

Why grooming the next line of university presidents matters more than ever

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Presidential terminations and resignations are nothing new, even in the staid world of academia. Yet, rarely have they played out in so public a manner as the [abrupt departure](#) of president Arvind Gupta at the University of British Columbia in the summer of 2015 or the [messy dismissal](#) of Ilene Busch-Vishniac as president of the University of Saskatchewan a year earlier. Quebec had its own drama in May 2015, with the resignation of Nadia Ghazzali, rector at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, following a critical report by Quebec's auditor general. All three leaders left before completing their first mandates.

Amidst the turmoil, Peter Stoicheff was [named the 11th president of U of S](#), a position he took up in late October 2015. A former English professor and a classical guitar composer with two recordings to his name, Dr. Stoicheff had served as dean of the college of arts and science at U of S for four years and knew the internal workings of the institution and its culture well. But there was a lot he didn't know, he readily admits, and that weighed on him.

“You really need some advice right from the beginning”

“Transitions are crucial,” says Dr. Stoicheff. “The note you strike, the directions that you set, the tone that you put out there in the first six months, it's hard to change that. And you really need some advice right from the beginning about what those things should be.”

Dr. Stoicheff counts himself lucky for having had the support of a presidential transition advisory committee. The 17-member panel included representatives of the university's board of governors, administration, faculty, students, alumni and other constituents. In the early days of his appointment, members of the committee organized meetings between Dr. Stoicheff and provincial government officials. Others introduced him to the local business community and to donors. Also at the committee's recommendation, Dr. Stoicheff met with other university presidents and hosted dinners for groups of faculty members.

The committee also acted as a sounding board. “I can tell him candidly how I think things are going. He can test out things with me,” says Michael Atkinson, a long-time faculty member and former provost who, at the board's request, served as committee chair.

So, as the committee wraps up its work, does Dr. Stoicheff believe his transition has been a success? He demurs politely and suggests that's for others to judge. But he does say, “I really feel like I've had tons of support.” Dr. Stoicheff predicts that within a few years' time, all universities will have some sort of formal transition process. “I think it will become absolutely necessary.”

“An epidemic of presidents really struggling”

You could argue that it's long overdue. But, as Dr. Atkinson points out, until recently most new presidents usually landed safely on their feet even though they may have stumbled on occasion. It's only within the past decade or so that there's been what he calls “an epidemic of presidents really struggling.” And U of S wasn't spared. Its former president, Dr. Busch-Vishniac, was dismissed by the board of governors less than two years into her mandate; she has since launched an [\\$8.5-million wrongful dismissal suit](#) against the university, Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall and the province's former minister of advanced education.

“We understood right away that the stakes were very high,” says Dr. Atkinson of the committee's mandate. At the same time, “we had the situation at UBC unfurl pretty much right before our eyes,” he adds in reference to Dr.

Gupta's sudden resignation last summer, apparently due to a rift between him and the board of governors. "There was also a general sense that universities in this country were not doing enough to ensure the success of their new president," says Dr. Atkinson.

But as U of S has demonstrated, that may be changing. In adopting a transition committee, it borrowed a page from its neighbour to the west, the University of Alberta, where a similar advisory group was put in place to welcome president David Turpin before his [installation in 2015](#). Admittedly, the circumstances of his appointment were different. Dr. Turpin was a seasoned academic administrator who had successfully led the University of Victoria for more than a decade. And he was taking over the reins from Indira Samarasekera, who had completed two successful terms at the helm of U of A. Still, the university was taking nothing for granted.

"Leadership transitions are times of real excitement and real opportunity. But let's face it, they are also times of risk," says Debra Pozega Osburn, vice-president, university relations, and chair of the transition committee at U of A. "I think the days when we could just sit back and hope for the best are long behind us."

Advisory committees: just one of the ways universities are smoothing the transition

U of A's committee had two principle functions: to honour the legacy of Dr. Samarasekera, and to usher in Dr. Turpin. But each institution is different and a committee's mandate should reflect its own particular circumstances, says Dr.



Pozega Osburn.

The panel came up with an 18-month plan that covered the time from when Dr. Turpin's appointment was first announced in 2014 to the end of his first year in office. For his part, Dr. Turpin travelled to Edmonton regularly in the months prior to his taking office in July 2015 to attend meetings and receptions. "They really helped me chart my entry into the office of the president," says Dr. Turpin.

Advisory committees are just one of the ways universities are using to smooth the transition of a new leader. When

Vianne Timmons was named president of the University of Regina in 2008, she was helped and supported by outgoing president and current chancellor, Jim Tomkins. Dr. Timmons spent two months on campus learning the ropes before taking up her new role. Working out of an office set apart from the administration building, she met with people, sat in on board meetings and got to know the institution. “For two months I really just listened,” she says. “So when I started fully in the role in September, I felt like I had heard the issues on campus and I had connected.”

Programs to help new presidents

After his appointment in 2012, Concordia University President Alan Shepard found similar support in interim president Frederick Lowy. “My relationship with him made a big difference in getting a successful start,” says Dr. Shepard. Dr. Lowy had served two successful terms as Concordia president from 1995 to 2005 and had strong ties to those within and outside the university. Having his endorsement gave “people a sense of calm confidence in the transition,” says Dr. Shepard.

It couldn’t have come at a better time. Concordia had gone through years of turbulence, which saw two presidents [exit prematurely](#) before Dr. Lowy stepped in and finally calmed the waters.

