Advice for a new president

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The transition into a college presidency is always difficult for the community, but rarely does one think of how hard it can be for the president. His or her salary is incomparably high, and the under-resourced departments are often frustrated with the financial disparity and the news of another change. The staff and administration do not empathize with the stress of presidency, believing the leader has everything and should not complain. The president receives welcome ceremonies and proverbial keys to the city, and he or she is instantly a major figure among the politically powerful; however, any seasoned president knows that the new school transition is a season of risk and anxiety. In fact, the transition period, typically 100 days, is one in which the president must proceed with caution and use his or her power carefully (Martin & Samels, 2004).

Spartan University is a well-established four-year public institution that is undergoing significant changes. The past few presidents have left the faculty disgruntled and distrustful of leadership, and now a new president has been named. Dr. Roan has accepted a contract as the new president of Spartan University, and she will be taking office in four months. Dr. Roan has close ties with the state's governor, Butch McDundee. From the onset, the new president will need to make some major budgetary decisions, which may likely involve cutting some programs. A review of recent literature provides pertinent advice for new presidents in this situation and can guide Dr. Roan as to how to proceed in making these budgetary decisions as well as how to earn the confidence of her new faculty.

Much of the literature urges new presidents to spend time before taking office preparing for the new role. This includes getting to know the new institution, becoming familiar with its culture, and thoroughly understanding the structure of the school. Bolman and Deal (2008) emphasize the importance of viewing an institution through a structural frame. It is vital to
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understand the hierarchy of individuals and the relationships among the administration, professoriate, and student body. Dr. Roan would be wise to spend time familiarizing herself with the structure of Spartan University by studying organization charts, the school's website, past strategic plans, and any other facts about the flow of information and authority.

It can be assumed and hoped that Dr. Roan and the board members of Spartan University have carefully considered whether or not she will be a good fit for the institution. It is vital that the style of a president is an appropriate match for the institution's culture, or else the president will not be able to gain the support of key constituents (Bornstein, 2003). In the case of Spartan University, where the faculty is dissatisfied with past leadership, it is possible that the former presidents were not a good fit for the culture of the university, which may have led to discontent and an unsupportive faculty. If Dr. Roan proceeded in an advisable manner, she would have thoroughly explored the nature of Spartan University and spent significant time and effort determining whether or not she felt connected to the institution. Conversely, it is hoped that the search committee of Spartan U conducted research on Dr. Roan's prior experience, her leadership, her philosophies, and her personality. If president and institution is not a good match, then Spartan U will be crippled when it comes to decision making and the overall running of the campus (Bornstein, 2003).

Not only must a president spend time prior to taking office learning the structure of the institution and making sure she is a good fit, there are also several other tasks she must complete before her actual starting date. Implementing a transition map is an effective way to proceed through the stages of a new presidency (Sanaghan, Goldstein, Jurow, & Rashford, 2005). It is essential for the new president to get to know her new board and key constituents before taking office. One suggestion is to create a "learning network" comprised of senior leadership members
who can help the new president understand the culture and history of the institution and the challenges that may arise (Sanaghan et al., 2005). This network should include the "adhocracy" of the university, those with the true power regardless of position (Sanaghan et al., 2005). Dr. Roan should also spend significant time on campus before taking office so that she can get to know faculty, staff, and students. All of those constituents can get to know her as well so that there is already a sense of trust and familiarity when she becomes the acting president (Sanaghan et al., 2005). Interactions with new colleagues should be done through face-to-face contact to further build trusting relationships with effective communication right from the start (Diamond & Adam, 2002, p. 392) (Diamond & Adam, 2002). Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard, held an ice cream social for the entire university on her first day in office secret code (Bryant & Faust, 2009). She explained in an interview that this was an opportunity to "shake a hand, look in an eye, say a name and try to be a person, to be a real person" (Bryant & Faust, 2009). It is essential for Dr. Roan to take a similar approach to engaging with the university community so that she can instantly build relationships and show the campus community who she is.

