

PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH

An Overview
for Board
Members

communication

planning

leadership

vision

consensus

transition

mission

discretion

review

selection

experience

ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH

An Overview
for Board
Members



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For 90 years, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has had one mission: to strengthen and protect this country's unique form of institutional governance through its research, services, and advocacy. Serving more than 1,250 member boards, 1,900 institutions, and 36,000 individuals, AGB is the only national organization providing university and college presidents, board chairs, trustees, and board professionals of both public and private institutions and institutionally related foundations with resources that enhance their effectiveness.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AGB wishes to thank James P. Ferrare, principal of AGB Search; Julie Manus, coordinator of search services at AGB Search; and William A. Weary, whose *Presidential Search* for AGB's Board Basics series informs this publication.



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Presidential search: an overview for board members / Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-926508-15-6 (alk. paper)

1. College presidents—Selection and appointment—United States. 2. Universities and colleges—United States—Administration. I. Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

LB2341.P6594 2012

378.1'11—dc23

2012003183

ISBN 978-1-951635-40-4 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-951635-41-1 (Kindle)

For more information on AGB Press publications or to order additional copies of this book, call 800/356-6317 or visit the AGB Web site at www.agb.org.

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Section One

LEADERSHIP ROLES DURING A PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH

THE selection of a president is a governing board's most important responsibility, and the search process is the board's best opportunity to help guide its institution into a successful new era.

As an institution moves through different stages of growth and development, its needs and ambitions evolve, too. A board must first assess those challenges and aspirations before it, along with other campus stakeholders, can accurately determine the leadership qualities most desirable in a new president.

While such considerations should always be of concern to boards, a search tends to inspire a broad review of the institution—its strategic direction, finances, programs, personnel, and curricula. A board that understands the institution's past performance and current circumstances can then harness the momentum of a search to gain both a new leader and an invigorating new vision for the future. Accordingly, a search should be viewed as a part of a long-term strategy and considered an invaluable chance to revisit, and perhaps re-envision, the institution's direction, mission, and goals.

Whether a departing president's exit has been a foreseeable, even amicable, parting (such as a long-planned retirement) or a disruptive and unexpected one (such as a firing or premature resignation), there is no question that at any institution of higher education, a shift in leadership can disrupt the institution's progress, planning, morale, and donor relations. To minimize those consequences, it is the duty of the governing board to be prepared at all times for the eventuality of a presidential succession, oversee an orderly search process, and help make the new president's transition as smooth as possible.

THE ROLE OF THE BOARD

In a well-run presidential search, an effective governing board will:

- Take stock of the institution's recent history, its current strengths and needs, and future prospects;
- Charge and empower a search committee to run the search;
- Allot funds for the search;
- Draw a campus together and generate institutional consensus;
- Prepare the institution for a new president;
- Create a leadership group able to help guide the new president's transition; and
- Establish expectations for the new president's performance.

THE ROLE OF THE BOARD CHAIR

Board chairs should accept their leadership positions with the understanding that a presidential transition could very well occur during their tenure: According to the American Council on Education, the average president remains in office for about eight and a half years. With that in mind, board chairs should be prepared for the increased responsibility, leadership, and visibility that comes with a search.

Should the need for a presidential search indeed arise, the board chair—usually a member of the search committee—appoints the search committee chair and works closely with him or her to present a cohesive front to the campus and the public by speaking for the full board. Ideally, a board chair should remain in that office for at least a year following a new president's appointment in order to provide stability and guidance to both the institution and the new president.

THE ROLE OF THE SEARCH COMMITTEE

As the public face of the institution during the search, the search committee represents the institution, as well as the interests of the board and the campus community, to the candidates. It exercises discretion and professionalism in its recruitment efforts, applicant communications, and assessments of candidate fit. Members of the search committee are usually chosen by the board, but may also include staff or faculty members who were elected by peers.

THE ROLE OF THE SEARCH COMMITTEE CHAIR

The search committee chair, as spokesperson for the committee, calls and runs committee meetings and provides timely status reports to keep the board, the candidates, the institutional community, and the news media informed of the search's progress. The chair must be organized, articulate, discreet, and able to convey enthusiasm about the institution's mission and possibilities. If the board has hired a search firm, the committee chair will work in close partnership with the consultant.

