

# The Best Search Committees

By nature, they are imperfect and varied, but successful ones share some traits



Mark Shaver for The Chronicle

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**H**igher-education search consultants — people like me who manage and help steward what is often the bumpy recruitment process of academic leaders — do our work in close collaboration with campuswide search committees. It may surprise you (or not) to learn that such committees are unique to academe, a byproduct of shared governance. My fellow consultants working on executive searches in other sectors like to joke, "How do you finish?"

As a former campus administrator and now a recruiter for higher education, I've had the opportunity to observe hundreds of campus search committees. Some are highly productive, with members who

are focused, efficient and collaborative. Others are less so — spending hours, for example, debating missing commas, H-indices, or unfounded assumptions about candidates. Search committees, by nature, are imperfect and varied.

Every so often I have the pleasure of working with a committee that seems to get how to carry out its charge expeditiously and effectively. I'll think, "This is the best search committee I've ever seen." What makes it so? Allow me to offer a few defining characteristics. Invariably (and in no particular order) this type of committee:

**Appoints a strong chair.** So much of a search committee's success flows from this one person. What makes a strong chair? A thick-skinned individual who can stand up to a sabotaging committee member. Someone who leads by example and provides opportunities for everyone on the committee to speak and be heard but who has the strength to push back against those who filibuster or try to control committee outcomes. Good chairs express their own opinions but also put personal biases aside for the greater good.

A strong chair keeps the committee on task and moving forward. Committees need an appropriate (and, these days, increasingly aggressive) timeline, and it is the chair's responsibility to avoid unnecessary delays. When a committee is deadlocked, the chair must make difficult decisions, all while balancing the best interests of the institution.

During a search the chair becomes the public face of the institution for top candidates, speaking with them directly, hosting campus visits and dinners, selling the merits of the campus, and ultimately helping the new hire make the transition into the job. It is no easy task.

**Solicits broad input.** Good committees appreciate all voices. Not all of those voices have comparable credentials, but their varied perspectives support collective, thoughtful decisions. The corollary here is that all committee members must be dedicated to asserting their opinions.

**Focuses on the known.** Search committees can fall victim to making hasty presumptions about candidates:

- Why would Candidate A want to relocate to our area?
- Candidate B is clearly using us as a steppingstone.

- Google says that Candidate C's former student's student was caught plagiarizing — she must have known, which gives me reservations about her.
- And my personal favorite: I hear that Candidate D is in another search; we must be his backup plan.

Good committees don't get caught up in speculation. They understand the risk in presuming a candidate's motivations before speaking to that person. A good search consultant, by the way, contributes by keeping the focus on the known and filling in details that may be lacking.

**Listens to the search consultant.** Of course I'm biased, but let's apply some logic to that statement. An institution hires my company to provide advice and experience. We are experts at managing executive leadership searches, in the same way that committee members are specialists in their academic fields. We have talked to thousands of candidates and worked on hundreds of searches. We know the hard questions to ask, the red flags, and the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate pool. We apply a level of due diligence during the search that removes significant risk from the process.

Some committees are tempted to ask the consultant to leave the room during candidate interviews or critical discussions. I was once asked by a faculty member to stand in the hall during committee deliberations. Fortunately for me, the committee chair pushed back and encouraged me to stay.

My point is that search committees should listen carefully to their consultant. Whether or not our advice is followed is ultimately up to them.

**Advances candidates on potential rather than experience.** That might sound counterintuitive, but those of us in the search business know that a candidate with high potential is often the best candidate.

Good committees focus on competence and fit over work history, so long as candidates meet appropriate levels of experience and job requirements. Soft skills and qualities — like work ethic, social and political acumen, diplomacy, leadership presence, and effectiveness — are often better predictors of success in a position than experience alone.

**Balances evaluating with selling.** For academics, it's second nature to question and contest, and vetting candidates is a primary charge of the search committee. But the strongest and most effective committees know how to do this with sincerity and warmth. They understand that the candidate is interviewing them as much as they are interviewing the candidate. They balance evaluating the applicant with selling that person on the opportunity.

I have seen strong candidates withdraw after being treated poorly by search committees. Something that committee members should keep in mind: The best candidates are going to be the least tolerant of bad committee behavior. Desperate or overeager candidates are more likely to overlook an inappropriate comment or the committee member who is paying more attention to a smartphone than to the candidate. Likeability, effort, and attentiveness matter on both sides of the hiring table.

**Makes diversity a priority.** The best search committees not only advocate for inclusion and diversity but ensure that semifinalist and finalist pools present candidates from different molds. I believe that committees (in addition to consultants) have an obligation to be proactive in recruiting a diverse pool.

So the next time you are asked to serve on a search committee, take some time to reflect upon these and other characteristics that can make it great. Applying what you learn increases the likelihood of hiring the right person.

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