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Mistakes

New Presidents Often Make

By

Kathleen D. Gaval and **Patrick Sanaghan**

A presidential transition can be a fragile time for any campus; expectations and stress levels are high. Almost everyone wants the new president to be successful and create a new beginning for the institution. The transition process can be a minefield of challenges and opportunities, and a new president must navigate both of these carefully and strategically.

Several years ago, we co-authored a book, *Presidential Transitions: It's Not Just the Position, It's the Transition* (Sanaghan, Goldstein & Gaval, 2008). In the process, we talked with scores of presidents about their own transitions, and they were surprisingly open to discussing the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of their journey. We have continued these conversations with a whole new set of presidents, and once again, have learned a lot.

In this brief paper, we want to share what we have learned and relearned about presidential transitions, and assist new presidents be successful in their journey.

Many Presidencies Derail in Their First 3 Years

In the continually changing world of higher education, what happens at the micro level when there is leadership transition in the campus presidency has a disproportionate impact. That is to say that the higher ed world is shifting and issues loom large, the pace is lightning fast, and the learning curve is steep. All too often, presidencies derail before they have barely begun.

Frequently, presidencies fail in the first three years – some even in the very first year – usually because of one or a combination of mistakes. For more information on this, see *Presidencies Derailed: Why University Presidents Fail and How to Prevent it* (Trachtenberg, Kauvar & Bogue, 2013).

It is critical for the president, the Board, and campus leaders to be aware of and ready to address the ten most common mistakes new presidents make early in their tenure.

Mistake 1 | Trying to Do Too Much in the First Year

University presidents often arrive on campus from outside the institution. In fact, a 2012 study from ACE reports that only 25% of bachelors, 27% of masters and 33% of doctoral institutions promoted presidents from within the institution.

Whether presidents come from inside or outside the institution, there are always high expectations. These include the heightened expectations of a campus community longing for visible progress and the Board's expectation that certain changes will happen as quickly as possible. There is also the adrenaline rush of a new president wanting to solidify his/her position and begin forward movement. It is a time of beginning, and the old adage that the learning curve is steep is often ignored under the pressure to show early or even instant success.

What is a new president to do?

First, take a deep breath and resolve to move deliberately, but without haste. Gaining an understanding of the issues (not just the data, but analysis) is critical. Trying to make changes before clearly understanding what works and what needs change is treacherous.

One way to quickly build an understanding of the issues is to survey the senior leadership team. Ask each member to identify the top two institutional issues, as well as two issues within in their divisions. Request a two-page

summary of each critical issue, rather than voluminous reports and heavy submissions of data. This isn't a test of how smart a new president is, but rather a fast way to gain an in-depth understanding of complex issues. Be attentive to "both sides of the story" and look for the "third side" that, somewhere, reflects the reality. Then ask the leader of the faculty senate to do the same, and identify the top two or three issues of concern to the faculty.

Using the senior leadership team to both analyze the issues and craft the path forward will also build buy-in and will help you begin to assess team members' skills and talents as well.

Once the president has a grasp of the top five to ten issues, it is time to see if this list matches that of the Board. With this shared understanding, the President and Board Chair need to set the agenda for the first academic year, with clear expectations about what will be possible and which areas the president will be evaluated on after the lightning-fast nine months that will follow. Resisting the urge to put everything on the list of goals for the first year is a mighty challenge, particularly for Board Chairs. One new president came to his first meeting with the Board Chair and was handed a 155-item list of action items for the coming year! The President and Board Chair need to do a reality check about what is urgent and strategic, what is necessary, and what is desirable, in order to arrive at a small, manageable list of first-year goals.

This short, agreed-upon list of president's goals leads to focus, and hopefully will head off the urge to make sweeping change or find the "home run" that will be key to a new president's legacy. The success of the first year of a presidency depends on "singles" that stabilize finances, reduce campus anxiety, meet student needs, and bring the campus community together.

Mistake 2 | Being Too Externally Oriented

A new president is often expected to meet, know, and please all constituents, all of the time. This is a valiant goal, but is not realistic in the first year. Every new president

needs to begin to build authentic relationships with key internal stakeholders, not just key external stakeholders. The president needs to strike the right balance between time spent traveling to meet alumni, government officials, and regional leaders, and time spent on campus with faculty, staff, and students. One way to prioritize is to develop a Relationship Map (Sanaghan, Goldstein, & Gaval, 2008).