THE ROLE OF THE SEARCH CONSULTANT

Although some boards will undertake a presidential search on their own, most retain executive-search firms for guidance. Search firms and their consultants can provide an outside perspective to help assemble a useful position profile, offer extensive networks of potential candidates, and work closely with the search committee chair to establish procedures that will ensure a smooth search, hiring, and transition.

The process of hiring a consultant is a “search” in and of itself. Usually, the board leadership will appoint an ad hoc transition committee to explore the capabilities of consultants at various firms, then make its recommendation to the full board. It also may delegate the task to the executive committee or to the search committee, once one is appointed.

Essential in the selection of a consultant is the hiring committee's confidence in the individual consultant and the process used. The following steps are recommended when vetting search firms:

- Read prospective search firms' literature and Web sites carefully;

- Compare the firms' experience with the needs of the institution;
- Research individual consultants' experience at similar institutions;
- Conduct phone interviews with, and request proposals from, three to five firms;
- Inquire about their experience, staffing, search model, suggested timeline, and final selection process;
- Obtain an estimate of the full cost, including fees and expenses, in writing; and
- Conduct in-person interviews with, and check the references of, a narrowed short list of two or three firms.

Hiring a consultant does not by any means permit a board to abdicate its responsibilities related to the search. Boards must remain directly engaged throughout the process by keeping in close contact with the search chair.

For their part, search firms can help organize the search process and the search committee, help develop a position profile, assist in developing a communications plan, manage nominations and applications, provide counsel to applicants, interview references, perform due-diligence checks, organize candidate interviews, and advise the search committee on developing its final recommendations to the board.

Exhibit 1. A Summary of the Roles in a Presidential Search				
Responsibilities	Board	Search Committee	Search Consultant*	Institutional Staff
Decide whether or not to hire a search firm	✓			
Vet search firms (if applicable)	✓	✓		

Exhibit 1. A Summary of the Roles in a Presidential Search

Responsibilities	Board	Search Committee	Search Consultant*	Institutional Staff
Allot funds for the search	✓			
Establish timeline	✓	✓	✓	
Communicate with campus community		✓		
Advertise the search and recruit candidates		✓	✓	
Consult with internal stakeholders	✓	✓	✓	
Develop position profile		✓	✓	
Coordinate scheduling and logistics		✓	✓	✓
Evaluate applicants		✓	✓	
Perform due-diligence checks		✓	✓	
Select finalists for interviews		✓		
Make the offer	✓			
Develop transition plan	✓		✓	✓

Exhibit 1. A Summary of the Roles in a Presidential Search

Responsibilities	Board	Search Committee	Search Consultant*	Institutional Staff
<i>*If a search firm has been retained, the consultant performs the checked duties in place of the search committee.</i>				

Section Two

PREPARING FOR THE SEARCH

In successful searches, the board, the search committee, and the search consultant (if applicable) perform a number of key tasks before, during, and after the search. Searches attract and retain the best candidates, and move forward most expeditiously, when each step of the process has been carefully considered and planned. Before a search officially begins, the board should first perform the crucial tasks outlined in this section.

1. Review relevant passages in bylaws, codes, and state regulations.

Few board members have been involved in presidential searches, so the first step in the process is to review internal institutional documents that outline policies and procedures. If an institution has not conducted a presidential search in some time, board members may be unaware of the ways in which bylaws, policies, and state or system regulations, practices, and bid processes may already prescribe their work. For example, if the board of a state system plans to retain the services of a search firm, it should first determine whether there is a pre-approved list of search firms from which they must choose. (See *“Public Searches” in Section 6.*) The human-resources office should also be consulted about institutional personnel policies regarding affirmative action and equal opportunity.

2. Articulate the board’s role in the search process.

It is important for the board to understand that the search committee’s work is analogous to that of all other committees: The committee convenes separately, conducts its work, and returns with its recommendations. The governing board, in short, leaves the search committee free to do its job—and that includes respecting the confidentiality of candidates and proceedings.

The board should help identify the names of suitable candidates and pass them on as nominations to the search committee, where they should receive non-preferential consideration along with all the other nominees.

The board also needs to consider and articulate the following:

- How does it wish to receive recommendations from the search committee? Ranked or unranked; with or without comments?
- Will it wish to interview all of those recommended or only a select few?
- How will it plan to complete due diligence on the final candidate of choice?

3. Appoint the members of the search committee.

The number of committee members may vary, but seven to 12 is an ideal range.

