Best Practices in Higher Education Presidential Search

Recruitment strategies for a new breed of academic leaders
# Table of Contents

Introduction: Reimagining the Presidential Search Process ..................... 1

A New Breed of College President

I. Seeking a Different Sort of Leader in Higher Education
   By Dennis Barden, Senior Partner ........................................... 3

II. Reinventing Leadership in Higher Education:
    A Confidential Survey of College Presidents
   By Jane Courson, Karen Goldstein, PhD, and Alice Miller, Consultants ......... 6

III. The Changing Role of the University President:
    A Former President Speaks
   An Interview with Robert Smith, PhD, Of Counsel ............................ 10

IV. Study: How Do Today’s Academic Leaders
    Compare to Corporate Executives?
   By Richard Metheny, Practice Leader, Solutions for Exceptional Leadership .... 13

Search Best Practices: Finding Great Higher Education Leaders

V. Succession Planning Takes Hold in Higher Education
   By Lucy Leske, Managing Director, Higher Education Practice .................. 19

VI. Assembling Strong Search Committees
   By Jean Dowdall, PhD, Partner .............................................. 23
VII.  How Institutional Fit Influences Presidential Selection
   By Katherine Haley, PhD, Consultant ................................................................. 27

VIII. Hiding in Plain Sight: Higher Ed is Choosing More Internal Candidates
   By Lucy A. Leske, Managing Partner, Higher Education Practice ....................... 30

IX.  Keeping Diversity Top of Mind in Higher Education Leadership Searches
   An Interview with Oliver Tomlin, Senior Partner .............................................. 32

X.  Enrollment Considerations During a Presidential Search and Transition
   An interview with Robin Mamlet, Senior Partner ............................................. 35

XI.  Advancement’s Role in Presidential Transition
   An interview with Jon Derek Croteau, EdD, Senior Partner, and Zachary Smith, PhD, Consultant .......................................................... 38

XII. On Transparency and Confidentiality
    By Dennis Barden, Senior Partner ................................................................. 42

XIII. The Final Decision-Making Process
     By Jean Dowdall, PhD, Partner ................................................................. 44

XIV. What to Consider Before Making a Leadership Change
     By Susan Resneck Pierce, PhD, Of Counsel ................................................. 48

XV.  Conclusion: Refining the Presidential Search Process
     By John K. Thornburgh, Senior Partner ...................................................... 51

Contact Our Authors .......................................................................................... 55
Reimagining the Presidential Search Process

The traditional model of selecting a new university president relies upon large, inclusive campus committees which represent a virtual Noah’s Ark of students, faculty, staff, and trustees. While these committees are devoted to their institution’s success, they are often unprepared to apply serious leadership evaluation tools and validate candidate strengths/weaknesses against the organization’s needs and priorities. As such, decisions on whether or not to move candidates forward are based more on intuitions than objective, qualified assessments of leadership skills.

There is no more important time than now to consider how some of the guesswork can be removed from presidential selection. Boards, presidents, and campus leaders are dealing with unprecedented pressures, while costs continue to rise and the very mission of higher education is being called into question.

As boards and campus committees gear up to identify and recruit dynamic, innovative presidential successors, there are fundamental best practices they should keep in mind. The following pages aim to provide such practices, offering insight into how boards and search committees can go about this monumental task more effectively and efficiently, to the satisfaction and benefit of all parties involved.

Lucy Leske
Managing Partner, Higher Education Practice
Trends:
A New Breed of College President
What does it mean to be a leader in higher education? That is no hypothetical question if you are charged with finding one for your institution.

My colleagues and I are faced in every search with trying to find ways to define that quality and, even more problematic, to measure it. Being consultants, we generally start by asking the various constituents of the college or university what they mean by leadership. Typically, their answers vary as widely as their perspectives.

In two recent presidential searches that I advised, I saw this issue of leadership play out in the range of candidates, with sitting chief academic officers on the one end and nontraditional candidates on the other. (By nontraditional, I mean candidates from outside of higher education—from corporations, government, and the military, for example.) The two cases I cite here involve private institutions of relatively similar size and geography, though of completely different circumstances. Their searches took place during roughly the same time frame. In both cases, the members of the hiring committee had no bias about the particular professional background they preferred in their next president.
Both institutions were seeking new and different kinds of leadership. Both search committees were composed of a majority of trustees; a small but respected and vocal contingent of faculty members; and a few representatives of the administration, alumni, local community, and so on. Both committees worked hard, and in both searches the candidate pools provided a diverse set of choices across the entire range of leadership experience and style.

In each case, the trustees on the committee were actively engaged in the life of the institution, with close working relationships with faculty members and administrators. Most of the trustees had been engaged with their institutions for many years, and both groups included alumni whose love of the institution and regard for its traditions was palpable.

In fact, if anything, these trustees were more aware of what was going on within their institutions than one might have reasonably expected. They also understood well the pressures being felt by all of higher education, and their institutions in particular, in these challenging times. In each case, they listened to the other constituents on the committee carefully and thoughtfully, particularly the faculty members, for whom the trustees showed—and I believe felt—great respect.

In short, these were highly functioning committees that worked hard, with total sincerity, in the best tradition of academe. So what leadership qualities did each group find compelling?

The candidates chosen as finalists certainly shared common attributes: One attribute was a level of energy and intensity that outpaced their competitors. Another was the sort of winning personality that portends happy and enjoyable relationships, some of which would presumably lead to philanthropic support.

In my view, however, the most important quality was an expressed willingness—backed up by evidence of performance—to make the tough decisions and to live with the consequences.
So, whence will come the presidents of the future? If my two recent searches are any indication, some of them will come from outside of higher education. Will they succeed? Time will tell. What I think is pretty clear, however, is that the perceived common wisdom about leadership transition in higher education is out the window, at least as far as trustees are concerned.

And my clients? One of them hired a nontraditional candidate; the other bucked the trend noted above and hired one of the sitting chief academic officers who managed to express a leadership philosophy that both trustees and faculty found compelling. I for one think it will be fascinating to watch the two over the next several years and to compare their rates of success.

Any bets?
Reinventing Leadership in Higher Education: A Confidential Survey of College Presidents

By Jane Courson, Karen Goldstein, PhD, and Alice Miller

Higher education today faces seismic challenges: inflated costs, uncertain revenues, technological upheaval, fragmenting business models, and more. Predictions of doom and gloom abound, some even saying that the once-sacred, four-year “traditional college education” may become a thing of the past. Students, parents, and even employers are openly questioning the value of higher-learning degrees.

What are college and university presidents to do? How severe are the challenges? To find out, we recently held confidential, one-on-one conversations with more than a dozen sitting presidents—representing a range of institutions from private, liberal arts colleges to major state schools. Higher education is at a tipping point, they told us, with the decisions made today dramatically altering the academic landscape of the future.

We received a wealth of information from these leaders about challenges and change (for the full report, visit WittKieffer.com), yet heard common themes again and again. The following seven, we believe, are the most salient:
II.

Seven Key Themes for Higher Education Leadership

1. **Revolution is here.** Whether from financial crises, global competition or disruptive technologies, higher ed is irrevocably changing, causing each institution to re-evaluate its mission, practices, and operational model. “We need to dramatically assess and revise how we deliver an education,” a president of a Midwest liberal arts college put it simply. While most of the leaders we interviewed waxed nostalgic about the academia of yesteryear, all of them acknowledged that there is no going back.

