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Academic Administrator Searches

The selection of a new senior academic administrator is among the most consequential decisions for a post-secondary education institution. Presidents play a powerful role in setting institutional direction for up to a decade. They also serve as the main public representative of their college or university.

The Vice-President (Academic) and Vice-President (Research) and their associates are central to the working interpretation of the academic mission of a university or college. Meanwhile, deans play a vital role in the everyday lives of academic units and academic staff.

In public universities and colleges, these offices are a matter of interest to the wider community as well as to the campus public.

For CAUT, post-secondary institutions meet their public responsibilities only if academic administrators are recruited under the core principles of collegial governance. Academic staff must be able to participate fully. Secret searches and searches run by private sector executive search consultants (“headhunters”) contravene fundamental conditions of transparency and publicness. Search firms may charge more than \$100,000 for a single search. Their impact, however, is not limited to the diversion of institutional finances.

Thirty years ago, post-secondary institutions rarely used search consultants to recruit even presidents. