

Right Leader, Wrong Campus?

Refining the presidential search process

By John K. Thornburgh

As university presidents gathered at this fall's conferences and seminars, the usual question of "How was your summer?" likely produced more than perfunctory, polite responses. It was a wild season for a number of higher education leaders. In June, the president of the University of Virginia was "temporarily" fired by her board for not being aggressive enough in pushing new initiatives. The president of the University of Illinois was removed by his board earlier in the summer for being *too* aggressive in driving change in his organization.

While there were unique issues and dynamics swirling around these campuses, the severe actions may have stemmed less from individual leadership flaws and more from a presidential selection process that is in need of some targeted reengineering. In both of these cases, accomplished presidents presented leadership strengths and experiences validated through long and impressive careers, but these traits may have been applied to the wrong campuses at the wrong time.

As an executive search consultant specializing in higher education clients, I have supported presidential searches on almost 40 campuses and thus have a front-row perspective on the recruitment, screening, and selection process.

The traditional model uses the time-honored protocol of establishing large, inclusive campus committees that represent a virtual "Noah's Ark" of students, faculty, staff, and trustees. While these committees are well-intended and committed to their institution's success, they are often unprepared to apply serious leadership evaluation tools and ill-equipped to dig deeply to validate



A "Noah's Ark" representation of stakeholders is often ill-equipped to dig deeply on candidate strengths and weaknesses.

candidate strengths/weaknesses against the leadership priorities needed for future success. As such, decisions to move candidates forward—or not at all—are based more on intuitions and first impressions than thoughtful, objective, qualified assessments of leadership skills.

The process is further complicated when there is a disconnect between the board of trustees—typically the ultimate hiring authority—and the search committee on what the leadership agenda for the institution should be and the accompanying skills, experiences, and styles that will equip the next president to achieve those goals.

Part of the problem here is that a growing number of boards are scrambling to get their own consensus on the university's direction. Yet, more often than not, even the standing strategies are not completely or effectively communicated to the search committees, who are

then left to their own devices to take a best guess at the ideal leadership profile. At the end, search committees hand off several finalists to the board, and everyone crosses their fingers that the president selected is the right fit in all respects.

TIME FOR CHANGE

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 underemployed 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 ►

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“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.

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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. **UB**