The time between a president’s resignation and the next president’s assumption of office—often a 12-to-18 month period—can be crucial for an institution. Between the winding down of an existing presidency and the successful launch of the next, there are all too many opportunities for lost momentum, frayed relationships, key departures, and financial disappointment. Some institutions have presidential transitions down pat; others struggle mightily. Running across both is an inescapable element: trustee oversight. My colleagues and I at AGB Search, assisting presidential searches and observing the larger life of institutions, know there is no one best way to manage these transitions. But too much is at stake for trustees to bury themselves in search and be bystanders to the rest. Here is what we’ve learned.

Best Endings
It is in the best interests of any college or university—and therefore of its trustees—that a current presidency be brought to a close in the most productive and gracious manner possible.

The enemy of a productive close is the president’s presumed “lame duck” status. Unavoidably, the campus knows that a new administration will soon be in place. But we’ve also seen presidents become lame ducks because of the way they themselves acted: agendas disappear, events are skipped, relationships neglected, and so on. Trustees become part of the problem when they countenance such an ending.

As Richard Richter wrote earlier in these pages (“Lame Ducks Can Leave on Wings That Fly,” July/August 1995), board members become part of the solution when they insist that the institution’s pace be maintained and then work with the president on a clear, substantive agenda, publicly announced, for the final months. If fatigue is an issue, a break or vacation may be in order. If authority to move ahead is at stake, an endorsed agenda strengthens a departing president’s hand.

Working with board support, we’ve watched outgoing presidents collect fundraising chits on final calls to donors; make tough program, budget, or personnel decisions that saved grief for a successor; and keep top deans and vice presidents in the loop and off the job market. Smart presidents know that how they end their tenure is a big part of how they’ll be remembered.

Board members should also work to ensure that every presidency ends with dignity if not grace. Few presidents who’ve made tough decisions will leave universally loved, but all possible honors and events should be scheduled, in style. These become a way to celebrate accomplishment, reinforce institutional stories, and honor the presidency itself.

A special—and difficult—case is that of the non-renewed or fired president. Boards might bear in mind that the irritations that called for departure are often unknown to much of the campus and to most alumni and donors; a dignified departure maintains their faith in the institution. The board and fired president both have reputational and leadership stakes in how the departure is portrayed; fingerpointing serves nobody’s purposes. And, since in the forthcoming search, all finalists will insist on speaking with that president (“What is it like to work with this board?”), a graceful, even generous departure is always in order. The generosity can start with a crafted announcement and extend to salary matters, outplacement services, moving expenses, and the like; departure agreements may include a mutual nondisparagement clause.

Happily, a more typical circumstance is that the departing president has won the admiration and gratitude of campus and board, prompting trustees to think about post-presidency honors. For exceptional service, “president emeritus” is the preferred title. The board may also consider whether he or she should be named chancellor. Except at the very few universities where it has been a tradition (the University of Richmond, for example), the universal caution is not to do it; it ties the hands of an incoming president and often confuses lines of authority. Ideally, the institution, at which time the matter of an additional title can then be raised.
Contemplating the Search

Ideally, the sitting president and board will agree on a departure well enough in advance (nine to 12 months is the norm) that a full national search for a successor can go forward. Events—an illness or firing, for example, or recruitment to another campus—often conspire otherwise, forcing a board to think about timing and options such as forestalling the search in favor of an inside appointment or of identifying an acting president from outside. The relevant point here is that the hasty search and quick appointment can be recipes for disappointment.

Haste, too, can be the enemy of the kind of reflection that ought to precede a search. We’ve all seen the board that says, “Let’s get a new person in office ASAP, and if they’re any good they’ll take care of whatever problems we have.” Lost in that rush is the kind of reflection that should precede a search. What have we learned from the last and preceding presidencies? What was our role in their fate? Given where we are, what background and abilities do we need next in that office? What kind of search will best contribute to a successful next presidency?

