

**A Complete Guide to**

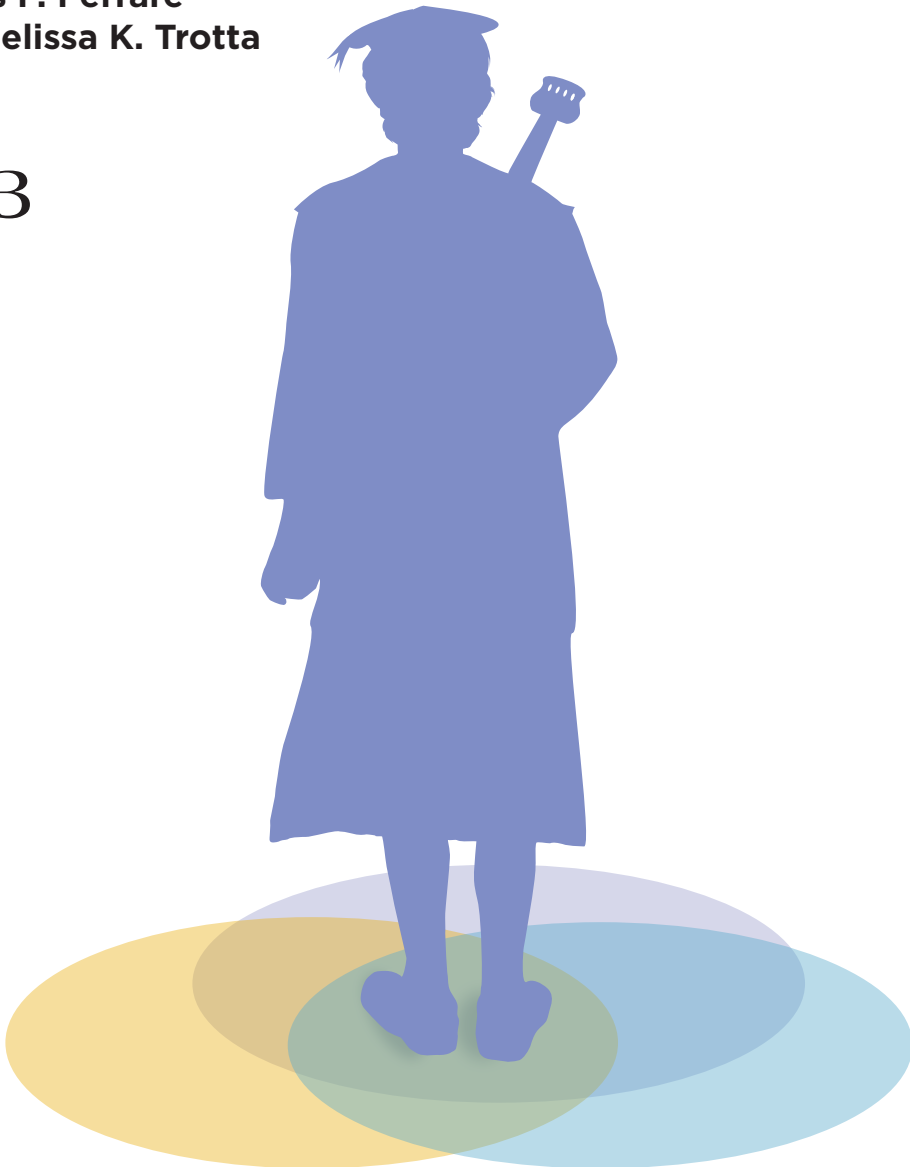
# **Presidential Search**

**for Universities and Colleges**

**THIRD EDITION**

**James P. Ferrare  
and Melissa K. Trotta**

**AGB**



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At the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), we believe in the power of higher education to transform lives, strengthen inclusive democracy, and support a thriving society. We believe that strong higher education starts with great governing boards. AGB provides advocacy, leading practices, educational resources, expert support, and renowned programs that advance board excellence for 40,000 AGB members from more than 2,000 institutions and foundations. For more than 100 years, AGB has been the trusted resource for board members, chief executives, board professionals, and key administrators on higher education governance and leadership.

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## Foreword

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITIES of the governing board of a university or college is to select and appoint the president. Governing boards must take that responsibility extremely seriously. The selection and appointment of a new president can make a significant difference in the future success of an institution.

