

THE PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH

The search for and selection of a university president is a fascinating process. Considering the growing importance of the university in a knowledge-based society and the complexity of this leadership role, one would expect that a rigorous and informed process would be used to select a university president. This is certainly the case for most other academic leadership positions (e.g., department chairs, deans, or executive officers), whose occupants are typically selected by experienced academic leaders, assisted by faculty search committees, and driven by the recognition that the fate of academic programs—not to mention their own careers—rests on the quality of their selection. Yet, at the highest level of academic leadership, the selection of a university president is the responsibility of a governing board of lay citizens, few with extensive experience in either academic matters or the management of large, complex organizations. This board is aided by a faculty advisory committee with similarly limited knowledge concerning the role of the contemporary university president.

The contrast of a presidential search with the selection of leadership in other sectors of our society, such as business or government, could not be more severe. In the business world, the search for a corporate chief executive officer is conducted by a board of directors,

composed primarily of experienced business leaders who understand the business and make their selection in full recognition of their legal and fiduciary responsibility and their liability for shareholder value. In government, leaders are chosen by popular election, with candidates put under extensive public scrutiny by the media and voters. Yet the selection of a university president is conducted in relative secrecy, by those quite detached from academic experience, fiduciary responsibility, or accountability to those most affected by the decision—namely, students, faculty, staff, patients, and others dependent on the welfare of the institution.

Actually, the selection of a university president is most similar to a political campaign. The search is surrounded by an unusual degree of public interest, both within the university community and beyond. Various constituencies attempt to influence the search with their particular political views and agendas. While some view the most important challenge of selecting a new president as sustaining or enhancing academic quality as top priority, others are more concerned with the implications of new leadership for peripheral activities (e.g., the university's athletic program), service activities, or perhaps even the university's stance on controversial political issues (e.g., affirmative action or gay rights). Local news media frequently treat the search as they would a political race, complete with leaks and speculation from unnamed sources. The search is generally long—frequently at least a year—and often distracted by legal issues and constraints, such as sunshine laws. But the selection of a university president has one important distinction from a political campaign: those most affected by the outcome have no vote.

THE SEARCH PROCESS

Most searches for university presidents begin rationally enough. After consultation with the faculty, the governing board appoints a group of distinguished faculty—perhaps augmented by representatives of other constituencies (students, staff, and alumni)—to serve as a screening committee, with the charge of sifting through the hundreds of nominations of candidates to determine a small group for consid-

eration of the board. This task seems straightforward enough: the university can place advertisements of the position in various higher education magazines to attract attention to the search, and university leaders at other institutions can be contacted for suggested candidates. Yet there are many complications.

Few, if any, attractive candidates will formally apply for the position, since they are typically in senior leadership positions elsewhere—perhaps even as university presidents. Instead, the challenge to the screening committee is to identify qualified individuals and persuade them to become candidates in the search—typically in a very informal sense during the early stages of the search, to avoid compromising their current positions. During this process, the members of the screening committee may be lobbied hard by their colleagues, by special interest groups, and even occasionally by trustees, in an effort to place their preferred candidates on the short list that will be eventually submitted to the governing board.

In an effort both to expedite and protect the faculty search process, there is an increasing trend at most universities to use executive search firms to assist in the presidential search process. These search consultants are useful in helping the faculty search committees keep the search process on track, in gathering background information, in developing realistic timetables, and even in identifying key candidates. Furthermore, particularly for public institutions subject to sunshine laws, search consultants can provide a secure, confidential mechanism to communicate with potential candidates without public exposure, at least during the early stages of the search. Of course, there are sometimes downsides to the use of search consultants. Some consultants tend to take on too many assignments at one time and devote inadequate attention to thoroughly checking background references. Other consultants, while experienced in searches for corporate executives, have relatively little experience with the arcane world of higher education and simply do not know how to generate an adequate list of attractive candidates. Perhaps most serious are those rare instances in which search consultants attempt to influence the search process by pushing a preferred candidate. Yet most consultants act in a highly professional way and view their role as one of facilitating,

rather than influencing, the search. If selected carefully and used properly by the screening committee and the governing board, executive search consultants can be invaluable to an effective search.

While the early stage of screening candidates usually proceeds in a methodical fashion (particularly if assisted by an experienced search consultant), the final selection process by the governing board more frequently than not involves a bizarre interplay of politics and personalities. The search process for public universities is frequently constrained by sunshine laws—notably those laws requiring public meetings of governing bodies and allowing press access to written materials via laws upholding the freedom of information. In many states, these laws require not only that the final slate of candidates be made public but, moreover, that these candidates be interviewed and even compared and selected in public by the governing board. These public beauty pageants can be extremely disruptive both to the integrity of the search process and to the reputation of the candidates. A great many attractive candidates simply will not participate in such a public circus, because of the high risk such public exposure presents to their current positions. Universities subject to such sunshine laws generally find their candidate pools restricted to those who really have nothing to lose by public exposure—those in lower positions (e.g., provosts or deans), leaders of smaller or less prominent institutions, or perhaps even politicians or corporate executives. For these candidates, public exposure poses little risk, and there is some potential for gain in their being identified as presidential candidates.

The interview process conducted by the governing board, whether public or private, is rarely a very effective way to assess the credentials of candidates. As former University of Texas president Peter Flawn has noted, many a governing board has been burned by “a charmer, an accomplished candidate for president who is charming and engaging, eloquent about ‘the academy,’ politically astute, yet who, once in the job, will turn the management over to vice-presidents, enjoy the emoluments, entertaining, and social interactions for a few years, and then move on, leaving the institution as good as the vice-presidents can make it.”¹ Flawn observes that only in extraordinary situations does the charisma last for more than three years.

Governing board members are lobbied hard both by internal con-

stituencies (faculty, students, and administrators) and by external constituencies (alumni, key donors, politicians, special interest groups, and the press). Since the actual group of trustees making the selection is usually rather small, strong personalities among governing board members can have a powerful influence over the outcome. Some university presidential searches are wired from the beginning, with powerful board members manipulating the search to favor preferred internal or external candidates. The politics of presidential selection becomes particularly intense for public universities, since the open nature of these searches allows the media to have unusual influence in not only evaluating candidates but actually putting political pressure on governing board members to support particular individuals. Sometimes political groups sabotage the candidacy of individuals by misrepresenting the background of a candidate or leaking false information to the media. Many who have participated in good faith in public university searches have been seriously compromised.

