

SO YOU WANT TO BE A COLLEGE PRESIDENT?

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Get ready to jump through many hoops!

This is Binder's manual for those numerous men and women, in and out of the academic closet, who aspire to that exalted position of a college presidency and are wondering how to get there. The manual, written by a retired college president, may also be used as a survival kit for those floundering about in the treacherous marshes of academe. It doesn't guarantee immunity from snakebite or malaria, but it may help to avoid the quicksand of the campus swamps. There are between six and seven hundred liberal arts colleges in this great land. Some of these private, four-year undergraduate institutions are church-related. Most are independent. The number appears to be shrinking. These colleges are scattered about the country, mainly in the East and Midwest, and usually are found in inaccessible places, often on a hill overlooking a town, or miles from the nearest airport. They vary, not so much in size, but in quality, from the Amhersts and Swarthmores to those which are undistinguished and almost unknown. One disgruntled alumnus once told me he was a graduate of a small Christian college—for small Christians. I knew the institution and winced inwardly. Among these liberal arts colleges, perhaps 10 percent each year will be looking to fill the office of president. That percentage may be reduced considerably when one is looking for a post in a prestigious or even a well-known institution. Thus, the odds are not in favor of the aspiring applicant. The road to securing a post as college president is filled with hazards, making the odds of surviving the journey slim. For those up to the challenge, here are some pointers.

STEP 1: THE VISION

Discouragement and discontent feed the fires of ambition. Why bother to move through those anachronistic professorial ranks only to die as an associate professor? Instead of the drudgery of teaching required survey courses to lethargic students, would it not be pleasant to become associated with an idyllic liberal arts college, complete with a soft, greenswarded campus populated by bright, happy students who are inspired by dedicated, competent, and collegial faculty? Certainly, both groups would yearn for leadership to guide them out of the deserts of mediocrity and into the promised land of superior performance.

STEP 2: THE UNION CARD

If one is determined to pursue the vision, one soon discovers that there are several steps along the way. First, there is the union card, euphemistically called the Ph.D. degree. College and university presidents without a Ph.D. are generals, defeated politicians, former corporate executives, priests, ministers, and State Department types. Regrettably, nothing in the life of a lowly university professor with an M.A. degree points to those professions. The only possible pathway to prestige and power is through graduate school. Not any graduate school, mind

you, as liberal arts colleges lean toward the Ivy League. Who can gainsay a Ph.D. from Harvard except, possibly, Yale? The odds favor the “fancy” degree over the “plain” degree and, thus, in a quest for academic Nirvana, one must be determined to attend an Ivy League university.

After several years of bondage, the Ph.D. is awarded. People could now call you “Doctor,” unless you went to Harvard. Titles aren’t everything, but they are way ahead of a second-place “Mr.” or “Ms.” Your colleagues, however, continue to call you by your last name, after mumbling some form of congratulations. Your spouse continues to call you by your first name, after mumbling a sigh of relief that the ordeal is over. So much for Ivy League elitism.

STEP 3: THE DEAN’S OFFICE

Armed with a Ph.D., it’s time to move down the road to becoming a college president by slapping on some training wheels. This is accomplished by becoming an academic dean, or even an associate or assistant academic dean. Another alternative is to become a departmental chairperson in a large university, but that takes a great deal of time. Anyone in a hurry to become a college president can’t afford to muck about in university departmental politics, as most department heads have to balance talent with seniority in order to be elected. Some might be tempted to gate-crash the academic compound by obtaining a doctorate in higher education from Michigan or Penn State, or wherever, but purists avoid these programs. They know, like all elitists with tunnel vision, that they possess the truth by virtue of a bona fide doctorate in the arts or sciences. Besides, who wants to be known as a “dead” (D.Ed)?

