

## References

Mead-Fox, D. (2010). It's Getting Harder to Find Superior Leaders. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 56(17), D25-D26. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.

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**Section:** ADMINISTRATIVE CAREERS & HIRING  
**It's Getting Harder to Find Superior Leaders**

### **To compete for the best talent, colleges must rethink how they recruit executives externally and internally**

NOT LONG AGO, a major public research university sought a new president to follow its revered and nationally known leader. Anticipating that interest in the job would be high and the competition intense, the search committee identified candidates on its own and hired an executive-search firm.

But, much to the committee's surprise, the large initial pool of prospective candidates narrowed quickly. The majority withdrew from consideration for problems of timing and personal circumstance. Others declined because of the rigors of the job and/or their current obligations. Still others were insufficiently qualified. The remaining candidates, while well known and highly accomplished, either withdrew late in the process or were rejected by the search committee. At the 11th hour, a strong internal candidate emerged who accepted the position, and who appears to be doing well.

But why hadn't the university nurtured multiple internal candidates for the position? And why were so few strong external candidates interested in such a prominent position?

Throughout higher education, search committees for president and provost are faced with an uncomfortable reality: It is increasingly difficult to find superior candidates. In addition, once a position is filled, another difficulty often emerges: The average number of years that a leader stays in office continues to decline.

The shrinking pool of qualified candidates--some of whom have relatively short tenures after assuming their positions--holds two lessons for colleges and universities. First, the search process needs to be more strategic and rigorous, and second, institutions must learn how to grow their own leadership talent with more purpose and care.

**Where are the leaders?** A confluence of mutually reinforcing factors is responsible for the shortage of higher-education leadership talent being felt today.

One factor is basic demographics. Experienced leaders who are stepping down or retiring are not being replenished in sufficient numbers by a new generation ready to take their place. While the recession will briefly relieve this problem as leaders defer retirement, it will provide only a temporary respite. Another factor contributing to higher education's leadership scarcity is the cultural shift in how people view their careers. A majority of leaders have spouses or partners who also work outside of the home, and many are faced with the dual responsibilities of caring for both children and aging parents. Those personal obligations reduce the number of qualified candidates interested in leadership positions.

Still another factor is the changing nature of those jobs. During the past two decades, college and university leaders have felt increasing pressure to attend to matters more and more removed from the core educational and research enterprise, including fund raising, outside constituency obligations, and legal and regulatory issues. Those new responsibilities make the job less educational in tone than managerial.

Ironically, despite their increased external focus, there is one external duty that top administrators are giving less and less attention to: speaking out clearly and persuasively about issues of interest to higher education and the nation. The "bully pulpit" remains largely vacant.

For all of those reasons, the odds that a president will fail, or will step down earlier than expected, are higher than ever before. Still, the daunting challenges do not mean that leadership positions cannot be successfully filled. A small cadre of strong and increasingly diverse leaders is on the way up. The compensation and stature of these positions continue to be a draw. And the silver lining in the economy's storm clouds is that deferred retirements will give new leaders more time to hone their skills.

**Searching for new leaders.** The challenge of conducting a search for a top administrator stems from a series of essentially unavoidable tensions that are both vexing and contradictory. If they are not managed appropriately, the risk of failure will inevitably rise. It is essential to view those tensions as normal, appropriate, and even useful.

Following are some of the critical tensions involved in searching for a new leader:

**Democracy versus hierarchy.** The structural and cultural democracy of higher education clashes with the hierarchical nature of executive decision-making. The best leaders need to be authentic partners with faculty and staff members while at the same time decisive and assertive in their decisions.

**Flexibility versus structure.** It is important to be "loose" and receptive in evaluating candidates. But it's also important to be logical and to seek out concrete evidence about them. The tension between those two states of mind can result in the temptation to emphasize or reject one at the expense of the other.

**Charisma versus fit.** "Presence," or charisma, is rightly seen as being a powerful leadership characteristic. However, charisma takes many forms, and clearly discerning an individual's "brand" of charisma and whether it will fit with an organization's needs and culture can be difficult.

**Gut reactions versus rationality.** First impressions are often accurate and highly predictive, but they can also be misleading or wrong. It is important to neither overemphasize nor give short shrift to subjective impressions.

**Evaluation versus recruitment.** Search committees must recognize the apparent contradiction between evaluating a candidate on the one hand and recruiting them on the other. Candidates should be asked probing questions in an honest and straightforward manner. Yet committees must also recognize that the shortage of strong candidates means the best ones will have other opportunities and, thus, need to be sold on a particular job. Striking a thoughtful balance is a way through that dilemma.

**Planning versus chance.** By design, a leadership search process is one of structure, discipline, and reasoned steps from start to finish. However, as with life in general, it is advisable to expect surprises and to respect the power and inevitability of timing and chance. Unexpected events may complicate the search, but they can also open up opportunities to capitalize on.

**Professional versus personal.** While the primary goal of a search is to identify and select a candidate for an open position, the reality goes well beyond that. Each candidate has a personal life that is, in many cases, unrelated to suitability for the job but that may determine his or her availability.

Along with a well-run search process, another rich source of candidates comes via internal promotion. However, most colleges and universities fall woefully short of developing leaders internally.

At best, most searches produce two or three internal candidates, and the odds are often stacked against them. Sadly, many insiders who aspire to leadership positions discover that the best way to gain one is to leave their current institution.

Virtually all innovation in the leadership-development arena has come from outside higher education, which is strange, given the many business and education schools across academe offering courses and programs on leadership and management. Whether through adapting corporate models or applying knowledge already resident in their institutions, higher education has the skills to provide leadership-development and mentoring programs. It just needs to make the commitment.

Successfully filling a leadership position, whether internally or externally, delivers value that is hard to overstate. There are no downsides to becoming known for conducting professional, organized, and confidential (where appropriate) searches and for offering state-of-the-art programs to develop leaders internally.

Gaining a reputation as a well-run and forward-thinking organization tends to help you attract stellar leaders. It also enhances morale generally and is a powerful tool in the recruitment of junior faculty and staff members. Despite the difficulty of finding and keeping superior leaders, there is no doubt that this is a challenge that can be met.

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