

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

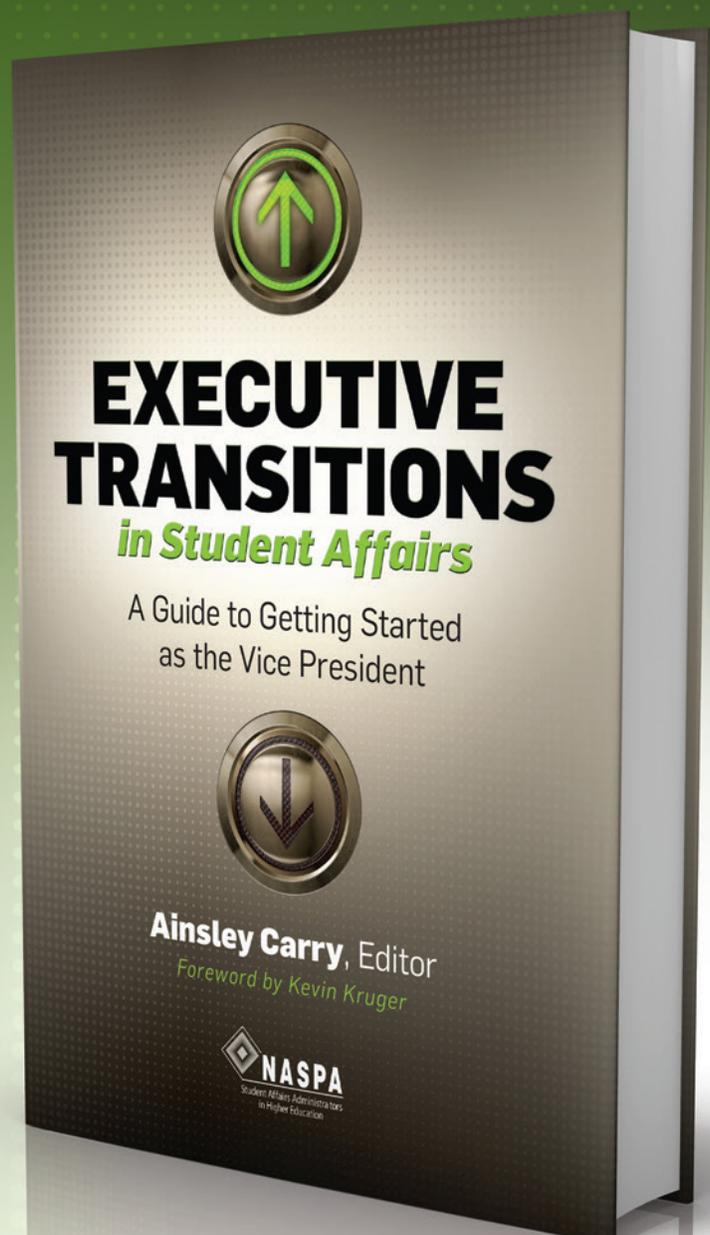
# EXECUTIVE TRANSITIONS

*in Student Affairs*

A Guide to Getting  
Started as the  
Vice President

**Ainsley Carry**, Editor  
*Foreword by Kevin Kruger*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

**THROUGHOUT ALL TYPES** of institutions, each year hundreds of educational administrators transition into the roles of vice president or senior vice president of student affairs. Executive transitions can be bumpy, but senior student affairs professionals can minimize the risks and maximize the opportunities if they take the time and energy to fully prepare for the executive role.

The concept for this book was developed in response to a gap that exists in the literature between how higher education professionals prepare for transitions to vice presidential positions compared to their corporate counterparts. The ideas and creative solutions in this book attempt to bridge the information gap.

In the book the authors explore the many rigors of the executive transition period and highlight what vice presidents can do to ensure a successful transition as well as long-term management success. It is not always understood that candidates must begin their homework long before the interview and their first day on the job. Management success at one institution does not necessarily translate to similar success at the next institution.

