

A Lost Opportunity in Academic Searches

BY JAMES D. HERBERT

I've always been fascinated with the academic search process. It is a rare opportunity to meet a wide range of smart people and hear their thoughts about the unit for which they are applying, as well as the institution as a whole.

As a faculty member turned university administrator, I've participated in many search committees, recruiting faculty, department heads, deans, administrators, and even a university president. But most recently, I was on the other side of the interview table, as a university presidency candidate myself, and ultimately was chosen for the position. Experiencing the process from this new vantage point provided me with a deeper appreciation of this academic ritual. Once the transition was underway and I had a chance to reflect on the process, I realized that my new colleagues and I had squandered an extraordinary opportunity.

The typical search process for senior academic administrators involves a gradual winnowing of prospective candidates into a dozen or so individuals who are invited for "airport interviews." The search committee then narrows the field to a small group of finalists who meet with various stakeholder groups and may give presentations to faculty, staff, and students. Throughout this progression, most candidates—in true academic form—prepare extensively. They study the institution and try to learn as much as they can from websites, other public records, and material provided by the committee. They closely examine higher education trends and consider future developments.

Such a deep dive allows candidates not only to form impressions about the

university's strengths, challenges, and opportunities, but also to develop ideas about how it might address key issues. As candidates share their observations and insights, the search committee—which brings together stakeholders from across the campus—listens intently, asks probing questions, and often engages in valuable dialogue.

Committee deliberations and recommendations follow, ultimately resulting in the selection of the top candidate, at which point the committee disbands and everyone gets back to business as usual. What is lost is the collective wisdom of the candidates who did not get the job: individuals who are highly accomplished leaders with vast experience and potentially valuable insights. In a sense, the search is like a parade of highly qualified consultants offering impressions and making recommendations regarding strategic directions.

But the typical search process does not summarize and preserve this input. Committee members may recall bits and pieces, but without an intentional mechanism to compile the finalists' collective observations, their input will not be transmitted to those who may benefit from it, including the person who ends up earning the position.

No single individual can possibly have a monopoly on all the best observations and ideas. I am thrilled to assume the presidency of my new academic home, but I am certain that other finalists, through their varied

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experiences, had observations and ideas that were different from my own. I'm sure I would benefit from their collective insights and perceptions. Such feedback would provide a check on my own impressions and might alert me to new opportunities I have yet to consider.

My conversation with the executive search firm that recruited me reinforced my perception that we need a more thorough and systematic process to collect insights in academic searches. But having a process to memorialize key ideas of candidates would require thinking through several issues, including the protection of candidate anonymity. The search committee should also avoid recording conversations made in confidence, during one-on-one meetings, and focus instead on remarks made in public presentations. In addition, any summary should reflect the candidate's own words, rather than those of the committee members.

In the highly dynamic and collaborative world of higher education, we should be learning more from one another, just as we encourage students to do both inside and outside the classroom. The academic search process affords such an opportunity, but it's one that is rarely fully realized. ■



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