Saying goodbye to a president—especially one whose term of service has been marked by numerous achievements and triumphs—can be bittersweet for any college or university community. While people generally extend good wishes to the departing president, there’s often a collective apprehension about the organization’s future and the new leader coming to the helm. “It’s a mixture of great hope for a new chapter, and yet there’s also anxiety,” says Jessica Kozloff, president of Academic Search, Inc. and former president of Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. “There are very conflicting emotions—sadness to see somebody go that you really admire and have worked well with, and yet excitement about a new person coming in with new ideas.”

When the outgoing president is leaving the institution on good terms, he or she can play a valuable role preparing the institution, as well as the successor, for the leadership change. Linwood Rose, president of James Madison University (Va.) since 1998, says he was “thoughtful” about choosing the timeline for his upcoming retirement to ensure a smooth transition for the university. He wanted to make sure the board’s search committee had ample time to carry out the selection process, but also wanted to make sure the university climate was positive, with capable leaders in place to provide seamless governance and a sustained commitment to JMU’s mission. When his successor, who was named in December 2011, takes over the reins in July, Rose is confident that he’s leaving the university positioned for continued success.

The reward of succession planning, says Rose, is that “the next academic year and subsequent ones will not be traumatic for the institution. The new president will be different from me, having different talents and abilities, but hopefully the university community will see a continuing of traditions that have already been built here.”
The outgoing president has an important responsibility to prepare the university’s constituents for the new president.

Planning the Exit

Succession planning—the practice of grooming leaders from within the organization to advance to key executive roles—is common in corporate America. The custom is looked upon with more suspicion in higher education, possibly because of the tradition of shared governance that permits the university community to have a role in such decisions. But some insiders believe it should become a routine exercise in higher education—and a matter that is discussed well before a president plans to resign or retire.

A report by the American Council on Education (ACE), The American College President: 2007 Edition, found that nearly half of all college presidents in 2006 were over 60 years old. That figure suggests that the next decade could see substantial turnover in university top spots—and a need to cultivate fresh leadership.

John Garland, president of Central State University (Ohio), remembers the first time his university board of trustees broached the subject of succession planning with him. The issue came up about seven years ago, in a conversation he jokingly calls, “The Bus Discussion.” Garland explains, “The trustees were concerned about ‘What would happen if you got hit by a bus today? Who could take over and move the institution forward?’” He recommends that all presidents think about succession planning and welcome such discussions with their boards.

“It’s easy to take that to heart and to think, ‘Is this a hint?’” explains Garland, who will retire this summer after 15 years serving his alma mater. “But I followed the conversation, and it became clear that it wasn’t about me. It was about the institution.”

Robert Bell, who’s retiring this summer from his post as president of Tennessee Tech University, agrees. He sees it as a presidential responsibility to develop talent from within the organization, and his university often sends campus up-and-comers to AASCU’s Millennium Leadership Initiative (MLI) Institute to prepare them to advance professionally.

“One of the roles of the president is to always develop successors and develop emerging leaders who could take the helm,” Bell says. “We’ve always done that, and there’s an ongoing responsibility [for the president] to do that.”

By thinking ahead about when to leave the institution, presidents maintain some control over the circumstances under which they leave, and claim the opportunity to shape their legacies.

When Garland began thinking about when he should leave his post, “I certainly wanted to make sure I left at a time when the university was doing well,” he says. “I wanted to leave when the university was poised to do and accomplish much better things. It’s always been my firm belief that it’s best to leave at a time when the organization is doing well.”

Preparing the Institution

The search for a new president is an all-consuming effort that typically involves the institution’s governing board, as well as representatives from key constituencies, such as the faculty, student body or alumni board. It’s easy for those folks to lose sight of daily operations as they search for a new leader. That’s
Public Purpose

Welcoming a Successor

The outgoing president has an important responsibility to prepare the university’s constituents for the new president, who often will visit the campus several times before his or her term begins. These visits provide an excellent opportunity for the incumbent to make introductions, answer questions and provide information about the inner workings of the institution.

During the months since JMU’s president designate Jonathan Alger was selected, Rose has hosted him on campus numerous times. Rose introduced Alger to key constituents, including state and federal legislators and to Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell. Additionally, JMU’s vice presidents prepared briefing books and a SWOT analysis [strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats] to help Alger become acclimated. “This six-month period has been critical in helping him prepare for the job,” Rose says. “I hope what it does is create a situation where the typical anxiety any organization would feel over a new CEO-president coming in will be minimized. There will be a comfort level developed through the chance to meet him and his family in advance of him actually starting his job.”

Even so, experts recommend that the outgoing president keep a distance from campus during the first year to give the new president a chance to solidify relationships and win the confidence of the campus community. “The key is to stay away from the transition process unless the new president asks for help,” Bell says. “You can offer to help smooth the transition, but not be in there telling them what they ought to do or who they ought to meet. It’s a delicate, loose-tight kind of thing. You’re there when they need you, but you’re totally out of the picture unless they’re looking for you.”

The outgoing president also should weigh carefully what issues to handle before leaving, or which to defer to the new president. While experts recommend resolving matters that could become problematic for the new president, such as budget cuts, most hiring decisions—especially for top-level posts—should be left up to the new president.

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“At this particular time in the history of American higher education, we are faced with leading during a time where there’s considerable economic austerity and economic constraints, which can dampen the optimism and spirit of the institution,” Moore says. “So the incumbent president has to be able to describe accurately the state of the institution with optimism for the future.”

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—Patricia Cormier

could become problematic for the new president, such as budget cuts, most hiring decisions—especially for top-level posts—should be left up to the new president.

Patricia Cormier, former president of Longwood University (Va.), for example, vacated Longwood’s official president’s house a month or so before ending her tenure, allowing ample time for the university to refurbish and paint the house. By taking on this expensive project, she helped deflect potential scrutiny from her successor.

“I got an estimate and approval from the board before I left, so it was my problem,” says Cormier, director of the New Presidents’ Academy. “Putting the pieces in place to pave the way for the new president is part of the responsibilities of the outgoing president. How can you make this a happy moment for someone else? And nobody could say a word when he walked in the door because I’d already taken care of getting the house ready … The new president coming into a positive environment always results in better outcomes. When you do this right, it’s wonderful for everybody.”

The presidency isn’t a lifetime calling, Kozloff says, and bringing in fresh leadership is a natural progression. For presidents leaving their institutions on good terms—especially those who have served long tenures—she recommends involvement in the inauguration ceremony for the new president. This gesture of respect for the institution’s storied past and hopefulness for the future can generate excitement and enthusiasm among faculty, staff, students and alumni.

“Having the former president come back and be involved in the inauguration is so reassuring to the campus because there’s this passing of the mantle—it’s a wonderful symbol,” Kozloff says. “The ability to convey that sense of a good, happy leadership transition is very important. It allows the campus to say goodbye in a respectful way but then to welcome a new chapter in the institution’s life.”

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