

Second Nature

NAVIGATING PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE FOR ACADEMIC CLIMATE CENTERS & INSTITUTES

Anticipate the risks, protect your funding and staff, and build durable relationships with incoming leadership.

WRITTEN FOR

- Center & Institute Directors
- Senior Operations & Development Staff
- Faculty Affiliates & Advisory Boards
- Provosts & Academic Affairs Staff

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INTRODUCTION: WHY PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS MATTER FOR CLIMATE UNITS

Presidential transitions at colleges and universities are among the most consequential institutional events that academic centers and institutes will face. A change in presidential leadership — whether planned or abrupt, smooth or contentious — reshapes the institutional landscape in ways that ripple through every unit on campus. For climate centers, institutes and initiatives (hereafter CCIs) these transitions carry distinct risks and opportunities.

CCIs occupy a particularly complex position within higher education. They often sit at the intersection of cutting-edge research, community outreach, curricular and co-curricular student engagement, and what has become politically charged subject matter. Their funding can blend federal grants, private philanthropy, state appropriations, and institutional support. Each of these streams are vulnerable to disruption during leadership changes. Their inter/trans-disciplinary nature means they depend on relationships across multiple schools and departments while often not having a college or departmental home, making them especially sensitive to changes in institutional priorities. Many of the CCIs also have other environmentally-related topics in their portfolio, so strong and healthy relationships across the organization are critical.

This guide is written for the directors, senior staff, and faculty affiliates who lead and sustain CCIs. Its purpose is to help you:

- Anticipate and prepare for the impacts of presidential transitions
- Protect your funding, staff, and programmatic commitments during periods of uncertainty
- Engage proactively and strategically with incoming leadership
- Build lasting institutional relationships that sustain your mission through multiple presidencies
- Navigate the unique political and communicative sensitivities that climate work entails

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide addresses transitions resulting from retirement, resignation, dismissal, or interim leadership appointments. It applies whether the incoming president is an internal promotion or an external hire.

It is written for use at all institution types: research universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, etc. Some sections, particularly those related to research funding, will be more relevant depending on your institution type.

References to external resources and organizations are included throughout. Contact information and URLs should be verified before use, as organizational details change over time.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is organized into five parts. Parts I through IV follow the arc of a transition chronologically. Part V addresses considerations specific to CCIs.

You do not need to read this guide front to back. If a transition is already underway, you may wish to go directly to Part III. If you are in an early planning mode, start with Parts I and II.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS GUIDE

- **Center and Institute Directors** — for strategic planning and leadership decisions
- **Senior Operations and Development Staff** — for practical task checklists and resource protection
- **Faculty Affiliates and Advisory Board Members** — for understanding your role during transitions
- **Provosts and Academic Affairs Staff** — as a framework for supporting climate units through change

WHERE TO START

A transition is already underway
Go to Part III, then work backward through Part II for anything you can still put in place.

You are planning ahead
Start here and read Parts I and II in order. The preparation they describe takes months, not weeks.

A new president has arrived
Part IV covers the first year — educating new leadership and renegotiating commitments.

You are facing political pressure
Part V addresses messaging, framing, and academic freedom considerations directly.

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NAVIGATING PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

PART I

UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSITION LANDSCAPE

Read the type of transition you are in, then map the people whose decisions will shape your center's experience of it.

1
Types of Presidential Transitions and What They Mean

2
Key Stakeholders and Relationships to Manage



1 TYPES OF PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS AND WHAT THEY MEAN

Not all presidential transitions are alike. The nature, pace, and context of a transition shapes both the risks and opportunities your CCI will face. Understanding the type of transition underway is the first step in developing an effective response.

Planned Transitions

A planned transition offers the most favorable conditions for preparation. Typically, institutions in planned transitions conduct formal searches with 12–18 months of lead time, appoint interim presidents, and establish transition committees. CCIs that leverage this time well can enter the new presidency from a position of strength.

