

Office of the (Interim) President: Lessons Learned in Leadership and Authority

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Picture this scene: The board of regents is considering delaying the establishment of a search and screen committee for a college temporarily headed by an acting president. A graduate student rises and implores the board to proceed with all possible speed to give the campus “a ‘real’ president!”

If this sketch sounds painfully familiar to you, know this—it was written over 20 years ago (see DeZonia, “Acting Presidents Should Act like Presidents,” *Association of Governing Boards Reports*, 21 no. 6, 1979, p. 3). Robert DeZonia served as acting president of the University of South Dakota in the 1970s and wrote eloquently and compellingly about the challenges and opportunities he faced in that position.

The passing of 20 years has had little diminishing effect on those factors; if anything, interim presidents face an increasing array of stewardship, leadership and authority challenges as the role of the modern university presidency has become ever more complex. Add to that the fact that the tenure of interim leadership now often approaches that of permanent leadership, and that the number of interim presidents (and other key leadership positions) in office at any given time is rising, and you find the need for a very skilled and specialized leader.

DeZonia’s article is one of very few on the topic of interim presidency. Little has been written about the skills, styles and strategies needed for interim leadership, and the way that the complex set of relationships and responsibilities interim leaders face differ from those of a permanent leader. By adding Dr. James Wagner’s story to the literature on this topic, we hope to help future interim leaders, the boards that appoint them and the institutions that support them think both strategically and tactically about the appointment and tenure of the interim president.

Interim Presidency 101: A Crash Course

In retrospect, the phone call James Wagner, Provost of Case Western Reserve University, received that morning was not so surprising. The president of Case Western had been under pressure from the beginning of his tenure to negotiate a new affiliation agreement with a key educational partner. The complicated and high-stakes negotiations, and the fundamental difference in the opinions of the board of trustees and the president on the matter, led to a break between the two that could not be repaired. The president resigned, effective immediately.

Nevertheless, Jim Wagner was stunned. In office for less than eight months as Provost at Case Western Reserve, Wagner suddenly found himself asked to take the helm of the university—under what could only be called a crisis circumstance— and guide it to smoother waters. Not only did he have to learn and take on the roles and responsibilities of the president, but he also had a shell-shocked community to reassure and reinvigorate. His predecessor had been in office for just 22 months, and his sudden resignation sent shivers of uncertainty and anxiety through faculty, staff, students and the greater Cleveland community.

Dr. Wagner was no stranger to leadership. After completing his Ph.D. in Materials Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, he worked for several years at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, eventually returning to join the faculty of Johns Hopkins and ultimately serving as Chair of the Department of Materials Science and Engineering. He served in that position for five years before being recruited by Case Western Reserve as Dean of the Case School of Engineering in 1998. Two and a half years later he was appointed Provost of the university by the then president—the same man he would replace in a mere nine months. His years of experience in academic leadership were about to be rigorously tested.

First Things First

The first matter to attend to was setting the tone of his administration—what Wagner described as “shared authority and accountability.”

“This kind of organization works best when you delegate as much as possible. This gives responsibility and authority while demanding accountability. Faculty at a research institution such as Case Western Reserve are independent and intellectually entrepreneurial by nature. To ensure a sense of corporate direction and to avoid concerns over a lack of leadership, it was necessary to move quickly and to provide reassurance that the leadership team was in control.

Times of uncertainty in academic leadership are easily exploited for short-sighted gain through unchecked spending, opportunistic (versus strategic) recruiting and other types of somewhat irresponsible behavior. By confronting this temptation head on, we were able avert it and to focus the energies of our deans and vice presidents on achieving the common good. In my first meeting as President with the deans and vice presidents, I told them that, considering the current circumstances, the central administration simply wouldn't have the time to police their requests for unauthorized or ill-advised expenses. The deans and VPs knew they could try and take advantage, and that there would be little I could do about it while occupied with responding to the abrupt change in leadership.

