

Multiple academic presidencies – Novelty or trend?

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Leading a college or university to success in today's complicated world is not for the faint of heart — and possibly not for “beginner” presidents. The complexities of finance, enrollment, fundraising, and academic administration are increasingly prompting boards, presidential search committees, and executive recruiters to reach out to sitting presidents of other institutions and persuading those leaders to take a look at a new presidential opportunity.

This trend is adding to the roster of “multiple presidents” — those who have served at the top of more than two institutions of higher learning. Prominent examples include Richard Meyers, the president of Fielding Graduate University (who entered his fifth presidency in 2009) and Michael Rao, who in 2009 assumed his fourth presidency — at age 42 — at Virginia Commonwealth University. Higher education's poster child for multiple leadership stints is undoubtedly Gordon Gee, who in 2008 returned for his second tour as president of Ohio State University after previous presidencies at Vanderbilt, Brown, the University of Colorado, and West Virginia University.

While these well-credentialed leaders have each compiled track records of success and added value to their institutions, it should not be an automatic assumption that all sitting presidents exploring lateral moves should go to the top of the candidate list in presidential searches. As an executive recruiter specializing in higher education, I routinely

apply an extra element of due diligence in evaluating these seemingly enticing prospects. The most important question to ask here is Why? I want to clearly understand the personal or professional aspirations causing them to explore a new campus. Often, there is a hidden story behind their motivation to leave one institution for another, and it becomes evident that the president is running away from a troubled situation — not towards a new platform for their contributions.

Ideally, presidents should be seeking opportunities where their proven skills and abilities can be applied to larger campus or more complex settings where they can make a greater impact. These aspirational moves should come at logical times for the institution and that president's current campus — such as the conclusion of a major capital campaign, the adoption of a new strategic plan, or the successful achievement of a Board-directed agenda. In these situations, the departure of the president is appropriately celebrated by the campus community — not because

they are getting rid of a troubled leader but because his/her mission has been accomplished. On the personal side, there are equally logical windows that support a move, such as the presidential couple becoming empty nesters or a return to one's family roots.

If these sitting presidents pass the logic tests, then the institution they are moving to next can benefit immensely. The only way to fully appreciate a contemporary president's incredible pace, demanding constituencies, variety of crises and diversity of roles is to have been a president before. While the majority of today's presidential appointments continue to be provosts, deans, and vice presidents who are assuming their first academic CEO role (and often end up becoming exceptional leaders) the learning curve can be staggering. A seasoned sitting president can more quickly focus on the key campus issues without having to go through an overwhelming orientation.

During the search process we work diligently to qualify candidate aspirations.

In our efforts to drive risk out of the hiring decision and to avoid unpleasant surprises for the hiring organization, we often get the “real story” by deploying probing referencing, media analysis, and other forms of intelligence gathering. Sometimes we find that sitting presidents have potentially toxic political baggage that can disrupt their initial introduction to a new campus and possibly sour the potential for a successful leadership run. By the nature of their jobs, academic presidents must make tough decisions that don't please every one of the myriad of higher education constituencies. These controversies may lead to faculty votes of no confidence or “brand” a president with an unwanted reputation that could carry to their next campus. Even more troubling is when we uncover financial or administrative performance lapses or — worst case — personal issues or malfeasance. More often than not, we find that the motivations for exploring a new presidency are not always what the candidate professes.

An interesting question to ponder is how many presidencies should one person realistically hold over the course of a career? While the value of these transient leaders seems apparent, does their effectiveness and stamina reach a

point of diminishing return? Scott Miller assumed — at age 48 — the presidency of Bethany College in West Virginia in 2007. For Miller this marked his third academic presidency in 18 years. On his previous campuses at Wesley College and Lincoln Memorial University, he was credited with completing significant turnaround initiatives, although he encountered some public criticism at both. He expresses caution about the energy required to take on a new campus “While I have found that I can hit the ground running in tackling the big issues, I quickly realize how difficult it is to start all over in getting to know a new campus, its people, and its issues. After a long tenure at my previous college, everything was second nature — I knew everybody and everything. Just forming new relationships is demanding. When I arrived at my new campus, everyone had to remember only my name, while I had to get to know hundreds of their names!”

Savvy academic leaders have developed effective tools to ease their transition to a new setting. Miller advocates that if at all possible the arrival of a new president should coincide with the kick-off of an institutional review or self-assessment process. “This gives me a remarkable forum to listen carefully to our constituents

as they define our character, challenges and opportunities for success.” Another tip that Miller has picked up is to make sure that a president is highly visible on campus when the academic year begins in the fall, as “the first few weeks always set the tone of the school's relationship with its president.”

In looking back on his own career — and ahead to its additional chapters — Miller finds logic in his moves. “I am a believer that no presidency should last more than 7-10 years, and that if your agenda is accomplished it is time to move on before everything becomes predictable and stale. It's important to get re-energized which I draw from interacting with students and faculty.” While Miller foresees a long run at Bethany, he doesn't rule out yet another leadership role, although at that point in his career he speculates that interim presidencies may have more appeal.

As the higher education landscape becomes increasingly more unpredictable, so does the nature and profile of its leadership ranks. While there may not be many budding Gordon Gees in the presidential pipeline, the multiple presidency has clearly become more than just a novelty.