Most governing boards launch the search process for a successor within several weeks after a president announces the intention to step down. Presidents who resign to accept an appointment at another institution generally leave within a few months, much to the relief of governing boards and university faculties, since lame ducks generally make very ineffective leaders. When a president decides to return to the faculty or retire, typically announcing in the fall that she or he will leave at the end of the academic year the following spring, there is usually the flexibility to allow more time for a transition. Yet even in these situations, interim leadership is generally required, since the search for a new president inevitably takes longer than anticipated, typically a year or more.

During this interim period, it is customary for the governing board to ask a senior member of the faculty or the administration to serve as interim or acting president until the search is completed and the new president assumes the post. Sometimes this is one of the senior vice presidents or deans. On occasions, a past president will be asked to come out of retirement to serve in the interim role for several months.

This interim period can be awkward and stressful both for the institution and for the governing board. Rarely do interim presidents

have sufficient authority to provide strong leadership. Even if the governing board grants them the power to be decisive, their limited term as an interim leader undermines their credibility both on campus and beyond. Most governing boards try to avoid appointing potential candidates, such as the provost, to these interim posts, both to keep from distorting the search process—that is, to maintain a level playing field for all candidates—and to maintain as much normalcy as possible within the administrative team. Woe to those provosts with interest in the presidency who are asked to assume such interim roles, since the complexities of both interim university leadership and the search process itself are likely to doom their candidacy.

Whether formally announced through a public vote or a press release, the final decision to select a university president is usually made in private. It generally involves a negotiation among governing board members. Consequently, the search all too frequently results in the selection of the least common denominator, that is, the candidate who least offends the most trustees.

A quick review of the history of the University of Michigan, including the more recent oral histories of its leaders, makes it clear that Michigan is no exception to this strongly political process of presidential selection. Each presidential search at Michigan has been unique. Some have been truly bizarre. In fact, most Michigan presidents have not even been the regents' first choice (including such distinguished leaders as Henry Tappan and James Angell, perhaps Michigan's greatest presidents).² In the end, the result of each search has been a consequence more of board politics and personalities than of any broader consideration of the university's needs of the moment, saga of the past, or potential for the future.

THE PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH: A VICTIM'S PERSPECTIVE

Perhaps the most vivid way to illustrate the complexities of a presidential search is to describe my own personal experience in being selected as Michigan's president, a process my wife, Anne, once compared to a 14-month pregnancy. Our situation was made all the more difficult because of the fact that as both provost and behind-the-

scenes president, I was continually under the microscope as a potential presidential candidate. It rapidly became apparent that there would be only one internal candidate in the search: me. The search process itself essentially consisted of comparing one external candidate after another against me as a calibration. While this probably was good training for the stressful public role of the contemporary university presidency, it could also be a bit unnerving, particularly when the comparisons were kept confidential to the search committee. Nevertheless, within a very short period, I concluded that we had been dragged into the search process far too deeply to withdraw without harming the university. Anne and I felt we had no choice but to stick it out until the end.

As provost of the university at the time that Harold Shapiro announced in May of 1987 his decision to accept the presidency at Princeton, I was faced with the challenge of providing leadership for the academic programs of the university during the interim period between presidents and with the possibility of being an internal candidate for his successor. Although many viewed me as the most viable internal candidate to succeed Shapiro, I knew that presidential searches were very complex (particularly in public universities with an elected governing board) and that it was quite likely that an external candidate would be chosen by the regents. If that were to occur, it was possible that I would be out of a job, since the new president would likely select his or her own provost. Yet Anne and I felt a very strong loyalty to the university and particularly to the deans who had become our family during my service in the provost role. Hence, we decided together to commit ourselves to providing whatever leadership we could in the provost role and to guiding and stabilizing the university through the transition between presidents, although we had no idea at the time that this period would last for almost 14 months. Although I continued to be approached by other universities concerning presidencies during this period, I turned these aside to focus on my duties as provost (and occasional behind-the-scenes chief executive officer) of the university.

The first order of business was to meet with outgoing president Harold Shapiro to more clearly define our roles and then to meet with the deans to seek both their counsel and support. In my experience,

there are two different approaches to leaving a presidency. Some departing presidents simply check out, leaving whatever mess remains for their successor to clean up. Others remain for a time, attempting to complete key agendas and to clean up any loose ends for their successor, although this may be difficult as one's authority and credibility rapidly erode during a lame-duck period. Harold Shapiro, always loyal and responsible to the university to the end of his tenure, chose the latter approach.

In my early discussions with Harold, I stressed the importance of his support during his remaining months. As provost, not only would I become, by default, the primary source of continuity during the leadership transition, but it was also likely that I would eventually be blamed for any mistakes made during the interregnum, since I would be the one left behind. In particular, I asked not only to be kept in the loop on all major decisions but for his assistance in building stronger relationships with the executive officers. No matter how hard an outgoing president tries, it is very difficult to shift the loyalty of the executive officers and staff to the interim leadership, since they know they are likely to soon be reporting to someone else. Hence, court politics can run rampant; petty turf battles, challenges to authority, and recalcitrance are commonplace. Equally important was the outgoing president's role in keeping the governing board on course, focused both on its ongoing responsibilities and on its efforts to conduct a search for the next president. At Michigan, this was difficult because of the deep political divisions on the board and its tendencies toward micro-management, which were likely to break out in the power vacuum that would develop during the lame-duck period.

Next, I turned to a series of meetings with the deans, since they would play such a key role in ensuring a stable leadership transition. In our discussions, I stressed my belief that it would be a serious mistake simply to adopt a "steady as she goes" approach. This was a very critical period in the university's history, and we could not afford to waste it through inaction. We were already far along in the strategic leadership effort that Harold Shapiro and I had launched the year before, and we could not put on hold such important initiatives as the Michigan Mandate, improving undergraduate education, building needed capital facilities, and strengthening state and federal relations.

But we also understood that the transition period would not be a time for business as usual, so we had to select carefully our priorities.

Shapiro and I agreed that an important element of this strategy would be to enable greater involvement of the deans in campus-wide leadership. To this end, I created a number of high-level advisory groups involving the deans. While this created some degree of overload for the deans, adding considerable responsibilities beyond their schools and colleges, they appreciated the opportunity to become more actively involved in university-wide leadership during the transition. This deeper engagement of the deans was so effective that I continued it during my presidency.

