The college or university leader safely ensconced in the ivory tower is an image from a bygone era. Today's presidential image? Maybe a selfie with the mascot that's been posted to Instagram and has thousands of likes.

Social media has changed how presidents and chancellors engage with students and show their fun—and even wacky—side. Before social media, if the chancellor started boogying down during the convocation cookout—looking at you, Chancellor J. Keith Motley at University of Massachusetts Boston (and current AASCU Board Chair)—or did the Harlem Shake with hundreds of students on a campus plaza—kudos to you, President Les Wong at San Francisco State University (Calif.)—only the students and staff lucky enough to be at the event were witnesses. Not so now. Video and/or photos posted to social media can instantly let everyone in on the impromptu, merry moment.

That's made it easier for presidents to showcase their lighter, funnier, more down-to-earth sides. Running a public college or university is a monumental task, but one of the most rewarding parts is when presidents get to genuinely interact and connect with students.

Following are five presidents and chancellors who take student engagement very seriously—and aren't afraid to let their true personalities show.

**FORMULA FOR ENGAGEMENT**

Back in 2006, on Thomas Haas’ first day as president of Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Michigan, he took a walking tour of the campus with the president of the student senate. While talking to a group of students, one asked him what they should call him. The students quickly dismissed “President Haas” and considered the possibility of “TJ,” which is what Haas went by in his college basketball days.

“And then a student said, ‘How about T. Haas?’, and they started chanting ‘T. Haas, T. Haas,’” Haas recalls. “A reporter was there from the Grand Rapids Press, and he wrote, ‘Students welcome T. Haas to campus.’ Now, even the mayor calls me T. Haas—and now my wife does too.”

In his 30 years in academia, Haas has always made student engagement a priority, starting off coaching the baseball, basketball and softball teams when he was a chemistry professor at the Coast Guard Academy. At GVSU, he spends an evening in the residence hall every winter to chat with students, and he always spends a quarter in the student section at the basketball games.

T. Haas is also a popular campus video star. He played 007 in a video promoting the formal Presidents’ Ball, which takes place every February and is hosted by Haas and the student senate president. And he starred in a video released last spring break that showed him feeling bored without the students on campus. “That 90-second video took six hours to film,” he marvels.
Haas counts as his “most enjoyable perk” so far his re-creation of the Blues Brothers Soul Man skit with the dean of students in his second year at GVSU. It was a rousing success on the burgeoning social media of the day.

Haas, who still teaches chemistry, knows that engaging with students is a simple formula. “You say yes if you can and then show up,” he says.

That showing up makes a long-term difference for the students and the institution. “It has been reported to me that recent alumni donors, since I have been president, account for 80 percent of the total new alumni donor base,” Haas says. “I think that engagement with students creates a relationship not just with me, but with the university.”

**ONE OF THEM**

When pressed, most campus leaders can dust away the cobwebs and recall certain aspects of student life, but Dana Hoyt, president of Sam Houston State University in Texas, gets an in-the-trenches reminder every year. During the Freaky Friday-like Sam Switch, one student becomes president for the day, and Hoyt takes the student’s place attending classes, lunching with friends and, in 2014, practicing with the dance team—all captured on video.

This level of student interaction is not a once a year phenomenon for Hoyt. “If you were to follow me around for a day, I can’t walk around campus without having students come up and talk to me and visit with me,” she says. “I think I feel approachable to them, and I like that idea.”

Hoyt starred in a video promoting dorm life, which was shown at all the orientation sessions this past summer and pushed through Facebook and Twitter, where Hoyt is very active. “It’s interesting that engaging in videos and social media feels more personal to [students]. It’s just a different generation, and this generation interacts that way,” Hoyt notes.

Hoyt also has lunch three times a semester with 20 to 25 students picked by her vice president for student services. Some are students the vice president thinks she should meet, and others are randomly selected. At lunch, the students are asked three questions: Why did you choose Sam Houston State? What do you like about the university? “And what would you change—besides parking, because everyone wants to change parking,” Hoyt says. “We have really good discussions, and they have really good suggestions for things that we have actually taken away and implemented,” such as extending library hours during finals.

She also knows that her approachability and engagement on social media and through videos helps a larger cause. “Any little thing that helps keep them engaged we hope helps retain them and get them through school,” she says. “It helps in the long-term to keep them engaged as alumni if they feel like this was a more personal experience while they were here.”

**FLYING HIGH**

As a longtime blues singer and guitarist, Joe Gow, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, knows how to give a performance. That’s good because he had to give the performance of his life when he was videotaped on a flight with the somersaulting Blue Angels.

