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Managing Expectations: Creating Community Among Diverse Constituencies

**PRESIDENTIAL
PERSPECTIVES**

a higher education presidential essay series





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MANAGING EXPECTATIONS: CREATING COMMUNITY AMONG DIVERSE CONSTITUENCIES

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Navigating between and among various institutional constituencies is one of the primary challenges of any presidency. The so-called stakeholders include trustees, faculty, staff, students, parents, administrators, alumni, donors, community groups, and institutional partners. Most presidents would agree that the two groups most critical to the success of their presidencies are trustees and faculty. Each group, although by no means with unanimity within the group, has expectations of what the president and the institution should be doing. These perspectives may sometimes be at odds—trustees often use the yardstick of corporate business and faculty use the prism of academic programs and governance. Sharing information between groups and getting them to support the same institutional agenda is an ongoing presidential task.

In the previous articles in this series, we've seen presidents who addressed the amenities demands of millennial students and their helicopter parents—those who engaged faculty and staff in order to ensure the ownership and success of strategic plans and others who were able to transform their institutions by persuading stakeholders, especially trustees, to take leaps of faith toward what the institution might become. Each of these presidents was reacting to, managing, and shaping expectations toward a common end—strengthening an individual institution to succeed in highly competitive markets.

The challenge of dealing with diverse and often divergent expectations cuts across all kinds of presidencies—public or private, two-year or four-year. But I would argue that the challenge is more salient in smaller institutions. At these institutions, the behavior of the president can be under constant scrutiny. Calls for “transparency,” “openness,” and participation in shaping the institutional direction are common and, in some instances, they are code words for less than enthusiastic cooperation. Trustees may call for and expect change; faculty may try to maintain a comfortable status quo.

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So how do we handle these expectations? First, managing expectations does not mean meeting all expectations. One simply cannot. Rather it means bringing all groups to accept, foster, embrace, and pursue the same values and strategic directions of the institution. It means communicating again and again with each group. It means articulating a strategic vision of the future of the college. It means expressing the long- and short-term agenda of the institution clearly and in ways that address, at least in part, the longings as well as the expectations of each group. Of course, this is easier said than done. So what are the factors that help or hinder “managing expectations” for the betterment of the institution?

Based on my experiences, one of the factors that I believe makes this task easier or more difficult is the prevailing **culture** of the individual institution. A culture that is collegial, holds common values, respects leadership, and strives to get everyone engaged and “on the same page” is far easier to navigate than a culture that is contentious, where constituent groups care mainly about their own self-interests, and advances are seen as zero-sum games. Most institutions fall somewhere along a continuum between collegiality and contentiousness. It behooves any president to understand where on this continuum the culture and dynamics of his or her institution falls. This is the first step in managing expectations—understanding the degree of relative receptivity to leadership and proposed directions by each stakeholder group as shaped by the institutional culture. This understanding helps a president to hear with the ear of the other—a powerful component of effective communication.

The next order of business is to **listen**, listen, listen. Once on a campus and in its distinctive culture, it does not take long to learn both the challenges and opportunities for engaging stakeholders in a common agenda. Note that when we serve on accreditation teams, within a couple of days, the nature of institutional dynamics becomes quite apparent. One simply needs to listen for the subtext in all discussions and conversations. What is it that trustees are really saying when they voice their expectations, or the faculty or major donors or alumni? Sometimes, we become so enmeshed in what we want to do for the institution that we fail to match our expectations (or vision, if you will) with those in the prevailing culture as it exists at this particular point in institutional **history**. This brings me to my third point.

Colleges and universities go through stages and phases of development just as individuals do. Recognizing the individual institution’s stage is vital to gaining a shared understanding of where it needs to go and a common commitment to moving forward. If a college has become stuck in its own past, that is quite a different situation from one that has just gone through a major transformation and now needs to consolidate its gains. Needless to say, a president doesn’t always have the luxury of tailoring leadership to the particular historical moment, especially in small, financially fragile colleges. But recognizing and factoring in the historical moment—the degree of institutional maturity and openness to change—can also help circumvent hurdles to managing expectations effectively.

It is no mystery that people, especially faculty, who have dedicated a significant portion of their professional lives to a given institution, expect their achievements to garner respect. Any president should honor history and academic achievements in word and in deed at the same time that he or she is calling for changes that respond to the pressures of the marketplace. This may include changing demographics, affordability issues, changing student interests, emerging job opportunities or a combination of these and a range of institution-specific factors.

The responsibility to analyze and synthesize the various factors (both internal and external)—whether as the product of a formal analysis or the collective wisdom of the major stakeholders—falls ultimately to the president. He or she must then communicate these observations and their implications to the various constituencies, especially the trustees and faculty, in ways each can understand but with the same core messages. In essence, one must **educate** each group of stakeholders to a common understanding of the major institutional opportunities and challenges in clear, precise and, where possible, data-grounded terms. Being unapologetic and straightforward, avoiding any tendency to over- or under-state, putting one's own credibility on the line, all make it easier for stakeholders to understand and accept the leadership directions and agenda articulated by the president.

As meetings and discussions take place, especially with trustees and faculty, it is imperative not to denigrate one in the presence of the other, but to be attentive to enhancing the understanding of and respect for the other group and its unique

responsibilities. It is all too tempting to blame the Board for tough decisions that must be made or to blame faculty for lack of progress on Board-desired projects. If we want each group to recognize its vested interests in the directions to be pursued and the changes to be made, we must work to bring them together. This will help to build a sense of community around shared goals and develop a common agenda and an awareness of the part each must play to achieve the desired ends. Sometimes, these outcomes can emerge from a strategic planning process; however, the most potent factor in community-building and creating common cause is the leadership of the president who must repeatedly and consistently speak to the priorities of the institutional agenda.

Of course, it is incumbent on us to recognize that not all stakeholders are created equal. A skillful president avoids trying to march to the disparate beats of various drumming constituencies by underscoring, repeating, stressing, and adhering to a **focused set of goals** and initiatives that are known to all concerned. I have a bias for the rule of three—that is, placing the highest priority in any given academic year on the three strategic agenda items that must be achieved. These items should be confirmed by the trustees and shared with the faculty in ways that make clear the role that they can play in achieving these goals. This helps to keep constituent groups on the same page, removes the mystery from resource allocation decisions, turns energies toward achieving priorities, and provides easily remembered accountability standards.

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In the last analysis, as indicated previously, managing expectations means bringing all constituent groups to accept, foster, and pursue the same values and institutional strategic directions. It means repeatedly communicating with each group and articulating a comprehensive, and comprehensible, strategic vision for the future. It means clearly expressing the long- and short-term institutional agenda in ways that address the longings as well as the expectations of each group. It means demonstrating in word and in action presidential leadership that carries a college or university forward with each stakeholder group playing its part in achieving the ongoing health, success, and vitality of the institution.



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