In a similar spirit of building university momentum during the transition, I strongly supported the efforts of both Harold Shapiro (as a lame duck) and Robben Fleming (as interim president) to proceed with searches to fill several senior personnel positions (including vice president for finance, general counsel, chancellor of our Dearborn campus, and athletic director), even though filling these positions would limit the ability of the next president to build his or her own executive team. Because of the considerable uncertainty about the length of time that would be required to search for and install a new president, we all agreed that the university was best served by moving ahead with these searches.

The final issue facing the university leadership during the interim had to do with maintaining control of the agenda in the face of the usual distractions that characterize university campuses: for example, student activism (in our case, student disciplinary policies; campus security; and various “isms,” such as racism, sexism, and extremism), faculty issues (compensation, health benefits, parking), government relations (state appropriations, political intrusion on university autonomy), and media exposés (enabled by sunshine laws, such as the Freedom of Information Act and the Open Meetings Act). The deans and I cautioned Shapiro and Fleming against taking any actions that might trigger campus disruptions and instability during the interim period, such as forcing through a new student disciplinary policy.

Despite the efforts of outgoing president Harold Shapiro and interim president Robben Fleming and despite the strong support of the university’s deans, the wear and tear of leading the university from

the provost position during this interim period (either directly or behind the scenes) was considerable for both Anne and me. During the holiday season, after the Shapiros left for Princeton and while the rest of the executive officers flew to Florida for the annual bowl trip of the Michigan football team, Anne and I remained behind in Ann Arbor to keep watch over the university (a typical provost role) and to take a deep breath in preparation for the final stage of the presidential search.

Part of the problem was the awkward nature of the search itself. The university's regents had begun the search process by fanning out across the country, talking with other university leaders, in an effort to educate themselves about the key issues facing higher education and to identify leading candidates. While this was a perfectly reasonable—indeed, laudable—objective, the personalities of some members of the board rapidly proceeded to turn off several of the most attractive candidates. This was complicated by disagreement among the board members as to just who would lead the formal search process and how it would be organized. Without the guidance of an executive search consultant, the search began to unravel. By fall, it was in a shambles. As the faculty members on the search committee became more and more frustrated with the slow pace of the search, they were finally able to persuade the regents to retain an executive search consultant to get things back on track. Even so, by early fall, it became apparent that the search process was simply not moving ahead rapidly enough to have a new president selected and ready to go by the time Harold Shapiro planned to leave for Princeton.

The role of provost of the university is complex enough without taking on the additional responsibilities of the presidency. My brief experience in handling both roles simultaneously when I had served as acting president during Harold Shapiro's brief sabbatical left me little appetite to continue as interim president. Fortunately, the board of regents had the wisdom to ask a former Michigan president, Robben Fleming, to return in the interim role between Harold Shapiro's departure and the installation of a new president, a period that would last roughly nine months. Yet, although Robben Fleming was widely respected by the faculty, particularly skillful in handling controversy, and supported by the regents, he had not been actively

involved in university issues for almost a decade. Since he was identified as the interim choice in the fall, it gave him an opportunity to come up to speed on several of the various issues affecting the university. It also provided me with ample opportunity to work with him and develop a close relationship that would be essential to operating smoothly through the transition.

While it was a duty above and beyond the call, I had the sense that Robben Fleming was actually rather excited to be returning to the fray. Since he was wise enough to realize that there was no way that he could master in such a short period the many complex issues involving the university or the many details required for its management, he decided at an early stage to focus his personal efforts on a few issues that aligned with his strengths and then to rely on his executive officer team to handle the other details. Key among his priorities were resolving the racial tensions that had developed during the last years of the Shapiro administration, the issue of a student disciplinary policy, and two key searches—for an athletic director and a chief financial officer. While Fleming recognized that as provost—both chief academic officer and chief budget officer—I would be handling many of the details in running the university behind the scenes, our relationship was such that if he felt I was headed in the wrong direction, he would immediately tell me, so that we could reevaluate and, if necessary, make midcourse corrections. Working with Fleming also gave me an opportunity to learn from his extraordinary people skills, particularly in handling adversarial situations.

Even working as a team with Robben Fleming and the other executive officers, I found the task of maintaining the momentum of the university during the transition period difficult. The newspapers carried continual speculation about the presidential search, including frequent rumors about the list of candidates. During the search process, Anne and I were asked to participate in a series of interviews for the presidency. I first met with the joint committee of faculty, students, and alumni. Then we were both asked to dine at Inglis House with the regents comprising the search committee. Of course, we knew that several external candidates were undergoing a similar process.

As the search approached its final stages in late spring, the papers

became more active with speculation about the search candidates. This was a rather depressing time for Anne and me. It was not that we had a burning lust for the Michigan presidency; we had been happy in both my roles as dean and then provost. It was, rather, the recognition of our vulnerability. We both had played a highly visible role in leading the university and sustaining its momentum during the interim period since Harold Shapiro's announcement of his resignation. If another candidate were selected, there would be strong pressure on me not only to step down from the provost position but to leave the university. We were well aware that one of the hazards of moving up the pyramid of academic administration was that there was less and less room as one moved toward the top. As the end of the interregnum approached, we realized that the best way to make certain we stayed at Michigan was to be selected as its next president, since returning to the faculty would be difficult at this late stage of the search process. Yet from the rumors reported in the newspapers and the total silence from the regents, we concluded that this was probably not in the cards. During this final phase, the regent's search committee had even pulled away from their search consultant, so even this channel of information about the search disappeared.

Finally, on the Sunday afternoon when we had just returned from our daughter's commencement at Yale, I received a mysterious phone call from the regent who was chair of the search committee, asking me to meet him the next day at the university's Inglis House retreat. Typical of my interactions with the board, there was absolutely no indication of the reason for the meeting. I called the search consultant that evening, and he, too, was totally in the dark. Both of us decided that the odds were about equal between two possibilities. I would either be offered the presidency or told to get ready to welcome another as the next Michigan president.

