

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION



Leadership Transitions: The New College President

Judith Block McLaughlin

EDITOR

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A framework is given for setting the vision of new leadership during the first two years of the presidency, with time frames and tasks to engage the community in its future.

Developing a Vision

Claire Gaudiani

New presidents. They fill campuses with hope but also dread. They arrive flush with new ideas, great expectations, and their own night terrors. The new president's vision conveys to widely diverse constituencies a spirit of confidence about the future and enthusiasm for the new leadership. The "vision thing" becomes a key to success. What does the president see? Can others see it too? Can they move to make the vision a reality?

In sixth grade we all read that Constantine saw a vision for his army—a sign in the sky whose letters said, "In hoc signum, vinces." And in that sign, they did conquer. His soldiers were convinced of their leader's vision and fought effectively, knowing the outcome in advance. Oh for the days when the leader's view of the future was so powerful! Constantine did not have diverse constituencies or polls to contend with.

Today, most leaders really have to engage their constituencies, to evoke, as well as announce, a vision of the future. Stone Soup is now a better model for vision setting. In this Russian folktale, three hungry, tired soldiers arrive in a village as they make their way home after an unnamed war. They go from house to house seeking some bread, but each villager claims that the postwar cupboards are bare, that even the townspeople are starving, so there is nothing extra for strangers.

In despair, the soldiers go to the town square. One of them suddenly announces that he will have to make Stone Soup, and he asks to borrow a cauldron and water. Curious onlookers bring these items, and watch while the soldiers locate one fine large round stone—a zesty soup stone. Others gather wood quickly and bring embers to light the fire. As the water comes to a boil, a ladle is offered for the first tasting. The lead soldier congratulates the growing crowd on the excellent soup stones they have in their town. Pleased and proud, townspeople draw closer to the strangers and respond quickly when

the soldiers suggest that a carrot and a potato would bring out the rich stone flavor. More vegetables, and then soup bones and a joint or two, arrive, and then other villagers bring contributions, as well. By nightfall, the hearty soup is ready, and it feeds the whole village their richest and happiest meal since long before the war.

In this story, soldiers had a vision—a good, hearty, peaceful dinner for themselves. They made their vision a reality, but also achieved much more—a fine dinner for the entire village, a strong and positive community experience, and a lesson for the villagers in how generosity and cooperation can improve life for everyone. They succeeded in making their vision a reality, not by announcing their vision, but by capturing the imagination of the villagers with an intriguing idea—Stone Soup. Moreover, their efforts began by locating the most important ingredient right there in the village—the large fine round soup stone. The process that followed was really a seduction—the villagers gradually falling for the idea of stone soup and deciding to participate in making it by giving something of their very own; something they had previously resisted sharing. The soldiers' vision and the experience they organized enabled the villagers to see and value their village assets quite differently. In fact, they became motivated to risk bringing some of those items out of the recesses of their cupboards, because they began to see how they could become more important in the cauldron than they were in the cupboard. The new president's vision should likewise entice the community to engage and give individual gifts to the common good.

A close reader of this story might object to its relevance to the experience of the new college president in at least four important ways. The soldiers did not come through a search process, were not selected to lead the village, and had no mandate and no power of an office to make things happen. However, while the soldiers did just arrive in town, for most people, so does the new president. In fact, in most cases this is exactly how campus villagers perceive the new president, although the president may not understand this for years. She and her vision have not been searched for or eagerly awaited by the community—only by the search committee and a few dozen others. The search itself has meant little to the majority of the community, except as passing curiosity. Of course, the trustees may have a mandate in mind but they are not on campus daily. The real villagers rarely have a compelling mandate they hope the new president will pursue. Some, perhaps most, just hope that, in their area, things do not change too much.

