



**To: My Newest Colleagues**  
**From: Stephen R. Lewis, Jr.**  
**President Emeritus, Carlton College**  
**Re: STARTING A NEW JOB**

**Some years ago** Mary Patterson McPherson, former President of Bryn Mawr, former Senior Vice President of the Mellon Foundation and current Executive Officer of the American Philosophical Society, asked me if I would join her in talking with several new college presidents in the fall of their first year. She and I discussed the format of our conversation, and both of us felt it would be somewhat presumptuous to offer “advice”—perhaps recalling the story of the elementary school student who identified Socrates on a quiz. “Socrates,” she wrote, “was a Greek. He went around giving advice. They poisoned him.” An alternative approach seemed called for.

Recognizing that every situation, and every individual, is unique, I suggested I might list a number of things during my early months in office which, in retrospect, I was very glad I had decided to do, and a roughly equal number which I wished I had undertaken but didn’t have the sense to do. After our conversation with a group of new colleagues, Pat and several new presidents suggested I write the ideas up, in the hope they might be useful to others who enter a presidency for the first time—and, perhaps, to colleagues on their boards, in their faculties, and on their staffs. So, here are some reflections many years after being selected as Carleton’s ninth President in 1987, a position from which I retired in 2002.

The diverse nature of both the “glad I did” and “wished I had” lists gave me pause; they form, perhaps, their own commentary on the nature of the job. I’ll end with some of the factors which were just dumb luck, and which, as much as or even more than anything one can do as an individual, frame how successful one’s tenure as a president will be.

### **Things I’m glad I did**

- 1. If one is asked to take responsibility, one has to have the necessary authority to act—and the action of picking the faculty and staff who will do the jobs is the single most important thing a president does.**

In meetings with the Search Committee, in interviews on campus, and in my first meeting with the Board following my formal election, I stated that, for me, recommendations of the president on matters of personnel and appointments were resignable issues. That is, while the Board was of course free to reject one of my recommendations, our understanding would be that, should they do so, their next action should be to form a Search Committee for a new president. George Dixon, the Board Chair who headed the Search Committee and who remained one of my most valued counselors, gave me some

supplementary advice on these matters. When I asked him, in my first year, if he would interview someone I was considering for a senior position, he responded, “Only if he understands I have nothing to say about whether or not he is hired at Carleton.” A corollary bit of advice which he offered during that year was, “Never hire someone you can’t fire.” It would be easy to read into these statements a sense of arrogance, or an unwillingness to listen to advice. That would be a bad misreading, since this is the most important thing a president does.

- 2. During my first few months at Carleton, a very experienced Trustee urged me to establish a regular executive session (i.e., without any staff present) with the Trustees, and with its Executive Committee, at every meeting.**

It would be, he argued, an opportunity for both me and the Trustees to be completely candid; and if it was regular then there would be no need to call attention to a particularly difficult issue that might have to be discussed only between the Board and the President. I started it immediately, and it proved to be invaluable as a communication device and as a way for me to receive candid advice from the Board, including about my administrative and faculty colleagues. It was also extremely useful, on several occasions, to have an automatic executive session. Neither the Board Chair nor I had to suggest one to deal with sensitive issues when it was best not to broadcast that something was up.

- 3. There are a small number of people in any institution with which I’ve been associated—non-profit, for-profit, sovereign governments, or international organizations—who have a hugely disproportionate impact on the welfare and direction of the institution.**

One thing I did during my first year was to get to know, and to establish relationships of trust with, a few of those key individuals among the trustees and alumni leaders. Colleges are people-intensive, and they depend on relationships. The heavy-hitters (not exclusively in financial terms), the agenda-setters, the conveners, the elders, are exceptional sources of the strengths of the college, and they are invaluable sources of wisdom, history and advice. Seek them out.

- 4. Whether the result is to inform fund-raising, budget-cutting, re-ordering of campus social and residential arrangements, or reforming the curriculum, my experience has been that a periodic, institution-wide review of priorities and directions is healthy, and critically important.**

In many institutions—in most of those with which I’m familiar—the need to build a consensus around an agreed list of priorities is of continuing importance. Before I arrived on campus I had discussions with faculty, staff and board leadership about the desirability of a college-wide exercise that would look at the decade of the 1990s. Chaired by Perry Mason, a senior member of the faculty whom I’d come to know in his role as Secretary of the Search Committee, it included faculty, staff, students, trustees, and alumni, and among those categories, individuals who were parents of Carleton students as well. By the end of my first year, I had the advantage of having had the campus go through the

process of looking ahead and thinking about the college's future, with my active participation. We had a document that could be the basis of a number of key decisions on bricks and mortar priorities, fund-raising goals and several other initiatives. I was not in the position of working from a set of priorities that had been established before I had been given both the opportunity to look things over and the responsibility for trying to meet the goals.

