

A Complete Guide to
Presidential Search
for Universities and Colleges

Second Edition



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Since 1921, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has had one mission: to strengthen and protect this country's unique form of institutional governance through its research, services, and advocacy. Serving more than 1,300 member boards, 2,000 institutions, and 40,000 individuals, AGB is the only national organization providing university and college presidents, board chairs, trustees, and board professionals of both public and private institutions and institutionally related foundations with resources that enhance their effectiveness.

In accordance with its mission, AGB has developed programs and services that strengthen the partnership between the president and governing board, provide guidance to regents and trustees, identify issues that affect tomorrow's decision making, and foster cooperation among all constituencies in higher education.

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Foreword

Whether they serve campuses in small communities or large towns, major metropolitan areas or on the national stage, college and university presidents hold positions that place them squarely in the spotlight. On these stages every decision is scrutinized, every word dissected, every misstep examined for the possibility of scandal. And scandal has been a frequent and unwelcome specter in recent years, ushered in by a host of issues that includes misconduct in collegiate athletics, inattention to student safety, persistently low graduation rates, and financial malfeasance, among others. When these problems explode into the public consciousness, governing boards are often swept up in the aftershock for not being properly attentive to their fiduciary roles, and failing to ask the hard questions of the administration. Little wonder that the search and selection of a chief executive officer stands as perhaps the most consequential of the myriad responsibilities facing governing boards today.

Being a college president is not for the faint of heart. Perhaps that's why a recent study showed that nearly half of the sitting presidents in 2016 plan to leave office in the next five years, and that the usual career ladder from provost to presidency is not as reliable as it once was. The position has long been among the most complex leadership roles in any sector, requiring intellect, emotional intelligence, and an understanding of and respect for the distinguishing values of higher education. In today's increasingly complex environment—where the faltering stature of higher education is contributing to levels of scrutiny previously unimagined—a successful presidency is critical, and the board's responsibility for finding and supporting talented individuals is magnified.

In this second edition of *A Complete Guide to Presidential Search for Universities and Colleges*, the essential elements of presidential search are intact. In meeting this essential responsibility, a governing board must commit to a thoughtful, well-designed process that will find a strong and effective leader who understands where higher education is today and where it is going tomorrow, who will provide vision and guidance, who understands the demands of the modern higher education chief executive, and who can work with and mobilize appropriate board and stakeholder engagement in addressing some complex issues. *A Complete Guide* outlines a process designed to identify and recruit

a high-quality pool of candidates who understand the changing needs of the next generation of students—a pool that is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity and that includes individuals who have followed traditional academic career paths as well as those from outside the academy. Ultimately, the board must lead the way in answering the question: who is the most qualified person to lead this institution into the future?

While the search and selection process remains unchanged in many ways, authors Joseph Johnston and James Ferrare have added to the body of knowledge in some important—and in some cases, what might be deemed controversial—ways, reflecting both the changing nature of the modern presidency and the magnified importance of recruiting and hiring success. They explore transition planning and the grooming of internal talent, the discrete skills and qualities needed by a president in today’s extremely challenging higher education environment, and the merits of traditional versus nontraditional candidates for the presidency. The authors also delineate the differences and comparative advantages of open, closed, and “hybrid” search processes, and offer a discussion about the value of personality assessments in evaluating finalist candidates. All statistics regarding college and university presidents have also been updated, as have best practices in compensation.

While many board members are experienced in corporate leadership searches, as higher education board members they need to understand the nuances of a more transparent and inclusive process. A board-designated search committee—consisting of a representative group of institutional and external leaders—recruits, interviews, and recommends candidates to the full board for consideration and selection. To do this work well (and efficiently), professional guidance—in the form of an outside search firm—is a very appropriate investment. It facilitates the search process and allows those making the hard decisions to focus more on the choice than on the logistics, which can overwhelm the overall effort.

As Joe and Jamie remind us, the board must retain ultimate responsibility for, and ownership of, the process. They frame a presidential search in the context of a leadership transition that begins with recognition of the departing president and concludes with an onboarding process that extends months beyond the new president’s first day in office. These two bookends of the transition are as much the responsibility of the board as is the search itself. Done well, they help ensure a greater likelihood of success.

In developing this second edition of *A Complete Guide to Presidential Search*



Introduction

Few moments have more consequence to a college or university than the selection of a new president. More than other leaders, a president comes to personify an institution and shape its future. A president must provide leadership in maintaining and strengthening academic integrity and reputation. He or she must build a sense of shared mission; ensure effective, competitive programs; and secure external support. A good choice can benefit a college or university far into the future. A poor one can exact a heavy and lasting toll. The process of presidential search and selection carries both enormous opportunity and considerable risk. It is crucial to get it right.

The Board Responsibility

In American higher education, the legal responsibility for selecting a president is borne solely by governing boards. All boards, by law, hold their institutions in trust. The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) identifies a set of basic obligations that boards must discharge in their legal roles as fiduciaries. Board members are involved, for example, in establishing the institution's mission and approving its strategic plan, ensuring fiscal integ-

rity and academic quality, and preserving institutional autonomy and academic freedom. But two of the board's paramount responsibilities focus squarely on the chief executive. The board selects and appoints the individual to serve in this position and then assesses his or her performance. In many ways, a presidential search is the most important task a governing board undertakes.

The responsibility of selecting a president is one role boards face often. Recent data suggest that they will need to face it more and more frequently. Today's presidents are older, but they are serving notably shorter tenures, an average of 6.5 years in 2016, down from 8.5 years in 2006.¹ Age and increasing job turnover spell the likelihood that colleges and universities will lose their presidents more frequently to retirement or other causes in the coming years. Boards, in turn, will need to find their successors.

Who Should Read This Book

Although boards reserve the final decision about presidential selection, it is extremely rare these days for an entire board to conduct the search that produces the final candidates. Instead, most create a search committee and charge it with screening candidates. In addition to appointing a majority of the committee members from the board, most search committees also include selected members of the college or university community—often faculty, staff, alumni, students, and other significant stakeholders. This group is an ad hoc committee assisted in many cases by a professional search consultant and potentially staffed by someone at the institution. The committee makes recommendations based on its charge from the board, and the board makes a final decision as to the candidate to select.

In this book, we offer guidance to those who have a role in presidential search, selection, and appointment. The audience includes the boards that have ultimate responsibility as well as board members who may be planning for leadership transitions. It also includes search committees and transition groups to which boards delegate, under their oversight, so much of the work entailed when a vacancy does occur. Other audiences are the members of a college or university staff—especially board professionals and general counsel—who support the process in a variety of important ways.

Although we refer primarily to campus searches, the discussion largely applies to searches for system heads as well. (For a brief summary of how state boards of regents, governors, or the equivalent typically conduct such efforts, see p. 98).