

CAREER PATHS

A roadmap to presidential career management

Presidential Hiring: A Team of Colleagues

By Harry L. Peterson

After a two-year presidential campaign, this year's focus has been not only on our new president, but on the people President Obama has chosen for cabinet positions.

The president's selections have received much praise for being smart, experienced, and pragmatic; however, we know from experience with other presidential administrations that some of them will not be successful. They will not be up to the job, they will not be a good fit for the position for which they have been chosen, they will offend constituents, or they will not work well with other cabinet secretaries or with the president and his White House staff.

We also know that the success or failure of Barack Obama will, to a large degree, depend on these individuals. Their competence, their loyalty, the candor of their advice, and his willingness to listen to them will shape his presidency and his legacy. So it is with college and university presidents. A new president's decisions about whom to hire and retain and how he or she works with those individuals can significantly determine success or failure in the job.

There are obvious differences between the jobs of the president of the United States and the president of a college or university, of course. There are, however, some important similarities from which campus leaders can learn.



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- Barack Obama chose foreign policy and other advisers who view the world differently from him and from one another. University presidents should seek people who view the university from different perspectives, who are likely to offer differing, even competing ideas and advice about important issues. The president can then choose whose advice to take, or develop an approach that is a blend of that advice.
- President Obama appointed Rahm Emmanuel to be his chief of staff, not only because he had served in the Clinton administration, knew the president well, and had a reputation for candor, but because he had been a member of Congress and could work with legislators to advance the president's agenda. Your senior colleagues should not only be competent in their area of responsibility, but also be able to contribute more broadly. The vice president for student affairs should be able to speak knowledgeably about the budget. The vice president for advancement needs not only to promote the university, but also to understand its academic programs. This kind of administrator will do a better job and be able to help other colleagues and the president make important decisions.



Illustration by Thom Sevalrud/i2art.com

- George W. Bush chose as his attorney general Alberto Gonzales, a man whose career success was entirely dependent on the president. We should not have been surprised by reports that, seemingly, he told President Bush what he believed the president wanted to hear. Barack Obama, on the other hand, has chosen senior administrators who already have proven themselves and did not need him or his appointment of them to establish themselves. This will help ensure independent thinking and advice.
- One of the worst things university presidents do is surround themselves with what they often describe as "their people." Those people work for the president, not the university. Such people may provide reassuring advice, especially during difficult times when there are tough decisions to be made and criticism is inevitable. However, presidents don't need reassurance during tough times—they need hard-headed advice based

on facts and what's best for the university. Such advice will serve presidents better in the long run.

- Presidents should expect loyalty, but should not confuse loyalty with obeisance. As president, your staff should not work *for* you, but *with* you. They report to you and you hold them accountable for their work, but together you advance the mission of your organization. You must convey that message, not only by what you say, but by how you encourage candid advice by acting on it when it is sound.

The Danger of Sweeping Change

There are important differences between hiring conducted by a U.S. president and a college or university president. Cabinet members have responsibility for agencies that may have several hundred thousand employees. These career employees are accustomed to changes in leadership, especially when different political parties take over the White House. They often resist change from the top, knowing they will likely endure in their own positions long after the politically appointed cabinet secretary has left office. Thus, the job of the agency secretary is often like leading a "hostile takeover," when one company buys out another.

College and university presidents sometimes engage in a similarly hostile takeover. They may seek colleagues with whom they have a high level of comfort, but who do not serve the university well. Presidents can make personnel changes too quickly, before learning about the contributions that

existing personnel have made to the university or how much support they may provide to the new leader. New presidents may remove all of the senior administrators and bring in outsiders who have no knowledge of the university, and whose loyalty is to the president and not to the institution. The result is an almost immediate tension between the faculty and the administration, a tension that reduces the effectiveness of the president.

An inherent structural tension already exists between faculty and administration, two groups of individuals with very different jobs in the same organization, typically with neither having a good understanding of the daily lives and challenges of the other. Recent research on the attitudes of presidents toward faculty found that although 60 percent of them believed that faculty should have a larger role in running the campus, overwhelmingly those presidents also believed that faculty are often ignorant about the university, unable to see the larger institution, and have a self-serving attitude and a lack of appreciation for administrators.

Approaching the presidency with such an attitude, and hiring senior administrators who are close to you but who cannot develop deep connections with faculty and staff, will result in a failed presidency. The job of the new president is to learn the culture, become engaged in it, and become a part of it, rather than trying to "take it over."

Dream Team

President Obama is deeply impressed with the excellent book by Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*. Goodwin described how Abraham Lincoln gave key assignments to several of the people who competed with him for the presidency in 1860, and how, for the most part, those individuals became helpful partners as he undertook the job of holding together a country torn apart by slavery. Obama applied Lincoln's example to his own administration, selecting Joe Biden as his vice president and Hillary Clinton as his secretary of state, both of whom competed with Obama for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Although those decisions by the new president reveal a high degree of self-confidence and an interest in surrounding himself with experienced and outspoken leaders, such an example is not necessarily helpful for a new college or university president. U.S. vice presidents and cabinet officers are only nominally a team in a modern presidency, as they have responsibilities that greatly exceed those of a university president. These individuals have constituencies who applaud their appointment, constituencies such as labor and women in the case of Biden and Clinton. A cabinet meeting of a U.S. president does not really constitute a working team, and cabinet meetings are often ceremonial rather than an exercise in joint problem solving.

A university president does not need a team of rivals, but a team of colleagues. Although it is often possible and sometimes appropriate to retain a vice president

who competed for the president's job, a president typically oversees and works with a small group of senior administrators who regularly meet as a team to help the president and one another lead the university. The academic vice president must be credible with the faculty and be sensitive to the faculty interests, but should not serve solely as a representative of faculty interests. Rather, he or she must serve the larger university and the president.

We will learn a lot more about President Obama and his appoint-

ments during his presidency. We will learn even more about whether he was successful in creating a team of rivals over the years after his presidency is concluded, when all of the reporting is done and the memoirs are written. When you conclude your presidency, it is unlikely that memoirs will be written and, over time, that your presidency (and mine) will be mostly forgotten, no matter how successful.

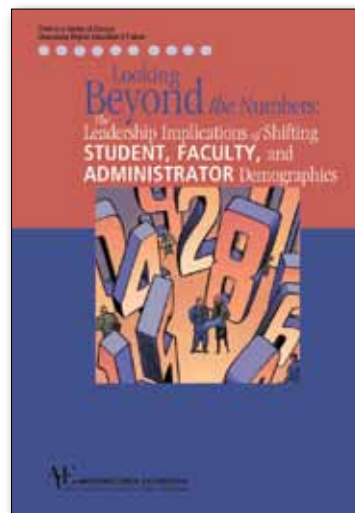
However, I can report that some of my greatest satisfactions as college president came

from long and sometimes difficult meetings when my colleagues and I talked to one another and listened to one another, addressing difficult problems and developing some great plans for our college. That can only happen if you have the right people join you—people who know what they are doing and tell you what they think because you have given them permission and encouragement to do so. ■

It's not just the numbers, but what they *mean*.

Prepare your institution to address these and other changes:

- By 2022, the number of Hispanic students completing high school will increase by **2/3**.
- **15%** of faculty at four-year institutions are aged 44 or younger and working in tenure-track jobs.
- The most common pathway to a presidency is via chief academic officer, yet only **25%** of CAOs have presidential intentions.



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