

Do We Need a Student on the Search Committee?

Dennis Barden | November 5, 2017

It is a standard question that my fellow consultants and I hear at the outset of any search, especially at the presidential level: Should we have a student on the committee?

The issue has always been somewhat fraught, but it has become more and more important as undergraduates around the country assert themselves on any number of topics facing their colleges — tuition costs, loan debt, racial inequities, gender identity, sexual misconduct, bullying and violence on campus, to name but a few. In many ways, the campus environment today is reminiscent of an earlier age, one in which campus unrest ultimately led to real change — the end of in loco parentis policies, inclusion of students in shared governance, and, oh yeah, stopping a war.

Yes, higher education has been through periods like this before.

When a presidential candidate gazes around the table at the search committee sent to determine the best path forward for the institution, the story would be incomplete without the presence of an institution's most important stakeholders — its students. Students expect, nay demand, a voice in the decisions that affect their future. They understand that their diploma is like a security: Its value rises and falls in parallel with the fortunes of the institution. They aren't willing to sit back and accept whatever fate their elders devise, especially when things are going wrong. They want a say. Based on my experience on search committees, they deserve one.

Folks who run searches tend to discount student input and involvement quite deeply. Among the common reservations:

- Students have no idea what a president does or the skills and experience needed for the job.
- They have no experience in either the “real world” of business or the inner workings of a college or university.

- They don't speak the same language as the constituents on a search committee, and they can bring little or no probative value to the exercise.
- We will have to tell them where all the bodies are buried. They won't keep things confidential.
- Including them on a search committee is pandering — give them a slot and expect them to sit in a corner and be seen but not heard.

The irony is: That attitude could be applied to every constituency represented on a committee.

Trustees and faculty members seldom have a sense of each other's stake in their institution, and even less often do they speak the same language. Likewise, I have never noted that students are a particular threat to confidentiality, and they are generally under less pressure from their constituents to spill the beans about the search than the other committee members.

Every constituency represented on a hiring committee has its own self-interest in mind and comes to the table with an agenda. Trying to help a search committee define an ideal candidate and set an agenda for a presidency is like asking a room full of blindfolded people to touch an elephant that stands before them, and describe it. To get a sense of the whole elephant, you must listen to what everyone has to say.

Students surely deserve their portion of the elephant to describe. They are paying for the enterprise, after all, and they will live with the consequences of the decision. Perhaps more important, students become alumni, and they will be asked to continue to pay for the enterprise long after the immediate quid pro quo of their education is long behind them. Surely, their stake in a major leadership hire is as great as any other group's, and they should be heard.

But should they have a seat on a search committee?

The presidential search committees on which I have served have ranged in size from 11 to 29 members. One seat constitutes something like 3.5 percent to 9 percent of the entire body — a not inconsiderable portion of the whole but not tremendously influential on its own.

At the same time, the clamor of constituents to be represented on the search is inevitably loud and constant. Nearly every search committee and/or board chair hears the same litany, “There is no one to represent my constituency/school/college/department/discipline/age group/appointment status/class year/region/demography on the committee. How can you possibly make a fair and wise decision?!” With pressure coming from so many corners, how can a committee remain small enough to work effectively and efficiently while representing the entirety of a large and diverse institution?

Choices must be made.

Like it or not, it is a fact that hiring and managing a chief executive officer is the sole province of a governing board. Anyone else involved in that enterprise — including the other members of a search committee and search consultants like me — is an invited guest. It is therefore appropriate that at least a plurality of the committee’s members should be trustees. It is also a well-established norm that boards invite key institutional stakeholders to be represented the search — typically the faculty, staff, alumni, and frequently others like parents, local officials, and, for faith-based institutions, representatives of the sponsoring organization.

Are students not a key constituency? Don’t most institutions put students at the center of the enterprise, claiming to be “student-centric?” How can they be left out of a major leadership search?

I don’t think they should. In my experience, students add value on a search committee. They seldom have been exposed to their institutions’ business enterprises, and they are usually kept blissfully ignorant of its pathologies. They may never have read a CV, and they are usually years away from asking or being asked for their philanthropic support. They tend to hang back in respect for their elders, waiting to be asked for their opinions rather than asserting themselves in the political process that is an executive search.

The reason they deserve a valuable spot on a search committee: They represent the institution as it is experienced in real time. They feel its heartbeat. They get the most important and elusive factor in any search: fit. Students are seldom so swayed by credentials and interview performance

that they don’t see straight through to the heart of the matter ... and of the candidate. They very often know when someone will — or will not — fit with the ethos and environment of the institution.

More important, they are there to speak for their constituency, not only in the deliberations of the committee but especially in the intercourse between committee and candidate. Astute candidates will ask questions specifically of the student representative, not only because it is a smart stratagem to enfranchise the student constituency but also because those candidates know that the student is the person in the room most likely to be deeply immersed in campus life and, at the same time, willing to speak the plain truth. Those exchanges can be invaluable in the process of vetting and recruiting candidates, and the search committee is charged with both.

There is the unmistakable symbolism in student involvement in the highest levels of institutional governance. “If you seek my epitaph, gaze about you” reads Christopher Wren’s memorial in St. Paul’s Cathedral. When a presidential candidate gazes around the table at the search committee sent to determine the best path forward for the institution, the story would be incomplete without the presence of an institution’s most important stakeholders — its students.

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The following article appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education on November 5, 2017. Permission to reprint has been granted.