2. **The value prop needs propping up.** The value of higher education and the four-year campus experience—so long taken for granted—is under fire. Students and families (i.e., consumers) are asking for more information regarding what they have to gain for their significant expense. “People really do not understand what we do,” one president lamented. “It gnaws at me.” Higher education has itself to blame, he says. As tuition and costs have skyrocketed, institutions have not done enough to clarify and quantify the value of their experience beyond graduation rates and starting salaries.

3. **Money matters, always.** Public and private institutions face perpetual resource constraints and a battle for survival. Issues of cost, funding, and return on investment will predominate all strategic decision-making. Every president is faced with “the need to continually find ways to increase revenues and reduce costs,” says the president of an Eastern state system satellite campus. This is echoed by other public and private school presidents, who fear financial issues will crowd out educational ones. “We are all stuck on this battlefield,” one president says, “and it is very destructive.”

4. **The president must set the tone . . . and bear the burden.** A new era calls for a visionary, communicative, and collaborative new leader, able to guide the cabinet, trustees, and entire campus community in new directions and bear the pressure of change. “I’m afraid that I will look back and think that the world was exploding and that we didn’t do the
right thing,” the president of a Midwest liberal arts school says. “How do we know what to do?” The challenge literally keeps these leaders up at night. “You find yourself always trying to make your product unique,” the head of a Christian college says. He fears straying too far from the school’s core values and roots.

5. **The CFO is stepping up.** The chief financial officer (or chief business officer) will take on an increasingly prominent, strategic role in guiding change and ensuring the institution’s long-term viability. In many cases, a triumvirate of president/provost/CFO is the institution's guiding force. This will require growth on the part of these finance leaders. “The CFO will have to learn much more about academic roles, pedagogy, costs and the need for learning outcomes than ever before,” says a Southern school president. The CFO/CBO must also be a motivator and communicator, he says, able to educate cabinet members and community on the business of higher education today.

6. **Leadership is a team sport.** Presidents must revitalize their cabinets and surround themselves with passionate peers who are forward-thinking, financially savvy, creative, and collaborative. “The risk is that if you don’t collaborate it will destroy you,” says the president of a major state university. “Expectations have been raised” for all cabinet members, another leader says, meaning every top administrator must be multi-talented and a team player—much more so than in the past. One president goes so far to say, “The people I have hired before I wouldn’t hire again.”

7. **Trustees must be up to the task.** Going forward, good governance will be critical but challenging. Boards of trustees, as well as institutional leadership and faculty, will be called upon to help lead change across campus and inspire the future of higher education—in line with the shared governance concept that is common to academia. “We cannot miss the opportunity to learn from our trustees and what they have learned as change agents in their careers,” one private school president says. The issue of boards taking on a greater role, however,
is complicated, as presidents express concern that trustees are out of touch. This is especially true at state institutions. “The board is dominated by people appointed by the governor,” a state campus leaders says. “They are relying on the governor’s staff for the decisions they make.”

Clearly, there is no turning back if institutions of higher learning are to flourish in the future. While colleges and universities cannot afford to stray too far from their roots and missions, “revolution” may provide opportunities for presidents and their schools to reinvent what higher education has to offer. There is much to be gained.
III.

The Changing Role of the University President: A Former President Speaks

An Interview with Robert Smith, PhD, Of Counsel

As new higher education institutions arise, so will new types of leaders. Someone quite familiar with university transformation is Robert Smith, former president of Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania. During his tenure, Dr. Smith oversaw a number of major advancements, including a 22 percent enrollment increase, 16 percent increase in student retention and 24 percent increase in graduation rates.

Smith currently serves as “of Counsel” to the Witt/Kieffer Higher Education Practice and is a member of the firm’s Education Leadership Council (ELC). In the following conversation, he discusses the myriad challenges facing presidents at major colleges and universities and what skills and strategies will be needed to shape higher ed’s uncertain future.

How can a president effectively lead in an era of downsizing and limited resources?

Smith: Most presidents will need to live with the fact that each successive year for the foreseeable future will be faced with declining resources. Continued cuts or under-funding of public institutions will require a president who is constantly coping with budget downsizing even while facing possible enrollment increases. The familiar line is that anyone can be a great president if they have money to spend, but the talented president is the one who can advance an institution with limited resources.
The communication skills to keep morale high (or stable) will be important. The president will also need to understand finance nearly as much—or even to the same degree as—the VP for Finance to best know how to deploy resources in this era of decline. This suggests that traditional Provosts might not be the best candidates for presidential positions unless they have had significant experience in truly managing budgets. Finally, an ability to make tough decisions and emerge with support of all constituents will be necessary for presidents interested in long tenures.

There seems to be a new breed of university trustee, one that is more demanding and results-oriented than in the past. How should presidents work to understand and accommodate today’s trustees?

Smith: Trustee appointments are becoming more and more conservative and more likely to lack public higher education experience or loyalty. As this trend continues, trustees will expect the university to be run like a business with a “bottom-line” mentality. They are more likely to view public higher education as “second-tier,” with a mission geared towards vocational and job-centric outcomes.

The ability for the president to articulate a differentiating vision will be important.

It is not unusual that this group views public higher education as “good enough” for certain classes of students and their families and therefore doesn’t need renovated or replaced buildings, honors programs, or enhancements they consider as “frills.” Thus, one of the presidential challenges will be to successfully communicate to these new trustees the tenets and values of a high-quality public university. In a similar way, the president will need to articulate the views of the trustees to distrusting if not dismayed faculty. The president will need to know the language and the culture of business and be capable of translating the institutional values in terms appreciated by the trustees.
Has the value proposition for higher education diminished? Are we moving towards, some would say, mediocrity, and what can the president do about it?

**Smith:** Institutions are downsizing, but not strategically to position themselves as distinctive institutions. They appear to be regressing more to the middle. In a time when bold strategic visioning is necessary, the internal choices have been to take away a little bit from all programs and slowly sink to mediocrity across the board.

As institutions become more and more alike, the ability for the president to articulate a differentiating vision will be important. The question for families seeking to spend their tuition dollars is: Why you and not the institution down the street? And cost will not be the deciding factor unless everyone wants to be the Walmart Institution of Higher Education. This will require savvy marketing and branding, two terms not always familiar to university presidential candidates or presidents.
IV.

STUDY:

How Do Today’s Academic Leaders Compare to Corporate Executives?

By Richard Metheny, Practice Leader, Solutions for Exceptional Leadership

Few would argue that there are fundamental differences in the challenges facing leaders within higher education versus those in the corporate world and in the roles that each must perform. College presidents are not private sector CEOs, clearly.

Nevertheless, as resource constraints and funding shortfalls plague many not-for-profit colleges and universities today, the suggestion has been made more than once that higher education presidents and other leaders need to become more “businesslike” or “entrepreneurial.” They should, for example, pay more attention to the bottom line, partner creatively with organizations outside of academia, and/or explore new sources of revenue. For most presidents and academic leaders, in fact, their roles have gravitated significantly in this direction already.

In short, higher education leaders are being asked to change. While the question of “should they?” is subject to fierce debate, the question “can they?” is also relevant. Can today’s academic leaders successfully adapt to a changing environment or might innate personality and values characteristics preclude them from doing so?

For more on this topic, read “Leadership Traits and Success in Higher Education,” available on WittKieffer.com.
To begin to answer these questions, Witt/Kieffer teamed with Hogan Assessment Systems to collect personality assessment data on more than 100 of today’s higher education leaders and compare these results to those gathered from leaders within the private sector.

**About the Assessments and Leaders Who Were Assessed**

Leaders involved in the study were given three separate proven personality surveys:

8. **Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI):** a measure of normal personality; used to predict “bright-side” personality, or what is seen when people are at their best.

