

The Successful Presidential Search

Careful planning and measured steps are important for a successful result.

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ANATIONWIDE PRESIDENTIAL search begins. Thousands of dollars are soon to be spent on advertising, consulting fees and travel expenses. Two or three strong candidates arrive for campus interviews. Hopes are high for a successful outcome.

Then comes the grim, surprising news: the favored candidate has withdrawn, or turned down the offer. The number-two candidate is no longer available (or perhaps not viable). The search starts anew, no doubt disillusioning faculty and staff who have sacrificed precious hours from their teaching, advising, research and administrative duties for the search process. And it is confusing to alumni, donors

and other stakeholders who equate institutional stability with presidential continuity.

How can colleges and universities ensure a happier search outcome?

Advice for a Positive Outcome

First, we recommend hiring an executive search firm for any presidential or vice presidential search. Second, the search prospectus and advertisements are critical. Both should clearly define what the committee is looking for, within legal limits. If a church-related college intends to hire a president from its sponsoring denomination, for example, this should be clearly noted. Third, advertising should reach target audiences. While traditional publications remain a “must,” electronic advertisements are also becoming popular, as well as advertising in specialized publications. Email messages to potential candidates and requests for nominations from higher education leaders can produce good leads, too.

Placement and wording of the ad are paramount. CEOs and candidates for senior posts prefer not to send their CVs to HR offices. They prefer a box or recognized recruiter in the return address line. Incidentally, postings in the executive section of specialized publications are read by more potential applicants than are those in the front portions of the employment section.


Some other time-tested suggestions include the following:

- **Check references before bringing candidates to campus, but be sure to secure permission to call even listed references.** This procedure saves valuable time later in the search process, after candidates have been to campus and may expect an offer.

Referencing can tell a committee a good bit about a candidate before a face-to-face interview, such as work style and ethic, personal interests and family.

When the search reaches the finalist stage, the candidate should be advised that due diligence will be done. This includes “non-given” reference checking, civil court and workers’ compensation records; criminal, credit and employment checks; driving records; and degree verification.

- **Be honest and realistic about expectations.** The best candidates are usually CEOs elsewhere. While they may welcome the challenge to “fix” a new institution, they may be reluctant to come if they sense existing trouble.
- **Provide candid information about the financial health of the institution.** We both have worked with new presidents through the Council of Independent College’s New Presidents Program. When we asked how many newly named CEOs believed they had received an accurate portrayal of the financial health of their new institution before accepting the position, 90 percent indicated they had not.
- **Supply candidates with external evaluations and reviews.** These will include the most recent accreditation reports and audited financial statements. Experienced candidates will want to know the good along with the bad.
- **Commission a team of experts to conduct an institutional review — before the new president arrives.** A review will point out areas of concern and also highlight the strengths of the institution upon which a new CEO can build. It also provides an opportunity to review, update and amend the institution’s bylaws.
- **Finally, be prepared to discuss with serious candidates the methodology and process for setting presidential evaluation goals.** Who will evaluate the president, how and when? Explain how goals are set, reviewed and assessed.

Careful planning with these guidelines can improve chances for a successful search. The alternative can be costly. 

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