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THE MODERN AD

Rethinking How Athletic Directors are Studied, Prepared, and Hired

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LETTER FROM TRAVIS SMITH

Letter from Travis Smith

Higher Ed Athletics has mostly been consumed as a video podcast interviewing athletic directors, college presidents, and the occasional individual insights video studying the AD position. The Modern AD is a new monthly outlet to share my insights and opinions on the AD position, specifically at the FBS level. I am currently writing my doctorate dissertation on the FBS athletic director position using a sensemaking framework. I am interviewing recently hired FBS athletic directors to understand why they think they were hired into these positions and what presidents said to them about their role.

The Modern AD is inspired by the research and studying I am doing on the position but meant to be easily consumed by busy practitioners. From reactions to AD hires, extra interview content from ADs and presidents, opinions on FBS openings, studying AD press conferences, to original essays on my thoughts about the AD position, there is something here for aspiring and current ADs as well as current and future presidents. Each issue will feature similar sections with fresh insights across the FBS levels, including learning backgrounds of ADs and presidents in different conferences each month. Get to know about a specific cabinet position that you may be unfamiliar with, and learn about rising deputies that will soon be in the AD chair.

Travis Smith, Higher Ed Athletics

HEA

College Athletics is a
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REACTION TO AD HIRES

Reaction to AD Hires

Kentucky — J Batt

Some sitting ADs and deputies had talked to me privately about the Kentucky search prior to J Batt being named. The search was described as unusual compared to other searches. Not bad, just unusual from traditional searches. The university used DSG Global and I was told the Kentucky CFO Eric Monday was heavily involved in the search. There is speculation that Monday is the president-in-waiting as President Eli Capilouto nears the end of his tenure leading the university. Regardless of the process, Kentucky had the luxury of time on their side with Mitch Barnhart's pending retirement. The opportunity to hire J Batt amidst dysfunction at MSU could be one of the easiest decisions and luckiest situations in recent memory of AD hires since I started studying them in 2019. They found an AD that quite literally was doing the job that Champions Blue, LLC is looking to do, and someone that has been inside conversations in the Big Ten (MSU) and ACC (Georgia Tech) the last two years. And he's already familiar with his SEC colleagues from his time as deputy AD at Alabama. I think it's a great move for Batt, too, as he clearly went to MSU to be with the president who is now leaving MSU for Clemson. With Kentucky seemingly having a succession plan in place for when their president leaves, it's hard to blame Batt for leaving for Lexington.

Oregon State — Kevin Griffin

Oregon State used Elevate to assist with the search that resulted in Kevin Griffin being named the next Beavers AD. What stood out to me about this search is that Griffin was not even listed as a deputy or on the senior executive team for Ross Bjork at Ohio State. He was the associate VP for brand engagement, services and partnerships at Ohio State, an associate AD for business strategy. I looked at this search as a great example of how a search firm and committee should look beyond the title and instead focus on what the person did and what they want their next AD to do. Griffin has brand power throughout his career with stops at two NFL franchises, a private marketing agency, and for a MLS club before getting to Ohio State in 2022. It seems Oregon State knew what it was looking for as the Pac 12 is being rebuilt, and that they wanted someone that can improve the fan experience, market the department to Beaverton and beyond, and they found someone with a diverse set of experiences across college and professional sports. The only concern I'd have here if I were advising a president and search committee is that his role at Ohio State likely was not high-level enough to be in certain conversations about the direction and difficult decisions of college athletics. Oregon State is still a FBS institution where the AD will face similar decisions and challenges as Ross Bjork does at Ohio State.

AD Film Study: Press Conferences

Jon Haarlow — Washington State

President Elizabeth Cantwell and Jon Haarlow sat at a table on the stage in a traditional press conference format as Chris King, radio voice of the Cougs, introduced Cantwell before she then introduced Haarlow with a football jersey. Both Cantwell and Haarlow spoke for approximately seven minutes at the podium. Cantwell opened with a few unscripted remarks before admitting, jokingly, that she wanted to say a thank you to Jon's family before beginning the prepared remarks that were not written by her, a disarming way to start. Once she got to her actual message, though, it was sharp: athletics, she said, is the "front door" to the university, suggesting that athletics is often the only point of contact people have with WSU if they didn't attend themselves. She framed the evolution of the AD job as requiring both a disciplined executor and an entrepreneur, and pushed the idea that the "start-up mentality" Cougar athletics has had to adopt amid conference realignment needs to spread across the entire institution, not stay contained to only athletics. It's a confident thing for a president to say out loud, and it told the room a lot about how she sees Haarlow fitting into her broader vision. And I think a telling remark she made was explaining how well her and Haarlow worked together while he was in the interim role.

Haarlow's own remarks ran about as long as Cantwell's but the bulk of his was thank you messages: coaches, staff, athletes, alumni, and finally his parents, kids and wife, with a genuine moment when he talked to his dad who sat in the crowd. It played well in the room, but it's worth flagging for any AD reading this ahead of their own presser. Doing the family thank you's before the substantive vision portion, the way Haarlow did, means you're delivering your actual message in the emotional afterglow rather than from a settled place. Oklahoma's Roger Denny took the opposite approach in his own AD introduction, putting vision and substance first and saving family thank you's for the very end, specifically so he wasn't trying to talk policy through a lump in his throat. I've had a few ADs and deputies tell me they're going to borrow Denny's sequencing the next time they're prepping for an AD press conference. For this kind of moment, and after watching Haarlow's version, I understand why. It's not a criticism of Haarlow's speech, which still landed, but it's a real strategic choice future ADs should make consciously rather than by default.

Once Haarlow got into the substance, he briefly explained the three pillars of student athlete success, competitive excellence, and financial strength and innovation, plus a pointed nod to activating WSU's 250,000 living alumni. He did lose his place on the paper for a moment before quickly recovering. That's not a knock on him; it happens to nearly everyone reading from prepared text in front of a packed room, and it's exactly why simple, speakable language and clean formatting on the page matter more than people think. For example, in my time working with a speechwriter, I found it helpful to make the font 16-point, double-spaced, single-sided pages with numbered lines. I used this method in an emotional speech at a Church event last summer and it made it much easier to stay on track. It also is a good way to spell out the sounding of a word or name in your remarks, such as the name of a trustee or donor. And if you're not sure of how to pronounce someone's name, ask the president or someone on their team.

Haarlow closed strong with a rehearsed line about WSU entering "our era" and needing everyone locked in arms together as they enter the new Pac 12, which was the one moment that felt the most performed, in a good way. The Q&A; that followed was telling in a different sense: the room was unusually quiet, which Cantwell joked about, and Haarlow handled the substantive questions (Pac-12 fit, transfer portal culture, balancing football revenue against the rest of the department) competently and fully.

The best moment of the entire press conference, though, belonged to Cantwell. When the last question turned to Pac-12 expansion numbers, she stepped in ahead of Haarlow and shut the door on adding schools just to hit a target number, talking instead about protecting the tightness and identity of the rebuilt conference. It was a clean, confident answer, and smart staging to end the day.

Taken as a whole, this was a disciplined, low-risk press conference, and I think that was the right call for Haarlow specifically. He seems to be used to being the humble, behind-the-scenes guy who just spent months running the department as interim, and he used the moment to keep redirecting credit toward his staff and the broader WSU community rather than building himself up. That's consistent with how Cantwell described him, and it reads as authentic rather than rehearsed humility. If there's a note for next time, it's that he could have given the room a little long speech. The crowd was large and engaged, and a few extra minutes of vision casting likely would have been well received rather than overstaying its welcome.

The bigger lesson for future ADs sitting in this chair: know the questions you're going to get before you get them. Haarlow clearly had a sense of what was coming (football versus Olympic sports balance, athlete health resources, conference math) and had real, specific answers ready rather than generic ones. Pair that kind of preparation with a president who's willing to step in and take the harder, more political questions off your hands, and you get exactly the kind of introduction WSU got here: short, calm, and unmistakably about the program and the future rather than the person at the podium.

