

5 KEYS

TO A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION YEAR

AN ACCT GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE BOARDS AND CEOS





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ACCT is a non-profit educational organization of governing boards representing more than 6,500 elected and appointed trustees who govern over 1,100 community, technical, and junior colleges in the United States and beyond. These community professionals, business officials, public policy leaders, and leading citizens offer their time and talent to serve on the governing boards of this century's most innovative higher education institutions and make decisions that affect more than 13 million students annually. For more information about ACCT, visit www.acct.org.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With over 50% of current college CEOs expected to retire within the next few years, boards are seeking new ways to connect the hiring and onboarding processes to ensure the new CEO's effectiveness and longevity. The first year often sets the stage for the CEO's success.

This document outlines key first-year strategies for the board and new president, including five key activities:

1. Conduct a board-CEO retreat.
2. Develop the CEO's first-year communication and transition plans.
3. Establish the CEO's professional development plan.
4. Complete a mid-year check-in during the new CEO's first year.
5. Conduct a first-year CEO evaluation.

The following pages discuss the value of undertaking these key activities and recommended processes by which they can be done.



THE ONBOARDING YEAR

Congratulations! Your college has just hired a new CEO. There is an air of anticipation, optimism, and a little nervousness across campus. The announcement of a new CEO caps many months of hard work and dedication. Activities to make this a successful hire included: gathering input from students, faculty, staff, and community members; determining a list of desired attributes; recruiting candidates; reviewing applications; coordinating campus visits; and conducting interviews.

It was an intense time for board members who felt the pressure of getting it right. They are eager to get back to normal routines, but also want to support the new CEO's success.

Julie Golder, Vice President for ACCT Searches noted, "The board's role does not end when the new CEO accepts the offer. In fact, phase two of the process is just beginning. During the first year, the board sets the stage for the new CEO's success by communicating clear priorities and expectations. Too often, when board members discuss priorities for the new CEO, they discover that every board member has a different idea."

Golder continued, "The board needs to clarify how and when progress will be measured in addressing these priorities."

Without clear direction from the board, the new CEO often sees all responsibilities as top priority, which can be overwhelming. During the first year, life moves quickly. There are often hundreds of faculty and staff to meet, community leaders and donors to contact, students to engage, a senior team to build, and the unexpected crisis to resolve. New CEOs need to develop a deep understanding of the campus culture and decision-making processes. This involves getting to know students and employees, learning the budget, understanding the strategic plan, setting new aspirations for student success and equity, and addressing unexpected developments. Everything feels like the highest priority except the availability of time.

Onboarding Timeline

- Prior to the new CEO's arrival: Plan celebrations for outgoing and incoming CEO
- Months 1-3: New CEO to meet with faculty, staff, students, donors, leadership team, each board member, constituents, et al.
- Month 1-2: Hold a board retreat (clarify roles, set communication protocol, develop evaluation process, agree on priorities)
- Month 6: Mid-year check in between new CEO and board
- Month 12: Board to conduct annual evaluation

FIVE KEY PRACTICES FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION YEAR

The Aspen Institute Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency (2017) noted that, “Because the initial year sets much of the tone for an entire presidency, every CEO, in consultation with their board and senior leadership team, should establish a first-year work plan to provide structured opportunities to learn about their institution, in part through extensive engagement with internal and external stakeholders.”

Much of the first year is spent “listening and learning” as CEOs become acquainted with internal and external communities, develop an understanding of the campus culture, and learn more about opportunities and challenges. It often involves spending significant amounts of time developing relationships and trust.

“As boards begin discussing how to ensure a successful onboarding year, an excellent first step is to hold a retreat,” Golder advised.

KEY PRACTICE #1 — CONDUCT A BOARD/CEO RETREAT

The board-CEO partnership is critical to the CEO’s success. A retreat, held within the first two months, provides an opportunity for board members and the CEO to get to know each other, discuss working relationships, review communication protocols, and clarify how they will approach major decisions. At the retreat, board members need to be clear among themselves and in agreement with one another about where the college is heading and identify key strategic priorities for the CEO’s first year (a pre-retreat strategic planning session is advised if priorities have not been agreed upon prior to the hiring of the new CEO).

Suggested retreat topics:

- Get to know each other/begin developing relationships.
Use case studies and activities that provide an opportunity to share participant “stories” and reasons for becoming involved with the college. Discuss opportunities and challenges facing the college and the community.
- Share information on high-performing boards/CEOs.
Review attributes of high-performing boards and successful board/CEO relationships. Discuss how this board and CEO will work together, clarifying roles and responsibilities.
- Share the board’s first-year priorities for the CEO.
Discuss and agree on the 3 – 5 strategic priorities the CEO will address during the first 12 – 18 months. Clarify how and when progress will be measured, using benchmarks and a timeline. Discuss the balance of on-campus and off-campus commitments.
- Discuss development of a first-year work plan.
Following the retreat, the CEO and leadership team often develop a work plan – a deliberate approach to getting to know the college and the community.
Suggestion: Ask each board member to provide a list of key community/business leaders with whom they are willing to provide introductions. Follow up to be sure these meetings are scheduled.