WHAT TO DO IN A PLANNED TRANSITION

- Begin documentation and institutional narrative work as soon as the departure is announced
- Identify and cultivate allies on the presidential search committee
- Prepare briefing materials for finalist candidates
- Engage with the interim president as a relationship-building opportunity
- Organize advisory board and external stakeholder outreach in anticipation of incoming leadership

Unplanned or Crisis Transitions

Abrupt departures happen for a variety of reasons (e.g. forced resignation, health emergency, existing president takes a new job, etc). They compress the timeline and elevate uncertainty. The institution may face a governance vacuum, board activism, or public attention that diverts focus from academic operations. CCIs are not immune to becoming collateral in such situations, particularly if the outgoing president was a visible champion of climate initiatives.

KEY RISKS IN CRISIS TRANSITIONS

- Budget freezes or discretionary spending pauses that affect CCI operations
- Loss of a presidential advocate without a clear replacement champion
- Uncertainty among donors and external partners about institutional direction
- Staff anxiety and retention risk, especially in grant-funded positions

A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING YOUR CONTEXT

WHERE DOES YOUR TRANSITION SIT?

	LOWER RISK	HIGHER RISK
Departure type	Planned retirement, ample notice	Abrupt resignation, dismissal
Outgoing president relationship	Strong advocate for climate work	Indifferent or skeptical
Incoming profile	Known entity, internal promotion	Unknown external hire
Institutional climate	Stable budget, clear priorities	Budget pressure, competing interests
Your center's visibility	Well-known, celebrated publicly	Relatively low institutional profile
Funding base	Diversified, multi-source	Heavily reliant on discretionary funds

INTERIM PRESIDENCIES

Interim presidents typically have a mandate to stabilize rather than transform, which is both reassuring and limiting. Sometimes they are candidates for the appointment; often they explicitly are not. Engage them on relationship-building, documentation, and protecting existing commitments rather than initiating new ones.

INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

Crisis transitions also expose gaps in institutional memory, particularly when key administrative allies depart alongside the president.

2 KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND RELATIONSHIPS TO MANAGE

Presidential transitions activate a web of stakeholders whose actions and attention will shape your CCI's experience. Mapping these relationships before a transition — and updating that map as conditions change — is a foundational strategic task.

Internal Stakeholders

THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES	Boards play an outsized role during presidential transitions. They hire the new president, often set transition parameters, and can be powerful advocates — or obstacles. If your institution's board has members with environmental or climate interests, they may be natural allies. Understanding board composition and cultivating appropriate relationships indirectly through those directly connected with them (e.g. provost if that is your reporting line) can be valuable.
PROVOSTS & ACADEMIC AFFAIRS	The provost or chief academic officer is often the most important institutional relationship for CCIs. Unlike a president, provosts tend to have longer tenures and deeper ties to academic operations. Ensure your provost understands the center's value and has the materials to advocate on your behalf to incoming presidential leadership.
VICE PRESIDENT OF RESEARCH	Some CCIs at larger research institutions are established and housed with a research office. The relationship with the leader of that office is another important one to maintain. The VP can support CCIs with discretionary funds, while the larger research enterprise and resulting budgets can be relatively insulated from presidential transitions.
DEANS & DEPARTMENT CHAIRS	CCIs, particularly those housed in academic affairs offices, often work with faculty and staff from multiple schools or departments. Relationships with the deans of affiliated schools provide both a buffer against presidential-level uncertainty and a channel for amplifying your institutional case. Brief them early and invite their engagement in transition planning.

FACULTY & GOVERNING BODIES	Nearly all CCIs have faculty affiliated with them, or under their direct supervision. The distributed governance model in higher education imbues a lot of independence and power to faculty, so they are an important constituent to have on your side. Faculty organizing and governing bodies, such as a Faculty Senate, are often responsible for curricular endorsements and decision-making, and so can be highly influential in ensuring favorable internal politics for your CCI.
STUDENTS	Often underappreciated as important institutional forces given their rapid turnover, students are a central stakeholder for CCIs during transition periods. Student success examples, current student experiences, and the impact of student-led projects all are core to the broader mission of the institution and can be translated into a compelling support narrative during transitional periods.
DEVELOPMENT & GOVERNMENT RELATIONS	Your institution's development staff manage donor relationships that may provide funding. Government relations staff manage federal and state connections that fund your research. Both offices will have their own transition engagement strategies and while it may be a lift to directly access them, it is better to align with them rather than work in parallel.