In independent liberal arts colleges, academic deans are appointed through the mysterious workings of a faculty committee assisted by the administration, with the president having the final say. Sometimes deans of liberal arts colleges are appointed from the faculty ranks of that same college. This is a bad move since a dean from the “inside” comes to the post burdened by friends and enemies on the faculty, as well as a stack of old, wornout ideas. In the absence of new visions, factions develop, personalities are pilloried, and old sores reopened. The president then steps in, becoming his or her own dean, which is a catastrophe. Deans should be brought in from the outside to breathe new life into the curriculum, root out faculty deadwood, and provide new strength to failing programs. Anyone given the chance to become a dean at his or her present college should politely but quickly decline. Always apply for a “deanship” at a college other than your own.

The qualifications to become a dean include a successful teaching experience and, at a minimum, being promoted from instructor to assistant professor. It is also essential to have published several scholarly articles, along with that dissertation, which doesn’t look half-bad in hardcover. Positive recommendations from the department chairman and your dissertation coordinator can put you ahead of the

game, but beware of recommendations from “trusted” colleagues. Above all, it’s time to polish up that charming personality for the interview.

While the president makes the final decision in selecting the dean, that decision should conform to the majority opinion of the faculty committee, or there will be trouble ahead. The selection of an academic dean is a delicate matter. The life-blood of the college, the academic program, depends upon the correct choice. It is better to appoint your brother-in-law dean than appoint one from inside, or one not approved by the faculty committee. Remember this when you become president.

STEP 4: THE EXPERIENCE

Having made it to dean, your chances of becoming president just increased ten-fold. As a dean, you’ll knock heads with recalcitrant faculty, fire and hire through proper procedures, and recommend or deny promotions. You will get other scars from locking horns with admissions personnel, the athletic director, the financial aid officer, student affairs, and even, on occasion, with the president.

Excellence is your trademark, your theme. Fortunately, the word is so nebulous that it is always safe to use, and no one knows exactly what it means. A college catalogue without the word “excellence” in its mission statement could hardly be considered a college catalogue at all. In the name of excellence, you have stood for quality and high standards of teaching, scholarship, and admissions. You have made influential friends and picked up a few enemies along the way. You have attended dozens of regional and national education conferences, suffered through hours of deadly speeches, and even given a few of your own. You have served on regional accrediting commissions. You have met all the right people at these dismal affairs. Now you are ready for that coveted college presidency.

STEP 5: THE APPLICATION PROCESS

In early spring, it’s time to read the presidential search notices in the trade paper, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. For good measure, peruse the ads in the *Sunday New York Times*. Call and write your friends to send letters of nomination and recommendation, but do not do this behind your president’s back. Profess your loyalty and tell your president what you are doing. Presidents who have been deans know the routine, and will be supportive. Even if you have been a thorn in the president’s side, the support will be there, just for the prospect of getting rid of you.

Leaving no stone unturned, you may decide to go to an agency in the business of placing people in administrative positions. Some are legitimate and some are suspect. National associations of colleges and universities are good bets, but be wary of independent “head-hunters” who call themselves educational consultants.

Unless you have “old boy” or “old girl” connections, you either get lucky or you don’t. There are usually 100- 200 applicants for every college president vacancy,

so it is often sheer luck. You are notified you have survived the early cuts and are among the top ten. It's a little like Ed McMahon's lottery, only you haven't subscribed to any magazines to receive the notice.

STEP 6: THE INTERVIEW

There are two kinds of interviews. The first is the perfunctory interview. Your name and credentials have surfaced. The real choice already has been made, but the chairperson of the search committee wishes to avoid legal complications. As a protective strategy, you and a few other candidates are invited to visit the campus. You are quickly, almost furtively, shunted about from one administrator to another. An assistant dean, barely out of graduate school, takes you to lunch in the school cafeteria. With the reminder to submit your expenses, with proper receipts, you are bid a quick goodbye. If you have flown in, you are deposited back at the airport by the same student driver or groundskeeper who met your plane. You learn the inside scoop from the driver, and decide you would not have accepted the appointment even if it had been offered to you.

The second kind of interview may be classified as the "serious" interview. The search committee has pared the list down to three candidates. You and your spouse are invited to visit the campus, as most liberal arts colleges are old-fashioned enough to take a look at your wife, or husband, as the case may be. More importantly, perhaps, your spouse wants to check out the town and its schools, cultural activities, employment opportunities, medical facilities, shopping malls, etc. And, of course, the president's house warrants a close look. Liberal arts colleges usually hire the president and the spouse, effectively getting two for the price of one.

