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## But She Was Our Top Choice

By GARY A. OLSON

**HEADS UP**Advice for  
academic  
administrators

Some years ago a young colleague rushed into my office and slammed the desk with the flat of his hand. He had been serving on the search committee for a new university president and had just learned that the Board of Trustees -- the legal hiring authority -- had chosen not the committee's favorite candidate but one of the two other finalists the committee had deemed "acceptable."

"I am outraged," he blustered. "The committee was clear that we almost unanimously supported the other candidate as our top choice, but the trustees simply disregarded the faculty's voice." He characterized the process as "corrupt" and as a flagrant example of the erosion of shared governance.

I have heard that identical sentiment expressed about almost every conceivable type of academic search. But the sentiment is based on the mistaken belief that a committee -- or an entire department or college -- selects (in effect, "elects" by popular vote) a new hire.

In academe the almost universal tradition is for search committees to forward an unranked list of acceptable candidates to whomever has the authority to make a final decision. That tradition is far from corrupt or undemocratic.

The problem is that things get complicated in practice. Often the board or the administrator who will make the final hire will formally request an unranked list, but is informally interested in knowing who the committee thinks is the top candidate. (That was the case with my young colleague above.) At other times the search committee will rank the candidates even if it has not been asked to.

I would argue that asking a committee to provide an unranked list of the top finalists is both an example of shared governance at its best and the practice that makes the most sense.

Shared governance, especially in the context of a search for a top administrator, means that professors, staff members, and sometimes students get to participate in the process -- unlike the bad old days when a university official could hire whomever he (and it was invariably a male) wanted without any input. "Shared" means that everyone has a role:

- The search committee evaluates applications, selects a shortlist of candidates, conducts preliminary interviews, contacts references, chooses a group of finalists to invite to campus, solicits input about the candidates from appropriate stakeholders, and determines which of the finalists are acceptable.
- Then it's up to the final decision maker, who is responsible for conducting background checks and entering into formal negotiations with the front-runner.

"Shared" doesn't mean that every constituency gets to participate at every stage.

Someone has to exercise "due diligence" and contact the front-runner's present and former superiors to discover if there are any known skeletons that are likely to re-emerge. I have seen due diligence prevent some disastrous hires: the candidate for a deanship who had concealed the fact that he had recently been fired; the vice-presidential candidate who had embezzled funds; the prospective chairman who had been disciplined for sexual misconduct.

Clearly, the main reason why a search -- especially for an administrator -- cannot be a simple matter of a popular vote is that someone must remain accountable for the final decision, and committees cannot be held accountable.

I see at least three compelling reasons why a search committee would be asked to present a list of unranked candidates.

First, if, as a dean, I am conducting background checks and discover a problem serious enough to prevent me from pursuing a candidate further, then I can unobtrusively move on to the next candidate on the list without revealing the problem to anyone. That seems appropriate, given that such problems usually involve confidential personnel matters.

Second, if I do eliminate a candidate, or if I negotiate with a candidate and fail to come to terms, I certainly don't want everyone to know that the individual we finally do hire was the second, or even third, choice. I know of one search for a department head that resulted in the hiring of the sixth-ranked candidate. She had to suffer a great deal of humiliation at the hands of thoughtless colleagues who made it clear to her that they were well aware of her ranking. No one should be put at such a disadvantage.

Finally, and most important, if I am the person in charge of making the final hire, I should have the opportunity to choose the candidate in whom I have the most confidence, and often that is a matter of personal chemistry. A president presented with three acceptable finalists for the position of provost should have the latitude to choose the one he or she feels most comfortable with, since the two of them will work very closely.

The same applies to other administrative positions. If you are hiring someone who is to report directly to you, surely you would want to select the finalist in whom you have the most trust and confidence.

Even searches for tenure-track faculty members should follow a similar pattern, although it is true that many departments tend to treat the selection of new colleagues as a simple vote. While the consequences of hiring a tainted provost are potentially much graver than those of hiring a tainted assistant professor, the same principles apply.

I know of a search in which a vigilant department chairman discovered that the new Ph.D. he was about to make an offer to had recently been charged with sexual harassment for coercing an undergraduate into a relationship. The chairman wisely chose to cancel the search.

I don't mean to suggest that all academic searches will conform to the principles of shared governance, or that all individuals in charge of searches will have purely unselfish motives, or that all participants in searches will competently fulfill their respective roles in the process.

An institution's formal policies regarding searches may well trump some of the principles I have outlined here. All I am suggesting is that in order to conduct genuinely effective searches, all parties need a clear understanding of one another's roles in the process. Perhaps then, distrust and hurt feelings -- not to mention a few bruised hands -- might be avoided.

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