

Savvy Senior Searches Complete the Presidential Package

by Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller
College Planning and Management, November 2004

A college or university presidency will ultimately be judged not by a single initiative, but by how effective the CEO is in building and leading a team. Yet some institutions that are willing to spend “big bucks” on a presidential search seek to hire other senior administrators on the cheap. This practice is foolhardy in the long run. As former Indiana University President Herman Wells once put it, “A policy of appointing second- and third-rate people to these vital positions is terribly expensive.”

“The selection of team members is critical to the entire presidency,” says James L. Fisher, noted author and president-emeritus of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE.) “They (senior staff) must support the president, complement his or her skills and abilities, and ensure that diverse constituencies are represented and heard. These crucial individuals can ruin an otherwise promising and productive presidency,” he adds.

In recent years, we have seen tremendous growth in the industry from firms conducting searches for college presidents. However, an often-overlooked aspect is the search for other senior administrators. The human resource function at colleges and universities is becoming more complex, with increasing pressures and mobility among those seeking to serve as senior administrators. The day of an individual staying at one institution for his or her entire academic career is becoming increasingly rare, necessitating professional searches for these critical posts.

Every president requires a team of close associates: the skills and abilities of these individuals are essential to his or her success. The entire senior staff must be viewed as mission oriented, dynamic and loyal to the president. The old axiom

that administrators have three choices: support the president, change the president’s mind or resign is right on. Perhaps a more contemporary way of putting it is that the top campus leadership must lead, follow or get out of the way, and a new president should candidly convey this concept early on. In addition, new presidents should make it a top priority to hire senior staff that is superior to them in their specific areas of expertise, because these individuals will enhance the presidential team.

Now, let us focus on advice for the selection of these key “players.”

- Insure that a vice president or other senior administrator is hired by the president, and not by a human resources professional and/or a faculty-staff committee.
- Set a reasonable timetable for concluding the search process. An overly long search process risks alienating or losing some promising candidates.
- Assess whether the institution needs to appoint an interim to the position while a thorough professional search is being conducted. In some cases, an interim appointment is preferable to a rushed permanent appointment that may not prove to be the right fit. A hurried decision is unfair to both the candidate and to the institution. In an attempt to save time and money, some colleges and universities limit their search to alumni/ae. While this approach can work, it often overlooks equally or better-qualified candidates with broader experience.

- Consider utilizing professional assistance to conduct the search. A professional search firm can help customize the search process, taking advantage of a deeper pool of resources

than the typical institution can access. Such firms will have the contacts to find outstanding people suited to the institution’s needs. Also, a professional firm can identify possible interim candidates if appropriate.

- Exercise due diligence in such areas as off-reference checks, criminal background checks, psychological testing, and verification of employment history and education. Many institutions could have saved themselves considerable time, money and even embarrassment had they done this. A professional search firm can often perform this service more expeditiously than institutions.

The demands placed upon today’s college presidents and the media and the public scrutiny of institutions for accountability all reinforce the need for well-prepared senior management with a record of producing results and who can work collegially with the CEO. An investment in a professional search to attract such talented individuals will prove to add long-term value to an institution.

* * * *

Dr. Marylouise Fennell is a past president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, PA. She currently serves as senior counsel to the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC).

Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of Wesley College in Dover, DE. He has served as a college CEO for nearly 15 years.

Both serve as consultants to college and university presidents and boards.