

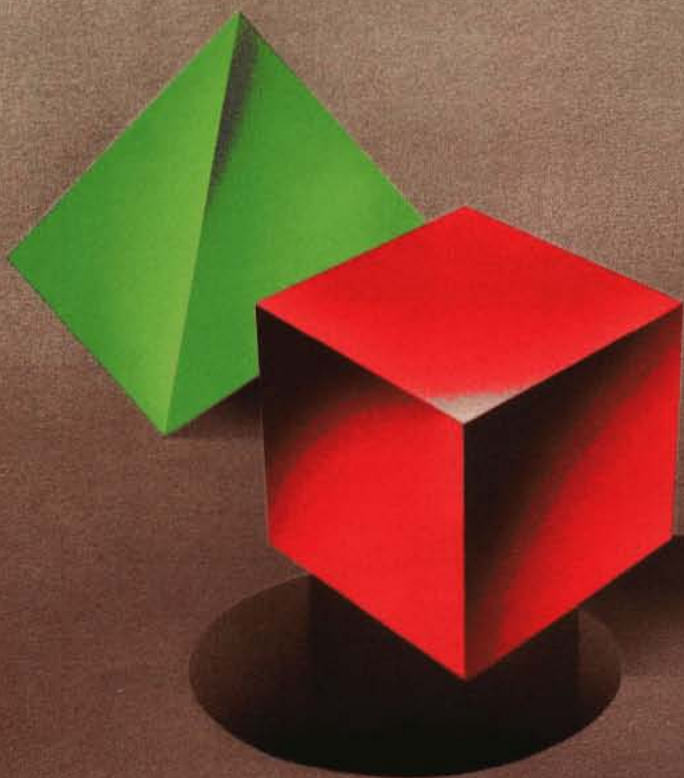
Selecting Presidents By Attrition

BY TERRY O'BANION

"We had to take a president who was our fourth choice, and I hope he works out," a trustee friend of mine told me recently. I asked why this was the case, and he said the top three candidates had withdrawn, and no member of the search committee really expected that candidates four and five would be considered. I asked why the trustees did not reopen the search, and my trustee friend said a deadline had been established and trustees had spent so much time on the process they felt pressured to complete the task.

"Confidentially," he said, "we were embarrassed to let the faculty and our community know we had failed to attract a really top candidate to the college."

Unfortunately, this is a story that has been told more than once by trustees and search committee members in the nation's community colleges. Although it does not occur too often, some community college trustees are selecting presidents by attrition, accepting their third, fourth, or fifth choices, because the top candidates withdrew at an inappropriate time in the search process. Trustees may not be able to do much about candidates who withdraw, but if this happens, they do have the power—and the responsibility—to review the process and make changes to ensure that a highly qualified leader is selected as the college's president.



It is the rare search process that locates five or six finalists who are all equally suitable for the position and match the special values and culture of the college. Sometimes an internal candidate who does not measure up to the other candidates is included out of courtesy. Sometimes a friend or protege of the search consultant or a member of the board is included out of vested interest. Sometimes representatives of special groups are included to satisfy specific guidelines. The selection of presidents is not an exact science.

A great deal has been written in recent years about the search process for presidents, and trustees and search committees should review this literature before embarking on a search. Attention to the basic principles and practices presented in this literature will, in many cases, present the situation described in this article, the selection of presidents by attrition. Obviously, if some of these suggestions were incorporated in the search process from the beginning, the process would be greatly improved. The suggestions are highlighted here in the context of revising a failed process to emphasize their value in preventing selection by attrition.

What can trustees and search committees do when the top two or three candidates withdraw? A number of approaches are suggested here with a caveat: they work only in community colleges where there is an open and honest communication among trustees, college staff, and presidential search consultants.

Keep the Deadline Open

Trustees must make sure there is no final deadline by which time the application process is closed. In recent years, this has become common practice by including a statement in ads and brochures such as "Nominations and applications will continue to be received until the position is filled. Because the search committee will begin screening candidates' materials in May 1992, submissions are especially encouraged prior to that date." This safety net provides the trustees with alternatives should they find themselves in a position in which the top candidates have withdrawn or top candidates have not applied.

