When the President is New: Helping the Campus Community Transition to New Leadership

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THE ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE WEARS MANY HATS. Along with our obvious office duties, we perform many less tangible roles: support to various sectors on campus outside of the president's office, the middleman facilitating communications between off-campus entities and administrators, event and meeting organizers, policy police when necessary, and masters of the president's calendar, to name a few. One of the biggest hats that we wear is that of the "sharer of information." We take pride in helping to keep our presidents in the know, as they cannot be everywhere and know everything at once. This is never more important than when a president is brand new to the institution. The president's new assistant can be invaluable to acclimating him or her to their new campus surroundings, all while helping existing employees navigate the transition.

When a new president joins an institution, it's an opportunity for exciting changes and growth. But it is also a time of adjustment for everyone involved, from classified staff members and faculty to the executive level. This is a time when employees are eager to impress, showing their new boss all of the initiatives their individual departments are undertaking, as well as displaying their own personal talents and capabilities. Everyone is vying for the new president's attention. But they also are trying to figure out his or her expectations, and the direction their new boss anticipates taking the college in the future.

Existing employees have the benefit of having support teams and colleagues in place as they traverse this change. For the new president, however, everything is new. From the moment they begin their new job, they are in constant adaptation mode, trying to familiarize themselves with the more palpable information such as faces, names, titles, and the general layout of the building as well as the less tangible elements, such as campus culture, employee dynamics, and important community and business connections.

The president's assistant has a unique vantage point during this adjustment period, and, if adept, can help make the transition easier on everyone, including the new president. This is the person that the rest of campus will rely on to get some insight on the president, both professionally and personally. Many people in this position are looked upon as the gatekeeper to the president, but I personally like to see myself more as the gateway. This hopefully makes me more approachable. When our institution hired our president in 2015, I was asked many questions as employees were trying to adjust. Most of the questions dealt with her leadership style and expectations of employees, but many were of a personal nature, such as “What types of food does she like to eat?” “What are her hobbies?” “Have you met her family yet?” “Does

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IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE THAT 2017 IS ALMOST TWO-THIRDS over. The ACCT Professional Board Staff Network’s Executive Committee has been hard at work throughout the year planning for the PBSN Workshop, which will take place September 25-26, 2017, during the ACCT Leadership Congress in Las Vegas, Nevada.

What's in store for participants? Every year following the PBSN workshop, we invite attendees to fill out a survey, which provides valuable feedback to the incoming Executive Committee and solicits suggestions for topics of interest for the next workshop. Based on the discussions and feedback received last year, we have put together a program that we hope you will find beneficial and enjoyable.

The annual PBSN Meet and Greet will take place on Monday, September 25, from 7:30-9:30 p.m. at the Planet Hollywood Las Vegas restaurant. This is a wonderful opportunity to get to know and network with fellow board staff professionals in a relaxing atmosphere.

The PBSN Professional Development Workshop will be held Tuesday, September 26, from 2-5 p.m. at the Cosmopolitan Hotel. The sessions include:

- A demonstration and discussion of board portal software
- Ergonomics, including information on the proper way to sit and stand at work and an opportunity to win a sit/stand desk, sponsored by Ergotron
- A mindfulness session, where attendees will learn how practicing mindfulness can improve their reaction to stress as well as their mood and well-being

Meet Us in Las Vegas!

By Margaret Lamb, San Diego Community College District, California

she follow sports, and what are her favorite teams?” I always kept in mind that it is an innate need to try to relate to your fellow human beings through questions such as these. I answered them as openly as I perceived was comfortable for my new boss.

One thing I tried to focus on was helping to garner connections between the president and her new staff. I made it a point to share information unprompted when it was appropriate and useful. For example, for those employees I knew to be dog lovers, I made sure that they knew the name of our president’s dog, Jack. For those employees I knew to be runners, I made sure to let them know that running was one of their new boss’s favorite pastimes. I tried to give little bits of information that would allow them to relate to the president on a personal level.

While working to help faculty and staff adjust to new leadership, I took it as my main responsibility to help the new president adjust to her new surroundings. This included small acts, such as whispers in the ear of names and titles that she might not remember right away, and more significant information sharing, such as helping her to connect the dots between the contributions of community members and local businesses to some aspect of our institution’s history.

Helping introduce our new president to the existing campus culture was also an important part of the transition period. It could at times be a tricky process, as I never wanted to overstep my bounds or create any perceptions or biases. I learned quickly a few presidents ago that the worst thing that you can say to new management is “this is how it’s always been done around here.” I would always do my best to inform the new president about existing methods and processes without making it sound like it was anticipated that everything stay the same. They appreciate knowing the existing processes, but always have methods for improvement in mind. I would cringe whenever I would hear someone from the executive team say “but this is how we’ve always done it.” In my experience, that is never perceived well. And a new president does not want to feel trapped within the confines of an institution unwilling to change.

While it can be tricky at times, it is in everyone’s best interest if the transition to a new president goes as smoothly as possible. The president’s assistant is a logical person to help facilitate. Change is inevitable and necessary, but it doesn’t have to be painful. Eventually the bumps will level out and familiarity will set in, and if everyone works hard towards common goals, that which was once new will feel like it’s always been in place.
• A demonstration of the new ACCT Member Portal
• Roundtable discussions on requested topics pertinent to the role of professional board staff.

Due to popular demand, the PBSN Workshop will continue on Wednesday, September 27, from 9:45-11:30 a.m., with sessions on social media and a panel discussion on the role of professional board staff in preparing for meetings with legislators. Following the workshop, the PBSN Business Meeting will convene in order to recognize the Professional Board Staff Award recipients, the accession of officers for 2018, and elections for the position of secretary and members-at-large for each region.

As the PBSN Charter states, “The Professional Board Staff Network (PBSN), under the aegis of the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), will provide individuals at community colleges who support governing boards and/or presidents/CEOs with a focus on continued development and enhancement of professional skills, sharing expertise and best practices, keeping abreast of new developments, and becoming more proficient at rendering service to governing boards and/or presidents/CEOs.” The 2017 PBSN Workshop promises to provide board staff professionals with expert advice and knowledge needed to keep current in the ever-changing world of the executive/governing board assistant.

We hope you can join us for these important professional development sessions, where you will meet with colleagues in order to learn from the experts, share best practices, and share experiences — sometimes funny and sometimes horrifying — all in a relaxed and confidential setting, because, as we all know, “What’s said in Vegas, stays in Vegas!” We hope to see you there.

PBSN Meet & Greet
Sept. 25, 7:30 p.m.
Planet Hollywood Las Vegas
3500 South Las Vegas Boulevard

Take a walk over to Planet Hollywood and join us at the PBSN Meet & Greet (sponsored by Edison State CC). This is an opportunity to become more acquainted with other members of the PBSN.

The restaurant is located in the Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace, just a short walk away from The Cosmopolitan.

PBSN Annual Professional Development Workshop
Sept. 26, 2:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Join us for presentations and discussions which will include board portal software, ergonomics, mindfulness, and information on how to use the new ACCT Member Portal. This is a great opportunity to network and enter to win your own Ergotron sit/stand desk! You must be present to win.

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PBSN Wednesday Workshop & Business Meeting
Sept. 27, 9:45 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.

Let’s be social! At this workshop, we will learn more about using social media effectively, and preparing for meetings with local, state, and national legislators. This will be followed by the PBSN business meeting which will include ascension of officers and elections for open positions.