This accomplished, a board is then in position to appoint and charge a search committee. The building of that committee best begins with selection of a chair for the search—a crucial appointment, given that he or she will over time manage the process, be its spokesperson, be a first and continuing contact with top candidates, and be the committee’s agent in transmitting recommendations to the board. The role of the search-committee chair is timeconsuming, so availability for the task must be a factor in this appointment. To instill ownership in the role, the chair-designate should have a hand in choosing the committee’s membership, likely to include trustees, faculty members, a senior administrator and staff person, a student or two, and maybe an alumnus or community leader. In all cases, institutional citizens with good judgment, and who collectively put a best face on the institution as it seeks to attract talent, are the best candidates for committee membership.

The board completes its launch of a search committee via a written charge, often delivered by the board chair at a first meeting of the committee. Having itself considered the matter, a key element in charging the committee is the board’s own sense of what the institution needs next in its presidency—the “What should you be searching for?” question. A formal charge also outlines board expectations for the process itself, bylaws requirements, a desired timeline, affirmative-action commitments, budgetary allotments, and the form and manner in which committee recommendations should come to the board (e.g., up to three choices, unranked).

In organizing for the search, committees must decide whether to engage a search firm. If so, an RFP is typically prepared, firms interviewed, references called, and a choice made. What can matter most here is how the committee itself sees the search unfolding. It will find firms that all but take over the search, promising everybody less work and a handful of candidates at the end. It will find others that want the full search committee engaged at every step, making all key decisions. The choice may hinge on which values the committee holds highest: speed and efficiency versus the committee’s own consultation and choice-making. The former may get a
next president in office as quickly as possible; the latter aims to found a next presidency in ways the community will embrace.

The committee’s work will be facilitated by the appointment of a capable search secretary, someone of experience and seniority. He or she will keep a record of committee proceedings, arrange its meetings, help candidates travel for interviews, arrange campus visits, collect feedback from those visits, and the like. Often it falls to the board’s own secretary to handle the task. Most committees deem it important to conduct the search without the departing president’s involvement, so a person not in his or her office may be chosen.

On most campuses, the departing president, no matter how admired, plays, at best, a supporting role, for example being available to finalist candidates for questions. Every president, having given heart and soul to the campus, is understandably eager about who the successor will be. But a board’s hand must be free to do what it thinks best for the next phase of institutional life.

**Appointing the President**

Presidencies succeed when president and board work hand in hand as partners in service to the institution. The first signs that a happy outcome may be at risk can come in the act of appointment.

Consider one institution, looking to replace its longtime president, that we observed recently. A small band of trustees with no presidential search experience took to itself the tasks of search and appointment. When they found a person they liked, they quickly offered her the job. Hearing yes, they stepped out in the hall, declared the appointment, wished the new president good luck, got in their cars and drove off.

What’s wrong here? For one, most of the board had no role or voice in the selection; for the new president, a most important constituency—the full board—had yet to be convinced. Across the wider campus community—which had largely been kept in the dark about the search—anxieties, resentments, and rumors abounded. For this president, there would be no honeymoon.

Just as important, the board members and this (inexperienced) new president never took the time to reach understandings about a whole range of factors crucial to their relationship. Beyond the mentioned salary, what resources and benefits would this person (and her family) need for success in office? What communication patterns, both ways, met each party’s expectations? Did the board expect the president to pursue a certain agenda? When and by whom would evaluation occur? When a separation occurred, what might be due the departing president? Indeed, beyond the handshake, would there be a contract vetted by professionals on both sides?
The larger point of a contract, beyond an enumeration of benefits, is that it forces board and president to have deeper conversations about what is needed on both sides for a relationship to work. These conversations must occur before votes are taken and announcements made.

Alas, this very real president lasted a bare four years in office. One rubbing point—again, not discussed in advance—was the presidential house, which looked fine on the outside but was in poor repair and dysfunctional within. No surprise, the six-figure repair and remodeling bill was put down by already-suspicious parties to presidential aggrandizement. A wise board never puts a sitting president in that position; between the announcement and assumption of office, the fixes should be made in the name of trustee investment in university property.