“You start telling people you are going to do this, and everyone’s reaction is the same: ‘Wow, you’re going to puke or pass out,’” Gow says. “I thought, What did I get into? I knew I didn’t want that to happen.” Spoiler alert: It doesn’t. “The last maneuver he did, I was right on the edge. I was like, OK, you can go home now. But it was a singular experience. There’s nothing that compares to that.”

Gow doesn’t fly with the Blue Angels every day, but he does interact with
students as much as he can. He came into campus leadership knowing that he wanted to do that. “One of the things that inspired me to be a campus leader is that I watched some other people do it, and they weren’t very approachable or relatable. And I thought I would be more down to earth, so to speak. I’ve had the good luck of actually being able to do that.”

Gow counts his inauguration as one of his best times as chancellor. “It was the standard inauguration with speeches and all that, but at the very end, I had asked the jazz band if they could please come and play.” He sang “Luck Be a Lady” by Frank Sinatra with the band. “People were like ‘Wow, this is a first,’” Gow says. Singing a jazz standard was a first for Gow, too. “It was a little risky, because what if you flop? But it was really fun; trying something new is really exciting.”

Gow’s favorite recurring part of the job is commencement, when he shakes all of the graduates’ hands. “To know that we have made such a difference in their lives, and I’m the one who gets to stand there and formally experience that is really exciting. It fills me full of great optimism for the future.”

And his selfie at last fall’s ceremony was a really big hit.

ON THE BALL

When Brian Noland became president of Eastern Tennessee State University in 2011, he was 43 years old. and forth with the guy I’m guarding. He hits me with a pretty good elbow under the basket; I do likewise. We’d been playing for a good 40 minutes, and the guy looks at me and says, ‘Dude, are you president of this place?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I’m Brian Noland. How are you?’”

Noland still plays basketball as much as he can, but “I get picked up pretty easily now,” he says.

From day one, Noland has tried to bring energy and a sense of engagement to his presidency. “The thing that I love so much about my position is the chance to interact on a daily basis with the students,” he says.

Twice a semester he gets up at 6:15 am to workout with the ROTC cadets, he plays on intramural basketball teams, serves pancakes to students during finals week, and opens the presidential residence to the community for an annual Easter egg hunt. “Part of being very active and engaged in the community has been an intentional effort on my behalf to lead by example. We are all here to serve the people of Appalachia and our students.”

And like all good leaders, he’s a consummate multitasker, as captured in a well-circulated photo in which he photobombs the ETSU health science deans. The backstory is that in November 2013, Noland broke his neck in a car accident and couldn’t attend the December 2013 commencement. By
commencement in spring 2014, he was on the mend, but he needed to do neck stretches that could look a little odd. “So, I thought, ‘Boy this is a good opportunity.’ I could stretch my neck and stare the living daylights out of the deans and not let people know what I was doing. That picture has gotten a lot of mileage.”

The Opposite of Cold

Last spring, Joseph Bertolino, president of Lyndon State College in Vermont, jumped into the icy Library Pond. Dressed like a hornet, Lyndon’s mascot, with balloon wings.

This came after getting a pie in the face and before spending some time in the dunk tank at Springfest. While Bertolino certainly had fun doing all of these things, he also had an ulterior motive: He was raising money for student scholarships with each high jinx.

From the very beginning, Bertolino, or President Joe as he’s known to everyone, made it a point to engage with students. “When I first arrived, I participated in our orientation program with a cohort of first-year students,” he says. “I’m still in touch with those students and my peer leader.”

Bertolino came to Lyndon from Queens College in New York City. “I walked into the president’s house here, and I thought, ‘What am I going to do with all of this space? The patio is bigger than my apartment in New York.’” He and his husband converted most of the house to public space, turning the upstairs into a small apartment where they live.

He says that students are always on the property camping, making bonfires, playing disc golf or walking his dog. “She is far more popular than I am,” Bertolino says about his dog, Willoughby, who the students named after Vermont’s Lake Willoughby.

Bertolino doesn’t consider himself a particularly adventurous or outdoorsy guy, but he told students that he would learn whatever they wanted to teach him. “My first year here I went rock climbing for the first time, taught by students. The students have held my hand and have been extraordinarily supportive and helpful.”

Bertolino’s campus activities run the gamut. At the invitation of the theatre students, he makes a surprise cameo in one production of every fall play and spring musical. “The students [attending the play] never know which one I’m going to be at or what I’m going to do. It’s usually something fun and surprising when I walk out on stage. The students love it.”

While Bertolino clearly is having a good time with his students, he’s also doing his homework as president. “I learn far more sitting in the dining hall having a meal with students or sitting in the bleachers at an athletic game surrounded by students without staff.”

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