

What Should a College President Do in Year One?

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In the first year on the job, a college president may feel pressure to put out a glossy five-year-plan or begin an ambitious capital campaign. But a new report by the Aspen Institute's Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency lays out a model for what a productive first year should look like — and it doesn't mention either of those big-ticket items.

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Instead the report, released Monday after an 18-month study conducted by a panel of 35 college and university presidents, recommends spending meal times in the dining hall and planning a vacation.

That's not to say that the first year is going to be easy. In fact, the report's authors say, the role of president has never been more complex: Budgets have become more strained, competition for students has increased, student populations have diversified, and pressure to ensure students get jobs has grown, all while social media has shortened the length of time leaders have to make decisions.

But the changing nature of the college presidency presents an opportunity, the report says. The job is about to experience a high level of turnover, with many presidents expected to retire in the next decade, but few lining up to take their places. The Aspen Institute hopes to help fill the gap with a cohort of new college presidents that is more diverse and better prepared for the rapidly changing institutions they will lead.

The 35-member task force was made up of a cross section of college and university presidents, including Sanford C. (Sandy) Shugart, president of Valencia College in Florida, Dan Porterfield, president of Franklin & Marshall College, Dianne F. Harrison, president of California State University at Northridge, and Freeman H. Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland—Baltimore County. The presidents met five times throughout the year, while the Aspen Institute also convened focus groups of faculty, provosts, deans, board members, students, and search firms to inform their research before writing the report.

To be effective leaders, the report said, new college and university presidents will need to be better prepared on Day 1. The group recommends that presidents work with their boards and top administrators to create "a first-year induction process" to acquaint them with their institution's challenges and set the right tone for the rest of their tenure.

"Coming into a presidency, you should have a hypothesis about where it is that the college needs to go," said Joshua Wyner, vice president of the Aspen Institute and executive director of its College Excellence Program. "The key is to take that and really test it and refine it."

To do that, presidents need to engage a wide array of people. So the report suggests a series of steps for building relationships:

Get to know students, faculty, and staff by spending time where they hang out. Go to sporting events, dining halls, and even teach a class.

Learn about the institution's decision-making processes. Attend meetings held by the faculty senate, student government, and faculty and staff committees.

Create a dashboard that tracks student data. Collect information on completion, retention, transfer, and acceptance rates, graduates' employment earnings, revenue trends, and other metrics.

Meet with community members. They will vary depending on the type of institution: superintendents of local school districts, executives of the largest regional employers, or state-government officials.

Build a support network. Meet with board members and other college presidents and identify a mentor.

Plan some personal time to disconnect from the college. Plan a trip or dedicate time to spend with family and friends.

Every situation is different, Mr. Wyner said. If a new president comes in when a college is troubled financially or is in the middle of a capital campaign, a strategic plan or fund-raising push may be essential. The point of the institute's suggestions, he said, is to encourage presidents to be intentional about what they're going to do when they start the job.

The process of developing a first-year plan may also help boards better understand what presidents do, Mr. Wyner added. The report recommends that board members, who typically do not have experience in college or university administration, should learn more about the president's job. Trustees can be trained to conduct more-effective presidential searches, it adds.

'Concerning' Lack of Diversity

Amid the proposals was a demographic warning sign: The report noted a lack of diversity among college and university presidents. Only 7 percent of college presidents are African-American and 4 percent are Latino or Latina, though those groups make up 13 and 18 percent of the U.S. population, respectively. To diversify their ranks, the report recommended, all presidents should identify two or three faculty or staff members to mentor, "with a focus on encouraging women and people of color to aspire to and prepare for the presidency."

Women and people of color are also underrepresented in the leadership positions, such as dean or provost, that often precede presidencies. That means colleges and universities should be willing to look outside the traditional pipeline for their next leaders.

"Given the overrepresentation of women among those with college degrees and the fact that populations of color are growing at the fastest rate in our country, the lack of diverse talent in positions that typically emerge to the presidency is especially concerning," the report said.

"The task force starts from the assumption that talent is broadly distributed," Mr. Wyner said. If there are populations that are underrepresented in the university leadership, "it suggests that an enormous amount of talent is being left on the table."

Nell Gluckman writes about faculty issues and other topics in higher education. You can follow her on Twitter [@nellgluckman](#), or email her at nell.gluckman@chronicle.com.