Finally—though it may not seem so—the president, like the soldiers, cannot really force change in attitude. In fact, it is no understatement to say that presidents of academic institutions have no more real power to exert over the faculty, staff, students, and alumni than the soldiers had over the villagers. Power is like fuel, anyway; if you use it, you lose it, and you may lose other things, as well. Imagine if the soldiers had decided to use their power to break into homes and take the food they wanted, or take hostages and force the villagers to give up their food in order to get the hostages back. Those soldiers

would not have had a good day, a good dinner, or a safe continuation of their journey. Most presidents know not to break and enter their new institution, but many make their first round of visits on campus and find the villagers polite but the cupboards bare. They hear good explanations outlining why things are the way they are. It may occur to the new president that realization of the vision will have to involve force. How about some powerful statements about cost-containment and accountability? Maybe the president should appoint a team to replan the university? Maybe hire a consultant for advice. . . . But if the new president is wise like the soldiers, she will see that what she really needs is a way to capture the imagination of the community.

The imaginative, even seductive, engagement of people in a fresh way of seeing the world is the first step of vision setting. The announcement of "Stone Soup" contains the president's vision and the power to make it a reality because the concept is open and engaging. It recognizes that power and resources are in the community itself—not in the president. The new vision is not a list of three, five, or fifteen presidential initiatives. Those will look like complicated add-on jobs for a lot of already busy people and they will make the president look like everybody's problem and nobody's solution, like the source of new burdens. The new vision should free people to see their own opportunity to contribute to an appealing project. One of the keys to a successful presidency is understanding how little power you have over people, yet what enormous power you have over their imagination. The role of the vision is to connect the knowledge and skills of the president and the community so powerfully that an outcome well beyond what anyone could have imagined actually results.

Like the soldiers, the new president has three distinct time frames in which to build a powerful vision to motivate the institution's community. The arrival in town or naming of the new president; the inauguration, when the vision is announced and first tastings occur; and the first two years where the soup is made and dinner is served.

Vision Setting: From Appointment to First Day on the Job

A magical and commonly underutilized period occurs between the announcement of the new president's name and the moment the new leader arrives on campus to take the helm. The trajectory toward success or failure is often set during these months. The announcement itself focuses everyone's attention on every word, smile, raised eyebrow, and head toss of the new president. Each is read for hidden meaning. This is the time for the president to capture the imagination of the community and to begin to set the vision and the style of the new era.

Mutterings . . .

"Will things get better for the faculty at last . . . or get worse?" "Are we finally going to have someone who can control costs . . . or get the faculty in line, or not?" "Is our college's reputation finally going to return to the high level we alums remember . . . or not?"

The new president's first informal remarks to the community and the press initiate a critical process of sizing up the leader and hopes for the future. These remarks and subsequent presentations on and off campus should show a true grasp of the institution's history. Good research and preparation for candidate interviews will have indicated some of the nuggets, but it is even worth delaying the announcement for a few days if the president can have the archivist, the secretary to the board of trustees, or other trusted insiders to the search process collect some stories about the institution's past, its heroes and heroines, historic moments, and decisions in which the community takes pride. People will move forward with greater energy and confidence with a leader who knows and values their shared past. Telling the institution's best stories reduces the profile of the new president as an outsider. Knowledge of the history shows respect for the institution, humility, thoughtfulness, and a willingness to do more work than is necessary. These are some of the virtues a leader needs in order to lead well, and ones most presidents probably have; if the community can discover them firsthand, some fears will be allayed.

Overheard . . .

"Is he arrogant?" "Does she care about this place or is she using us as a career stepping stone?" "Am I going to like this president?" "Why did they choose him?" "Why did she decide to accept this position?"

The prehoneymoon, preinaugural period is also a time to listen and establish the style of a listening leader. My dear great aunt who taught nursing in the 1920s once told me that people know what is right and what is wrong with them. They even know something about how to get better. Most doctors do not listen, do not ask, and do not watch carefully enough to learn. My aunt's wisdom applies to institutions, both big and small. The new president can only benefit from listening to the people. She will, after all, be setting the new vision, new directions, and new expectations, and certainly knows the external conditions impinging on the institution better than most community members. For the new vision to be seen quickly in the community and at many different levels, the people need to believe they have helped to shape it. In fact, the president's vision will be powerfully enriched by its contact with the wisdom of the community.

