

A Presidential Search Is Opportunity Knocking

Boards should embrace a transition between leaders as a chance to assess the institution, reach out to stakeholders, and pave the way for future success.

WHEN THE INEVITABLE CHANGE in presidential leadership takes place at a college or university, board members often think only of the additional demands the search will place on their hectic schedules. But no matter how inconvenient the timing may appear at first, trustees would be well advised to cast aside their trepidation and embrace the proposition.

No other situation allows board members to contribute so positively and profoundly to the immediate and long-term welfare of the college or university. A well-designed and executed search affords the board an opportunity not just to identify and recruit a new and capable leader but also to exercise its powers to improve the institution's reputation, viability, and financial strength. These opportunities too often are missed.

The search for a new president affords the board a rare chance to take stock of the college or university's overall health and direction—and to meaningfully influence its future direction. While some institutions go so far as to conduct a formal assessment and even retain a consulting firm to conduct an organizational audit before launching the search, some boards' initial actions are less formal.

At the very least, it is an opportune time to hold small-group sessions and open forums with the major constituent groups. Even the most experienced board members can learn a great deal by joining these sessions.

What to Evaluate. The following are some important questions for boards to consider when making their presearch assessment of the state of the institution:

1. How is morale?

• by r. william funk •

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2. Which functions within the institution are not operating smoothly?

3. What factors are impeding the faculty's ability to effectively accomplish their teaching and research responsibilities?

4. Are the students' needs being appropriately addressed? Is the academic and nonacademic atmosphere vital and satisfying?

5. What are the major challenges and opportunities the new president will inherit?

6. What are the institution's most positive attributes that should be shared with reluctant candidates to encourage them to consider applying for the job?

Armed with the information gleaned from this exercise, the board can take appropriate and constructive steps to revisit the strategic plan and tweak it if necessary. The board can develop a fairly complete profile of the kind of new leader it feels will be best able to accomplish its goals and objectives at the current time, taking into account experience, management style, personality, and worldview.

Dennis Bottorff, vice chair of the board and chair of the search committee that recruited Gordon Gee to be chancellor at Vanderbilt University, believes it is important for the board to remember it is conducting a recruitment effort, not a selection one. "Once we had defined the characteristics of the ideal candidate," Bottorff says of the Vanderbilt effort, "our search firm helped us identify the best people who could fulfill the requirements. In our final list of ten, only five individuals had applied for the position. The other five we were soliciting."

A Comforting Plan. The manner in which the search process is defined, articulated, and executed has the potential to "calm" the campus and provide assurance that a fair, logical, and well-formulated action plan is in place to recruit the best candidates. Regardless of why the outgoing president is leaving, the academic community will be concerned and may well be traumatized about the resulting leadership void.

As soon as it becomes clear that a vacancy will occur, the board should immediately develop a search plan—either in-house or with help from an outside firm. If the vacancy is occurring at the initiation of the board, or if there is an otherwise obvious

countdown to retirement, there is no excuse for failing to develop such a plan. Even in a worst-case scenario, in which a board is surprised by a president's sudden resignation, nearly all presidents will give the board chair a "heads up" if they are in a finalist group elsewhere.

Ann Cieslak, secretary to the board at the University of Minnesota, recalls the immediate steps her university's board took following the president's resignation in 2002: "Right after the president announced he was leaving, the chair of the board took some steps that helped steady the institution," Cieslak says. "She convened an executive committee meeting to reassure senior administrators. Over the following days, she called or met with key constituencies, such as faculty governance, employee groups, and the alumni association. It sent the message that there was a firm hand at the top and no leadership vacuum."

Once the search plan is in place, the board should communicate the process to campus constituents via the Web site, student newspaper, alumni magazine, faculty newsletter, letters to "friends of the university," and so forth. This is not only an opportunity to calm concerns by communicating a logical, well-constructed process, but it also serves to remind constituents of the board's primacy and leadership role in hiring the president. The campus community must perceive that the search is inclusive and affords an orderly and fair transition.

When the University of Minnesota began the search for its new president, the board found it was important to have one—and only one—spokesperson for the search. "The chair of the board served that role, and all inquiries were directed to her," says Cieslak. "It helped ensure that there was a consistent message and reinforced that the board was in charge."

A well-executed search also can be a positive factor in allaying fears and building trust. It is important to ensure that the search committee is appropriately representative of the institution's various constituencies (and there can always be debate about what is "appropriate"). Representatives of these groups should have an opportunity to meet with the committee and express their ideas and suggestions.

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Appointing an effective search committee chair is a key element of success. “If it is not the chair of the board, then it must be someone who will communicate regularly with the chair,” notes Cieslak. “It is ideal when the two chairs agree to rules about who is the spokesperson and talk frankly about what is the role of the search committee—advisory or authority to appoint. Good chemistry and trust between them helps a lot.”

Engaging Constituents. Boards should not overlook the “institution building” and “relationship building” dimensions intrinsic to every search process. A good presidential search is an opportunity to reach out to various stakeholders to deepen existing relationships and build new ones.

As important supporters invariably become disengaged from the institution over time, the occasion of a presidential search is an ideal time to reengage these contributors. A letter, personally addressed and signed by the board chair, informing supporters that a search has been launched and that the board values their suggestions and nominations, is often well received. Similarly, an invitation to a breakfast, lunch, or open forum to discuss the search will be appreciated.

Constituents who already are involved in the school’s activities can become more deeply engaged through selection to the search advisory committee or a personal visit by a search committee member. Frankly, a flattered donor who feels included in the search is far more likely to be receptive to the new president’s overtures when the next capital campaign is launched down the road.

A change in presidential leadership also offers the opportunity to celebrate the past while building excitement about the future and the next president. Celebrating the institution’s past successes (an easier task when the outgoing leader is a long-serving, beloved individual) while engendering excitement about its plans for the future can help build constituent morale and foster positive institutional identity. These are important objectives during this period of uncertainty about the future leadership of the school. Recognizing what already has been accomplished provides optimism about the future, and the notion that the next president can “build

upon this foundation of success and lead us to even greater heights” should be encouraged.

What’s more, a presidential search is a tremendous opportunity to showcase the campus to the larger academic community. “Besides helping the campus engage a good president,” says Teresa A. Sullivan, executive vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Texas System and the chair of three recent presidential searches within the UT System, “a search that generates ‘buzz’ may in the long run assist in improving faculty hiring and student admissions.”

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Groundwork for Success. Finally, a well-conceived presidential search that is inclusive, fair, and credible helps ensure that the new president will have the best opportunity to be successful. A process that lacks these ingredients lowers the odds that the new president will win consensual support. If a candidate is appointed after what is perceived to be a flawed search process, a successful transition can be exceedingly difficult. If a new president is immediately burdened with winning over skeptical constituents, the “honeymoon” period may be rocky.

Conversely, if the board ensures a smooth search process, the new president will have positive momentum entering the position and many helpful and supportive allies.

“An academic search is very different from a corporate search,” says Vanderbilt’s Bottorff. “In a corporate search, once you are satisfied that you have identified the desired candidate, you can abbreviate the process. In an academic search, however, the ultimate acceptance of the final hire will be impacted by the deliberate and thorough inclusion of the views of all of the university’s constituents.”

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The message for boards is clear: Approach the search process with enthusiasm and with the recognition that the process involves more than simply recruiting a new president. Trustees have an opportunity to have a profound and positive impact on the institution's future. ♦

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