

Manage Your Career

Mind the Gap

By Katherine Haley Will, Ph.D.

In English rail stations, the public-address system warns passengers to “mind the gap” as they step on and off the train. Danger lurks in that gap between train and platform — and the same is true for unexplained gaps in your professional experience. Your vita will reveal those gaps, but your cover letter is your opportunity to explain them.

Think of your vita and cover letter as the only two pieces of evidence a presidential-search committee has about you. Experienced CV readers are adept at skimming your career history. They will grab that vita and in three minutes flat (truly) make a preliminary judgment of your qualifications, and your prospects for a presidency. They seek very specific cues that signal your readiness for the position, and they will trip over gaps of any kind in your vita.

Your first challenge is to identify the gaps that need explanation. Try reading your CV as if it were a piece of evidence under a microscope, or a text submitted to the knowing eye of a literary scholar. What questions arise? What facts cry out for interpretation and explanation? Do you have the expected qualifications for the position? Does your current job title really reveal what you do?

Once you know the questions your vita will raise, you can answer them in the cover letter. Delivering those answers even before the questions are asked will make members of the search committee smile and nod their heads. And that’s precisely the reaction you want.

A variety of gaps almost inevitably arise in the CV’s of presidential candidates. Let’s consider a few.

A gap too wide. If you’re applying for a presidency and you do not come from the traditional career path — dean, provost, or president — you’ll need to explain why your experience nonetheless qualifies you for the top job. I know of a dean of students, for instance, who recently applied for a presidential

post. Her title suggested that she did not have the right experience for a presidency. But her cover letter explained that she had far greater responsibility than the position title commonly implied. In her case, the dean of students had responsibility for enrollment management, strategic planning, and athletics, as well as the usual portfolio of duties, and, thus, far more preparation for a presidency than might have been assumed.

A provostship is a traditional career path to the presidency. But for provosts seeking the top job, the gap — the open question — will always be: Do you have fund-raising experience? If you do, detail it. Name the amounts you have raised and your role in raising that money. If you don’t, and provosts often don’t, then you have to answer the obvious follow-up question: “Can you raise funds?”

If your fund-raising experience is nonexistent or minimal, just admit that rather than playing up something trivial. (And don’t assume that success with grant proposals is a proxy for private philanthropy. It isn’t.) One successful tack in a cover letter is to show that, even though you don’t have experience in fund raising, you understand the process, and you possess the necessary qualities to be a successful fund raiser. Another strategy is to communicate that you love “making the case” for needed programs, that you are passionate about telling an institution’s story, that you enjoy visiting with alumni and donors of the institution.

That last point is key. So many people cannot imagine asking for money. Assure the search committee (but only if it’s true) that you would take great pleasure in seeking support for the institution and that you would do so assiduously. Tell a story about an instance in which you had to ask someone for something that you had reason to believe they would be loath to give you; every provost has done that! Those analogies are the best you can do if you don’t have experience. So showcase your potential. Everyone has to start somewhere, and many a provost has been hired to a presidency with little or no fund-raising experience. But they had to acknowledge the gap first.

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A gap and a gaffe. In one search I was consulting on, a candidate's vita caught my attention and that of my fellow consultants because it showed a one-year gap. The candidate had a seven-year stint as a president and a current position as vice president for advancement at another campus. Even a novice vita reader would sense trouble. Unfortunately, the candidate's cover letter ignored the gap, which raised our antennae. Why the downward trajectory? Why the gap? Was there a scandal? Was the candidate fired from the presidency?

A gap like that in your vita absolutely must be explained in the cover letter. Otherwise, the application will be set aside with a shake of the head, if not dropped like a hot potato.

In this case, we made sure to ask the candidate about the gap and suggested revising the cover letter before it went to the campus search committee. The candidate gave an explanation — she had stepped down for personal reasons, a divorce — that immediately dispatched any doubts that it was performance related. As consultants, our first instinct is for candidates not to share highly personal circumstances with a search committee. In fact, it is often considered taboo. But if it helps the search committee to understand a sizable gap in your vita, and if you really want the job, you will have to explain. In the vast majority of cases, you can depend on the committee's discretion and confidentiality.

A few final words of advice about cover letters:

Proof, proof, proof. Sounds trivial, but typos and misspellings are the kiss of death. People will notice and dock you for them. In fact, some search-committee members will count the number of typos. They view mistakes as careless and disrespectful. And they are. I saw one candidate recently who would have been very competitive, except that he misspelled the name of the institution in his cover letter five times. The committee could not get past it, and the application was set aside.

Keep it short. Most committees find overly long cover letters annoying, if not risible. Anything more than four pages gives the impression of a writer who has struggled unsuccessfully with clarity — and his or her own self-importance.

Make sure it doesn't read like a form letter. Most people who are applying to multiple positions have a cover-letter template that they revise to fit each institution. We all understand that.

But you must go to great lengths to tailor your letter to each institution. At the most basic level, be careful with your “find and replace” tool and make sure that the name of another institution does not linger in the fifth paragraph. Believe me, we see that mistake all the time, and it's lethal. That also reminds me of a cover letter I was really enjoying, until the writer, in the closing paragraph, addressed me as “Tom.”

Don't just talk about yourself. There is a delicate balance to strike between describing your qualifications and showing how well they match the needs and aspirations of the institution. In the cover letter, few candidates fail to describe their own achievements. Many, however, forget to demonstrate a thoughtful insight into the college and an explanation of how they can make a contribution.

Tell them you like them. It is a simple fact of human nature that we all love to be appreciated. Telling the committee that you understand the strengths and uniqueness of the institution should be a natural instinct when applying to be a president, but you would be surprised how few do it.

Despite what you might think, search committees do read cover letters. In my experience, they are assiduous in their review of candidates' credentials and materials. They will notice everything, and they care passionately about finding the right person. Don't give them any reason for questions or doubts.

So if you want to get past the first round, compose a cover letter with the best prose you can muster, make it specific to the institution, and make it accurate, succinct, thoughtful, and honest. Be sure to tell the search committee why you want to be president and why you think you are in a position to make a difference.

And, finally, mind any gaps in your vita. Anticipate the questions. And answer them in that cover letter.

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