The deans were asked to give our leadership team two months to get ourselves organized before they launched any new initiatives or grand spending programs. More broadly, they were asked to be self-critical, not relying on guidance or regulation by the provost's office. As far as I can tell, they gave us

the entire term of my interim presidency. By explicitly asking for their help in running the university responsibly, by reminding them that we sink or swim together, and by appealing to their sense of responsibility and loyalty to each other and to Case, it was possible to delegate much of the worry and challenges that presidents, interim or not, face. We decentralized from the president's office down, and asked everyone to step up and pick up their share of the challenges we faced. Without exception, they did."

Crisis vs. Planned Interim Tenure

Thankfully, few interim presidents enter the office under such troubled circumstances. That said, Dr. Wagner points out a few potential *advantages* to taking over in a crisis:

"The crisis forced everyone to make decisions and take responsibility. In the aftermath of a crisis, such behavior is not unusual, though. Consider the events following the tragedy of September 11 as an example. No one responded to that event by saying 'the federal government must spring into action and force the Red Cross to collect blood.' Ordinary people didn't rely on the central government to guide their actions—they just rolled up their sleeves, quite literally. They felt that they, as individuals, had to do something and not wait for the federal government to come to the rescue. Many felt that it was in fact a *failure* of the federal government that led to the events of that day. In our case, people perceived that our trustees and president had failed and we needed to rely on individuals to roll up their sleeves. The challenge was to restore a sense

of legitimacy to the institution of the presidency and the board, while at the same time harnessing the loyalty and distributed leadership on the campus.

Taking the helm in a crisis also allowed me to express comfortably my own inadequacy. I could compellingly request assistance and cooperation, and could assume or assign ownership beyond the President's office. Once it was clear that much of the future of the institutions was in good hands—their hands, that is—they were just as eager and confident to move on as I was. No one wanted to wait.

This issue of waiting is another key advantage to coming in under a crisis. The 'lame duck' phenomenon is well known, especially in academia. Interim presidents who take over in a planned way often either don't have the authority from their trustees or the legitimacy with their constituencies to actually *do* something with their time in office. Everyone is thinking 'we know this guy is picked as interim, we know the search is underway, he's just keeping the university on ice until new guy's arrival.' No one expects to have to work *harder*. Coming in under a crisis gave me permission, so to speak, to ask people to work both harder and differently for the sake of the university. We couldn't afford to wait in the status quo before the new guy moved us forward. It was important to move immediately."

Roles, Responsibility and Authority

A key challenge for any interim leader is clarifying his or her roles and responsibilities as well as sources of authority. It is often assumed that the interim leader will "have and exert all of the responsibilities and authority as one in the regular role. The fact is, however, that institutional policies ordinarily do not prescribe the roles and

responsibilities of the one assuming the interim state, nor do they bestow the necessary authority for effective leadership” (see J. E. Chapman et al., “The Acting or Interim Leadership Position: Expectations, Perceptions, Realities,” *Health Care Management Review*, 1988, 13(4), pg. 83). Ideally, institutions develop such policies independent of a time of crisis and need for an interim leader. More often, interim leaders find themselves making or breaking rules as they go. This situation can lead to two equally unproductive outcomes: an interim leader who “seizes upon an opportunity to effect changes in ways that commit the next [leader] to a set of options constricted by previous actions, however well meaning or, at the opposite extreme the chaos of inaction” (Chapman et al., p. 83).

DeZonia (p. 3) spells out the typical responses of a board under such circumstances:

“The board can shackle the Acting, making him or her dependent on the board or its staff. [The] board thus inevitably gets itself undesirably ensnarled in the daily management of the institution. Advice [from the board] to the Acting to maintaining a low key is, in my judgment, a disincentive to firm leadership with resultant negative effects on the institution.

On the other hand, the board can vest in the Acting the full authority and responsibility to act a president with all rights to whatever praise and/or blame that may accrue. The board which does this, without hesitancy, minimizes the risk of compromising its own leadership role and that of its temporary chief executive. By unfettering the Acting, the board also prevents administrative over-cautiousness which tends to dam up institutional energy crucial to momentum.”