While it was once the case that presidents experienced a certain 'honeymoon' period in which they could acclimate to the new culture, this does not seem to be true anymore (Martin & Samels, 2004). Today's college presidents are no longer given a grace period upon arrival, but rather are expected to get started and make major decisions right away (Martin & Samels, 2004). Upon taking office, key constituents are eager to learn about the president's plan for action and steps she will take toward change (Martin & Samels, 2004). Dr. Roan should proceed with caution during this initial phase of her presidency, because speaking too soon could be disastrous. A new president must wait until she has established respect and understanding for the campus community before making any statements about her plans (Martin & Samels, 2004).
During the first few months of presidency, it is crucial for Dr. Roan to continue building relationships with all members of the Spartan University community. The first 100 days in office mark the president’s opportunity to set the culture and focus of her presidency (Martin & Samels, 2004). Dr. Roan needs to build a reputation of being highly visible on campus (Sanaghan et al., 2005). She should continue face-to-face contact with senior leadership, attend campus events, and interact with students and faculty in both formal and informal settings (Sanaghan et al., 2005). Some sources advise the new president to profile board members to gain an extensive knowledge of their backgrounds and attempt to "woo" them into the president's favor (Heller, 1984). As she proceeds, it is important for Dr. Roan to show her board members that she is appreciative of their hard work and that she knows the work could not be done without them (Heller, 1984). She can thank them through cards and other expressions of gratitude so that they will continue to support her and to feel that their contributions are meaningful.

While it is advisable that Dr. Roan does not act too quickly so as to startle the campus community, she also knows that it is necessary to make some budgetary decisions immediately. In order to create the faculty buy-in that she needs for a successful presidency, it is absolutely vital that Dr. Roan does not make any cuts to faculty salaries or to faculty development (Phelan, 2010). By continuing to invest in faculty, Dr. Roan will show them that she recognizes the importance of their work and values them as key players at Spartan University. It is also essential that Dr. Roan keep the community aware of the fiscal situation through every step of the process (Phelan, 2010). She must be open and transparent so that there are never surprises for any members of the campus community (Phelan, 2010). This will help to keep their trust and build their confidence in her as she proceeds through making more decisions further along.
Beyond making the faculty and other constituents aware of budgetary decisions, Dr. Roan should also invite their direct participation and input in the process, promoting an atmosphere of working together for a common cause (Diamond & Adam, 2002, p. 397). If Dr. Roan gives her faculty a chance to take ownership of the process and actually acts on their ideas, then they will feel more committed to the institution and feel more appreciated and empowered, which is important for the success of the entire group (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 72). Harvard's Faust contests that "if people feel they were listened to, that their views were taken into account... they're going to be much more likely to go along with a decision" (Bryant & Faust, 2009). It would be wise for Dr. Roan to form a committee consisting of faculty members from various departments, board members, and senior leadership. This committee could meet to discuss possible solutions to the need for budget cuts. They would be able to brainstorm together, discuss ideas, and possibly reach reasonable solutions as to which programs or items can be cut from the budget so that financial needs are met and the greatest number of constituents is satisfied. Of course, this is not fail-proof, as some parties will inevitably be dissatisfied with the resulting decisions, but they will at least have the opportunity to feel that their voices were heard and that their opinions were solicited. This will make them more likely to support future decisions, because they know that they are part of the process rather than subject to the president's monocratic decisions.

In order for Dr. Roan to both become and remain successful throughout her tenure as president of Spartan University, it is vital that she must, to some extent, limit her own personal individualism (Bornstein, 2004). While it is important for her to engage in frequent interaction with members of the campus community, she must also limit her interactions to maintain political boundaries (Bornstein, 2004). A president cannot share her personal beliefs,
partisanship, or judgments (Bornstein, 2004). If Dr. Roan talks too much about her former institution, her ties to the community, past civic engagement, political stance, or religious viewpoints, then she may inadvertently distance herself from key players whose support she needs. A college president must keep all interactions as part of the professional agenda, acting diplomatically when dealing with all members of the college community. While Dr. Roan has ties with Governor McDundee, it is wise for her to keep these ties purely professional and unbiased. It would be unwise for her to campaign for him or even express her favor for him publicly.

When Dr. Roan first sets foot on campus as the new president of Spartan University, the spotlight will be on her. This is the time for her to share her vision and inspire the campus community. Because she will have built relationships prior to taking office, her transition should be relatively smooth. As president, she must tread carefully during the first 100 days, not create drastic changes immediately, and spend significant time connecting to the people around her and establishing herself as a familiar face and trustworthy leader. By giving constituents power to make budgetary decisions, Dr. Roan will earn the trust and support of key players and prove to them that she is their to facilitate changes with them rather than rule with an iron fist. An extensive review of the literature finds that many authors make very similar suggestions regarding the transition into a new presidency. By following this pertinent advice, Dr. Roan will be able to effectively create change and have a successful tenure at Spartan University.
References