The book is written primarily for aspiring and new vice presidents for student affairs who are in the process of preparing for the executive transition. Secondary audiences include active vice presidents for student affairs who are looking to make another transition, and graduate students in higher education administration programs, who can use the text to better understand the complexity of the role of vice president for student affairs as they consider their own career paths.

Each chapter is authored by a current vice president for student affairs, representing public, private, large, small, two-year, and four-year institutions. The book is divided into two sections, which together provide readers with lessons learned during the executive transition period and strategies to deal with specific management problems new vice presidents could face.

Part I contains seven chapters on specific topics written by 10 vice presidents. Contributing authors pull from their experiences and offer insights on areas that are particularly challenging to navigate during the transition period. The topics include:

- Executive transition education
- Onboarding for new executives
- Institutional culture
- Campus culture assessments
- Challenges of the internal transition
- Communication
- Strategies for success

Part II contains five examples of detailed case-study scenarios based on real dilemmas that could face vice presidents in transition. Twelve active and retired vice presidents for student affairs write and respond

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to the case-study situations. Their varied perspectives provide options on how new vice presidents can handle the most difficult situations. The scenarios include:

- A new job that does not match the job description
- Management challenges faced by the internal candidate
- Meeting expectations in an era of declining resources
- Crisis response situations that trump all other priorities
- Working with a boss who previously held the vice president for student affairs position

To a large extent, new vice presidents are responsible for their success during the executive transition period. A time of both uncertainty and tremendous opportunity, the transition period lays the groundwork for all future successes and sets the stage for effective long-term leadership of the organization. The information presented in this book can help vice presidents realize their personal and professional goals for the next stages of their careers and strengthen their student affairs operations in the process.

# **Chapter 1**

## **The Case for Executive Transition Education in Student Affairs**

This chapter, prepared by Ainsley Carry and Kurt Keppler, defines executive transition and presents a review of recent research on executive transition, including success and failure rates and costs associated with executive transition failure. Based on a review of the literature, the authors offer a number of factors that contribute to transition failure, including a lack of self-awareness, feedback voids, absence of an onboarding plan, misdiagnosis of a situation, and over-reliance on past success.

The authors conducted their own survey to compare the ranking of transition challenges reported by active vice presidents for student affairs with the perceptions of aspiring vice presidents. Aspiring vice presidents ranked budget, institutional governance, and strategic planning as the top three transition challenges; active vice presidents ranked budget, personnel conflicts, and human resources as the top three. Four important conclusions emerged from the study: (1) personnel and human resource issues should be resolved sooner than later; (2) transition challenges are unique and depend on the situation, timing, and institutional climate; (3) financial

decisions are often an important part of the successful executive transition; and (4) often institutions do not have clear priorities, forcing new executives to spend a good deal of time trying to understand institutional priorities.

*“The executive transition period is the period during which new leaders transition into an executive-level position and work their way to competence and productivity.” (Chapter 1, p. 5)*

## Chapter 2

### Onboard Yourself

In this chapter Ainsley Carry attests that it takes much more than a formal orientation process coordinated by an institution's human resources department to prepare educational executives for the complexities of leading in a new environment. To a large degree, individuals must take responsibility for educating themselves about an institution.

Before Day One on the new job, new vice presidents must begin gathering and devouring information with voracious appetites, including extensive document analyses, staff profile reviews, and SWOT (strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analyses. These efforts will help them reduce knowledge gaps among staff members and ensure all staff are operating on the same wave length. In addition, new vice presidents may want to consider hosting an onboarding event, such as a retreat or discussion, to share information and devise a communication plan.

*“Onboarding—the practice of bringing new executives up to speed on organizational issues, priorities, and operations before their first day on the job—is a corporate business practice that has not been generally adopted in higher education administration.” (Chapter 2, pp. 28–29)*

## Chapter 3

### Cultural Challenges: Keys to Thriving in the Transition

Every institution has its own distinct culture. In this chapter, authors Brian Hemphill, Melanie Tucker, John Jones, and Susan Gardner identify ways that new vice presidents can find the balance between maintaining integral components of campus culture while advancing the mission of student development.