**5. Some organizational changes are better made before arriving on the campus so that people do not take them as personal affronts.**

Institutions have their own peculiar characteristics, and their form of organization grows out of an accommodation of interests and individuals who have been there over the years. As the conditions change, the form of organization often does not. In our case, an institution had grown up called the Administrative Executive Committee, and its membership included not only individuals who reported directly to the President, but also several individuals who were not direct reports. Each had some historic reason for being there, and in several cases the individuals had changed, removing the reason for the membership, but the successor had stayed. And, in the campus climate of the time, when "The Administration" was seen, or portrayed, by many as a kind of gray, amorphous authority, it seemed that a body with the title of this one—implying by the title, "Committee," that this group made decisions—was a way of asking for trouble. So, before arriving on campus, I decided to abolish this old Committee and to simply meet weekly with my direct reports—two vice presidents and three deans. It became known as The Weekly Meeting, or TWM—which, a young staffer who'd graduated from Carleton quipped, stood for Those Who Matter. We tried (with limited but occasional success) to get across that this group was not a decision-making body for The Administration (a term which I urged my colleagues to abolish as a part of ordinary discourse), but a chance for colleagues to get together to share ideas and mutual concerns, ask advice, and tell one another what they were doing. There was no way I could have made this change after I had been at Carleton, even for a very brief period of time. Each excluded individual would have taken it as an even greater personal offense if I'd made the decision after I had come to know them as individuals.

**6. Presidents and deans probably have to lean against the prevailing wind from time to time in order to ensure balanced conversations on campus. Getting beaten up on occasion is an essential part of the job.**

In the years before and during my introduction to Carleton, the issue of "divestment" of securities of companies doing business in South Africa was one of the hottest campus controversies. At Carleton, it seemed to me, discussion (if that was the correct word) of the matter had deteriorated substantially, and it seemed the only parties involved in the controversy were the President and Treasurer, the Trustees and a vocal group of students and faculty. Positions were pretty hardened, and (I believe, as a direct result of such hardening) the large number of people who were concerned about Apartheid in South Africa, but who were unclear that there was an obvious set of actions to be taken by American institutions, had retired to the sidelines and were not part of the debate (if such it was). Having worked most of the previous dozen years in Southern Africa, written two books and several articles about the region, and served for four years on the Shareholder

Responsibility Committee advising the Trustees at Williams College, I decided the best thing to do was to jump in with both feet. The first week I was on campus I gave a talk on “Sanctions and South Africa,” which drew a large crowd, and in which I laid out my analysis of the situation and the reasons I had for skepticism about any simple view of what outsiders should do. There was lively and passionate discussion afterward. I was struck by the fact that, over the next week, several students stopped me on campus, and two wrote me notes, that, in effect said: “Thank you for making it possible to talk about this issue again.” In subsequent months, as controversy continued to rage, I made it a practice to personally invite a dozen or more faculty and staff to any meeting on the subject, saying I did not know how they felt, but I knew they were broadly concerned with the issues, so could they please come. As a result, the moderates started to show up, and the meetings (with some notable exceptions) became less polarized and more civil. My conclusion after these events was that there were plenty of good citizens who, given a choice, would rather be home with family or a good book, but if asked would come to be part of the conversation, or at least the audience. The lesson was repeated a number of times.

**7. Carleton is a place where students expect to participate in decisions at every level if they believe the decisions will affect either their lives or the nature of the College.**

A favorite story from my early years to illustrate the point came when a student, upset at some alleged outrage committed by one of the student affairs staff, asked me: “President Lewis, do you think it’s legitimate for an Administrator to make a decision?” When I arrived on campus I established a “walk-in hour” for students, which was held every week during terms when I was not traveling. Any student could come in to discuss any issue, without need for an appointment. The topics, and the traffic, varied over the years, but it proved to be invaluable as a safety valve on issues, as an ease to scheduling, and as an ear on the campus. I had everything from expressions of outrage on numerous issues to confessions about alcoholism and drug use, and from lobbying on major policy issues to an ad hoc concert by four students who wanted to stop by and say “Hi.”