Listening can also demonstrate the president's values and style. After my appointment, in the five months before I assumed the presidency of Connecticut College, I announced in the campus newspaper that, every ten days, I would be on campus for a full day of community consultations. I asked all members of the community to come talk with me, to let me know what I needed to know to lead the college well. I asked people to bring any papers or reports they thought would help me understand our past and plan for our future. Because I believe that valuable insights come from people at all levels of the college community, and that encouraging creativity and responsibility

for the common good among all community members multiplies institutional assets, I made certain that custodians and secretaries, faculty and students, directors and deans all felt welcome to sign up for a half hour with me.

This was some of the most valuable time of my early years as president. I had a chance to get to know so many different people, to hear their stories, hopes, and disappointments, and to receive their warnings and suggestions. I prefaced each meeting by stressing that these meetings were not for me to talk or to make promises or commitments, but to listen and learn. I assured each person confidentiality and took notes after asking if the visitor was comfortable with my note taking. I read notes back to assure both of us that I had really heard the messages. I asked questions, many questions that helped me to test new ideas, to gauge reactions to current conditions, to connect what I had read in the catalogues, handbooks, and histories to the human dimension at the college. My closing questions to each person were: "What values do you think most people share on this campus?" "What one change would be most powerful for you, your colleagues, and the school?" (Even now, seven years later, I continue to use this style of consultation from time to time as I face important decisions.)

The president's willingness to listen not only brings in a lot of information and wisdom, but also demonstrates her values and style and buys goodwill. Many people see themselves as leaders in an academic setting. Consulting with the new president gives these people a chance to shape her thinking and to feel their own leadership. In addition, frequently repeated ideas begin to have deeper meaning for the president and she can acknowledge these ideas, making people feel good about their meetings with her.

Reflections . . .

"We used to always . . . but now we. . ." "In this campus with all the people who . . . we ought to be able to. . ." "When . . . was here, a lot of us were excited that the college was going to . . . but then. . ." "A lot of us would be willing to work pretty hard to . . . but we would need. . ."

Finally, listening familiarizes the campus with the new president. It gives many different people personal time with her. They recount their experiences to others. As members of all constituent groups start to evolve a clearer sense of who this new president really is, she becomes less of a stranger. This process diminishes the chance that any one incident or the opinion of any one person can be determinative, particularly negatively determinative.

Meetings like these should continue as open office hours for faculty, staff, and students every few weeks through the president's first year and subsequently, if possible. The president's personal engagement with people sets an important example for everyone who supervises others about how to listen, how to care, how to evolve vision, eventually set goals, evaluate achievements and value people.

Vision Setting: Between First Day and Inauguration

From the first full day of official responsibility to the day of the inaugural, the president has a chance to connect what she learned in the community consultations with her own insights about higher education, change, and the role of the institution under new leadership.

The president's ideas are, of course, vital to vision setting. She was, after all, chosen from a competitive group because of strengths that a cross-section of people on the search committee thought were just what the institution needed. A collective wisdom was already applied to address the question of what the new vision should be and the answer is the new leader.

The months between arrival on campus and inauguration are a powerful time to engage the official governance structures in thinking about the future. The president's question at this point is: "What do you think we need to do to dramatically strengthen our institution?" The president should begin to engage the formal governance structure, much as she had engaged informally with individuals earlier. Convening trustees, faculty, staff, and student and alumni leaders in separate groups, the president should address this question with people in half-day and even daylong retreats. Rather than trying to solve any problems, these meetings should aim to get ideas out on the table. With the president asking the questions, and a scribe recording ideas on flip charts, these brainstorming sessions can release new energies and freshen perspectives. With minimum guidance from the president, each constituency engaging the question will identify institutional strengths and weaknesses and identify information needed to assess these more fully and to forecast the risks and opportunities which lie ahead. The president's role is to liberate fresh thinking and to encourage blue-sky speculation. After six or seven of these constituent-based meetings, the president can ask two people from each group to go through all the notes and papers from the individual meetings and collect the ideas that recurred in two or more meetings.