External Stakeholders

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	PRIORITY ACTIONS DURING TRANSITION
Federal Agency Program Officers	Proactively communicate institutional stability; provide updates on any changes in sponsored research administration
Private Foundations and Major Donors	Personal outreach from CCI director or development officer intermediary; reassure continuity of mission and leadership team
Corporate Partners	Brief on transition timeline; confirm continuation of any formal agreements or MOUs
Peer Institutions and Research Networks	Maintain communication; leverage network relationships if institutional context becomes difficult
State Government and Legislators	If relevant to your funding, ensure awareness of transition; connect with government relations office
Community Partners and NGOs	Reassure continuity of programs; invite them to share their support for the center with institutional leaders
Media	Establish a consistent narrative; coordinate with communications office; avoid independent statements about institutional direction
Advisors and Advisory Boards	Provide updates for external perspective feedback; ask to advocate as a supportive voice with the incoming administration

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PART II

BEFORE THE TRANSITION BEGINS

Everything you can settle in advance: your narrative, your paperwork, and the funding that keeps the lights on.

3
Institutional Positioning and Visibility

4
Internal Readiness and Documentation

5
Protecting Grants, Contracts, and Funding



3 INSTITUTIONAL POSITIONING AND VISIBILITY

KEY POINT

The strongest protection a CCI can have during a presidential transition is a **clear, compelling, and widely understood institutional identity**.

If your CCI is known for its value, visible in the right places, and understood by key stakeholders, incoming leadership will be much more likely to recognize and sustain it. Always make sure your identity and mission has clear connections with the institutional mission.

Articulating Your Value Proposition

A value proposition for your CCI should be crisp, credible, and resonant with institutional priorities. It should communicate what you do and why it matters. Prepare versions at different lengths:

Elevator pitch — 30 seconds
For chance encounters with incoming leaders or board members

One-pager
For transition team distribution and briefing packets

Full briefing document — 5–10 pages
For formal introductions to the new president

Annual or impact report
For ongoing visibility with institutional leadership

CRAFTING YOUR VALUE NARRATIVE

- **Lead with impact, not description.** "Our center trained 340 students who now work in climate policy across 22 states" is more compelling than "we offer interdisciplinary climate education."
- **Quantify wherever possible:** grants secured, students trained, publications, media mentions, community partners, economic activity generated.
- **Connect your work to the institution's own strategic priorities.** Review the current strategic plan and identify where climate aligns.
- **Name your funders, partners, and champions.** Incoming leaders respond to evidence of external confidence.

Raising Your Profile Before the Transition

Proactive visibility-building as soon as you learn a transition is coming pays dividends throughout the transition process. This internal positioning is most authentically done as an extension of the relationships you already have, but some will involve extra effort during the transition period.

INTERNAL VISIBILITY ACTIONS

- Publish a year-in-review or impact report timed to reach leadership before the transition begins
- Request a meeting with the provost to brief on strategic direction and make the case for the CCI
- Host an event on campus that brings together external partners and internal leadership
- Seek inclusion in institutional communications (alumni magazines, president's public speeches, institutional website features)
- Cultivate relationships with faculty governance leaders who will be active during the search process

EXTERNAL VISIBILITY ACTIONS

National organizations
Engage them to amplify your institution's climate commitments

Rankings and awards
Pursue or promote any national recognition your center has received

Congressional staff
Brief your delegation, especially if you receive federal funding

Major funders
Ask them to signal commitment to your institution's leadership

Engaging in the Presidential Search

Presidential searches provide a rare opportunity to shape who leads your institution. CCIs should engage thoughtfully and strategically, working within institutional norms while advocating clearly for what matters. Often in planned transitions a search firm is used, so attending the search firm meetings to inform how they put together the job description and candidate profile is an important opportunity for attracting candidates to the position who will be predisposed to supporting the CCI once they step into office.

