

Effective Onboarding

BY ERVIN V. GRIFFIN, SR.

HOW HALIFAX COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES HELPED ENSURE A SMOOTH PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION.

HALIFAX COMMUNITY COLLEGE, A MEMBER OF THE NORTH Carolina Community College System, recently selected a new president/CEO after a careful and comprehensive search and onboarding process. “We realized that the selection of our new president/CEO would be critical to the future success of our institution,” said Michael Felt, chair of the Halifax Community College Board (HCC). “The outgoing president/CEO served with distinction, received outstanding performance reviews from the board, and was extremely involved and loved in the community. Our board needed to find the right president, and we needed to have an effective search and onboarding process to continue the good success at HCC.”

Choreographing and Orchestrating Presidential Change

The board chair’s role in choreographing and orchestrating a presidential change while ensuring complete transparency can be a daunting task. The outgoing president/CEO gave ample notice; however, the board of trustees still had a number of challenges to overcome and critical decisions to make in a short time.

They included:

- Should the board hire a consultant?
- What will be the current president’s involvement (if any)?
- How do we involve stakeholders who supported the college?
- How do we select search committee appointees and determine media involvement?
- How do we have transparency while respecting the confidentiality of the applicants? (Transparency was a paramount concern — this bears restating.)

The board designated its chair to work directly with the presidential search committee and report to the board. The presidential search committee was diverse, including faculty, staff, students, business and industry, the economic development

board chair, and many other community leaders. In short, the board determined that the new president/CEO — much like the outgoing president/CEO — would need to serve as a sort of president to the whole community.

Managing Expectations Among Stakeholders

The incumbent president/CEO and board chair both agreed that the outgoing president/CEO would have no role in the process other than preparing materials and documents for review by the new president/CEO. Moreover, the chair of the board made it clear that the board of trustees would determine the job description of the new president and make the final selection. The board also developed a website for posting updates on the search process and provided the opportunity for students, faculty and staff, community members, and media to have separate input toward the final decision. The board of trustees’ search firm narrowed the 38 completed applications down to 24 in order for the presidential search committee to begin its work.

The presidential search committee made specific recommendations to the board of trustees, including:

- The search committee should review the 24 remaining applicants and recommend 12 semifinalists.
- The search committee should review and submit comments based on the video presentations of the 12 semifinalists answering the same set of questions.
- After reviewing all the documents and video presentations, the search committee should recommend six finalists to the board of trustees for the board’s consideration.
- After completing background checks, the board would begin its interviews, deliberations, and selection of the new president/CEO.

The board of trustees set up “meet and greet” schedules for each of the six finalists and invited the entire community to



Halifax Community College (HCC) President Dr. Michael Elam, Board Chairperson Michael Felt, and Dr. Ervin V. Griffin, Sr., President Emeritus of HCC



Halifax Community College (HCC) President Dr. Michael Elam, Board Chairperson Michael Felt and Dr. Ervin V. Griffin, Sr., President Emeritus of HCC, with students from the Welding Technology Program. From left, Trinity Carter, Mohammed Ghilis, DeMonte Thomas, and Marcus Futrell

attend on- and off-campus presentations. The six finalists also had separate interviews with electronic and print media that provided additional opportunities for the community to give their impressions of the candidates. During this process, all comments were made available to the board of trustees for review. After all the input was reviewed, the board made the final selection and made an offer of employment. The board chair then negotiated a new contract with the assistance of legal counsel, which the board subsequently approved.

Ensuring a Smooth Transition

With the presidential search process completed, the onboarding process between the incumbent and incoming president/CEO began in earnest. The incumbent president established several protocols to ease the onboarding process, including:

- Providing the opportunity for the incoming president/CEO to speak at the outgoing president's retirement ceremony, allowing for broad exposure to faculty, staff, students, and the community at large.
- Inviting the incoming president to attend a board meeting to have the opportunity to see how the board of trustees handled their business and the role of the president in carrying out the same.
- One-on-one meetings with the incoming president to discuss specific files prepared by the incumbent president. The files consisted of various critical projects and cost centers with budget information for special initiatives.
- Working with the *Spirit of the Roanoke Valley Magazine* published by the local newspaper, which profiled both presidents in an article entitled "The Spirit of Leading the College."
- Presenting the new president with an official HCC Jacket with the presidential seal.
- Both presidents shared the stage when HCC received the 2017 AACC Community College Safety, Planning, and Leadership Award of Excellence.
- The incumbent president presenting the incoming president his official academic regalia before leaving office.

Onboarding Complete

Michael Elam, the new president of HCC, recently noted that "as I climbed the career ladder, there was always a supervisor or some other accountable individual to assist with the onboarding and training process... Unfortunately, now at the pinnacle of my career, that same onboarding process is usually nonexistent. The president emeritus, board chair, and others have been valuable resources for me during this selection process. The onboarding process at HCC has been the most beneficial and the smoothest I have experienced. I am much better prepared to lead, collaborate, and address the challenges facing the college as a positive result of this process."

Effective onboarding of new leaders involving key stakeholders can be one of the keys to a successful search and presidential tenure. The *Roanoke Rapids Daily Herald* noted in a recent editorial concerning the college's 50th anniversary celebration... "This week, and every day to follow, is time to look forward to what the next 50 years hold for HCC. We see Elam and the college have done well to master those lessons... Now is the time to put the past in the rearview mirror and move full speed ahead to see what the future holds. And we believe Elam is the perfect person to be at the helm."

Onboarding at HCC is now complete. The board of any college undergoing a presidential transition should make the time and effort to support the incoming president throughout the onboarding process. Conscientious onboarding orients the new president to the college's and community's needs, giving him or her the best possible chance of "moving full speed" toward the future.



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