Cross-sectional leadership meetings should follow the constituent group meetings to share outcomes developed. At these meetings with leadership collected from a cross-section of faculty, staff, students, and, if possible, alumni, the president can read back to the assembled group what the institutional leadership has said it believes, fears, and aspires to become. In all of these meetings, the president can keep testing parts of her own vision and verifying the wisdom gleaned in the earlier informal community consultations. The mix of the president's initial vision, the informal consultations, and the formal brainstorming are critical to the rich soup the president is simmering. The new president can ask more questions, and suggest some areas for further research but not really unveil the vision—that is for the inauguration. It is widely reassuring for everyone to discover the rich overlap in understanding shared by members of different constituencies. It is also good to unearth widely held notions that may in fact, be mistaken. At one college, the president heard, "To make this a stronger college, we would have to pay women faculty better. Everyone

knows women faculty are paid less here for the same rank and number of years of service than men." The president's question was, "Have we done a study to prove this? No? We need to do the study, then." When a study was done, this assertion proved false and correct information could be shared.

These meetings are powerful signs that the president will lead *with* the community, that the community has had informal and formal shaping effect on the new president, and that fundamentally they will be able to trust the new vision because it is already "ours," not an isolated "hers." The community has watched the vision being made. Finally, the vision, inclusive and responsive as it is likely to be, can be announced at the inauguration.

I always worry when new presidents say they will take the first year or so to really learn about the institution before making any big pronouncements. The president loses valuable honeymoon time that can never be recaptured. The college loses the momentum that a change in leadership releases. And chances are that the president will have to make a difficult and potentially divisive decision before having captured the institution's imagination, engaged its best resources on its own behalf, or increased the community's confidence in their new leader or increased their collective sense of well-being. Energetic use of the two early time periods enables a decisive vision to emerge early in the president's tenure, take hold strongly, and stand as a protective shield between the president and the first dangerous moment.

Inauguration: Laying Out the Vision

The inauguration itself should capture the future of the institution in courageous ways. The community anticipates a fresh perspective from the new president's inaugural. The address should recognize external conditions, build on the strengths of the institution, and strike in new directions that have been shaped by the president's vision and the consultations with various constituencies. People should hear clearly what the president values and what the institution will be striving for, but they will treasure hearing, as well, the value the president places on the institution's own history and internal wisdom. The president's vision should be shaped and worded in ways that the various constituencies can understand and own. Citing the wise words of an emeritus professor or kitchen staffer to illustrate a point, referencing a moment of institutional history, the president confirms that careful homework and listening has followed the announcement of the new leader. The vision expressed in the inauguration should become a point of reference for the president's tenure. As years pass, people should be able to go back to that speech and recognize it as the map for the journey the president has led.

The address itself connects past with future, insiders and old-timers with newcomers and new-thinkers. Respecting the past gives the new president extra leeway to focus on his or her new vision, personal style and stamp, favorite references, unique moral commitments. People will be more willing to accept the new president's vision if its first public presentation marks it as

organically connected to the best of the past and striving ambitiously to create the best future for the institution. To keep the vision clear:

Don'ts

Don't begin sentences with "When I was at . . ."

Don't point out weaknesses of the institution or its past leaders—no matter what.

Don't forget that you symbolize the college and its values and commitments, and that you represent authority—but must tread softly to move effectively.

Don't be small-minded, easily hurt, or vengeful.

Do's

Do take in what new colleagues tell you, and work from the college's strengths with discretion.

Do have open office hours for *all* staff, students, faculty, and so on—and have lunch in garage with physical plant personnel.

Do thank widely: not just trustees and major donors, but faculty, students, and staff in the kitchen and physical plant as well as directors and vice presidents. After graduation or reunion, for instance, write notes. Ask faculty and supervisors to let you know when someone they work with deserves special thanks.

Do take time to repair your spirit and keep checking on the vision.