ENGAGING IN THE PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH

HOW TO ENGAGE	NOTES
Participate in open forums	Most searches include open sessions for campus community input. Attend and speak constructively.
Submit written input to the search committee or firm	If an input process is offered, prepare a brief articulating the CCI's needs and the qualities you seek.
Brief committee members who are allies	Ensure faculty senators, deans, or board members you know understand your priorities.
Prepare materials for candidate briefings	Search committees sometimes share briefing packets with candidates. Offer to contribute an overview of your CCI.
Arrange to meet finalists	Some candidates visit campus before selection. If invited, prepare a concise and compelling briefing.
Avoid public advocacy for a specific candidate	This can backfire and damage relationships regardless of outcome.

AVOID PUBLIC ADVOCACY FOR A SPECIFIC CANDIDATE

This can backfire and damage relationships regardless of outcome.

4 INTERNAL READINESS AND DOCUMENTATION

KEY POINT

A presidential transition is a **forcing function** for getting your house in order.

CCIs that are well-documented, operationally clear, and strategically coherent are far better positioned to weather uncertainty and make a strong case to incoming leadership.

Organizational Documentation

Ensure the following documents are current, accessible, and ready to share with new institutional leadership:

1	Charter or founding documents, including any memoranda of understanding with the institution
2	Current governance structure: organizational chart, advisory board roster and bylaws, faculty affiliates list
3	Strategic plan (current) with progress metrics
4	Annual reports or equivalent impact summaries for the past three years
5	Budget history and current budget, including funding by source category
6	Staffing overview including FTE, funding sources for each position, roles and responsibilities connected with the org chart
7	Active grants portfolio with PI names, award amounts, end dates, and federal agency/funder
8	Key partnerships: list of active MOUs, formal and informal agreements, and programmatic partnerships

Institutional Memory and Knowledge Management

Presidential transitions are not the only leadership changes that can destabilize a CCI. Directors, associate directors, and senior staff also turn over. While some CCIs have staff of one or two people, they should maintain institutional memory systems that are not dependent on any one person.

INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY BEST PRACTICES

- Maintain a central shared drive or knowledge management system with key documents, decision logs, and contact lists
- Create a CCI handbook that documents key procedures, vendor relationships, and recurring obligations
- Record the institutional history of the center: founding story, key milestones, past presidents' commitments
- Document informal agreements and understandings in writing, even if not formally executed
- Conduct regular knowledge transfer conversations when any senior staff member transitions out

Succession Planning

Particularly for larger CCIs, directors should ensure that operational continuity does not depend entirely on their own presence. Even if succession planning feels premature, a presidential transition is an excellent time to assess your own vulnerability to leadership disruption.

Interim leadership
Identify who would step in if the director were suddenly unavailable

System access
Ensure other staff can reach finance, grants management and email lists

Strategic briefing
Brief senior staff on the full picture, including confidential commitments

External voice
Consider whether your board chair could speak publicly in an interim period

SUCCESSION PLANNING

Even if succession planning feels premature, a presidential transition is an excellent time to assess your own vulnerability to leadership disruption.

5 PROTECTING GRANTS, CONTRACTS, AND FUNDING

Funding protection is one of the most operationally urgent priorities for CCIs during a presidential transition. Presidential changes can trigger procedural requirements from federal sponsors, affect institutional credit ratings relevant to grant eligibility, and create administrative disruptions that jeopardize reporting deadlines and compliance obligations.