A Relationship Map ideally includes all the external constituency groups who are essential to the institution's success. The goal is to maintain and strengthen these relationships during the presidential transition. The constituencies are listed and prioritized so that those who need to meet the new president early are accounted for during the first six months of the schedule. Including the assignments of senior leadership team members in the Relationship Map ensures that communication between the institution and the constituency group is maintained during the transition.

The highest priority internal constituents are likewise identified. It is important to utilize both existing structures and informal opportunities for meeting them. Find monthly opportunities to meet and learn about internal groups, and also show respect for existing governance processes. When practical, meet faculty and staff in their own departmental conference rooms or in standard meeting locations. This will be well received and will provide the president with more knowledge of the facilities and of the tempo of the campus.

In assembling this Relationship Map, identify the "adhocracy" on campus (Mintzberg, 1989). These are the informal, but highly influential leaders throughout any campus who have significant credibility with their peers. Often, these leaders don't appear on the official organizational chart, but people know who they are and their opinions matter to many. These unique stakeholders are critical to completing the Relationship Map. The new president needs to connect with these individuals, build a relationship with them and listen carefully to their perspectives and input.

The most challenging piece of advice to new presidents is to lean toward being more campus-based in the first year. This will feel like a tug-of-war. On one side, the

advancement staff will be anxious for alumni to embrace the new leader and to get the next campaign underway. On the other side, building relationships with the institution's internal community will lead to the systemic changes needed. A goal of roughly 70% inside and 30% outside is often what it takes for those relationships to solidify in the first year. When adding in time to meet each of the trustees one on one, the time spent inside vs. outside can end up being more like 65/35. It's crucial that the new president be visible *frequently* on campus; it is very hard to "reconnect" with people on the campus if you have been mostly absent. We knew of one president who gained the unfortunate moniker of "Casper" (as in "Casper the friendly ghost") because he was mostly absent from campus during his first year. Avoid this situation at all costs.

When holding the introductory meetings, the new president needs to listen well and share back with groups what he/she is learning. Probing the complexity of one or two critical issues with each group will help the new president gain understanding as well as valuable political capital that will be necessary for change. Presidents also benefit from translating what they are learning as they travel across stakeholder groups. In this way, the president becomes one of the few people on campus who actually understands the systemic issues across institutional boundaries.

Mistake 3 | Failing to Build a Senior Team

The list of essential first-year tasks of a new President continues with the need to assess the strengths of the senior leadership team (both individually and collectively). Some presidents enjoy building a team; others lack the skills and patience to do this. In fact, some presidents who are natural leaders themselves are not in tune with the leadership development of others.

Regardless of the approach, building the senior team takes time; the evaluation process begins in year one, but is typically completed over a period of two to three years. A study of 12 presidents in the first three years of their first presidency revealed that presidents assess personal

chemistry and fit early on, as well as deciding early if the incumbents are ready for the next institutional challenge. However, the presidents in the study also respected the incumbents' institutional knowledge and the need to make changes in an orderly fashion (Gaval, 2009).

While it takes time to solidify a high-performing senior team, getting a good start in year one helps move the team in the right direction. For example, it is important to identify which team members *want* to stay, and who are ready to move on. Presidential transitions are natural times for each team member to assess his/her own goals, and having these conversations helps the president begin to build productive working relationships. If this assessment can take place *before* the new president comes on board, all the better. The last thing you want is the new president's arrival to coincide with an exodus of senior leaders. Such an exodus will shake the confidence of the campus and create a rough beginning for the new leader.

Planning the Presidential Exit

We had one client who planned his exit from the presidency carefully and with a year of lead time, and who wanted to assess his cabinet's career plans and aspirations before he left. He needed to understand how much leadership change might occur with his departure, and he wanted to strategize strong interim solutions where they were needed in order to provide stability to the campus and to continue the momentum after his departure. With the agreement of the president and the senior team, a highly trusted, internal leader interviewed everyone on the senior team confidentially to ascertain their plans and hopes for the future. Although there was a fair amount of anxiety concerning the upcoming presidential exit and entry, only one of the nine senior leaders anticipated transitioning out of his/her role and back to the faculty. This helped us plan carefully for the transition, identify an interim strategy, and inform presidential candidates about the senior team's stability.