There is no shunting about this time, as the second interview is well structured. The chairman of the board is present, and may even meet your plane. There is a small reception in your honor. You meet a number of people and promptly forget their names. But no matter... there will be time to sort them out later. If you are a male candidate, your wife is commandeered by a couple of trustee wives and doesn't reappear until lunch. You spend your time in interviews with various administrative officers, whose unspoken concern is whether they keep their jobs if you take the position.

You also meet the chairperson of the faculty and three or four senior professors, a couple of student government types, a half-dozen trustees, and the alumni president. Along with the chairman of the board, these people constitute the search committee. Excuse yourself from making a general speech to the faculty and staff. Instead, spin out your educational theories during your interviews. Be consistent, be politically correct, but be general. Sing the praises of the liberal arts and sciences. Stand up for a well-rounded education, whatever that means. No one will challenge that stance as everyone has his or her own idea of what a well-rounded education really is. Do not linger in any office longer than your

schedule permits. Before lunch, be sure to go the restroom. There is a long afternoon ahead of you.

STEP 7: THE LUNCHEON

This affair, the main ritual of the interview process, has its own special procedures and pitfalls. For one, never salt your food before tasting it. If you do, it will be interpreted as impetuous decision-making without ascertaining the facts. And make sure to eat the salad on your left. Eating the wrong salad will throw the whole table off. A Ph.D. won't help if people start to mutter "bumpkin." Be sure to compliment the business manager on the food service, as this is the person who hired the company. Do not question the business manager about the college budget or endowment, but ask for a copy of the audit quietly and in private. In general, stick to broad topics such as the weather and the Super Bowl, and keep politics out of the conversation. Never harp on your own hobbies. Colleges want to know they are getting 100 percent of your time. During the luncheon, don't be intellectual. This is not difficult for most presidential candidates. Being intellectual may embarrass trustees who are automobile dealers or who own Pizza Hut franchises. Use buzz-words and phrases such as your present position is "secure" and "gratifying," but you are looking for "new challenges." For good measure, throw in such words as "quality," "interface," "linkage," and, of course, "excellence." Don't pause to define these terms.

Here are some luncheon guests to be especially wary of:

(1) The president of the student body and the editor of the student newspaper. Smile, but avoid eye contact. Don't ask for their opinions. Twenty-four hours after you take office, they will tell you their opinions on everything.

(2) The college chaplain. Included in the lunch to say the blessing, the chaplain will take your moral temperature and test your social conscience. Avoid eye contact here, as well, to reduce the chances for direct interrogation. At this point, you don't know the territory but you can certainly sense the minefields.

(3) The director of development, also known as the vice-president for college advancement, or something like that. This person has all the instincts of a used car salesman. You will be working closely with this individual, but don't get too friendly. You may have to find a new director of development if the job is not getting done. Make sure the director of development can introduce you to the right people, including grantmakers, corporate leaders, local and state representatives, members of Congress, and wealthy alums.

(4) The dean of academic affairs. Be polite, as this dean will have a vote in your selection. Also, the dean may have wanted the presidency. As soon the contract is signed, start looking for a new dean.

(5) The chairman of the board. The most important figure at the luncheon, this person's friendship and support are vital, especially once you get the job.

Most chairpersons are reasonable people and have a great love for the college and respect for its president. So cultivate this person's goodwill and trust, and seek his or her advice and counsel. In return for this loyalty, you are expected to be a model of honesty and propriety. The few who are not and still keep their jobs are too clever to be college presidents and should seek careers in more lucrative occupations.

STEP 8: THE CAMPUS TOUR

After lunch, you are treated to a campus tour by the director of buildings and grounds. Ask if the maintenance staff is unionized. Sadly, yes. There is no further discussion on this point. The director, a cautious person, shows you only newly constructed or recently renovated buildings. There aren't many of either, so the tour is very short.

