

## A Personal View of the Presidency

Nils Hasselmo

President Emeritus, University of Minnesota

President Emeritus, Association of American Universities

Let me begin by congratulating you on your decision to consider becoming a college or university president.

It's in my view the most interesting, rewarding, challenging, and harrowing career experience you are likely to have! I think that you are very likely to experience it that way – as I did.

Presidencies are interesting because you will be leading a community that is devoted to the search for knowledge in all its marvelous manifestations. In that, the presidency, of course, shares much with the chief academic officerships with which you are familiar.

In the presidency, you will also be leading a university in its many and varied interactions with the broader community, its interaction with its board, with local, state, and federal politics, with its alumni, with the surrounding business community, with the surrounding arts community, and with a variety of other cultural and social organizations – and with sometimes very loud individual voices from the community.

Presidencies are rewarding because you never need to doubt the value of what you are doing. It is very important. And you work with a lot of people who are highly dedicated to that enterprise.

Presidencies are challenging because you will be providing leadership amidst a plethora of problems and among multiple constituencies with very varied, and often conflicting, expectations and views.

And presidencies are harrowing because you – yes, you – will be the one to make those very difficult, even heart-rending, decisions that the institution's values and circumstances require. To coin a phrase, the buck does stop with you!

A presidency involves an interplay between what you set out to do and what falls in your lap. An interplay between your strategic plan and necessary crisis intervention. It involves the need to stay on course when the institution and you are buffeted by swirling winds.

There are certain aspects of the presidency that are common to all, or at least most, presidencies. But, ultimately every presidency probably has its own profile and its own evolution over time.

The better you understand the profile of your presidency, the better you will be able to steer the institution in the right direction. What are the values of this institution? How is it viewed by its several constituencies? What do they expect? How should the institution meet those expectations

in terms of its mission? What are the most important questions that have to be addressed now, and by me?

The better you understand the evolution of your presidency, the better you will be able to adjust the way you act. How can I best use the opportunities, the benefit of the doubt, I will enjoy as I take the helm? How can I best maintain momentum for what needs to be done as my presidency progresses? How, and when, can I best conclude my presidency?

Remember, as they say, a president makes only two truly important contributions, arriving and departing!

So, what are some of the more specific views of the presidency that I developed over the eight and a half years I served as president of the University of Minnesota?

I will state some of the things I found to be important and provide illustrations from my presidency. But, do keep in mind that my presidency had a certain profile and a certain evolution over time, which may not be the ones of your presidency. You will need to calibrate!

#1 Affirm the values and purposes of your institution.

I arrived at the University of Minnesota after a period of considerable turmoil. My predecessor had been forced to resign after only a couple of years in the presidency. The media attacked him for having spent lavishly on the president's house, and for having set up a "slush fund" from income from the university's endowment. Both were, to me, spurious issues. The real issue seemed to me to be the aggressive change agenda he had adopted, called "Commitment to Focus". This agenda seemed to undermine the highly valued egalitarianism of Minnesota by limiting access to the university by decreasing the enrollment of undergraduates and raising admission requirements.

The university did suffer a serious erosion of trust with important constituencies, ranging from the population in general to the legislature and the governor, not to mention the media. The Regents actually withdrew the university's pending request to the state for funds!

My first task became to try to re-establish trust.

I did that through personal appearances throughout the state and before the legislature and with the governor. It was important that I simply showed up!

And I did it by reaffirming the land-grant mission of the university with its tripartite agenda of teaching, research, and service. I said nothing new, but the mission had to be re-affirmed! And I firmly believed in that mission!

I had the advantage that Minnesotans do not believe that somebody of Swedish descent, least of all an immigrant, is capable of being truly devious! There was an ugly rumor that my Swedish accent got thicker and thicker the closer to the legislature I got!

There was a cartoon in the St. Paul Dispatch – I still have the original – which caught the situation. It showed a ferocious dog, with the label "Legislature," who had just devoured my

predecessor – tattered clothing with his name hanging out of its cruel jaws – a ferocious dog sitting in front of the university. And down in the right corner there was a little timorous-looking person, with the label “Hasselmo,” who was cautiously trying to approach the ferocious dog and going “Nice doggy, nice doggy”!

I spent a lot of time going “Nice doggy, nice doggy”!

Now, all that show was not enough, of course.

In concrete terms, we developed a report card that identified fourteen important problem areas that we felt needed to be addressed. It became our means of reporting every month at the Regents’ meetings on what we were doing and to what extent we had been able to deal with the problems. Building trust could not simply be a general public relations effort; we needed to pin down what the real problems were and what we were doing.

Identifying these fourteen problem areas, ranging from graduation rates for undergraduates to fiscal management, identifying these areas helped overcome the general feeling of distrust – which was in many ways based on false or misleading information. It helped us break through the fog of vicious anecdote!

