



# First 100 Days as President or Chancellor

TAKING THE HELM OF AN INSTITUTION SUCCESSFULLY

# A New Playbook for the Modern University President

The era of the stable university presidency is quickly fading. Across the American higher education landscape, leadership transitions are more frequent and more fraught with peril. The average tenure of a college president has fallen to just under six years, a stark reflection of the immense pressures now bearing down on our nation's institutions. This accelerating pace of change is not happening in a vacuum. It coincides with a period of unprecedented challenge: shifting demographics, eroding public trust, political polarization, and a financial model that is buckling under its own weight for many institutions.

For generations, higher education has been a cornerstone of American prosperity and global leadership. Today, that standing is under threat, weakened by lackluster outcomes and a perceived reluctance to adapt. Our institutions must act now, with urgency and foresight, to avoid cutting off the very branch they are sitting on.

This environment creates a difficult situation for newly appointed leaders. The traditional 100-day "honeymoon" period has evaporated. In its place is a high-stakes diagnostic period where a new president or chancellor must quickly grasp the reins of an institution likely facing existential threats. They are expected not merely to manage, but to transform. This is the new reality: incoming executives will be confronting larger and larger issues that demand quick, decisive, and significant action across strategy, finance, the academic portfolio, delivery models, cost structures, and operational efficiency. The margin for error has never been smaller.

Moreover, true in higher education and private industry alike, success or failure is often determined not by grand vision alone, but by the strategic management of the transition. A well-executed transition creates a virtuous cycle, where early successes build credibility, which in turn grants the leader the political capital to drive more significant, lasting change. A poorly managed one creates a vicious cycle of missteps and eroding trust from which it is nearly impossible to recover.

We believe that navigating these difficulties requires a new playbook and support structures for the new executive that blends the strategic discipline of the private sector with a sophisticated understanding of the unique cultural and political ecosystem of universities and colleges.

## The Idiosyncrasies of the Academy: Who's Leading Whom?

Before applying any transition framework, a new leader must internalize the fundamental distinction of the academic environment: shared governance. Unlike a corporate CEO who can often rely on hierarchical authority, a university president must complement command and control techniques with influencing, persuasion, and coalition-building. The faculty, particularly tenured faculty, are often attempting to wield power over the academic core of the institution. They often do not consider

themselves employees in an organization - instead they perceive a form of stewardship of the institution.

This reality shapes every aspect of a transition. A top-down directive that would be standard in a corporate setting can be perceived as an existential threat to academic freedom and institutional identity. Therefore, the successful president must operate as a hybrid leader, blending the data-driven rigor of a CEO with the deep listening and political savvy of a seasoned diplomat.

## A Phased Approach to the First 100 Days

A successful transition is not a series of ad-hoc meetings but a deliberately managed strategic process. Based on best practices from across sectors, we have synthesized a phased approach that provides a blueprint for success.

### Phase 0: The Pre-Transition (between appointment and before day 1)

The most effective transitions begin long before the new leader officially occupies the office. The period between appointment and arrival is a finite window of opportunity for structured intelligence gathering.

- **Establish fact-based transition team.** We recommend borrowing a best practice from the private sector, by ensuring the support of a new CEO by a dedicated transition team that prepares a comprehensive briefing book. In higher education, this sometimes means working in close collaboration with the Board's Transition Committee. This group of people can provide a crucial political shield, allowing the president-elect to ask probing questions and receive sensitive information under the neutral banner of a board-sanctioned process, rather than as a "presidential inquiry."
- **Actionable Intelligence:** In support of the new leader, we recommend a request for the outgoing president to prepare a confidential strategic analysis, a report on future challenges, and a "relationship map" of key internal and external influencers. Furthermore, engaging a third-party consultant to conduct a confidential diagnostic through quantitative and qualitative analytics (including interviews with trustees, deans, faculty leaders, and donors) can provide an fat-based overview of the institution's true challenges and improvement areas. This allows the new leader to arrive with a nuanced understanding of not just the formal organizational chart, but the informal power structure where influence often resides.

### Phase 1: Days 1-30 – The Strategic Listening Tour

The first month for the new CEO is a period of total immersion. The single most important objective is to listen and learn, resisting the powerful "action imperative"—the urge to make decisions prematurely.

- **The Higher Ed Nuance:** The listening tour is not a PR exercise; it is a systematic diagnostic tool. It must include a mix of one-on-one meetings with the cabinet and board chair, small group sessions with faculty and staff, and informal "walk-arounds."

- **Key Questions to Uncover Reality:** The goal is to move beyond surface-level conversations. Powerful questions include:
  - "What are the three things you believe we must change?"
  - "What are the three things we must protect and preserve at all costs?"
  - "What are you most afraid I might do?"
  - "What am I not hearing that I absolutely need to know?"

This process builds trust and provides the qualitative data needed for a rapid, realistic assessment of the institution's culture, financial health, and operational pain points.

## Phase 2: Days 31-60 – Synthesizing and Securing Early Wins

After a month of intensive listening, the focus shifts to synthesis and shaping a preliminary agenda.

- **Best Practice from the Private Sector:** Successful corporate turnarounds often hinge on securing early wins. An early win is a visible, meaningful accomplishment that addresses a widely felt pain point and can be achieved within the first few months. In a university, this might not be a major strategic overhaul but fixing a universally disliked administrative process, resolving a long-standing policy ambiguity, or providing resources to a stalled but popular campus initiative.
- **Building Momentum:** These wins are critical for building credibility and earning the political capital required to tackle larger, more complex challenges. They demonstrate that the new leadership group is listening and can deliver results, creating a virtuous cycle of success. During this phase, the president must also conduct a thorough assessment of the senior leadership team, evaluating for competence, alignment with the emerging direction, and cultural fit.

## Phase 3: Days 61-100 – Aligning and Launching

The final phase is dedicated to communicating a preliminary vision and establishing a clear rhythm of execution.

- **The Higher Ed Nuance:** This is not the time to unveil a fully formed, top-down strategic plan. Instead, the president should deliver a "state of the university" address that is explicitly grounded in the findings from the listening tour. The narrative should be: *"Here is what I heard from you... here are the key themes you identified... and therefore, here are the initial priorities we will focus on together."* This frames the president as a synthesizer of the community's collective wisdom, not an outsider imposing a foreign agenda.
- **Faculty Considerations:** Faculty support will often be important to gain traction in the CEO's agenda. Gaining this requires a deliberate strategy: clearly explaining the rationale behind any proposed change with data, creating opportunities for faculty to participate in shaping solutions, and openly acknowledging and addressing their objections, where appropriate.

## A Call for Strategic Partnership

The modern university presidency is one of the most demanding leadership roles in any sector. The challenges are immense, the stakes have never been higher, and the path to success is riddled with unique complexities. Navigating this landscape requires both a strategic playbook and experience in managing top management transitions - but also demands a sophisticated understanding of academic culture, a disciplined strategic process, and the ability to build broad coalitions of support.

We believe that a well-managed transition is the bedrock of a successful presidency. This strategic process, taking place twice per decade for the average institution, will often require real investments in expertise and external resources. The Board and new executive leader will require the unvarnished, fact-based perspective necessary to make sound decisions, and the detailed knowledge of not only devising strategy but knowing how to implement it effectively within the complex realities of their institutions.

The crucible of change is here. For new presidents and chancellors, the first 100 days will set the trajectory for their entire tenure. Those who approach this period with strategic intent, a commitment to deep listening, and the courage to act decisively will not only survive but thrive, positioning their institutions for a sustainable and impactful future. Get it right - the future of American higher education is at stake.