The college library is a vital stop. Look for signs of frustration and dissatisfaction on the part of the college librarian. Assure the librarian of your commitment to books and an expanded library budget, should you be appointed. The word will spread quickly right back to the senior professors on the selection committee. As for the computer center, promise to modernize, regardless whether it is needed. The promise is easily kept. Inevitably, it will need modernizing three months after you arrive.

Because you have some extra time, ask to see the gym. It is called the athletic complex, but it is really a gym, and smells like one. By its smell, you judge it to be a 1950 model. You are wrong. The plaque at the entrance reads "The Alumni Athletic Complex—1939." You meet the athletic director, who usually has a nickname like "Buff" or "Grits" or just plain "Coach." Use it. You will need the A.D.'s support among the alumni jocks when you start the fund drive for a new athletic complex—a real one this time.

STEP 9: SEALING THE DEAL

By the end of the day, the vote has been taken and it has been decided you are the person for the job. The chairman greets you in the boardroom and extends the formal invitation to join the college. The terms of employment are outlined. You will serve at the pleasure of the board. Read "mercy" for "pleasure." The contract is for one year, to be renewed annually at the board's pleasure. (There's that word again.) Since the term is for one year, you know you are on probation. Not to worry. For college presidents, probation is a way of life. Make sure the salary measures up to the going rate. Confirm health and retirement benefits, insurance, and a reasonable expense account. Business is business and you are not a charity case.

The chairman presses you to sign the contract. You hesitate, not wanting to appear overly eager, or desperate. The chairman grows impatient, so you sign. The chairman introduces you as the new president of the college, and there is a round of applause from the selection committee.

STEP 10: SETTLING INTO THE JOB

The honeymoon year can be a disaster or a triumph. The odds are it will be the latter, with new faces, new ideas, a new academic dean, a faculty complacently expectant, friendly alumni, and supportive board members. And no wonder! Except for the appointment of a new dean, you haven't made any decisions to upset the status quo. Anyway, nobody liked the old dean, who is back teaching freshman math.

The honeymoon year will also feature the formal inauguration. You try to keep it low-key, but fail. It turns out to be a gala event. There is an elaborate, expensive luncheon attended by several hundred people. There is a formal academic procession and visiting dignitaries to attend to. There are a number of speakers, including the board chairman, the faculty chairman, the presidents of the alumni and student body, and two honorary degree recipients. You take the oath of office, and now it's time to make the inaugural address. The audience, saturated with speeches, is growing restless. You have written your address to last 20 minutes. You shuffle your papers and cut it to five. You are rewarded with thunderous applause, not for what you said, but for what you left unsaid.

STEP 11: JUGGLING THE MANY CONSTITUENTS

With any luck, you can start the first year with a clean slate, as the former president will have departed the scene one way or another. Perhaps, sadly, he or she has died, or was fired. Or perhaps the previous president resigned to accept a better position. More ominously, perhaps your predecessor has retired and is now "President Emeritus." The title is bad enough, but what is worse, he or she buys or builds a house in the same town. The ideal situation is for the president emeritus to live out the golden years in Tahiti, or at least as far away as Florida or Arizona.

Be particularly wary of the president emeritus who stays at the college's doorstep. This individual may prove meddlesome and usually is. Dissatisfied faculty and staff will seek out the president emeritus to tell their troubles. The troubles are you. The president emeritus has friends on the board who listen to the grumbling. Now you have troubles. As the board makes policy and approves your annual contract, the first and last commandment is to keep your board happy and supportive.

It's also important to keep a close eye on the faculty. Every faculty member, it seems, thinks he or she could run the college better than the president. Recognize this inborn trait and be tolerant, but not patronizing. Develop loyalty among your staff by delegating tasks and encouraging new ideas. Hold regular cabinet meetings, but keep the membership small. Expect honest assessment, good advice, and superior performance. The staff is your administrative team. They want you to lead. Don't disappoint them.

