

The Increasingly High Price of Confidentiality

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Last year I wrote about the role of [confidentiality in presidential searches](#). There is an understandable need to protect the privacy of candidates, especially in the early stages of a search. However, once the search committee decides on the list of finalists, the need for transparency should outweigh concerns for secrecy to protect the candidates. Yet, recent events suggest that some governing boards actually are moving in the opposite direction and taking extreme steps to prevent the campus community from learning the names of those being considered as their future president.

The recent search for the new president of [Harvard University](#) was one of the more traditional and civil attempts to keep finalists' names secret. As reported by the *Harvard Crimson*, the search committee held meetings off campus, including a Saturday meeting at the home of a search committee member with individuals arriving in "[large SUVs with tinted windows](#)." Despite the *Crimson's* success in identifying finalists for past presidential searches, this time the Board of Overseers was able to maintain a veil of total secrecy using relatively innocuous and passive measures.

The same cannot be said for recent searches at the [University of Oklahoma](#) and the [University of Louisville](#). *The OU Daily* recently [reported](#) on various aspects of the secrecy of the search to replace longtime president David Boren. Like at Harvard, candidates arrived in SUVs with blacked-out windows and apparently entered the campus library through the loading dock. But what really caught our attention was an article stating, "A reporter from *The Daily* who was attempting to cover the [search committee] meeting was prevented from fully doing so by OU police officers, who restricted access to a hallway from which it appeared potential candidates were entering and leaving the building." The officer is quoted as telling the reporter, "The university does not want you back here."

At first, I thought that using campus police officers at the University of Oklahoma to protect the presidential search process was a one-off. I was wrong. Just days later, as the *Courier Journal* reported, "University of Louisville police officers were stationed outside a closed-door board of trustees meeting Sunday so the public wouldn't catch a glimpse of a presidential candidate ... stationed on sidewalks and back entrances to the building -- turned away members of the media."

In January 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice [reported](#) that 91 percent of public universities -- such as Oklahoma and Louisville -- use armed "sworn police officers [who] have full arrest powers granted by a state or local authority." The DOJ report stated that among the over three dozen functions performed by campus police departments, other than providing security at "auditorium events," matters related to traffic enforcement and call dispatching, "executive protection" is becoming the most common function performed by sworn campus police

officers. Apparently, this now includes providing protection for presidential searches. It would be hard to imagine any other state or local agency using scarce police resources to guard a search committee conducting interviews for a city or county executive or other senior official.

Something has gone awry. As I wrote last April, governing boards already are requiring search committee members to sign confidentiality agreements. Some of these not only bind individuals to a lifetime of silence but also threaten faculty representatives on the committee with criminal prosecution and the possibility of breaking tenure. But now I am learning, thanks to the press, that some governing boards have taken secrecy to a new extreme. They are turning to secretive attempts by armed guards to prevent anyone from trying to lift the veil of secrecy.

Such activities can come at a real cost to the schools involved. At the University of Central Florida, for example, the use of campus police during the recent open search for a new president added nearly \$4,000 to the cost of the search -- costs to maintain secrecy may be much higher.

Based on our research, confidentiality is playing an ever-increasing role in presidential searches. More and more governing boards are conducting "secret searches." This is when a single finalist is brought to campus for public meetings or, as I have found more frequently, a press conference is called to announce the new president. I am not certain why this is the case, but have suspicions. There is no evidence, other than self-interested reports from search consultants, that such searches yield a stronger pool of candidates or result in the appointment of more successful presidents.

Over the past several years, the search process for university presidents has changed dramatically. It started with the use of executive search firms -- something almost unheard of 50 years ago but which is ubiquitous today. (Our research indicates that in 1975-76, 2 percent of presidential searches involved a search firm; in 2015-16, that number was closer to 92 percent.) These consultants often recommend confidential searches. I don't know if these firms recommend the use of campus police to keep the media and others from learning the names of candidates. But, perhaps as the events at Oklahoma and Louisville suggest, maybe there is a new business opportunity on the horizon -- presidential search security firms.