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## 4 Roadblocks to Hiring Public-University Leaders

By Jan Greenwood and Betty Turner Asher

In the current market, searching for presidents to lead public universities presents challenges unlike any that higher education has experienced. Universities, constituencies, search committees, and boards of trustees will be in a better position to begin a search-and-recruitment process if they understand market changes and their potential impact on a search.

Public universities serve about 85 percent of undergraduates and 70 percent of graduate students in the United States. The success of those institutions is paramount to the success of our nation. Large public and land-grant universities in particular are uniquely positioned to work for the public good, and recruiting great leaders is in everyone's best interest.

The following are four roadblocks that may prevent the hiring of many candidates for leadership positions at public research universities.

**Economics.** The challenges of the economic climate can affect searches in many ways. Prospective candidates may have an upside-down mortgage, owing more money than their home is currently worth, and/or may live in a housing market where property is not selling or is slow to sell. A candidate recently told us that he could no longer consider administrative posts at public universities, because public boards couldn't match the salary that he received from his private university and couldn't waive tuition for his children. He wanted to make one more career move, but he had to base his decision not only on mutual interest and a good fit with an institution, but also on the compensation and asset management it could offer.

Some excellent would-be candidates feel it would be disloyal to leave their university and its challenges in difficult economic times. They may have a spouse or partner who has little promise of a new job in a new location. Further, the possibility of membership changes on boards of trustees after new governors are elected may

increase candidates' anxiety: "The board that hired me may not be there in a year."

**Politics.** Some believe that the work of university leaders has become so political and resource-driven that presidents are being removed from the core mission of the university, which is teaching and learning. When we asked current presidents what can be done to make their positions more attractive, many emphasized that they wanted more support from the board, which would help them obtain more funds from legislators and donors and would allow them to make tough decisions without fear of public backlash. They also wanted to be evaluated on the basis of their overall performance rather than their political and fund-raising success.

The need for confidentiality. Universities, candidates, and search firms typically prefer a public search, but the reality of the market challenges that preference. The question of whether leadership searches should be confidential or public became an issue in the early 1990s. Presidents who looked for other job opportunities faced negative consequences. They were at risk of being fired, and if they were not offered a job, or turned an offer down, they often found their leadership weakened at their home university. Financial requests to legislators were met with, "Let's wait and see what the next president asks for." Donors held back donations.

Today some states prohibit confidential searches. Yet public universities run into trouble trying to attract good candidates to the pool if their names have to be made public. In general, highly qualified university leaders will participate in confidential search processes, but rarely will they risk involvement in public searches.

A limited pool of applicants. In 2006, of 167 presidents of public doctoral institutions, 16.2 percent were female and 14.5 percent were minority members, according to a report by the American Council on Education. Universities often expect that their next leaders are currently either presidents or provosts at an institution of a similar type and size. Likewise, members of the Association of American Universities may want candidates who work at another AAU institution; land-grant universities may prefer land-grant experience; and flagships may prefer candidates who have administrative experience at a flagship campus.

That narrow definition of the "ideal candidate" not only limits the number of women and minority members in the pool, but also incorrectly assumes that prospects outside of the desired group do not have the skill set or experiences to be a good leader for their university.

As for candidates not working in higher education, boards tend to believe that hiring them is a risk but has the potential for a big reward. Board members may wonder: Does the candidate understand how the university works? How can she lead an academic enterprise if she has not been deeply involved in academic work? Can she lead effectively within a culture that historically has been slower to change than the business world, and necessitates collaboration, transparency, and involvement from a wide variety of constituencies?

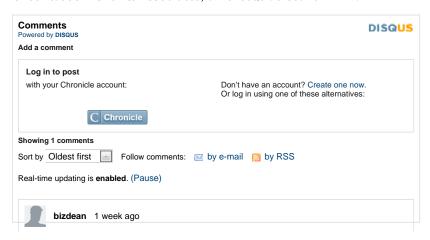
What, then, to do?

Some governing boards wonder if it is time to reconsider succession planning—i.e., developing and hiring leaders from within the university. The data are not readily available to determine the number of internal hires who are women and/or minority members, but institutions must bear in mind the diversity of candidates they are considering, whether hiring leaders internally or externally.

All public research universities have a role in expanding the pool of leadership candidates in higher education. If universities develop their employees' administrative skills and experiences, then that pool will grow, and the community will benefit. Even if an employee leaves, the institution will benefit from the leadership training afforded to an outside hire by his or her previous university.

Finding and keeping successful public-university presidents is in the best interest of both the institutions and the public. Universities must commit to overcoming the challenges of hiring those leaders in order to focus on their core business, which is providing a high-quality education for their students.

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It's 4 days after publication, and no one has thought this claptrap was worth commenting on. I don't either, but just for the record:

Economics. Yeah, all we need is more salary inequality between profs and prexy. That'll make for a healthy, high-morale university! What a transparent attempt to increase a headhunter's commissions, which are based on a % of the placed official's starting pay.

Confidentiality: A candidate lacking the courage to be identified during the search process is unlikely to show courage in dealing with the difficult issues of running a university. Public open-record acts are there for a reason, as well: See the Chronicle articles at http://chronicle.com/article/R... and http://chronicle.com/blogs/tic... for proof of what happens when hires are made on the basis of closed

Limited pool??!!: If the writers think president hires do better than would a randomly chosen faculty member, let them explain why. Because I haven't seen it yet, and I've worked for four universities and consulted for many others. OK, I'm exaggerating, but the point is, the pool is vast. And if leadership development is needed, wouldn't these writer/experts be in the best position to provide it?

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