Show the College's True Colors

If the search process is reopened or extended, the trustees should review the brochure or statement advertising the presidential position. Most of these statements are boringly similar: they state the obvious and fail to convey the special characteristics of the college or special

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In all searches, trustees, in concert with college leaders, should carefully develop a statement that conveys the special values and culture of the college. In addition, the statement should describe clearly and unabashedly the specific characteristics required in a new president. If the college is not special or unique and does not offer a challenge, many candidates will qualify, and statements abound describing the characteristics of presidents required for these basic jobs. Trustees and college staff take great pride in announcing the large number of applicants who apply for their presidencies as if this were some indication of the college's quality or national standing. A large number of applicants probably means that the statement advertising the position was so general that a great many people assumed they were qualified.

But if the college is special and unique, or even if the college is in difficulty and offers an interesting challenge, then the trustees and other college leaders have an opportunity to be clear and specific about the kind of person they need for the situation. The development of a succinct statement describing the college and the kind of president the college is seeking is an opportunity for institutional consensus building and renewal. If approached carefully, the process of developing this statement can be a powerful means of clarifying institutional and professional values, reviewing program needs and priorities, and building community among the constituencies of the college. If the process is successful, the new president joins an institution that knows what it wants and where it is going, and the way is paved for an exciting and creative period for the college.

Mt. San Antonio College in southern California advertised for a new president in the spring of 1991, and the brochure reflects thoughtful attention to the development of a precise statement of what the college needs in a leader. Under "Academic Leadership," the new president must have, among other qualities:

- Experience in multicultural and multi-ethnic settings with proven ability to strengthen ethnic and gender representation at all levels
- Commitment to a curriculum that will respond to the gender, cultural, and ethnic mix of the community

Under "Personal Qualifications" the new president must demonstrate, among other qualities:

- Independence of thought with an openness to innovative ideas and a strong sense of self
- Ability to display an energetic attitude and create enthusiasm while maintaining a rich sense of humor

These descriptive statements, selected from a longer list for the purpose of illustration, are clear and specific and convey, in part, the special character of an outstanding institution seeking a new president to follow the retirement of an outstanding president.

It will be more difficult for college leaders to agree upon and communicate in writing the needs of an institution in trouble. A few colleges have resorted to the unethical practice of selecting presidents without fully disclosing financial, staff, and political problems, but the great majority review these challenges with candidates as part of the interview process. Few, if any, colleges publicly own, much less publicly advertise, their difficulties, but such an approach might be refreshing and productive.

Presidential candidates who like to be challenged, and this is the majority of sitting presidents and aspiring presidents, are sometimes willing to respond to a troubled situation requiring their specific skills and abilities. Some presidents have extraordinary skills for healing a college in need of caring and community. Some presidents are greatly challenged when an institution needs to find new sources of financial support or mend alliances with state legislatures. There are presidents exceedingly skilled in the problem of focusing the college's priorities on student growth and development.

The troubled college that can publicly own and communicate in writing its difficulties and the kind of new president it needs to help resolve these difficulties is an incredibly honest institution whose leaders have, by this act, already taken an impor-

tant step in correcting the situation. That honesty itself will be an attractive element to some candidates, and when the needs of the college match the talents of the newly selected president, there is hope for the college's future.

Broaden the Scope of the Search

If trustees decide the finalists remaining in the pool do not meet their requirements, they need to broaden the scope of the search. Too often the trustees rely on a presidential search agency to do most of their work for them. There are a number of state, regional, and national presidential search agencies specializing in the community college. Most of these agencies are staffed by experienced and well-respected professionals who perform excellent services for the contracting colleges.

In a few cases, however, the agencies may actually contribute to the selection of presidents by attrition. All agencies operate within a defined network of sources for candidates. Even the largest national agencies eventually rely on an established network of key contacts to identify candidates. Unless these agencies are constantly expanding and changing their networks of key contacts, their candidate pools will diminish greatly.