POWER AD OPENING SHORT LISTS

Power AD Openings – Thoughts & Short Lists

There are five Power AD jobs open at the time of this publication. The unique thing here is that four of those schools are also searching for their next university president, which likely slows down the likelihood of high profile sitting ADs from taking the jobs.

Wildcard for any FBS Opening

One wildcard name that I think could kick the tires on any of these openings is Utah's Mark Harlan. Here's why. Now that the private equity deal is finalized at Utah, it would be interesting if he leaves for another job if it wasn't his idea to invite PE into Utah athletics. Harlan has two years remaining on his most recent contract and his buyout drops to \$500k on July 1st (source: AD Vantage). He likely stays, but I wouldn't be surprised if some schools interested in learning more about the PE strategy reach out to see if Harlan has interest in replicating it somewhere else, or if he has interest in separating himself from it.

Michigan State

MSU has a board of trustees problem. Is the appeal of a Big Ten institution enough for a sitting FBS AD to take the job? I think Kentucky will have enough open positions with their next model of athletics and expected retirements that Batt could bring most of his recently-formed executive team with him to Kentucky. But it seems like MSU is moving forward with Spartan Ventures on July 1st, which was announced the same day that Batt left for Kentucky. The letter was signed by Jon Palumbo, Jared Kozinn, and Tim House — all three Batt hires. That doesn't necessarily mean they all three stay, but for now it certainly seems those three are going to get Spartan Ventures off the ground in July. I could see MSU look for a credible stop-gap AD for the next 2-3 years and allow the board issues to be resolved, hire and keep a president, and then allow that president to hire a permanent AD, all while allowing Spartan Ventures to be rolled out.

Here is what I think MSU leadership should consider doing. Either hire Jon Palumbo permanently or make Tom Izzo the AD until the board is aligned, a president is hired, and let that president hire an AD when Izzo is ready to retire. Or keep both and let Palumbo run Spartan Ventures and continue to serve as executive deputy AD.

Jon Palumbo

Palumbo is the number two at MSU and served in the same capacity with Batt at Georgia Tech. Palumbo served in the interim capacity at GT until it was announced Ryan Alpert got the job and Palumbo joined Batt at MSU. I had the good fortune of sitting down with him for an hour a few months ago. He's certainly capable and ready to be a P4 AD. I do think he's currently seen more of an operator instead of a visionary fundraiser (at this level, obviously he fundraised as the AD at Texas A&M; Corpus Christi), which might be why he sticks around at MSU leading Spartan Ventures to bolster that area of his career.

Palumbo and Batt are close friends and I suspect the board of trustees (or interim president) would consider making him the permanent AD because of his involvement with the creation of Spartan Ventures. He is also the football administrator so hiring Palumbo would help Fitzgerald stay focused heading into his first season. Palumbo staying and becoming the permanent AD might make the transition of Batt easier to digest for donors and Spartan fans, too. But I also wouldn't be surprised if Palumbo follows Batt to Kentucky — because if the job was in such turmoil that Batt didn't want to stay, why would Palumbo want to

stay? I think the obvious answer would be the ability to run his own P4 program and see Coach Fitzgerald's first season unfold after all the work he's put into the football program turnaround. If it's not Palumbo and he still stays at MSU to run Spartan Ventures, expect him to be a top candidate for other P4 jobs in the near future, too, as institutions try to mimic Spartan Ventures.

Tom Izzo

MSU turned to Izzo as a co-interim AD with Jennifer Smith before landing Batt. This could be similar to a Barry Alvarez at Wisconsin situation for MSU and Izzo. If they cannot find a sittings P4 AD or a reputable deputy to take the job because of the president and board issues, perhaps they ask Izzo to sunset his coaching career and move into the AD chair permanently. This used to be the model of the AD position — hire a former football or basketball head coach. Izzo is clearly irritated with the direction of college athletics and the constant turnover within MSU leadership, but that doesn't mean he can't be exactly what they need right now. Izzo is 71 years old and probably wants to retire permanently at some point, but he clearly loves MSU. Maybe they can get a good two to three years out of him and allow the next president to get settled and hire the next AD. He wouldn't be the position profile you'd expect of a BIG athletic director in 2026. But the situational dynamic cannot be ignored. They have a need for stability at the AD position and they've probably scared away top FBS ADs. At the same time, they have Spartan Ventures up and running and that could help Izzo become the AD for the foreseeable future.

Virginia Tech

Virginia Tech has hired Parker Executive Search to help find both an AD and the next executive director of the Hokie Club, which will report to the AD, I'm told, in the new model and vision of their athletic department. Let's keep the focus on the AD job. There were reports in the D1.Ticker on Friday morning that there will likely be a named successor before Whit Babcock's last date of June 30th.

The report from The Virginian-Pilot also indicates a handful of sitting ADs have been vetted for the job by the search committee: JMU's Matt Roan; Coastal Carolina's Chance Miller; Memphis' Ed Scott; and FAU's Brian White. What's unclear is whether the interest is mutual for each of those, but I suspect it is. I think they are all great ADs. Roan attended Virginia Tech before transferring to Southern Utah to play football. What he has done at ECU and JMU have been impressive, but I do think no experience in the P4 will hurt him with the committee. Ed Scott has ties to the state and ACC from his time at UVA. Is that and the upward trajectory of Memphis enough to land him the job? Brian White and Chance Miller were already on my Virginia Tech shortlist before this report, as well as one name not on the list: Jared Benko.

Jared Benko

Auburn Deputy AD Jared Benko would be a name I'd give serious consideration to for the Virginia Tech AD job. He has previous FBS AD experience at Georgia Southern to go with his decade-plus time in the SEC. His CFO-style background would be important to steward the \$75 million the university is giving to the athletic department. I also don't think Virginia Tech is mandated to find a career fundraiser (he obviously did fundraising at Georgia Southern) because they will have the executive director of the Hokies Club to manage the commercial side of the department. Benko is an at-will employee at Auburn so there would be no contract situation to consider, either.

Chance Miller

Chance Miller stepped into a great situation at Coastal Carolina two years ago and has proven he is an innovator and not afraid to make difficult decisions, like making a football HC change. He has SEC experience at South Carolina as deputy AD that is likely going to be seen favorably by the search committee. I had him on the HEA podcast a few months ago and got the impression that a P4 AD job is his next stop. The president that hired him, Michael Benson, also left for the West Virginia presidency and that may give him a guilt-free exit. Since Miller only signed a three year contract when he became the leader of the Chants, he has one year left on his contract and only has a \$50k buyout (source: AD Vantage).

Brian White

Brian White has been a name I've followed for quite a while in studying AD openings. I had wondered if he would land the Georgia Tech job before Alpert was hired. He has been at FAU since 2018 and signed a contract extension in the summer of 2024 that has him under contract until the summer of 2029 as well as an automatic one-year rolling extension unless the president says otherwise (source: AD Vantage). The \$625k-\$675k buyout depending on the actual date he'd leave FAU is affordable for a school like Virginia Tech. It's worth noting that White signed the extension under the leadership of a different university president. That's not to say his relationship with the current FAU president is bad, but it's certainly a different dynamic, especially at FAU and other Florida public universities where so many of the president hires have been former politicians stepping into the role. White has the P4 background to go with his many years of fundraising success. And don't forget that White's first coaching hire at FAU was Dusty May who took them to the Final Four before leaving for Michigan and winning a national championship.

Wisconsin

I think the next AD at Wisconsin will be Ricky Sandler. If it's not him then I suspect it will be Jeramiah Dickey or John Cunningham, particularly since CSA Search & Consulting is assisting with the search – the same firm that placed Dickey at Boise State and Cunningham at Cincinnati.