9. **Hogan Development Survey (HDS):** identifies “dark-side” personality-based performance risks and derailers of interpersonal behavior—what is exhibited when people are stressed or when their guard is down.

10. **Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI):** reveals a person’s core values, goals and interests —what a person desires and strives to attain.

Hogan’s assessments are among the most widely researched and commonly used personality and values assessments in the world. Hogan maintains a research archive demonstrating links between Hogan assessment results and performance in over 300 different types of jobs. Furthermore, the HPI, HDS, and MVPI have been translated into more than 40 languages.

Over 100 U.S.-based higher education leaders consisting of presidents, VPs, deans, and other academic administrators completed the HPI, HDS, and MVPI to create a benchmark for the Witt/Kieffer Higher Education Competency model—this model is now used, upon client request, to assess leadership candidates in executive searches Witt/Kieffer conducts within higher education. In an exploratory effort, we compared the higher education leaders to a general population of more than 1,000 U.S. executives across HPI, HDS, and MVPI scales to gain insight regarding education leaders’ performance strengths, barriers, and drivers.
IV.

Key Similarities

As one might expect from leaders, both groups had elevated scores (71st percentile) on the HPI Ambition scale. High scores on Ambition indicate individuals who are driven, achievement-oriented, and willing to take initiative. High Ambition scores are typical of people who seek leadership positions.

Additionally, both groups showed elevated scores along the HDS Colorful scale (65th percentile). Elevated scores on this scale are associated with dramatic, attention-seeking, and self-promoting behaviors. Scores above the mean on the HDS Imaginative scale, found in both groups, are indicative of creative, innovative, and curious people. It can be a negative tendency and is often associated with, for example, sharing ideas before considering their practicality.

For the MVPI comparisons, results for the two leader groups did not mirror each other as closely as with the HPI and HDS assessments, though the categories of Power, Recognition, Security, and Tradition showed similar relationships.

The findings indicate that leaders within higher education and the private sector have similar aggregate personality scores in most areas assessed.

Key Differences

On the HPI comparisons, higher education leaders scored higher than U.S. executives on HPI Learning Approach (70th percentile). High scores suggest individuals who tend to value education and demonstrate expertise in their area and may advocate learning and training opportunities for others. This finding is consistent with what we would expect in academia. Higher education leaders showed elevations along HPI Interpersonal Sensitivity (58th percentile), which may indicate that these leaders tend to communicate more diplomatically and seek to form and maintain alliances.

High HDS Leisurely scores (63rd percentile) for higher ed leaders can suggest a tendency to be overtly cooperative and covertly resistant in times of stress.
or pressure. Private-sector leaders, on the other hand, tended to show elevated scores on the HDS Mischievous scale (65th percentile), indicating they are more likely to react to stress by making daring (even uninformed) decisions and testing boundaries and limits.

Perhaps most notably, MVPI results showed that higher education leaders scored significantly higher on MVPI Altruistic (66th percentile) and lower on MVPI Commerce (30th percentile). People with high Altruistic scores typically focus on helping or providing service to others, considering others’ wellbeing, and promoting staff morale. Those who scored high on the Commerce scale likely have a strong interest in money, profits, investment, and business opportunities.

**Commerce Orientation: The 23-Percentile Difference**

The most noteworthy discrepancy in scores between leaders in higher education vs. those in the corporate world is on the Commerce scale within the MVPI assessment. There is a 23-percentile difference on the Commerce scale, with higher ed leaders scoring at only the 30th percentile compared to the 53rd percentile for the executives.
This carries significant implications. It may suggest, for example, that leaders within higher education would not be predisposed to concern themselves with matters of finance, investment, profitability, and so forth. Given the uncertainty over the changing “business” model of higher education, and the trend towards fewer resources, tighter budgets, and greater need to prove the “return on investment” within higher education, this low Commerce score may be a red flag for current and potential higher education leaders, as well as for those who recruit and select them.

Moving forward, as colleges and universities facing significant financial and marketplace challenges seek new leaders and develop their current leaders, they may consider whether candidates’ personalities and, specifically, values can more closely align with those of successful private sector executives without ultimately sacrificing their mission-orientation and commitment to higher learning.

**Implications for Higher Ed Leaders and Institutions**

Within any specific institution, personality assessment results can help match individual values to the most predominant characteristics of the organization’s culture, or the responsibilities of a given leadership position. If indeed the role of the future university leader is to be more “businesslike” than in the past, it may be helpful to know this, and to consider precisely which traits and competencies correspond with leadership success.

Similarly, this assessment information can help institutions in the future identify new leaders—perhaps even those from the corporate world—who are most likely to fit well in certain colleges and universities and thrive in academic leadership positions.
Search Best Practices: Finding Great Higher Education Leaders
Succession Planning Takes Hold in Higher Education

By Lucy Leske, Managing Director, Higher Education Practice

Colleges and universities have been slow to embrace corporate America’s approach to formal succession planning for their executive leadership. To determine best practices in and barriers to leadership succession planning, Witt/Kieffer recently conducted a survey of college and university presidents and board members.

Most survey respondents reported that their institutions practice succession planning in some capacity. “We discovered about a year ago that in the next five years almost all of our key positions would be eligible for retirement and could walk out on the same day if they chose,” according to one college president. “That really alarmed us and started our development of a comprehensive leadership development program across the university.” Some of the other key findings from the study include:

Succession planning most often occurs at the board and president/chancellor level. Among institutions where succession planning may be direct or in-direct, it appears to be focused on turnover at the board member/board leadership level. That’s followed by succession planning at the senior administration level and president/chancellor level. Where institutions want to begin succession planning or expand what they’re already doing, they are most likely to focus on board members/leaders and/or presidents/chancellors. Furthermore, respondents believed the culture of their institutions is most likely to support succession planning at those levels.
Identifying and nurturing internal leaders is the most common succession planning practice. As respondents anticipated turnover at all levels, identifying and nurturing talent within the organization was the most common aspect of succession planning that their institutions would be willing to undertake. That is followed by:

- Planning leadership transitions well in advance of the actual event;
- Considering methodologies other than open searches (e.g. internal promotions) to fill key leadership positions; and
- Creating or further developing a process of orienting and nurturing new leaders (“onboarding” is the accepted parlance) that plans and executes a smooth and successful transition for the new leader.

There may be a bias toward “open” searches that prohibits succession planning. “National open searches are part of the culture,” stated one college president. “This can be a problem where there is an obvious number two who can do the job but doesn’t want to take the risk of applying . . . I have been able to manage this and talk persons into applying but I have also lost two really good candidates because of the commitment to open, public searches.”

Balancing succession planning with a commitment to diversity is among the biggest challenges. “The term ‘succession planning’ connotes place-base planning,” one university president observed. “The challenge then, for the university, is to balance succession planning with diversity goals. Many institutions do not have a diverse work force from which to attract diverse leaders, so the open search is their opportunity to attract diverse leaders. Otherwise, the institution just ends up cloning itself.” Another college president responded, “We have created expectations for extensive searches in order to achieve diversity objectives that make it hard to really engage in serious succession planning without making it appear as if a search is wired.”

Shared governance represents a major challenge to succession planning. “With our system of ‘shared governance,’ in which there are legally prescribed roles for the regents, the system president, the faculty, the non-faculty staff and the students, it’s impossible for any administration to do
the sort of succession planning that is common in private organizations,” responded one university president. Another college president indicated that while the institution was making progress to overcome shared governance barriers, the challenges are lack of trust and accountability in the process.

