

# Recruiting Presidents for HBCUs

## A Conversation with Oliver B. Tomlin, III

Historically black colleges and universities are fundamental to U.S. higher education. Many of the more than 100 HBCUs trace their origins to the mid-1800s and were pioneering institutions in their states and regions and bastions of opportunity. Recognizing their significance, the federal government has recently increased funding for these schools.

Presidential searches for HBCUs are competitive affairs among candidates who grasp the historical and cultural gravity of the role as well as the academic prestige. Witt/Kieffer senior partner Oliver B. Tomlin, III has led the presidential recruitments for top HBCUs as well as colleges and universities across higher education. In the conversation below, he shares insights into what makes for an exceptional presidential search at historically black colleges.

### *What draws candidates to the role of HBCU president? Who tends to come forth?*

**Tomlin:** Candidates are drawn to the role because of its prestige, especially among African Americans and people of color, but more importantly because it's about the mission and a chance to make a difference. HBCUs have rich histories, extremely close-knit cultures, and committed constituents across the board, from students and faculty to administrators and trustees. There are certainly challenges – from finance and funding on the operations side to enrollment and student success on the academic side – but most presidential candidates understand that addressing the challenges is part and parcel of fulfilling the mission.

Top candidates tend to be current provosts or presidents from the academy. The ideal background would be a sitting president who has had a successful run for five-plus years, led a capital campaign, seen the institution through accreditation, and has the ability to connect with the board, students and faculty, and alums.

### *How important is fundraising ability and a vision for the school's capital and resources? You mention provosts . . . are they at a disadvantage if they have not, for example, led a campaign?*

**Tomlin:** It is paramount that an HBCU presidential candidate have fundraising skills and show an affinity to donor and alumni engagement, philanthropy, corporate partnerships, and identifying other contributors to the bottom line. For this reason, many top candidates are sitting presidents who can boast specific campaign experience – and document results.

Provosts typically don't have primary responsibility for fundraising and capital campaigns; this usually is left to deans. Therein lies the rub. But many of those provosts previously held dean positions, of course, often

with significant components dedicated to funding and philanthropy. So those are telling experiences that we look at and inquire about. We explore any kind of funding-related activities candidates may have had that will speak to future success in these endeavors.

***Are there other administrative or academic areas that good candidates might have spent most of their professional lives?***

**Tomlin:** Yes, many. A couple come to mind. Something that's unique to HBCUs is that VPs of student affairs are looked at as particularly intriguing candidates because of their student-first background and orientation. HBCUs have by tradition always embraced students on an extremely personal level. The campus expects the president to be visible and accessible, to walk around campus, eat in the cafeteria, go to football games. These things are a given, and executives coming out of student affairs therefore get notice as long as they've got the other primary presidential credentials.

Financial administration is another possible area of experience that will get a candidate a look, given the need for today's HBCUs to expertly manage their budgets with somewhat limited resources. An institution has to be fiscally prudent and responsible, but also progressive. Fortunately, VPs of finance and administration today are much more strategic and forward-thinking in funding and how it gets allocated than before. It is terrific expertise for presidents to have as well.

***What stands out to you about the presidential search process at HBCUs?***

**Tomlin:** It is, as presidential searches are, comprehensive and involved—a marathon, not a sprint. Again, students are prioritized at HBCUs so candidates should be tuned in to the topics that are important for coeds on that particular campus, and be ready to engage with students in the process. Students will serve on the search committee and their voices will be heard and respected. So while a serious presidential candidate will need to win over the entire search committee (including trustees, faculty and other campus leaders) and impress the campus and community during on-site visits, he/she must keep student needs, experience and success top of mind.

## About the Author

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