

Swift and Silent Exits

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This summer's college president departure season is off to a swift start that has largely been marked by little forewarning from colleges before exits are announced.

Many boards of trustees would consider it best practice to have a quick parting of ways with little surrounding drama. But it doesn't always go so smoothly in higher education -- it didn't [last summer](#) -- making the pace and tone of presidential partings so far this year stand out. Also noteworthy is that many recently announced transitions have involved leaders who are relatively young or who are early in their tenures.

The president of Washington College on Maryland's Eastern Shore [resigned](#) just a week after word leaked that all was not well between her and the institution's board. That president, former Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation chair Sheila Bair, was two years into a five-year contract. She cited her family when she departed, but the college did not go into depth on reasons for her resignation.

The president of Ferrum College in Virginia, Joseph Spooner, was [released](#) from his contract after less than a year in office. Tuskegee University in Alabama [is parting ways](#) with its president, Brian L. Johnson, who was hired in 2014. And Carnegie Mellon University's president, Subra Suresh, unexpectedly [said last week](#) that he is stepping down at the end of June. Suresh has been president of Carnegie Mellon for four years, but that's a relatively short period of time for an institution with a history of lengthy tenures for leaders.

Every individual situation is different, as are the institutions involved. There has not been speculation that the Carnegie Mellon president was pushed to leave his job. Still, several consultants, lawyers and search firms have noticed the swift start, sudden announcements and seemingly increased churn on display over the last several weeks. None commented on specific situations but pointed out general trends that could be driving the developments.

"Boards have the best presidents in the world until they don't," said Frank Casagrande, president of Casagrande Consulting, a firm with services covering higher ed compensation, presidential assessment, board effectiveness and institutional planning. "It's a cliff."

Some faculty members have attributed the high rate of presidential turnover to a lack of true leadership during what is a difficult era for colleges and universities squeezed by financial and political developments. Other experts believe it is the result of business practices increasingly filtering into boards of trustees, who are now willing to quickly cut ties with a president who is not living up to early expectations.

Board behavior could also be contributing to the silence coming from colleges in the weeks leading up to presidential departures. Trustees could be moving toward putting in place clearer performance expectations and evaluations for presidents. When presidents don't meet those expectations, the next logical move is to make a clean break after graduation. In some cases, [like that](#) of Washington College, institutions may even be able to name a replacement president without undertaking a new search.

"Someone is saying, 'We've done the presidential review, and it's not what we were hoping for,'" Casagrande said. "Now the question is, 'What's the timing of the exit strategy? How do we not interrupt the academic year?'"

Departures after graduation often make sense for all sides, said Alexander Yaffe, president and CEO of Yaffe and Company.

"If it isn't a burning platform, let people wrap up the year," said Yaffe, whose firm's services cover presidential compensation, contracts, transitions and performance assessments. "Go through your transition and appoint

someone as an interim when things are less complicated, during the summer.”

Yaffe does not see a single issue driving the presidential turnover this year. Higher education is under economic and academic pressure, and boards are giving presidents less time to work out problems, he said.

Many boards are also becoming less deferential to presidential leadership, Yaffe said. They often have a clear set of objectives in mind for a president.

“I think that if you lay out a set of goals and objectives and you don’t achieve them and the reason they’re not achieved is because of circumstance, I think a president is going to get more running room to make some changes,” Yaffe said. “I think if that continues for several years, then the board starts to say, ‘Wait a minute, let’s get someone else at the helm.’”

College president tenures are generally believed to be shortening. But it should be pointed out that there is not yet a definitive way to say presidential turnover is up this year.

Many who watch the world of college leadership are waiting for a new edition of the “American College President” report from the American Council on Education, which is expected this month. Until then, the latest edition is from 2012, meaning it can’t be used to determine the most recent trends. The last report did show the average tenure of presidents dropped from an average of 8.5 years in 2006 to seven years in 2011.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities estimates one in four of its member campuses have gone through leadership changes at the presidential level in recent years. The association does not have good longitudinal data, but turnover is generally up recently, said the organization’s director of state relations and policy analysis, Thomas Harnisch.