# 2 Provide continuity.

My predecessor had developed what I thought was an excellent strategic plan for the university, a plan called “Commitment to Focus.” But, it had become a third rail of discontent and doubt, even outrage, among many constituencies in the state, including students. When I arrived on campus, “Commitment to Focus” had been converted into an obscene graffiti that you could see on the backside of street-signs!

I still do not understand how an excellent plan for the university could become so thoroughly misunderstood! But, it certainly is an illustration of how good intentions are not enough in the swirl of information, misinformation, and disinformation that is our contemporary world.

I still believe strongly that it is very important to provide continuity when you enter as a new president.

It may be tempting – and I think it happens too often – to throw out what has been done, especially any plan that bears your predecessor’s name.

It is also a temptation, I have noted, to be the great visionary! You descend on the institution with a vision that is all your own. Then you move to another institution and become the great visionary there – and so on. In the meantime leaving to your successors the grubby task of trying to implement something – for a change!

So, what was I to do?

I told the Board of Regents when I was interviewed that I believed firmly in the thrust of “Commitment to Focus,” and that I intended to build on that plan. They accepted that – although I was elected on an original vote of 7-5 (only later changed to a unanimous vote).

The trick became how to pursue an agenda along the lines of “Commitment to Focus” while avoiding the stigma attached to that name. The trick became to show that providing demanding education to new generations of students was, indeed, being true to our mission. That sharing the responsibility for access with the other institutions in the state was a cost-effective means of providing access – with quality.

### # 3 Be sure you do have a strategic plan

In my situation, I at first decided not to make much of our strategic plan. Instead I started making decisions along the lines of “Commitment to Focus” but referring to those decisions simply as “Restructuring and Reallocation”. This title, of course, was so bland that people’s eyes would glaze over – which is what I hoped. We were able to adopt a rather aggressive change agenda without being attacked for having tried to take the university in the “elitist directions” attributed to “Commitment to Focus.”

But, of course, pressure soon started building. “What is Hasselmo’s plan? Doesn’t Hasselmo have a plan? Why doesn’t Hasselmo have a plan?”

At that point, we were actually able to develop a new plan, which became known as “University 2000”. We prepared that plan after very extensive consultation with constituencies around the state as well as with faculty, staff, and students and with legislators and the governor. It contained basic elements of “Commitment to Focus,” which were now more widely understood and accepted – although not by any means unanimously.

When we moved to close the Waseca campus of the university, which clearly overlapped with the new technical college system that the state had developed, things were tough again for a while. But the Board of Regents voted unanimously to carry out this change. *The legislature – while beating up on me in hearings – accepted it as well. Some of them even took me into their offices after hearings and told me “Nils, you are doing the right thing.”*

The point I am making on the basis of my experience, and the circumstances I encountered, is thus that you have to have a strategic plan, but it has to be developed in such a way that, when it is presented, it has the substantial support that it needs to succeed.

I had the experience both of successfully closing a campus and of failing to close a college! I was able to lay the groundwork in the former case; in the latter case I was not!

### # 4 How to get out of “Never-never Land”?

By the way, I did develop this point long before “Neverland” took on its current, specific meaning.

One of the problems with “Commitment to Focus” was clearly that the plan was misunderstood.

The state of Minnesota provided very extensive access to higher education by a large number of fine state universities (former teachers’ colleges), community colleges, and technical colleges, and a large number of excellent private colleges. The old assumption that the University of Minnesota, the land-grant university, should provide access to every college-bound student in the state was clearly out-dated (and really never applied).

Given the resources of a research university, it seemed obvious that the University of Minnesota should provide special opportunities to students, both in terms of entrance requirements and in terms of the majors offered. Providing extensive remedial education was not a primary mission of the university.

As far as the university itself was concerned, it seemed that what most urgently needed to be done to advance its status as a research university was – perhaps somewhat paradoxically – to improve its undergraduate education.

What do I mean by getting out of “Never-never Land”?

This phenomenon expressed itself in the assumption that the University of Minnesota should, and could, be everything to everybody. And it expressed itself in the form of assumptions about financing. The university was seen by many, at one point even the governor, as feeding at the public trough. There was little or no understanding in political circles of the extent to which the state appropriation was an investment that yielded spectacular returns, not only in teaching, research, and service but in the 74% of the university budget generated by the university itself and supporting thousands of jobs around the state!

*Taken together, these assumptions amounted to wanting to admit everybody with a high-school diploma (which the university had never done), to graduating them in four years with a sterling education, and to doing it on a reduced state appropriation (when the state already provided only 26% of the total budget of \$1.8 billion). While providing internationally competitive graduate and professional education and research, and effective outreach in all the 87 counties of Minnesota.*

The plan we developed had as its basic goal to focus – yes, focus – the university on its unique and special responsibilities within the framework of a highly developed higher education enterprise.

Selling this proposition in terms that made sense was our main challenge.