- Clarify how the CEO will be evaluated.

Priorities, job description, college goals, and the first-year work plan form the basis of the first-year evaluation. At the retreat, begin discussions about how the CEO will be evaluated. Many of the details, including how information will be gathered and results used, can be finalized during the mid-year check-in.

Suggestion: An annual evaluation should be included in the CEO's contract and a completion date specified.

Having a CEO evaluation process in place is a standard of good practice; in addition, most accrediting agencies expect the board to have an evaluation process in place.

- Share the board's first-year priorities for the CEO. Be sure to include the institution's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion and building an equity-minded institution. For example, the area of focus may be to close the completion gap. Clarify how progress will be measured.

KEY PRACTICE #2 – DEVELOP CEO'S FIRST-YEAR COMMUNICATION & TRANSITION PLANS

The first year is fast and furious. Everyone wants the CEO's time, and invitations far surpass availability. Many new CEOs and their executive teams develop a work plan to ensure that they dedicate significant time to learn the college culture, traditions, and personalities as well as focus on priorities set by the board.

The transition plan provides a deliberate approach for becoming acquainted with faculty, staff, and students, as well as key political, business, and community leaders. The plan helps prioritize meeting invitations – determining which meetings need to be held during the first three or six months, and which can be delayed until later in the year. By combining a communications plan with the transition plan, the CEO reinforces messages and increases the impact of each visit and meeting. This positive momentum allows the CEO to move more quickly and strategically toward achieving priorities. The transition plan can be a simple list or a more sophisticated monthly calendar – either should be designed to provide the CEO and staff with a roadmap for first-year contacts and meetings.

Recommendation: Have the board review and adopt the work plan at a board meeting. This provides a public show of support and communicates the new CEO's priorities to the college community.

CEO'S FIRST-YEAR COMMUNICATION AND TRANSITION PLANS

Before the new CEO arrives on campus

The exiting CEO serves until their last contracted day. It is important that the new CEO does not create confusion about who is leading the college. However, if the current CEO and board chair approve:

1. Contact the communications office (or appropriate department) one month before the new CEO starts, to discuss a communications plan for the first few months, including announcements, coordination of social media, key internal/external communication, speeches, and important meetings. This helps create a smooth transition between CEOs and sets the stage for a successful presidency. The new CEO should also begin following the college on social media.
2. Connect with the exiting/retiring CEO to learn more about the college history, culture, challenges, and opportunities. Discuss the college's role in the community, important partnerships, and key opinion leaders, both on and off campus.

After the new CEO arrives on campus

3. Within the first few months, write an all-purpose speech that can be adapted for internal and external audiences. Its purpose is to let people know more about the CEO, facts and figures about the college (enrollment, demographics, ethnicity, completion rates, pride points), national and state perspectives, opportunities for the future, and why the new CEO is excited to serve the college and the community.
Suggestion: Use personal stories. They are a powerful tool to connect with audiences.

4. Coordinate personal and college social media. On personal social media, make an announcement of the new role in a way that fits with the new college's voice and brand. Work with the communications office to craft an announcement that includes a "getting to know you" post. A post could be as simple as "The 5 questions I'm most asked." It is a place to add a personal touch to all other outreach. Engage in the comments. Regarding social media, timing is important, and any action should be done with guidance from the communications office and in accordance with college guidelines and policy.

Moving forward, continue to be mindful of college policy and continue to work with the communications office. Consider posting visits to classrooms, acknowledge faculty and staff achievements, college recognition, and other communications that demonstrate to readers that the CEO is engaged, proud, and following through on priorities and promises.

5. Develop a contact list and calendar. Work with the executive assistant, communications office, or individual who has been designated to support the CEO during the transition year. Following is an example:

SAMPLE COMMUNICATION PLAN/CONTACT LIST/CALENDAR

CONTACTS	WHEN	HOW	TOPICS?
Board Members (meet with each one)	First Year	Board Member preference	Get to know each board member better.
Employees	Fridays, 1 – 3 p.m. e.g.	Visit offices Make yourself available around campus	Talk with faculty/ staff. Follow up with notes.
Student Leaders	Monthly	Attend meetings	Listen to concerns. Follow up with email summarizing meeting and "to-do's."
Students	Quarterly	Open Forums	Listen. Ask for advice. Share vision for college. Follow up with article in student newspaper.
Employee Unions	Monthly	Regular meetings with CEOs	Get to know leaders. Listen to what is working and what could be improved.
Major Donors	Quarterly first year	Small Groups	Introductions. Thank them. Ask advice. Follow up with personal note.
Community Boards	Join two during first year	Ask the board for ideas	Represent the college.
All College	Quarterly	Town Hall meetings	State of College Q and A. Follow up with email summarizing discussion.
Local Legislators	Fall Winter	All area legislators' individual meetings	Introductions/share funding request



Additional Stakeholders:

Business Leaders

Faculty senate officers

College leaders

Nearby school district superintendents and college CEOs

Elected Officials

Major employers

Recommendation: Follow up on all commitments made in these meetings – it builds trust and credibility.