Ricky Sandler

Ricky Sandler is the founder and CEO of Eminence Capital, a global asset management and investment company. I wrote about Sandler being my top choice in April. A week later it was announced that he was shuttering Eminence Capital after 25+ years. Him and his wife are Wisconsin alums and he has held strong ties and deep commitment to the school of business over the years. He might be the outside hire with deep roots that the board and interim chancellor look at to measure his interest in the position. The worst case scenario is he says no but offers up advice on the direction of college athletics and the B1G for them to consider in who they hire.

Jeramiah Dickey

Dickey would be a great hire and is likely to be highly sought after by Wisconsin and basically any other P4 job until he decides to leave Boise State. He has had to deal with uncertainty around the presidency at BSU as the president that hired him left for another school and the interim for the past year just left for another permanent presidency. He still has three years on his contract but the president leaving triggered a buyout clause in his contract that only requires \$250k (source: AD Vantage).

John Cunningham

Cunningham has had a successful tenure at Cincinnati. This could be an opportunity to reunite him with football HC Luke Fickell and see if that jumpstarts the program. Cunningham still has two years remaining on his contract and would demand a large buyout that is just north of \$1.5 million beginning in July (source: AD Vantage). I do think he would be highly sought after by other P4 openings, too, like Purdue or Virginia Tech.

Miami

Outside of the short-lived mentions of Michael Yormark and Jim Frevola, I haven't heard any names mentioned for the Miami job. I have been told by two P4 executives that the word on Miami is that nobody wants the job. I really find that hard to believe but I don't think a sitting AD will be the next AD of the Canes. CollegeAD reports that Miami has selected CAA executive search to help them with the AD search so I suspect traditional AD candidates need not apply. Their president's recent comments on a radio show on Wednesday, June 17th makes me think Yormark may actually land this job still.

Miami President and CEO Joe Echevarria on what they're looking for in an AD:

“We really need a forward-thinking leader. But that person has to have real commercial experience, especially in media, media rights, revenue, innovation. Now they gotta be deeply committed to excellence and student development, but they've also got to be able to honor the storied brand of the U and build upon the legacy to lead us into the next era of college athletics. Because the one thing we are uncompromising in our pursuit of greatness, that's just who the U is. That's what we're looking for, that's the type of individual we're searching for.”

President Echevarria continued: “And just to clear up some of the noise out there...Dan, who we hired back in 2021, when we hired Dan, we were intentional. We needed somebody who could bring us credibility because we lacked it in athletics. So, of course, what did we do? We hired the top athletic director from the top program in the conference. Back then it was Clemson. And Dav gave us credibility and experience and he was a great partner. But out of respect to Dan, he wanted to retire this year. So, we didn't actually start searching for an athletic director until the end of April. But I'm in no hurry. I'm in no hurry. There's lots of people who want that role, but it's got to be the right person for the future of college sports, not the past.”

Asked about how important it will be for the candidate to be someone that can generate money: “If you want to win it's expensive. Okay this is much more a professional model than an amateur model once we lost that Supreme Court case four years ago and NIL opened up. So generating revenue is the very first thing I talked about but that requires innovation from the most obvious to philanthropy and fundraising but more elevating the brand. You know, we can put our logo on all sorts of fields that you see on a TV screen that are not actually on the field of competition. We don't maximize those opportunities very well. Patches are coming out now and we can put a patch on our teams coming up this year. We have Adidas and Nike always jockeying for opportunities. So, revenue and innovation are at the very top of the list because without that, you can't make investment to be competitive in athletics anymore.”

Michael Yormark

Michael Yormark has been the President and Chief of Branding and Strategy at Roc Nation since 2014. Before that he was the President and CEO of the Florida Panthers in the NHL from 2003 to 2013. The name leaked (intentionally or unintentionally) and seemed to be met with fans not being happy with the idea of Yormark becoming the Hurricanes AD. It seemed like this mostly stemmed from his time leading the Panthers. I lived in South FL during the end of this Panthers tenure and I know the team wasn't great then, the prices for everything at the arena were outrageous, but it was a very good organization back then in my opinion.

The more I listened to the president talk about what he's looking for, the more I think they will not go with a traditional AD and would be more likely to get Yormark. I do think his twin brother, Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark, has had a better tenure so far than people thought he would, and possibly the way Brett's navigated challenges and conflicts recently will help the idea of Michael also entering college athletics.

Jim Frevola

Jim Frevola's name was mentioned by a college football analyst as a potential AD. Frevola, a Miami alum, has been the President of Business Operations for the English Premier League's AFC Bournemouth since December 2022. He has also held a variety of executive positions for NHL teams and the UFC more recently, as well as history with NFL franchises. I think if it was going to be him it would have happened by now. Frevola does have a strong commercial and revenue generation background, but I don't see anything related to actual fundraising. That is still a huge part of the job and I don't think you can be the AD at Miami with that being a gap in your resume despite the direction of college athletics.

Purdue

Purdue has only had two ADs in the last 35 years. Morgan Burke and Mike Bobinski have left big shoes to fill for the next AD. Purdue is about to start a president search but they are arguably in a better situation than others as Mitch Daniels, former longtime Purdue president and Indiana Governor, is back as the interim president. There has been no timetable shared publicly about how long it will take Purdue to find their next president. They used Funk Associates for the last two president hires and I suspect they'll do the same this time.

Will it be Daniels who hires the next AD or will they wait until a permanent president is in place since Bobinski is not retiring until January? I expect Daniels and the board chairman will ask input from Bobinski as well as well-respected men's basketball coach Matt Painter in the meantime. If you are interested in the Purdue job then two things you might want to consider as a local journalist who covers Purdue sports told me recently. First, I've been told there is a succession plan with men's basketball that sees former Boilermaker player and longtime Matt Painter assistant, coach PJ Thompson, taking over the program once Painter is ready to retire. Second, there is a good chance that Mitch Daniels becomes the permanent president for another tenure. The two-time governor of Indiana is 77 years old and retired from the presidency in December 2022 after nearly a decade leading Purdue. He is beloved by many at Purdue and the business school was recently named in his honor. Don't be surprised if Daniels has another three to five years in him.

The fact that Bobinski is staying on until January makes me think neither deputy AD on staff will be elevated to the post, but I could be wrong. In addition to consideration of names like John Cunningham or Jeramiah Dickey, here are three other names I think would fit the profile of Purdue.

Julie Cromer

If I were advising Purdue one of the first calls I make is LSU's Julie Cromer. I always thought of Ohio University as a miniature Purdue campus and I think her personality would fit well with Purdue leadership and be a long term AD. She left Ohio for LSU to be the deputy for Scott Woodward. Verge Ausberry then took over and added Heath Schroyer from McNeese State as another deputy. Cromer may be happy at LSU but it's worth the effort to try and get her to consider becoming a Boilermaker.

Amy Folan

Amy Folan is one of the more impressive ADs I've ever interviewed on Higher Ed Athletics. She went from being a top deputy at Texas for almost two decades and then decided to pursue an AD job and became the AD at Central Michigan in October 2020. After 5+ years and continuously breaking fundraising records at CMU, perhaps it's time for Folan to make the jump to a P4 school like Purdue. Her experience at CMU would be respected and her longevity at Texas would stick out to Mitch Daniels as they look for an AD that would fit the mold of 10+ year tenures. Folan has three years remaining on her contract but only has a \$50k buyout (source: AD Vantage).

Haven Fields Sr.

Another consideration would be to hire a Big Ten deputy AD that has been familiar with internal conversations and the direction of the conference. I think this could be a new trend we see is deputies rising to AD positions from within their conference. If that's the case, I think Haven Fields of Nebraska would rise to the top for Purdue. He has a strong fundraising background from Illinois to go with the experience at Nebraska with Troy Dannen. Another interesting dynamic with Fields is that his wife is an assistant dean at Purdue. He also has ties to Indiana having been the deputy AD at Ball State. The strong network he has in the conference, including Iowa's Beth Goetz who hired him at Ball State, cannot be overlooked. The more I think about it, he might be my top candidate if I were advising Purdue.