The authors describe four strategic activities, which are complemented by personal stories that can ease the acculturation process. New vice presidents must take the time to do the research on the new institution and broaden their understanding of the institution's unwritten rules, traditions, beliefs, and ceremonies. The authors affirm that new vice presidents must embrace the existing culture and make every effort to fully understand the environment and leaders driving the culture. Once they understand the culture, they must demonstrate patience and move cautiously before implementing an overly ambitious change agenda.

## Chapter 4

### **Making the Internal Transition**

New vice presidents for student affairs hired from within institutions face even greater expectations for success, due largely to the perception that they understand the institution, know key players, and are ready to hit the ground running. Author Karen Warren Coleman offers insight about the career path she followed and how she seized the opportunity to become an internal candidate for an executive position. She relates first-hand experience on the tricky aspects of being hired from within: the assumption of knowledge the internal candidate may not have; changes misinterpreted as a reflection on the predecessor; and staff perceptions of situations that do not match the realities.

Coleman urges all aspiring vice presidents to capitalize on opportunities even though they may not present themselves at the most opportune time. Throughout the process, candidates must seek advice from friends and colleagues and think through all the possible outcomes, including the emotional repercussions when the job is offered to another candidate. Once hired, the author suggests vice presidents mark and celebrate the transition with a clear signal of their new role, such as the move to a new office. Insiders will be expected to take advantage of their internal status, built-in credibility, and flexibility to push harder and faster. Relationships are sure to change with the transition, so vice presidents must move quickly but with care in making the needed readjustments.

## Chapter 5

### **Communication: The Most Overlooked Skill**

From the onset, new vice presidents must pay special attention to communication with staff as well as executive-level cabinet members. In this chapter, Gage Paine offers guidance to new vice presidents for a more thoughtful and strategic approach to communications, beginning with every interaction with new colleagues. She urges vice presidents to ask themselves: What ideas do you want to communicate? How will you

communicate them? What kind of leadership will you exercise?

Equally important is demonstrating good listening skills, which Paine notes may be the most powerful tool for executives. New vice presidents should create venues for both listening and sharing their expectations, such as regular staff meetings, and use all

*“One important reality: New colleagues will remember with pinpoint accuracy when your words and actions are not in alignment. Everything you say and do communicates something.” (Chapter 5, p. 87)*

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available technology and other communications resources to take their messages to broader audiences. In the first year, new vice presidents should accept invitations to as many activities and events on campus as possible to build the perception of accessibility and to engage constantly in communicating and listening opportunities.

# Chapter 6

## Strategies for Success and Pitfalls to Avoid

What is the key to successfully transitioning into an executive position? John Laws affirms vice presidential candidates must do their homework on the institution's mission, values, and vision far in advance of accepting an executive-level position. As they accept their new positions, vice presidents must begin developing relationships immediately at all levels, starting at the top with the president.

Vice presidents should be introduced to colleagues and key stakeholders throughout the campus and invest time learning their roles and responsibilities. A review of biographies and résumés of direct reports can speed the learning curve about staff members, and meetings with cabinet-level peers in their respective offices will lay the groundwork for future relationships with staff in areas outside the student affairs divisions. These meetings can assist vice presidents in determining expectations and building teams committed to reaching those expectations. All of these steps can help avoid what the author identifies as major pitfalls: a lack of a clear plan, vague expectations, lack of respect for the culture, and inappropriate tones in communication and appearance.

# Chapter 7

## Assessing the Campus and Divisional Cultures

Many student affairs professionals are drawn to the work because of their deep affection for the higher education campus, culture, and experience. Assessing and understanding the campus culture may require new vice presidents to draw on assessment tools introduced earlier in their careers in higher education student affairs programs. To avoid missteps in sizing up the organizational culture, vice presidents will benefit from using proven methods and employing strategies to thoroughly investigate, assess, and reflect on that culture.

