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Knowing When to Leave the Presidency

We'd all prefer to leave on our own initiative and when our institution is thriving -- not when the board chair asks us to step down, writes Roger Martin.

By Roger Martin



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I am writing this essay for presidents who have served their institutions well for at least six years (the average tenure of a college president these days) and are hoping that they can go on forever. Unfortunately, many presidents who think this way sometimes end up having lunch with the board chair, who unexpectedly suggests that maybe it's time for them to retire or move on.

No one wants to be blindsided like this. All of us would prefer to leave on our own initiative, preferably when we are at the top of our game and our institution is thriving, not when the board chair asks us to step down. So even if things seem to be going well, let me suggest some questions you might ask yourself each year on the anniversary of your appointment as president.

Am I still getting along with the board? Because successful colleges and universities are the result of a partnership between the president and the board, it's important occasionally to ask yourself whether your relationship with the board, and especially the board chair, is still positive. Not that there won't be moments of discord. But if suddenly a definite and/or irreconcilable

divide occurs between you and the board, or if a new board chair arrives with whom you are incompatible, you might want to take stock of your situation.

Am I still enjoying the job? The presidency is difficult, but it should also be pleasurable. I've known too many presidents who in their sixth or seventh year will tell me they can't stand the job anymore. They have gotten into a repetitive cycle of meetings with alumni, faculty members and others that are predictable to the point of being monotonous, but they are nevertheless hanging on. Colleges and universities need high-octane leaders who are enthusiastic and energetic, not people who no longer enjoy the job and wish they could be somewhere else.

Does the institution have new or different needs now? The needs of a college or university change over time. Perhaps the board hired you because you had a special expertise in finance and your college *at that point in time* needed someone who could manage and balance the budget. It took six years, but now your college is not only in good order financially but thriving. Now what it needs is a president who can participate with the faculty in curriculum reform, which is perhaps not your strong suit. If that is the case, you need to ask yourself whether you have the ability and/or the inclination to adjust to the changing needs of your institution

If you can answer these questions positively, I think you are probably in good shape, at least for the time being. But asking these questions could also cause you to see the beginning signs that it's maybe time to reconsider your situation. What are some of those signs?

Perhaps you have become involved with too many external organizations. Of course, this is how higher education works. Presidents, representing their colleges and universities, become involved in academic associations and accrediting agencies, as well as on boards in their communities. The problem is that when external involvements begin to compromise our internal responsibilities, our institutions begin to suffer.

For example, I know of a former university president in his ninth year who had become almost exclusively involved with a national higher ed association, even though his institution was not doing particularly well. He had taken on this involvement perhaps to compensate for his disappointments on the home front, but a good percentage of his time was now spent off campus attending one meeting or another. In other words, he was being paid by his university to give advice and counsel to other universities, while his own institution really needed his undivided attention and involvement. The board acted, and he was asked to take retirement.

Perhaps, after many years in office, you are beginning to wear thin on the faculty. Good presidents usually have the support of most of the faculty, especially if the institution is moving forward. Of course, when hard decisions must be made, like initiating faculty and staff reductions during periods of financial stress, some members of the community will grouse. But everyone knows that this is what presidents must do.

Even successful presidents begin to wear on the community, however, when the college is in stasis and it seems as if they might never leave. That happened to another president I knew. Early in her presidency, and with the faculty's support, she raised a major foundation gift that allowed for the creation of a new and rather innovative general education curriculum. But 15 years into her presidency, as this new curriculum became commonplace, the question from the faculty became, "So, what's next?" When "What's next?" wasn't answered by this president, the faculty began getting restive -- another sign!

Perhaps you are ready for a new challenge. Many presidents who have served their institutions well for six or more years might yearn for one. If you have successfully accomplished your goals at the institution you lead and are in good health, nothing's wrong with moving on -- maybe even doing a second presidency.

Perhaps you are not in good health. Failing health is a natural reason why you might want to consider stepping down or retiring. That happened to me.

Several years into my second presidency, I contracted metastatic melanoma, a serious form of cancer that was almost always fatal back in 2000. But after a series of treatments at Johns Hopkins, I went into full remission.

Understanding that the immune system fights cancer but can be compromised under stressful conditions (something we presidents experience in spades) and with the encouragement of my doctor, I elected to take early retirement and am still alive and in good health!

Despite what I have just said about signs that it might be time to retire or step down, many presidents decide to remain at the helm. Here are some excuses I often hear when counseling presidential colleagues who know they should move on but for one reason or another are just hanging on. Can you identify with any of these?

“I can’t imagine not being a college president.” Behind this excuse is often the lure of power and prominence. A college president is often likened to the potentate of a small country whose authority is unquestioned; who, within the bounds of reason and decorum, can do whatever they want; who often lives in a grand house and has housekeepers and grounds crew to keep up the property; and who commands a handsome salary and benefits. Why would anyone want to give this up? Often in retirement, when I am mowing the lawn or washing the dishes, I ask myself the same question.

All that said, no longer being a president after having done it for several decades can be liberating, as it was for me. Giving up the presidency relieved the stress and anxiety that goes along with power and responsibility (and in the process elevated my immune system!). Not living in a grand house but in something smaller but my own was affecting. Mowing the lawn and washing the dishes brought me back to the reality of what most people must do, and I actually enjoyed these mindless chores. Finally, I got into higher education to teach and do scholarship. Once again being able to write articles and books in

my field brought me full circle to the idealism that defined me when I left graduate school.

So I say to my friends who have done the job well but have gotten into a rut, imagine eventually *not* being a college president. Perhaps it's the greatest job in the world, but some alternatives are just as pleasurable.

"I'm indispensable. I can't leave." Another excuse particular to presidents who have served their institutions for many years is the feeling that because they have become so much a part of the fabric of their institutions, they are indispensable. And they think others in the community (especially the Board of Trustees) feel the same way about their value to the university.

The problem with this rationalization is that probably many people on the board and in the community *can* imagine the university having a new president. That's because institutions of higher education thrive -- or should thrive -- on new ideas and initiatives, and by year 10, many presidents have achieved their principal objectives and are treading water. As we have just seen, the community wants more positive change, not just the status quo, and will go after a long-term president who has settled into de facto retirement.

"I can't leave. I need the money." We all want financial security, but this should not be a reason to hang on to a college presidency -- especially when things have gone stale and you should have left long ago. I have a friend who told me he was bored as a college president, didn't particularly like his colleagues anymore and detested the board chair, but, he argued, "Hey, how can I leave? I need the money." The consequences of staying at a college solely for personal reasons -- "I need the money" -- can sometimes be unfortunate.

"I've been a president for 15 years. What would I do?" If there is anything a college presidency teaches us, it's the skills needed to do the job, including the ability to communicate effectively with many different constituencies, to clearly think through seemingly intractable challenges, to balance budgets and

to raise money. These are skills that are applicable to countless postretirement involvements.

I'm not saying you necessarily need to leave your institution. Many presidents serve their institutions successfully for many years, and this is good. I'm just suggesting that there can be a life after the college presidency.

Bio

Roger Martin, a retired president of Moravian College and Randolph-Macon College, is the executive director of the British Schools and Universities Foundation and a senior consultant with R. H. Perry & Associates, a higher ed search firm. Recent books include Off to College: A Guide for Parents (University of Chicago Press, 2015) and Racing Odysseus: A College President Becomes a Freshman Again (University of California Press, 2008).