**8. Alumni showed a very high degree of satisfaction with their education; very large numbers regarded Carleton as a life-changing experience for them; and in general they were very proud of the College. However, as some alumni later told me, “No one ever told us we were responsible for the health of the College.” I concluded that the alumni body was the biggest untapped resource Carleton possessed.**

Having come from an Eastern institution, I was used to a very high degree of alumni involvement in the college, and a culture among alumni that assumed a high level of financial support by all graduates. One heard about one’s obligations to Alma Mater from the first day of one’s arrival on campus. Carleton was different. In my first week on campus (here comes some dumb luck) the Alumni Board was meeting, and Bill Beldt, the Alumni President, asked if he could have lunch to talk about agendas. He laid out a series of concerns about the relationship of the alumni to the College, and he reinforced my conclusion about the untapped resource. Bill and I blocked out an agenda of action in that

first week and revisited the progress over the remainder of the year. Both hard analysis and gut feeling said: this is the way to go. The key relationships mentioned in item 3 above played into the alumni program and provided a self-reinforcing aspect to the momentum. By the end of the first year a group of alumni, encouraged by what they saw in a new relationship to alumni, asked if they could take over all aspects of annual fund-raising, with the College providing all the logistical support, but with alumni volunteers setting the goals, recruiting other volunteers, and asking for the gifts. We said “yes” immediately, and this added to the momentum. The assessment of the nature of the untapped resource turned out to be correct.

**9. Both people and circumstances change; matching the right person with the right job requires continuous review, and the need to act on personnel changes in a timely way seems always to be with us.**

As might be expected, once I had committed to come to Carleton I started receiving all manner of advice about personnel, particularly advice about those I inherited on the staff who should be sacked! Knowing how sharp the knives are in the academy, I was skeptical about a good deal of the advice and wanted to make my own assessments. I did make changes in the first eighteen months in some areas important to key elements in the College’s emerging agenda. As hard as those decisions were, I concluded that I was unlikely to move too precipitously in such areas—indeed, my own inclinations have been to let things run too long before making a change. Advice from several key trustees—that I act with dispatch, and that once a decision was made to be sure the transition was very short—proved to be correct. And, I must add, these are not matters of “building one’s own team.” The lessons of the first year’s changes were most salutary.

**10. In many instances, I took advantage of being the new kid on the block, with no track record of any kind, to ask questions and propose solutions without people having a sense I had a Carleton-honed axe to grind.**

One of the characteristics of Carleton’s procedures that struck me as being in need of modification was that the College-wide faculty group advising the President on matters of tenure were not expected to act as a body, but as individuals. The result was a lack of any sense of corporate responsibility for tenure recommendations. Further, there was no committee of the faculty to whom the President or the Dean could turn for advice on a wide range of other personnel issues—reviews of non-tenured faculty, promotions in rank, allocations of faculty slots to departments and programs, exceptions to general college rules on leaves of absence, etc. I raised the issue with the Faculty Affairs Committee in my first meeting with them, eight months before I arrived on campus. We pursued the matter for over two years, and finally arrived at a new Faculty Personnel Committee. It had neither the design I had initially envisioned, nor that of the old system, nor indeed that of any of the other college models that were surveyed. But, by getting the conversation going early, before there was any history of my involvement with any particular decision and any example, helpful or harmful, to provide a lens through which to view my objectives in the exercise, I think we produced an extremely good result.

- 11. I've heard other college presidents speak about the necessity of changing staff as many times, and as quickly, as one needs in order to ensure strength in that key management support position. I think they are right.**

In my earlier lives I had been fortunate to have had the opportunity to experience and to observe how important the direct staff support of senior executives—in any type of organization—can be. Indeed, while I was being interviewed at Carleton, many people semi-jokingly said it didn't matter who was President, since Helen Nelson, the Secretary to the President, ran the College! I agreed to come to Carleton secure in the knowledge that I would have a strong and experienced right hand and manager. On a phone call to Helen in June about how various arrangements were progressing, we finished our business and she said to me: "I think there's something David wants to talk over with you." David Porter, a widower, was Carleton's President during 1986-87 and was about to leave to become President of Skidmore College. David came on the phone and said, "Steve, there's no way to break this softly, but Helen and I are getting married and she's coming with me to Skidmore." Fortunately I was able to persuade Janet Runkel, a highly competent and experienced person who was then running the office of the academic dean, to move down the hall and take over my office. I'm convinced that getting the right support in one's own office is one of the most critical decisions one can make. I've always been puzzled at the lack of attention paid to those crucial people in the biographies of important political, business and educational leaders (Missy LeHand and Rosemary Woods to the contrary notwithstanding).

