

WHEN
TIMES CALL
for an
INTERIM
President

Experienced academic presidents who are available to guide an institution through chief executive transitions may be found through a nationwide registry.



IN AN “OFF THE RECORD” CONVERSATION RECENTLY, A university board chair described the worst kind of chief executive for higher education: “It’s a president who is just good enough to get the job done—and can’t seem to go beyond that level—but not bad enough to be fired.”

This chairman was not speaking hypothetically. He was referring to a specific institution and its president of eight years. Nor was this an isolated case; unfortunately, the scenario is far too pervasive across American higher education.

When chief executives like these finally retire or resign, their numbers are counted among the 400 to 500 presidencies that change hands each year. Also in this group are new chief executives who last a year or so and the

much larger number who leave office within five years.

It’s a disturbingly high turnover rate. Some of it, of course, is due to death or other unforeseen circumstances, but the vast majority of these men and women who either remain too long or leave too soon depart of their own volition—or are asked to leave—because the “fit” was wrong. In virtually all of these cases of bad hires, the causes can be traced to flawed search processes. Typically, the errors are of both omission and commission, most of which occur in the early stages of the process. Recovery often is difficult, if not impossible.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that there is an effective antidote, a simple concept with the potential to eliminate these and

• BY ROBERT HASTINGS PERRY •

similar problems. It is the concept of an experienced interim president. To explain it, let's first examine some of the most common presidential transitions and the mistakes that are made before and during the course of the search processes.

Uncertain Transitions. In most cases, the departing president gives the governing board ample notice, perhaps as much as a full year. All parties assume that the incumbent will remain in office during the course of the search, and no one suggests that there might be another way, a better way, of handling the approaching transition.

Presidents in this situation are uncertain of the appropriate extent of their involvement in the search process. They may have good intentions, but rather than enhancing the process, they may make it more problematic. At a time when the institution needs to become introspective, the chief executive's presence often prompts guarded rather than open discussions. Even worse, an outgoing president may be reluctant to "let go" and, likely on a subconscious level, works in ways that are counter-productive to the process.

Incumbents who choose to stay at arm's length may encounter a different kind of problem, the infamous "lame duck" syndrome. Suddenly finding themselves on the periphery, these presidents experience feelings ranging from alienation to rejection to humiliation. Although no one intends for this to happen, the pattern repeats itself from place to place, time and again—possibly because each occurrence is the first for that individual and institution. There is little or no forewarning, and after the fact there is a natural reluctance to talk about such personal and sensitive matters.

In other situations, trustees are unprepared to lose their president and are taken by surprise. Faced with the daunting task of launching a search without the benefit of a game plan, the board often acts precipitously. Believing that the office should not be vacant, they

appoint an acting president, logically the institution's No. 2 administrator. What is essential at this point—and in many cases completely overlooked—is a determination of whether that individual will be a candidate for the permanent post. Simply put, if the acting president is permitted to be a candidate, the process will suffer greatly, as will the institution.

Acting chief executives who declare their candidacies may find themselves dealing with conflict-of-interest issues, in which case decision making becomes awkward. Because they are well known within the institution, supporters and detractors alike may try to wield influence, presenting search committees with various difficulties.

But far more serious than these internal obstacles is the negative effect on the external marketplace. The message from the university and its search counsel that the process is open and all-inclusive falls on deaf ears. The best prospective candidates, believing the search is wired, choose not to apply or to accept nominations. There can be at least two results: The final slate of candidates is missing the horsepower it otherwise would have had, or the institution and search counsel lose face because of the perception that they cooperated in a sham.

Finally, there are some presidential transitions, regardless of how they were brought about, for which a conventional search is not the proper course of action. When this occurs, it almost invariably is due to one or more tenuous conditions within the institution. The governing board of an institution that is in perilous straits, for example, knows what it must do to stay afloat and the skills the next president must have to turn things around. Rationalizing that such candid information will scare away top talent, the search committee plays up the positive points and suppresses the severity of any problems. Such problems may include the need to terminate senior administrators, staff, or faculty—something new presidents rightfully are reluctant to do.



Top prospects initially may be attracted to the opportunity, become caught up in the courtship, and fail to conduct sufficient due diligence on the institution. Once on board, they soon realize that there has been less than full disclosure, that hidden agendas were at play, and that they were hired for the wrong reasons.

In such cases, the process was successful in the sense that it resulted in the appointment of a new president. But in fact, the process was flawed, and what appears to be a successful search will likely be a failure because it was based on deception. In such cases, the new president almost certainly will become another turnover statistic.