It was precisely this damming effect that Jim Wagner and the CWRU board wanted to avoid. Though the board, like most, had no provisions for interim leadership beyond

very short term provision, they vested in their interim president the full authority he needed to make significant progress on institutional initiatives. He did that through an ingenious strategy and with an interesting play on words.

“Presidential Proof Initiatives”

It’s been said that flexibility and a modest ego are key attributes for an interim leader (see A. G. Rud, “In the Interim,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 21, 2002, <http://chronicle.com/jobs/2002/03/2002032101c.htm>). Wagner certainly showed the latter when he coined the phrase “presidential proof initiatives” to describe the institutional objectives that had to be addressed regardless of whom was sitting in the president’s chair.

“Almost immediately upon being asked to serve as the interim president, I drew up a list of all the initiatives currently underway on campus. The list totaled 31. From that, I circled the ones that required presidential involvement and then chose the ones that could be ‘presidential proof.’ I ended up with a list of eleven.”

Wagner’s criteria for choosing “presidential proof initiatives” were:

- *Initiatives that were essential to the health and future of the university:* For example, investments in physical plant, fundraising, admissions and retention initiatives. Failure to move ahead on physical plant investments or delay in implementing needed damage control of our student recruiting in the wake of a sudden departure of the University’s president would have led even to more damage and expense related to the initial crisis.

- *Initiatives that would be a clear priority for any president of Case Western Reserve*

“In other words, the trustees would not hire a president who did not place high priority on such initiatives.”

- *Initiatives that Wagner felt the university could either complete, or at least make significant progress on, in one year's time*

“It was important to get us moving forward to preserve morale and grow a sense of well-being and strength. We needed a few quick hits so that the university community would not feel impotent. For example, whenever we signed a new dean or achieved any of our objectives, we sent broad emails to celebrate our success. The university community knew that together we were moving forward.”

- *Initiatives that would allow CWRU to be proactive versus reactive*

“There are necessary and important tasks that require attention in a reactive mode—tasks that can fill the agenda of the entire management team. It was all the more important, therefore, to identify and engage in initiatives where we could take the first step to really shape the outcome.”

One criterion that clearly prevented an initiative from being president proof was a direct impact on the governance relationship of the university. As Wagner puts it, “trustees should relate to the university through the president as a person, not only the president as a role. The board began working on reforming the governance structure while I was interim, but they did not complete that work until they found our next president. The impact of the president as a person is too critical a feature in the governance of the university to be considered ‘president proof.’”

It would have been easy to have launched these initiatives as his own, and to expect public acknowledgment of his work. Instead, by distancing the person Jim Wagner from

total ownership of the responsibility for executing initiatives the university had to act on, it made it easier to get buy-in and enthusiasm across campus. Everyone understood that these initiatives were essential for the institution, hence 'robust' no matter who filled the presidential role (see Thomas N. Gilmore, *Making a Leadership Change*, Philadelphia: CFAR, 1988). By standing to the side of the presidential role, he increased its authority in ways that were respectful of whomever was appointed as the next president.

Decision-making in the Interim

In keeping with his own style of moving fast and communicating broadly, Wagner believed that the best way to make progress on the initiatives was to avoid a formalized feedback process. He wanted to hear from the community without being stymied by the democratic practices that, in academia at least, often lead to the chaos of inaction. Interestingly, and in keeping with the theory, he did not make this decision widely known.

“We distributed the list of ‘president proof initiatives’ widely, but did not explicitly lay out a feedback or voting process. It was important not to give the impression that we were in an evaluation mode, and I did not want to be perceived as indecisive. We had to move on these eleven objectives for the sake of the university. So we simply asked for comments and assumed that, if we did not hear back from a group, we had license to move forward. Not moving, not making choices about the few things that were most critical was far more damaging than the risk of choosing one that was wrong. We also found that by using this informal process that the champions of the initiatives self-identified, allowing yet another opportunity to delegate and spread responsibility.”