### **Things I wished I'd not done**

- 1. Over-scheduling in my first year was a major liability. And, as will be evident from the other "wished I'd" items, I could have spent the time much better on some other critical areas I neglected.**

In my eagerness to be seen to be accessible and to be interested in all aspects of the college and all of its constituencies, I insisted on a full schedule of regular meetings with all manner of people and groups on campus. Sometimes I would have scheduled appointments for nine hours straight. All the off-campus constituents expected their piece of my time, of course, and by the end of the first term, as I felt myself going under for the third time, I talked with my Chair, who'd run several major organizations with great success. "George," I said, "you've run big institutions—I'm trying to run a small one, and I just can't get it all done. What's the secret; what's the most important thing to do?" He responded promptly: "Get control of your calendar—that's the most important thing." I said that sounded very plausible—how'd he manage to do it? "I never did," he said, "I just know it's the most important thing!" Unfortunately, having established expectations for frequent and regular meetings, it took a long time to unwind the schedule. But, having successfully done so, I found myself plenty busy but with the time to think about and set more of my own priorities, respond immediately where there were crises, show up at

unexpected times and places, and be available on very short notice to colleagues who had an issue to deal with.

- 2. I should have established a fairly comprehensive list of faculty and staff and spent time with lots of them getting to know them on an individual basis.**

Coming to a new place was, I knew, a challenge, since I didn't know any thing about either flora or fauna at Carleton. Many of my missteps in the first few years could, I think, have been avoided if I had acquired, early on, a better sense of the players, the lay of the land, the alliances, and the location of the scar tissues (which, I think, dissolves more slowly in the academy than in most other institutions). Bad error.

- 3. As a corollary to the last point, I wish I had not relied so heavily on individual advice from some of the people who, I thought, had the pulse of the faculty (and students).**

In retrospect, either they were not in touch, or they wanted to push me in particular directions, or both, and I made some serious missteps that could have been avoided. I was much better at establishing a sense of who had the pulse of alumni. My error on campus was probably due to the fact that I was unconsciously transferring my sense of confidence of knowing what was what from my previous place—where I had the accumulated knowledge of over twenty years. If I'd done number 2 above, I'd have been less vulnerable to 3. (The fact that previous commitments to finish several projects kept me from arriving at Carleton until after classes had started for Fall term meant I began behind the eight-ball—which made errors easier and more frequent, due to lack of local knowledge.)

- 4. As a corollary to the first point, I did not do a good job of setting priorities and making strategic choices in my first couple of years. Mainly, I did not follow the dictum I have tried to give others: if everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.**

This tendency to try to do everything, combined with the over-scheduling of meetings, diluted the effort considerably. As the Emperor said to young Wolfgang Amadeus: “Too many notes, Mozart.”

- 5. Having had little to do with fundraising activities except for foundation proposals in my previous life, I was ignorant, and I should have found some ways of finding good advice.**

My ignorance was exacerbated by a very substantial turnover in our development staff just before I arrived. I probably lost two to four years of effectiveness through not knowing the game, and not having the right people to whom to turn. A couple of emeritus trustees were extremely helpful, and I should have used them more. I also should have been more aggressive in discussing my lack of experience, its consequences, and how to go about overcoming it, with my Board Chair. It is such an enormous part of the job, getting it right should have had higher priority.

6. Part of the consequence of the ignorance in number 5, but in some ways independent of it, was my failure to realize the importance of continued stewardship of long-time benefactors.

I did make a few early connections and kept them up, but I did not realize that I should have figured out who were the most important two to five dozen people or couples, and set up arrangements to see each of them in the first six to twelve months, simply to say “I’m the new kid on the block.” I know that failure cost time in developing some further support; I am pretty sure it cost gifts, as well. And, based not just on my own experience but also comments from some other new presidents, I should have asked for the list and then made my own arrangements for visits, rather than simply relying on the development staff to work it out.

7. While some of my critics, and perhaps some of my friends, would doubtless disagree, I came to the job without a sense of the “voltage” carried by a visit or call from “The President of One’s College.”

Bob Gale, a long-time and very wise trustee, coached me in this, but the lesson did not stick early enough. I failed to realize that not only can one call up and ask to see someone, or have lunch, simply because you’re The President, but I was making a big mistake not doing so with all sorts of folks, not just potentially large donors.

