

# The Providence Journal

## **Leo Higdon: College president's recipe for success**

Sunday, May 6, 2007

NEW LONDON – AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY, Drew G. Faust is preparing to step into a presidency that can arguably be termed the highest-profile higher-education role in the world. At many other colleges and universities across America, search committees are looking for new leaders. Each unique situation cries out for an extraordinary person. At the same time, the media are full of the challenges facing higher education: rising costs, changing demographics, feisty faculty, calls for assessment and accountability, and, last but not least, bottomless fund-raising needs.

I first became a college president 10 years ago, at Babson College, in Wellesley, Mass. Since then, I've been continually taken aback by how many people inside and outside of academe tell me they haven't the slightest notion of what a college or university president does on a day-to-day basis, whether they are successful, or for that matter what it takes to be successful in this job.

I have seen leadership at many levels and in many diverse manifestations — in the Peace Corps, on Wall Street, and, subsequently, in higher education. Analyzing these experiences, I've come to the conclusion that certain principles apply to successful leaders across higher education.

First, we must be strategic as we set goals, measure results, and create a shared vision across all constituencies. Through conversations at all levels and with all constituents, we unveil aspirations, set direction, test theories, gauge reactions and begin the process of developing a shared vision and a strategic plan to get there. It's a straightforward process, one I've used with positive results at every institution I've led.

New presidents have to engage in learning the institution, intimately. And there's no substitute for face time. In my first eight months at Connecticut College I entertained faculty and staff in my home, visited every residence hall, dropped in on nearly every campus office (sometimes on the way back from my early-morning run), and cheered for Camel athletes in a wide range of sports.

Second, we all need to enhance resources for our colleges and universities by connecting strategic goals to fund-raising and the operating budget. Securing gifts for an institution does not happen overnight. The president must build deep, meaningful relationships with alumni, parents and friends of the college.

In each one of my presidencies, I've logged thousands of miles criss-crossing the country and sometimes the globe getting to know the institution's friends. Again, face time is essential. Donors are not just giving to the college. They are investing in an institutional vision for which the president is the chief standard bearer.

We need to build relationships that develop ties and instill loyalty. We should be good listeners who pay attention to what people are saying, positive or negative. A comprehensive communications plan is essential to encourage open discussion on all strategic issues.

And lastly, we need to be engaged members of our communities, on and off campus. We need to be proponents of shared governance and shared decision making, and advocates of transparency at all levels. Imperialism just doesn't cut it on the college campus.

While institutions of higher education vary widely, all share a significant mission and responsibility — to educate the next generation of leaders. The model I've outlined here is, I firmly believe, higher education's model for success at the presidential level.

Attracted by its transparency and shared governance, more corporations and not-for-profit organizations are also moving toward this approach. As college and university presidents, though, we have an added responsibility to be good leaders because we have such an impact on students.

Yet being a college president is the best job in the world. Further, I firmly believe our nation's colleges and universities are in good hands — the hands of true leaders who recognize the challenges and opportunities that come with their jobs, and have the skills necessary to manage, collaborate and lead.

This is true whether you are a successful chief executive officer, an executive director of a not-for-profit, the leader of a selective liberal arts college, or even the president of Harvard University.

Leo I. Higdon Jr. is president of Connecticut College, in New London, and the former president of Babson College and the College of Charleston.