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LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

Welcome to the College Presidency. Oh, the House Is on Fire.

By *Jack Stripling* | APRIL 24, 2020

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Jon Krause for The Chronicle

Dwight A. McBride arrived in New York City on March 17, the day Mayor Bill de Blasio shut down all the restaurants.

McBride, who five months earlier had been named the next president of the New School, soaked in the eerie sight of a desolate Times Square, and he began to settle into the quiet of his temporary two-bedroom apartment in Greenwich Village.

By that time, an estimated 10 New Yorkers had died of Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. Normal life in one of the world's most vibrant cities had come to a crashing halt.

This is not how McBride, a former provost of Emory University, envisioned the start of his first college presidency. The coronavirus pandemic, which throws into doubt many of the foundational elements of residential higher education, will test the mettle and ingenuity of even the most seasoned college leaders and their teams. But for a handful of new college presidents, some of whom are leading universities for the first time, a trial by fire with potentially existential implications awaits.

"It's a very different presidency now than the one that I accepted in October," McBride said.

McBride, who officially took the helm of the New School on April 16, had planned to shadow David E. Van Zandt, his departing predecessor, on the job for three weeks. Dinners and receptions were scheduled, all part of a choreographed introduction of McBride to the university, a private institution of 10,500 students that houses, among other programs, the well-known Parsons School of Design. Presumably, many hands would have been shaken.

Of course, none of that happened. On March 11, a few days before McBride arrived in New York, the New School, which is also in the Village, announced that it would move all of its classes online, joining hundreds of colleges that have abandoned in-person instruction for the foreseeable future.

In that moment, the presidency of the New School, just like that of colleges across the nation, changed in fundamental ways that no one can yet begin to quantify. A president's inbox is filled now with a cascade of critical decisions about when it may be safe for students to return to campus, and what will happen to tuition-driven institutions if enrollment plummets. Every president now has one big job, and that job is crisis management.

Presidents Without 'Superpowers'

McBride spent his first official day as the New School's president stuck in the now-familiar confines of his "home office," the temporary apartment where he will live before moving into the president's on-campus residence. In an interview with *The Chronicle*, conducted via Zoom, McBride recalled how he had hoped to start his presidency. One of his first moves, he expected, would be to pledge \$100,000 for student scholarships. Instead, he steered that money toward the university's Student Emergency Fund, which is designed to meet urgent and unexpected financial needs.

"Families and students are struggling," McBride said. "Many of them have lost their jobs, lost their income. I thought it would be very important and timely to think about being of more immediate help."

How quaint all of McBride's plans seemed by his first day, he acknowledged, as the city's death toll hit 8,632. He probably expected to be on campus, not talking over video chat in a New School T-shirt with a Zoom background photo of the campus welcome center behind him.

"The world changed in none of the ways that were expected," McBride said.

The university's own urgent financial needs are coming into focus, too. When the New School transitioned to online instruction, the university refunded students' room and board. Tuition next year will be frozen, rather than rise by 3.8 percent as the board had planned, McBride said. Enrollment numbers, which were already a source of some concern, could get worse. All of that, McBride said, "comes with a price tag attached to it."

"To put it in crude financial terms," he said, "our cash management is going to be an immediate concern."

Colleges that are feeling the early financial pinch of the coronavirus have already responded with furloughs, pay cuts, and layoffs. Ideally, a new president would be afforded some time to build goodwill and trust on a campus before making painful and far-reaching decisions. That's not the case now, as new college presidents try to get to know their colleagues through Zoom chats. It is difficult to establish a connection, McBride said, with people who "appear as little stamps" on a computer monitor.

"I think of myself as a person who enjoys my time socially with people," he said. "I draw energy from that. I value that, and I also trust it.

"It's almost like starting this job with one hand tied behind your back," McBride continued. "One of your superpowers is taken away."

But colleges continue to muddle through, using virtual technology to approximate the experience of welcoming a new president in person.

'Headed for a Storm'

April 2 was a big day for Southwestern University.

The announcement of a new president was the culmination of a monthslong national search. As the moment of the big reveal approached, Scarlett J. Moss, the university's communications chief, emailed the president-to-be and several trustees.

"We are ready to go from our end," Moss wrote. "Fingers crossed the technology works with us.

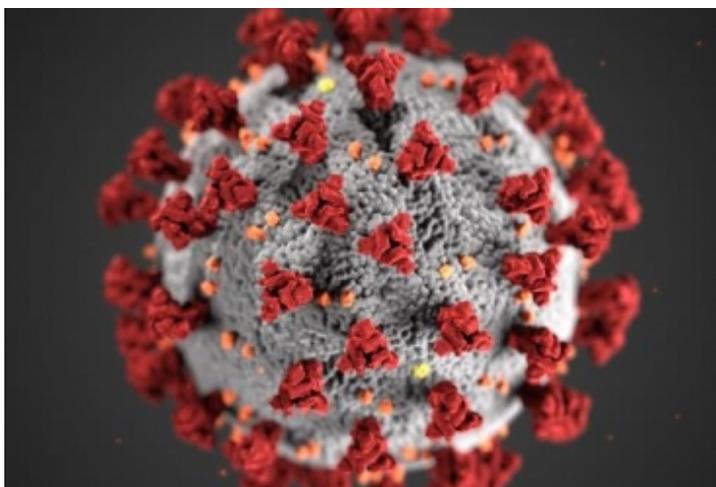
"Let's do this!"