Two Models. Today, about half of all colleges and universities retain search counsel to assist in their presidential searches. The processes employed vary depending on the type of institution and its particular circumstances. Typically, however, the processes fall into one of two broad categories: corporate or educational search models.

Having evolved from within the academy over many years and created before today's pervasive use of search counsel, the educational model is heavily process-oriented. That means significant involvement of the search committee and all of the institution's constituencies. Among the principal advantages of this model is the opportunity it offers to strengthen the institution through a campuswide "buy in" of the process and ultimately to provide a mandate for the new chief executive.

The downside is the tendency of committees to pay so much attention to processes and accompanying minutiae that they lose sight of the high-quality result they are seeking. Some critics go further, asserting that the involvement of so many groups, each with differing feelings of entitlement, tends to breed the "least common denominator" and results in a compromise choice.

The corporate model is diametrically opposed to the educational one. Born in the business world, it emerged after corporate headhunters were contracted to identify and attract executive-level talent. The focus was on a candidate's skills and motivation, with the authority for the final hiring decision often resting with a single individual.

When corporate search firms began entering the higher education market some 20 years ago, they adapted their approach but retained the emphasis on the cultivation and presentation of candidates. A distinct advantage of this model is that it has a good probability of generating high-quality candidates based in part on the firm's skill at protecting confidentiality. The common disadvantage is the lack of constituent involvement, particularly of faculty, which later may work against the new president.

This last point is a deceptive one that is best illustrated by an example: The governing board of a mid-size private university retains a search firm that uses the corporate model. After valid concerns are raised, the board opts for a confidential process that relies on a selection committee composed of only trustees and search counsel with expertise in identifying and attracting top candidates. The actively involved trustees are aware of the need to keep everyone informed and periodically release communiqués intended as status reports.

There is a significant difference, however, between reading general information and serving on a committee that speculates about prospective candidates and reviews and analyzes the credentials of nominees and applicants. Throughout the process, faculty

An interim president can be helpful to the search committee and can provide finalists with candid insights about the position and institution.

members may feel patronized. Once the new chief executive is announced—even when that individual has superb qualifications—resentment is likely to exist, if only on a subconscious level. When the new president commits one or more missteps, there looms the natural tendency to say to one's colleagues, "See, I told you this would happen!" In the worst of such cases, votes of no confidence ensue, and another presidency fails.

Irrespective of which process an institution employs, the flaws are generic, and they cause the same degree of damage whenever and wherever they occur. How can these flaws be avoided so that presidential searches can be successful in every sense?

The Registry. The answer, a fundamentally simple concept that has spawned a highly effective procedure, was created in 1992 and named the Registry for College and University Presidents. The Registry, in brief, provides a cadre of more than 60 retired or former college and university presidents who are prepared to serve an institution for periods of a few months to several years. When a governing board requests an interim chief executive, the "search" already will have been completed, and all that remains is to select from among three or four individuals whose experience is most appropriate for the institution, its issues, and its challenges.

Generally, these men and women will have had no previous connection with the institution and are not candidates for the permanent position. These seasoned administrators have the right expertise for the institution, and they know what to take care of and what to leave for the new president.

Current administrators who might become candidates are left to continue performing their functions in the best interests of the institution and in support of the interim, thus allowing top prospects from the outside to perceive an open, all-inclusive process and join the competition. Perhaps most important for

the successful internal candidates who have competed on a level playing field, they begin their presidencies with validation from a credible national search and a mandate from all the constituencies.

Ideally, the interim will serve in an ex-officio capacity on the search committee, assisting at the outset in the institutional study and even recommending prospective candidates. He or she also may play a key role in providing the finalists with candid and objective insights into the institution and the position.

In addition, because the process encourages candor about shortcomings in the outgoing administration and what is most needed for the future, granting the departing president a sabbatical provides multiple advantages. While honoring the incumbent, it ensures that the president does not suffer through the lame-duck syndrome or become overly involved in and detrimental to the search process.

Moreover, at the conclusion of the search, the president returns in time for an overlap period with the president-elect. This is a "win-win" situation: The reigns are passed in a spirit of mutual respect, acrimony has been avoided, and the search process has been significantly enhanced—very likely resulting in a well-qualified new president.

Not every college and university should engage an interim chief executive during a presidential search, but every search can reap tremendous benefits from bringing on a carefully chosen and objective interim leader. There are occasions, many more than are commonly acknowledged, when to do so is undoubtedly the best course. ♦

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