The College Presidency

Soon I will be starting a second show called “The College Presidency.” The show will of course include interviews with sitting presidents and chancellors, but the idea is to also talk to other cabinet members and chiefs of staffs to get their input on the role of college presidents. As the modern AD position continues to look and feel more like that of a college president, I think this show will resonate with a lot of current and future ADs and presidents. That’s why I wanted to go ahead and write an article about my own experience working for a university president and how I think it can help ADs become better at their jobs.

Six Things I Learned Working for a B1G President That Future ADs Should Know

For one year, I served as deputy executive assistant in the Office of the President at Indiana University, working for President Pam Whitten. I tell people it was, in many ways, the equivalent of an immersive master’s degree in observational leadership. I think President Whitten is the smartest and most effective administrator in higher education. In my role, I was able to observe and watch how she managed the many different constituencies and challenges the president of a flagship university has to balance.

The role of the athletic director has changed. ADs are no longer just sport administrators — they’re fundraisers, media figures, political operators, and public faces of the institution in ways that increasingly mirror the role of a college president. I refer to this as the Modern AD. The AD chair is more similar to the president’s job than ever before. Here are six things I learned about college presidents that I believe every future AD should understand.

1. Emotionally Agile

College presidents move from meeting to meeting covering different topics, stakes, and emotional registers — sometimes within minutes of each other where other people are waiting on the president and they’ve been preparing for that meeting for two weeks yet the president was only briefed that morning. A tense conversation about a political issue can be followed immediately by a celebratory meeting with faculty members or donors, and an outside observer would never be able to tell which one just happened. The best presidents are simply present and focused on whatever is in front of them, without carrying the emotional residue of the last meeting into the next.

Why it matters for ADs: An athletic director’s day can swing from a coach’s contract negotiation to a crisis to a booster dinner. The ability to compartmentalize emotion and meet each moment with full presence is a survival skill, and it’s one that becomes more important the more public-facing the role becomes.

2. Manage the Day, Week, Month and Year

A college president's time isn't just about a calendar — it's about strategy. Effective presidents (and especially their chiefs of staff) know exactly who they need to meet with regularly, which relationships require consistent touch-points (deans and faculty governance groups, etc.) and the importance of showing up across the entire state, counties or regions they serve. They also know when the moment calls for travel to the state capital or Washington, D.C., to meet with legislators. It could be easy to get sidetracked by trying to manage issues and constantly putting out fires. But an effective president cannot play Whack-a-Mole with every issue that hits their desk or they will never get anything critically important done.

Why it matters for ADs: An athletic department runs on the same layered rhythm — daily operations, weekly executive staff meetings, monthly conference or board updates, and an annual cycle built around recruiting, fundraising, and competition seasons. And now more than ever ADs are expected to understand how lobbyists work and the importance to prepare for meetings with state and federal legislators and be calculated in what they say and don't say. Know what is critical, urgent, or important, something TCU AD Mike Buddie shared with me on a podcast you'll hear soon.

3. Political IQ

The political IQ required of an effective college president is incredible. In a politically charged environment — with a board of trustees, state legislators, faculty governance, donors, and the public all watching — the best presidents operate in a way that makes it nearly impossible to tell where they stand on hot-button political issues. I remember on more than one occasion someone asking me what political party the president leaned towards — IU is typically seen as a left leaning university in a right leaning state. I honestly did not know and didn't care, but she never indicated either way to anyone. That's a rare and deliberate skill, and one that's often under-appreciated in leaders at this level, in my opinion. This shows up most visibly in moments of public scrutiny — board meetings with protesters in the room, contentious media cycles, or controversial decisions. The best presidents stay completely focused and are not distracted or reactive, no matter what's happening around them. I'm sure presidents feel very annoyed and upset on the inside, but with the best ones you never know.

Why it matters for ADs: Athletic directors operate in an increasingly political space — Congressional hearings, NIL, conference realignment, campus politics, etc. The ability to stay above the fray, read a room, and avoid becoming a lightning rod is invaluable, and it's a skill that can be learned by watching how good presidents handle it.

4. You Won't Make Everyone Happy

Effective college presidents know how to be disliked — and they're okay with it. A president is hired by the board, and the most effective ones know who they work for and what they were hired to do. Board alignment with the president is incredibly important, not just for the university but for the broader state or system it serves. But that alignment comes with a cost. Faculty and other constituencies may not like the president, and there might be talk and articles written about the erosion of "shared governance" or overemphasis on college athletics along the way. It doesn't mean presidents don't care about shared governance or about students — they do — but they also know they have a specific job to do and not a lot of time typically to get it completed. Presidents and their trusted advisors also understand the direct and indirect consequences of a decision and weigh that against their options in different scenarios to manage the fallout of each decision.

Why it matters for ADs: An effective AD will sometimes be unpopular to different constituents they serve, like fans, students, donors and alums. If an AD is not willing to make the difficult decisions that are best for the institution just because it may upset someone, then they risk the athletic department getting left behind in the old model of college athletics. Remaining aligned with the president is more important than everyone liking you. But at the same time, the AD needs to be able to look around the corner at the fallout of a decision and who they might piss off in the process — and it better not be their president.

5. Mission Critical

The most effective college presidents have a clear sense of what their critical mission is — the reason the board hired them — and they hold onto that sense of mission even amid heavy public criticism. Every decision traces back to that mission, even when it isn't popular. For example, I believe President Whitten was specifically hired by the board of trustees to modernize IUPUI into IU Indianapolis and make it a great urban research university in downtown Indy by reaching R1 research status (it since has), which wasn't a popular idea for those that think of IU as just the flagship campus in Bloomington. I think she was also hired to become a more active partner with state and federal leaders to make IU an economic engine. Both of those things have been at the forefront of her tenure at IU. Part of executing on that mission is building the right team. Effective presidents approach cabinet-building and executive searches with intentionality — they aren't just filling out org chart boxes, they're assembling people who can execute on institutional priorities and who can be trusted to represent the president well when they aren't in a room.

Why it matters for ADs: An AD is only as strong as the coaches, deputies, and administrators around them. Hiring people who complement your weaknesses, share your mission, and can be trusted to make good decisions independently for the institution is the difference between an AD who can scale their impact and one who becomes a bottleneck to what's mission critical. Understanding what's mission critical and acting on it day in and day out can only be possible with a group of people you trust, respect, and don't want to let down.

6. Speaking the Same Language to Different Audiences

College presidents are constantly translating the same institutional priorities into different languages for different audiences — a faculty senate, a board of trustees, state legislators, donors, students, and the media. The substance doesn't change, but the framing, tone, and emphasis do. And the best presidents are remarkably consistent in the underlying message, even as the delivery shifts.

Why it matters for ADs: This is one of the most important parallels between the president's office and the athletic department. Yes, an AD needs to know what's actually happening across their department. But just as importantly, an AD needs to know the language and phrasing the president and the institution are using across campus and in public, and stay aligned with it. The most effective ADs treat talking points and speeches the way a president's staff does, as something to be coordinated, not necessarily improvised. The AD needs to know how to talk about it in a way that reinforces, rather than undercuts, the institution's broader message. TCU's Mike Buddie told me that he has traveled often to speaking engagements with his chancellor, which early in his tenure helped the transition from Army to TCU by knowing what to say based on what he heard the chancellor saying. Attend different types of speeches your school's president delivers and see if you can find the commonality in the messaging.

AD Backgrounds – ACC

Of the 18 positions, six have been filled within the last 12 months (Newmark, Alpert, Blair, Evans, Larson/Simon-O’Neill, Donahoe), and 2 more are currently vacant (Miami, Virginia Tech). Roughly two-thirds of this group has turned over since 2024.

There are eight private schools in the ACC (BC, Duke, Miami, ND, SMU, Stanford, Syracuse, Wake) and that is more than the Big 12 (3), Big Ten (2) and SEC (1) combined.