Most governing boards appoint a presidential search committee, co-chaired by a board member and a representative from a key constituency, who recommend to the board a certain number of finalists for further consideration. The committee will most likely include additional board members and campus representatives, local community leaders, alumni, and other significant individuals.

However, many governing board members and representatives from campus constituent groups have never served on presidential search committees. Their only knowledge about presidential searches might be what they have gleaned from reading about one in a newspaper or other publication or from talking to fellow board members or colleagues at different institutions. Many institutions also do not have the resources to conduct an inclusive, competitive search on their own, so most governing boards hire an executive search firm to help identify and recruit the institution's new leader.

I believe that governing board members would readily admit that finding the right president for their institutions can be incredibly difficult. They might wonder if the challenges facing higher education today will inhibit candidates from applying for the presidency or whether they will be able to attract those who are best qualified for the position. Unfortunately, little information about the best practices for conducting a presidential search is available.

The third edition of *A Complete Guide to Presidential Search for Universities and Colleges* fills that void and provides advice to members of governing boards and presidential search committees about how to conduct the most effective and fruitful searches. The guide describes the search process from the beginning of the transition to the selection of the president. It builds on the best practices for presidential searches described in the first two editions, published in 2013 and 2018.

Jamie Ferrare and Melissa Trotta start by outlining the planning process for the transition from the current president to the new president, the announcement of the current president's departure and any issues related to it, and, if needed, the establishment of interim leadership. Then, in part two, they discuss choosing a search firm or consultant, selecting the presidential search committee, organizing the search, and defining the specific leadership

needs of the institution. In part three, they address building a pool of candidates, identifying and interviewing semifinalists, selecting finalists, interviewing and conducting due diligence on those finalists, and making recommendations to the governing board. Finally, in part four they describe selecting and appointing the new president and launching a new presidency.

This guide contains the thoughts and suggestions of many current and past AGB Search consultants who have a wealth of experience assisting universities and colleges with presidential searches. Jamie and Melissa spent countless hours interviewing current and former AGB Search colleagues who have guided numerous institutions of higher education through successful searches. In addition, they reviewed the documents in AGB Search's files from current and previous presidential searches to identify trends in the field.

I encourage all governing board members and presidential search committee members to read this guide before starting a search for a new president. It is full of important best practices—including those I've found, through my own work counseling institutions about presidential searches over the past nine years, that governing boards and search committees sometimes overlook.

To be sure, the role of the governing board in selecting and appointing a new president is consequential. This guide contains much helpful information on the presidential search process that would lead to productive board and search committee discussions. And, ultimately, it provides a roadmap for successfully initiating and conducting a search process that ends with hiring the best possible person to serve as the institution's next leader.

Jamie and Melissa have done a wonderful job updating the previous editions of the guide and writing the third edition. Many thanks to all those who played a role in helping them produce this invaluable guide to presidential search for governing boards and search committees.

*Roderick J. McDavis, PhD*  
*Managing Principal and CEO, AGB Search*  
*June 2026*

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## Introduction

FEW DECISIONS have greater consequence to a college or university than the selection of a new president. More than other leaders, a president comes to personify the institution and shape its future. A president must provide leadership in maintaining and strengthening the institution's academic integrity and reputation, as well as build a sense of shared mission, ensure effective and competitive programs, and secure external support. A good choice of a president 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 imperative to get it right.

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## The Board's Responsibility

All boards, by law, hold their institutions in trust.

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has identified a set of basic obligations that boards of American higher education institutions must meet in their legal roles as fiduciaries. Those obligations include, for example, establishing the institution's mission, approving its strategic plan, ensuring fiscal integrity and academic quality, and preserving institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

In U.S. higher education, the governing board solely bears the legal responsibility for hiring and overseeing their institution's president. The board selects and appoints the individual to serve in this position. Once the chief executive is in office, the board then assesses their performance to ensure the institution has the most appropriate and effective leader at its helm. In fact, a presidential search is in many ways the most important task the board undertakes.

That responsibility of selecting a president is one that boards face increasingly often. Today's presidents are not only older but also serving notably shorter tenures—an average of 5.9 years in 2023, down from 6.5 years in 2016 and 8.5 years in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Age and more frequent turnover increase the likelihood that colleges and universities will lose their presidents to retirement or other causes in the coming years. That means that boards, in turn, will need to find, recruit, help orient, and regularly assess the best new leaders to take their places.