Because the board will ultimately select the final candidate, the committee should be composed mainly of trustees who adequately represent the full body. Yet the committee should also be broadly representative of an institution's major constituencies, and therefore include representatives from the faculty and, in smaller numbers, perhaps administrators, alumni, students, or members of the broader community. Ideally, membership will also be balanced in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and age.

The expertise and credibility of those selected to serve on the search committee should be readily apparent. Essential qualifications for members include knowledge of the institution, a commitment to its greater good, a strong reputation, a willingness to devote time, and the ability to maintain confidentiality.

Board members who sit on the committee should represent emerging and established board leadership, and they should, for the most part, intend to remain on the board beyond the conclusion of the search. After all, the knowledge base and shared concepts that members of the committee

develop over the course of the search will allow them to become better informed and more influential in moving the institutional agenda forward.

Above all, the search committee should be united around the vision for the institution and the desired characteristics, skills, and talents of the next president.

4. Develop a formal charge for the search committee, as well as a confidentiality statement for both the committee and the full board.

Typically, the search committee, along with the search consultant if one has been hired, will be tasked with:

- Developing a plan and timeline for the search;
- Developing a communications plan;
- Advertising for, and actively recruiting, candidates;
- Managing the applicant pool;
- Keeping all candidates informed of their application status;
- Selecting and screening semifinalists;
- Conducting thorough due diligence, including reference and background checks;
- Interviewing semifinalists;
- Arranging and conducting campus visits; and
- Conducting its affairs with appropriate discretion.

The board will specify in advance what number and format of final recommendations the committee should make to the board. An unranked selection of three or so highly qualified, thoroughly vetted candidates gives

the board options, flexibility, and a good chance of a successful appointment.

Clear instructions on the scope of the committee's duties and the board's expectations, including the importance of confidentiality, are essential to help prevent misunderstandings. The charge and confidentiality statement should be signed by all members of the search committee (as well as the full board) and turned in to the search committee chair. (*For a sample charge and confidentiality statement, see [Appendix A](#).*)

5. Identify institutional direction.

At the beginning of the search process, the board should conduct a careful analysis of the institution's current mission statement, established goals, financial health, and strategic plan. The full board should then hold both internal discussions and listening sessions with key campus constituencies to identify institutional direction and desired leadership attributes. Following those conversations, the board can refine its vision for the institution to help guide the selection process.

6. Engage campus constituents.

Involving an institution's constituents—including faculty members, administrators, students, and alumni—serves two important functions. First, it builds support for the new president. And second, it reveals important perspectives and wisdom that substantially improve the quality and outcome of the search. All of the following promote healthy and productive engagement:

- Balance in the membership of the search committee;
- Inviting constituents' input when preparing the position profile;
- Timely, respectful communication to the campus community about the structure, timing, and progress of the search;
- Regular updates to a Web page dedicated to the search on the institution's Web site; and

- Well-planned, structured opportunities to meet with finalists as they visit the campus and to share individual observations.

7. Approve the position profile.

Following a thoughtful discussion with the campus community about the needs and future direction of the college, and drawing on the board's analysis of institutional direction and goals, the search committee develops a position profile. Or, in the event that a search firm has been hired, the consultant will gather the relevant background information and develop a profile for the search committee's approval. (See "[*The Role of the Search Consultant*](#)" in [*Section 1*](#).) In both cases, the board will often choose to exercise final approval of the profile.

Strong position profiles are much more than mere job descriptions: They explain the necessary and preferred attributes of the new leader; describe the history, mission, and values of the institution; and outline the challenges that lie ahead. The specificity of the described tasks and experiences allows the search committee to determine with some accuracy whether a candidate is a good fit for the job and the institution. After all, good position profiles provide an overview of the agenda the institution must address in the next three to five years and translate those challenges into experiences a successor will need to advance that agenda. As a search progresses and each candidate's personal traits and performance become evident and gain importance, the profile serves as a guidepost to the search committee during the recruitment and screening of candidates and the appointment of the next president.

An essential element of a good search process, the position profile is a public document that demonstrates diligence, clarity, and consensus among board members. Further, when distributed throughout an institution's community, a good position profile can help focus the community on the institutional agenda and work that lies ahead. This enables all constituents to view the new president's performance in terms of the institutional vision. Indeed, good profiles illustrate the institution's expectations of presidential performance and serve as the basis for future reviews.