One effective approach offered in this chapter by W. Houston Dougharty and

*“Existing literature about campus culture underscores the value of such [assessment] efforts and provides insight into the benefits that can result from evaluating a campus and the culture of student affairs divisions.” (Chapter 7, p. 122)*

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JoNes VanHecke is to ask students, faculty, and staff how they experience the educational endeavor of the institution. The authors summarize a number of accepted models that can help inform a campus cultural assessment along with indicators and questions to guide a new vice president through the assessment process. A review of campus and student affairs websites and institutional research along with campus visits and professional networking are further ways to inform the process. The authors also share examples of how vice presidents have benefited from conducting thorough cultural assessments.

### Chapter 8

#### Case Study: Bait and Switch

A student affairs professional assumes a vice president position only to discover he has been sold a less-than-honest bill of goods and the scope of the job has been greatly exaggerated. Should the vice president

*“A vice president’s relationship with the president is the most important aspect of his job. Maintaining positive, honest, and open communication with the president is extremely important.” (Chapter 8, p. 164)*

leave and try to return to his old job? Should the vice president try to recapture departments originally included in his job portfolio? Does the position need to be renegotiated?

Ainsley Carry, Arthur Sandeen, and Brandi Hephner LeBanc review the options for a vice president dealing with changes in expectations during

the transition process and the pros and cons of returning to a former institution, resigning from a position, or weathering the storm. Whatever the decision, a new vice president should solicit advice from friends and colleagues within and outside the institution, discuss their concerns with the president, reassure current staff members, and manage emotions in efforts to make the most of a difficult situation.

### Chapter 9

#### Case Study: The Internal Candidate

A long-time employee fully expects to be hired for an executive position and quickly becomes disgruntled when another candidate is hired for the position. While most institutions have processes in place for dealing with disgruntled staff members in this type of situation, the new vice president will need to take certain steps to maintain authority and reassure current staff members.

Ainsley Carry and Arthur Sandeen review the best way to mitigate the impact of the unhappy staff

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member. Mary Coburn offers a multifaceted strategy that involves meeting with the president and senior leadership, human resources staff, and student affairs senior staff. Felicia Lee urges new vice presidents to analyze their physical and emotional responses, to seek clarity in the situation, and understand how it affects their day-to-day actions as a leader. Across the board, new vice presidents must follow protocol while engaging outside advice and support.

# Chapter 10

## Case Study: A Bold New Vision But Declining Resources

Enter a new vice president who quickly implements a comprehensive strategic plan only to be faced with a multi-million dollar budget cut and reorganization and the elimination of several programs. This case study by Amy Hecht challenges new vice presidents to meet the pressure of managing in times of economic uncertainty.

The responding authors agree on the necessity of a clear vision, a plan to identify new revenue sources to offset budget cuts, an optimistic outlook, and a renegotiation of expectations with the president. Mary Coburn and Brandi Hephner LaBanc suggest that communication,

staff morale and development, and financial solutions are key factors to address. Arthur Sandeen discusses ways to lead a division through a tumultuous time, including the development of a protocol to guide the tough decisions on layoffs and cost cutting.

*“Although no vice president wants to see budget cuts, it is important to convey an optimistic message: The division has been through tough times before and has survived.” (Chapter 10, p. 197)*

# Chapter 11

## Case Study: Crisis Response Protocol

A first-time vice president for student affairs is committed to improving the quality of student life, but several student crises highlight her inexperience in managing these incidents and bring her priority-setting into question. This case study by Amy Hecht demonstrates the dangers of concentrating on one singular goal at the expense of other priority areas.

Johnetta Cross Brazzell, Debbie Kushibab, Gail DiSabatino, and Theresa Powell offer their solutions with a number of common themes emerging. The role that student affairs can play in crisis response is evolving, and student affairs leaders must conduct an assessment of how these crises affect the entire

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student population. To ensure the safety of students and the entire campus, the vice president must build relationships with the leaders of campus safety and the local police department. This case study also proves that reliance on successful past experiences can lead to missteps at a new institution.