8. As might be surmised from several of the previous points, I should have carved out more time for regular and sustained contact with several trustees—for their coaching, their sense of history, and their advice on all manner of issues, both internal and external.

I did my early rounds to meet people, and I did get some good coaching. But in retrospect, if I had spent a couple of hours a month with a few of the truly wise people on the Board, I would have benefited enormously, and so would have the College.

9. In addition to my failure to get to know enough individual faculty and staff to get a good handle on things, I did not figure out how to develop the best relationship with students—and consequently had some pretty rough times for several years.

(One low point was the sale, for fifty cents a piece as I recall, of “Impeach Lewis” buttons during my first spring term.) Eventually, both because of the cumulative effect of the walk-in hours, goofy pranks, attendance at lots of student events, reading bed-time stories in the dorms, and a variety of other things, the relationships changed substantially. But, especially in a College as participative as Carleton, “consent of the governed” is quite important, and I should have developed and executed a clear plan to be sure I was in touch.



- 10. Despite having done administrative jobs, large and small, for a couple of decades, and having worked in government organizations for very senior people in Kenya and Botswana for almost twenty years before coming to Carleton, I had never had the top job, and it's just plain different from everything else.**

In my fifth year I did something I should have done much earlier. By that time George Dixon had retired as Chair of the Board and had wound down many of his other commitments. He agreed to give me two days of “consulting.” He came to campus and interviewed everyone in my office and all of my direct reports on a strictly confidential basis. I'd done some analysis through various personality tests and management practice inventories of how I, and my associates, viewed my work style, and I shared all those with George. He wrote out a report for me, and we talked it over for a couple of hours. I've made a lot of changes based on his advice, and still keep the document in my top desk drawer. I would have saved a lot of wear and tear on myself, and others, if I had had the sense to obtain a systematic look at my management style and techniques at a much earlier stage—say, the end of the first year. And—I wish I had read *The Art of War*, *The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*, and several Peter Drucker books, including the ones on managing non-profits, during my first year.

- 11. “When you're president, you should only be doing those things that *only you* can do. If someone else can do it, they should do it.”**

As I was frantically trying to understand this complicated new beast for which I was responsible as well as manage it as best I could, I was taking some shots from people who thought I was “micro-managing” the College. I had a long talk with Lloyd Johnson, a trustee, alumnus and banker who turned Norwest Bank from a nearly failing enterprise into a powerhouse—today it's Wells Fargo. He had come in from the outside, too. He said two things by way of advice. First, he noted that he, too, had been criticized for micro-managing his first year, but he felt it was absolutely essential that he learn how the bank worked from the bottom up before he started to let go. Both the understanding and the letting go were important. Second, he said: “You're the kind of guy who thinks if you can do something, you should do it. Wrong rule. When you're president, you should only be doing those things that *only you* can do. If someone else can do it, they should do it.” I wish I had been able to put it into practice sooner. It was among the best coaching I've had.

### Things I wished I'd done

**There are all sorts of things over which one has absolutely no control** that probably have more impact than the skills, or the failings, that the individual president brings to the party. I had some wonderful luck on people—George Dixon as my first chair, and later as a continuing source of advice; Perry Mason, Professor of Philosophy who was secretary to the search committee, chaired the first long-range planning committee and then agreed to be Vice President for External Relations for three years while we started to build the alumni program; Board leadership that by tradition and

practice kept its eye on the long ball and did not meddle in day-to-day affairs (and also encouraged other trustees not to do so); strong alumni leadership in Bill Feldt and Mark Steinberg early on who shared the agenda on alumni relationships; the continuous support of Carleton's largest donors, Bill and Betty Hulings and their family; a tradition established by long-time Treasurer Frank Wright that budgets will always be balanced, expenditures would be prudent, and the College would be "lean and mean." One has to mention, too, an economic situation and securities markets that helped solve a multitude of problems.

There were some lousy pieces of luck, too, but I won't dwell on them, except to note part of George Dixon's advice during my fifth year: you have to remember that no matter how hard you work, how smart or charming you are, how well you plan and build your team, sometimes things are not going to work out—and it's not your fault. If someone less accomplished than George had told me that, I'd have given it less credibility. But, I think it was exceptionally wise advice that, at times, helps keep things in perspective.

I hope some of this is of use. The only advice I'd close with is simple: find some folks with whom you can talk candidly, and laugh heartily. Both are needed activities.