Succession planning must be transparent, participatory and part of overall professional development. One college president described stepping into the role as a result of a transparent succession planning process during which his appointment as acting president and a four-month selection process gave the board time to evaluate and prepare the respondent for the permanent position. “The process was extraordinarily transparent and open to all constituencies,” this college president reported. “I have heard nothing but positive feedback about the board’s approach to presidential succession, and as the successor, I am quite pleased with the legitimacy of the process.”

Succession planning must be intentional in colleges and universities. Colleges and universities incur a variety of costs by not being intentional about succession planning. “Viable internal candidates for senior leadership positions may be easily lured away by other offers because the institution is incapable of making any type of forward commitment or even giving someone a reasonable assessment of their chances in a full search,” reported one university president/chancellor.

Succession planning in higher education requires new thinking and cultural change, but is overdue. “Having come from a background in the for-profit sector where succession planning and implementation was common, it is interesting to experience higher education’s continuing resistance to such initiatives,” commented one president/chancellor. “When attempting to be open about presidential transition at my institution, I was cautioned by
V.

executive search firms that such plans would imply that the change was forced and not voluntary which could place me in professional jeopardy for a new position.”

Open searches remain the norm and continue to bring value if colleges and universities remain open to new ideas, focus on long-term goals and high internal leadership standards. Despite increasing calls for succession planning, open searches remain a deeply-rooted norm in higher education. Those searches are most valuable when institutions are open to new ideas and tie leadership standards to strategy and culture.

“There are three keys to successful transitions,” responded another university president. “The first is to have strategic plans that are tied to current performance metrics and goals, but focused on long-term objectives that enjoy widespread support throughout the organization and for which there is a sense of common cause and ownership. The second key is to develop internal candidates for leadership roles so that there is always a high standard of capability within the organization against which to measure the qualities of outside candidates. Third, it is important to have a culture that embraces a common sense of purpose and aspirations in which there is not only no cult of personality but a genuine appreciation of people who put the community’s success ahead of their own recognition.”
Assembling Strong Search Committees

By Jean Dowdall, PhD, Partner

[The following is excerpted from the book Searching for Higher Education Leadership: Advice for Candidates and Search Committees, by Jean Dowdall (Rowman & Littlefield Education). Permission to republish has been granted.]

The attractiveness of the institution and the position are the most powerful factors in shaping the strength of the candidate pool. The next most important factor is the quality of the search committee. The membership of the committee sends a powerful signal to candidates about the institution’s values and aspirations. A committee and its chair should be respected members of the institutional community who have good judgment and a clear understanding of the nature and needs of the position. They should also be individuals who are willing and able to work hard and are disciplined and well organized, who put institution-wide priorities before narrower interests, who are able to maintain confidentiality during the search and forever after, and who are able to present the institution to candidates in a manner that is both engaging and candid.

Some of the characteristics that are most valuable in search committee members include:

- Good judgment and the respect of the community
- Understanding of the position
- Ability to invest time in the search process
- Institutional perspective and teamwork
VI.

- Confidentiality
- Capacity to attract candidates
- Diversity

When selecting a committee chair, the following should be considered:

- Team-building
- Leadership in creating a culture
- Ability to reach a conclusion

**Making Appointments to the Search Committee**

With these criteria in mind for the chair and committee members, who makes committee appointments? Often this is a matter of institutional policy, which may call for a Noah’s ark of members—five trustees, four faculty, three staff, two students, one alumnus, etc. Policy may also dictate the manner of selection—e.g., trustees selected by the executive committee, or faculty elected by their peers. Established policies should be respected but can often make it difficult to achieve the goals described above while simultaneously appointing a balanced group that includes men and women, majority and minority group members, and representatives of the major units within the institution.

If there is a single appointing authority, achieving the goals described above is more likely. The best committees are created when the constituencies provide slates of names from which the appointing authority can select a skilled and diverse group. If the authority to appoint committee members is dispersed, or if committee members are elected, it can be useful to provide a summary of the expectations described above so that participants in the committee selection process can reflect on who would be best suited to serve. If the president or the board has appointing authority for some subgroup of the committee, they might defer their appointments until the others are made so that they can take into account any missing elements in the group.
The Charge to the Search Committee

Structuring the typical presidential search committee requires first determining the charge to the committee. If the committee is charged with actually selecting the single preferred candidate (even though it may be ratified by a vote of the board), or charged with rank-ordering the finalists, then members of the board of trustees must dominate the committee. This is because the responsibility to appoint the president cannot be delegated by the board. If board members are not the dominant group on the committee, the board will have given up its most fundamental responsibility. In this situation, there might be, for example, six trustees and a total of five others (faculty, staff, students, administrators, etc.). If adequate representation of those other constituencies requires eight non-trustee committee members, then there should be at least nine trustees; this drives up the total size of the committee, but I believe that is a less important consideration. The more important issue is the need for the board to dominate the selection of the new president. The board chair should not be reluctant to specify that this is the reason for the numerical dominance of board members on the committee.

If, on the other hand, the committee is charged with bringing to the board a group of three to five candidates, unranked, the constraints on committee composition are changed. The trustees do not have to dominate the committee because, in the end, the full board (or a committee of the board) will make the selection. It is true that other constituencies can shape the list of three to five finalists, but that carries less risk for the board’s authority. There should certainly be several trustees but their total number does not have to exceed the total number of other members. In this case, the focus is typically on how many faculty should come from each academic division, whether there should be the same number of faculty as staff, whether there should be both an undergraduate and a graduate student and perhaps a continuing education student as well, whether a single individual can represent both the alumni and the community, and so on. There is no formula for success; each institution will need to decide what is most in keeping with its culture and politics.
In the midst of the debate and even controversy that can sometimes surround the appointment of presidential and vice presidential search committees, it is important to remember that a smoothly functioning committee can be an excellent occasion for finding common ground and building relationships and mutual understanding across sectors (e.g., faculty and trustees). The members of many presidential search committees observe once the process ends that the search was a wonderful and rare opportunity to get to know and understand each other.
How Institutional Fit Influences Presidential Selection

By Katherine Haley, PhD, Consultant

[The following originally appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education. It is reprinted with permission.]

At the beginning of every well-run presidential search, trustees, search-committee members, and consultants spend countless hours identifying what we want to see in the institution’s next president.

We draft an extensive leadership profile that serves as a road map for the recruiting and selection process. We debate and negotiate the final language with painstaking care, especially the list of desired qualities and experience. The leadership profile is, in many ways, a covenant or a contract—a public, explicit list of measurable presidential credentials and qualifications on which the campus has agreed.

But however laudable that effort to establish rational, concrete criteria for the selection of the next president, we all know that underlying every search is a highly powerful current that runs virtually unseen. It is the far-from-objective element of institutional “fit.”

In other words, once a candidate meets all the objective criteria (earned terminal degree, appropriate experience in key areas, etc.), the final selection of a new president will depend almost entirely on an assessment—by the candidate and by the institution’s constituents—of the level of cultural comfort...
they have with one another. The majority of new presidents (64 percent, according to one study) come from outside the institution and are, thus, “barbarians”—literally, foreign, and, from a Roman perspective, uncivilized.

A successful presidential candidate must be able to articulate an attitude that demonstrates: “I know and appreciate Roman culture” or “I know how to become a Roman” or “I know what Rome is like; I work in a place like Rome, and I can make the transition to proper Roman citizen.”

Identifying with, and honoring, institutional culture are absolutely essential for a candidate to be named president and to lead the campus successfully. A look at two presidents who have recently taken office illustrates how campus leaders establish their qualifications for institutional citizenship and the important part that “fit” plays in the decision-making process.