### Off to a Good Start

The business sections of larger bookstores have a shelf of how-to books full of advice on starting a new job well, of making those first 30 or 90 or 500 days count. *Trusteeship* has run articles on the topic, too, and the advice isn’t much different: Do your homework, listen well, learn the history and culture, develop relationships, evaluate people, figure out agendas and whom to trust, look for small victories while holding off larger decisions.

Board members can help the process by hosting well-planned visits to campus before the president assumes office; by facilitating “listening tours” with key donors, politicians, and community leaders; and by funding relevant learning experiences, such as the New Presidents Seminar at Harvard or AGB’s Institute for Board Chairs and Presidents. A daylong retreat may help a board and new president hash out expectations and an agenda. If at all possible, even at the cost of a delayed entry, negotiate a break or vacation time between a present job and the new presidency. Do not overload a president-elect with visits and constant phone calls; one regret many presidents express later was that undue demands from their new institution frustrated their ability to conclude a prior position in a professional manner.

One creative thing boards can do for their incoming president is to raise money to create a president’s discretionary fund for use on entry, giving him or her opportunities to make an immediate difference (“small victories”) within the confines of an inherited budget. At Eckerd College, trustees came up with $350,000, which allowed its new president to involve many parties in creating a campus master plan and to create a new fitness center, all of which lent a sense of energy and forward progress to his administration.

### Making It Happen

The good news is that for all that needs to happen during these 18 months of transition, most trustees will have, at best, a supporting role. No question, a well-managed transition will test a board chair’s time and wisdom, and that of executive committee members, too. But all work will be greatly aided by a smart, active, and reasonably funded transition committee.
Such a committee is sometimes authorized in board bylaws or by institutional or system protocols. (Indeed, it is a good idea in general for many of the key steps in transition, including the appointment of an interim president and a search committee, to be specified in advance.) A transition committee needn’t be large. An effective one we observed recently included two local trustees, the board secretary, a senior administrator, two tenured faculty members, a student, and an event planner. Their charge was to look across the 18 months and plan events that celebrated the institution and its presidency.

The first phase of work focused on the departing president, for whom the committee organized a black-tie dinner, an all-college reception with an art show, a ceremonial start to a basketball game, and a staff picnic. It arranged for and presented a bound volume of photographs and testimonials, commissioned a portrait, and raised funds for a trip for the president’s family. Each of these steps was taken with the president’s approval, with several events reflecting his favorite aspects of campus life. His initial hesitancy about “all this fuss” was overcome by arguments that this was personal, but it was also about an institution celebrating its presidency.

At a certain point, the locus of attention shifted to the welcome of the new president. It was the transition committee that oversaw repair and preparation of the president’s house (in quiet consultation with family members), arranged the introductory campus visits, funded a professional development event, and worried about things like car leasing, expense reports, HR paperwork, and e-mail accounts. At Monmouth University, the new president was welcomed with an all-staff garden party, an event that is gratefully recalled on campus.

Two possible items remain on a transition committee’s agenda. One is to act as a sounding board or “kitchen cabinet” to advise the incoming president on institutional folkways. The second is to oversee preparations for an inaugural event. On both of those matters, of course, a president eventually will seek his or her own way, but the help proffered will be much appreciated.

A Final Note

John W. Chandler, a former colleague and president of both Hamilton and Williams Colleges, taught us that “institutional fortunes are affected profoundly by board decisions before, during, and immediately following the selection of a new president.” With that realization—and a good sense that what’s needed will always be situational—board members can fashion presidential transitions that support leadership, reinforce values, and sustain the mission.
Responding to the Call for Equity: What Every Board Member Should Know
Department of Education Issues Proposed Title IX Regulations on Sexual Harassment
Recognizing the Role of Boards in Title IX
Institute for Board Chairs and Presidents of Independent Colleges and Universities
Institute for Board Leaders and Chief Executives of Public Universities and Systems