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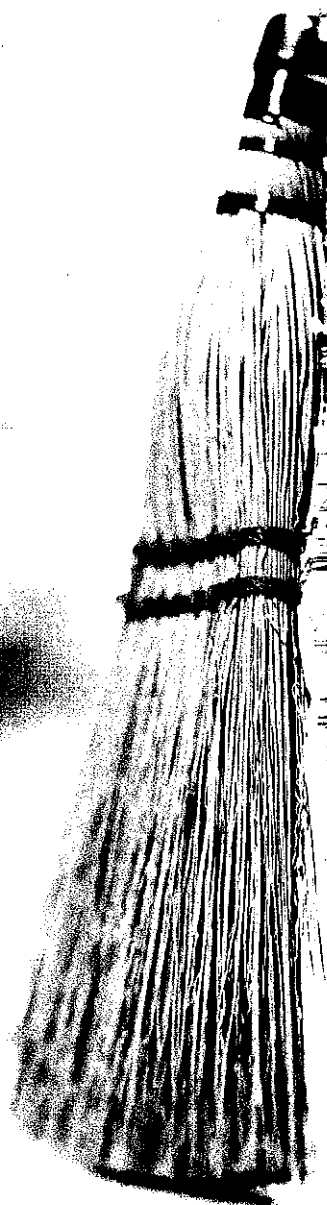
Time to Shine

Advancement and
Campus Leadership

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Effective communications
are essential to ensuring stability
during interim leadership



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In many ways, President Joseph Chapman had put North Dakota State University on the fast track to success—in just 10 years, the university had increased its student body by more than 50 percent, and hiring was on the rise. But when some improper expenses—including a million-dollar-plus cost overrun on a new presidential residence—came to light, Chapman came under intense scrutiny from the media and government officials and resigned in late 2009.

NDSU hired an interim president, Richard Hanson, who moved quickly to right the ship. However, bad news kept coming as more information surfaced about the university's finances, says Najla Amundson, media relations director at NDSU. "Nobody had known everything, and unfortunately, the details unfolded in the media rather than through internal communication," she says. "Faculty and staff were finding out what was happening when they opened up the paper, which is exactly what you want to avoid."

Amundson scrambled to get on top of the story and worked with Hanson to ensure that, going forward, difficult news was delivered on campus before it reached the media. "We owned the fact that we would be the bearers of bad news," she says. "We knew it was better for faculty, staff, and students to hear that news from us, not the media."

Though it took months, Hanson began to rehabilitate NDSU's image through frequent and open communication to the campus community and beyond. When he passed the reins over to the current president, Dean Bresciani, in June 2010, the

university was able to put one of the most unpleasant episodes in its history behind it. "Dr. Hanson spent much of his time dealing with the past, so when Dr. Bresciani became the new president, he could focus on the future," says Amundson.

An interim president has to perform a particularly difficult balancing act. He or she shoulders the burdens from—or legacy of—the previous president and must also provide a foundation of stability for the new president. Throughout the process, effective communication—both internally and externally—is critical to ensuring a smooth transition.

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Although interim leadership isn't necessarily a growing trend in academe, there will always be a need for temporary leadership at colleges and universities, says Bryan Carlson, president of the Registry for College and University Presidents, an organization that provides interim leadership at presidential and senior administrative levels at institutions across the country. In 2010, the registry provided more than 65 placements, about a third of which were at the presidential level.

The demand on an interim leader is intense, particularly at the outset of the presidency. Nearly any new interim president will have external audiences clamoring for his or her time, whether it's the media, elected officials, or campus constituencies. But in the beginning, the campus community—students, faculty, and staff members—is the most important audience to address. And because the

STEPHEN WEBSTER FOR CASE

Dean Break

By ERIN PETERSON

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role of interim president is often the result of a significant change on campus, most leaders will want to start by communicating the stability that still exists within the institution, says Cynthia Cooper, assistant to the president for college, community, and government relations at Monroe Community College, part of the State University of New York. "An interim president should have a calming and healing presence," says Cooper. "You want people to feel reassured that the college is strong, that it's on solid footing and it's moving forward, and it's part of a communication professional's job to help the interim president achieve that goal."

Larry Tyree, who served as MCC's interim president from September 2008 through June 2009, couldn't agree more. He has served as an interim president at six institutions, and in each position he has instituted key policies to help the campus community feel secure about his leadership.

"Every month, I have an 'Ask Larry Anything' meeting," he says. "It's an opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to fire away." He also e-mails weekly president's reports on current concerns and challenges to employees and board members. "It's vitally important to have open channels of communication," he says. "People need to have confidence in an interim president. Am I perfect? No. But I certainly know how important [frequent and open communication] is."

Other interim presidents have lined up dozens of individual meetings with faculty and staff or arranged for small lunches each month where guests sign up on a first-come, first-served basis and no discussion topic is off-limits.

