can help them start their presidencies on a solid footing,” Fisher says of this evaluation process. “They have found them useful in finding out ‘how things really are’ and in making plans. A review pays special attention to strategic positioning.”

### Appearances Matter

Like all successful leaders, college presidents must act on the adage that “perception is reality” when it comes to personal conduct. Thus, a president must not only be honest, modeling integrity for the entire community, but also should appear to be beyond reproach.

New campus CEOs have failed more often over expenditure of institutional funds than any other single issue. So, we must insist: at the beginning, when all eyes are watching you, don't spend a lot

of college money on personal expenses. Expensive redecorating and furnishing of residencies should be deferred. If need be, pay for these items out-of-pocket and request partial reimbursement later. Be prudent in travel expenses, too. Always exercise sound stewardship of institutional talent and treasure.


### Words Matter

Be careful whom you listen to, and be equally attentive to how your words may be interpreted by others. Especially in the early months, it is important to say what you mean and mean what you say.

Our valued colleague Kent J. Chabotar, president-emeritus and now professor at Guilford College in North Carolina, likes to tell the story of King Henry II of England. Becoming exasperated with Archbishop Thomas Becket in 1170, the king carelessly exclaimed, “Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?” Much to the King's chagrin and embarrassment, four over-zealous knights took him at his word, murdering Becket during services. When it comes to early public utterances, it pays to heed the time-tested principle articulated in Stephen R. Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

### Processes Matter

In their zeal to be productive and proactive, too many new presidents confuse action with leadership. As the late Peter F. Drucker put it, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing.” Be wary of secrecy. Although closed-door meetings may produce quicker decisions, counsel and buy-ins from campus constituencies establish a stronger foundation for long-term trust and success.

It is critically important to give skeptics a seat at the table. As Chabotar wisely emphasizes, “If opponents cannot criticize presidents for individual decisions, they will surely try to ‘get you’ on the process.” Don't try to go it alone! 

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