

Manage Your Career

Confidentiality Is Becoming the Norm in Presidential Searches

By Dennis M. Barden

I have just had a remarkably interesting week.

Normally I would expect few readers to care about my weekly comings and goings, but this week may well be an exception. You see, I have been hired to assist in three presidential searches, all of them on almost the same timetable. They are at different sorts of institutions—one public and two private; one small, one large, and one in between; one in the South, one in the Midwest, one on the West Coast. They have some issues in common—fund raising is, as always, a concern—but, by and large, they are looking for different sets of skills and diverse personal qualities in a leader.

What makes them fascinating (well, to me, anyway) is that all three are struggling mightily with the expectation of a public experience for, and with, their final candidates.

As far as I can tell, higher education is in the midst of a pretty significant shift in the way institutions conduct searches for campus leadership.

The issue is an old one—transparency of governance versus the candidate's right to privacy. Many institutions, by tradition or statute, continue to conduct their searches in confidence. However, it is still common for institutions to bring the finalists to the campus for open visits. A public institution almost invariably requires those visits, and a private institution usually has a precedent that makes them an expectation.

But that orthodoxy is being challenged.

My three clients are illustrative. The public institution I'm working with is in a "sunshine state," meaning that every aspect of the search is subject to public scrutiny. Much has been written on these and other pages about the relative costs and benefits of an open search, but my role is not to question. The search has proceeded apace, and the institution has considered excellent candidates. The public's right to know has been honored as the high priority that this state's legislature has pronounced it to be.

I can tell you for sure, however, that the university would have had more candidates—and one may assume candidates of higher potential—had they had the opportunity to become engaged in the process without the fear (real or imagined) of being compromised at their current institutions. It is a simple fact that some of the best candidates refuse to participate in a search if their names are to be made public, especially in the earliest stages.

My two private clients faced a different and, in some ways, more subtle dilemma. They were not bound by statute, but only by expectation and precedent. One campus decided from the outset that it would have no public vetting of finalists. Naturally, faculty members and students were unhappy when that news was revealed, since it flew in the face of historical precedent, if not shared governance itself.

The second situation was more complicated. The institution actually never made any official pronouncements concerning the interview process for the finalists. That allowed people to assume that the finalists would go through the usual public vetting.

Life and its realities intervened.

More than a couple of the candidates made it clear from the beginning that they were unwilling to participate in a public interview at any point in the process. The overwhelming consensus on the search committee was that the quality of the finalists trumped the expectation of a public role in the interviews. I should add that the committee was broadly representative of the institution's constituencies, including substantial faculty involvement.

It was left to the search committee to explain to everyone else on the campus why their assumptions were wrong, and that there would be no public meetings with the finalists. It was a lively discussion.

I've seen multiple, obvious reasons for the move toward more privacy in the hiring of top administrators. The most important

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one is the necessity of raising financial support for the institution. Presidents and chancellors—even deans and department chairs—have become increasingly focused on the external in their daily work, responsible for raising private support, working with lawmakers on appropriations and earmarks, seeking alternative sources of support, creating partnerships and leverage. As a result, the value of their personal relationships with key decision makers has risen as considerably as the amounts they are pursuing.

To have to replace your chief executive, therefore, is not simply a matter of changing internal leadership; it is a matter of forfeiting contacts, some built over years, that bear directly on the institution's financial health.

Boards understand that. That's why they are willing to take major steps to accommodate the sorts of leaders who are successful in the fund-raising arena—and that includes protecting their status as candidates in the search process. Boards do so, in part, because they realize that they are competing for a limited number of highly qualified candidates with a great many other institutions, including the candidates' current employers, who are also going to great lengths to retain their leaders.

Candidates who understand the situation—and who are sensitive to maintaining their current relationships when considering another job opportunity—insist upon search processes that protect them and their privacy unless and until they are selected as “the” candidate.

Increasingly, either the insistence on confidentiality is accommodated, or potential candidates will not participate in the search. Period. That is the lesson of my week of three searches.

The public institution could not accommodate candidates who wanted privacy, and the candidates stayed away. The two private institutions did accommodate their candidates, and the superior ones came forward to consider the positions.

But at what price?

Is there a substantive difference in the historical success of candidates who are chosen through an open process versus a confidential one? I am aware of no scholarship on the matter. I am pretty sure, however, that this question is going to be asked frequently from now on. And I am betting that more and more boards, especially at private institutions, are going to be sympathetic to candidates' desire for confidentiality. Otherwise it will be increasingly difficult for institutions to attract candidates with the external-relations skills and track record that are so prized in this marketplace.

There is no right or wrong answer to the question of an open interview protocol versus a confidential one. Every institution must decide for itself what is optimal.

But “because we've always done it this way” is clearly no longer a dispositive argument. It is crucial, moreover, that the options be discussed at the outset of the search process. While boards may well be tempted to agree immediately to the easiest path to the highest-quality candidate pool, they must also remember that leadership requires agreeable followers. In academe that arrangement is seldom, if ever, legislated.

I think that I can anticipate many more interesting weeks.

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