



Successful Presidential Leadership: Succession Planning

BY DEVORAH LIEBERMAN, PHD



PRESIDENTS CORNER

As presidents and leaders in higher education, we often believe our leadership responsibilities should primarily focus on activities such as strategic planning, enrollment management, fundraising, artificial intelligence or innovations in teaching and learning. Essentially, that is what has been modeled for us by our presidential mentors. Yet, one of the most critical, and I have found often overlooked, responsibilities of leadership is succession planning. To support the long-term sustainability of our institutions, we must also make time and space for creating effective succession planning. Strategic and effective succession planning helps ensure that when change occurs (which it inevitably does), the institution remains stable with established continuity, forward focus, and mission-driven.

The most recent data (The American College President: 2023) suggests that the length of tenure for presidents, vice presidents, and deans is increasingly shorter. The reasons most often cited for presidential retirements are related to the increased stressors in these positions, e.g., external politics and the uncertainty of federal government pressures on higher education,

campus politics and unrest, enrollment fluctuations, the uncertainty of the future of AI, and, increasing options for students who choose not to pursue traditional educational paths...the list could be endless.

(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2023/08/01/abrupt-presidential-exits-underscore-jobs?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

When I speak with senior administrators nationally and internationally who are choosing to leave higher education or retire, the refrain I most often hear is that the increasing, seemingly endless, stressors are taking too great a toll on their mental health, physical health, and family relationships. Traditionally, a year prior to a self-selected retirement, presidents offer their boards a year's notice. However, because of increased pressures and stressors, more are leaving these positions with little notice to the university, while others give notice that permits an internal or external search. For example, when I was Provost (for 8 years) and moving to a presidency, I gave 7 months' notice to my then-president, which allowed him adequate time to search for my successor. Then, after twelve years as president, I gave my Board of Trustees 12 months



to conduct a search for the next president. Though giving this length of notice is not required, it has become an expectation in higher education to ensure campus continuity and as little disruption as possible. However, not every institution has the luxury of “time to search for a replacement” when they are informed that an upper-level administrator is choosing to leave or is asked to leave a position. With sudden departures, the questions most frequently asked are “How do we best fill this position? Can we find a qualified internal person to serve as the interim? Do we potentially eliminate the position and have another administrator assume these additional responsibilities? Should we hire a search firm and conduct a national search?” Strategic succession planning is critical for asking and answering these questions.

There are two essential kinds of succession planning that every college or university should prioritize: emergency succession planning and deliberate, strategic succession planning. Both are vital to the long-term health and continuity of an institution.

Emergency Succession Planning: Preparing for the Unexpected

No president, provost, or senior leader expects to face an abrupt departure or emergency, yet higher education has seen many such instances, e.g., a sudden illness, resignation, or even an unexpected crisis that requires an immediate change in leadership. Without a clear plan, these situations can lead to confusion, instability, and loss of confidence among the board, faculty, and community.

“
An emergency succession plan is not a sign of mistrust or pessimism; it is an act of institutional stewardship.
”

An emergency succession plan is not a sign of mistrust or pessimism; it is an act of institutional stewardship. Every president should ensure that a clear line of





authority exists if they are unexpectedly unable to fulfill their duties. This usually means identifying and preparing a capable “#2”, such as a provost, executive vice president, or trusted cabinet member, who is familiar with the institution’s strategic priorities and governance structure and can step into the position’s responsibilities immediately. When I served as president, the Board of Trustees asked me who I would recommend be the interim president in the unlikely case that I was unable to fulfill my presidential duties. I asked the same question of each of my direct reports on the senior staff. I recorded my answer to the Board’s question and the VPs’ answers (with my approval of their recommendation) on a document and confidentially shared it with the board. This gave the board confidence that if I or any of the senior staff were unexpectedly unable to complete their responsibilities, there would be a capable replacement to be named the interim.

Key Steps in Strategic Emergency Succession Planning



These are the key steps I recommend for strategic emergency succession planning:

- **Clarify roles and responsibilities** in writing for interim leadership. For the presidential emergency succession, this should be discussed with and considered a recommendation to the Board of Trustees. For the vice presidents and other direct reports, emergency succession is the purview of the president. However, it is good practice and instills confidence and trust if the president shares her succession choices with the Board of Trustees.
- **Engage the board of trustees** in approving and understanding the emergency protocol. This should be a thorough discussion with the Board Chair and the Board of Trustees.
- **Ensure institutional continuity** by reviewing who has access to key systems, decision-making authority, and communication channels. Sharing this with the Board of Trustees will further educate them on shared governance and the complexity of managing and leading a division, a unit, or the entire organization.
- **Rehearse the plan** periodically, just as an institution rehearses its emergency preparedness drills. The document with the emergency succession plan, presidential recommendation, and senior management decisions should be updated and reviewed with the board annually.
- **Create a communication plan** that will allow you to share the interim choice with the campus constituents. This may be a sequence of communications that are disseminated to various constituents (e.g., faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors, greater community).