For Lori Bettison-Varga, who took office as the eighth president of Scripps College, in Claremont, Calif., in July of 2009, the elements of institutional fit arose from a mosaic of experiences and values. First, there was her longstanding experience with small, private liberal-arts colleges. Her record as a faculty member and administrator at several of them—Pomona and Whitman Colleges and the College of Wooster—afforded her a deep familiarity with the culture and workings of that unique sector of American higher education.

“All of my teaching and administrative experience has been in liberal-arts colleges,” she said, “so I know the language of the liberal arts, and I resonate with the culture and values—small classes, dedication to excellent teaching, a focus on students, an intense sense of community, academic rigor. It’s all second nature to me.”

And it didn’t hurt that Bettison-Varga’s mother is a devoted Scripps alumna. “My mother’s meaningful experience reminded me of how Scripps College provides a uniquely empowering education for women, especially with its interdisciplinary approach and joint science program,” she said. So while she could not herself claim direct experience with attending a women’s college,
her mother’s connection, coupled with Bettison-Varga’s own stature as a female scientist, provided her a level of cultural bona fides for an institution like Scripps, which takes pride in its focus on the education of women.

For Richard (Dick) Hanson, the new president of Bemidji State University and Northwest Technical College, an important aspect of fit was geographic. Hanson, who formerly served as president of Waldorf College, came to his new post after a stint as interim president of North Dakota State University.

“Most of my professional and personal experience has been in the upper Midwest,” he said. “I understand the regional culture.”

A social scientist, Hanson sees institutional fit in terms of process and negotiation. “As the finalists and the institution look one another over,” he said, “it’s a dance—each gesturing and signaling to the other, each affirming and mirroring the other—if all goes well.” Fit, he added, “is the foundation for establishing trust; the institution is buying into your values, and you are buying into theirs.”

A new president cannot enjoy, or succeed in, the job if his or her values and inclinations are not consonant with the institution’s. The Romans sought leaders who understood and honored Roman culture. Candidates from “foreign” institutions must prove that when in Rome, they can—with enthusiasm and fluency—do as the Romans do.
Hiding in Plain Sight: Higher Ed is Choosing More Internal Candidates

By Lucy A. Leske, Managing Partner, Higher Education Practice

Today’s challenged economy places extraordinary demands on campus leadership—and it is equally demanding of search processes. More academic institutions are announcing leadership hires without national searches. Is the calculus on internal candidates and length of searches changing, or is this simply a product of the times?

The costs of an external search include not just direct expenses but also the costs of delays in making key decisions and the risk of a poor fit between an external candidate and the hiring institution.

Then there are the add-on costs of distant candidates to factor in. Geographic mobility is at its lowest since World War II. Adding a trailing partner or spouse to a new job market, maintaining a home that may not sell immediately and exchanging the known for the unknown can de-motivate potential candidates from accepting an offer—or even entering the pool—for a job that requires relocation.

On the other hand, an internal candidate knows the issues and can anticipate how to go about addressing them. He or she will ride a much shallower, swifter cultural learning curve. And if he or she has already demonstrated significant leadership within the institution, an internal appointment can represent continuity and stability.
Internal succession is a new concept for higher education, but one that is gaining ground. Boards and presidents have recognized that successfully working within governance cultures to shorten the search process by appointing internal candidates is a viable model for leadership transition if key conditions are met. Avoiding any appearance of an inside track can compromise a new leader’s effectiveness, so communication and transparency are essential.

Of course, it helps to have highly competent individuals in the organization who are prepared for broader leadership roles and who are interested in greater responsibilities. Boards and presidents are wise to have leadership transition plans in place across the institution that include criteria and processes for preparing, evaluating and considering internal candidates. The goal: to increase the likelihood that they will see the solution hiding in plain sight.
Keeping Diversity Top of Mind in Higher Education Leadership Searches

An Interview with Oliver Tomlin, Senior Partner

Most institutions of higher education today are “very serious” about developing diversity among their top administrators, believes Witt/Kieffer senior partner Oliver Tomlin. That’s a vast improvement from the past, he says. But it doesn’t mean that schools and search committees still can’t learn a thing or two about how to better develop diverse leadership and strive to be more inclusive as well.

In the interview below, Tomlin discusses the nuances of how diverse leadership is defined in this day and age, and how progressive schools are prioritizing diversity when they undertake a leadership search.

What does diversity mean today in the context of higher education leadership searches? Is it more nuanced than in the past or has the definition of diversity expanded or changed?

Tomlin: The short answer is yes. I think not too long ago diversity was defined primarily as gender, ethnicity, religion, and maybe disability and sexual orientation, but I think it’s gotten even broader today. In fact more and more institutions aren’t even using the term diversity as much as they are referring to the office or the initiative as inclusive. They want to be known as an inclusive environment and accepting of all differences in every aspect. Some can even define it as being inclusive of differences in ideas and diversity of thought. So yes diversity has more nuances and is defined differently than in the past.
Do you think most higher ed institutions today are really serious about developing and maintaining diversity and/or inclusiveness in their top leadership positions?

Tomlin: Yes, I think they are very serious about it. I think the more serious institutions are those that have board support for their diversity or inclusion efforts. And it’s also a function of the type of institution. For example, institutions that have a large minority population or international population are much more conscious of diversity at the senior leadership level. Those that are not are still interested but probably have less teeth behind their initiatives.

What’s your view in terms of the diversity of candidates who are available for top positions within higher ed? Is it stronger today than it was five or 10 years ago?

Tomlin: Yes, absolutely. We haven’t made a lot of progress but certainly the available candidate pool has increased with the number women in senior leadership positions, people of color in senior leadership positions, and people that are open about their sexual orientations. Yes, the pool is larger. If you take a look at the numbers, it hasn’t changed dramatically but I think it will continue to increase as we go forward.

How does the search committee ensure that it has diversity top of mind throughout the recruitment process?

Tomlin: More and more search committees now have someone from HR or from the chief diversity office either on the search committee or sitting in on discussions. With their presence and our raising the issue of diversity of the candidate pool, that ensures that these issues remain at the forefront. In addition, some public institutions have reports that they have to complete during the search process. That’s very formal and that’s an exception and not the rule.

Explain a bit more about how the idea of inclusivity is prioritized and present throughout a leadership search?

Tomlin: Inclusivity is more of the search committee’s reaction to a situation. It refers to the committee’s willingness to look at candidates from all types of backgrounds, and to even look at candidates outside of the
academy—for example, presidential candidates that have not had experience within another institution of higher learning. It is when you are willing to consider candidates who are “off spec,” if you will.

**Is that something a search committee has to train itself to look for?**

**Tomlin:** Some do that. In the commencement of a search, some committees have to go through a tutorial that’s done by their institution or a third party—about how to keep an open mind, how to be inclusive in the process, how not to pre-judge, or so forth. So there are formal processes to go through and over time individuals and institutions grow to understand what it means to be inclusive in looking for leaders.

Inclusivity refers to the committee’s willingness to look at candidates from all types of backgrounds.
Enrollment Considerations During a Presidential Search and Transition

An interview with Robin Mamlet, Senior Partner

Managing enrollment effectively is critical for every college and university today. And yet when an institution undertakes a search for a new president, enrollment issues can get ignored or lost in the shuffle.

It is critical that trustees and search committees keep enrollment front and center during the search for a new campus leader. Presidential candidates need to be questioned and vetted for their ability to understand and champion enrollment issues; students, families, and other stakeholders will want reassurances that the institution is functioning effectively during a very important transition and recruiting a dynamic leader to guide the school’s future.

