

How to find the next president of your university

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Grace Karram Stephenson 20 January 2017 Issue No:443

Despite our best intentions every university president (or chancellor) eventually leaves the job. Most presidents are more than happy to retire into the sunset after a decade of fundraising, strategic visioning and crisis management. Others return to their research or are recruited elsewhere to lead another organisation.

Whatever the cause – and we must admit the cases where controversy cuts short the presidential term – at some point universities will find themselves in need of a new leader. The majority of institutions have detailed policies outlining the search process, but there are often bumps along the way.

Often the most challenging factor is the imperfect transfer of knowledge between committee and board members in charge of the search process. Fortunately, some recent research in the Canadian context highlights key techniques to facilitate a successful search process when choosing a new university president.

The changing world of governance

University governance is a monumental undertaking. In the Canadian context, institutions are autonomously governed while funded by the government. This leaves them with the full weight of their own oversight yet still having to meet the accountability requirements of the province.

In such a system, the scope of governance seems infinite. In a [special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*](#). Canadian scholars had a chance to weigh in on current governance dilemmas. A particularly useful study was [Margo Baptista's action research](#) on how to choose a university president.

The main finding? Too many presidential searches are a process of trial and error with committee members learning on the spot. Institutions should not wait until the next search is underway, but rather build strong systems for knowledge transfer between successive generations of board members in advance of the next search.

Knowledge transfer

Perhaps the most difficult part of choosing a leader is the transfer of institutional knowledge to a committee that only assembles once a decade and whose members are different each time.

At many institutions the search for a new president is conducted by members of the board of governors. These individuals, often highly-skilled in the business world, serve for a few years in a voluntary capacity. Their service with the university may not outlast more than one president, meaning subsequent presidential searches are made up of entirely different individuals.

The Baptista study emphasises the importance of implementing systems for educating new board members

on the search process as well as connecting board members of different generations to share best practices.

The voluntary nature of selection committees is another challenging factor as any non-organisation can confirm. In presidential searches, where the committee is prestigious and time is limited, it is not unusual to have members miss meetings. Knowledge transfer systems, that account for volunteer members and update them when they are absent, are essential in filling this gap.

Succession planning

Succession planning is a dilemma for boards of governors generally, but it poses an increased challenge in cases like presidential searches that happen only once or twice each decade. Although many institutions have a detailed policy on the selection process for a new president, such policies are significantly more effective when they also outline the formation of the committee itself and the systems that will be used to inform members on the unique features of past searches.

Leadership transitions are never easy, but institutions that prepare for the next search before it is foisted upon them, stand a much better chance of smoothly bringing their university into its next era.

Other key tips from the study:

- Professional development is essential – send members of the search committee to corporate learning events on best techniques for personnel searches.
- Integrate external recruitment agencies – most institutions have clearly articulated policies for the search committee, but need to update them to reflect the increased role of external recruitment agencies.
- Fill the volunteer gaps – since individuals serve on search committees in a voluntary capacity there is a need for orientation activities that effectively align new members with the mission.

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