As for the students, you must be visible, honest, and a good listener. If you don't like students, resign! It is obvious you are in the wrong profession. Fraternities and other campus groups, however, can be problematic. In all candor, fraternities

are counter-productive to the educational enterprise. If you are stuck with them, maintain control and don't mess around with them. The Dean of Students will become your loyal ally. Other groups, alas, tend to spring up like mushrooms after a rain. The rule is, or should be, hear them out and be fair. However, if they damage the campus or threaten the safety of the faculty, staff, or students, go on the offensive. Expel the ruffians, or take legal action, but be sure the college has retained a competent law firm. Nobody wants a president who appears permissive, vacillating, or pusillanimous.

The alumni, on the other hand, are a welcome and vital part of the college constituency. Cultivate them and enjoy them—alumni also can be fun. Alumni are the college's link between its past and present.

Finally, be sure not to neglect the town itself. Join a local service club. Although this may be painful, it is necessary. Attend community concerts even if you hate Bach and string quartets. Support the United Way. Get to know the town leaders and walk the second mile to improve town-gown relations.

STEP 12: AVOIDING THE PITFALLS

College presidents must be prepared to face problems and outright emergencies. Many problems can be delegated. But emergencies need immediate attention. Who steps into the breach? You do. If you are not willing to accept that responsibility, go back to "deaning" or to the safety of the college classroom. A word of caution. Never enter a battle you are not confident of winning. As von Clausewitz warned, be careful that you don't win a battle, only to lose the war. Winning the war is the important thing. For a college president, winning the war means staying in charge, and keeping your constituents solidly behind you. When you're not busy putting out fires, there may even be time to implement some of the changes you'd like to see happen. Perhaps you want to alter the college curriculum, to bring it into the modern age. The old adage holds true: changing a college curriculum is like trying to move a cemetery. Here is where you may lose the war. Your academic dean should be your front line of defense. Don't expect miracles. Good deans wear down the opposition. Great deans just do it a little faster.

Changing the college calendar may prove an easier target, as long as the academic program is not sacrificed. Longer vacations are popular with students, and especially with faculty. After all, teaching 9 hours a week for a total of 28 weeks a year can be exhausting.

For most college presidents, fine-tuning the admissions process is a priority. Liberal arts colleges are competitive enterprises. They compete for faculty, foundation grants, corporate gifts, and, most of all, qualified students. Select your admissions team with care, and have them push scholarship aid, junior year abroad, the college's job-placement record, admissions to graduate and medical schools, and the safe campus environment. Provide for some ethnic diversity on the team, but steer clear of student quotas. Quotas benefit no one group. Try to

select students on the basis of their academic achievements, extra-curricular activities, and the quality of their high schools. Leave the remedial courses to the community college. If you are disillusioned by the watering down of the SATs, construct your own admissions test. This may sound old-fashioned, but it is honest. Most alumni will approve, though the weekly news-magazines will not, as the move will upset the data used in their annual selection of the nation's best colleges. If you believe in their listings, you must believe in the tooth fairy.

STEP 13: KNOWING WHEN TO LEAVE

The shelf-life of a college president is said to be seven years. There appears to be no firm data behind this figure, but it seems to have become a tenet in the business. Some presidents seem to endure a quarter century or more. No one, however, has come close to the tenure of Dr. Eliphalet Nott, who presided over Union College for 62 years.

Still, there is no firm rule for when to move on. If you are fired, you know it's time to go, but it's also a bad idea to stay in a job when the challenge becomes routine. Presidents who are bored make bad presidents. If the job loses its luster, and the defeats are more numerous than the victories, you have lost the war and need to concede.

Ideally, though, the time to leave is when the college is better than when you came. It boasts a balanced budget, improved salaries and benefits, a larger endowment, superior faculty, higher entrance scores, record annual giving, a few new buildings, and no debt. You believe you have done all you can. You are ready for a new experience and, hopefully, get offered a better job. Or, perish the thought, it's time to retire as president emeritus. If this is the case, do your successor a favor and head for Tahiti. And don't come back to town.

All of the above steps may sound like preaching. Knowing what I now know about the process, and after 27 years as president of three colleges, I can still say that all I ever wanted to be was a college president. But ask me if I would have done anything differently, and I'll tell you I wish I had followed Binder's manual!

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