After Inauguration: Confirming and Achieving the Vision

Most communities divide into three groups after the inaugural: believers, skeptics, and same-old-same-olds or wait-and-seers. The believers are those whose imagination the president has captured early or perhaps those whose jobs depend most closely on the president's approval. They may be the naturally optimistic or enthusiastic people who must almost be actively dissuaded from a positive view of the future. The skeptics are those who have decided that this leader cannot or probably will not succeed, or that no leadership ever really succeeds, or that fundamentally all authority is corrupt. The rest are the people who have seen presidents come and go and know that life will go on as usual regardless; that no one, certainly not they, need change or engage . . . probably.

The president's postinaugural task is to engage the believers deeply in the vision, make the same-olds into believers and move the skeptics into the wait-and-see category. To work this magic, the president can proceed with three or more of the following steps:

Address a long-standing need decisively. In one university, the informal and formal early consultative processes indicated that benefits had become a sore point for faculty and staff. Two days after the inauguration, the new president assembled a cross-departmental team including faculty and staff to explore and address employee benefits issues. The charge to the task force was constructed

using the president's notes from preinauguration individual and group meetings. The task force was given a ten-week period to complete the work, and the human resources head and institutional research director were both on the team, along with two hourly employees, two salaried staff, and four faculty, one of whom chaired the task force. They gathered annual comparative data from the institution's past and from a set of peer institutions, made cost and revenue projections, and established a deeper understanding of a broad range of issues related to benefits. While comprehensive participatory strategic planning was proceeding on schedule, this widely perceived problem that the community had shared with the new president was moving ahead on a faster track, thus satisfying people that straightforward progress could be made on previously identified issues.

In addition, the president used this issue to model how to make change. The president had assembled a widely representative community-based team, given it a clear charge and time frame, and provided access to all relevant data. The president met with the team every three weeks to hear progress and advice. He offered additional sources of information, suggested ways to phase in changes, and encouraged people to use benefits more wisely and reduce costs. The way this work proceeded briskly, addressed a major issue for all employees, and merited the president's personal attention, gave clear signals that the new president not only listened well (consultative period) and spoke well (the inauguration) but could act decisively and not just on issues he cared about. He showed that he could commit resources, including his own time, to issues the community brought forward. Thus, he also modeled how others could step forward and commit to work on issues he considered of strategic importance.

Identify and achieve one success in the new vision. Early successes capture people's imagination and release energies for the new efforts ahead. At one college, the new president's vision proposed that the institution define itself more clearly by a Center for Leadership Studies. Within her first year as president, she was able to induce a donor to endow a chair for this center. After that, the rest of her vision seemed achievable. "She had, after all, brought in the chair for . . ." In another case, the president wanted to initiate a new international initiative that required two faculty votes. Getting legislation composed and passed within the first six months of the president's first year was seen as a first-order triumph and suggested that other curricular changes might be possible as well—in a setting that had experienced prolonged stalemate on academic change. The extra time and effort that these new presidents expended on their early successes paid substantial dividends for years.

Develop a broadly participatory and comprehensive planning process. The president's vision for distinctive institutional strength should be presented in crisp, courageous, and memorable form in the inaugural, but when participatory, comprehensive planning is a part of the vision, the institution's doors and windows remain open to more possibilities. People feel that their advising and the president's listening have connected to create hopes and dreams beyond those

the search committee saw. The wait-and-seers and same-olds will be likely to pay attention. Even skeptics might take note. The inaugural can make it clear that a full planning process will be necessary to build the institution to new strengths.

Often, new presidents approach planning by appointing a committee to write an institutional plan focusing on the central ideas of the president's vision as they have been agreed upon loosely by trustees or articulated in a more isolated vision statement at the inauguration. "Our university will take a national leadership role in advancing research while improving undergraduate education, utilize new technologies throughout the curriculum, and strengthen our ties to the local community as one of our great assets." The team now has its mandate—how best can we progress on making this vision real?

This kind of planning can be a major stumbling block. The problem with this approach is how many people are left off center stage without a role to play, before they even know how they feel about the new director. Options begin to close down for many faculty, students, and staff. "Well, I guess the arts are not part of the president's vision. . . ." "The president is not concerned about scholarships, diversity, or the quality of student life or. . . ." How much better it is to announce three broad areas that are the core of the vision of a stronger and striving institution and announce *as part of the vision* that a powerful participatory planning effort will engage hundreds of community members.