Without sharing specific names of potential emergency successors, a well-defined emergency succession plan provides reassurance to the campus community that leadership transitions, even sudden ones, are handled thoughtfully with the institutional success in mind. Emergencies do not need to become crises. A sound, strategic emergency succession plan will ensure there is little to no disruption in the university's business, mission, or momentum.

When a university invests in identifying, mentoring, and developing those individuals, it fosters a culture of leadership readiness.

Deliberate Succession Planning: Building a Culture of Employee Growth

Deliberate and thoughtful succession planning, proactive and developmental, ensures institutional stability and sustainability. Think about leadership at every level of the institution, among department chairs, associate deans, directors, and staff. When a university invests in identifying, mentoring, and developing those individuals, it fosters a culture of leadership readiness. Additionally, when employees know that they have ascendancy options within their own institutions, they are more likely to participate in leadership training, deepen their commitment to the institution, and consider themselves long-term employees. The Office of Human Resources can easily take the lead on these kinds of trainings and activities, which are not considered “one and done” trainings, but ongoing trainings throughout the year. A culture of commitment and employee growth will ensue.

This type of planning includes:

- **Leadership development programs** for aspiring administrators and faculty leaders.
- **Mentoring relationships** that connect emerging leaders with experienced executives.
- **Cross-departmental assignments** or task forces that expose employees to new aspects of institutional management.
- **Transparent advancement pathways** that allow employees to envision and prepare for their next role.

ACE, 2021; EAB, 2020; Gartner, 2023; NASFAA, 2019; Rothwell, 2010)

When employees see that their institution invests in their growth, morale rises, retention improves, and leadership transitions become smoother. Rather than searching externally for every new appointment, the university can often promote from within, advancing individuals who already embody the institution's values and strategic goals. I have often heard from employees that they need to move to another institution to advance in their careers. I have also heard “it is better to hire new employees from outside the institution in order to bring in new ideas, creativity, and perspectives.” While both perspectives have merit, neither should be thought of as absolute; rather, depending on the context and the situation, both should be considered and implemented as appropriate.

The Shared Responsibility of Succession Planning

Succession planning should not rest solely with the president. It should be embedded within the **board of trustees, cabinet, and human resources leadership**. Together, they can ensure that succession planning becomes part of the institution's governance structure and a culture of employee growth.

Successful Presidential Leadership: Succession Planning



A robust succession framework not only prepares for emergencies but also creates an environment in which leadership development is an expectation, not an afterthought. The result is a stronger, more agile institution. It becomes an institution that successfully navigates change while remaining true to its mission and values.

The president, leading by example with strategic succession planning, should model for the campus what is means to invest in and believe in the employees within the university. Succession planning is, at its core, an act of institutional nurturing, reflecting an intentional commitment to developing people, sustaining organizational values, and ensuring leadership continuity over time (Rothwell, 2010). It is an indication that leaders are focusing on leadership beyond themselves, being purpose-driven, and envisioning the enduring success of their colleges and universities. By preparing both for the emergency while concurrently cultivating and lifting the next generation of leaders, institutions ensure that their missions, and the communities they serve, will continue to thrive for generations to come.

References

American Council on Education (2023)

American Council on Education. (2021). Succession planning in higher education: Developing leaders for the future. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Succession-Planning.aspx>

EAB. (2020). Succession planning toolkit: Building leadership capacity in higher education. EAB. <https://eab.com/resources/tool/succession-planning-toolkit/>

Gartner. (2023). Succession planning: A guide for HR leaders. Gartner, Inc. <https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/topics/succession-planning>

National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. (2019). Staffing and succession planning. NASFAA. https://www.nasfaa.org/atp_staffing_succession

Rothwell, W. J. (2010). Effective succession planning: Ensuring leadership continuity and building talent from within (4th ed.). AMACOM.



Devorah Lieberman, PhD, is a senior consultant at The Phoenix Philanthropy Group, President Emerita of the University of La Verne, Harvard President in Residence, Senior Advisor to the President of the American Council on Education, Consultant-International Association of University Presidents, and Executive Leadership Coach.