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## Run Your Campus

### How Institutional Fit Influences Presidential Selection

*By Katherine Haley Will, Ph.D.*

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 three 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.

Tom Kazee, who assumed the presidency at the University of Evansville in June after serving as provost of Furman University, defines fit as finding a place that matches “one's professional strengths and philosophy.” He said he was attracted to two key

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elements of the Evansville culture, ones he had already experienced firsthand at Furman. First, he said, Evansville “marries a strong commitment to liberal education with an array of preprofessional programs. I find that a very powerful educational philosophy.” Second, “the university is deeply connected to the community and devoted to serving its needs; that’s a mission I find enormously compelling.”

The search process itself gave him a feel for the importance of community on the campus. He noted that the two co-chairs of the search committee, both of them trustees, made a great effort to reach out to Kazee and his wife, spending time getting to know them and letting them get to know the university. “That’s how we knew we wanted to be part of UE,” he said. “It was clear there was a fit in terms of culture and values.”

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.”

So while rational, objective measures like credentials and experience determine whether you make the shortlist, your fit with institutional culture and values is *sine qua non* in determining whether you are selected as the institution’s next president.

Candidates must establish their appreciation for a college’s norms and values and must be able to comprehend and speak its special language. All the qualifications in the world — fund-raising success, financial acumen, management expertise, scholarly accomplishment, teaching experience — will not suffice if the fit is not right.

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.

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