Federal Funding: Key Risks and Protections

Federal grants, contracts, and/or cooperative agreements are governed by terms and conditions that do not change with institutional leadership transitions. However, the administrative infrastructure that supports those grants can be disrupted. Proactive steps include:

1	Review all active grant terms for notification requirements related to significant institutional changes
2	Identify whether your institution's Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR) will change, and if so, update agency records promptly
3	Brief your sponsored research or grants administration office on the transition timeline and flag any grants at risk
4	Review upcoming reporting deadlines, subcontract renewals, and no-cost extension windows
5	Confirm that your institution's registration in SAM.gov and related systems is current

Private Philanthropy: Communicating Continuity

Major private donors typically give because of their trust in the institution's mission and leadership. A presidential transition can trigger donor anxiety — particularly if the outgoing president was a personal relationship for the donor. Take these steps:

- Identify your top donors by relationship strength and gift size
- Coordinate with your development office on a communication plan for each
- Personally reach out to major donors as the director, expressing confidence in the institution's direction
- Where appropriate, invite major donors to participate in stakeholder engagement during the transition (with development office approval)
- If there are any multi-year pledges or planned gifts in progress, confirm in writing with the development office that those agreements will be honored

Institutional Funding: Protecting Discretionary Support

Many CCIs rely on institutional budget allocations from the president's office or discretionary academic funds. These are the most vulnerable funding streams during a transition. To protect them:

- Document current funding commitments in writing as early as possible
- Connect the internal support to external funding, so that the incoming administration sees the matching value of their investments
- If there are oral commitments from the outgoing president, seek written confirmation before the departure date
- Engage the provost, VPR, or CFO to confirm that existing institutional commitments will survive the transition
- Identify your institutional funding's line in the budget and understand whether it requires annual reauthorization
- Build a reserve fund if your budget allows: even three to six months of operating expenses provides crucial flexibility

WHY THIS IS URGENT

Presidential changes can trigger procedural requirements from federal sponsors, affect institutional credit ratings relevant to grant eligibility, and create administrative disruptions that jeopardize reporting deadlines and compliance obligations.

PART III

DURING THE TRANSITION

The window when a new president is listening: getting in the room, keeping your community informed, and looking after your team.

6
Engaging with the Transition Team

7
Communicating with Internal and External Stakeholders

8
Navigating Uncertainty and Protecting Staff



6 ENGAGING WITH THE TRANSITION TEAM

KEY POINT

This period can last weeks or months and is **among the most important windows** for CCIs to establish themselves in the new administration's awareness.

Incoming presidents often appoint a transition team or conduct a listening tour before formally taking office.

Understanding the Transition Process

Transition processes vary considerably by institution and by the incoming president's own preferences. Some presidents arrive with a clear agenda and move quickly; others spend an extended period listening before acting. Common elements include:

- A formal listening tour with structured meetings across campus units
- Meetings with deans, directors, and faculty governance leaders
- Review of institutional budget and strategic planning documents
- Meeting with major donors, community partners, and external stakeholders
- A formal 100-day or first-year agenda that establishes priorities

Getting on the Listening Tour

Not every CCI will be included in a formal listening tour. Directors should work through their dean or provost to request a meeting or at minimum to provide a briefing document that will reach the incoming president's team. Consider:

1	Asking your senior manager (e.g. provost, VPR) to arrange an introduction or brief the president on your behalf
2	Offering a concise briefing document for inclusion in the transition materials packet
3	Inviting the incoming president to an event, site visit, or field program—something experiential and memorable
4	Mobilizing your advisory board chair or a prominent external partner to request an introduction

Preparing for Your Transition Meeting

MEETING PREPARATION CHECKLIST

- Prepare a one-page brief: who you are, what you do, why it matters, and one specific ask
- Anticipate questions about budget, staffing, and any politically sensitive aspects of your work
- Brief the colleague who may introduce you on what you hope to accomplish
- Lead with institutional alignment, not disciplinary pride, and connect climate to the institution's strategic interests
- Have a clear, specific ask: a follow-up meeting, an invitation to a program, a review of a commitment
- Follow up within 24 hours with a thank-you note and any promised materials
- Do not share confidential concerns about institutional dysfunction or outgoing leadership

Providing Input Through Formal Channels

Many institutions offer structured opportunities for campus units to provide input to incoming presidents: surveys, written submissions, open forums. Take advantage of them. Collective voices from climate faculty, students, and staff carry weight. Coordinate with affiliated faculty to ensure the transition team receives coherent, consistent messages about the value of climate work at your institution. Reach out to other center leaders on campus to see if a joint communique makes sense in support of the larger ecosystem of cross-institutional initiatives.

