

Planning for Presidential Succession

Carol D. Frost
Myron B. Allen
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The end of a university presidency, though ultimately inescapable, is an event that institutions understandably avoid thinking and talking about. As a result, at most universities the exit of a president is essentially an unplanned event. Few institutions have a protocol in place that describes what will happen once a president steps down, yet orderly transition requires planning for several years before a change is anticipated. Planning for a transition when one isn't imminent makes it easier to develop procedures that earn the trust of constituencies: processes adopted later are more likely to exacerbate people's natural anxieties about whether specific candidates or groups appear advantaged or disadvantaged. This white paper outlines some of the issues that the UW Board of Trustees may wish to consider as they develop their plan for presidential succession. These include:

- The national landscape for presidential hiring,
- Elements of advance planning,
- Considerations regarding the candidate pool,
- Some aspects of the search, and
- Managing the transition.

The national landscape: a graying presidency¹ and an insufficient pipeline

The average age of university leaders in 2006 was 61², making significant turnover in college presidents inevitable. At the same time, there are limited numbers of candidates who have the experience traditionally considered prerequisite for higher education presidencies. Provosts are typically viewed as having the ideal preparation for the presidency, yet a 2011 survey by the Association of Governing Boards found that only 25% of female chief academic officers and 33% of male chief academic officers had intentions of becoming presidents. Virtually all provosts come from the academic ranks and possess a keen devotion to the university's academic mission. Some see the presidency as a job that will take them too far from aspects of the institution to which they are professionally attached. If a number of presidencies at research universities become open at one time, trustees can expect keen competition for a limited pool of interested provosts or sitting presidents. Strong candidates will have multiple options; it is in the university's interest to ensure that their position is an attractive one.

The elements of advance planning

Well in advance of any anticipated presidential transition, the board can ensure that two aspects of succession planning take place on an ongoing basis.

First, the board can encourage the president to make academic leadership development a strategic institutional priority. UP3's Action Item 108 commits UW to developing programs for cultivating leadership skills among UW faculty, academic professionals, and staff. Several initiatives are under way to implement these programs, for academic and nonacademic

¹ This title adopted from Jack Stripling's article in the *Chronicle* on September 30, 2011, "The Graying Presidency."

² Presidential Leadership in an age of transition. AGB 2011

employees. Among academic employees, these efforts are important for developing a strong pool of future department heads, deans, and other administrative leaders.

In addition to formal leadership programs like these, personal encouragement is a powerful influence on promising future leaders. For this reason, the board should encourage the president to identify, train, and mentor good potential internal presidential candidates and expose these individuals to the board and to other constituencies. These efforts have multiple benefits: in addition to developing potential future presidents at UW or elsewhere, they pay off in producing strong, contributing members to the president's leadership team.

Second, the board can develop a succession plan and review it annually. Through development of a plan well in advance, the board ensures that when the time comes they have prepared for a search process that will unify the campus and that has a high probability of producing a president who is both competent and a good fit with the institution.

Elements of the plan could include:

A description of the institution's mission, goals and priorities. A new leader can be recruited most easily to a university that has a strong sense what it stands for and how it contributes to society. An annual discussion by the trustees to define the key institutional issues and priorities will position the board when the time comes to seek a new leader. These reflections, undertaken in the absence of the pressure of a search, will help clarify UW's purpose and will help identify the background and abilities we seek in a president.

A leadership statement summarizing the characteristics of a successful presidential candidate. The board could discuss the job specifications for its president, taking into account the skill sets needed at this juncture in the university's history, the kinds of experiences that may prove most valuable, and the personal qualities that deserve the heaviest weight. A good statement balances vagueness against over specificity and realistic expectations against a desire for an unattainably high standard. The leadership statement should avoid language that prospective candidates may misinterpret as excluding people who belong to groups who are traditionally underrepresented in university presidencies. Such statements unnecessarily limit the talent pool, discouraging highly capable women and people of color as well as white male prospects.

A process guide for presidential selection. This document should describe the responsibilities of the board, search committee, and others in the UW community, the advance steps to be taken, how the search will be conducted, and the projected timeline. The plan should include a plan for comprehensive emergency succession to provide stability if the president is away or indisposed. In addition, this guide should specify the size and composition of the search committee and include a draft charge letter to the committee. In developing this document, the board should determine the role of an outside search consultant, if any. The appendices to Bornstein³ provide helpful guidelines.

Considerations regarding the candidate pool

A recent study by AGB⁴ notes that the pipeline for the presidency is limited by several factors:

³ Bornstein, R., 2010, *Succession Planning for the Higher Education Presidency*, AGB Press.

⁴ *Presidential Leadership in an age of transition*. AGB 2011.

- The dearth of academic vice presidents interested in the role,
- A shortage of women and minorities in the system,
- The shrinking numbers of permanent, tenure-track faculty, and
- The challenges that confront non-academic presidents.

In light of these limiting factors, governing boards must think carefully about (1) the utility of opening the search to internal candidates, (2) the need to recruit applicants from underrepresented groups, (3) the issues facing candidates from nonacademic backgrounds, and (4) general implications of the dearth of good candidates.

The issue of internal candidates. If a goal of the presidential search is to gather the strongest pool of candidates possible, then both internal and external applicants will be welcomed. However, it is important to recognize that familiarity often works against internal candidates: there is a natural tendency to want to attract a charismatic champion from a prestigious institution who will bring exciting new vision and catapult the institution to heady new prominence. However, at least 50% of new corporate executives hired from outside leave within three years³, an indication of success that is consistent with UW's experience hiring tenured professors. Individuals promoted to the presidency from within a university tend to have longer tenures than do those hired from outside. The board should discuss how qualified internal candidates will be integrated in a search process, and how they will ensure that internal candidates will be accommodated fairly.

