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The Relay Race of Leadership

Roger Martin advises new presidents that, while strong leaders surely make a difference, a college's success can't be attributed to any one person.

By [Roger Martin](#)



Every year, a new batch of college and university presidents takes office. What they are about to take on is one of the most important jobs in America: helping to provide an education for America's future leaders. I did the job for 20 years, mostly with success. But what follows is a bit of self-criticism that I hope might be helpful to new college presidents and the boards to whom they report.

During the years I served as a college president, I often caught myself doing what many of my colleagues do: crowing about my colleges' successes as though they mostly happened because of *me*. Presidents with healthy egos don't want to seem weak, and so at alumni meetings, in college publications and with foundations, we will often speak as though we and the college are one and the same. I can't remember how many times during my first couple years as a college president I said things like "Last year I raised \$8 million in current and planned gifts" or "I was able to boost enrollments by 5 percent." Only in retrospect do I realize how conceited I was. A strong president, of course, makes a difference. But a college's long-term success cannot be attributed to any one person. Great colleges exist because of leadership stability and the contributions of many people, including faculty and staff members and the Board of Trustees.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

When I became president of Moravian College in 1986, I met a couple who had lost their son, a student at the college, in an Outward Bound accident. As

a result of this tragedy, they had been donors to a scholarship in their son's memory. But the college now needed to build a new recreation center, and at an early meeting with this couple, I asked for a large gift. The father was now serving on the Board of Trustees, and he and his wife ended up providing substantial funds that resulted in the field house that today bears their son's name.

At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the local paper interviewed me, and I took credit for bringing in this gift as though it happened largely because of me. But it hadn't. The president before me had more to do with this gift than I did, because he had spent many years cultivating the family long before I appeared on the scene.

After 11 years, I left Moravian College for my second presidency, and the presidents who followed me -- including the current president -- continued to have a presence with this family. Last year, the family was afflicted by a second tragedy. Their daughter, also a Moravian graduate, was tragically struck by a car while jogging. Another significant capital gift providing support for a health-sciences facility and the college's nursing program was eventually made, celebrating both mother and daughter -- this one much larger than the first. Over some 35 years, Moravian College was transformed because of this family and another generous benefactor.

There is an important lesson to be learned here, one that took me some time to realize. Fund-raising is usually not the result of one person but of many. Sure, it sometimes happens that a president lucks out and brings in a large gift on the very first call. But usually large gifts happen because of what several generations of college presidents and their development offices did. My predecessor's cultivation of this family resulted in a large capital gift when I became president. And the continuing cultivation that I and my successors did resulted in an even larger gift down the road.

A Team Effort

This observation about the importance of continuity in fund-raising says something more general about why strong colleges are strong.

Often colleges that are barely making it have had a series of short-term presidencies, sometimes the result of dysfunctional boards. The convention is that it takes at least six years for a president and his or her administration to achieve substantive goals. When the presidency changes every two or three years, the institution starts to spiral down.

Sticking with my fund-raising illustration, large gifts usually happen because of long-term and consistent cultivation. Because college presidents today must take a leadership role in that cultivation and then ask for gifts, this can't happen when the college leadership is always turning over. Constancy is compromised, and prospective donors get the impression that the ship is rudderless -- which inspires neither confidence nor an interest in giving large gifts.

Yale University didn't become what it is today because it had a new president every couple years. Yes, it sometimes had not-so-strong leaders. But for its 315 years of existence, it has had only 23 presidents, who have served on average 13.7 years. For Williams College, the average is just about the same. The college presidency is like a relay race. Each president, with the support of faculty and staff members, and along with their boards, makes a contribution. The next president builds on this contribution, keeping what works and maybe eliminating or modifying what doesn't. And because of this continuity, the college ends up going from strength to strength.

So today, when I talk about the two colleges where I served as president, I make the point that while I played an important role in their success, it was really a team effort. A joint effort between a creative and imaginative admissions director and a wise dean of students results in a program that increases admissions and reduces attrition. A beloved emeritus faculty member who inspired generations of students results in a multimillion-dollar gift to create a chair in her honor. And the fact that presidential leadership is constant creates a stable environment for all of those things to happen.

I think my friend Alan Ray, former president of Elmhurst College, has excellent advice for new presidents: "A new president must learn to see, acknowledge and reward collective accomplishments wherever they arise in their institution, even and especially where the role of the president is tangential at best." He also points out that there is an upside to this: "Sharing credit improves morale and makes the president look secure, generous and committed to school's welfare, not their own self-aggrandizement."

I couldn't agree more.

Bio

Roger Martin was president of Moravian College and Randolph-Macon College. This year he published Brave Noises: Journal of a First-Year College President (Amazon) and Off to College: A

Guide for Parents (*University of Chicago Press*). He currently does executive search in higher education for R. H. Perry & Associates.