

Can a President Have Friends on the Campus?

Melody Rose and Patrick Sharry

The American college presidency has taken quite a beating in recent months. Critics have debated the pressures of the position, the impossibility of doing it well, and even its core desirability. All of those stresses are made even more difficult by a central quality of the work that leaders rarely talk about until they step down: the loneliness of the job.

A college president is academe's version of Rapunzel: trapped alone in their own tower by virtue of their position and unique authority. Literally peerless on their campus, a president often confronts a kind of loneliness that leaves them feeling isolated and apart even while they are connecting, networking, and handshaking on a daily basis. Is there a real chance to let their hair down? Or, as a recently appointed president asked us, "Can I even have friends?"

Given the generous salaries that most presidents earn, plenty of people across academe may have little sympathy. But as executive-search consultants, we think this aspect of leadership affects people's willingness to take on the role, especially in tense times. We have some suggestions on how leaders can escape the tower of loneliness.

An "n of 1." Let's presume that you are that college president — alone, staring down wistfully at the bustling campus below or across the picturesque quad outside your window. First off, let the record show that you are not alone in your feelings of isolation. In fact, loneliness is a common experience among leaders across various professions. Ernest Shackleton may have stated it

perfectly with his summation: "Leadership is a fine thing, but it has its penalties. And the greatest penalty is loneliness."

"On a campus you're *sui generis*," said Marjorie Hass, former president at Austin and Rhodes Colleges and current president of the Council of Independent Colleges. A higher-education lifer, the formative years of her career were spent as a faculty member and filled with shared experiences, comradery, and commiseration. "Whatever I was going through, there was a colleague who had had similar experiences," she said in a Zoom interview. "As you transition into leadership roles, that group gets smaller and smaller and smaller. The jobs become more isolating."

As president, she added: "There are certain things you can't discuss with anyone on campus. You carry the weight of confidential information."

You're lonely but never alone. Whether at the local store or on a trip abroad, someone notices you and wants your time. Frequently it's to gripe. The president acts as a sponge for a drumbeat of negative (and, yes, positive) emotions, Hass noted. "You bear the full weight of difficult decisions. You're an 'n of 1.'"

"It is very difficult for a president to make friends inside the campus," agreed Javier Cevallos, former president at Kutztown and Framingham State Universities. "It could lead to conflict, favoritism or at least the perception of favoritism. Not to mention that your cabinet members work at your will, so they cannot be 'friends.'"

"As the president, your work BFFs become figments of your past," wrote Felicia Ganther in [an essay published last summer](#), a few months before she stepped down as president of Bucks County Community College. She added: "There is a level of respect that is ingrained in our culture that won't allow your team to step beyond a certain level of comfortability with you. As important, there is a level of comfortability that a president should never go beyond with their team or with anyone who works at their institution."

You as president must create an inherent separation between yourself and everyone else that should not be (and, really, cannot be) breached. You must exercise caution when assessing potential friendships and maintain a balance between professional boundaries and personal connections.

You have two reputations to maintain — yours and the institution's. As president, you are the bridge connecting the campus (its students, faculty and staff members, and alumni) to the outside world. An institution's successes are shared. But when it comes time to answer for an oddity, mishap, or a scandal, your name is first on the list for the media to interview and for critics to blame. A crisis may be the loneliest time for a president, when it's easy to become the scapegoat for problems that were not entirely yours in the making.

Additionally, as a president, oftentimes you are thrust into the spotlight of your college town, becoming a public figure whose every move is scrutinized. The constant attention can lead to increased stress, heightened expectations, and a loss of personal privacy. Especially in small towns, everyone you interact with has an opinion about the institution, and sometimes about your performance. People who don't actually know you may believe they do because of your ubiquity and outsized significance within a close-knit community.