Dr. Shepard, who previously held senior administrative posts at Ryerson University and the University of Guelph, as well as Texas Christian University, notes that in the U.S. there is a more formal process for preparing university leaders. The American Council on Education, an advocacy group, runs several programs for new presidents and presidential hopefuls. These include: [Advancing to the Presidency](#), a two-day workshop to prepare senior administrators for the presidential search process; the [Institute for New Presidents](#), a multi-day program for leaders in their first three years of service; and the [Institute for Chief Academic Officers](#), a year-long program that provides executive leadership training for presidential hopefuls. As well, Harvard University’s Institutes for Higher Education offers a seminar for newly appointed presidents and another for experienced leaders, both of which are attended by Canadians.

In Canada, the University of Manitoba’s Centre for Higher Education Research and Development offers an annual course for [senior university administrators](#), while Universities Canada runs the only program for new presidents specifically tailored to the needs of Canadian leaders. Topics covered in the Universities Canada seminar include, among other things, budgeting, fundraising, government relations and president-board relations. The association also offers a track for alumni of the new presidents’ seminar who are now one or two years into their terms.

Ramona Lumpkin, president of Mount Saint Vincent University, has participated in the seminar for more than a decade, first as the newly appointed principal of Huron University College at Western University and now, as she approaches her retirement from MSVU next year, as an experienced leader who provides advice to her junior colleagues.

Finding the right balance

She recalls attending one presentation early in her presidential career where a former president who had been terminated spoke about the critical nature of president-board relations and emphasized the need for regular performance evaluations to avoid being blindsided when problems occur. “I learned that a president needs to take responsibility for ensuring that the evaluation gets done,” says Dr. Lumpkin. And she has insisted on, and has received, written evaluations from her board every year she’s been in office.

A new president must also gain the trust of faculty members who, as members of the senate, play an important role in university governance, adds Dr. Lumpkin. External constituents, such as community leaders, donors and alumni, are equally important. And finding the right balance in the amount of time one devotes to the various groups can be a challenge, she says.

The Universities Canada seminar also covers crisis management and communication strategies. “There’s a lot of

scrutiny on us and you need to know how to maneuver and manage that,” says U of R’s Dr. Timmons, another regular seminar participant. She notes that when she started as president eight years ago, no one paid much attention to her activities or those of the board. Now, the university regularly receives media requests for the board agenda. “The scrutiny is much more intense,” she says.

The role of a university president has changed in other fundamental ways too, adds U of A’s Dr. Turpin. Where universities were once focused primarily on teaching and research, today’s institutions oversee many varied off-campus ventures and business enterprises. “The job is far more complicated,” he says. “Universities are very large, complex, multi-stakeholder organizations.”

The reasons behind unfinished presidential mandates

A [2014 study](#) co-authored by Dr. Turpin looked at some of the reasons behind unfinished presidential mandates. It noted that the role of a university president has shifted from that of a primarily academic leader to one that requires professional management skills as well as academic achievements. At the same time, demands for accountability and transparency have increased while boards have become more active, increasing the likelihood of a disagreement with the president.

Julie Cafley, vice-president of the Public Policy Forum, has [researched](#) and [written extensively](#) about higher education leadership in Canada, particularly on the issue of unfinished presidential mandates. Dr. Cafley notes that of the 18 university presidents who left their posts before the end of their appointments over the past decade, all were external hires. And many of them had run into difficulties with their boards, either with board members failing to understand the complexities of the presidency, or presidents underestimating the importance of president-board relations.

A change in the makeup of the board or the board chair early into a new president’s mandate was another potential obstacle, she notes. In other instances, once the board had chosen a new leader, it paid little to no attention to the transition process.

Those with an interest in leadership positions aren’t supported or encouraged

The problems go deeper than the board level, however. Dr. Cafley says that the overall culture of academia is such that those with an interest in pursuing leadership positions aren’t as supported and encouraged as they are in the private sector. “The role of a leader is definitely undervalued within a university environment,” she says.

Concordia’s Dr. Shepard agrees: “Sometimes you need to be covert about your interest in these leadership roles because other people will think that you are not a real researcher, or that you’re not a great teacher.”

There are signs that this too may be changing. Some institutions now offer professional development training programs to those further down the chain of command. U of R, for one, has a pilot program under way called [URLeading](#) (PDF), a six-month course for those who aspire to move into administrative positions, such as department chairs, deans, program heads and directors. It runs two streams: one for faculty and staff members with less than two years of leadership experience, and another for more experienced administrators. The program aims to help participants develop an awareness of their leadership style and how to build a team, foster community relationships and develop a support network, among other things.

Programs such as these are a big turnaround from even five or 10 years ago, says Glen Jones, who was [recently named](#) dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. It’s a welcome development because professional development opportunities at junior administrative levels can help set the foundation for a successful leadership role down the road, he says.

“It’s difficult to navigate all that on your own”

Taking the same approach to succession planning and professional development opportunities for presidential hopefuls is trickier because of the way the search process works, Dr. Jones explains. The decision of who becomes the next president is officially made by a board of governors, usually on the recommendation of a search committee and often with the help of an executive search firm. Often, the successful candidate is from outside the university. This can make it difficult for a sitting president to groom a potential successor, as is common in the corporate sector.

When Dr. Jones is asked to speak to board members about governance issues, he emphasizes how the role of a university president is markedly different from that of a corporation's chief executive officer, partly because of the bi-cameral structure and the collegial governance tradition at universities. He notes as well that there are more limitations to the office of university president compared to that of a corporate head. Tenure makes it difficult to fire people, he notes, while staffing and funding changes can't be made as quickly as they can at private organizations due to collective agreements and other policies. These are things board members need to understand in order to assess a president's performance reasonably and fairly, he says.

None of the complexities surrounding the president's office are lost on U of S's Dr. Stoicheff. "It's difficult to navigate all that on your own," he says. "That's some kind of heroic enterprise that I wouldn't recommend to anybody. You need a lot of advice."