

# 360° Support

FOR  
THE



# 24/7 President

*Board members can help sustain the well-being of those who hold down today's demanding academic presidencies.*

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**EW CHIEF EXECUTIVE POSITIONS** rival today's academic presidency in the complexity, unpredictability, and stress-producing nature of the job. Fortune 500 CEOs have it comparatively easy. These leaders have much more control over their environments and have ample time for thoughtful strategic planning, investor relations, and day-to-day oversight of operations.

Not so for university presidents. While their "day jobs" are comparable in challenge to those of their corporate counterparts—managing multimillion-dollar budgets, recruiting and retaining the best management and academic talent, and distinguishing their institutions in fiercely competitive markets—their array of added responsibilities and constituencies produces a unique leadership portfolio.

Beyond fulfilling their daily management expectations, presidents are in constant demand on and off campus. The

• BY JOHN K. THORNBURGH •

ceremonial commitments can be staggering. The president is expected to show up at every sporting event, cultural performance, key academic meeting, chamber of commerce gathering, and staff recognition function. Away from campus, the escalating expectations of the president's role in friend-raising and fund-raising require enormous commitments of time attending alumni gatherings and making personal solicitations (not to mention wear and tear brought on by constant travel).

And if this routine—if such a word indeed is appropriate—of local and long-distance activity isn't enough, presidents learn very quickly to “expect the unexpected.” Inevitably, their personal leadership is summoned at inopportune times, often compromising opportunities for planning or foresight. Witness some typical examples of unforeseen intrusions on a president's time and energies:

- A student sit-in protesting the change of campus food-service vendors.
- A faculty vote of no-confidence in the president's leadership based on real or perceived slights.
- An “out of the blue” federal lawsuit challenging the college's compliance with Title IX.
- Phone calls from irate alumni complaining about the firing—or hiring—of a football coach.
- A campus protest regarding the political views of an invited speaker.
- The anguish of dealing with a campus tragedy such as a fire or death.

Such situations and events add to an already overloaded presidential agenda and place intense personal stress on the individual. While virtually all presidents—and candidates seeking the position—understand the occupational hazards that come with the territory, those working alongside the president need to ensure that a proper support infrastructure is in place so that the president doesn't become burned out and ineffective.

Governing boards in particular are obligated to provide resources to minimize the stress and optimize the energy, enthusiasm, and commitment of their presidents. As close counselors to the president, trustees should make direct efforts to develop an “early warning system” that alerts them to undue presidential pressures. In the process, however, boards should be mindful that some stakeholders—

often the faculty and some external critics of higher education—may express resentment of what they might see as overly generous presidential benefits. Boards can go a long way in balancing these considerations.

**Tools and Benefits.** Here are some initiatives boards can consider to foster the well-being of the president:

**1. Appropriate personal staff.** Presidents no longer can be expected to manage their time and priorities on their own. Beyond the essential needs for an experienced cabinet and a top-flight executive assistant, presidents increasingly are relying on a chief of staff to coordinate everything from their schedule to board meeting agendas to correspondence.

In addition to taking charge of the president's administrative needs, these professionals can play an important role as a “buffer” in deflecting issues and people who might normally clutter up a president's day at the expense of more substantive matters. A chief of staff also can keep the office focused on important initiatives as opposed to reacting constantly to the events of the day.

These individuals must act in a highly diplomatic fashion and not be perceived as a “deputy president,” but as invaluable in prioritizing the president's daily activities. A board that recognizes the positive impact of this executive-support position should allocate the necessary funding and ensure that expectations are properly set regarding roles and responsibilities.

**2. Professional development opportunities.** Often, a change of scenery is just what the doctor orders to refresh and revitalize a stressed-out president. There are several options that a board might prescribe:

**Board memberships.** Presidents are constantly in demand to serve on local and national corporate and non-profit boards. Corporate boards traditionally have been enticing, in light of their prestige and compensation. However, trustees and presidents should carefully evaluate such opportunities to determine whether a certain directorship would enhance or detract from the president's agenda.

In the wake of high-profile scandals, corporate directors' fiduciary obligations are under the spotlight, thus requiring additional time and commitment. Gone are the days when a director—no less a university president—could sit on five or six boards simultaneously.

Nonprofit board service—particularly on behalf of prestigious national or academic organizations—may

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provide lesser financial reward but can offer fulfillment and enhanced stature to both the president and the university without the intense scrutiny of Wall Street, shareholders, and the news media. Another alternative is for the president to volunteer for high-profile task forces, which have a limited shelf-life but offer a chance to make substantive contributions to national debates on topics of interest to the academy. Boards should authorize the president to seek these positions, and trustees can help open doors and make connections with the right organizations.

- *Teaching opportunities.* Sometimes the best tonic for an overloaded president is to get back into the classroom. A carefully selected and scheduled teaching opportunity in the president's discipline might help to keep the intellectual juices flowing and keep the president connected with students and the core academic mission. Word will get around very quickly about the new professor on the block, thus providing some subtle—and perhaps positive—image-building. Teaching a class need not necessarily be part of the president's contract, and faculty will need to be consulted.