KEY PRACTICE #3 — ESTABLISH CEO'S DEVELOPMENT PLAN

During the first year, the board often encourages the CEO to create a professional development plan – which may include travel, attending seminars or participating in meetings on special topics. In order to improve equity, diversity and inclusion, the board may wish to support the CEO in developing or enhancing a program such as “Creating and Leading an Anti-Racist Campus.”

Please Consider: An executive coach is another way the board can support a CEO, especially during the first year, by providing an objective sounding board, counsel, and trusted advice. Depending on the circumstances, this could be invaluable.

Many CEOs find value in developing a support network of other college CEOs, business leaders, community representatives, retired CEOs, and thought leaders. These are individuals from whom the CEO can seek advice and varied perspectives, develop a better understanding of the community and college, learn more about the history of specific initiatives, and obtain observations and encouragement.

- **CEO's Well-Being Plan**

The personal demands that accompany the college CEO role are extensive. By being aware of the physical and emotional demands of the position, the board can support the CEO's health goals, vacations, retreats away from the campus, and dedicated time with family and friends. Trustees should understand that this is not only a matter of personal care, but that an institution can only be properly run by a CEO who is adequately rested and in “good working order.”

KEY PRACTICE #4 — COMPLETE MID-YEAR CHECK-IN

A mid-year check-in provides the CEO and board (or board representatives) the opportunity to discuss how the year is going and progress toward priorities and the transition plan, as well as opportunities and challenges that have arisen during the year. This is a good time to begin finalizing the evaluation process, including timing, who will provide input, how results will be organized and used, whether it will be done internally or with the help of a consultant, etc. This decision of who will participate in the evaluation should be established early on.

Recommendation: The check-in is in addition to regular board chair/CEO meetings, so there should be no major surprises during this meeting.



KEY PRACTICE #5 — CONDUCT FIRST-YEAR CEO EVALUATION

The first-year evaluation usually takes place at the end of the school year. Often, the CEO prepares a self-evaluation of progress made toward priorities as well as the college strategic plan. The report might include an assessment of how the college responded to unexpected challenges and opportunities. Taking the time to discuss the evaluation provides the board an opportunity to review the self-assessment, identify areas of accomplishment, and highlight any areas the board would like to see additional focus on in the year ahead. In addition, goals and priorities for the following year are set. The evaluation may also include an evaluation of the CEO's performance on typical leadership criteria.

Some boards hire an external consultant to help with the process, while others conduct the evaluation themselves. The evaluation is conducted in executive session. Many boards hold a special board meeting, others add it to an existing board meeting. The CEO evaluation is now a priority for accreditation agencies and most accrediting agencies lists CEO evaluation as a criterion for accreditation. It is also a contractual obligation that protects both the CEO and the college.

TO THINK ABOUT

- **EXITING CEO**

The transition process can have a major impact on the new CEO's success. The exiting CEO can visibly support an effective transition process. Some retiring CEOs help write the transition plan. Many exiting CEOs ask each leadership team member to write a memo to the new CEO about the status of current projects/priorities, budget commitments, timelines, names of project leaders, etc. Assuming the exiting CEO is leaving on good terms, find ways to honor their dedication, tenure and accomplishments. In the event the CEO is not leaving on good terms, consider ways to move forward the healing process.

- **CELEBRATE**

With so much to do and challenges to meet during the first year, the board and new CEO are advised to use the first year as an excellent time to celebrate milestones, accomplishments, faculty and staff achievements, student honors, etc. By using the opportunity to promote what is working well at the institution and highlighting the outstanding individuals, departments, and the institution, the new CEO builds commitment, pride, and a positive campus culture.



In 2020, ACCT conducted a survey of new CEOs. The feedback highlights the relevance of the Five Key Practices. The following pointers and lessons learned were shared by CEOs throughout the country to help boards to better support their new CEO during the transition year:

- “I would suggest the process be formalized and also allow the opportunity for input from the new CEO. Communication between the CEO and the governing board is critical to the success of the college.”
- “Retreat was helpful but should have happened earlier.”
- “Discussions [of] preferred communication styles are critical.”
- “I enjoyed frequent and flexible interactions I had with the board chair during the first year. Discussions actually started before I formally assumed the role.”
- “My on-boarding experience could have been more formalized and streamlined.”
- “A plan developed in collaboration with the board, senior leadership, student leadership, and unions leadership, that focused on a prioritized list of opportunities to learn the culture of the college and community. Ongoing advisory support by the group during the first year would have provided additional insights and information.”
- “We held a two-day retreat within the first month to talk about expectations. While this was helpful, the board had not had the conversation prior to the retreat, so we spent a fair amount of time hearing individual expectations rather than board expectation. While this was valuable, it did take us some [time] to develop [a] shared understanding of what was expected. Fortunately, we took the first year to develop the formal process by which I will be evaluated against going forward.”



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MORE INFORMATION

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