

FINDING AND SELECTING THE RIGHT PRESIDENT
by Nathan H. Wilson, Esquire
CHAIRMAN, District Board of Trustees
Florida Community College at Jacksonville



FINDING AND SELECTING THE RIGHT PRESIDENT
by Nathan H. Wilson, Esquire
Chairman, District Board of Trustees
Florida Community College at Jacksonville

FINDING AND SELECTING THE RIGHT PRESIDENT

Everyone seems to agree that the two most important duties of a Board of Trustees are the creation of a viable presidential position and the selection and appointment of the right president.

Governing boards in this country select two new college presidents every working day, a total of five hundred each year. Eighteen percent will serve one year or less and about twenty percent will be "permanent" presidents. This selection process goes on in a job market where the evidence says that being a college president is unattractive if not impossible. To make the right choice requires Trustees to follow an astute and careful selection process.

If I were preaching on this subject today, I would use as my text the first thirteen verses of Chapter 16 of the First Book of Samuel. It is the Bible story of the first search committee where the Lord appoints Samuel to help Him select a new king over Israel. Seriously, there are some good lessons for us in that story. Samuel is sent to do background checks on the seven oldest sons of Jesse. He was at first impressed that the eldest was the obvious winner, with seniority, good looks and height of stature. All seven are in turn rejected as being inadequate for the big job.

Samuel has to be patient and has to keep searching, because the real winner was not even in the pool of candidates in the initial search. Of course, David is finally found, selected and anointed. Now, I don't recommend that we go quite that far, but I do urge careful planning, a good process, a representative search committee with the right leader, and a patient search. Don't jump at the first attractive candidate, and be sure the pool contains a real winner.

At Florida Community College at Jacksonville, the Trustees have been through a transition of working with a president who had served 14 years, an interim president who served nine months, and now a new president for the past year and a half. You can well imagine the disruption and trauma this can cause to an institution, particularly when the press and other critics are superwatchful and ready to continue their criticisms.

As John Nason pointed out in his book Presidential Search, (authoritative references herein are taken from this as well as Clark Kerr's book, Presidents Make A Difference) a number of considerations are and were overriding.

1. The role of the college president is changing.
There is no longer a single model of the college president. Boards of Trustees must decide what

they want before deciding whom they want to be president.

2. In colleges, unlike the business world, shared governance is the rule. Faculty, students, senior staff and the Board of Trustees all have a major influence on decisions in a much more participative style of governance.
3. Equal opportunity requirements, preference for outsiders, and local cultural situations, each place a cautionary flag on the presidential search.
4. At FCCJ, we were in a crisis situation. Enrollment was dropping (20+ percent in three years), the press was focussing directly on the president's travels and policy decisions, and faculty and staff morale was low. The president resigned in September, 1984.

So we set up the search with the knowledge that no best method was possible to select a new president. The Board was considering hiring a consultant, going with ACCT, or going it alone. Each had pluses and minuses to be discussed later.

The Board of Trustees at FCCJ are all mature, experienced business, professional and public service people. They knew they needed a president who could walk on water, even if no such president existed! We were willing to search.

A. SETTING UP THE SEARCH

1. Board Decides Nature of the Search
2. Selecting an Interim President
3. Choosing a Consultant
4. Selecting and Appointing a Search Committee
5. Giving the Charge to the Committee
6. Organizing the Committee; Working in the Sunshine
7. Meeting With the ACCT Consultants

The search for a new president turned out to be a ten month process, which is shorter than might be the case at many universities but longer than at many community colleges. From a list of three candidates, two of them interviewed, Dr. Lee Henderson, formerly State Director of Community Colleges, was chosen to serve as Interim President, hopefully for a period of about six months. Simultaneously, the Board of Trustees investigated different approaches to selecting a permanent president: a) hiring a prominent consultant from within the State, b) hiring ACCT or similar consulting agency, and c) going on alone with an internal search committee.

The Board of Trustees appointed ACCT as consultants and an internal Presidential Search Advisory Committee of 15 members with Dr. Duane Dumbleton as Chairperson. The committee met with the consultants at the beginning of January to organize, establish procedures, develop a presidential profile, and lay ground work for reviewing the College's mission as part of the search process.

The entire search process was conducted in full view of the press, who sent a reporter to all sessions of the committee and regular consultations with Dr. Dumbleton. Florida has a sunshine law which requires that all deliberations and decisions be made in full view of the public. All applications, files and materials were available for public inspection at all times. All advertisements and announcements for the presidency included the notice that the search would be conducted in the sunshine.

B. FORMULATING CRITERIA AND ADVERTISING

1. Establishing General Competencies and Personal Qualities
2. Writing Appropriate Advertisements
3. Establishing Time Lines
4. Contacting Key Individuals to Build the Pool
5. Developing Support Materials

6. Beginning the Process of Writing a New Mission/Goal
Statement

Based upon committee considerations and the profile of the presidential position prepared by the consultants, an advertisement was prepared and sent to the Chronicle of Higher Education and the Affirmative Action Register. Both ACCT Consultants and FCCJ staff consulted with various presidents and educational leaders across America to seek applicants and nominees.

All efforts of seeking a pool of applicants resulted in 140 applicants from over 30 states. Each applicant was sent materials about the College, an application to get similar information from each candidate, and three brief questions to be addressed focusing on why the person felt qualified to be president at FCCJ. Not all candidates addressed these questions, but all sent resumes' and completed the applications. (One candidate claimed to be descended from royalty and disdained filling out an application).