- *Sabbaticals.* For presidents who really want to get away from it all and recharge their batteries, a six-month or year-long paid sabbatical is especially attractive to long-serving incumbents. Interestingly, however, sabbaticals are increasingly rare. Boards want to be certain that the president is on the job and attentive to the institution's agenda. An extended time-out makes them nervous. Also, a presidential sabbatical is sometimes "code" for an upcoming leadership transition, which elicits its own set of anxieties on campus. A board should offer a sabbatical carefully, manage expectations appropriately, and embody its terms and conditions in the presidential contract.

**3. Mentoring and coaching.** It's lonely at the top. By the nature of the role, presidents rarely have anyone other than a supportive spouse with whom they can regularly share personal frustrations and challenges. Because a leader invariably wants to portray a confident and "in control" style, it's simply not appropriate to vent the frustrations of the job with subordinates and others on campus. A president really needs a buddy to confide in.

Depending on the personal relationship and chemistry, the board chair might serve as this confidant. As an alternative, the president might be encouraged to seek out a peer

president from another campus and maintain a regular, confidential dialogue to compare notes and bounce ideas off one another. An extended benefit of this relationship is leadership coaching from a respected colleague.

On a more formal basis, presidents are turning to "executive coaches" to help refine their leadership skills. These professionals can provide wisdom in areas such as public speaking, relationship building, and stress management. They tailor their guidance to enhance the specific skills that will make a president more effective within his or her organization. In providing for informal mentoring and professional coaching, the board's role is to encourage the president to take advantage of these resources and to cover all relevant costs.

**4. Personal perquisites.** One of the attractions of the presidency, though certainly not among the foremost, is the general package of benefits that accompany the appointment, such as official residences, automobiles, and club memberships. Great care needs to be taken here to ensure that these are made available for all of the right reasons. It should be the board's goal not simply to offer the

president access to these but to ensure that their availability and use are carefully monitored with little potential for political fallout or abuse. Trustees should always keep in mind that the

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intent is not to foster an imperial presidency but to minimize personal distractions and allow the chief executive more time to focus on the welfare of the institution. Examples include the following:

- *Presidential residences.* These are commonly provided to support a president's official entertaining and allow for a convenient presence on or near the campus. In addition to monitoring policies and practices concerning how the residence is to be used, the board should allocate proper staff and funds for maintenance, upkeep, and event support. It defeats the purpose for the president and spouse to have to weed the garden, fix a shutter, or prepare canapés. A word to the wise: Trustees should be politically sensitive to the timing of major renovations to a presidential residence. There are few juicier media stories than allegations of presidents spending university funds to (literally) feather their nests. Significant renovations or structural enhancements ideally should be done during presidential transitions.

Finally, trustees should ensure that this residence provides genuine privacy for the president and his or her fam-

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ily. Living in a fishbowl produces its own stress, and adequate space should be established for private living to the extent possible.

- *Transportation.* Although it is rare for a president to have access to university-provided aircraft, automobiles (and in many cases a driver) routinely are made available. Trustees should be prepared to support this practice as a means of giving the president added capacity to travel frequently on behalf of the university and to have more time to spend on the business of the institution.

In recognition of the frequent long-distance travel that goes with the job, trustees also should formalize a policy regarding business travel expenses for the president—and the president's spouse.

- *Club memberships.* As a vehicle to support the official business of cultivating friends and donors, universities frequently provide for the president's membership in dining and golf clubs. Again, with the proper constraints, these are wise investments. However, there needs to be a careful consideration of which clubs to join (to avoid those clubs that might raise discrimination issues) and a thorough accounting for the president's official and personal use.

Club memberships also can help accomplish another goal that the board should establish—and enforce—with the president: the ongoing care and maintenance of the chief executive's mental and physical condition. Boards face no bigger crises than dealing with the unexpected resignation or death of their president. With an eye to contemporary society's increased focus on wellness, the board should encourage the president to exercise regularly and tend to his or her personal well-being. This should also include an annual physical.

- *Vacations.* Like anyone who works hard, a president deserves—and should take advantage of—appropriate time off the job. The board not only should ensure that a president is given proper vacation time, it should be “hawkish” in making sure that the president actually uses that time.

Long gone should be the days when an executive could admirably boast about all the unused vacation he or she accrued. Vacations offer a meaningful respite from the daily rigors of life and are essential in providing for proper balance of work and leisure.

These are just a few of the tools that boards can use to construct a presidential support infrastructure. Successful presidents are characterized by an abundance of patience, confidence, optimism, and stamina. Governing boards must do what they can within their powers to provide the president with these capacities.

**Care and Feeding.** A standard component of an annual presidential review should be the board's candid discussion of the president's personal, emotional, and intellectual wellbeing. The board and president together should develop a specific plan that draws on the foregoing resources and initiatives. Also, boards are increasingly forming “transition committees” to ease a new president's personal and professional orientation. This concept should be institutionalized throughout the president's tenure. A similar group of trustees can ensure that the “care and feeding” of the president is done carefully and effectively.

A board makes substantial emotional, financial, and strategic investments in the chief executive. It is essential that its members systematically ensure that this investment is both appreciated and appreciating. ■

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**T'SHIP LINKS:** Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, “Academic Leadership Is Not a Piece of Cake,” July/August 2005. Scott D. Miller and Marylouise Fennell, “If Your President Needs a Mentor...” May/June 2005.