

# THE CHRONICLE

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## Advice

### Every Sin Is a Public Sin

By Dennis Barden

There was once something known as “local news.”

Things would happen in a community, and the local paper, radio station, or even TV station would tell the townspeople that it had happened. And that would be that.

If you were the one involved in that incident, few people outside of your community would know that it had occurred, unless a search committee considering your candidacy elsewhere was particularly intrepid – or lucky – in its inquiries. Later, institutions came to employ what were called “clipping services,” people who would scour local newspapers from around the country, literally clip out stories, and mail them to clients in these things called envelopes. News was incomplete, and what you got, you got very slowly.

In many ways, that was an optimal situation for the hiring of presidents, provosts, and other senior leaders.

It doesn't exist anymore, of course. Now, everything that happens in every city or town is available internationally, essentially in real time. Whether offered up by the candidates themselves (and do I really need to be informed by tweet when someone I otherwise respect is *Keeping Up with the Kardashians?*), or reported by a second or third party, what you do is instantly discoverable by everyone.

That new reality has, of course, had a profound impact on executive searches in higher education. You are likely already warning your students, your colleagues, and your loved ones about the dangers of posting things online that will live in perpetuity – and that is excellent advice. Search committees, hiring officials, and consulting firms are taking full advantage of the availability of a wide array of data points about candidates to reduce the risk of a bad hire. As a search consultant, I can assure you: What is out there will be found.

Knowing everything possible about a candidate is definitely part of the solution. But what about when it is part of the problem?

Search committees and governing boards used to enjoy a sort of proxy when it came to judging the seriousness of issues emerging from their candidates' pasts. If some incident in a candidate's past was sufficiently important to transcend “local news” and be played to a wider audience, it was likely worthy of consideration in the hiring process. Otherwise, whatever may have been there but was unseen was assumed to be inconsequential. It was admittedly an imperfect standard, but it worked tolerably well.

I have been in the executive search business for a little more than 18 years, and during that time, information flow has gone from a rivulet to a tsunami. We are now privy to youthful indiscretions, high-school hijinks, petty crimes, misunderstandings, and momentary misjudgments – in addition to the sort of egregious misbehaviors that everyone can easily agree are fair game for hiring decisions. The volume of information has increased at a mind-blowing rate.

By and large, search committees and governing boards are still make hiring decisions on the basis of everything they know, yet now they know more than ever before about their candidates.

Think about it. Could *you* withstand such a level of scrutiny? Can anyone? Is there nothing in your past – from that period before everything became a matter of public record – that you find embarrassing? An error in judgment? Some stupid thing you did as a kid from which you learned and thus never repeated? What if everyone knew about that thing? What if you couldn't get a job for which you are otherwise highly qualified because of that

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thing, that stupid thing from so long ago that it was done by a completely different person, the person you once were?

Any absolute standard is easy. Zero-tolerance policies are very popular, especially in K-12 education. They position leadership not to have to exercise any judgment. Everything is black or white; something either is or is not a violation of the letter of some rule.

Unfortunately, life does not suborn to such standards. There is a fair amount of gray in most people's backgrounds. At this moment, I would observe that most search committees and hiring officials are equating the gray with the black, taking an absolutist stand when it comes to any past incident that presents a candidate as having led a less-than-perfect life.

Is that still the right standard? What is the cost of upholding it?

At present, the cost is somewhat modest. Most people seeking leadership positions today came of age – and presumably had exorcized their youthful demons – before people's personal histories became routinely available on the internet.

Moving forward, however, institutions will increasingly consider candidates whose entire lives are essentially an open book, available for anyone to examine. Before long, search committees, hiring officials and boards are very likely not going to be in a position to uphold an absolute, "zero tolerance" policy in regard to their candidates' backgrounds. A more nuanced, subjective set of measures will be needed.

One interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that there are actually two standards that dominate conversation when this topic arises among trustees and committee members.

The first and most obvious is a moral standard. Is there anything in a candidate's background that calls into question his character and integrity? Does what we know from her background compromise our assumption that she will do the right thing for the right reasons for our

institution and our people? Incidents that rise to this level of scrutiny always have been (and should always be) appropriate to consider when making an important appointment.

The second standard is considerably trickier and potentially more costly to the hiring institution. I have sat in numerous search committee and board meetings discussing an incident from a candidate's past in which the consensus view is that the incident does not compromise the candidate's worthiness ... on the merits.

The conversation then inevitably turns not to the actual import of the incident but to people's perception of it. Search committees and boards frequently allow themselves to become slaves to the initial reaction to the appointment, dreading the first 48 hours of the news cycle that illuminates the incident but all-too-frequently ignores the context. Members of the search committee – as well as the hiring administrator and trustees – already know that context and had it in mind when they made their decision to hire the candidate. What they fear is the reaction of those who do not know the context.

And it generally scares the pants off of them, enough to incentivize them to turn their backs on otherwise excellent candidates. Committees and boards just don't want to take the heat.

So if we assume that the time is nigh when there will be an insufficient body of available leadership talent with no skeletons in their closets to satisfy the demand in the hiring marketplace – which I do – institutions are going to have to find a more subjective and actionable standard to apply. That is the easy part.

Their constituencies are going to have to accept less-than-perfect personal histories as part and parcel of the hiring exercise. That is the hard part.

I predict that, at some point in the relatively near future, this issue is going to get a very public airing. I will bet – dollars to donuts – that there are sitting presidents out there with some sort of incident in their backgrounds that has not yet come to light but will someday.

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If those presidents are successful on the job, an objective observer will postulate that there is little or no correlation between an indiscretion in one's deep, dark past and one's current capacity to serve both ethically and well. The open question is whether such an observation will change the bias of boards and other hiring officials – and whether or not everyone else will accept the change in standards.

We shall see.

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