And you are always — wherever you are, whoever you are with, or whatever time of day it is — the president. One of us (Melody) was a chancellor and will never forget being in a grocery after a run, sweating and in workout gear, when a fellow shopper and complete

stranger tapped her on the shoulder in the checkout line, and said, "Well, you don't look like a chancellor."

Balancing the public demands of the job with your personal well-being can exacerbate the sense of loneliness. (Dimensions of gender, race, and sexual identity add further nuances.)

5 Ways to Lessen Your Isolation

So how can you alleviate what is clearly an inherent aspect of the college presidency? Here are five strategies:

Scout for a few experienced shoulders to lean on.

Go outside your institution's footprint to find mentors and friends. Look to engage with other presidents who have faced similar challenges and can provide guidance, understanding, and empathy. Formal mentoring programs for presidents are designed to build relationships with people who are truly peers and who "get" you and your job. The independent-college council, for example, has a new presidents program every January, and has begun a [Presidential Renewal Program](#) for those in the role for five years or more. Other well-known leadership-training programs include those at [Harvard University](#) and the [American Council on Education](#), while affiliate groups with varying degrees of formality exist for presidents who are women, Hispanic, Black, and LGBTQ.

Closer to home, build your network in the local region around your college. Ganthers, the former community-college president, said she reached out to corporate CEOs in her area and quickly developed a "squad" that she trusted and regularly leaned on. Relationships with senior executives from other sectors can provide you with valuable professional insights, not to mention be a source of personal support.

Get your management team talking. Foster a culture of open communication within your institution and across your executive team. Set up meetings, formal and informal. Let others speak. Let them air concerns and grievances; answer as honestly as you can.

They may never become your BFFs, but team alignment and transparent communication (more advice on that subject [can be found here](#)) can help bridge the gap between you and them, fostering a sense of shared purpose and collaboration and helping you (and them) to feel less alone.

Get back to your roots. The people who “knew you when” can be a vital source of consistent connection, trust, and true fellowship. Friends developed over the course of a lifetime become true treasures, especially at a time of your life when establishing new friends might be challenging. Rely on those established connections that can actually transport you — even briefly — out of your presidency.

Build your network as you hone your leadership skills. Participate in conferences, workshops, and seminars tailored to the unique needs of presidents. Professional-development opportunities provide platforms for you to network with peers, talk openly about shared challenges, and learn from experienced leaders. These opportunities can foster a sense of belonging and provide a supportive community outside of the day-to-day grind.

Or call in a coach. Having one-on-one time with a certified coach can alleviate some of the loneliness that comes from lacking close confidants who “tell it like it is.” A coach can help you “suss out the various agendas of those around you and then decide where you land on a particular issue,” and feel more confident in your decisions and vision, argued two former administrators [in a 2021 essay on executive coaching](#). While coaching has long been accepted in the corporate world, it has tremendous value within higher education as well.

Bond with your board. Some presidents have a neutral or adversarial relationship with their trustees. As president, however, you have the ability to make your board a champion of your vision and partner in your corner. They also know all the intricacies of the institution’s condition: from finances to morale, your trustees can be sources of connection and support. As a university president, I (Melody) became lifelong friends with some of my trustees; our friendship was rooted in a meaningful, shared experience and deep respect.

The loneliness experienced by college presidents is a complex issue rooted in the nature of the role and the challenges you face. And obviously, part of the solution is to make time in your schedule to take care of your own personal needs (even if that occasionally means being spotted in workout gear). Presidents rarely talk about their own mental health, [as a recent essay by a former president](#) noted in these pages. But participating in activities that bring you joy and fulfillment outside of work — hobbies, exercise, family time — can provide a much-needed sense of balance and connection.

It may not be much solace to know that you are not alone in feeling isolated as a college president; many of your peers feel the same way, too. But by seeking peer support, fostering open communication, developing external connections, engaging in professional development, and drawing on established connections, you can allay some of those feelings and create a more fulfilling and connected presidency.

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This article was originally published in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). Permission to reprint has been granted.