# **Chapter 12**

## **Case Study: Your Boss Is Your Predecessor**

A new vice president, who was not the president's first choice for the job, takes the helm ready to assume all the management responsibilities that accompany the position. He must tread lightly as the president previously held the vice president position. The case study by Tyjaun Lee presents a scenario in which the new vice president is faced with the defections of a number of team members and a president who quickly begins treating him in an adversarial manner.

Responses by Valarie Evans, Daryl Minus, and Kenneth Ray, Jr., explore the options with general agreement that one of the most important steps is for the new vice president to focus on building relationships and understanding the culture. Had the vice president developed a transition strategy with buy-in from the president and executive team before his first day on the job, he could have facilitated a much smoother transition.

## Praise for *Executive Transitions in Student Affairs*

“*Executive Transitions in Student Affairs* is a welcome addition to the student affairs landscape. Using an effective mix of change management literature, campus culture frameworks, case studies, and personal narratives, the authors present a comprehensive approach to ‘onboarding yourself’ as a new chief student affairs officer. This book should be given as a welcome gift to every newly hired student affairs executive.”

—**PENNY RUE,**  
vice president for campus life,  
Wake Forest University

“This book is a must-read for those who are contemplating the challenging transition into the role of chief student affairs officer. Many talented colleagues in student affairs have contributed to this thought-provoking book that describes the how, what, why, and when-to-do’s in an honest and thoughtful manner. The practical nature of *Executive Transitions in Student Affairs* will reduce your adjustment time and accelerate your success, and the compelling examples of real-life circumstances will enrich and guide your learning as a future chief student affairs officer.”

—**PATRICIA TELLES-IRVIN,**  
vice president for student affairs,  
Northwestern University

“*Executive Transitions in Student Affairs* is an insightful and on-target prescription for success in a senior student affairs role. Anyone transitioning into a vice president for student affairs position is making a mistake if they don’t take advantage of this publication. You’ll thank the authors for having written it, and your president will thank you for having read it!”

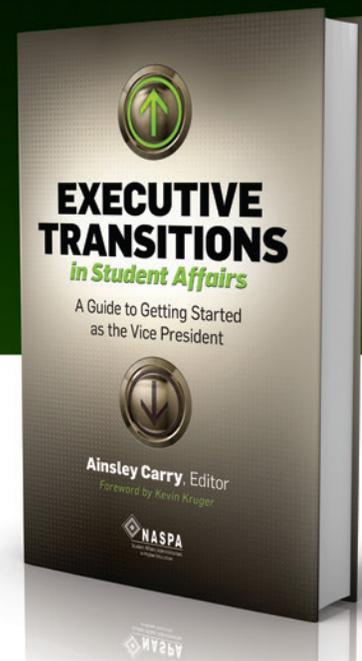
—**DEAN BRESCIANI,**  
president,  
North Dakota State University

“This book is full of rich and profound insights on the professional transition process. The authors have generously shared their experiences, which is a true gift to the reader. While the book focuses on executive transitions, it can be a valuable professional development tool for professionals at all stages of their career journey.”

—**LARRY D. ROPER,**  
vice provost for student affairs,  
Oregon State University

“So many people simply aspire to leadership roles with no plan for how to be successful if they get there. This is a great book to help vice presidents for student affairs achieve success as it clearly demonstrates that their work begins the day they accept the position.”

—**WALTER KIMBROUGH,**  
president,  
Dillard University



Aspiring and new vice presidents can learn how to navigate the complexities of moving into senior management in NASPA’s new publication *Executive Transitions in Student Affairs: A Guide to Getting Started as the Vice President*. The book features a diverse sampling of strategies and advice offered by vice presidents who have successfully made the transition and continue to effectively lead in their respective institutions. Also included are detailed case-study scenarios based on real dilemmas that could face vice presidents in transition, with responses from active and retired vice presidents for student affairs.

Seamlessly transitioning into a vice presidency requires extensive preparation long before the interview and the first day on the job. *Executive Transitions in Student Affairs* can help vice presidents realize their personal and professional goals for the next stages of their careers and strengthen their student affairs operations in the process.

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