New presidents also need to ascertain which team members will readily transfer their allegiance to the new president and the new team. New presidents seek a balance of new talent and ideas, while also maintaining stability and adding diversity. The goal is to make the right changes, in the right sequence, at the right point in time. This will take thoughtful reflection and may require seeking advice from confidants, other presidents, and even experienced external consultants.

Very few presidents have ever been trained on building a real team, and often new presidents rely on a few sports metaphors and analogies in shaping a model for their senior team. However, the sports analogy does not always work well in higher education. Presidents need to become "students of the game"; they need to read about high-performing teams, talk with other presidents about how they created their own teams, and use credible consultants where necessary. *Below are some suggested readings on teams.*

Suggested Reading

1. Gustavson, Paul, and Stewart Liff. *A Team of Leaders: Empowering Every Member to Take Ownership, Demonstrate Initiative, and Deliver Results*. New York: American Management Association, 2014.
2. Hackman, J R. *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.
3. Harvard Business Review, Jon R. Katzenbach, Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, and Lynda Gratton. *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Teams (with featured article "The Discipline of Teams," by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith)*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013.
4. Katzenbach, Jon R. and Douglas K. Smith. *The Discipline of Teams: A Mindbook-Workbook for Delivering Small Group Performance*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001.

5. Katzenbach, Jon R., and Douglas K. Smith. *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*. New York: HarperBusiness, 2006.
6. Lencioni, Patrick. *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2002.
7. Sanaghan, Patrick. and Eberbach, Kimberly. *Creating the Exceptional Team: A Practitioner's Guide*. Amherst, Mass: HRD Press, 2014.

The challenge is not only to assemble the right people, but also to develop the assembled group of leaders into a high-functioning senior leadership team. In some cases, these leaders will continue to expect the former leadership style, unless the new president invites honest dialogue about the former decision-making style and introduces his/her preferred way of working as a team. One way to accomplish this is to begin the presidency with a retreat for the team. At this event, new team members can get to know each other, and the president shares and seeks reactions to the first-year agenda. The team should identify responsible parties or champions for each goal and develop (together) metrics for evaluating success.

Establish decision rules so that team members are clear about how decisions will be made. Decisions can occur at weekly meetings, at one-on-one meetings, or outside of the process—but clarify which decisions are to be made by the president, which will be made with his/her input, and which decisions other team members are responsible for making and reporting back. Without clarity on decision making, team members will make assumptions within the framework of “how it used to be done,” and things can become bogged down quickly.

The key element here is to remember that only the president can build a real senior team. This can't be delegated to the provost or the vice president of human

resources (Goldstein & Sanaghan, 2009; Sanaghan, 2012; Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2012). This will take time and attention, which are in short supply for most presidents, but this time and attention is almost always a great investment for the new president to make.

Mistake 4 | Failing to Deal with Difficult Senior Staff Issues

The best gift a departing president can offer his/her successor is to deal with any lingering, difficult personnel issues. This is an honorable thing to do, but it sometimes doesn't work out this way, and the new leader inherits a difficult personnel problem. When this happens, the new president needs to identify those issues and evaluate the information on the individuals' past activities and performance early on. This is where working closely with the HR function is essential. There are obvious legal issues to be considered, but a powerful and urgent strategy needs to be established as soon as possible.

Most people already on campus will know if there is a “problem” on the senior team and will be very interested in what the new president will do. Even under the best of circumstances, this is a sticky situation, and everyone is watching. Often, the new president wants to avoid making waves and will be reluctant to make dramatic changes too soon in his/her tenure. It will take discipline and courage to make this kind of tough decision.

If you inherit a low-performing senior team member

If a new president has a low-performing member on the senior team, he/she needs to share clear, fair, and specific expectations with this person, as well as provide any reasonable support needed (e.g. coaching) and strong accountability. You want to give the low-performing members a fair shot at being successful, but they need to understand, in no uncertain terms, the consequences for continued poor performance.

