



**Leader, Listener, Liaison:  
Change, Trust, and the University Presidency**

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The world is changing. Higher education must also change. Such words are now said so often they hardly seem provocative. And, a quick read of the news quickly illustrates the necessity of change (or at least the implications for not doing so). An increasing number of colleges and universities are reorganizing, merging, or closing.

The key now is not simply recognizing that change needs to happen, but understanding how quickly and in what way change needs to occur. This also disrupts notions of what is the role of the college president – which we partly unpack here.

One of the opportunities associated with the *AGB Institute on Leadership & Governance* is hearing directly from current and former university presidents and board chairs. The conversations are frank, candid, and illuminating. Among the most significant takeaways was the understanding that the expectations upon and of today's university presidents are different than before.

Presidents are being looked to for more and different leadership as they guide their college or university through uncertain and often uncomfortable times. The world, it seems, changes at a faster pace than colleges and universities are able, or willing. In the past, many leaders attempt to weather changes until better times returned. Such approaches have proven not to work as the environment that we now operate is fundamentally different – the students are different, perceptions of the value of a higher education are different, accountability is different, finances are different, and expectations for everything from access to student services and even post-graduation success are different.

Presidents must navigate the university and its many communities through those changes, at the same time positioning the institution intellectually as well as financially for the future. They are looked to for stability, leadership, vision, resource generation, representation and advocacy, and are expected to be as well versed and as facile with the campus' history and politics as they are about the broad and changing landscape of higher education. Presidents are the bridge between their campus and the rest of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> *Across the Green* was started as a series of periodic letters from Provost Rosowsky to provide updates on current initiatives and information on topics of interest to the broader UVM academic community. Started in 2013, *Across the Green* was published three times per year during the six years Dr. Rosowsky served as UVM's Provost and Senior Vice President. The *ATG Brief* series continues in the spirit of this communication with topics focused on higher education and leadership.

Yet, change can be hard, both individually and institutionally.

In the midst of change, people need to feel that they are heard and leaders need to garner understanding from those who will or are experiencing the change. As such, presidents are also expected to be great listeners – authentic, inclusive, and responsive – and to model that behavior for their leadership team and the campus. While it is understood that the president must also be decisive and balance many demands/expectations, it is nonetheless expected that s/he is respectful of shared governance, responsive to internal and external stakeholders, and actively engaging, listening, and hearing. It is expected that the president is an informed and inclusive decision maker.

Presidents who listen carefully soon realize the contradictory roles that they are often asked to play. Presidents are expected to provide stable yet visionary, cautious yet ambitious leadership. Boards and faculty often have different understandings and different expectations of the president, the functioning of the university, and their respective governance roles. In many ways, the president serves a liaison (what the org theorists call a boundary spanner) among these various groups.

It is by no means an enviable position – living between various groups, but never being part of one. Yet, that is the role of the president – listening and liaising among them and then, hopefully, moving the institution forward.

In many ways, the president can help clarify roles, unpack differing opinions, unfounded judgments, and shared understandings. Whether it is working with the governing board (e.g., trustees, regents, visitors) faculty senate, or other university governing body, the president can play an important role in helping each understand institutional challenges and how to move forward collectively.

They may need to help the board understand how shared governance functions, the role of the faculty, and when and how to be visible on campus. They may need to help the faculty better understand the board's responsibilities to the institution and specific expectations of the president. The president plays a critical role in breaking down barriers created by mistrust or misunderstanding. High functioning governance can only exist with a president who is successful in this bridging role.

And we cannot forget about the importance of the student voice. Student governance plays an important role in the evolution of the college/university and students have long demonstrated interest in having a say in the direction of the university, and feeling empowered to create change. The more they understand about the university and its management and oversight, the better positioned they will be to have impact and the less likely they will “go rogue” and seek more disruptive (and less productive) means of garnering attention. Presidents can help create this understanding and facilitate opportunities for input and engagement.

Finally, we also learned the extent to which the president is the point person for crisis, whether internally or externally generated, and for responding to myriad demands – from students, faculty, alumni, legislators, media, and community members – for change, transparency, equity, resources, solutions, assistance, and more. In this time of rapid information (and misinformation) dissemination through social media and even a sometimes overeager mainstream media, it is essential that this respected and trusted liaison role be established early in a president's tenure. It also is essential that

everyone understand the official communications channels and spokesperson for each governance group.

In the event of a very serious crisis, such as we are seeing more and more frequently at colleges and universities, there should be a willingness by the president and the board to seek outside assistance. Procedures should be in place to identify and engage with crisis management experts, communications experts, and/or legal experts as needed. At these times, of course, communication between the board chair and the president is far greater, as are expectations by the campus and the community for regular updates. The president's liaison role may never be more important than in times of managing crisis.

Only when there is trust among groups built through the listening and liaising of the president can the person in that role effectively lead an institution through meaningful change.



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