The potential for candidates from underrepresented groups. Women and people of color are underrepresented among chief academic officers. In addition, women — the larger of the two categories — are even less interested on average in seeking a presidency than their male counterparts. According to Bornstein³, "Women are often hesitant to apply for higher-level positions unless they are extremely well qualified. They believe there may be bias, even if unintended, in the selection process. Although men also report being inadequately prepared, women suffer from lack of support, encouragement, training and visibility." UW's experiences in attracting women into other leadership positions, such as deanships and academic department headships, partially corroborates this observation. For these reasons, the board may wish to reach out to women leaders and encourage them to apply.

The potential for candidates from nonacademic backgrounds. The board may also open the presidency to more non-traditional candidates. It is important to recognize that candidates without an academic background face considerable challenges, on two fronts. First, there is a strong bias by faculty against candidates who lack academic backgrounds and degrees. The practical importance of this factor stems from the fact that buy-in from the faculty — who possess essential expertise and who play a pivotal, day-to-day role in the institution's central mission — is necessary for any meaningful advances in this mission. Second, the sheer organizational complexity of a typical research university exceeds that of almost all other institutions, with the arguable exception of the military, where executives have more management tools (such as the power of command) at their disposal. However there are notably successful presidents who come from political, legal, corporate or military backgrounds. This fact and the shrinking numbers of permanent, tenure-track faculty nationwide make it is unwise to exclude non-academic backgrounds *a priori*.

General implications of the dearth of good candidates. As discussed above, the pool of qualified, capable candidates who are interested in a university presidency is small. When one filters out those whose visions are at odds with the institution's character and those who won't move to Wyoming for various personal reasons, the pool of viable candidates can dwindle rapidly. The board must not assume that good candidates will apply just because the position has been advertised, that they will agree to interviews just because they've survived the search committee's screening, or that one will accept a position just because the board has made an offer at a good salary. Any good candidate tends to have great choices, one of which may well be to keep enjoying success in his or her current position with its current reporting line. The board will have to sell the institution, the state, the community, *and the board itself*.

Aspects of the search process

A number of aspects of the search process would benefit from discussion:

Search committee composition. Presidential search committees commonly are composed of eight or more persons, including several trustees and faculty members, and one or more administrators. Some committees include a member of the community and/or a student. The board should discuss what experience and perspective that potential members will bring to the committee. For example, a student member may be invited out of a wish to be inclusive of all parts of the university community. On the other hand, the perspective of a student may be limited when it comes to understanding the job of the university president and the qualities that make a successful candidate.

Another aspect to consider in composing the search committee is its diversity. It is human nature to gravitate towards people that resemble ourselves: multiple studies have shown that male symphony conductors choose male musicians, students tend to prefer advisors of the same ethnicity, and women preferentially enroll in exercise classes taught by women. The gender and ethnicity of the search committee members thus can affect the selection of finalists, however unintentionally.

A third important aspect is credibility among stakeholders. The faculty must see their representatives (which are not the same as their administrators) on the committee. Appointing a dean or higher-level administrator helps reassure members of the university community that someone with experience in high-level university searches is involved. A student presence on the search committee can help smooth the new president's transition into office, should the board select an external candidate. Members of the Board of Trustees must have confidence that their own representatives on the search committee will respect and reinforce the board's ultimate authority to select the next president.

Presentation of finalists. The board should consider carefully the number of finalists they'd like the committee to identify and whether these should be presented as a ranked or unranked list. Asking the committee to submit a confidential, unranked list of finalists, along with their strengths and weaknesses, has many advantages. Some of these become starkly clear in retrospect if the board's top-ranked choice differs from the committee's or if the committee's top-ranked choice declines to pursue the job further. The problems are compounded if these circumstances play out in public. If a search firm is involved, what is the extent of their involvement in the search? For example, is it optimal for the search firm to contact finalists and arrange interviews, or should their involvement be limited to identifying — or helping to identify — a pool of candidates?

In short, clarity of roles is critical, for the search committee, the search firm, and individual board members themselves.

Timing of Board Involvement and Decision. A presidential search can occupy 6 or more months, and it is natural that the board will want to be apprised of the search committee's progress. It is important to recognize that many candidates will be reluctant to have their candidacy known and therefore the board should not expect the search committee to reveal details of the candidate pool in advance of much screening. A great deal of patience may be required while the committee is identifying finalists; board members should express confidence in the process and let the search committee carry out their task. At the time that finalists are invited to campus board members will play a critical part in making the job attractive to the top candidates, in evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, and making a decision. They also will want to be involved in building a good relationship, negotiating the terms of the contract, and ensuring that the new president has what is required for a successful tenure.

Managing the transition

It is in the interest of the university to make the time between the resignation of a president and the arrival of an incoming president as productive and positive as possible. A recent article in *Trusteeship*⁵ recommends the following:

- Make the outgoing president's final months rewarding and fruitful by working with him or her to develop a publicly announced, clear and substantive agenda.
- Involve the full board in conversations with the new president about what is needed on both sides to create a synergistic and constructive relationship. Create a discretionary fund to give the president an opportunity to make an immediate difference within the confines of an inherited budget.
- Appoint a transition committee to look across the transition period and plan events that celebrate the institution and its presidency. This committee may also advise the incoming president on institutional traditions and expectations. Possible membership could include two trustees, a senior administrator with detailed knowledge of the institution's strategic plans, two tenured faculty members, a student, the board secretary, and an event planner.

Summary

UW has benefitted from outstanding presidential leadership; one of the most important responsibilities of the board is to ensure that future presidents are equally successful. Advance planning will prepare the institution for an eventual transition.

⁵ Marchese, T.J., 2012, Making the most of Presidential Transitions, *Trusteeship*, Jan/Feb 2012, p. 25-29.