



executive
SEARCH

The Community College Leadership Crisis and Executive Search

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The Problem

Over the course of the next ten years, community college presidents, administrators, and faculty will retire in unprecedented numbers. Dr. John E. Roueche of the University of Texas at Austin believes that “hiring for the next generation will be one of the most important undertakings of the [community college] movement over the next decade.”

Competition for the best talent is already increasing. Fewer people apply for advertised positions, and search committees report difficulty in finding suitably qualified candidates. Minority and women candidates are particularly difficult to find. In some particular areas (technology, nursing, minority administrators, etc.), qualified candidates are especially hard to come by.

One Solution

A partial solution to the leadership shortage is to use an executive search firm to help the community college find candidates that are well-qualified and that match the institution’s people and culture. Executive search firms have been active at the presidential level for a number of years. More recently, community colleges are using search firms to help find vice chancellors, vice presidents, deans, directors, and even key faculty.

Some search firms are paid only when the college hires their candidates. This puts the focus on promoting their candidates, rather than on finding the best possible match between the college and any candidate for the position, coming from any source.

Other search firms act as consultants for the entire search process. *These firms put the college’s needs first.* They contribute far more than a few candidates. They help the college define its need for the position, check the market for similar positions, assist in preparing the position description, search actively for candidates, screen and preliminarily interview potential candidates, present candidates to campus search committees, observe on-campus interviews, conduct reference checks, and assist with employment negotiations.

Benefits of Using an Outside Executive Search Firm

The key benefit of using an external search firm is that the firm can be much more **proactive** in recruiting potential candidates than is possible for people inside the college. *The firm actively seeks out the best people in the country for each position, whether or not they are in the market.* In fact, most of the people placed by search firms are happy in their current jobs, and would not consider applying for the position if the opportunity were not brought to their attention.

Closely tied to being proactive is **confidentiality**. Confidentiality benefits both the institution and the candidates because the firm can bring them very close to the opportunity without exposure at home. It also *enables the firm to make a far better match*, based on more detailed information about both the candidates and the college. Confidentiality is critical to helping both colleges and candidates all the way through the search process. It also helps tremendously in the negotiation stage.

Accompanying proactivity and confidentiality is **speed**. A search firm can recruit excellent candidates and help the institution fill positions much faster than the normal internal processes used in community colleges. *Search firm researchers are accustomed to identifying potential candidates quickly*, and as private organizations, they can move very fast to check references and recruit the top possibilities. Good firms complete their searches 90-120 days.

The search firm approach is to **focus on the stars**—to direct their principal energy and attention to the *candidates who show the highest potential of a good match* with the position and the college. The more of their time is spent learning about the best candidates, the better the choices that they are able to offer the community college. This focus on stars eliminates excessive bureaucracy in the search process.

A proactive search process is especially important in recruiting **minority candidates**, since the *demand outstrips the supply* in this area. Good search firms comply with and exceed the institution's affirmative action and equal opportunity requirements, precisely because the confidentiality of the search process allows them to engage in discussion with minority persons who would not otherwise consider the opportunity.

Finally, the work that good search firms perform is **guaranteed**. Agreements with search firms should stipulate that if a candidate leaves the institution within a calendar year, the firm will help the college find another candidate to take the position at no additional cost.

The Costs of Using an Outside Search Firm

The costs of using an outside search firm appear to be expensive, because the fee arrangement is very tangible—normally one-third of the first-year earned cash compensation. For a job paid at the rate of \$75,000, this involves \$25,000.

These costs can be offset in several ways. First, the cost of **advertising** can be brought way down, because only the local posting requirements need to be followed. Estimates of advertising costs for top-level positions in various media range from \$2,500 to \$12,000.

Second, the cost of **staff time** devoted to the search process can be reduced dramatically. One community college recently estimated that 700 hours of staff time went into a search for a position that paid \$75,000. Using an outside search firm allows about 600 of these hours to be returned to peoples' primary responsibilities. At \$40 per hour, this results in \$24,000 worth of staff time being returned to the principal focus of the institution.

Finally, there is the cost of a **bad decision**. If a bad decision is made and the wrong person is hired, the college experiences a downturn in morale and productivity that can last until the decision is made to dismiss the individual. Other costs include training the second successful candidate, duplicate relocation costs, and the cost of things not done until the department or unit is fully functioning again.

Executive search fees are often paid out of **lapse funds**, or budgeted funds not spend during the period of time that the position is vacant.

Collaboration With Internal Search Processes and Committees

Executive search firms normally have a clear, step-wise process they use to support a college's recruitment effort. The good search firms adapt their approach to tie in smoothly with the college's institutional processes.

A good search firm will also work effectively with internal search committees. In most cases, the firm meets with the committee early in the process, both to review the position specification and to define respective roles for collaboration on the search. The aim is for the search firm to do as much of the administrative work (as well as the proactive recruiting work) as possible, *to leave the committee free to concentrate on deciding among the short list of candidates.* Search committees in community colleges seem to prefer working in this format, as opposed to carrying out all of the work themselves.

Affirmative Action

A good search firm will commit to working within the college's affirmative action guidelines and procedures. The true test of affirmative action is ensuring that minorities are represented in the short list of candidates who are interviewed on campus. A search firm will keep its eye on that ball, bringing highly-qualified minority persons to the committee for consideration. Since the demand for minority candidates is greater than the supply, a search firm can play an especially important role in identifying qualified candidates, getting them interested in the opportunity, and helping them think through their career choices in light of the new opportunity.

Personnel Policies and Procedures

A good search firm will fully comply with the college's personnel policies and procedures. This requires close coordination with the Human Resources office. Normally, the firm's representatives meet with Human Resources early in the process to review the college's procedures and ensure that their processes will effectively complement institutional policy and practice.

The Match

The critical element in a successful search is the "match" between the candidate and the college, its people, and its culture. In choosing a search firm, the community college should be certain that the firm clearly and fully understands the college's people, policies, procedures, and culture. This will help the firm recruit candidates who not only have the requisite skills and experience, but who also fit well in the institution. And this in turn ensures that the placement will be a good investment in the future, both for the candidate and for the community college.

For More Information Contact

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