The next morning, I went to the meeting prepared for either possibility. Two regents met me. After about 15 seconds of chitchat, they said that they were authorized by the board to offer me the presidency. Not being one to beat about the bush, I said that I had made a personal commitment that if I were going to remain in the search until the end, it would be with the understanding that if offered the position, I would accept it—but with one caveat: there was another

party that had to be a part of this decision—Anne—since I viewed the presidency as a two-person position. I felt it important that they make a similar request to her. They agreed, and so I called to invite her over to the meeting. Anne had also realized that the Inglis House meeting could go either way. When I asked her to come out to join us, she expressed some relief—but also some anxiety. Nevertheless, together, we agreed to accept the presidency. We really had no choice.

However, there was a technicality here. In an effort to comply with the state's Open Meetings Act, the regents had utilized a process of forming a subquorum subcommittee to conduct the actual search. They believed that to fully comply with state law, it was necessary to conduct a public meeting of the full board, at which I would be interviewed. There, the search subcommittee would submit its recommendation, and the formal vote would be taken. Two days later, just prior to the regents' meeting, I assembled the staff of the Office of the Provost and briefed them on the decision to "move downstairs" to the Office of the President. There were probably more sighs of relief than sad farewells, since they, too, understood the alternatives all too well. The regents' meeting itself was relatively noneventful. As one regent put it, the interview consisted largely of lobbing me a few softballs to hit out of the park, such as "What do you think the largest challenges facing the university are?" Each regent had the opportunity to ask one question, then the senior regent, as chair of the search committee, introduced a resolution to appoint me as the eleventh president of the university. The regents approved it unanimously.

Since the regents' meeting was public, there were enough people in attendance to require the use of the anteroom. Beyond our daughters, there were a number of our friends on the faculty. There were also a number of university personalities, such as football coach Bo Schembechler. Needless to say, Bo stole the headlines with his statement "He was my choice!" In general, there was a very positive reception to the selection, both on the campus and in the media. We were well known to the university community, and there seemed to be a sense of confidence in the direction that we would lead.

The rest of day was spent calling numerous VIPs: the governor, key legislators, other Michigan university presidents, the mayor, industry leaders, and student government leaders, most of whom I

already knew personally from my days as dean and then provost. One particular conversation stands out: a senior editor of the *Detroit Free Press* and longtime friend of the university asked to drop by for a brief conversation. He pledged his strong support, but he also wanted to convey an early warning. He feared that the increasing fragmentation of the political parties in Michigan, controlled as they were by an ever-narrower block of special interests, would continue to have a very negative impact on Michigan's board of regents, causing increasing politicization of our governing board and putting both the university and its president at some risk. He suggested that this might be my most formidable challenge as president. As I was to find later, he was right on target.

The presidential search that led to my presidency had already been complicated not only by conflicts among board members (particularly the behavior of one maverick board member who attempted to sabotage the end phase of the search by discouraging one of the finalists)³ but even more by the intrusion of the media, using the state's Open Meetings Act. Several papers brought suit against the regents for violating the act, which was finally upheld in 1994 by a local judge, who decided, in a fit of pique, to punish the university by demanding that every document concerning the search be opened to the public, including letters of personal reference and personal notes. Although my skin had grown thick enough to weather such exposure, many other candidates involved in the search were seriously embarrassed by the judge's action. It would not be until 2001 that a similar case brought against a presidential search conducted by Michigan State University would make it to the Michigan Supreme Court and receive a ruling that the university's constitutional autonomy and the responsibilities of governing boards overrode the application of the Open Meetings Act to presidential searches.

On a more positive note, since I had been in various faculty and leadership roles at the university for almost twenty years, I understood well the Michigan institutional saga. Furthermore, in my role as provost, I had worked closely with Harold Shapiro and the deans in designing the strategic leadership agenda intended as the vision for the university as it approached the twenty-first century. Hence, I was able to hit the ground running almost immediately as president-elect (and

still provost); and long before I would formally assume the presidency in September, I had begun to define and put into place the key themes that would characterize my administration: diversity, globalization, and our evolution into a knowledge-driven society.⁴ Hence, by the time of my formal inauguration in October of 1988, the university had emerged from its interregnum and was already accelerating rapidly.

A POSTMORTEM

The difficult task of leading the university through a transition between presidents had come to an end. Despite the long and somewhat confusing presidential search, my leadership team took pride in not only keeping the university on track during the transition but actually making some significant progress on an array of issues, ranging from race relations to resource allocation to intercollegiate athletics. There was a certain personal toll, since Anne and I entered the presidency a bit weary from this task. But our relief at being able to stay at Michigan and our excitement about the challenges and opportunities ahead kept us in high spirits. Perhaps as well, our blissful ignorance about just how challenging the months ahead would be also played an important role in helping us approach our new roles with a spirit of optimism.

In looking back at the experience, there appear to be several lessons to be learned. Of course, the first caveat concerns the awkward position of internal candidates in such searches, particularly when they are in senior positions, such as provosts or interim presidents. All too frequently, this is a no-win situation. As in my case, most such internal candidates are likely to be used as stalking horses in the search, serving as a calibration for one external candidate after another. Furthermore, being held up as a visible candidate during such an extended period invites anyone and everyone to register their views (and take their best shot at the incumbent). The public exposure is unrelenting, and the pressure is intense.

Although such internal candidates are sometimes selected, this is more frequently a result of being the last available candidate in the pool after external candidates have dropped out rather than the first choice of the board. It is also frequently the case that when the board

decides to go outside, the inside candidates are left high and dry as damaged goods. Not only do they represent a potential threat to the arriving president-elect, but their credibility as a candidate elsewhere is sometimes damaged beyond repair.

Maintaining the momentum and stability of the university from my position as provost through the long transition period was challenging enough, without the additional complexities and burdens of being a candidate in the search. Try as I might always to act in what I perceived as the best interests of the university (even though there were times when this would get me crosswise with several of the regents, potentially damaging my status as a candidate for the presidency), there was always second-guessing from some on campus about whether I was “campaigning” or whether commitments made during the interim would be sustained by the next president. This situation would have been made even more difficult had I served as interim president. Looking back on my experience, I have concluded that, in general, universities should not select as interim presidents those who might be regarded as candidates. Furthermore, in my own experience, my health, sanity, and good humor might have been better served had I simply declined at the outset to be considered for the presidency.