If you inherit a toxic senior team member

If the president finds that there is a “toxic” leader on the senior team, the stakes are higher. Rarely do these kinds of individuals “improve.” The facts need to be in order, legal issues resolved, and HR’s advice and wise counsel taken into account, but decisiveness with integrity is essential in this situation.

By making this kind of tough, but fair decision, several things are accomplished by new presidents. They set the standard for how leadership needs to act under their watch. They also communicate to the senior team that they are committed to developing a strong and trusting team that lives their stated values, and that they can make the tough decisions that are necessary. We have witnessed this kind of leadership several times over the years, and those bold, early decisions have become watershed moments for the institution.

Mistake 5 | Creating a “Kitchen Cabinet”

A new president almost always inherits a senior team. Some teams are larger than others. Some presidents prefer a more intimate group with whom to conduct weekly business; others prefer a larger, more inclusive group. In either case, new presidents need to hear many voices and a range of viewpoints if they are to transition into the new institution effectively and lead that institution into the future -- and the senior team is one of the most effective vehicles for helping the new president hear that range of views.

One of the stickiest problems we see is when a president forms an informal “Kitchen Cabinet,” which is a highly trusted, small group of leaders, usually a subset of the cabinet or senior team. The president feels “comfortable” with this set of advisors and solicits advice and emotional support, engages in strategic thinking with them, and uses them as a sounding board for ideas. This is all well-intentioned, but can be devastating to the overall senior team or cabinet.

A Kitchen Cabinet creates the powerful dynamic of “insiders” and “outsiders” on the senior team, something you want to avoid. The ones who are “in” feel good about their close relationship with the president; the ones who are “out” will resent their exclusion deeply. They will wonder what happens inside the Kitchen Cabinet’s meetings and discussions and how decisions really get made. They will question whether they have any real influence and will spend a lot of time thinking about why they were not chosen to be on the inside.

This kind of small group completely destroys trust within the larger team.

We fully realize that the president can seek wise counsel from anywhere he/she sees fit, but a new president needs to be conscious that the informal selection of a small, intimate group will cause problems with the larger team, and will limit the views and range of perspectives the president has access to. In the end, forming a Kitchen Cabinet detracts much more than it contributes.

Mistake 6 | Failing to Develop a Constructive, Trusting Relationship Between the President and the Board Chair

If the presidency is to succeed, the ability to solidify a strong working relationship with the Board chair is key. This was one of our surprising and pervasive findings when we did interviews for our book on presidential transitions. Since then, this dynamic has grown even more critical with the Boards and presidents we have worked with (Sanaghan, 2011).

A productive Board process is key to being able to move the institutional agenda forward. If there is a personality “clash” between the president and Board chair, trouble is inevitable. They need to be on the same page about where the campus is going, and their relationship must be

based on respect and trust. This takes time and patience on the both parts, but is an essential investment to make. When this relationship is a generative one, the institution thrives and the Board functions more effectively.

This Board-President relationship can be assisted by some forethought on the part of the Board. Often, the Board chair who selects the president is not the chair who will later work with the new president. In designing the search process, it is ideal to tap the next incoming Board chair to serve as chair of the search committee. Having the future chair intimately involved in the search process is strategic and helps build a connection with the selected president from the very beginning of the transition.

The dynamics of the Board-President relationship are influenced by both the circumstances of the search and the relative confidence the Board members had in the previous president. The previous president's "shadow" can loom large if the Board saw that previous leader as ineffective. In such a case, the new president can inherit a lot of caution and close attention by the Board. The new president needs to address this issue head-on, but collegially, with the Board chair and surface any concerns that they might have. Do not let this dynamic negatively influence the burgeoning relationship. Deal with the issue, clear the table, and pursue a more constructive relationship between the two leaders.

Agreeing on regular communications, and finding the most comfortable way for each party to communicate is a first step. For some Board Chairs, email is sufficient; others prefer in-person meetings. At a minimum, weekly check-in calls are helpful in the beginning. Don't let issues percolate without back-and-forth communication well in advance of Board meetings.

We have found that both parties agreeing to a small set of "ground rules" (e.g. complete transparency, no secrets; bring bad news fast, no surprises; asking for help and advice is a positive thing; frequent face to face meetings are a priority) can be very helpful in creating the kind of positive relationship necessary for the two individuals to lead the institution.