C. SCREENING AND INTERVIEWING

1. Developing a Pool of Applicants and Related Problems
2. ACCT Does Initial Screening
3. Reviewing the Final 16 Applicants

4. Checking References and Getting Background
5. Narrowing the Field to An Interview List
6. Setting Up The Initial Interviews
7. Establishing Interview Questions
8. Conducting the Interviews
9. Recommending Top Candidates

From the pool of 140 applicants, all of which were reviewed by each of the ACCT consultants, 16 candidates were recommended in late March. One candidate withdrew. The Presidential Search Advisory Committee unanimously accepted the consultants' recommendations without further additions. The committee members quickly checked references and after spring break, met with the consultants to review each candidate and narrow the field.

The committee vote, conducted in the sunshine, resulted in six candidates being recommended for interview. Each of the six candidates was sent the draft mission and goals of the College as well as considerable materials about the College curriculum, financial condition, community relations, relevant state documents, and recent press clippings. Some candidates wanted to know very much, others asked for nothing in advance.

The six interviews were conducted, two per day, in the first part of May. Each candidate met all College groups and was

introduced to key community leaders if they wanted to be. Again, there was considerable diversity in their personal requests.

Each candidate was asked the same basic questions in order to provide the committee information to make comparisons. The committee voted, again in the sunshine, to recommend three of the interviewed candidates to the Board of Trustees. One of the six had withdrawn shortly after the interview because of adverse publicity in his home town.

D. SELECTING A PRESIDENT

1. Careful Background Check
2. Visiting Candidates' Campuses
3. Conducting the Final Interview by the Board
4. The Final Selection
5. Negotiating a Salary and Benefits

Members of the Board of Trustees were fully briefed about all aspects of the process as it unfolded. There were no surprises for them nor major disappointments. The Interim President had agreed not to be a candidate and stuck to that promise. The college community was considerably more stable, morale was improved, and hard budget and staffing decisions had been made.

The final three candidates all met the highly demanding profile jointly established by the committee and the consultants, although they were as diverse as any three candidates could be. They had met informally with most Board members on their first visits, so the Board of Trustees decided to do site visits before the final interviews and selection.

A team visited each candidate consisting of Board Members and members of the selection committee. One non-committee member joined up with one team because she was at a professional conference in the same city at the time of the visitation. One of the teams visited two candidates who were from the same state in adjoining community college districts.

All three candidates proved to be highly qualified and were subsequently invited for a final interview with the full Board of Trustees in early June. One of the three candidates withdrew, announcing that he had taken another position in another part of the country.

Both remaining candidates had very positive and favorable interviews. However, one of the two remaining candidates withdrew, again as a result of adverse press investigations in his hometown. Searching for a president in the "sunshine" had taken its final toll.

Considering all the aspects of the search the needs of the College, and the qualities of all the candidates, the District Board of Trustees unanimously selected, on June 10, Dr. Charles Spence, President of Clinton Community College in Clinton, Iowa, as the next president of FCCJ. His enthusiasm, excellent record, and vision were what the College was looking for and needed.

E. FOLLOW UP AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

1. Working out the Contract
2. Easing the Transition
3. Assignments for the New & Interim President

The Board authorized its Chairman to negotiate with the new president the contract, salary and benefits, the limitations of the position, performance and evaluation criteria, starting date and family relocation arrangements.

The Board also appointed an Ad Hoc Transition Committee to work with the new president to assist in establishing his office, locating a new home and all of the other aspects of settling-in as the new president.

Care was also taken by the Board in determining how much overlap there should be with the interim president and the new president both in residence. This is a very important aspect of the entire process and should not be taken lightly. The period of duplicate residency will depend on the circumstances of each college, but this part of the transition should be completed as quickly as possible and the new president placed in sole charge.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Some Items to Consider:

1. The process was smooth, orderly and effective.
2. The process proved to be healing and unifying to the College staff.
3. In the last analysis, the press coverage, on balance, was a positive influence and fair.
4. The Interim President was very helpful in all aspects of the search.
5. The use of consultants was right for FCCJ at this time.
6. The search committee and its chairperson were very effective and worked well with the consultants and college staff.
7. The time table established, though longer than originally conceived, was natural and appropriate.

8. The costs of the entire search were under the \$20,000 allocated, including \$10,000 for the ACCT consultants.
9. Paperwork and record keeping were simple and not burdensome.
10. Conducting the search in the sunshine was less than ideal, but manageable. Several good candidates would not apply because of this Florida law.
11. The Board of Trustees did not interfere or put pressure on the committee during any part of the search process.
12. The College staff felt involved and informed throughout the process.
13. The pool of candidates was large and more than adequate to find many good candidates.
14. Minorities and women were represented in all aspects of the search, although no women were in the final six.
15. Interviews were conducted openly and fairly and were a helpful part of the process.
16. Site visits were useful, primarily to confirm impressions and verify records.
17. Candidates' personalities and personal style were important factors in the final selection.
18. The candidates' spouses were important components of the final selection.
19. Negotiating salary and benefits is a process that needs careful attention from both sides.
20. We got a great new President.

REFERENCES & NOTES

1. Nason, John W. Presidential Search: A Guide to the Process of Selecting and Appointing College and University Presidents. Washington D.C.: The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1980/1984.
2. Kerr, Clark, Directed. Presidents Make A Difference: Strengthening Leadership in Colleges and Universities. A Report of the Commission on Strengthening Presidential Leadership. Washington, D.C. : Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1984.

April 2, 1987

DD/ak