A comprehensive planning process will lay open the whole institution to change, not just the three or four pet areas of concern to the new president. "From this comprehensive effort at reenvisioning the future together, we will discover and invent new strengths and remember old ones!" The president can follow words like these by referring to two or more most often repeated ideas from the earlier consultations as areas for consideration by the planning process.

Establish systematic management systems. Vision without a plan is pie in the sky, not nourishing soup. The systematic management of tasks and teams within crisp time frames is critical to achieving the vision. New presidents quickly reveal their management styles and these influence the way their vision is perceived by others.

Continued Muttering . . .

"He is great on details, loses the forest for the trees." "Great conceptualizer and visionary but forget trying to get an answer to a question in finite time, never mind by a deadline." "Likes to give assignments . . . can't be counted on to complete any."

Hardworking staff, especially those closest to the president, are the canaries in the mine where the president's vision is hidden. People will look to them to see how well they look as they work hard closest to the new vision. Systematic dependable management of tasks assures their health, productiv-

ity, and good feelings about their work. It also bolsters the confidence of those who watch them. Constant frustration with confusing and unclear signals, missed deadlines, scrambled prioritizations or volatile reprioritizations show in the eyes and sighs of the president's staff. The unmistakable danger signs are clear to others.

Solutions are available. Management software packages can enable the president and senior administrators to track projects efficiently. They are well worth the investment. The software helps assure that routine updates on projects or problems can be exchanged by computer and only take up meeting time if special circumstances suggest it. To manage the paper flow among and between senior staff and the president, I mark documents with initials of staff who should get copies and add R.D. to indicate that a response is due. At our regularly scheduled meetings, the senior administrators and I go through their sets of papers. Both of us are already well prepared to discuss them. I also periodically review the senior administrators' operational and strategic objectives to be sure that they and we are staying the course. These periodic reviews of the major goals occur while the R.D. files and software printouts assure that the rest of the range of responsibility is covered in appropriate detail and in predictable time frames.

Systematic management means thinking ahead of the schedule of activities so that deadlines are met without pressuring colleagues unnecessarily. The president's management style should include enabling senior administrators to forecast their work clearly, paving the steps from the event or the goal backward to "the work we need to do today." Reviewing schedules systematically with senior administrators will enable the president to connect elements of his or her vision to the daily unfolding of the first year. A new president will need last year's calendar of events for each constituency (students, faculty, trustees), curricular change schedules, and information and dates for each important college process (for example, the tenure process). Systematic management of tasks and time makes for easier leadership of people, and assures that the president's vision is not pie in the sky, but a real treasure that all will benefit from.

Learn names, learn names, learn names—everyone's. Finally, through the first year, the vision will be as real to people as they believe they are to the new president. The president needs to learn names. People know the president and his or her ideas belong to the institution and belong in the institution when the president makes people belong in his or her mind. To make the vision accepted by people, accept them as distinct individuals—learn their names. The new president will be expecting a lot of individuals to invest time and energy beyond the call of duty. The personal touch of knowing names early is deeply appreciated and admired because it is so hard. The president needs to show the self-discipline of doing something hard that is a gesture of consideration for others if she wants the same energy back in the offices, classrooms, labs, libraries, and on the fields and grounds of the campus.

Conclusion

Setting the vision is the president's most dramatic, difficult, and interesting work in the first year or two in office. The success of this task often determines the length and strength of the president's tenure and the contribution that tenure makes, not only to the institution as a whole, but just as importantly to the professional growth and personal well-being of the individuals who comprise the institution, including the president herself.

Each time the president models open, dynamic, courageous, disciplined, and inclusive thinking, people learn how to create similar environments in their own offices, departments, and workplaces. Over time, the spirit of the institution may come to reflect the style and spirit of the president. It can also reflect the institution's reaction against that style and spirit. The process of vision setting takes time and is very similar, even in diverse institutional educational settings. Ultimately, the vision is about the institution imagining itself, and it is about the president teaching the community to make and share its future, well-being, and success.