After the board has approved the position profile, the institution's public-affairs office, along with a consultant if one has been hired, publishes and distributes the profile throughout the community, on the institution's Web site, and on the search firm's Web site. Each nominee and candidate receives a copy.

8. Decide on the degree of openness for the search process (when applicable).

At public institutions, open-meeting and open-record laws may dictate the level of permissible confidentiality, which may have an impact on the number and quality of the candidate pool. (See *"Public Searches" in Section 6.*) Most independent institutions, however, have latitude in how open or closed they choose to make their search. Overall, institutions tend to generate and maintain the largest number of good candidates when they can assure candidates of privacy until the final interview stage.

9. Establish that internal candidates will receive equitable treatment.

All candidates, internal and external, should be evaluated in the same manner.

(A note: Many experts suggest that interim presidents serve best when they are not candidates for the permanent position; some boards stipulate this arrangement in the interim president's contract.)

10. Develop a timeline for the search.

Establish a firm start date for the next president. As a general guide, thorough searches take about five months from beginning to end, excluding summers (which are best for preparing, not searching).

A prolonged search is undesirable. It puts undue stress on applicants, and many worthy candidates—who are often in multiple searches at a time—may be unavailable by the time a long search concludes. That said, taking some extra time to ensure the selection of a candidate who is a good fit is

preferable to strictly adhering to the timeline and hiring a candidate who is not a good fit for the institution.

11. Set a budget.

Searches tend to be far more expensive than most boards imagine. Full-time administrative support for the search committee may be necessary for several months, and the committee may need to hire temporary help. Advertising on the Web sites and in the publications that reach desirable candidates can be costly. Bringing semifinalists to a central meeting place (often housing them overnight as well) and hosting finalists and spouses or partners on campus for two or three days add still more costs. If the search committee needs to be lodged for those events, such expenses must be accounted for as well.

If the board decides to hire a search firm, the firm will charge in one of two ways—either a flat fee for services rendered (plus expenses), or up to one-third of the president's first year's cash compensation (plus expenses). The firm may also charge extra for extensive due diligence. Because the total cost of the search can be a relatively large expense for some institutions, careful financial planning is essential.

12. Set the range of compensation.

In the absence of a compensation committee, the board's executive committee determines the range of compensation and benefits for the new president. When setting compensation, the board should take the utmost care to ensure a transparent process and develop a justifiable compensation package that is in accordance with reasonable benchmarks (both internal and external, and in keeping with peer institutions) and adheres to IRS regulations.

13. Review and modify, as necessary, policies on presidential performance reviews.

It is essential that new presidential contracts clearly articulate how an annual performance review will be conducted, and by whom. A search is an

opportune time to make constructive changes, as modifications are easy to make between presidencies and difficult to establish later.

Section Three

DURING THE SEARCH

AFTER the board has laid the groundwork in the pre-search period, the search committee—in partnership with a consultant, if one has been hired—assumes primary responsibility for conducting the search process. The committee and/or consultant will handle recruiting, vetting, and due diligence during this phase. However, board members still have several key responsibilities, too.

1. Help generate an applicant pool.

Board members can and should recommend or nominate candidates, through either the committee chair or the search consultant. Board members should understand that their nominees will not receive preferential treatment.

2. Meet finalists during campus visits.

Campus visits promote acceptance of the search process among constituents, help sell candidates on the institution, and provide yet another measure of the candidates' fit.

Typically, the search chair congratulates those invited to campus, informs them that coming to campus will make their candidacy public, and sends them an information packet about the institution. The visits should be set up to allow various constituencies access to the candidates. Included should be as many board members as possible, the senior administrative team, and faculty, student, and alumni leaders. One or two receptions or open meetings can be helpful in introducing the candidate to larger numbers of people.

Board members should actively engage in campus visits by attending receptions, sitting in on interviews, meeting the candidates and their spouses or partners in separate sessions attended by multiple board members, and assessing the candidate's performance against the leadership qualities and attributes identified in the position profile.

3. Review feedback from the search committee and campus community following candidate visits.

Following the candidates' campus visits, the search committee will distribute, collect, and analyze comment sheets on each finalist. After reviewing the final evaluations, the committee will make its recommendations to the board.

Upon receipt of the committee's recommendations, the board should review the feedback from the committee, perform its own due diligence, and weigh its options.

