Breaking the Two-Year Cycle:

Strengthening Presidential Tenure at HBCUs

Introduction

Recent studies confirm what many in higher education have sensed for years: presidential turnover at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is alarmingly high. According to research from the American Council on Education and reporting by the Chronicle of Higher Education, the average tenure of an HBCU president has fallen to less than three years, with many lasting closer to two. For comparison, the national average presidential tenure across all U.S. colleges and universities is approximately 5.9 years (ACE, 2022).

This shortened runway creates a leadership vacuum at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Presidents barely have time to cast vision, stabilize finances, and cultivate donor confidence before transition begins again. The toll is heavy on faculty morale, student recruitment, donor engagement, and the credibility of the college itself. The question is not whether this cycle is damaging HBCUs. The challenge is in determining how boards and institutional partners will put an end to it.

The Role of Board Governance

Board governance is one of the most powerful supports for a successful presidency. The best outcomes happen when a board and a president begin with shared purpose, clear expectations, and a unified approach to decision-making. HBCU boards carry voices from many valued stakeholders, including alumni, local communities, church partners, and state leaders. Bringing those perspectives into a common vision is complex work, and when it is done well, it gives a president the runway to lead with confidence.

Boards set the tone for partnership. The most effective boards establish a clear calendar of goals with the president, agree on how progress will be measured, and maintain a consistent communication rhythm so that surprises are rare. They keep discussions focused on strategy rather than operations, support healthy debate that is rooted in trust, and present a single voice once decisions are made. Research from national governance organizations reinforces these practices and highlights the value of a board chair and president who work together as a team.



The Importance of Partnership with a Strong Search Firm

The presidential search process is where this cycle can either be disrupted or reinforced. Too often, searches focus narrowly on credentials, overlooking the alignment that must exist between board, president, and institution.

At CarterBaldwin Executive Search, we have built our reputation on helping boards look deeper. Our proprietary 27-step process is not about rushing to fill a seat. It is about building confidence, credibility, and alignment before a candidate ever steps on campus. We invest time on the front end to understand institutional history, culture, and aspirations. We meet every finalist in person, conduct rigorous due diligence, and remain engaged with both client and candidate well after the hire is complete.

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Our experience is that early alignment work pays dividends. During a search, we help boards translate mission and strategy into a clear leadership profile, discuss governance style and decision pathways with finalists, and establish agreement on first-year priorities before the offer is accepted. After the hire, a simple board chair and president cadence of scheduled check-ins, transparent scorecards, and agreed upon decision gates can prevent the small misunderstandings that often grow into larger frustrations. These are practical steps that respect the board's fiduciary role while strengthening the president's capacity to lead.

A Call to Boards and Leaders

Breaking the cycle of short presidential tenures will require boards, presidents, and trusted partners working together in a spirit of shared purpose. The good news is that HBCUs are uniquely positioned to model how effective collaboration can transform institutions and communities for generations to come.

Board members bring deep commitment to mission and a profound sense of responsibility for the institutions they serve. When that commitment is matched with intentional governance practices and strong leadership partnerships, the result is an environment where presidents have both the support and the clarity they need to succeed. In that kind of environment, bold vision and long-term planning become possible.



Foundations for Long-Term Success

1. Foster Governance that Aligns and Supports.

The healthiest presidencies begin with clarity of mission and agreement on priorities. Boards that work closely with their president to establish shared goals, realistic measures of success, and steady communication create conditions where progress can take root and flourish.

2. Partner with the Right Search Firm.

Presidential transitions are moments of both risk and opportunity. By working with experienced executive search partners, boards gain access to broader candidate networks, deeper cultural assessments, and processes designed to build confidence among all stakeholders. The right search partner helps ensure that alignment is secured before a new president ever steps on campus.

3. Set Realistic Expectations of Impact.

Transformational change takes time. Presidents who are given the space to listen, learn, and build trust are far more likely to lead meaningful, sustainable progress.

Boards that recognize the importance of pacing and long-term investment signal confidence to faculty, students, and donors. HBCU presidents shoulder one of the most challenging and most significant roles in higher education. They are called not only to lead institutions but also to inspire communities and model hope for future generations. Boards that embrace intentional governance,commit to transparent partnerships, and cultivate realistic expectations provide the foundation on which great presidencies are built.

CarterBaldwin has seen firsthand how strong board leadership combined with a thoughtful search process produces outcomes that endure. When boards and presidents begin to align and remain committed to partnership, institutions are positioned to grow in stability, attract philanthropic support, and achieve their mission with renewed strength.

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The call before HBCUs today is clear. By creating the conditions where presidential leaders can thrive, boards are not only extending tenure but also safeguarding the legacy and future impact of their institutions. With clarity, alignment, and the right partnerships, Historically Black Colleges and Universities can ensure that their leaders have the most important resource of all: the time and trust to leave a lasting mark.



About CarterBaldwin Executive Search

CarterBaldwin Executive Search serves organizations that are serious about mission and performance. Originally founded with a focus on corporate clients spanning private, public,and private-equity-backed companies, CarterBaldwin has built a complementary nonprofit practice leveraging best practices learned and developed in their corporate work. A highly experienced staff, an unrivaled search process that delivers excellent results for clients, and an exceptional candidate experience all contribute to Search Done Better for our nonprofit, higher education, K-12, association, and foundation clients.

If you would like to know more about how CarterBaldwin can assist in your succession planning or pending executive search, email us at gwilliams@carterbaldwin.com or visit www.carterbaldwin.com.

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Dr. Gerri Williams brings a powerful combination of real-life experience, recruiting and search management expertise, and a dynamic leadership style to her work at CarterBaldwin. Since joining the firm, she has led higher education and global nonprofit president and cabinet searches, partnering with key leaders, Boards of Directors, Trustees, and search committees in successful placements.

Prior to joining CarterBaldwin, Dr. Williams served in key leadership positions with both private and public institutions of higher education, including North Carolina Central University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Our Lady of the Lake University, and the University of Texas at San Antonio. She also founded a consulting firm, which secured over $23M in grant funding for educational institutions and nonprofits. Dr. Williams holds a BA in interdisciplinary studies and an MA in adult and higher education from the University of Texas at San Antonio and earned her EdD in educational leadership with a specialization in higher education from Lamar University.