Mistake 7 | Failing to Build "Relational Capital" with Faculty

Missing the opportunity to build relationships with faculty is an unnecessary misstep for new presidents. The faculty needs and wants to have confidence in the new leader. Even in circumstances where the faculty is divided about the selection of the president, most will be cautiously hopeful.

First, an efficient way to meet many faculty members in one semester is by scheduling small lunch meetings for 6 to 8 faculty at a time, thus connecting with 75 or 80 faculty in a semester. We know several presidents who regularly hold these "chews & chats" with faculty and report that it is one of the very best uses of their time (Goldstein & Sanaghan, 2009). These are *not* gripe sessions, but opportunities for dialogue and discussion with faculty. We have found that having two focus questions or themes at these "chats" is helpful in creating a constructive and balanced discussion: "What's going well on the campus? What needs my attention?" Begin with the faculty members who served on the search committee or interview committee; this is a positive way to continue that earlier connection.

Second, allocate time on campus to meet faculty in their departments. In their space and from their perspective, the president can learn directly their points of pride and their concerns.

Third, requesting time on the agenda of regular governance meetings (faculty senate, policy-making bodies, planning and budgeting committees, etc.) will give the president access to a broad cross-section of faculty members from all disciplines. This approach has the advantage of showing respect for the governance system and a willingness to be inclusive.

Finally, presidents can also provide opportunities to interact through informal gatherings, which can help in getting to know faculty on a more personal level.

The most important factor in developing relational capital with faculty is to continually communicate early and often.

However, the communication needs to be genuine, in the president's own "voice," and needs to include meaningful information in a timely manner. It is a good practice to be proactive in seeking feedback. Don't wait for bad news to emerge; pay attention to what's going on and encourage two-way dialogue.

Mistake 8 | Trying Too Soon to Be a "Visionary" Leader

During the interview process, presidential candidates are queried on their leadership style and their past academic and administrative experiences. However, once the president is selected, the expectations shift from a focus on experience to a focus on vision, and on the strategy to carry out the vision. Having a vision seems to be a requirement for the office; however, there is a risk in formulating a vision for an institution that is still largely unknown to a new president.

Without an in-depth understanding of the institution's unique strengths and challenges, it is hard to hit the right mark with a vision statement. Developing that vision too early sets the president up for communicating unrealistic expectations and can damage the president's credibility from the beginning.

Instead, take time to engage university stakeholders in a collaborative planning process that will create buy-in for the *shared* vision that evolves out of that process. In this way, and without seeming rudderless, a new president can move ahead to addressing major issues and moving new concepts into reality.

Take the time to do two important things:

1. Build the relational capital you will need to actually lead the institution, and
2. Strive to deeply understand the campus culture and history.

Without these two elements, creating a "vision" doesn't really matter much.

Often, new presidents are incentivized to create a "vision" as early as possible, because in many cases the Board sets up an unrealistic expectation that the new president needs to be a "visionary" (Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2012). More than once, we have heard Board members tell a new president that they need to create a "vision that takes our breath away." This is not helpful because it is almost always unrealistic. When we look at the corporate sector, a handful of true "visionaries" (e.g. Steve Jobs of Apple and Richard Branson of Virgin Airlines) come to mind, but how many of these true visionaries are actually out there? In reality, they are as rare as blue diamonds. It is important that the Board not set up the new president to fail or to lose credibility by charging them with crafting a transformative "vision" for an institution they do not know very well and are just beginning to understand.

Mistake 9 | Having No Boundaries

The non-stop pace of the job is a fact of the president's life. There are more demands on a president's time than there are hours in the week to fulfill them. Much of each day is filled with non-negotiable meetings. Therefore, it is extremely important to manage time strategically and set firm boundaries (and communicate this schedule to the Board). Without ground rules for the day, the week, the month and the year, the president's schedule will gradually cause a serious case of burnout.

A president who works with the office staff to carve out necessary personal time will thrive, even in the midst of the frenetic pace of each day. For example:

- Identify time in the day for exercise, time that will be protected no matter what. For some, the early morning is easiest and least likely to be interrupted by meetings.
- Schedule one hour in the day to be without meetings, to provide time to read and reflect, and for a check-in with staff.
- Build in prep time for important speeches in the days prior to major events.