Hence, from my perspective, at least, I would strongly recommend against accepting an appointment as an interim if one has aspirations for a permanent appointment. If you are already a provost when the presidency opens up, you are in an awkward position. Both your life and your leadership would be best served by issuing an immediate Sherman statement: “If nominated, I will not run; if elected, I will not serve.” However, if you are determined to continue to lead even as a candidate, you had better develop a thick skin and be prepared for disappointment.

SOME ADVICE FOR PRESIDENTIAL
SEARCH COMMITTEES AND
UNIVERSITY GOVERNING BOARDS

Clearly, the selection of a university president is the most important responsibility of a governing board, since it not only must sustain the

institution's momentum but also set its course for the future. Mistakes made in a presidential search that result in the selection of a candidate lacking the necessary experience or skills or whose personality conflicts with the character and culture of the institution can cause very serious damage that may take many years to heal. Faculty advisory committees and search consultants can assist in the process, but in the end, the board must accept full responsibility for the success of the presidential search. It is the governing board's judgment that is on the line. The board must take ownership of the search process from day one.

University presidential searches are considerably more difficult than leadership searches in the corporate or government sector. There are a very large number of constituencies who need to be consulted in the search (e.g., faculty, administrators, alumni, key donors, and students). For public universities, public exposure and the constraints imposed by sunshine laws, such as the Open Meetings Act, pose a considerable challenge. Beyond that, the rumor network on and among campuses is quite strong, so that there are invariably leaks to the press as the search plods along. But the most significant challenge is how to conduct a search when both those screening candidates (e.g., faculty) and those making the final selection (i.e., governing board members) are hindered by quite limited knowledge about the nature or role of the contemporary university president. Furthermore, all too often, board members with considerable experience in evaluating and selecting talent in their own careers in business, government, or learned professions tend to leave their wisdom and judgment behind when they enter a boardroom to select a university president and rely instead on highly subjective and personal reactions to the candidates.

Hence, in the spirit of the Chinese proverb "To know the road ahead, ask those who are coming back," let me offer a few words of advice to governing boards faced with a presidential search. What checklist should the governing board give the faculty search committee and the executive search consultant? Of course, the specific wish list will depend on the institution, its challenges and its opportunities. But there are some generic qualifications for a university president.

First, there are matters of character, hard to measure, but obvi-

ously of great importance. These include such attributes as integrity, courage, fair-mindedness, a respect for the truth, compassion, and a fundamental and profound understanding of academic culture. The leadership of an educational institution requires a certain degree of moral authority; hence, moral character and behavior become quite important.

Second, there are a number of characteristics, also obvious, but somewhat easier to measure from a candidate's track record. For most institutions, a president must have a credible academic record. This demands strong credentials as a teacher and a scholar. Otherwise, the faculty will not take the president very seriously as a peer, and neither will peer institutions. Strong, demonstrable management skills are also required. After all, the contemporary university is one of the most complex institutions in our society. In these days of increasing legal and financial accountability, universities appoint amateurs to campus leadership at their own risk. However, one must here resist the assumption of many outside of higher education (including many executive search consultants) that the contemporary president's role is similar in style and compensation to chief executive officers in the corporate world.

An array of other experiences are useful (although not mandatory) in candidates for university presidencies. These include familiarity with state and federal relations; experience with private fund-raising; and, perhaps unfortunately, some understanding of the complex world of intercollegiate athletics. A candidate's abilities in all these areas can be easily assessed by thoroughly examining a candidate's past experience and record of achievement.

Some governing boards, particularly those selected through political processes, place a candidate's political skills as an overriding factor in the selection of a president. To be sure, the leaders of both public and private universities require political skill to advance their institution's interests with federal, state, and local government and to handle the array of complex political issues and constituencies within the university. But a university president is called on to provide leadership of many types: executive, academic, moral, and strategic, in addition to political. All too frequently, while politically adept leaders may be effective in pleasing politically determined boards or politi-

cally elected state leaders, they may be totally lacking in the intellectual skills necessary to lead an academic institution or the executive skills necessary to manage the complexity of the contemporary university. While political skills alone may be sufficient for many government roles (indeed, they are sometimes the only visible skills of those elected to public office), far more is necessary for university leadership. Many presidents who are the most able politicians have become absolute disasters for the long-term welfare of their institution, since their actions and decisions tend to be based on the near-term imperatives of the political process rather than the long-term interests of the institution. While such leadership might be tolerated for the short term if paired with strong, experienced academic administrators in such roles as provosts and deans, selecting a university president who has only political skills and is isolated from academic traditions and values can lead to disaster.

Beyond these obvious criteria, there is another set of qualifications, again hard to measure, but of particular importance at this moment in the history of public higher education in America. My own experience would suggest the importance of a strong commitment to excellence, including the ability to recognize excellence when it is present and to admit when it is absent—a perspective drilled into me by such mentors as Harold Shapiro, Billy Frye, and Frank Rhodes. Today, presidents need both an understanding of the importance of and a driving passion to achieve diversity, along with a willingness to achieve and defend equality for all members of the university community. As the university's chief recruiter of talent, presidents require an impeccable "taste" in the choice of people. They need the ability to identify and attract the most outstanding talent into key leadership positions in the university, to shape them into teams, and to provide them with strong support and leadership.

As I stress throughout this book, to be successful, presidents must have the capacity to comprehend and the willingness to respect the institutional saga of the university they will lead. They also should have the confidence and wisdom to build on the contributions of their predecessors, even if it is natural that they will tend to chart their own course to the future. Governing boards should seek candidates with personalities and experiences well aligned with the particular

character and needs of the institution. For example, selecting a prima donna president to lead the prima donna faculty characterizing some elite U.S. universities can lead to disaster. If the aim is to select a president capable of elevating the academic quality of an institution, the candidate should have experience—either as an administrator or faculty member (or perhaps even student)—with an institution higher up in the pecking order. Here, boards should resist the pressure to determine presidents by the issues of the moment and should instead seek candidates capable of positioning the institution for challenges and opportunities a decade or more in the future.

Finally, it is my belief that presidential searches should seek leaders—those who will seize the helm and guide the institution, rather than simply serve as a representative of the institution to its many constituencies. Although governing boards and faculty senates sometimes shy away from such candidates, times of challenge and change require strong leadership. Of course, leadership goes far beyond management skills and involves the capacity to develop a compelling vision for the institution and to build support for this vision within the university community and among its various stakeholders. It goes without saying that such leadership will require, in turn, immense physical stamina, undiminished energy, and a very thick skin.