Most ADs in the ACC (Corrigan, Currie, Williams, Heird, King, Neff) climbed a traditional ladder — compliance, development, deputy AD — inside college athletics for 15+ years before getting the top job. But a growing minority are explicit outsiders brought in for revenue and business expertise rather than traditional sports administration: Stanford’s Donahoe (ex-Nike/eBay CEO), Notre Dame’s Bevacqua (NBC Sports/PGA of America), and North Carolina’s Newmark (NASCAR team president). None of these three had run a college athletic department before. That’s a striking signal of where the industry thinks the job is heading — toward media, business, and revenue strategy rather than pure athletics operations. However, it also could be a sign of the importance of relationships as all three of those individuals have close ties to the universities they now lead.

Clemson – Graham Neff

Graham Neff was named Clemson AD in December 2021 when Dan Radakovich left for Miami. His career expertise is in athletics finance, facilities, and capital project development. Neff joined Clemson in 2013 as associate AD of finance and facilities and was promoted to deputy AD in 2014. Neff has both a BS degree in Civil Engineering and MBA from Georgia Tech. When Neff remained at Clemson instead of leaving for Georgia Tech when the job opened in 2025, it was a signal at how committed he is to Clemson. Neff is under contract through June 2031.

Duke – Nina King

Nina King was elevated to the AD position in 2021 upon the retirement of her longtime mentor Kevin White. King worked for White at Notre Dame before Duke and they have co-taught a sports business class in the MBA program at Duke for years together. She has been reappointed to a second five-year term as Vice President and King-Compton Families Director of Athletics, and is under contract through June 2031. Her expertise is in athletics strategy and legal affairs, underpinned by an Accounting degree from Notre Dame and JD from Tulane. Arguably the first major decision she was tasked with as Duke AD was overseeing the men’s basketball leadership succession plan from Coach K to Coach Jon Scheyer.

North Carolina – Steve Newmark

Steve Newmark is best known for his fifteen years as president of Roush Fenway Keselowski Racing in NASCAR. His career expertise is in motorsports business operations, sponsorships, contract negotiations, and media rights — before his tenure in motorsports, he practiced law in Charlotte, NC, where he negotiated multimedia rights agreements for major collegiate conferences and NCAA properties. As part of an AD succession plan, Newmark joined UNC as Executive Associate AD in August 2025, focusing on revenue-driving strategies, and was just recently officially transitioned into the full AD chair in the summer of 2026, succeeding longtime AD Bubba Cunningham. Newmark graduated from the College of William & Mary with a BA degree in History and Psychology.

NC State – Boo Corrigan

Boo Corrigan was selected as the NC State AD on January 29, 2019. His career expertise is in athletics marketing, fundraising, and facility development, built over decades in the ACC and beyond. Corrigan arrived at NC State after eight years as AD at Army. Before joining Army, he worked for three years at Duke as senior associate athletic director for external affairs, and held earlier stints at Notre Dame and the U.S. Naval Academy. Boo earned an Economics degree from Notre Dame and received a master's degree in Education from VCU. Corrigan is the son of Gene Corrigan, the former AD at Virginia, Notre Dame, and Commissioner of the ACC. He is under contract through June 2029.

Wake Forest – John Currie

John Currie was introduced as the AD at Wake Forest on March 4, 2019, and was promoted to VP in June 2024; the 2025-26 academic year marks his 16th as a Power-4 AD after stints at Kansas State and Tennessee. His career expertise spans athletics fundraising, facilities development, and leading financial turnarounds. The Wake Forest alum earned a History degree in addition to a master's in Sports Administration at Tennessee. He is currently welcoming a new university president in Peter Rodriguez, who is an economist coming from Rice where he was the dean and professor of strategy for the graduate school of business.

Virginia – Carla Williams

Carla Williams is in her ninth year as AD at Virginia, having been named to the chair in 2017. Her immediate position before becoming the AD at Virginia was deputy AD at Georgia where she had worked her way up to that position for a decade. Williams was also a standout women's basketball athlete at UGA where she earned a BA in Sociology. Williams also earned a master's of Public Administration at UGA and a PhD in Sport Administration from Florida State. A cool fact is that her husband, Dr. Brian Williams, is a professor of public policy at UVA. Williams is currently serving on the College Football Playoff Selection Committee. UVA has long been one of my favorite universities in America to study with its rich history, and Dr. Carla Williams is atop my short list of ADs I want to interview one day for HEA or speak with privately. Williams is under contract through May 2030.

Georgia Tech – Ryan Alpert

Ryan Alpert was introduced as the AD at Georgia Tech in July 2025, after serving as senior deputy AD and chief revenue officer at Tennessee. His career expertise is in athletics fundraising, revenue generation, and capital projects, including the Neyland Entertainment District. Before Tennessee, Alpert was the deputy AD at both Missouri and FAU. Alpert earned his BS degree at South Carolina before a master's degree at Memphis when he was the director of fundraising. Alpert has been very active with his communication to fans since arriving in Atlanta, and I think he has a communications style and energy that ADs need to consider copying. Him bringing Brent Jones with him to the Flats was a huge move that likely is paying off in a big way for both of them as they navigate Alpert's vision. Georgia Tech is on the hunt for a new president and that person will definitely not have to worry about the direction of the athletic department. Alpert is under contract through June 2030.

Florida State – Michael Alford

Michael Alford became the AD at Florida State in January 2022 after serving as the President and CEO of Seminole Boosters for a year. Before coming to FSU, Alford was the AD at Central Michigan University from 2017 to 2020, and prior to that served in several development and external focused positions, including Oklahoma and the Dallas Cowboys. Alford earned a BS in Communication at UAB and a master's degree in Athletic Administration from Arkansas. Alford is under contract through June 2028.

Boston College – Blake James

Blake James became the William V. Campbell Director of Athletics at Boston College, in July 2022 after Pat Kraft left for Penn State. His career expertise is in athletics fundraising, ticket sales, and development, built over a long career across multiple programs. He served as the AD at Miami (FL) from 2013-2021. Earlier in his career, James served as the AD at the University of Maine from 2005 to 2010. He earned his Marketing degree from Minnesota State University – Mankato and a master's degree in Sports Administration from St. Thomas University.

Pittsburgh – Allen Greene

Allen Greene was named the AD at Pitt in October 2024. It's interesting to note that he just joined the UPMC Hillman Cancer Center Council at Pitt in May 2026. The multi-school AD has career expertise in finances and fundraising. Greene had previously been the senior deputy AD and COO at Tennessee for a year, returning to work with Danny White who he had followed as AD at Buffalo when White left for UCF. Between Buffalo and Tennessee, Greene served as the AD at Auburn from 2018 to 2022. He earned a Finance degree from Notre Dame, where he was a standout baseball athlete, as well as a MBA from IU South Bend.

Syracuse – Bryan Blair

Bryan Blair was named the next Syracuse AD in March 2026 after serving as the AD at Toledo since 2022 where he broke fundraising records and had creative facility renovations and department initiatives. Prior to Toledo, Blair was Washington State's deputy AD and COO under former AD and current Washington AD Pat Chun. There Chun tasked Blair with managing an ambitious strategic plan that likely helped him land the Toledo job as the youngest FBS AD at the time. Blair was a former football athlete at Wofford where he earned a BA in History. His legal background comes from a JD at South Carolina while he worked in athletics.

Notre Dame – Peter Bevacqua

Peter "Pete" Bevacqua succeeded Jack Swarbrick as the James E. Rohr Director of Athletics in March 2024, although he joined ND in July 2023 in a succession plan. The Notre Dame alum's career expertise is in sports media, business strategy, and golf administration, rather than the traditional AD career ladder. He previously was CEO of PGA of America from 2012 to 2018, and president and chairman of NBC Sports from 2018 to 2023. He has numerous additional jobs across the golf industry prior to becoming PGAA. He earned his JD at Georgetown to complement his BA in English at Notre Dame.

