2018

Tips for Retirement

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Four former Linfield College presidents have suggestions for President Hellie as he settles into retirement.

2002-2005
Marvin Henberg

“Commit to nothing in at least your first six months. Read widely and catch up on good movies you’ve missed, but build your lists of reading and viewing via recommendations from others. That will take you out of your comfort zone to discover authors and directors, topics and themes you will miss by relying only on your present tastes.”

Henberg served as president of The College of Idaho from 2002-2005. He and his wife, Laurie, moved to Sunriver in 2015, where they continue to pursue outdoor adventure including skiing, hiking and water sports. They’ve traveled extensively visiting Spain, Argentina, Peru and other locations. He serves as chair of the Capital Campaign Committee for the Sunriver Nature Center and Observatory and on the board of The Patagonia Conservation Trust. He is working on a book, Range Wars: Grazers, Predators, Rustlers and Mithra on the Western Plains.

1992-2005
Charles Walker

“Heal on to your relationships with others and keep a bit of inventiveness handy. This led me to the Ford Family Foundation, James and Marion Miller Foundation, Foundations for a Better Oregon, The Oregon Cultural Trust, Nez Perce Chamber Music and the Public-Private Library in Pacific City. They were all good experiences for which I’m grateful. You definitely will have many opportunities after Linfield, too.”

Some 26 years after Linfield, Walker still works to strengthen the McMinnville community and the First Baptist Church. He and his wife, Cherie, enjoy live music – chamber and symphony to Pink Martini and folk – and attend Linfield events often. They travel to experience the world far and near. They are in a walking group that does laps around the Linfield track and they go to a gym exercise class. Looking back, Walker says, “Linfield got two workers for the price of one, in us.”

1992-1998
Vivian Bull

“My own retirement years have been full of projects, so it is unlikely I can give any advice… but to just keep moving. There is so much good to be done in this needy world and so many opportunities.”

Bull served as president of Drew University from 2012 to 2014. She has served as a consultant to a number of institutions of higher education, to corporations and to a variety of government and non-government organizations. Her primary focus is social responsibility investing. She helped organize the College of Management and Administration at Africa University, a private college in Mutare, Zimbabwe, where she continues to serve as a consultant. She works with the Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church.

1968-1974
Gordon Bjork

“Advice for others is always particular for the individual. Serving as president of a college like Linfield is very demanding. On retirement, you should find a new life and engage in it.”

Following his time at Linfield, Bjork resumed a career in teaching and research, serving as the Jonathan B. Lovelace Professor of Economics at Claremont McKenna College. He was appointed to the National Advisory Council on Environmental Policy and Technology of the Environmental Protection Agency. In retirement, Gordon and his wife, Susan, are enjoying children, grandchildren and friends, keeping fit with tennis, walks and the gym, and participating in a variety of activities.

The evolving role of a college president

What does it take to lead a college in 2018 – a sage scholar or a strategic business person? In today’s higher education, the answer is probably both.

The serene ivory tower was always more myth than reality. But it applies less now than ever, in an era of enrollment pressures and rising concern over affordability and the value of higher education in society. The role of a college president has shifted, too – paralleling the changing landscape in higher education.

A century ago, the top job at many universities fell to members of the clergy who served as teachers and disciplinarians, then morphed in later years to administrator as presidents dealt with increasing economic and social issues. Following the Great Recession a decade ago, which brought to the forefront issues of affordability and student debt, the role of a college president morphed yet again.

“The president sets the tone, sets the pace, helps to create momentum to keep an institution moving forward,” says Judith Block McLaughlin, chair of the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents. “It’s harder than it’s ever been.”

A well-spoken intellectual is no longer enough. Leaders are needed who have worldly and practical skills, who can read a financial statement, seek out financial support and navigate a kind of education that will meet the practical skills in high demand.

Today’s president raises both funds and supporters for the institution, takes on political battles surrounding education and oversees a complex campus organization. He or she must be accessible yet measured in an era driven by round-the-clock news coverage and social media. It’s a grueling pace.

The average length of service for college presidents is seven years, according to the 2017 edition of the American College President Study, produced by the American Council on Education and the TIAA Institute. That’s down from 8.5 years in 2006.

The drop comes as no surprise to Stanley Katz, professor of public and international affairs at Princeton University. He has witnessed a dramatic change in the presidential profile over six decades.

“These are arduous jobs,” says Katz. “Presidents spend a significant amount of time raising money and raising enrollments to provide the wherewithal for high-level education. They tend to be very tired, working long hours and under pressure.”

Consider a typical schedule: Presidents meet with students, faculty, donors, legislators and trustees. They attend campus, community, alumni and fundraising events and advocate for educational issues. They answer calls and emails, read reports, consider strategy and vision, ensure institutional fiscal health, prepare for speeches and events – the list goes on.

With intense competition for students and resources, presidents find it increasingly difficult to devote themselves to the educational mission of the college. Budget and finance remain an area of primary focus, with state and federal funding anticipated to decline in the years to come.