Moments later, Stephen G. Tipps, chairman of Southwestern's Board of Trustees, appeared in an online video via Zoom. Seated beneath a ceiling fan in his Houston home, Tipps announced the university's "16th and first woman president, Dr. Laura Skandera Trombley."

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- [Covid-19 Sent LGBTQ Students Back to Unsupportive Homes. That Raises the Risk They Won't Return.](#)
- [Video Kills the Teaching Star](#) ✓ PREMIUM
- [Could Coronavirus Antibody Tests Really Help Colleges Reopen in the Fall?](#) ✓ PREMIUM



As with every new college president right now, Trombley is walking into an institution riddled with uncertainty and scrambling to adapt. Concerned that prospective students and their families might not be ready to commit to enrolling, Southwestern recently joined dozens of institutions in extending its deposit deadline from May 1 to June 1. In

addition to reducing stress for families, Southwestern officials hope the extension will give the university more time to recruit students online should campus visits be impossible.

For Trombley, who will assume the post on July 1, the challenges presented by the coronavirus aren't merely theoretical. A couple of weeks before she was named Southwestern's next president, Trombley announced a plan for layoffs, furloughs, and pay cuts at the University of Bridgeport, where, after a nearly two-year tenure, she recently resigned as president.

"I didn't think, 'Let's kick the can down the road and let the next person do it,'" said Trombley, who said she wanted to move to Texas, in part, to be closer to a family member who is ill. "The university was in a place where we needed to make an immediate decision."

Stephen Healey, Bridgeport's former provost, has stepped in as interim president.

To hear it from some faculty members, there is no rush to start a search for Trombley's permanent successor.

"Now is not the time to attract the right candidate," said Frank Martignetti, chairman of Bridgeport's music and performing arts department. "We're in a pandemic. We're in a budget deficit. There are things that we as an institution need to work through right now."

At the same time, Martignetti said, he is optimistic.

"We're all headed for a storm in this industry right now," he said, "and I think we're ready to weather it" at Bridgeport.

Some college campuses are suspending presidential searches amid the outbreak. But Southwestern, a private, undergraduate, liberal-arts institution with 1,400 students, was far enough along to forge ahead. Even a few weeks, though, might have changed that.

Three candidates visited Southwestern's campus, in Georgetown, Tex., in March, just after officials in nearby Austin had canceled South by Southwest and its education offshoot, SXSW EDU.

"We just barely made this happen in a face-to-face format," said Robert M. Bednar, a member of the Presidential Search Advisory Committee.

As with many presidential searches today, Southwestern strictly limited the number of people who knew the identities of the candidates in hopes of protecting their privacy. It was expected, though, that in the coming weeks Trombley would visit the campus and get to know students and professors.

"For most people on campus," Bednar said, "they've never met her and will not meet her until who knows."

Historic Hire

The new presidencies of the Covid-19 era are sure to be historic, if only for the unprecedented challenges leaders will face. That may be particularly true, though, at the Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering, which recently named Gilda A. Barabino as the second president in the institution's history.

Olin, a 350-student undergraduate college near Boston, officially opened, in 2002, under the leadership of Richard K. Miller, who is sometimes described as "Employee No. 1." The college, which was built from scratch with the support of a \$460-million donation from the F. W. Olin Foundation, prides itself on attracting risk takers who like to experiment.

During the presidential search, of course, no one envisioned the level of experimentation that would be required of Olin's next leader. Before moving online in response to the outbreak, all of Olin's classes were face to face, emphasizing hands-on instruction in relatively small groups. Retaining the college's ethos after such a dramatic shift online wasn't a challenge Olin's presidential-search committee specifically anticipated, but they were looking for someone who would thrive in a start-up culture in which things can quickly change.

Lynn Andrea Stein, vice chairwoman of the search committee and a professor of computer and cognitive science, said that the group pressed candidates on whether they were comfortable with “ambiguity and uncertainty.” As a founding member of the faculty at Olin, Stein signed up with the university when it was a “hole in the ground” with no curriculum or students. The college wanted a president who would embrace an opportunity like that, she said.

“We deliberately tried to cast an incredibly broad net so we would have the highest probability of finding the particular unicorn who would be our next president,” Stein said, “and we didn’t know what that person was likely to look like.”

In the end, it looked like Barabino, dean of the Grove School of Engineering at the City College of the City University of New York.

“No one could have predicted this,” Barabino said in a recent interview with *The Chronicle*. “We are in unprecedented, uncertain times. We are all in uncharted waters. No one is ready to predict with certainty about anything. But I do feel I’m joining an environment where they are accustomed to thinking boldly, broadly, differently.”

Barabino, who will assume her role on July 1, says she is not concerned that this is her first college presidency. The “core skill sets” of leadership are the same, she said, irrespective of administrative titles.

“When you’re working with strong teams,” Barabino said, “you figure it out.”

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