This process served the university well and clearly helped Wagner avoid the lame-duck syndrome. A sampling of the institution-shaping decisions made during his tenure as interim president include:

- *Affiliation agreement with a key educational partner.* The very issue that spelled disaster for his predecessor was did not prove such for Wagner – an interim agreement with the partner stabilized the situation under Wagner’s leadership. With the unwavering support of the trustees, he and his top team, Interim Provost Lynn Singer and COO Rhonda Gross, worked through marathon negotiation sessions to ensure the uninterrupted education of CWRU’s medical students. Yet the one-year time horizon of this agreement would give the next president, whether Wagner or not, both the opportunity and the obligation to extend it for a longer period.
- *Leadership hires.* As with any university, the quality of its education is only as good as the quality of its leaders. In an increasingly competitive environment, Wagner knew he could not afford to pass up the opportunity to fill vacancies with the best scholars and managers in academia. He did, hiring deans for three schools, as well as three university vice presidents.
- *Master planning.* Although underway when he took office, Wagner credits his team with ensuring that there was no “waiting for the ‘real president’” when it came to master planning for the campus. They made and implemented tough decisions about where and when to invest.

Characteristics of a Successful Interim President

Based on Jim Wagner's experience and on the stories of other interim leaders, a list of the characteristics of a successful interim president is beginning to emerge.

Successful interim leaders:

- Have the ability, and in fact desire, to ask for help, to delegate and to confront their inexperience head on
- Have a deeply felt sense of conviction regarding the critical needs of the institution
- Feel a sense of ease with the reality that their authority is provisional, yet are able to draw on the situational authority of a crisis and on the subset of issues that are essential and are loosely connected to the person of the president (Gilmore).
- Can learn to "think silently." Unlike in the faculty senate, where it is common to engage in debate and test ideas, people expect leaders to have opinions and make decisions, not think out loud (see Peter G. Beidler, "Some Advice for Would-Be Administrators from a Professor Who's Been There," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. XXXVII no. 4, March 21, 1984, p. 96). As DeZonia points out, the verbal thinker may become a provocateur in an interim role.
- Relish the role of communicator. Between trustees, faculty, staff, students and the external community, an interim president will be expected to communicate well and often to his or her constituencies.
- Have a very thick skin. Understand that while you may be quite enthusiastic about the interim position, others may not and will not hesitate to tell you so (Rud, p. 2).
- Are at ease with numbers and costs, both of doing things and not doing things (Chapman et al., p. 84). In Wagner's case, these were exemplified in a campus-wide budget reform process and in decisions to fill top leadership positions.

- Have a “positive attitude of addressing the problem rather than complaining” (Chapman et al., p. 86).

Lessons Learned: Advice for Interim Leaders and the Boards that Appoint Them

Dr. James Wagner is once again Provost and University Vice President at Case Western Reserve University, working in a unique partnership with his recently appointed successor, President Edward Hundert.

This partnership itself might be thought of as an offspring of the way Wagner served in the interim role. Dr. Hundert had been looking for a leadership position that would allow him to work in a truly collaborative way with a top team. Jim Wagner’s approach to leadership, his careful stewardship of the role of the presidency, and his continued connection to the ‘academic side of the house’ (through his duties as provost) were a perfect fit for Hundert’s vision.

The two now work side by side in the newly christened Office of the President and Provost, where Wagner has played a key role in helping to *end* the “president proof” era, transitioning to the vision laid out by himself and Hundert. At the first retreat with his top leadership, including deans and vice presidents, Hundert himself joked that the initiatives and focus would remain, but the “president proof” moniker could go.

For over a year, Jim Wagner served as a true steward of the university, moving ahead where and whenever possible while maintaining a sense of stability crucial to the anxious campus community. He looks back on his time as interim president as a true gift, despite the never-ending challenges. “I learned more about myself, about leadership, about teamwork and about communication than I thought was possible in fifteen months. It was truly a crash course.”

