

Administration 101: Part 5, Getting Your Name in the Real Pool

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Advice



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By David D. Perlmutter May 14, 2017

If you want to be a chair, dean, provost, or even president, you must ace every step of the hiring process, or you will not advance to the next. Each stage has its own nuances and peculiarities.

So far in the Admin 101 series, we have covered the [initial decision](#) to seek a leadership position, the [ways to prep](#) for the job hunt, the challenges of [working with search consultants](#), and the [tricks to assembling](#) your application.

Now we turn to a crucial intermediate step before you are a full-fledged candidate: getting your name in the pool that matters. That is, either: (a) the pool of people that an executive-search firm will present to the hiring committee or, (b) where no outside consultant is used, the pool taken seriously by the campus search committee. In both cases, your goal is to be selected for the next step — a first-round interview, often held at an airport or on Skype.

Keep in mind the context:

- First, a search consultant's main job is to provide a strong pool of candidates. As of this writing, I just completed chairing a search committee on my campus for provost. "How strong is the pool?" was the

question most frequently asked — of us and by us.

- Second, there really are two pools. The larger one is the "solicited and interested" pool. Search firms will contact possibly hundreds of people via emails and phone calls. Some applicants will apply on their own initiative. The initial pool tends to be smaller when no executive-search firm is involved. But in both instances, that initial pool will self-winnow and be winnowed: Some candidates will not be interested in the job, others will drop out or disqualify themselves, and still others will not be taken seriously because they are patently unqualified. Obviously, you hope to end up in the narrow pool of 40 to 50 people who are then considered and evaluated very closely.

So what (or who) regulates entry into the inner circle?

The steering hand of the consultant (and others). Part of the reason search firms are controversial on many campuses is that they may have great influence on who moves forward at each step of the hiring process.

Admin 101

In this series, David D. Perlmutter writes about pursuing a career in academic administration and about surviving and thriving as a leader.

The initial cull is the realm where consultants wield the greatest power, since we (academics) don't always know whom they have talked with, encouraged, and advised versus whom they have warded off or never spoken to at all. In most cases, that culling is helpful: Few if any search-committee members actually want to review 1,000 CVs for a deanship.



There are subtleties at work here. For one thing, search firms don't start with blank slates. One college's search for, say, a dean of natural sciences may be the fifth such position the consultant has worked on in the past year. The firm, thus, has a list of usual suspects — people it feels deserve the eye and ear of committee members. And, yes, the consultant will have favorites: "Sharon is terrific — you should meet her!" Even search committees working without the help of a consultant will have individuals already identified and nominations from others, internal and external, including major stakeholders in the search.

Besides being good at what you do, networking at all levels is really the best way to become somebody's favorite before the search begins. Putting yourself on their radar is the only way to get this call: "Dr. Chatterjee, I think you would make a strong candidate for a dean of natural science position at a major research university. In fact, here are two searches we are consulting on that you should consider." Likewise, the more people who know you, the more likely someone on the hiring committee will champion your entry into the inner pool.

The prestige factor (institutional or personal). Administrative hiring is rife with class and name prejudice. Generally, everybody wants to hire from "peer or better" institutions.

So, for example, if you become a dean of engineering at a prominent Ivy, Big 10, Big 12, or flagship state university, you will get job solicitations from search firms within six months of starting. Conversely, you may be the most amazing dean ever, but if you work at a little-known liberal-arts college, there is almost zero chance that a search committee at a flagship research university would take your candidacy there seriously.

Thus, where you are now in the institutional hierarchy often determines where you can realistically aspire to reach. Unfair? Perhaps, but the assumption is that the better situation you are in, the more qualified you are for something

greater.

Your own name matters as well. Having a research-heavy, grant-laden CV counts for openings at research universities — especially in an era of heavy competition for federal and other grant dollars. But name may mean something else: A search firm once told me that a governing board at a top private university was looking for "a big civilian name" (i.e., nonacademic) for their next president — a former U.S. senator, a military chief of staff, or a U.N. secretary general. Name recognition will bring job inquiries.

Checking the right boxes. Certainly, the most direct way to enter the inner hiring pool is on the strength of your achievements. If you have a long list of coups and positive metrics, then most search firms and committees will take notice. For example, if you have a strong fund-raising record as a department chair, recruiters and committees will appreciate how you might continue that success as a dean.

Of course, you can't rely on a busy and distracted committee to always uncover the qualities that it's nominally looking for on your CV. As advised in an [earlier installment](#) in this series, you must tailor your application materials — from the CV to the cover letter to the dreaded executive-summary questionnaire — to the local situation. Which of your achievements visibly align with what the institution wants — especially the required qualifications and strategic goals? Explain in detail, with examples. Absolutely press home your greatest hits.

The issue of "fit." Aside from their qualifications, successful administrators also must "fit" the campus and its culture, or disaster looms for all. A friend at a low-key collegial university in the West described a dean candidate who showed up for his airport interview sporting an "Armani suit, French cuffs, and a know-it-all, better-than-you-peasants attitude." The search committee concluded, "He would last here about a year." The projected mismatch was too wide.

Again, is it unfair to judge people that way?

In my 25 years in higher education, I've witnessed or heard about the failures of many academic leaders. Almost always, at the root of their problem was an inability to navigate the culture of their campus and communicate well within that culture.

Background is not destiny, of course. And you don't have to be a local to apply, whether the institution is in New York or Lubbock. But as a candidate, you must show that: (a) You understand not everyone locally is like you, and (b) you can work within the system and its folkways. "He doesn't fit us" has sunk more candidates than any other factor. Search firms often understand that as well and will try to steer candidates to positions where the "fit" is more palpable.

The unofficial background check, and other intangibles. The quality, efficiency, and integrity of an academic job search vary — whether it's for an assistant professor or a president. Search firms are composed (mostly) of hiring experts who can make the process less erratic. I have been mistreated by faculty search committees; I have never been mistreated by a search firm.

One area of major uncertainty is what people know about you — or allege they know — that is not on the official record.

Search firms, in part, are expected to alert committees to any question marks or danger flags in a candidate's past: votes of no confidence, lawsuits, allegations of all kinds, and so on. Other times, people on the committee or on the campus will bring issues and problems into the discussion — as in, "Look what she said about tenure in this interview from three years ago." In our online era, you can pretty much expect that committee members will at least Google you.

The good news is that many such discussions are nuanced. Search firms — if they like you and favor your candidacy — will offer context that may mitigate a gray spot on your record. You hope committees will realize that it

is impossible for any human being to hold an administrative appointment for any length of time without making someone unhappy or doing something "controversial" — but types and shades of problems matter, of course. One faculty member criticizing you on a blog is not equal to a lop-sided, campuswide no-confidence vote.

To quote Ecclesiastes, chance and circumstance affect job searches as much as outright merit. Nevertheless, if you achieve great things on the right type of campus, your name is likely to end up in the pool that gets attention from search firms and hiring committees.

In administrative searches, conventional wisdom holds that your CV is what gets you to the airport interview, and after that "it's all politics and personal qualities." That's neither entirely correct nor entirely wrong. For good and bad, reaching that important next stage in the leadership-hiring process is based on both your record and on many unquantifiable factors.

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