7 COMMUNICATING WITH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

KEY POINT

The absence of communication is itself a message.

Consistent, thoughtful communication during a transition prevents rumors, reassures partners, and keeps your community engaged.

Internal Communications

YOUR STAFF AND POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHERS

- Hold a staff meeting within two weeks of any significant transition announcement
- Provide honest updates on funding security for each position
- Share what you are doing to engage with the transition and what the timeline looks like
- Establish a regular cadence of updates—even if the update is that nothing has changed
- Create a safe space for staff to ask questions and share concerns

GRADUATE STUDENTS	Graduate students are particularly vulnerable during transitions: their funding, their supervisory relationships, and their academic timelines can all be affected. Proactively communicate about the status of their funding, the continuity of CCI programs, and any anticipated changes.
FACULTY AFFILIATES	Faculty affiliates are both an audience and a resource. Keep them informed and activated. Their voices carry weight in faculty governance contexts that shape presidential agendas.
CHIEF OF STAFF / ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANTS	Even though this is a transitional period, the staff in the interim president's office will often remain through the transition and are important administrators to keep in the loop about your activity. The administrative assistants often manage important information about the timing and decision-making that will help inform your preparations.

External Communications

AUDIENCE	KEY MESSAGES AND APPROACH
Federal Agency Program Officers	Proactive notification of transition; confirmation of AOR continuity; no disruption to grant management or reporting
Private Foundations	Personal call from director; confidence in institutional direction; invitation to continue relationship with new leadership
Corporate Partners	Confirmation of program continuity; introduction of any institutional transition contacts; status of existing agreements
Media	Consistent messaging about center stability; refer questions about institutional direction to communications office
Alumni and Donors	Coordinate with development office; emphasize mission continuity and long-term trajectory
Community Partners	Personal contact; reassurance about program delivery; invitation to express support for the CCI to institutional leadership

Managing Social Media and Public Presence

- Maintain your normal social media and communications cadence—absence creates a vacuum
- Focus on the work: research findings, student achievements, community programs
- Do not comment publicly on the transition or the incoming president's presumed priorities
- Coordinate with your institution's communications office before any significant announcements
- If asked for media comment about the center's future, express confidence in the institution while staying in your lane

8 NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY AND PROTECTING STAFF

The uncertainty inherent in presidential transitions can affect morale, productivity, and retention—particularly for staff in grant-funded positions whose employment security is already contingent. Leaders of CCIs have both an ethical obligation and a strategic interest in protecting their teams.

Assessing Your Funding Cliff Risk

1	Which positions are funded entirely by grants ending within 18 months?
2	Which programs depend on discretionary institutional funding that could be redirected?
3	Do you have any positions or programs funded exclusively by outgoing-presidential commitments?
4	Are there ongoing searches or hiring commitments that may be paused by the transition?

PROTECTING GRANT-FUNDED STAFF

- Identify all positions whose funding ends within 18 months and begin renewal strategies now
- Explore bridge funding options through your institution's sponsored research or provost offices
- Review your grants for no-cost extension eligibility that could provide a runway
- Communicate proactively with program officers about upcoming renewals
- Identify whether any positions could be temporarily supported by indirect cost recovery or other institutional funds
- Document in writing any institutional commitments to provide bridge funding for grant-contingent staff

Supporting Staff Mental Health and Morale

- Recognize and publicly acknowledge staff contributions during a high-stress period
- Be flexible about scheduling and workload during periods of heightened uncertainty
- Connect staff to institutional wellness resources
- Be clear about what you do and do not know

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PART IV

AFTER THE TRANSITION

Once new leadership is in place: building the relationship, securing commitments, and coming out stronger than you went in.

9
Educating the Incoming President

10
Renegotiating Resources and Commitments

11
Long-Term Positioning for the New Era



9 EDUCATING THE INCOMING PRESIDENT

KEY POINT

Your task is to **educate, illuminate, and connect climate to what they care about**, not to insist they care about what you do.

