

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

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Messy breakups between colleges and universities and their presidents made headlines again this summer. Trustees have accused presidents of poor judgment, unapproved and unauthorized spending, lack of professionalism, and inadequate goals and objectives. The separations played out in public, and many of them required a legal resolution.

But litigation costs are only a fraction of the harm done to both the college and the president in these kinds of terminations.

The reputations of both the college and the president are damaged by the controversies. Stories that portray a board as not supporting its president will probably cause future candidates for leadership positions at the college to think twice about applying. Community supporters and donors may withdraw support from the institution in response to the negative press that often accompanies the termination of employment of top leadership. For their part, presidents who are fired often have trouble overcoming the damage to their careers and successfully securing a leadership position at a different college or university.

Sometimes, the breakups occur early in the president's tenure. In 2016, the president of [Lake Michigan College](#) was ousted after only three months on the job. Others may occur later in the president's tenure, perhaps after contentious campus issues, difficult financial decisions or the election or appointment of new trustees.

What can trustees, presidents and candidates for presidencies do to reduce the chances of such a forced separation?

The first consideration for both the board and candidate is one of fit. From the board's perspective, it's important to ask if the candidate is the best choice to meet the needs of the college. When a presidential vacancy occurs, the board should take the time to assess current institutional challenges, problems and opportunities. Before beginning a search, it should review the college's mission, goals and strategic plan, and then it should agree on the characteristics and capabilities needed in a new leader. The outcome of that review should shape the position announcement, guide the search committee and determine advertising venues, screening criteria, interview questions and questions for references.

Before making a hiring decision, trustees should, where possible and with the candidate's authorization, consider sending representatives to the institutions or organizations where the finalists are employed to talk directly with people who work with the candidates. Responses to trustee questions can be most helpful in determining fit.

Trustees bring different perspectives to their positions, so they may not all agree on a final choice for president. But the board should try hard to reach a consensus. Any implication of lack of confidence in the choice of a president can present problems for both that person and the college -- and increase the chances of a breakup.

From the President's Perspective

When applying for a presidential position, the candidates must be as concerned about fit as the search committee and the board. They need to understand the needs and culture of the college, its current challenges and opportunities, and the culture of the community. Too many new presidents have been surprised by financial problems, pending litigation, personnel problems, labor strife or political issues. If problems must be addressed, does the candidate feel they have the experience and ability to deal with them -- and will the board support the president in tackling those difficult issues?

Candidates should view the interview as a two-way assessment and can often get a feel for the issues confronting

the institution from the questions they're asked. They should also talk to people who know the college and its issues, as well as review documents such as accreditation reports, financial audits, board meeting minutes and academic senate meeting minutes. A search for local newspaper or online articles can also be informative.

Candidates also must be concerned about the culture of the community. Some communities are more racially diverse than others. Some have deep religious traditions, while others are more secular. Some are urban, some are rural and some are suburban. Economies and culture can be based on agriculture, manufacturing, energy, chemical processing, tourism, technology, health care, higher education, policy development, mining and many other industries. Some communities are economically depressed or losing population, perhaps with community and state leaders focused on transforming the economy.

In addition, candidates should assess the strength of the college leadership team. Will changes need to be made? If so, will the board support the president in making them? And how does the candidate feel about the board itself? Is this group one that the candidate feels comfortable with? Did the board express a consensus opinion in the selection? If the board was divided, the career risk for the president will be elevated.

Easing the Transition

Some activities related to welcoming a new president should take place before that person arrives. For example, if the board sees a need to remodel the president's office or to upgrade his or her residence (if one is provided), it is best to allocate the necessary resources before that individual is on the job. If the board wishes to schedule an inauguration to introduce the new president to the community, the board should make the decision in advance of the president's arrival. New presidents who get involved with the details of remodeling their own homes or offices or of planning inaugurations run the risk of alienating the campus community -- especially during times of tight budgets.

The new president and board should schedule a retreat or workshop as soon as possible after the president arrives to develop a common set of goals for the president. If the board gives the president no direction -- or worse yet -- if individual trustees have different expectations for the president, there will likely be trouble ahead. The board at Lake Michigan College cited inadequate goals and objectives as one of the reasons for precipitously firing its president.

The board should also periodically schedule facilitated retreats or workshops. At those meetings, away from the demands of regular board meetings, trustees and the president can set goals for themselves, evaluate their progress in meeting those goals, and assess whether the college is advancing toward its vision of the future.

Evaluation of the president is one of the board's most important responsibilities, and an annual formal evaluation is the key way to provide a unified and clear sense of direction. Boards need to understand that presidents must deal with conflicting demands, insufficient resources, hectic schedules and long hours. Progress toward some college goals may take longer than expected, especially when other priorities emerge. And while a president should always strive to maintain a positive institutional climate, the board's evaluation must be more than a reflection of his or her popularity.

Colleges that have been identified as the best are those with long histories of strong and stable leadership at the board and president levels. Positive relationships between boards and presidents do not develop accidentally. They must be continually nurtured and developed. By understanding the expectations that boards hold for them, presidents can provide the leadership colleges need. And messy breakups can be avoided.