Most of these important characteristics should be easily discernible from the track record of candidates and not left simply to the vagaries of superficial impressions from interviews. Candidates with the experience and achievement necessary to be considered as a university president will likely have a track record a mile wide and a mile deep to examine. The typical career path to a university presidency—traversing as it does a sequence of administrative assignments as department chair, dean, and provost—provides search committees and governing boards with ample opportunities to assess the full qualifications of presidential candidates long before they are invited to the campus.

With these formidable qualifications in mind, where should governing boards and search committees look for university presidents? Unfortunately, the pool of attractive candidates considered by most searches is rather small. In fact, the same names keep coming up time and time again, until they are finally selected for a position or ruled

out permanently because of some discovered fatal flaw. Perhaps this should not be surprising, since most advisors (usually former university presidents) and executive search consultants have relatively short-range radars and tend to keep scanning the same highly visible leadership positions, such as provosts or deans in major institutions.

Another issue of concern is whether institutions should give preference to internal or external candidates. Most institutions seek a balance among internal and external candidates in filling key academic leadership positions, such as department chairs and deans. But these days, it is rare for a university president to be chosen from internal candidates. In fact, recent surveys indicate that 80 percent of the time, governing boards will select external candidates.⁵

While trapped in an airport one day, I conducted a back-of-the-envelope comparison of inside versus outside presidential appointments over the past several decades at major research universities and arrived at some interesting conclusions. During this period, roughly 85 percent of the presidential searches for Big Ten universities have ended with the selection of external candidates. The Ivy League is a bit more balanced, with a fifty-fifty split, although this is primarily due to the tendency of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton to go with internal candidates, while the rest usually go outside. California stands out as the other extreme, with 75 percent of the selections at the University of California and Stanford being insiders.

Let me suggest two unsubstantiated speculations about these results. First, the better the institution, the more willing it seems to be to consider internal candidates, that is, to grow its own. Here, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and the University of California stand out (although I suppose I could add Wisconsin and Michigan, at least during some periods of their history). It takes a strong sense of institutional self-confidence to assume that the best leader would be one of your own faculty members. Second, there is a particularly pronounced trend for the governing boards of public universities to select new presidents from outside. To some extent, this may simply result from the notion that “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”—or, perhaps more accurately, that “the devil you don’t know is always more appealing than the devil you do”—at least when it comes to university presidents. But it could also be a sign that gov-

erning boards, particularly in public universities, have become ever more political and insecure in their selection of leadership, believing they can better control external candidates who arrive on campus with no local constituency of support. Ironically, the history of several institutions that today tend always to look outside suggests that their best presidents in years past have come from inside (with John Hannah at Michigan State and William Friday at North Carolina being prime examples).

Finally, this tendency could also be evidence of the rather low priority given to leadership development within our universities. Governing board members who have served as directors on publicly traded corporations realize the importance of succession planning that involves not only identifying a leadership depth chart but recruiting and developing junior executives with leadership potential. It is my belief that governing boards should demand that similar attention be given to succession planning and leadership development in higher education.

An unfortunate consequence of the tendency of governing boards to look outside for university leadership is accompanied by another characteristic of today's university presidents: the number of institutions where they have served as faculty or administrators as they climb the leadership ladder during their careers. To some extent, institution hopping among academic administrators is perfectly logical. As I noted earlier, the leadership pyramid narrows markedly as one climbs up the ladder, and since the rungs back to faculty positions in one's field tend to evaporate, there is little choice but to move to another institution for further advancement. So, too, some presidents have used an institution-hopping strategy to move up the ladder of institutional quality, establishing a reputation as a leader at one institution, then jumping to a similar post at an institution of higher reputation—or, in some cases, just leaving town before the lynch mob catches up with them. Yet the phenomenon of the vagabond president has recently become even more pronounced, with many administrators serving not only as academic leaders (chairs, deans, provosts, presidents) in several institutions but even as presidents in several different universities. While it takes a rare talent to be able to adapt to new institutions and provide effective leadership, it is also the case

that it takes a newcomer time to understand the institutional saga of a university and much longer to have a substantial and enduring impact on the institution—at least five years and more likely a decade for most universities. From this perspective, it is not surprising that many perceive a leadership vacuum within the higher education community these days, since the tendency of governing boards to recruit presidents from outside has led to a generation of short-timers who tend to bounce off institutions without making a dent. It is also understandable why many faculties seem weary and frustrated from the effort to adjust to one externally appointed president after another, each lasting for only a few years before moving on to another assignment, without the time to achieve the leadership continuity necessary to build institutional momentum.

Finally, a word about just how boards should approach the recruitment of their top candidates. Executive search consultants and compensation consultants tend to stress the importance of competitive compensation. Yet I believe that these evaluations tend to be biased, since consultant fees are frequently indexed to executive compensation levels. Furthermore, the recent inflation in presidential compensation, with salaries no longer simply at the top of the faculty but now beginning to approach those of even football coaches in both the magnitude and the complexity of the compensation scheme,⁶ is driving a wedge not only between the faculty and the administration but between the public and higher education.

Although this view may not be shared by governing boards or even many faculty members, I would raise a flag of concern that the university presidency may be evolving away from an academic leadership assignment to a separate profession, with its own unique professional characteristics—including compensation packages—quite apart from those of the faculty. In years past, at most universities, the salaries of academic administrators (e.g., the president, executive officers, and deans) have been generally comparable to those of the top faculty. It was felt important that these academic leaders be seen as senior members of the faculty rather than corporate officers. Rewarding a university president like a corporate CEO threatens to open up a psychological gap between the faculty and the administration (where the faculty no longer views the president—and other senior administra-

tors—as “one of us”), thereby decoupling the president from the academic core of the university and undercutting his or her effectiveness at leading the institution. Derek Bok notes: “A huge presidential salary tends to exacerbate tensions that too often exist between faculty and administration. At critical moments, however, when academic leaders need to rally the faculty to make special efforts for the good of the institution, the distance between highly paid presidents and their professors can be costly indeed.”⁷