- Limit the number of long days with evening events to just 2-3 per week.
- Identify at least one weekend off, each month.

That weekend off is as important as it is difficult to schedule. The cycle of special events in a year that require a president's participation never ends, and most alumni events are on the weekends. Add to that travel for Monday meetings, and it is rare for a president to have a full weekend off. It is possible, however, if planned in advance, and working with the major university events calendar. It is wise to find one weekend every month and secure it for personal or family time. The same holds true for vacation; putting dates on the calendar six months in advance will help the staff plan and will help the president get much-needed time away to recharge.

A good assistant will guard the president's personal time religiously. Most of the specific ground rules for the president's schedule will be unknown to those who request time with the president, but it will become evident that personal balance is a priority, and that sets a positive tone for the senior leadership team as well. Remember this: the job will take all the time you can give it; you need discipline and a plan if you are to lead a balanced life *and* serve the institution for the long haul.

Mistake 10 | Not Understanding the "Seduction of the Leader" Syndrome

Early in the transition, presidents often realize that the campus exhibits almost a reverence for the office of president. In addition, each new president has a "honeymoon" period, however brief. The impact of these two effects is that there are few individuals on campus who will provide honest feedback about the new president's ideas or leadership effectiveness. Our former colleague, Dr. Rodney Napier, introduced us to the phrase "the seduction of the leader" to explain this pernicious leadership dynamic (Sanaghan 2011; Sanaghan & Goldstein, 2011).

Often, followers have real difficulty speaking truth to power for a variety of reasons:

- Followers may lack either the skill or courage to approach a new president with a negative or contradictory message.
- Others may believe that the president represents "the institution" with all the tradition, history, and power that is attached to the office, and might feel it is disrespectful to deliver uncomfortable news to the new leader.
- On some campuses, there might have been negative consequences in the past for speaking the "truth" to the president. That history has created a culture of avoidance and reluctance among those who need to be providing honest feedback.

Whatever the reason for the lack of honest feedback, the outcome can be a president who becomes isolated and ill-informed.

This "seduction" dynamic is ever present; it doesn't magically go away, even if you are a really nice person. In fact, we have found that team members often have the most challenging time delivering difficult news openly and honestly to "nice" leaders.

Encouraging "truth to power" is the task for each new president. In order to facilitate productive "give-and-take" dialogue about the critical issues facing the institution, the president needs to set expectations that constituents will discuss these challenges with them regularly, actively providing input on the front end, as well as feedback along the way. The new president needs to be proactive and insistent about seeking feedback and hearing from different voices.

Without unfiltered information that conveys honest concerns, suggestions and ideas, the leader risks being seduced into thinking that they are on the right path and that everyone is behind them. Here are some suggestions for avoiding "the seduction of the leader":

1. Seek out divergent thinkers, even if they have a negative edge. They often are caustic, but will tell it like it is.

2. Seek input from multiple perspectives; this way, no one stakeholder group has undue influence.
3. Watch out for “gatekeepers” who might block access to you, or who “filter” negative information before they deliver it.
4. Think about going last in senior leadership team discussions; the president’s “opinions,” when offered early in the conversation, can sway a discussion dramatically.
5. Invite people to think with you. For example, when approaching an important decision, let people know where you stand on the issue and then ask “What am I missing here?” or “Help me think about what others’ reactions might be to this proposal.” The key is to actively invite folks into your conversation.

Summary

A few things to remember:

Build authentic relational capital with stakeholders, especially faculty. It is the “currency” of higher education, and enables you to lead.

Build a great senior team; the leverage that a high functioning team can create is amazing, although this is very hard to do.

Encourage honest feedback and openness so that stakeholders understand you value these qualities, and recognize and reward it when you experience it. Remember, the “seduction of the leader” dynamic is always present.

Focus on small wins at first. Meaningful and visible success creates positive momentum and builds the confidence of stakeholders. The larger gains can come later and you will be better prepared for taking on real challenges.

Learn to really listen to people and reflect back on what you are learning. In this way, they will feel heard and respected: two very important aspects of a successful presidency and vibrant campus environment.

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