

Why New Presidents Can't Sleep

JAMES MARTIN AND JAMES E. SAMELS

Many new college and university presidents across New England are not sleeping well this fall. The job is not what they thought it would be, and a growing number of them are choosing to step down earlier than their predecessors.

The presidential “honeymoon” has disappeared from most campuses. Once, new campus leaders were afforded a grace period during which the institutional community forgave a pause in decision-making or a decision that failed to account for a key political consideration, constituency or aspect of institutional history. Now, smaller, resource-stretched schools cannot afford even a brief period of presidential uncertainty, much less inactivity. Presidents at larger institutions likely never experienced that now anachronistic element of the presidency.

JoAnn Gora, who left the University of Massachusetts Boston earlier this year to become the first female leader of an Indiana public university, Ball State, offers a stark view of the presidential honeymoon: “Presidents expecting honeymoons should dust off their wedding albums; it is a word, and a concept, disappearing from our lives. The first thing new presidents are asked, even before arriving on campus, is, ‘What is your plan?’ Effective leaders should be very careful about talking about any ‘plan’ until they have demonstrated respect for the new community by taking the time to learn first-hand about its opportunities and challenges.”

Gora’s view reflects the passing of a slower period of higher education management when chief executive officers were hired for their potential and expected to receive much of their training on the job.

Today, an unforgiving set of expectations is swiftly placed on new presidents—often before their first day on campus—by students, faculty and, most commonly, trustees. Kevin Sayers, former senior research analyst at Brown University and now vice president for institutional research and effectiveness at Capital University, says even presidents who are very skilled at planning “are growing restless in their efforts and weary of the burdensome demands of institutional and program accreditors; as a result, many leaders are becoming unable to move their colleges beyond relatively simple day-to-day decision-making to much-needed long-range forecasting.”

This past summer, Vicky L. Carwein began her tenure as president of Westfield State College. As her leadership team works to boost Westfield’s profile and attractiveness in the metro Boston and New York markets, she offers this view of her first weeks as a state college president: “National economic stresses, includ-

ing a steady decline in state support for public higher education, have led to two increasing pressures on New England college presidents: a focus on private fundraising and an emphasis on greater accountability via value-added outcomes of teaching and learning. Within what seems like only weeks, new presidents will need to raise significant private dollars, to quantify their institution’s successes and to anticipate what the next benchmarks will be—all while remaining committed to mission and integrity.”

After the new president arrives, it is often not long before the board chair suggests, in so many words, “clear your desk, focus the institution and complete a strategic planning cycle immediately.” Younger presidents, in particular, need to discover for themselves that strategic planning has become more complicated than it was a generation ago in part because of the louder calls for accountability from almost all constituents involved in the planning process. Many presidents experience extremely narrow margins for error with their planning goals under the microscope at weekly trustee meetings.

In his first year as president of Roxbury Community College, Terrence Gomes faced a strategic abyss. The college had not implemented a major strategic plan in a good number of years despite several planning exercises. Gomes immediately focused on a new way to think about planning both effectively and rapidly at Roxbury by working with the community to articulate its most important “core values.” As he described it, “I found it important to spend my time creating a new climate across the campus and in building a strong platform on which effective strategic planning and its accompanying timelines could begin. Thus, community members entered the process at Roxbury realizing that a realistic timeframe for implementation in their areas was a critical aspect of the plan itself.”

These causes of presidential night sweats could be matched by three, six, or even nine more of almost equal intensity this fall, as many of New England’s new presidents struggle quietly, perhaps painfully, to move their institutions forward in the country’s most competitive higher education marketplace.

James Martin is a professor of English at Mount Ida College and academic vice president of the Education Alliance, a higher education consulting firm based in Framingham, Mass. James E. Samels is president and CEO of the Education Alliance. They are authors of Presidential Transition in Higher Education: Managing Leadership Change (Johns Hopkins University Press, September 2004).