Witt/Kieffer senior partner Robin Mamlet, former dean of admission and financial aid at Stanford University and former chief enrollment officer at Swarthmore College and Sarah Lawrence College, knows full well the importance of keeping enrollment matters top of mind during a presidential search. She shares best practices in the following Q&A.

**How does enrollment factor into a presidential search?**

**Mamlet:** There are two areas to think about. First, institutions need to ensure that all stakeholders have a sense of continuity, forward movement and involvement during a presidential search, and that extends to prospective students and their parents. The outgoing president, search
committee, enrollment leaders, and others must be on the same page and convey messages of continuity. This lets people know that the institution is in good hands, both during a search and in the future as a new leader comes on board.

Also, strong candidates for the presidential position ought to ask really hard questions about student demand and student retention – the best candidates certainly will. The search committee needs a clear understanding of where the institution stands on both, and what enrollment strategies are going forward. Being able to provide candidates with thorough and “clean” data related to enrollment is critical during a search.

What should candidates be expected to know about enrollment issues?

Mamlet: A presidential candidate’s ability to bring in revenue through public and private philanthropy has always been recognized as a critical skill and experience set. Only recently has an understanding of student enrollment and its relationship to net tuition revenue and the general health of the operating budget become at least as important a prerequisite. Operating budgets today rest on student tuition revenues, and so a president’s knowledge of enrollment opportunities and realities is more critical than ever.

Candidates can’t bring up every key issue, or answer every question, but they need to demonstrate an understanding of enrollment and related issues in a concrete and nuanced way. They need to show an in-depth understanding of market, branding, positioning, and program innovation in order to reach deeper into existing markets and establish a presence in new markets. Most small, liberal arts colleges especially are going to need to innovate in order to thrive, and a president must demonstrate enthusiasm for trying new ideas and reaching out to students in creative ways.
Which skills or characteristics bode well for a president who understands enrollment matters?

Mamlet: The board and search committee should be looking for someone who has well honed analytical and strategic skills, plus a strong understanding of markets. These candidates are inventive and calculated risk takers. Right now, enrollment—and net tuition revenues—is one of the greatest challenges facing higher education. Institutions have to have a culture of enrollment management to be successful. Trustees understand that in their bones. They get it, but they need to look for presidents who understand that and are going to model that for the entire institutional community.

How can a search committee and institutional leaders reassure stakeholders during the presidential search?

Mamlet: Part of the answer comes from the board chair and the search committee chair projecting a sense of calm and order and showing strong leadership during a search. Families of current and prospective students want to know that someone is firmly in charge. While this constituency does not necessarily have direct contact with trustees, the tone the board establishes on campus will come through clearly to many prospective students and families who engage with the college.

Also, a website devoted to a presidential search can be very effective in keeping students, families and the community informed and reassured. This can work both ways, though. You want be open about progress and challenges without sharing too much or scaring the general public. There are some families—typically highly educated, full-pay families—that act like smart consumers in doing their homework before they make a several-hundred-thousand-dollar investment. They want to know that the investment is going to pay dividends over the years. In past searches, I have advised clients to think carefully about key messages and cautioned them not to share information on the website or in public forums that might be misunderstood by the general public.

Institutions have to have a culture of enrollment management to be successful.
Advancement’s Role in Presidential Transition

An interview with Jon Derek Croteau, EdD, Senior Partner, and Zachary Smith, PhD, Consultant

Presidential transitions in higher education are times of tension and uncertainty, but also opportunity as the new leader brings fresh ideas and energy. Among the overriding issues that the campus community will be concerned or curious about include how a new president will interact with key donors, reach out to alumni, and support fundraising and marketing efforts.

Therefore, it is critical the advancement office have a say in who is selected as president, and play an integral role in ensuring a smooth transition between the old and new regimes. In particular, the chief advancement officer must make sure he or she is heard throughout the hiring process, and then be an essential, right-hand resource as the new president takes over.

Witt/Kieffer senior partner Jon Derek Croteau and consultant Zachary A. Smith have a unique perspective on this matter, having worked closely with various colleges and universities in the recruitment of both chief advancement officers and presidents. They are also co-authors of Making the Case for Leadership: Profiles of Chief Advancement Officers in Higher Education (Rowman and Littlefield, 2012). In addition to profiling ten prominent advancement officers, the book presents an Advancement Leadership Competency Model to help gauge leaders and leadership candidates in this area.

In the interview below, Croteau and Smith share their thoughts about what role advancement must play in presidential recruitment and transitioning.
How should the advancement office be represented in a presidential search? How can it ensure its voice is heard loud and clear?

**Smith:** First, it is ideal that the chief advancement officer serve on the search committee. Being on the committee is certainly not a given, but it is hard to imagine many boards not having a clear understanding of how important the advancement competencies are to the success of a president. Through the committee, the chief advancement officer can provide perspective and context about the full spectrum of external relations issues to both the committee and potential candidates. Because the external function has become such an important role of today’s presidents, the chief advancement officer can provide critical input about the campus’s needs related to communications, marketing, alumni relations, government relations, and, of course, fundraising.

**Croteau:** Let me add that the chief advancement officer can also help assess candidates for their advancement competencies as well as their past successes in regards to furthering advancement goals and initiatives. For university and college presidents today, the ability to understand advancement and its needs is critical. What better way to assess that ability than to have advancement prominently represented on the search committee?

If the CAO is not on the search committee, it is then important for him or her to be intimately involved with the interviewing process and to have an important stake in the decision-making process. The CAO can reach out to members of the board and search committee to convey priorities and discuss advancement issues that are critical to consider as candidates are being interviewed and vetted.

**What kinds of issues should advancement look for in potential new presidents as they are being recruited? Is there a best way to voice concerns or praise for specific candidates?**

**Smith:** In addition to assessing a new president’s fit with the culture of the entire campus, the chief advancement officer should also be assessing
how potential candidates will fit with donors, trustees, volunteers, media, and alumni. Chief advancement officers have the best understanding of the culture of these various constituent groups, and forming positive and productive relationships with external constituents will be crucial for the success of a new president. The chief advancement officer must make sure he or she communicates what makes these constituencies unique to the specific campus and the community, and the type of president needed to work successfully with these groups once on board.

**Croteau:** In regards to giving feedback about specific candidates, it is important to be measured and grounded in the facts. What proven results was each candidate able to describe in regards to advancement matters? What role did the candidate play in an institution’s advancement? Call attention to individual candidates’ successes and metrics from past performance, since this is the best indication of future performance.

Feedback provided about candidates should also focus on competencies. What advancement competencies are most essential for the president to possess—intellectual curiosity, effective communications skills, self-awareness, etc.—and does the candidate have those competencies or not? It sounds cut and dry, but this takes a lot of the subjectivity out of the equation.

**What kinds of discussions should advancement and development professionals have with the outgoing president?**

**Smith:** I would argue that the discussions advancement professionals have with the outgoing president are based largely on the circumstances surrounding the president’s departure. However, I believe the chief advancement officer should focus primarily on issues and existing relationships the current president has with external constituents, and divide those issues and relationships into three categories: 1) issues and relationships that need immediate attention and stewarding during the transition; 2) those that need attention and stewarding immediately upon the new president’s arrival; and 3) those issues and relationships...
XI.

that need attention and stewarding within six months of a new president’s arrival.

The outgoing president can help evaluate and make those judgments in collaboration with the chief advancement officer prior to his or her departure, and the chief advancement officer can then develop an action plan based on those three categories of issues and relationships.

