

Presidential Searches: Why Spring is the New Fall

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As we know, the average presidency at U.S. universities is shrinking. Not only is the average tenure slipping down from 7–8 years to 3–5 years, the pool of those interested in the positions and qualified for them is also shrinking. In light of truncated terms, colleges and universities must be strategic in their selection process. Here we explore a new model that allows colleges and universities to attract an increased number and higher caliber of candidates. It also allows a new president to assume his or her duties in a time-frame that provides adequate orientation and a smoother transition.

Traditionally, presidential searches begin in the fall, operating under the assumption that higher education shuts down in the summer. While campuses used to be ghost towns between terms, that is no longer the case. Summer season has evolved into a time for innovative programming and planning—including having more time to review and analyze career trajectory. With a simple calendar shift, search committees can take advantage of a new search cycle that generates more and more uniquely qualified candidates.

Spring is the new Fall —Here's Why

When working with a Board of Trustees on the early stages of a presidential search, consider shifting the beginning of the search from fall to spring. What would such a search look like and how would it benefit those involved? Consider a timeline that begins in April, releasing a position profile in May. This enables a search firm to recruit in June and July, attracting a more engaged group of candidates throughout the summer, when their schedules can be more flexible without the daily pressures of the academic year. A search firm can then conduct preliminary interviews in September, work with campus communities and committees throughout October, and to announce a successful candidate in November. This sets the stage for a candidate to begin his or her presidency with the calendar year, coinciding with the start of the spring semester.

Defining the Transition Period

Depending on the successful candidate's availability, this affords a January–May transition cycle during which the outgoing (if applicable) and new presidents can work together with the senior leadership team on:

- Strategic Planning
- Communications
- Budget and fiscal planning
- Collaborative introductions to campus culture and community leaders

Without an outgoing president, a spring semester start gives the new president a chance to work with staff, meet campus personnel and students, and have some actual familiarity with the campus and local community by Commencement. This timing is also helpful to meet and engage with faculty to learn about their passions and concerns. A traditional summer start, does not allow for natural interactions with faculty unless they are engaged in summer teaching or year-long administrative duties. Our proposed timing avoids having to make big decisions about the culture of opening year activities without the benefit of having been on-boarded. A transition committee, composed of local board members, established campus staff, and community members can be an important resource for a transition throughout the first year.

In either situation, this timeline makes the new president's first hundred days far more efficient and engaged, giving the incoming leader an opportunity to become immersed in the college or university's planning cycle with the benefit of the established leaders' insights.

Benefits for the College or University

Starting a presidential search in late spring allows you to attract more candidates, and candidates from more diverse backgrounds and industries. Traditional searches ask for submissions in one of the busiest times of the year in academia—fall semester—and receive poorer responses as a result.

The timeline allows for greater level of critical in-depth vetting of candidates, which typically yields a higher-quality selection.

The transition term allows adequate time to introduce the new president to the necessary duties in a thorough, guided way. This avoids unnecessary disruptions and allows for the new president to check assumptions about what is working and what isn't to make informed, transformative changes. Building trust is also an important component of the proposed time. When significant changes need to be made, trust—both in character and competence—is a helpful attribute to build. Unless the new president is from within, his or her character and levels of competence are not apparent to the new campus, if they exist. A president and community become acquainted during the transitional period, allowing for informed and strategic decisions for the first full year of the presidency.

Benefits to Candidates

With September–May cycles packed with meetings, events, and critical daily operations, candidates have more time in the summer months to notice, pay attention to, and respond to a search profile, resulting in a more thorough presentation.

Assuming duties in January allows for an engaged and informed transition, enabling shared collaboration on critical planning.

This transition period provides a solid foundation on which the new president can build in his or her first full year at the helm.

A New President's Checklist

- Capitalize on newness. Everyone wants to meet you and say they've met you.
- Check assumptions about existing processes and situations, including policies and procedures that may (or may not) exist.
- Understand more about the major aspects of college leadership, such as budget and admissions, what tools exist, and how good (or bad) it really is.
- Set expectations for how we will interact together as a campus community, and be true to your expectations.
- Listen, listen, listen. A January start allows a president to demonstrate s/he is listening by being able to make an informed decision that addresses feedback from campus constituents.
- Meet everyone on-campus and see every office.
- Conduct one-on-ones with each trustee (in their spaces).
- Develop relationship with Board Chair and set aspirational goals.

- Develop relationships with community leaders, those in positions of leadership, and the informal leaders that make the community work (especially in small, college towns)
- Develop relationships with regional leaders who are affected by your academic programs (They hire grads, take interns, etc.).
- Develop relationships with area colleges and universities.
- Develop relationships with political leaders—local, regional, state, and national.
- Understand the state politics and how the Education Department works.
- Develop relationships with professional organizations from your new position.
- Observe, observe, observe. It is an opportunity to observe during the spring semester and ask "after-action" reports so that for the upcoming academic year there is a record of what worked, what could change, and what things might be combined or eliminated for better efficiency, effectiveness, and attendance.
- Celebrate small wins.
- Set the tone for how communication will occur.
- Be a role model for the institution's circumstances. If the budget is tight, conduct your business to set the example for everyone else.
- Make the difficult decisions—they don't get any easier! (Mullen)
- Put your leadership on the line if necessary. Nelson Mandela said, "The day I am afraid to put my leadership on the line is the day I should no longer be your leader."

Suggested reading (before and after being elected):

Presidential Transitions (Saningan, et al)

On Being Presidential (Pierce)

The First 90 Days (Watkins)

Mind the Gap (Soghoigan)

Legitimacy in The College Presidency (Bornstein)

Mindset (Dweck)

The Speed of Trust (Covey)

Crisis in Higher Education (Docking)

What Got You Here Won't Get you There (Goldsmith)

Dr. Mankey's Bio

<http://www.defiance.edu/offices/pr-marketing/2015/1510-dr-richanne-mankey-named-president-of-defiance-college.html>

Cheryl Hyatt's Bio

<https://www.hyattfennell.com/cheryl>