Louisville – Josh Heird

Josh Heird, who served as Louisville's interim AD after the sudden departure of Vince Tyra, was hired as permanent AD in June 2022. His career expertise is in athletics facilities, capital projects, and championship event operations. Heird worked his way up in the department previously at Louisville from 2007-16, then spent three years in leadership roles at Villanova before returning to Louisville as deputy AD in 2019 under Tyra. Heird is an alumnus of Louisville with a MBA to go with his undergraduate degree from Mississippi College. Heird is under contract through June 2030.

SMU – Damon Evans

Damon Evans began his tenure as SMU's AD in March 2025 after serving as the Barry P. Gossett Director of Athletics at Maryland since June 2018. Evans was also the AD at his alma mater, Georgia, from 2004 to 2010. The former standout UGA football athlete earned both a BS in Finance and a master's degree in Sport Management. The move from Maryland to SMU seemed to shock some people in the industry, me included, until you study the trajectory of SMU in Dallas, TX. The small private institution is very different than a Maryland or Georgia. He isn't the only one new from large to small school transitions. His president is former UT Austin president, Jay Hartzell, a finance expert. Evans was one of Hartzell's first hires as president, if not the very first decision he made as the president of the Mustangs.

California – Jay Larson & Jenny Simon-O'Neill

Jay Larson and Jenny Simon-O'Neill formally transitioned into the role of Co-ADs in July 2025, after Jim Knowlton's retirement, under a new, innovative leadership structure appointed by Chancellor Rich Lyons. The arrangement was originally described as just for the 2025-2026 academic year but it has since been continued and extended. It's important to note that neither oversee football as Cal football GM and former longtime NFL head coach, Ron Rivera, a Cal alum and standout football player, oversees the program and reports directly to the chancellor. Cal is a unique institution and one of American higher education's most respected universities. This model might not work at many places, but at Cal it seems to be working just fine. Larson brings two decades of experience, including 10+ at Cal, and had previously served as Cal's deputy AD and sport administrator for football from 2018-2025. He earned his bachelor's degree at Minnesota State University – Mankato, and his JD from Minnesota. Simon-O'Neill brings over 17 years of athletics experience at Cal, previously serving as deputy AD, chief of staff, and SWA, with a portfolio covering compliance, Title IX, and sport supervision. She is a Berkeley lifer as her father was a faculty member in economics. Simon-O'Neill earned a BS in Mathematics and Sociology from Mount Holyoke College. She also earned her MBA from UMASS Amherst.

Stanford – John Donahoe

John Donahoe was appointed Stanford's next Jaquish & Kenninger Director and Chair of Athletics in September 2025 after Bernard Muir resigned from the position after 10+ years leading the Cardinal. Donahoe's career expertise is in corporate business leadership and management consulting, marking a notable departure from a traditional AD background and a transition into a new position profile. Donahoe was the CEO of Nike from 2020-2024 as well as previous CEO roles at places like eBay and Bain & Company. Donahoe also had ties to Stanford prior to the appointment as he earned his MBA from Stanford to go with his BS in Economics from Dartmouth College. Donahoe is definitely in a different type of business model than the longtime CEO is used to, but I suspect he is doing just fine. It should have been no surprise that President Levin, who became president in 2024, went with someone like Donahoe for the AD opening. Levin is an economics expert and was previously dean of the graduate school of business. Donahoe was on the school's advisory council and given his background it should be expected the two have had many conversations about industry and organizational change over the years.

President Backgrounds – Big 12

A unique note about the Big 12 is how many of the presidents rose through the ranks internally or returned to the institutions they already knew. Schovanec at Texas Tech, Reese at BYU, Pinto at Cincinnati, Randall at Utah, and Cook at Iowa State all built their entire careers at — or had deep prior histories with — the schools they now lead. Several others, like Livingstone at Baylor and Garimella at Arizona, specifically returned to institutions where they had worked earlier in their careers. There's a clear preference across the Big 12 for leaders with authentic institutional ties.

Averaging across all 16 institutions, Big 12 presidents have been in their current role for roughly 6.1 years. That number is pulled significantly upward by outliers like Crow (23+ years) and Khator (18+ years). If you exclude those two, the median falls closer to 3.5 – 4 years, and five of the sixteen have been in their seats for one year or less — reflecting a notable wave of recent turnover across the conference, with new leaders at Arizona, Iowa State, Oklahoma State, TCU, and West Virginia all arriving within the last year.

Arizona – Suresh Garimella

Suresh Garimella serves as the 23rd president of the University of Arizona, a position he assumed in October 2024. His expertise is in mechanical engineering, with a decades-long research focus on thermal sciences and energy systems. Prior to coming to Tucson, Garimella was president of the University of Vermont, where he doubled research funding and led the institution to an R1 designation. Before UVM, he served at Purdue as the Goodson Distinguished Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Executive Vice President for Research and Partnerships. He has yet to make an AD hire as a university president.

Arizona State – Michael Crow

Michael Crow has been serving as the 16th president of Arizona State University since July 2002, making him one of the longest-tenured presidents in the Big 12 at over 23 years. His expertise lies in science and technology policy, and he is renowned as an architect of the “New American University” model he pioneered at ASU. Earlier in his career, Crow previously served as executive vice provost and professor of science and technology policy at Columbia University, where he served as chief strategist of Columbia's research enterprise. Under his leadership, ASU has been ranked the number-one most innovative school in the nation by U.S. News & World Report for eleven consecutive years. He has hired three athletic directors in his tenure at ASU.

Baylor – Linda Livingstone

Linda Livingstone is the 15th president of Baylor University, having served in that capacity since 2017. Her academic expertise is in organizational behavior, leadership, and management. She previously served as dean and professor of management at The George Washington University School of Business, immediately before coming to Baylor. She also served as dean of Pepperdine University's Graziadio School of Business and Management from 2002 to 2014, and was a tenured faculty member and associate dean at Baylor's own Hankamer School of Business earlier in her career. She recently completed the first AD hire as a university president.

BYU – C. Shane Reese

C. Shane Reese is the 14th president of Brigham Young University, a statistician and academic administrator whose expertise spans sports analytics, Bayesian modeling, and national security applications. He started his tenure in May 2023, and came up the ranks at BYU, having served as Academic Vice President since 2019 and previously as Dean of the College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences from 2017-2019. Before joining the BYU faculty, he worked at the Los Alamos National Laboratory as a technical staff member. He has made one AD hire in his time as a university president.

UCF – Alexander Cartwright

Alexander Cartwright was selected as UCF's sixth president by the UCF Board of Trustees in March 2020, bringing with him more than 20 years of university leadership. His expertise is in electrical engineering, specifically optical sensors. Before his nomination to UCF, he was the chancellor of the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri, and Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor of the State University of New York. He has made one AD hire in his time at UCF and did not make an AD hire while leading Mizzou.

Cincinnati – Neville Pinto

Neville Pinto serves as the 30th President of the University of Cincinnati; a university teacher, researcher and administrator with 40 years of experience in higher education, he became UC's chief executive in February 2017. His expertise is in chemical engineering, particularly biochemical and environmental applications. Before returning to UC as president, he joined the University of Louisville as Dean of the Speed School of Engineering in 2011, and rose to serve as Acting President there. Before Louisville, he served for 26 years on the faculty in chemical engineering at the University of Cincinnati. Pinto has made one AD hire in his time as a university president.

Colorado – Justin Schwartz

As the 12th chancellor of the University of Colorado Boulder, Justin Schwartz joined CU in July 2024 from Penn State, where he most recently served as Executive Vice President and Provost. His expertise is in nuclear engineering, with a research career spanning materials science and superconductivity. He previously served as Harold and Inge Marcus Dean of Penn State's College of Engineering from 2017 to 2022, and has spent his career as a researcher, educator, entrepreneur, and academic leader in large state universities. Schwartz holds a bachelor's degree in nuclear engineering from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and a doctorate in nuclear engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has hired one AD as a university president.