4. Make the final selection.

After reviewing the results of the finalists' interviews, the board may feel confident in making an offer without further interviews. If not, the board may prefer to bring one or more finalists back for more in-depth conversations. Ultimately, it is the full board's responsibility to appoint the next president.

5. Extend the offer and contract to the finalist.

After the board has chosen the finalist, the executive committee, the search committee chair, or the board chair can meet with him or her and begin discussing a compensation package. (See "*Contracts*" in *Section 6*.)

Once an offer has been made and a contract extended, the candidate should be asked to respond quickly so that if the offer is rejected, the board can make another offer rapidly.

6. Publicly announce the new president's appointment.

Once an offer is accepted, the board chair, in coordination with the institution's public-relations team, should craft a public announcement that conveys enthusiastic support from the entire board and campus community for the new president. The announcement should include the new president's start date and biography, as well as statements from the board chair and new president.

7. Speak with one voice.

As discussed in [Section 1](#), the search committee chair should function as the sole spokesperson for the institution throughout the search process. However, after the full board has made its final choice, the chair of the board typically makes the formal announcement.

The board chair's role as a spokesperson indicating consensus should be maintained during and after the final selection process, no matter how intense internal debate over selecting a finalist may have been. For the sake of the candidate and the reputation of the institution (and the board), it's best to keep internal conversations confidential.

8. Maintain confidentiality.

Discretion and confidentiality throughout the search process—at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end—are crucial. The board's discretion is a clear reflection of the integrity of the search, as well as the board's respect for the candidates.

Section Four

AFTER THE SEARCH

In the interest of fostering consistent, strong leadership at their institutions, governing boards should help ensure a smooth start during the new president's first year by engaging in thoughtful transition planning. By providing the president with regular assessment, constructive feedback, personal support, and a network of mentors, the board can be invaluable in nurturing strong leaders and smoothing the path for future ones.

1. Establish expectations.

An essential but often overlooked component of transition management is the establishment of performance expectations. Effective boards lay out the metrics by which the new president will be judged at his or her annual review and discuss mutual expectations regarding board culture, processes, communication, and operations.

2. Assist with the new president's orientation.

Effective boards carefully consider welcome and orientation arrangements to smooth the new president's arrival. They prepare a schedule of introductions, assemble a reading list about the institution, set up communication channels, and perhaps schedule a series of listening sessions to familiarize the new president with the institution.

3. Ensure a smooth transition.

The board should create a dedicated transition team that is tasked with:

- Managing the departure of the outgoing president (in the case of an expected departure);

- Officially welcoming the new president;
- Creating a schedule of events both on- and off-campus to introduce the new president and spouse or partner to the campus and local community;
- Setting up meetings with campus and community leaders;
- Arranging tours of campus facilities; and
- Introducing the president to key donors and former board members.

ENSURING A SMOOTH TRANSITION

The board of trustees has a tremendous investment in the presidential search and a significant responsibility to ensure that a successful presidential transition takes place. Although the work of the transition team itself does not require great involvement of the board, it is good practice for boards to:

1. Ensure that a transition team is created prior to the new president's arrival;
2. Appoint a representative of the board to serve on the team;
3. Invite the board's representative to provide interim reports to the board's leadership;
4. Encourage the new president to meet with as many individual board members as possible before the first board meeting;
5. Encourage board members to introduce the new president to constituents (government officials, business leaders, donors, etc.) beyond the campus; and
6. Invite the president and the president's family to social events and create opportunities for them to expand their networks.

Source: Artman, Richard B. and Mark Franz, "Presidential Transition Teams: Fostering a Collaborative Transition Process," *Trusteeship*, July/August 2009.

4. Begin succession planning.

Boards should remain prepared for future leadership changes by ensuring that processes are in place to anticipate those transitions, measure internal talent, and develop the leadership potential of promising current staff members. In so doing, the board signals that it is open to the idea of internal candidacies. Further, whether or not one of those internal candidates eventually becomes the institution's president, such career development strengthens the institution by enhancing in-house leadership skills.

Succession planning should begin upon the appointment of a new president. By being proactive, the board can avoid being caught flatfooted by a president's resignation or other untimely departure—instead, it will already have a succession plan in place. The beginning of a search is no time for panic in the boardroom.

