

Executive Recruitment in Higher Education: Finding the Right Balance

Placement of executives for colleges and universities has become more sophisticated through the years, but fundamental practices and principles still apply. For search committees, there is no substitute for due diligence. The best hiring process is a compilation of many qualitative and quantitative factors that result in a “narrative” about a candidate, says [Dennis Barden](#), Senior Vice President at Witt/Kieffer. For the candidates themselves, honesty and enthusiasm, as well as “doing one’s homework,” are still valued, he says.

In the interview, Barden speaks with Rob Henry, Executive Director of Emerging Constituencies for the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), about the current state of executive recruitment and best practices to which academic job seekers and search committees must adhere. Barden has more than 20 years of experience in academic administration advancement, and thirteen years in executive recruitment. In 2000, he was the recipient of the CASE Steuben Crystal Apple Award for excellence in teaching.

Henry: I have heard this term used over and over again: “executive recruiting.” What does that really mean?

Barden: Well, executive recruiting is really the use of a third-party expert to address the marketplace actively and aggressively in the recruitment of leading executives, and in particular reaching out to people who are currently employed and not seeking a career move at this point in order to recruit them for client institutions. So it’s a very aggressive and proactive way to procure candidates for consideration.

Henry: As you know, Dennis, you’ve been a key part of our Minority Advancement Institute, and one of the questions that the participants always ask you is, what trends are you noticing in the recruitment world?

Barden: Interestingly enough, over the course of the twelve or thirteen years that I’ve been doing this, we’ve seen a huge increase in the use of executive search consultants across higher education. It used to be that advancement — development, alumni relations, etc.

— were the province of executive recruitment, but they would never be used for academic searches — deans, provosts, presidents. Increasingly, that’s becoming the norm. So that’s certainly one trend.

As a result of this increased use of executive recruitment firms, search committees and hiring officials — presidents, deans, boards, etc. — have become more nuanced in their understanding of how to work best with people like me. They understand better what services we provide and how to best to complement what we do.

The other trend is the additional tools that we’re able to bring to the marketplace, in addition to the traditional interviews and referencing. We’re now bringing things like psychometric assessments, off-list referencing, verifications of employment and degrees — things that pretty significantly reduce the risks of hiring. Those are all pretty pronounced trends.

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Henry: What are the big mistakes that organizations make in searching for quality candidates?

Barden: Narrowness of mind comes first to mind; being narrow about your view of who might work in a particular job. One example of this would be what we call “sector discrimination.” You see this all the time. Particularly as you work for institutions with higher and higher reputations that are considered to have greater and greater prestige, they come to believe that only people who are already serving a like institution could possibly work for them in their job.

You see this also between sectors of higher education, the more pronounced one being between four-year institutions and community colleges. The fact of the matter is, those things have almost nothing to do with job preparation or professionalism. They simply have to do with bias.

A collateral example would be an overreliance on direct applicable experience. The fact of the matter is that in any employment market, particularly in development or advancement, there’s just a tremendous amount of what we call the “Peter Principle” out there. There are a lot of people who have fancy titles at fancy institutions who simply don’t have the ability or talent to move to the next job, and to rely on titles or current institutions as a proxy for ability and talent is a fool’s game.

Another mistake that people make is an overreliance on either quantifiable

evidence or on their gut instinct. Hiring is always about both. You can have all the data in the world, but if your instincts and gut tell you it’s a bad fit, you should probably be listening to that. And the opposite is also true: no matter what your gut tells you about someone, if they don’t have the data to back it up, you’re really tempting fate.

The best hiring process, really, is a compilation of all of these tools, and the creation of a kind of profile of the candidate that becomes a narrative, whether it’s resumes, cover letters, interviews, references, psychometric assessments, verifications — all of these things. You have to add them all together. And to think that any one of those things is going to be a magic bullet that’s going to tell you who to hire or who not to hire, that’s just a big mistake.

Henry: And what are the mistakes that candidates make in applying or participating in a job search?

Barden: You really need to have done your homework; you need to know the institution as intimately as you can; you need to know the data; you need to have a sense of what they’re about; and you need to be able to answer questions with some specificity.

Even more, you need to be able to ask questions with some specificity. You know, the moment is going to come in the interview when you’re going to be asked, “Do you have questions for us?” And the questions that you ask are part of presenting yourself in the interview.

The quality of the questions, the specificity of the questions, the insightfulness of the questions tell the interviewer something about you that’s very, very important. If you don’t do your homework, you can’t ask those good questions.

And then finally, one of the biggest mistakes that candidates in advancement and development make is arrogance. You know, this is an imbalanced marketplace. There are many more jobs than there are talented, experienced people for those jobs, and that makes for a seller’s market.

A seller’s market does provide candidates with a tremendous degree of discretion in terms of the opportunities that they do or don’t pursue, but the expression of arrogance within the framework of that is just deadly. But there’s a more insidious cost, which is that, in the long term, people are going to remember that kind of behavior — particularly people like search consultants, who have long memories and very active and accurate databases. That kind of behavior will follow you not just in a current job search, but throughout your career.

Henry: There was an interesting point that you made, Dennis, about the job market and how there are more jobs than there are candidates. How should hiring managers evaluate transferable skills in their selection process?

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Barden: The easy answer is, as best they can. Seriously, this is not an easy thing to do, to balance between looking at data — quantifiable data — and job performance, on the one hand, and sort of gut instinct on the other. Hiring people who are making a career change requires a pretty substantial dose of that gut instinct. Part of this is just knowing who you think will do well in a particular environment.

The other thing that hiring managers, search committees and so on can do is put the candidate in the context of the day-to-day of the job, not just the words on the paper. Will this person resonate with key constituents? Is the person smart enough and does he or she have sufficient drive to allow the hiring official to assume that he or she will learn quickly and will learn well? Do they show passion and desire to do so? Do they have a track record for learning new tasks and techniques quickly and well? This willingness and enthusiasm to learn, combined with personality, is an awful lot of what has to happen in development.

And then the part of this that's hard to factor in is: willingness to learn is all well and good, but does the institution have the capacity to teach? Is there a training program or are there at least resources to outsource that training to organizations like CASE? Will the person find a mentor? Is there somebody who's going to show them the ropes?

Is it realistic to think that the institution can actually proactively take someone from one career path and turn them into a high-performing development officer — or is it simply a shot in the dark, trying to fill a slot? The failure to answer these questions in an honest way, and to really be truthful with yourself about what is possible, that's perhaps the most insidious cost of trying to help someone transfer careers into advancement. Not only do they have to be willing to learn, but you have to be able to teach them.

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