

Going the EXTRA MILE in a Presidential Search

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Let's consider the presidential turnover rate in higher education. According to "The American College President," a report published in 2007 by the American Council on Education, for 20 years prior to 1995, the average tenure of college and university CEOs was 7.3 years; after dipping slightly, the figure increased to 8.6 years by 2006. While these numbers may seem acceptable at first glance, they become more worrisome when we break them down. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the number of presidents who make up the lower quadrants of the averages – those who remain in office only a few years – it's safe to say that it's too high.

When it comes to a trustees' own institutions – often their alma mater – statistics are just that – statistics. There is no consolation to knowing that one's president has served for X years if that service has been sub-par and not met expectations. All of us know of precipitous departures by presidents for whom the "fit" just wasn't right. While these cases may be under the radar, they are symptomatic of a much larger disorder. To use the lexicon of executive search consultants, too many "bad hires" are occurring – and of equal importance, too many garden variety hires as well. Why, and what can boards do to plan and oversee more effective presidential searches?

The obvious culprit – a lack of talent – is easily dismissed. There is considerable leadership talent inside and outside of higher education, including experienced incumbent and former presidents, senior administrators with high potential and nontraditional candidates whose backgrounds lend themselves to new roles. So given this strong supply of candidates, the "bad hire" issue narrows to process questions: Is the presidential search process sufficiently sophisticated and inclusive to yield the best possible candidates? Do search committees or search counsel conduct in-depth due diligence that exceeds routine verifications to determine a candidate's motivation and cultural "fit"?

Many trustees would define "due diligence" using business terminology to identify a function that takes place after a deal essentially is done. In the recruitment parlance of higher education, however, due diligence begins when finalists are announced publicly and confidentiality has ended, but *before* a governing board has selected its top candidate.

Once the process has reached this eleventh-hour point, routine due diligence begins: formal reference checks, terminal degree verification, credit checks (because of the office's fiduciary responsibility), civil and criminal litigation checks, and extracts of media coverage. But standard due diligence rarely includes a critical extra dimension: visits to finalists' home campuses. We contend every presidential search always should include such visits.

However, for home-campus visits to be effective, they should build on skilled interviewing and thorough reference checks — the two core components of a presidential search. Each of these critical tasks is more difficult to execute than one might think. Let's consider them in sequence:

Good Beginnings. Unlikely as it may seem, interviews are not always reliable indicators of the best candidates. Faulty interviews can cause committees to reject candidates with high potential and overrate weak ones. The time-tested, nearly foolproof predictor of a successful new president is an individual's track record verified by professionally conducted reference checks.

Naturally, some search committee members are dubious and point out many reasons for the glut of "bad hires" and the disproportionately high turnover of academic presidents. Indeed, there are many reasons. Leading the list is a misplaced reliance on interviews to answer a wide array of questions and serve as a barometer of potential performance. A closer look at interviewing and reference checking is warranted.

- *Well-intentioned but ill-prepared people usually conduct interviews, rendering the interview process less than reliable.* Unfortunately, almost no one on a search committee has formal training in the art and science of interviewing. (This is not surprising, considering that interviewing historically is viewed as a skill all supervisors automatically possess.) However, search committees generally are receptive to coaching and open to developing penetrating questions.

- *Reference checking is handled poorly more often than professionally.* In an alarming number of cases, reference checks are perfunctory and contribute little insight.

References from individuals the search committee or consultant has discovered — as opposed to references volunteered by the finalists — often are the most revealing or important.

Today, most midsize and larger institutions use consultants to help plan and conduct presidential searches. Consultants are most helpful early in the search by conducting effective, "behind the scenes" interviews and identifying and presenting top prospects. Over time, search committees (assisted by a consultant or on their own) will winnow the slate to three or four finalists, each of whom presumably meets prerequisite qualifications — with track records subject to verification.

At this point in the search process, committee members must address questions of fit and style — subjective assessments based on members' perceptions and instincts. But they are susceptible to what can be costly errors if they assume they have learned all they can about a given finalist and that no further discovery is possible. The opposite is true. In fact, a process that employs thorough due diligence can reveal a great deal more information — information just waiting to be gleaned during visits to finalists' home campuses.

Home Field Advantage. Granting finalists nearly unfettered access to representatives of all constituencies and facilities on your own campus is a crucial part of the presidential search process. If one accepts the basic tenet that a presidential search is a "50-50" proposition, turnabout-in the form of a visit to a finalist's home campus not only is fair play, it is required. Although home-campus visits occur in the absence of the finalist, a search committee naturally must seek the candidate's permission to conduct such a visit. Although some candidates may be reluctant, most will see the merits of the visit and applaud its purpose.

On a typical campus visit, a search committee team may speak with as many as 40 to 60 people. Truth is, such visits usually reveal some ambivalence from interviewees — no one wants to lose one of his or her best colleagues. Even so, the marvelous collegiality that is omnipresent in academe asserts itself, and interviewees invariably wish their associates well.

Finalists should help arrange the itinerary of a home-campus visit by distributing copies of an executive search profile or "leadership statement" prepared by the searching institution. This statement describes the institution, the qualifications the institution seeks in a new president, and the challenges the new president will encounter. In this way, everyone with whom the team meets will be able compare the two institutions and reflect on the candidate's qualifications for the new position. This preparation saves time and facilitates meaningful discussions.

The dynamics of these visits can be fascinating. At the outset, the team may agree that Finalist A is the leading contender, B a close second, and C less certain. Invariably, some stocks go up and others go down; few remain unchanged. In some cases, a home-campus visit has determined that a finalist, considered the second-in-command at his or her institution, really was running the university and serving as a surrogate chief executive. There's nothing like seeing someone on his or her own turf!

Mitigating Concerns. With all these positive attributes, what's the downside of a home-campus visit? First, the searching institution may be operating on a tight budget. Reluctance to add expense certainly is understandable, considering the costs of travel and lodging for a team of four or five people visiting three or four campuses spread around the country. However, when search committees view such expenses as an investment in obtaining the best possible president and as a way to prevent the high cost

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The visiting team begins the day with the finalist and his or her spouse and then meets with groups and individuals that include trustees, the president, faculty, peers, members of the finalist's staff, students, community leaders, and alumni. The team's goal should be to learn firsthand about the finalist's accomplishments, management style, and interpersonal skills. A home-campus visit gives the team the chance to test concerns that may have arisen during interviews or reference checks and can cast more light on such unknowns as fund-raising potential and the ever-elusive "leadership quotient."

of making an unwise selection, they may see the expenses in a different light.

A finalist who is an incumbent president also may voice a valid concern, perhaps this way: "I have nothing to hide. In fact, I'd love the opportunity for 'show and tell' but what if I'm not selected? I'm afraid I'll be viewed differently in the future." These concerns pop up infrequently (in less than 5 percent of the recent visits we've conducted) and can be handled effectively using other measures—video and telephone conferencing with selected trustees, faculty, and staff, coupled with an informal or unofficial campus visit. Thus, anxious incumbents are protected.