Section Five

PITFALLS TO AVOID

DESPITE best intentions, some presidential searches go badly awry. Several common missteps can lead to an unsuccessful presidential search:

- Inadequate planning and process;
- Excessive haste;
- Lack of clarity on institutional needs and required leader attributes;
- Poorly defined or misunderstood roles of the board and search committee;
- Insensitivity to constituents' needs and desires;
- Insensitivity to candidates' needs and desires;
- Rancorous disagreement or an impasse among committee members;
- Inadequate disclosure of institutional weaknesses;
- Outside interference;
- Loss of confidentiality; and
- Failure to perform due diligence.

INADEQUATE PLANNING AND PROCESS

A typical presidential search takes five to six months to complete. To ensure a successful search, meticulous and orderly preparation for the entire process is essential.

EXCESSIVE HASTE

Unfortunately, for many institutions the anxiety of a search can foster an unhealthy desire to appoint a president as soon as possible. Such haste can create new problems and exacerbate existing ones. Rushing the process can, for example, prevent a board from taking full advantage of the opportunity to set new goals and forge an innovative path toward the future. And it may prevent adequate due diligence on candidates—a process that should never be hurried or cut short under any circumstances.

LACK OF CLARITY ON INSTITUTIONAL NEEDS AND REQUIRED LEADER ATTRIBUTES

A careful review of institutional needs and essential leadership attributes can best ensure a successful appointment. Open and honest campus involvement in the early stages of the search is integral, too. Searches that lack such basic groundwork can end up marred by campus dissension or stalled by a stalemate in the boardroom.

POORLY DEFINED OR MISUNDERSTOOD ROLES OF THE BOARD AND SEARCH COMMITTEE

Without a clear charge and a guiding document such as a well-crafted position profile, search committees may seek and put forth candidates who don't meet the expectations and desires of the board. A detailed and thorough profile, along with regular, open communications between the search committee and the board chair or executive committee, can prevent such mistakes.

INSENSITIVITY TO CONSTITUENTS' NEEDS AND DESIRES

Common points of disagreement among boards and constituents include a candidate's depth of experience, professional background (an academic

versus a corporate background, for example), or religious faith (usually at religiously affiliated institutions). Dissension among members on what type of leader is needed is, again, best prevented by developing a very specific position profile and interviewing only those candidates who possess the profile's stated attributes.

INSENSITIVITY TO CANDIDATES' NEEDS AND DESIRES

To show proper respect to candidates, it is essential to conduct a well-planned, timely search; maintain strict confidentiality; and communicate clearly and consistently throughout the search. Keeping applicants informed about the timeline, process, and expectations helps to ensure that candidates remain actively engaged and interested in the position. And addressing their concerns in a timely fashion throughout the search will help them sustain the long wait and stressful process.

INTERNAL DISAGREEMENT

Inevitably, disagreements will arise among the board and the search committee about which candidate is strongest, which has the most relevant background and experience, and which has disqualifying weaknesses (including some that may have been identified during due diligence). In a worst-case scenario, such disagreement can lead to difficulty in identifying candidates, infighting, and the selection of a compromise candidate in place of a strong, dynamic leader.

In the case of dissent among the committee, it falls to the committee chair and/or the search consultant to lead the team through its differences by reminding members of the need for the utmost professionalism, as befitting their roles. In the case of dissent among the board, it is the role of the board chair and the consultant, if one has been hired, to step in early to try and help the board reach consensus. A failure to do so can lead to major consequences—including factions on the board, a lack of institutional unity, and a controversial appointment that can derail the new presidency before it has even begun—or even stalemate and a failed search that could harm the institution's reputation.

INADEQUATE DISCLOSURE OF INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESSES

Anything less than a full and candid accounting of the institution's difficulties can lead to an unsuccessful search and presidency. That includes disclosing financial problems, board dysfunction, personnel issues, program and curricular deficiencies, and any other significant weaknesses.

OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE

Non-committee board members, such as major donors, local policymakers, and powerful coaches, may sometimes attempt to use their clout to influence the board's selection of a new president. But the board alone is responsible for the search, and it is incumbent upon all members to present a united front against undue influence.

LOSS OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Leaks from the board or committee can disrupt or derail the entire search process, as well as irreparably damage candidates' careers—consequences that can carry serious legal implications. Again, a confidentiality statement and/or a code of conduct for the board and search committee to follow is imperative, as is full adherence to it.