“What I can say is that the volume of turnover in recent years is far more than it was a generation ago,” he said. “It speaks to an overall instability in higher education as well as a general retirement from the baby boom generation.”

Estimates of turnover among presidents at private colleges eligible for Council of Independent Colleges membership have averaged around 100 in recent years, according to the organization’s president, Richard Ekman. This year is unusual not because of data showing a spike in overall number of transitions, he said. What is more remarkable is that many presidents who are leaving are relatively young or are departing institutions that appear to be healthy.

CIC estimates that there were 95 presidential transitions among its members in 2016 -- a number that includes transitions of presidents who were leaving for reasons ranging from retirement to taking another presidency. CIC estimates there have been 92 transitions and counting so far in the 2017 calendar year.

A number of issues have been making the job of college president difficult for many years, Ekman said. They include pressure to discount tuition. Ekman also believes this year stands out because of pressure from a high level of continued interest in the tuition-free public college movement.

CIC has also noted a jump in turnover among chief academic officers, he said. Last year, about a third of chief academic officers turned over, up from about a quarter the year before.

That could be another indicator of building pressure on college leaders, including president. It’s likely that presidents are delegating an increasing number of difficult issues to chief academic officers, Ekman said. Those officers are in turn using up their political capital as they grapple with challenges.

“The turnover is bigger than the turnover of presidents,” he said. “The old vision of the dean or vice president being a faculty representative who is going to do a stint as a dean for 10 years and go back to the faculty, that’s all gone now.”

Another major higher education search firm, Academic Search, reported an uptick in searches for presidents and

higher education administrators more generally.

“Last year was probably the busiest we’ve had,” said Jessica Kozloff, president and senior consultant at Academic Search. “Talking to other colleagues in the search world, I think it’s true for, if not all of us, most of us. We’re just seeing much more activity.”

One aspect of the increased activity is retirements, Kozloff said. Experts have been predicting a wave of retirements among aging college presidents for several years. But she noted reports of increased pressure on presidents as well.

“I’m also hearing from clients for presidential searches that they feel a tremendous amount of pressure right now in terms of enrollment and competition,” Kozloff said. “That’s not really very scientific. It’s just sort of what I’m seeing at the presidential level.”

William G. Tierney, a professor of higher education and the co-director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, argued a core issue is the quality of current college presidents. He said via email that presidents are not on par with top leaders of the past like the late Notre Dame president Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh.

“It reflects presidents uniquely unqualified in navigating their institutions through turbulent times,” Tierney said. “The issue may be racial or economic or social, but our presidents are mostly managers when we need leaders. I do not see Ted Hesburgh right now; I see people in gray flannel suits.”

Other experts pointed to changing dynamics between governing boards and presidents as being behind the current turnover trends. They also attributed trends to board composition.

Raymond D. Cotton, a Washington-based lawyer who represents boards and presidents in contract negotiations, has said growth in the number of businesspeople on boards of trustees has led to changes in the relationship between boards and presidents. Those with business backgrounds are used to reporting earnings on a quarterly basis, Cotton said. Higher education does not function on such a short timetable.

Asked about the current spate of swift and silent presidential departures, Cotton said boards may be learning lessons from past firings that have not gone well. If a board is not happy with a president but that president has not broken any laws or committed any acts amounting to cause for dismissal, it can be cleaner to part ways with a president after the academic year is over.

“I think the boards have gotten more sophisticated about how to do it,” Cotton said. “They’re going to replace him or her but wait until commencement is over.”

The reasons for presidential turnover are different from institution to institution, said Rod McDavis, managing principal of AGB Search.

“Every presidency is so unique that it’s hard to sort of cluster these together,” McDavis said. “But when you look at categories, certainly one category would be differences between presidents and boards of trustees -- things that cannot be reconciled.”