**What should advancement do to prepare itself for an incoming president?**

**Smith:** The advancement office should prepare by first developing a comprehensive summary of external individuals associated with the campus. This summary should include names, photos, background information, and a summary of recent activity reports. A call list should also be provided to the new president so that personal phone calls can be made to high-level constituents. Ideally, these calls should be made immediately upon the announcement of the new president (or just before the announcement). The call list should include the campus’s most important and high-profile constituents (large donors, elected officials, etc.) who need or deserve immediate attention from the new president (those in categories one and two above). The chief advancement officer should review the call list with the new president, and in some cases help the president during the calls (i.e., sit with and brief the new president as conversations are taking place).

**Croteau:** The chief advancement officer should also put together a brief overview (1-2 pages) of the advancement division’s strategic plan that includes strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for success in the future. And, of course, incoming presidents should be provided with an historical overview of fundraising data.
On Transparency and Confidentiality

By Dennis Barden, Senior Partner

While it is still common for educational institutions in the final stages of a leadership search to bring candidates to campus for open visits—public institutions are often required by law to do so—some candidates are pushing back. The issue of transparent governance versus the candidate’s right to privacy is an old one but the current climate is shifting toward a more confidential process.

The reason for this is paralleled by a shift in the nature of the daily work of university presidents and chancellors. With increasing responsibility for external relations—raising private funding, working with lawmakers on appropriations and earmarks, seeking alternative sources of support, creating partnerships and leverage—the value of academic leaders’ personal connections with key funders and other stakeholders has risen.

The candidate who fears being compromised at his or her current institution while considering another job opportunity may insist upon privacy until he or she is selected as “the” candidate. In cases where the recruiting institution cannot or will not accommodate a candidate’s desire for confidentiality, some superior candidates will opt to stay away.
Boards understand this and realize they are competing with a large number of institutions for a limited number of highly qualified candidates, including those candidates’ current employers.

There is no right or wrong answer to the question of an open interview protocol versus a confidential one. For some institutions, a state legislature may have preempted the choice. And even when confidentiality is an option, tradition often creates the expectation that faculty and students will be participants in the process—or at least fully informed of its progress.

Regardless of the approach the board chooses, it must discuss the issue of confidentiality at the outset of the search process. A quiet path to the highest-quality candidate pool could result in a noisy arrival for a new leader if the followers are not agreeable.
Preparing a Committee Recommendation

At the end of the second-round interviews, after campus responses have been gathered, tallied, and summarized, and after all reference checks are complete, including calls to those not listed as references, the committee is ready to prepare its recommendation. Begin by reviewing the charge to the committee so that you are clear about what you have been asked to do—rank-order candidates, present a list of all finalists with strengths and weaknesses, present exactly three candidates or two to four candidates, and so on. The committee should deliberate about the candidates and formulate statements of their strengths and weaknesses. Following an hour or two for this deliberation, the president or the board chair can be asked to join the meeting to discuss the report and ask questions. Or, the committee chair can present the report to the president or board chair at a subsequent meeting.

In a vice presidential search, the president is the appointing officer. Presidents often reserve certain key reference conversations for themselves, such as a call to the president of the finalists’ current institutions. The president normally has interviewed the finalists at least once during their second-round campus interviews. And normally, if the president feels there is no one in the pool
worthy of appointment, that would have been signaled to the committee earlier. Moving from a committee recommendation to a selection in a vice presidential search should go smoothly.

In a presidential search, the process is more complicated because of the role of the board and the number of people potentially involved. Some boards charge search committees with rank-ordering the candidates, and the board is expected to ratify the committee’s choice. In that case, the committee should select the preferred candidate but also rank-order any other finalists so that, if an agreement is not reached with the preferred candidate, the board can turn to the next candidate.

In other cases, the board decides to reserve for itself the selection of the new president, drawing heavily upon committee appraisal of strengths and weaknesses but making its own decision. The search committee presents the board with a short list of candidates, unranked, with strengths and weaknesses, rather than a ranked list or a single preferred candidate. As the board selects a president, a solid base of information should be provided for board review. The committee should give the board the finalists’ letters of application and CVs, as well as a summary appraisal of strengths and weaknesses of each finalist. In addition, the committee might provide the written reference reports or a summary of the references, a summary of other background checks that have been done (e.g., verification of educational credentials and employment, Web searches), and results of campus feedback following the second-round interviews. All those receiving the materials or participating in the deliberations must be reminded of the need for confidentiality both during and after the process.

Ideally, some or all board members will have met and interviewed the finalists when they visited the campus during the second-round interviews. If few have been able to do that, an additional visit by the candidates for board interviews may be required; these conversations give board members an opportunity to make their own appraisal of the candidates, but they also give presidential candidates the opportunity to make an appraisal of the board—the president’s most important constituency.
Timing of the Final Steps

It is important to remember as you move into the final stages of the search process that you do not have full control of your candidates. While you are busy judging and selecting them, they are also considering whether they want to accept the position if offered, stay where they are (perhaps with a counteroffer), or accept another offer that they may have received or may hope to receive in the coming days. Candidates may have been asked whether they are in other searches, or what reservations they have about accepting your position if it is offered, but that does not guarantee that they will accept. When you review your finalists and select your favorite, consider whether you would appoint the second-ranked candidate, and even the third-ranked candidate, if the higher-ranked candidates were to disappear at the last minute.

Time is of the essence. The longer the process from second-round interviews to an offer, the greater the risks to the successful completion of the search. In addition to the risks described above, there are the added risks of annoyance and second thoughts. Candidates may begin to feel that your institution is too disorganized or divided to be attractive, or they may suspect that you are negotiating with someone else and that they are seen as second best, or they may reflect and talk with colleagues and family and decide that the offer is not so attractive as they thought during the excitement of the interviews.

Plan from the beginning of the search to move swiftly through the final stages. If this means scheduling special board meetings, or a board conference call, or delegating the decision to the executive committee, you should do these things and plan in advance to bring the search to a prompt conclusion.

Assuming that you approach the selected candidate with an offer, what happens next? If the candidate’s family has already come to see the campus and community and look at housing, and if there has been enough opportunity for the candidate to learn everything that is needed during the previous interviews and visits, perhaps no additional visit will be needed. A
fully informed candidate may only need a couple of days to reflect and talk with family members or trusted advisors before calling the board chair back with a decision. But if you have not provided for a family visit and if you have not provided enough information to the candidate, then he or she may well ask for time to come back to campus, have more conversations, and gather more information. This prolongs the process, and it also creates potential problems in relation to the next candidate on your list. Avoid this situation by making sure that the preceding steps in the search process attended to all these things. It is reasonable to ask a candidate to take no more than a week to make a decision. Candidates who want more visits and more information, and who seem to be covering ground already covered, may be moving toward declining your offer. You either need to intensify your recruiting efforts, or press for a decision so you can present an offer to the next candidate in line.
What to Consider Before Making a Leadership Change

By Susan Resneck Pierce, PhD, Of Counsel

[The following is excerpted and modified from an article originally published on InsideHigherEd.com. Permission to republish has been granted.]

College and university presidents serve at the pleasure of their boards and that the most important responsibility of boards is to hire and in unfortunate cases to fire presidents. However, the forced resignation and subsequent rehiring of president Teresa Sullivan at the University of Virginia in 2012 offers a cautionary tale for how boards should exercise such authority.

What seemed to elude the UVa Board is that in those circumstances when boards decide to terminate a presidential appointment, they have the responsibility to do so in a way that is informed, that is mindful of adhering to institutional and legal processes, and that is ethical. They also have the responsibility to act in ways that they are convinced will not harm the institution.