From many years of experience in assisting in the selection and recruitment of academic leaders, it continues to be my belief that top talent is rarely lured by dollars alone. To be sure, a competitive salary is viewed by some candidates as a measure of how much you want them. But it is rarely the deciding factor. Far more important is the challenge, opportunity, and prestige of building a high-quality institution or academic program. Many candidates are seeking new opportunities because they have been blocked by the narrowing pyramid of the academic hierarchy in their own institution. Some are after wealth and fame, though usually not from their university salary but, rather, from outside their academic appointment, through corporate boards, national commissions, or other opportunities. Some actually view academic leadership as a higher calling, with emotional rewards and satisfaction that simply cannot be quantified in terms of compensation. And some, believe it or not, have acquired a sense of loyalty to a particular university and view such assignments as a duty of service. Skeptics of this perspective might just consider the list of institutions with the highest executive salaries. For the most part, these are the places you have to pay talented people to go, not those institutions capable of attracting them with their quality and reputation. Put slightly differently, the higher the risk of the position, the higher the compensation necessary to attract strong candidates. If a president cannot depend on the board to support him or her when the going gets tough, it is natural to seek to protect oneself in the event that the tough have to get going.

I offer a final comment here about the dangers posed by the professionalization of the university presidency—whether by a widening gap between the faculty and the president because of celebrity compensation levels or because the itinerant careers of many professional

university presidents rarely allow the opportunity to build the strong bonds with the faculty necessary to understand the distinctive institutional sagas of the universities they are leading. There is ample experience from both government and the corporate sector to suggest that leaders without the experience or appreciation for the “business” of an organization can get their organization into serious trouble, threatening its very survival. Of most concern here is the lack of institutional understanding and loyalty evident when a president strives more for personal achievement as an academic administrator than for the higher calling of loyally serving an institution while keeping its institutional welfare the primary concern. The professional university president may be yet another sign that the nature of the contemporary university has outstripped the capacity of the traditional approach to its governance—for example, such traditions as lay governing boards and shared governance among boards, faculty, and administrators. To the degree that this creates a cadre of professional university leaders with limited experience and attachment to the faculty and the core teaching and scholarly efforts of the university, it will almost certainly threaten the fundamental academic values and traditions of the university.

SOME ADVICE FOR CANDIDATES
FOR UNIVERSITY PRESIDENCIES

While there are many attractive and rewarding aspects of a university presidency, those tempted to consider such appointments should be aware that such roles are accompanied by significant risks. Reporting to a governing board of lay citizens is considerably different than the reporting lines characterizing most academic leadership positions in a university (e.g., chair, dean, or provost) where one reports to academic peers. The president’s relationship with the lay board is a complex one, particularly when it has the political nature characterizing most public universities. Unlike the reporting relationship of a CEO to a board of directors, populated in most cases by peers in the business profession, the university governing board has little direct experience in understanding either the academic nature of the institution or a means of evaluating the president. Usually, the relationship with

the board is sustained through a personal relationship with the board chair or a small executive committee, hence it will change when the board composition changes—a particular challenge for the small, politically determined boards characterizing public universities. This creates a certain instability to the appointment, since the board relationship will change with its composition.

In the past, many presidents served “at the pleasure of the board,” which was akin to being a wife of Henry VIII as long as he was willing. My own appointment was of this character, and one of my regents always took great delight in announcing publicly that the first item on the agenda of each meeting should be a vote on whether or not to fire the president. If the board chose not to, it should proceed with the business of the meeting. In fact, the tenures of many presidents of public universities do, in effect, continue from meeting to meeting, always threatened by a volatile issue or a change in board composition that will create a majority of votes opposed to their leadership. In sharp contrast to an elected public official, such as a governor with a fixed term of office, the electorate for a public university president (the board) can ask for a recall at any time.

For this reason, many presidents today (indeed, most in public universities) insist on a firm contract stipulating the nature of the appointment for a fixed period (e.g., five years). But in contrast to golden parachutes characterizing the employment agreements for most corporate executives, most university presidents have rather weak postemployment agreements, such as a year’s salary while they find another job. In most cases, it is far easier to fire a president than a football coach (which suggests that more university presidents should learn from their athletics colleagues to hire a top-notch attorney or agent to negotiate their contract). This intrinsic vulnerability of the position is not particularly conducive to courageous, visionary leadership. Nor is it capable of attracting many of the most talented potential leaders into these positions.

At the same time, let me caution candidates against being too demanding as they approach the negotiation for a university presidency, since excessive greed could well plant land mines that return to haunt them later. For example, while it is natural to seek generous compensation (particularly if one is concerned about the risk posed

by a political governing board), keep in mind that a president with compensation too far above the faculty is asking for trouble. Similarly, some judgment must be present in negotiating perquisites, such as modifications to the presidential mansion, transportation, office, or football box. Remember, you are not being hired as king or queen but, rather, as a servant of the institution and the public to which it is accountable.

SO WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO NOW?

Once a university governing board has selected and recruited a new president and enjoyed the euphoria of relief and congratulations for a job well done, it can relax. Right? Wrong! The next task is to make certain that the board provides the president with the support necessary to be successful and advance the interests of the institution. In fact, developing a strong relationship of mutual trust, confidence, and respect between the president and governing board is one of the most important factors in determining the success of a presidency.

First, it is essential that during the selection and recruiting process, there has been an agreement up front on the relative priority of presidential duties, since this will form the basis for further evaluation of the president's performance. If the board believes that the academic quality of the institution should be taken to the next level or that a major institutional transformation should occur, it had better be prepared to fully support strong presidential action and to take the inevitable heat when sacred cows are sacrificed. If the board has been foolish enough to put fund-raising or state politics as its highest priorities, it should be aware that it is unlikely to get strong academic leadership.

Next, it is very important for the governing board to make certain that the newly appointed president gets off on the right foot. Too many times, new presidents feel abandoned by their boards during those critical early days of their tenure. The governing board must find opportunities to demonstrate their strong support for the agenda of the new president. For presidents new to the campus, the board should also take steps to link the president to the university community, including influential faculty and former university presidents.

