

Search Committees: Who Are You Searching For?

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Candidates sometimes say they've read the leadership profile for a position but still aren't sure what the institution really wants. This can occur because the position description has been written in general language meant to be expansive and inclusive, yet ends up conveying ambiguity. It may be that there is no consensus about the experience and qualifications candidates must bring to the table, or even the charge of the position.

The desire to resolve these issues upfront can be eclipsed by the urgency to launch the search, thus the decision is made to be vague about the role's description in the hope that it will all work itself out later. Such an expedient approach can undermine the end goal of landing a strong leader. Though it often requires more time and challenging discussions, institutions that take the time to fully explore what they really need and want in a role, especially when there is controversy surrounding that question, best position the search committee to do its work effectively.

Coming to a set of clear expectations at the outset of a search enables a more focused and strategic recruitment effort and helps to reinforce in the minds of strong would-be candidates that they are a good fit for the position, thereby increasing the chance that they will apply. Striving for greater clarity also fosters a better understanding among committee members about the criteria from which they should assess and select candidates, improves the cohesiveness

and morale of the committee, and positions the committee and any consultants supporting the search to better communicate the institution's vision and support for the role to candidates.

When the role of the position has been clearly defined, the job of prioritizing candidate selection criteria is easier, though given the size and diversity of most search committees, the list of must-haves expected of each candidate can be extensive and difficult to refine. That requires open discussion about what experience, credentials, and qualities are most crucial to the candidate's success. To work most efficiently and effectively, it is a good idea for the committee to explore beforehand where they are willing to be flexible. For instance, the question of whether candidates must qualify for tenure is best determined early and stated clearly in the job description. Though committee members will and should bring their subjective perspectives to candidate assessment, it is crucial that they try

to establish a more objective lens through which they can collectively view candidates when they review actual applications.

For example, presidential search committees are increasingly willing to be flexible about the necessity for candidates to possess traditional scholarship and tenure track faculty experience. This allows them to consider candidates with otherwise strong profiles, particularly in terms of extensive external relations and fund raising experience, activities that occupy the lion's share of a president's time. This has opened the door for candidates to be selected with leadership experience in areas like advancement or enrollment management despite limited or no experience as faculty members. Similarly, in searches for deans of business, medicine, and public affairs, or for leaders to head up areas like international affairs, institutions have been willing to explore non-traditional candidates who bring a wealth of high profile "real world" experience coupled

with strong academic credentials, but whose formal scholarship may be limited. Careful committee discussion about the potential viability of such candidates on the front end, translated into clear language in the position description to either include or exclude them, is important both to attract the best range of uniquely qualified candidates and to help give the committee a more objective measure for whom they rule in and out of the interview process.

With a clearly articulated role and candidate assessment criteria, the committee will enjoy a more productive dialogue, a stronger sense of teamwork, and a greater sense of confidence and enthusiasm about the candidates they select. In turn, the committee is more likely to convey a positive dynamic and shared sense of purpose to candidates as the interview process begins.

Locations Nationwide:

Oak Brook, IL	Atlanta, GA	Minneapolis, MN	Philadelphia, PA
Emeryville, CA	Burlington, MA	St. Louis, MO	Pittsburgh, PA
Irvine, CA	Nantucket, MA	New York, NY	Houston, TX
Denver, CO	Bethesda, MD	Toledo, OH	Seattle, WA