FAILURE TO PERFORM DUE DILIGENCE

The importance of a thorough due-diligence review cannot be overstated. Search committee members, or the search consultant (if one is hired), must verify candidates' educational credentials and conduct meticulous reference, credit-report, and criminal-record checks. It is also advisable to interview individuals not named by the candidates—perhaps including chairs of the faculty senate, leaders of the student government association, other administrators, business leaders, former colleagues, and trustees at the candidate's present institution.

Section Six

SPECIAL ISSUES

PUBLIC SEARCHES

In some states, an open search is mandated by state open-meeting (or “sunshine”) laws that require public institutions to offer varying levels of access to their meetings and records. In some states, that even requires releasing the names of nominees.

While the public’s desire to stay informed is understandable, the fact remains that the resulting lack of privacy may dissuade some qualified would-be candidates. They risk being compromised at their present institutions, damaging relations with donors, and suffering embarrassment and reputational damage if they are not ultimately chosen.

It is imperative that the board understands the laws of its state and takes the opportunity to maximize the search process within the boundaries of law.

INTERIM PRESIDENTS

In some circumstances, an institution requires a considerable amount of challenging work—so much so that a new president’s effectiveness might be compromised. In these cases, an interim president can allow a new president to start fresh. An interim president, who may come from either inside or outside the institution, should be appointed as quickly as possible. Using a modified and shortened version of the search process can identify candidates and lead to a successful appointment.

INTERNAL CANDIDATES

Internal candidates should always be evaluated in the same manner as all other candidates in the search.

DEPARTING PRESIDENTS

When it's time for a president to depart, the board should, when possible and appropriate, make its best effort to help make the exit a graceful one.

SPOUSES AND PARTNERS

Negotiations regarding compensation for the new president's spouse or partner are a perennial minefield. Spousal/partner compensation—frequently viewed as a form of nepotism—can generate vocal opposition from the faculty, staff, surrounding community, local news media, and some trustees.

However, some presidential spouses or partners must give up their careers in order to avoid potential conflicts of interest. And they typically put in long hours “meeting and greeting” at campus events, assisting with fundraising efforts by planning and overseeing parties, and attending off-campus events and social functions.

However a board decides to proceed, it should consider other options in assisting and recognizing the contributions of a spouse or partner. For example, the institution could provide event-planning assistance for a spouse or partner's efforts related to fundraising, campus celebrations, and alumni activities.

CONTRACTS

After a compensation package has been established by the compensation or executive committee and reviewed by professional counsel—perhaps including tax, employment, and contract experts, as well as the institution's general counsel—a written employment contract, approved by the full board, is recommended to codify the agreement between the institution and the new president.

Section Seven

CONCLUSION

THE manner in which a governing board conducts a presidential search is a reflection upon the entire institutional community. It is the responsibility of the board to ensure that the search is conducted as fairly and openly as possible, consistent with the values of the institution. An organized, timely process that is respectful of both campus constituents and the candidates themselves is in itself a worthy goal to which all boards should aspire.

It is imperative during a search for boards to delegate wisely, yet remain properly engaged; help generate nominations, but not exert undue influence; and engage in meaningful debate about the future of the institution, but not get mired in intra-board conflict. The search process offers an opportunity for all board members to demonstrate their leadership as they help usher in a new leader for the future.

APPENDIX A: Charge to the Search Committee

Presidential Search Committee

The search for the president of [institution name here] is underway and is expected to conclude [target conclusion date here]. As a search committee member, we ask that you commit to the following timeline and expectations.

1. Attend search committee meetings and candidate interviews. The committee will meet to review candidate applications, participate in preliminary interviews (occurring over a space of approximately two days), and attend one additional meeting to develop committee recommendations for the board. (In addition to the time spent reviewing candidate application materials, the committee will meet at various times throughout the search in coordination with the schedule provided.)
2. Participate in discussions that relate to the identification of priorities and personal and professional attributes sought in the next president.
3. Review all candidate applications and prepare to identify a short list of candidates for additional screening and consideration.
4. Identify a short list of candidates for preliminary interviews.
5. Participate in preliminary interviews with candidates and, following preliminary interviews, identify candidates to be invited as finalists.
6. Assist with interview visits as needed.
7. Recommend to the board individual strengths and concerns for each finalist.

It is critical that the committee commit to conducting its business with total confidentiality. At no time can committee business be discussed outside of the committee structure without the consent of the committee chair.

Please sign and date this document and return one copy to the search committee chair. Please retain the second copy for your records.

Signature

Date

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