We capitalized on an expected overall enrollment decline twenty years ago – which, as you may remember, did not materialize. But at the time, it provided support from the rest of the higher education community for an enrollment reduction at the university without cutting the state appropriation proportionately. This would help other institutions maintain their enrollment.

This is, by the way, a good example, I think, of how a crisis – preferably one that does not materialize – can help you do things that might be very difficult, or impossible, in flush times!

But it also meant that we had to be specific and concrete in the presentation of the plan and in the implementation of the plan. It meant that we had to be specific in terms of what we were eliminating and what, in return, we were building. And it meant that we had to be specific – and unrelenting – in communicating what we had actually been able to do, what the outcomes of our actions were. Again, we developed a report card that summarized the results. *When one of the most critical legislators quoted back to me excerpts from the report card, I – well, I was quite jubilant, in an appropriately restrained presidential fashion, of course!*

# 5 Maintain the right relationships

You, the president, are, of course, not the university or the college! You are just a steward, for a while! You need a lot of help.

I had the advantage of having many outstanding persons working for me, vice presidents, deans, chiefs of staff, faculty, staff, and student leaders.

I also benefitted greatly from the participation and help of alumni and a number of community and corporate leaders who provided important expertise in, for example, the restructuring of the health sciences – a large and complex part of the University of Minnesota – and of our personnel management in general. Executives from companies such as Medtronic and 3M worked on a pro bono basis on such issues, sometimes for a year or more at a time.

Delegation was, of course, absolutely necessary, not least when you serve, as I did, both as the president of the system and the chancellor of its major campus.

You do find, however, that delegation may not work when the real crises strike. The really difficult problems have a tendency to end up on your desk.

This was true for me, when it was discovered that FDA regulations had been grossly violated for twenty years in the Department of Surgery. I found myself without administrators in the health sciences who were willing to take on the onerous task of firing the very prominent and popular head of that department. When I got out of bed the morning I was going to the department to announce that decision, I really had to remind myself that I was working for an important enterprise – a really worthwhile enterprise!

*On the other hand, there was the chairman of the Board of Regents who represented the congressional district where the campus we were closing was located. He came with me to the campus and faced 2,000 demonstrators, barricaded with all kinds of agricultural equipment, to announce the closing. That certainly made that task much less onerous than it could have been.*

# 6 So, what are the personal qualities that a president needs?

I found that being president was truly a journey of discovery.

I discovered a lot about institutions, a lot about politics and politicians, a lot about our judicial system (we had 241 law suits when I left the university), a lot about people, and also a lot about myself!

You develop a special kind of understanding of an institution when you have to make decisions about it. I certainly developed an even more intense admiration for American higher education as I worked with leaders from the other sectors of that enterprise, including the private colleges. I had to try to implement actions that would ensure the effectiveness of the University of Minnesota, but cooperation with the other institutions of higher education was absolutely essential. To be sure, we compete. But, we also cooperate with each other, and must cooperate with each other, if we truly are to serve our students and society.

But, you also do develop an understanding of yourself, of your motivations, your principles, your stamina under pressure, and your willingness to stand up and take a beating.

And occasionally you experience the adrenaline rush of being important. But, don't let that get to you!

You realize that you have to be stubborn, because no matter how you may think – as I often did – that “nobody could possibly object to this,” you will always find that there are objections.

But, you must also try to make sure that you are stubborn where it is the right thing to do, and the right kind of groundwork has been done.

I was stubborn when it came to closing the Waseca campus. And it worked. I had done the groundwork, especially with the Board of Regents, with the help of that brave chair.

I was also stubborn in trying to close something called “General College.”

This unit had provided access to the university when Minnesota high schools did not always provide students the opportunity to fully prepare for entry into the university. Minnesota's Nobel Laureate, Norman Borlaug, the man behind the original “green revolution,” among others, had gotten into the university years ago through General College.

In my view, however, it had clearly outlived its mission. But, I did not lay enough of a foundation for carrying out that decision. After extensive demonstrations, the Board voted 11-1 against my recommendation, including the then chair. It was a lonely afternoon!

The fact that my successor at Minnesota, one removed, has been able to change General College also seems to me to illustrate a fact of life: Sometimes someone is able to make changes because a predecessor broke his or her lance on them! I benefitted greatly from what my predecessor had broken his lance on.

You do have to have thick skin.

I even learned to accept with some sort of equanimity the almost daily cartoon of me that appeared in the student news paper. I even came to accept that I was always going to intersperse my sentences with a “You betcha!” The only thing that upset me was when they had me say “Uff da,” in Minnesota a well-known Norwegian expression for expressing surprised disgust. As you all undoubtedly know, a Swede would, of course, say “Oj då!”

Although occasionally I may have expressed surprised disgust, I can tell you that I think back to my years as president with a smile on my face. I think some day you will, too!

Good luck in your pursuit of that most enjoyable of positions, that of a college or university president!

Let's take questions!