A new president arrives with their own experiences, priorities, and mental models. They may have deep familiarity with climate issues—or none at all. Some even may be hostile to the work for no other reason than it was a priority of the previous administration.

Understanding the Incoming President's Background

- Read their prior institution's climate commitments (if any)
- Review their public statements on sustainability, climate, or environmental issues
- Look at their prior institution's research profile for any climate-related areas
- Understand their academic background and what disciplines they are most comfortable engaging with
- Learn what strategic priorities they have publicly articulated—and find the connections to your work

The First Substantive Meeting

Approach your first substantive meeting as an opportunity to establish a relationship, not to make an ask. Listen at least as much as you speak. Identify what the new president cares about and how your work connects to it. End with a specific, modest follow-up: an invitation to a program, a request for a second meeting, an offer to provide ongoing briefings.

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP: FIRST-YEAR PRINCIPLES

- Invite the president to a high-visibility climate event on campus—a keynote, a launch, a field experience
- Offer to serve as a resource on climate policy and science as they develop their own public position
- Connect the president with prominent external funders and partners who can reinforce the center's value
- Find early wins: small things the new president can do or say that associate them positively with climate work
- Avoid asking for major new commitments in the first months—let the relationship develop before making significant requests
- Communicate impact regularly: send a brief quarterly summary of key achievements and metrics

Providing Ongoing Education

- Invite the president to co-author an op-ed or lend their name to a climate initiative
- Provide brief, readable monthly or quarterly updates on center activities (one page or less)
- Connect the president with national climate leadership networks
- Brief the president's chief of staff or senior advisor on major announcements before they become public
- Look for opportunities to feature the president at national climate convenings—this builds their own reputation and ties them to your mission

10 RENEGOTIATING RESOURCES AND COMMITMENTS

A transition is both a risk and an opportunity. While existing commitments may need to be defended, a new president may also be willing to make new ones—particularly early in their tenure when they are eager to demonstrate vision and build relationships.

Auditing Your Existing Commitments

- Budget line items and their approval authorities
- Space allocations and any associated agreements
- FTE commitments for staff, faculty, and student workers
- Letters of support or matching commitments for grants
- Promises made by the outgoing president that were not formally documented

For each informal commitment, determine whether it can be formalized before the transition is complete. A provost or CFO can often confirm commitments in writing even if the president has departed.

TIMING YOUR REQUESTS

The first 90 days of a new presidency are typically not the right time for major budget requests. However, this period is ideal for confirming continuation of existing commitments, planting seeds for larger conversations, and aligning your needs with the president's emerging strategic priorities.

Making the Case for New or Enhanced Support

1	Enrollment and student demand for climate programming
2	Research competitiveness and national rankings
3	Alumni engagement and philanthropic potential
4	Institutional reputational benefits from climate leadership
5	Compliance obligations or sustainability commitments the institution has made
6	Peer institution benchmarks demonstrating underinvestment relative to comparators

11 LONG-TERM POSITIONING FOR THE NEW ERA

KEY POINT

The goal of navigating a transition well is not simply to survive it. It is to **emerge from it better positioned than before**.

CCIs that engage transitions strategically often come out with stronger institutional relationships, clearer identities, and better documentation than they had going in.

Formalizing Your Institutional Foundation

- If your CCI operates on informal understandings, pursue a formal charter or memorandum of understanding with the provost's office
- Seek multi-year budget commitments rather than year-to-year allocations
- Formalize faculty affiliate relationships through departmental agreements where possible
- Establish or renew your advisory board with formal bylaws and explicit institutional endorsement

Diversifying Your Funding Base

- Identify new federal agencies or programs aligned with your research priorities
- Develop a planned giving or endowment strategy with your development office
- Explore fee-for-service or sponsored research agreements with corporate partners
- Assess capacity for certificate programs, professional education, or other revenue-generating activities
- Look for opportunities to co-lead center or consortium grants that broaden your institutional base

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NAVIGATING PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

PART V

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CLIMATE CENTERS

What sets climate work apart: the political context around it, how to frame it, and the networks that extend its reach.