Although the venue or medium may change, the goal—openness and honesty—remains consistent, says Carlson. "To achieve credibility, an interim president must also have transparency," he says. "Achieving transparency with internal constituencies is the No. 1 communication skill needed by an interim president."

FORGING RELATIONSHIPS

While communication with the campus community is a top priority, outside stakeholders, from alumni and donors to the media and elected officials, should get plenty of attention also. For entering interim leaders, meeting early with the communications staff

is critical for crafting an appropriate communications strategy, says John Allen, director of public relations at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. In his institution's case, it was essential that everyone agree on the most important initiatives, such as finishing capital projects and the accreditation process, and communicate progress on these issues in a timely manner.

He and his team also relied on a few key tactics, from developing talking points with a desired headline in mind to identifying controversial questions and crafting appropriate responses, to ensure that media interviews with UMKC's interim chancellor went smoothly. "We developed responses to these red-flag questions and ways to bridge back to the desired talking points," Allen says. Mock interviews helped prepare him for even the most challenging discussions.

But it's not just the difficult questions that need attention, Cooper says. Helping an interim president understand the subtle nuances of an institution's relationship with a particular government official or media outlet can help nurture a friendly relationship or prevent an unnecessary gaffe.

"Every reporter and elected official has a history with the institution, and they have particular viewpoints and issues that are important to them. That knowledge is incredibly important," says Cooper. "You need to help get the interim president up to speed very quickly."

The interim president and leadership staff must be equally open with the communications staff since the impact of difficult news can be magnified if handled improperly. "You cannot do your job as a communications professional unless you know the whole story—you've got to have access to the president and administrators so you can advise them on the best way to handle negative news," Amundson says. "If you don't have all that information, you're driving blind. That can create many more problems than being up-front in the first place."

In the end, says Amundson, it all comes back to the idea of telling the right story to the right audience at the right time. While these external constituencies should be apprised of developments, communications professionals know that the progression of information should always move from internal to external

audiences, not the other way around. At NDSU, important news from a president is communicated first through internal listservs, then moves to the college's home page, then its blog, Twitter, and Facebook pages—all before being sent through traditional media channels, Amundson says. Though the whole process might take just 10 minutes, sharing information with the campus first helps build trust with these internal audiences.

"It's so important to take ownership of your message," she says. "Your office should think of itself as the source of news, rather than relying on traditional media to be the source."

IN TRANSITION

While the interim president will have a hand in many of the most pressing communications issues at the outset of his or her presidency, there are some topics that a communications staff typically will address without much assistance from an interim leader. These usually involve plans that extend beyond an interim's tenure at the institution.

In general, there is a tacit understanding that an interim president won't come in with a plan to make wholesale changes to programs and strategic plans—and that includes communications strategy—because this responsibility belongs to the succeeding president, says Tyree.

"Typically, the job of an interim president is to be tactical, while the job of a [permanent] president is more strategic," he says. "It's important to have a very close working relationship with public relations staff, but you're primarily looking to help them accomplish their short-term goals."

Indeed, one of those short-term goals may be to bear the brunt of criticism so that the next president can turn his or her attention to moving forward. When possible, communications professionals should carry on with their long-term strategic plans as they address the short-term needs of their audiences during the transition.

And as that switch from an interim leader to a permanent president begins, a flurry of activity and preparation will ensue due to the additional stream of information that accompanies a change in leadership.

In April 2009, the media relations staff at the University of Idaho mapped out a plan to put together a

multimedia package within the 36 hours between learning the name of the new president and a news conference officially introducing him to the public, says Joni Kirk, associate director of media relations. With the help of about two dozen people from the university's communications and marketing office, they pulled together essential materials for the media as well as a new president's website with a welcome video and photos, and an update for the home page. During the announcement, Twitter followers quickly retweeted the news of the presidential pick.

"We also made some media buys so we could make an announcement in the Sunday newspaper," Kirk says. Soon afterward, she and her colleagues began planning a five-day, 11-city statewide listening tour for the new president.

While the focus on hiring a new president can make it easy to downplay the importance of an interim president, UMKC's Allen says it's important to strike a balance throughout the process. "You've got to treat an interim president as you would a permanent one," he says. "Interim presidents can advance and protect the reputation of the institution, and [communications professionals] can help them do that."

OFF TO A GOOD START

No matter how smooth the transition from leader to leader, permanent or interim, communications challenges will always exist. However, by maintaining—even increasing—the communication between the president and internal and external audiences, communications professionals can help interim leaders put the institution on a strong footing for the next president.

"Interim presidents can—and should—make it clear that the institution continues to advance its mission," says Allen. "They can do that with communication that is clear, constant, and easy to understand." ■

Erin Peterson is a freelance writer based in Minneapolis.