In addition, all agencies feel great pressure to identify and, in some cases if assigned to do so, recommend a slate of three to 10 candidates, all of whom they are willing to certify as qualified for the position. The reputations of search consultants are built on the quality of the slate of identified and recommended candidates. But the slate is never equal; there is the matter of chemistry between the candidate and the board of trustees; there is the matter of ensuring that the final slate is "representative;" there is the matter of candidates using the situation to improve their contracts back home; there is the matter of sunshine laws and their effects; there is the matter of negotiating salaries, accommodating spouses, and locating housing. And in this complex situation, because trustees and search consultants have participated in an agreed-upon contractual process that usually works, presidents are sometimes selected by attrition.

Trustees do have alternatives if the top candidates withdraw from the search process, even one managed by a highly qualified search firm. Trustees can extend the contract of the search agency, contract with another agency, and/or broaden the scope of the search. One way to broaden the scope is to invite two or three national leaders in as a consultation team to help the college identify three to five top candidates

who would make excellent presidents for the institution. These potential candidates can then be invited in one by one as consultants/candidates to help the trustees and other college leaders review their institution. The professional search consultant can manage this process for the college. These consultants/candidates would be asked to spend two or three days on campus to assess the college's values, culture, quality, resources, problems, and potential toward the end of helping trustees identify the kind of president most appropriate for the institution. During this process trustees should be evaluating the consultants/candidates and taking readings on the chemistry between the consultants/candidates and themselves, and between the consultants/candidates and the rest of the college community.

Woo the Best Candidate

If there is a good match between the college and a consultant/candidate, the trustees should pull out all the stops in pursuing the consultant/candidate as the college's next president. There is no more powerful motivator for a potential president than to be wanted by a college and its leaders. Well-established presidents in flagship colleges can be lured away to new opportunities and new challenges if they are properly wooed.

One compelling approach is to arrange a meeting in the candidate's city, maybe on a Saturday, with the candidate and selected members of the trustees and search team. In that meeting the question becomes "What will it take to get you as the president of our college?" This is a pretty flattering situation for a candidate, and assuming that the match is good, that negotiation options exist, that there are no insurmountable reasons why the candidate cannot leave his or her current position, then a commitment can emerge that may prove to be one of the significant chapters in the college's history.

This approach, or some variation of it, may be the only practical solution to the limits placed by sunshine laws. Since some established presidents cannot risk their current situation by applying for a presidency, an assertive approach such as that suggested here should be explored to woo highly desired candidates.

Tap New Pools

If no sitting president, usually the desired choice of trustees, emerges in the search process to match well with the college, trustees should change the game plan and seek experienced vice presidents, deans, and vice chancellors who aspire to the

presidency. Key national leaders and search agencies can assist in identifying these potential presidents, or trustees can review candidates who have participated in the AACJC and League for Innovation/University of Texas leadership development programs. Second-level administrators in other community colleges in the state where the college is located should be reviewed carefully for their potential. Several states, including Kentucky, North Carolina, and California, coordinate statewide leadership development programs, and these programs are rich resources from which to identify potential presidents.

Most colleges usually want experienced presidents, but with current retirement rates there are fewer and fewer presidents to go around. There are about three times the number of vice presidents available, a great many of whom are well qualified and who aspire to the presidency. In the case of vice presidents, the trustees and other college leaders may be better able to influence and shape the leadership style of the new president to meet the institution's needs.

These suggestions for revising the search process, assuming the college has used a traditional approach and failed to attract a highly qualified candidate, may not work for all colleges. Colleges must design or revise processes appropriate to their culture, their resources, and the limitations mandated by state agencies.

Selecting a president is one of the most important—some say *the* most important—task of the board of trustees. Since it is hoped that this task does not occur very often, and since the president is such a key player in the overall effectiveness of the college, the job of selecting the president must be done carefully. When the established process fails, responsible and creative trustees who care deeply about the quality of education for their students will review their situations, revise their approaches, and make new attempts to locate the right person for the job. To settle for less when more is available is a travesty, and the sins of the trustees who fail to select



the best candidate will fall heavily on the heads of faculty, students, citizens, and, sadly, most heavily on the poor president who was selected by attrition.

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