Houston – Renu Khator

Renu Khator is the chancellor of the University of Houston System and the president of the University of Houston; in 2008, she became the first female chancellor in the state of Texas and the first Indian immigrant to lead a comprehensive research university in the U.S. Her expertise is in political science, global environmental policy, and public administration. Prior to Houston, she was provost and senior vice president at the University of South Florida, capping a 22-year career at that institution. She has served at the University of Houston for approximately 18 years, making her by far the longest-tenured leader in the Big 12. She has hired four ADs in her time as a university president.

Iowa State – David Cook

David Cook, an Ames native and Iowa State alumnus, began his tenure as the 17th president of Iowa State University in March 2026. His expertise is in organizational communication, health policy, and land-grant university leadership. From May 2022 to February 2026, Cook served as president of North Dakota State University, where he reversed 10 years of declining enrollment and broke records for research expenditures. Prior to NDSU, he held executive leadership roles at the University of Kansas, including vice chancellor for Public Affairs and Economic Development, and spent 14 years at the University of Kansas Medical Center, where he earned tenure in the School of Medicine. He has not hired an AD in his time as a university president.

Kansas – Douglas Girod

Douglas Girod began as the 18th chancellor of the University of Kansas in July 2017. His expertise is in medicine, specifically as a head-and-neck surgeon and surgical oncologist. Before becoming chancellor, Girod served as Executive Vice Chancellor at KU Medical Center, overseeing the educational, research, patient care and community engagement missions of the schools of Medicine, Nursing and Health Professions. A head-and-neck surgeon, Girod first joined the KU Medical Center faculty in 1994 and quickly rose through the academic ranks, and he is also a veteran of the United States Navy Reserve. Girod has hired two ADs in his time as a university president.

Kansas State – Richard Linton

Richard Linton currently serves as the 15th president of Kansas State University. He holds a bachelor's degree in biology, a master's degree in food science and a doctorate in food science, all from Virginia Tech University. His career expertise is in food science and food safety engineering. Before coming to K-State in February 2022, Linton served as dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University from 2012 to 2022, and as department chair of food science and technology at The Ohio State University from 2011 to 2012. He has yet to make an AD hire as a university president.

Oklahoma State – Jim Hess

Jim Hess was named president by the Board of Regents in April 2025 after serving as interim president since February 2025. His expertise spans healthcare administration, graduate education, and Oklahoma higher education policy accumulated over more than four decades. Previously, he served as the Vice Provost for Graduate Programs at OSU-CHS, where he supervised all academic graduate programs, and also served as the CEO of the OSU Veterinary Medicine Authority. During his time in higher education, he initiated several innovative online graduate programs, leading to enrollment growth at OSU-CHS, and secured OSU Medical Center as the nation's only osteopathic teaching hospital. He has yet to make an AD hire as a university president.

TCU – Daniel Pullin

Daniel Pullin began his tenure as the 11th Chancellor of Texas Christian University in June 2025, succeeding Victor J. Boschini, Jr., who became chancellor emeritus following more than two decades of service. His expertise is in business, entrepreneurship, and higher education strategy, rooted in nearly two decades of academic administration. Before becoming chancellor, Pullin served as the John V. Roach Dean of the Neeley School of Business for three years, and then led the university as president for the past two years learning the ropes from the outgoing Chancellor. Pullin earned undergraduate degrees from the University of Oklahoma and an MBA from Harvard Business School before returning to OU to earn a JD. He has made one AD hire in his time as a university president.

Texas Tech – Lawrence Schovanec

Lawrence Schovanec is the current president of Texas Tech University; his career at Texas Tech spans more than four decades, during which he has held faculty and senior administrative roles, including department chair, dean, provost, and president. Schovanec began his role as the 17th president of Texas Tech University in August 2016. Schovanec was raised in Oklahoma and earned his doctorate in mathematics from Indiana University; other than two appointments as a visiting professor, he has spent his entire career at Texas Tech University. His scholarly expertise is in applied mathematics, particularly biomechanical and physiological control systems. He has yet to make an AD hire as a university president.

Utah – Taylor Randall

Taylor Randall began his tenure as the 17th president of the University of Utah in August 2021. His expertise is in accounting and operations management, with particular strengths in entrepreneurship and innovation. Prior to his appointment as president, he was dean of the David Eccles School of Business from 2009 to 2021, and before that a professor of accounting for 11 years at Utah. He graduated from the University of Utah with honors in accounting and then earned an MBA and Ph.D. in operations and information management from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. He has never made an AD hire as a university president.

West Virginia – Michael Benson

Michael Benson, a veteran higher education president, became the 27th president of West Virginia University on July 15, 2025, bringing 3 decades of academic and administrative experience to his role; WVU is Benson's 5th presidency. His expertise is in modern history, university governance, and higher education policy. Prior to his arrival at WVU, he led Coastal Carolina University starting in 2021, and before that served as president of Eastern Kentucky University and Southern Utah University. He graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University and completed his doctorate in modern history from the University of Oxford. He has been responsible for hiring two ADs in his time as a university president, one at ECU and another at Coastal Carolina.

FRESNO STATE'S GARRETT KLASSY ON BULLDOG SPORTS ENTERPRISES

Fresno State's Garrett Klassy on Bulldog Sports Enterprises

Fresno State Athletic Director Garrett Klassy is betting on ownership over outsourcing, bringing the Bulldogs' multimedia rights in-house under the newly launched Bulldog Sports Enterprises. In a conversation with Travis Smith, Klassy made the case that for schools like Fresno State — premier brands in their regions without pro franchises competing for corporate dollars — controlling your own intellectual property is simply smart business, especially in an era where NIL and brand partnerships are increasingly intertwined. Klassy sees in-house rights not just as a revenue play, but as a way to deepen community ties and give student athletes the full power of the Fresno State brand behind their name.

Full Q&A;

Travis Smith: You're bringing multimedia rights in-house, and I watched a press conference you did about this. Can you explain the benefits of that flexibility and what opportunities it provides? And originally, did you feel like you were limited in what you could actually do when speed and creativity are kind of the name of the game right now?

Garrett Klassy: There are multiple layers to this decision-making process, and I don't think bringing multimedia rights in-house works everywhere. But when we did it at Nebraska and now at Fresno State, both of those schools are the premier brands in the regions where they sit — you're not competing against professional franchises and you can go out and make a difference in your community.

The other thing I've always believed throughout my 30-year career in college athletics is that a university's IP is their most valuable asset. It never quite made sense to me why you would allow a third party to solely own and sell your intellectual property when you can monetize that yourself, especially where we're headed today.

Learfield was a great partner — has been a great partner at almost every school I've been at. This is nothing against any of the third-party rights holders because they have a business model that works for many schools and many institutions. But I wanted the flexibility to go out and monetize as much as possible.

One example I can give you: at Fresno State, let's say we have four or five really big star players across our 18 sports. If a car dealer wants to advertise with a star volleyball player, her value in our calculations is probably twofold what she can get from that car dealer if she's in her volleyball uniform or using the Bulldog logo and our marks. We can control that. We can allow her to use those logos and marks without having to pay a third party for access to use marks that we own but effectively lease out. I never quite understood that arrangement.

Now, I understand third-party rights holders can scale their business model and have access to more national sales data, and that works for a lot of places. But for us, this felt like the right time to try something different. We're doing unique things with revenue generation here, and we're looking at either renovating or building a new football stadium. To me, it's really important to be able to control every asset possible.

I've had some discussions on the private equity side of things, and I don't think that will work at Fresno State, but I want to be able to preserve that as a lever we can pull down the road if needed. Keeping that flexibility makes smart business sense.