In reflecting on those fifteen months, Wagner has a few words of advice to offer to others in the interim position and to the boards about to appoint them: “Pull from within the university ranks. These people will have the most ownership and loyalty to the institution.” Wagner’s words are amplified by many others. Milton Greenberg, who served as Interim President of American University, writes about his dismay in the practice of “renting” temporary presidents, writing “are you telling me that not a single person on [the] campus is capable of doing the job, and that you want a total stranger to run your shop?” Greenberg also agrees with Wagner’s point regarding loyalty, “Promotion from within encourages loyalty and stability” (see Milton Greenberg, “Lame Ducks: The Scourge of Academic Administration,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* September 17, 1999, <http://chronicle.com/jobs/99/09/99091702c.htm>).

There is equal agreement with the second of Wagner’s recommendations: try to fill interim presidencies with people who are not candidates for the permanent position. Though a candidate himself, Wagner feels that such a move could help avoid some important conflicts of interest: “I was nominated as a candidate one week after I took the position as interim president. I like to believe that I made decisions based on Jim Wagner the Interim President versus Jim Wagner the Candidate, but it’s a fine line to walk. It’s too tempting to soft pedal the tough issues if you’re worried about getting the job.”

DeZonia and Chapman et al. agree. Although recognizing that it may be impossible to avoid (“since the best local talent in terms of an Acting assignment may very well be the person who would like nothing better than to become the campus’s full-fledged chief executive” (DeZonia, p. 4) both feel that interims-as-candidates sets up a series of potentially damaging effects:

- It can place the potential candidate on trial in ways that disrupt the interim effort as well as the longer-term candidacy (Chapman et al., p. 86).
- It may encourage internal and external criticism that the subsequent search is a “set-up” for the ambitious Acting if indeed he or she is chosen, and simultaneously fails to protect the ambitious Acting from disappointment if he or she is not” (DeZonia, p. 4).
- If the potential candidate is not chosen, their disappointment may lead them to look for other more attractive opportunities at other institutions, leaving the campus facing the loss of a talented leader (Chapman et al., p. 84).

A 1998 report published by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges surveyed 52 former interim presidents. Their advice: “Don’t be a candidate. They’ll doubt your motives at the time if you have to make unpopular decisions or serious cuts” (see E.K. Fretwell, Jr., “The Interim Presidency: Guidelines for University and College Governing Boards,” Special Report of the *Association of Governing Boards*, 1995).

Wagner recommends that the board of trustees “ask for and expect tangible goals and achievement—don’t expect a babysitter. Don’t rush the decision—take the time to set expectations.” Again he is echoed by the available literature, which recommends that trustees ensure that the interim is “carefully charged with the type and dimension of responsibility expected by the appointing authority” (Fretwell). DeZonia points out that “governing boards would do well to charge the temporary chief to act ‘as’ president” versus ‘like’ president (DeZonia, p. 2). Boards would be well served to confer the interim appointment for a specific period of time, both to push their own search process and to set clear expectations and boundaries with the interim.

Wagner firmly believes that he was well served by his board, which clearly took risks in fully empowering him to act “as” versus “like.” “The board has to take a risk in appointing an interim. Our board could have added a second signature line to every agreement I made, reserved for the Chairman of the Board of Trustees. They did not, which means taking a risk. They agreed that undoing an occasional mistake was less expensive than failing to move forward.” It was also of vital importance to Wagner that the Case Western Reserve board expected (and got) the acceptance of the campus community in appointing Wagner interim, “They knew it would undermine my authority to say ‘this is the best we can do for now, we’re sorry, hang in until the real guy comes.’ They supported me 100 percent and expected the campus to as well.”

Dr. Wagner’s reflections, as well as the available literature on interim leadership in the academic setting, surface as many questions as recommendations. Each interim situation is unique, yet there are general lessons to be learned and challenges to address. The process by which governing boards appoint and charge interim leaders, the pros and cons of candidates as interims, and the transition of interims back to previously held positions all deserve further attention. Two things seem clear, however: successful interim leaders have a special set of skills and characteristics; and those skills and characteristics will be in increasing demand in the years to come.

(The author would like to express her appreciation to Jim Wagner, without whom this article would not be possible.)