12
Political Sensitivities and Messaging

13
Interdisciplinary and Cross-Institutional Networks



12 POLITICAL SENSITIVITIES AND MESSAGING

KEY POINT

Navigating this requires **strategic communication, not retreat.**

Climate work exists in a charged political environment. Incoming presidents may face pressures from trustees, legislators, donors, or community stakeholders that make them cautious about the visibility of climate programming. In some cases, the new leader may be hostile to the past work, which illustrates the importance of creating durable messaging and efforts connected to core missions and identities of the institutions. Counter-pressure with support and testimonials from partners and students is essential. Funding, and the potential to lose it, also is highly resonant for senior administrators.

Understanding the Political Landscape at Your Institution

1	What is the ideological composition of your board of trustees?
2	Does your state legislature have a history of scrutiny of climate or environmental research?
3	Are there major donors whose priorities are in tension with climate work?
4	What is the local community's relationship with fossil fuel industries or extractive sectors?
5	Has the institution recently faced political pressure related to environmental commitments?

Framing Climate Work Across Political Contexts

FRAMING	EFFECTIVE IN THESE CONTEXTS
Economic opportunity & innovation	Boards focused on economic development; states with growing clean energy sectors; presidents with business backgrounds
Community resilience & security	Coastal, drought-prone, or flood-affected communities; institutions serving rural constituencies
Workforce development	Institutions with strong professional programs; states with climate-related job growth
Energy security & independence	Contexts where "climate" is politically fraught but energy is not; military-connected institutions
Agricultural adaptation	Land-grant institutions; states with large agricultural sectors; USDA-funded programs
Public health	Medical schools and health science centers; urban institutions serving vulnerable populations

Responding to Political Pressure

1	Do not make unilateral changes to your programming or public identity without consultation with your senior management
2	Engage national higher education climate networks as your peers have likely navigated similar pressures and can share strategies
3	Document all directives received in writing; clarify ambiguous instructions before acting on them
4	Consult with faculty governance if there are implications for academic freedom

ACADEMIC FREEDOM CONSIDERATIONS

- Research on climate change is scientific inquiry protected by academic freedom norms.
- External political pressure on university climate programs has been successfully resisted at multiple institutions. Document your case carefully.
- The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and your faculty union (if applicable) can provide guidance and, if necessary, advocacy support.
- Transparency about your funding sources and research methods is your best protection against political challenges to research legitimacy.

13 INTERDISCIPLINARY AND CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS

KEY POINT

Presidential transitions are a good time to **activate and reinforce** those networks.

CCIs are inherently networked institutions. Their value depends in part on their ability to convene across disciplines and institutions.

Leveraging Your Network During Transitions

- Ask peer institution directors to communicate their respect for your CCI to the incoming president
- Leverage national climate network memberships to demonstrate your institution's standing in the field
- If your CCI is part of a research consortium or hub, ensure the incoming president understands the reputational and financial implications of that membership
- Invite national figures—agency heads, foundation officers, or prominent researchers—to visit campus during the transition period

Cross-Institutional Governance Considerations

- Notify consortium partners of your institution's transition and its expected timeline
- Confirm that your institution's participation commitments in any consortium are documented in agreements that survive leadership transitions
- Assess whether any consortium activities require presidential signature or endorsement
- Use consortium peer relationships as a support system for navigating your own transition

A FINAL NOTE

Presidential transitions are not exceptions to normal institutional life—they are a recurring feature of it. Every CCI will navigate multiple transitions over the course of its existence. The CCIs that sustain their mission through these changes are those that have done the hard work of articulating their value, building broad institutional relationships, and maintaining the operational discipline to weather disruption.

Climate work at universities is not just about one type of activity - research, teaching, or community engagement. It is about strengthening the institutional capacity to address one of the defining challenges of our time. That capacity must be sustained through administrative and political seasons as well as scientific ones. We hope this guide serves that purpose.