We're just getting Bulldog Sports Enterprises up and rolling, but the early returns have been really good. And one thing I underestimated both at Nebraska and here is how much local companies love writing their check directly back to the university. They feel like it's definitely going back to impact the student athletes. We all know that money still reaches student athletes through a third-party deal, but there's something in the mindset of keeping it local — especially in places where local partnerships, community support, and relationships matter immensely.

Only time will tell if this is truly successful. It was wildly successful at Nebraska, and I have no reason to believe it won't be here. But even if it's not, we've preserved the flexibility to go back out to bid and capitalize on that. Right now I want to grow this brand, control our assets, and give our student athletes the opportunity to monetize not just their own name, image, and likeness, but to use the Fresno State brand behind it. The more the Bulldog is out there with reputable companies, the more brand exposure we get — and I like having that out there.

Of course, if we have an exclusive deal with Pepsi, we're not going to let a student athlete partner with Coke. But the reality is we have so many businesses in this region, and for Fresno State to really be a leader in the Pac-12 and grow to where we want to go, we need corporate support. We felt like this was the best way to grow that support here.

DEPUTY DIVE

Deputy Dive

Deputy Dive is an opportunity to highlight deputies that are the next generation of athletic directors.

John Daniel – Cincinnati

John Daniel — known as JD — arrived at Cincinnati as CFO just as the Bearcats were preparing to enter the Big 12, and has since evolved into the Senior Deputy AD and COO for Cincinnati. JD laid out just how much groundwork went into Cincinnati's rise: over \$300 million in capital projects across a decade, including a reimagined Nippert Stadium, a top-tier arena, and a brand new indoor performance facility, all while managing on a partial Big 12 revenue distribution. His response to that financial tightrope was to build an unusually transparent relationship with the university's campus finance team — eventually earning a dual reporting line to both the campus CFO and AD John Cunningham — giving him a rare, institution-wide view of how higher education finance actually works. When the House settlement moved the goalposts mid-plan, Cincinnati's campus partners stayed the course and kept supporting athletics, a testament to the trust JD helped build.

What makes JD a compelling future AD candidate is the breadth of experience he's accumulated in a relatively short window. He's overseen a major football coaching search, helped launch Cincy Sports Partners as an in-house multimedia rights operation that set sales records in its first year, and is now getting exposure to major gift fundraising alongside a seasoned development team. He's also done the work of working with the university CFO to cross-train outside his athletic department lane — learning how state funding, labor negotiations, and AI are reshaping the broader institution. As JD noted, the AD interview is the first job in an administrator's career where the hiring committee isn't made up of athletics people, and that campus fluency is becoming a genuine differentiator.

His preparation philosophy reflects that same thoroughness. JD casts a wide net — using D1 dossiers (which he thinks he actually may have started the first dossier for one of his bosses) and ChatGPT to organize research — but what stands out is a four-category framework a mentor gave him for evaluating opportunities: opportunity first, then responsibility, then title, then money. In that order. It's a framework that clearly guided his decision to come to Cincinnati, where he saw the chance to be part of a Big 12 entry and a landmark capital project before a contract or title ever entered the conversation. For a president looking to hire an AD who understands ROI, contract complexity, and institutional alignment all at once, JD is building exactly the right resume.

Jovan Overshown – Baylor

Jovan Overshown has built nearly a decade of impact at Baylor University, where she now serves as Deputy AD and COO providing strategic direction across the athletic department. Jovan reflected on what she's most proud of when she joined me on the HEA podcast — and the answers were telling. First, the people: she's prioritized recruiting and retaining mission-fit talent, including serving on the search committee for head coaches. Second, the revenue: her team has exceeded budget goals for seven consecutive years through NIL turbulence, revenue sharing uncertainty, and the completion of \$300 million in capital projects. In the current era, Jovan sees the “cuffs coming off” as an invitation to be entrepreneurial every day — running no-bad-ideas brainstorming sessions, tapping into Waco's underrated community identity, and treating every staff member as a brand ambassador.

What sets Jovan apart is her commitment to learning outside the walls of college athletics. She draws inspiration from brands like Disney, Chick-fil-A, and luxury companies, and credits truth-tellers in her life — including AD Doug McNamee (who hired her to Baylor years ago) — with keeping her from getting stagnant. Her participation in Leadership Waco, a cohort program that immerses 40 professionals from different industries in the inner workings of their city, is a prime example. Jovan told me that even after seven years in Waco, the program gave her a deeper gratitude for the community and a richer network of business relationships — exactly the kind of foundation that supports donor development, staff recruitment, and spousal buy-in when hiring coaches.

When the conversation turned to her future, Jovan was candid. She's fielded AD opportunities but has been intentional about timing, citing her faith, her husband and their two young boys, and her belief that the right fit matters more than the next title. She's looking for a place with strong institutional alignment, a genuine commitment to athletics, and an environment where she and her family can show up authentically. An AD chair is likely in her not-too-distant future, but I do wonder if it will be outside of Texas or not for the lifelong Texan.

Cabinet Curiosity: VP for Government Relations

Cabinet Curiosity is a monthly feature designed to help athletics leaders better understand the roles, responsibilities, and leadership challenges of university cabinet members beyond the athletic department.

What Does a Vice President for Government Relations Actually Do?

When most aspiring ADs think about a university president's cabinet, they can usually identify the CFO, Provost, General Counsel and perhaps the VP for Enrollment. But one of the most influential and often least understood cabinet members may be the VP for Government Relations.

While athletic departments spend significant time managing donors, fans, coaches, and athlete experience, universities also have another increasingly active and critical constituency: government.

The VP for Government Relations serves as the institution's chief advocate with elected officials, government agencies, and policymakers. Their job is to ensure the university has a seat at the table when decisions are being made that could affect funding, research, financial aid, construction projects, workforce development initiatives, and countless other aspects of campus operations. They also help inform the president on strategic priorities and prepare them for visits and speeches with state and federal legislators. Think of this role as the university's ambassador to city halls, statehouses, and Capitol Hill.

A typical week might include:

Meeting with state legislators regarding higher education funding.

Monitoring bills that could impact university operations.

Coordinating campus visits by elected officials and preparing detailed briefings and talking points.

Working with federal agencies on research grants and regulations.

Advising the president on political developments that could affect the institution.

Building relationships with local government leaders and community organizations.

In many states, public universities receive a substantial portion of their operating budgets through state appropriations. A strong government relations strategy can directly influence a university's ability to fund new programs, construct facilities, and expand research opportunities. And the president will likely have to present to a committee of legislators requesting the money and what projects they plan to do with the funding.

Why Athletic Directors Should Care

Athletics leaders often underestimate how many issues affecting their departments originate in government offices rather than athletic conferences. Maybe they are waking up to that now with congressional hearings and ADs visiting DC so often of late. And let's not forget the Louisiana governor with the fallout of Scott Woodward or the Texas and Oklahoma attorney generals writing letters to each other during the Texas Tech/Brendan Sorsby situation. As athletic departments become increasingly intertwined with broader institutional priorities, understanding the university's government relations strategy becomes a valuable leadership skill.

For aspiring ADs, learning about cabinet-level positions outside athletics provides valuable perspective. The best university leaders understand that athletics is one piece of a much larger enterprise. The AD needs to know how to step in and be a VP and cabinet member and not just the director of athletics when the group gets together for cabinet meetings.

The VP for Government Relations can influence millions of dollars in funding, shape institutional priorities, and strengthen the university's standing with key stakeholders. That's why, despite operating largely behind the scenes, this role often sits among the most influential seats at the president's cabinet table.

Next Edition Preview

AD Film Study: Press Conferences

The Rise of the Interim to the Chair

AD Openings & Short Lists

Alums as Athletic Directors

Executive Assistants' Advice for New Athletic Directors

AD Interview – Eddie Nunez (Houston)

AD Interview – Jared Mosley (North Texas)

AD Backgrounds: SEC

President Backgrounds: Pac 12

Deputy Dive

Cabinet Curiosity: VP for Research

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters. — Colossians 3:23

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