The next task is to determine whether they made the right decision. Put another way, how does a board know when it has made a mistake in appointing a new president, and what can they do about it? During the past several years, we have seen an unusually high attrition rate among university presidents at leading institutions. Some of these departures have been triggered by cosmic events (e.g., a faculty vote of no confidence or a political onslaught by the media or politicians), but in most cases, the governing board deserves more blame than the president. In some cases, the board simply selected a president whose style was incompatible with the institution they were expected to lead—a situation that should have clearly been recognized, anticipated, and avoided before the appointment was made. In other cases, there was not a clear understanding between the board and the president about objectives. There are also examples of a failure of nerves, when a president marching into battle looked back only to find the board had turned about and was beating a hasty retreat. Again, a thorough presidential search, a wise selection, and a careful and candid up-front negotiation could have avoided these disasters.

Over time, both institutional needs and presidential abilities can change. It is the governing board's responsibility to continually monitor the quality and effectiveness of the leadership of its institution. This requires a rigorous approach to the evaluation of presidential performance. Just as many board members seem to leave behind their experience and common sense from their own professions when they hire university presidents, they frequently do the same when they evaluate a president's performance. In the corporate world, boards of directors have well-defined measures of executive performance based on shareholder value, such as achieving goals in such measures as earnings per share, revenue growth, and profit margins. Indeed, bonus compensation is directly determined by such quantitative measures. The key principle is clear. University presidents should be evaluated on what their institutions accomplish, not simply on issues of personal style or appearance. Yet, just as lay boards bring little experience to selection of the leaders of academic institutions, they are similarly limited in their capacity to evaluate a university president, since it is hard for them to understand measures of university progress without an academic background. Even when quantitative measures

are used, these tend to be simplistic, such as gift income (which is usually determined by cultivation of potential donors many years earlier); university rankings in, for example, *U.S. News and World Report* (which are of questionable validity and also are determined by investments years earlier); or the win-loss record of the football team.

Hence, most boards evaluate their presidents on a highly subjective basis, by how people (particularly board members) “feel” about them, which all too often depends on whether the president has been responsive to a particular personal request or perk. Sometimes, boards tap into the gossip networks or seek out the opinion of faculty or staff members they know. But few boards seek an objective evaluation of just how the institution is doing, which would be the best measure of presidential performance.

There are several key indicators of whether a university presidency is going to be successful, even at a very early stage. Here, one must look beyond the superficial and symbolic activities of the president to gain an assessment of substance. After all, most presidents will enjoy a honeymoon of popular support from students, faculty, alumni, and perhaps even the local media during their first few months.

First, one should focus on the ability of the president to build a strong leadership team. The quality of executive officers, deans, and senior faculty determines the quality of the institution. While some changes among executive officers, deans, and senior staff are to be expected with a new administration, warning flags should go up immediately if the new president launches a series of purges of long-standing, successful and loyal academic and administrative leaders—particularly if the new leader is from outside the university. Inexperienced or insecure presidents sometimes try to wipe the slate of existing leadership clean, replacing long-serving officers and staff by their own appointments, with the primary criteria being loyalty to the new regime. Beware, as well, of presidents who insist on selecting external candidates for most open positions, since this approach is likely aimed at solidifying personal power rather than improving the quality of the institution. It is important to recall here that universities tend to evolve according to long-standing institutional sagas—traditions, practices, and values. To begin a presidency by eliminating those academic leaders (executive officers and deans) and senior

administrative staff members who understand and can help sustain these traditions is not only damaging to the institution; it is almost certain to lead to a failure in presidential leadership.

The second warning sign also has to do with recruiting and team building. The university president is the institution's leading recruiter. Successful presidents have the ability both to identify topflight talent and to recruit it into key university leadership positions. Incompetent presidents eventually surround themselves with weak appointments, creating a cascade of incompetence that flows down through the institution, paralyzing even successful activities and resulting in a downward-glide path.

Third, university presidents are looked to for their vision for the future of the institution. Successful presidents should be able to work with the university community to generate a shared sense of participation in both creating and striving toward a vision. To be sure, this is always difficult for those unfamiliar with the people, traditions, and culture of an institution. This is all the more reason why successful presidents seek a mixture of old and new on their leadership teams.

Finally—and this is most important—the success of a presidency should always be assessed by asking a simple question: is the university better when the president leaves than when he or she arrived? Of course, this assessment cannot occur until long after a president's tenure ends. From this perspective, only history itself will validate the wisdom of a governing board in conducting a presidential search.

Clearly, I am not a big fan of the current process for selecting university presidents. It has always struck me as bizarre that we leave the selection of leaders of such important institutions to a group of lay citizens who have limited experience and understanding of the complex nature of a university and the intricacies of academic life and who are often heavily influenced by politics (particularly in the case of public universities) and influential observers (e.g., wealthy alumni or powerful football coaches). Even board members with extensive experience from other sectors, such as corporate governance, all too frequently leave behind their judgment (not to mention their values and integrity) when it comes to selecting a university president. Presidential selection tends to be based on the most subjective intuition—

sometimes the flimsiest of whims—rather than on the thorough due diligence that would be demanded for a corporate CEO.

Some suggest that the selection of a university president is more akin to that of a major political election of a governor or even a U.S. president, where the votes of lay citizens also determine the outcome. But political candidates are required to parade in front of the body politic for many months, thoroughly examined by the press and challenged by their opponents, to give voters a better sense of whom they should support. Contrast this with the backroom process used in most university searches, particularly in the endgame, when the governing board must decide among the finalists. No matter how well intentioned or determined, few search consultants are able to penetrate and comprehend the complexities of faculty or peer evaluations of presidential candidates. Laws concerning privacy and freedom of information make the process even more difficult, forcing many consultants to rely on a well-worn (and frequently stale) pool of potential candidates. It is little wonder that few internal candidates are selected for these posts, since they are usually not yet on the search consultants' radarscopes, which tend to be dominated by professional institution hoppers.

It is ironic, indeed, that universities that put great effort into the very thorough evaluations of faculty candidates for hiring, promotion, tenure, and academic leadership roles tolerate such a cavalier approach to the selection of their leadership at the top. In over two decades of tracking presidential searches through the nation, I must confess that I have yet to see a search conducted with the thoroughness and rigor of a faculty tenure evaluation. Whether due to the questionable competence of governing boards, the limited ability or self-interest of search consultants, the detached view of faculty search committees who feel that their recommendations will not be heard in any event, or a belief that most university presidents simply are not very relevant to the activities of teaching and research in the trenches, it is a fact of university life today that the presidential selection process in American higher education is sadly lacking in rigor, insight, and, at times, even integrity.