Boards should also in every possible way give the departing president dignity as the relationship comes to an end. This sorry situation gives rise to a number of important lessons for this board and others. Below, based on my 11 years as a college president and six years of consulting with boards and presidents, I offer what I think are the most critical lessons:
Lesson #1: For a decision of this magnitude, the full board should meet in person and the trustees together should debate the costs and benefits of its possible choices. The important piece here is that the board members deliberate as a group, each benefiting from the knowledge, insights and judgments of others. I have seen many instances in which individual board members come to a meeting intending to vote in a particular way about a matter before them, only to be persuaded by the arguments of their colleagues to vote in a very different way.

Lesson #2: Prior to board deliberations, it is incumbent on the board chair and vice chair to gather as much pertinent information as possible and to inform the president that they are doing so. I know of several situations in which a board has questioned a president’s action or actions. In the most serious of these cases, when the board chair and vice chair informed the president about their concerns, the president admitted culpability and chose to resign, citing personal reasons. The board chairs quickly convened their boards to inform, in strictest confidence, the other trustees about what had taken place and why.

Lesson #3: Boards need expert public relations advice if they intend to make a presidential change that is unexpected or potentially controversial. In such circumstances, I recommend that the board give serious consideration to hiring a public relations firm with expertise in crisis management to determine how best to announce and explain the change in leadership.

Lesson #4: Boards that are confronted with a presidential transition (voluntary or involuntary) should collaborate if at all possible with the departing president on a press release and a communications strategy. They will also need to bring the person in charge of the public relations into the loop. It may be that the board and the president, in the interest of transparency, can agree to disclose the nature of the disagreement between them. On the other hand, if the disagreement was about a personnel matter or if disclosing the area of disagreement might in itself prove harmful to the institution, I believe that the less said, the better.
Lesson #5: The board chair should designate one person from the institution as spokesperson, whether that be the board chair, another trustee or a member of the administration. The board chair should, however, ask the press to work through the institution’s communications person in scheduling interviews.

Lesson #6: All board members need to adhere to the notion that personnel matters are confidential. Virginia’s sunshine laws, for example, permit a public body to “convene a closed executive session with a majority of the vote” for “discussions of employment, employment conditions, discipline and resignation of public employees.”

Lesson #7: Before any public announcement is made about the presidential transition, the board should have developed and then should talk about the succession plan, particularly whether there is going to be an interim president and who that person will be along with a description in broad strokes of the search process.

Lesson #8: Simultaneously with or immediately after making an announcement about a presidential transition, the board leadership should meet with the leaders of key constituencies: the faculty, the staff, the students and the alumni, to inform them of the decision, to explain the boundaries occasioned by confidentiality and to outline the search process going forward.

Lesson #9: When commenting on decisions of institutional significance, boards should keep their focus on the health and well-being of the institution rather than on themselves.

Lesson #10: Boards need to model the core values of the institution. In my judgment, this is the most important lesson to be learned.
Conclusion: Refining the Presidential Search Process

By John K. Thornburgh, Senior Partner

[The following appeared in University Business Magazine. It is reprinted with permission.]

There is no more important time than now to consider serious process improvement steps that take much of the guesswork out of presidential selection. Boards, presidents, and campus leaders are dealing with unprecedented pressures. A storm is gathering that is forcing academic thought leaders to question not just the viability of individual campuses, but the very mission of higher education.

Costs continue to rise, as do expectations for serious efforts to contain campus and instructional expenses. Resources are dwindling, as public institutions are reeling from state budget cuts, and tuition increases in all sectors will be modest at best, kept flat by public pressures as well as parents and students saying “enough is enough.”

Even more alarming is the erosion of the value pact that higher education has historically offered its students. As the growing mass of un- and under-employed graduates will attest to, the historic notion that a college degree will provide ready access to sustainable, relevant employment is vanishing.

As the financial and strategic paradigms in higher education continue to shift, presidents are expected to “peer around corners” and proactively reposition
their campus missions to ensure relevance and sustainability. Boards have heightened expectations for their presidents, and their tolerance for failure or mediocrity is shrinking. As such, we should anticipate an acceleration in presidential turnover, driven both by boards pushing presidents out and presidents deciding that there is no better time than now to retire, lest their legacies be defined more by negatives than positives.

**Best Practices**

As boards and campus committees gear up to identify and recruit presidential successors, there are a few fundamental best practices they should keep in mind:

- **Engage the board in developing the leadership agenda and profile.** The board has the presidential hiring authority and fiduciary accountability for the long-term direction of the institution. At the time of leadership transition, all trustees should be fully aligned on what they want this person to do and what this person should proverbially look like. So much of the search process cascades from this profile, and it should not be delegated to an ad hoc campus committee or left to a search consultant to cobble together a composite based on a series of interviews. The board must take a direct role in the starting point of the recruiting process. It can and should still seek input from campus constituents but ultimately needs to own this process and its deliverables. Search consultants typically target candidates based on the precise needs of the institution, so the process is best served when the profile reflects the board’s specific strategic priorities and those of the core board leadership.

- **Apply formal assessment tools to help evaluate final candidates.** Many presidential selections are based on the intuitions of the committee and board participants—not on a comprehensive understanding of candidates’ leadership styles and competencies. Potential presidents are run through a gauntlet of 90-minute airport interviews, dawn-to-dusk campus tours,
and final meetings with the full board. This whirlwind sequence of meetings often relies on general impressions to drive the narrowing of the field and ultimate appointment. While parallel due diligence (references and background checks) accompanies these decisions, there is a need to add more science to the current art of picking a president.

More and more, higher education is deploying formal assessment techniques to assist in understanding candidate strengths and areas for further growth. These tools help predict a candidate’s future job performance, identify possible barriers to success, and predict his or her attitude. They very effectively map one’s executive decision-making style within the culture of the institution.

Our firm has surveyed over 200 successful leaders in higher education to develop a competency model that assesses individuals in sixteen core areas, centered on the themes of Leader of Self, Leader as Relationship Builder, Leader as Manager, and Leader as Innovator. These are weighted according to the institution’s strategic priorities and are applied to candidates in the final stages of the search process. The results ultimately give the board a detailed “read” on individual styles and abilities to respond effectively to the campus’ priorities.

This input complements—not replaces—feedback and due diligence traditionally provided to the board. Thoughtfully interpreted, assessments can remove a lot of the guesswork that goes into final appointment deliberations, as well as the disconnects that ultimately drive the fate of presidents whose styles aren’t in line with the expectations of their boards.

- **Preserve confidentiality in the presidential search process.**

Higher education’s serious challenges call for serious leaders. Every potential roadblock to attracting the best presidential candidates needs to be identified and removed. One of these is the tradition of publicly announcing candidates at the finalist stage of the search—if not before.
Initially driven by the shared governance tenet that presidential selection should engage the masses, this “outing” of candidates has driven many strong contenders away, and have limited campuses’ leadership options at the precise time when the overall pool of high potential prospects is dwindling across the country. This is particularly true for sitting presidents who might naturally and logically aspire to a new opportunity, but who can’t possibly face the wrath of their current constituents if it were known that they were courting a new position.

There are ways to balance campus needs for inclusivity in the search process and candidate needs for confidentiality. For starters, the Search Committee itself is intended to be representative of its constituencies. Properly assembled with members who have acknowledged respect and confidence from their peers, these committees can—and do—carry out their work in a fashion that assures their colleagues they have a voice in the process. Also, we are seeing more and more searches in their final stages broaden the constituent access beyond the core committee, but those additional participants still operate under strict rules of confidentiality.

These suggestions do not advocate a massive overhaul of academic recruiting to make it more corporate, but instead pose some food for thought as the leadership stakes continue to grow—and the threshold for what makes an exceptional president continues to rise.
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Best Practices in Higher Education Presidential Search
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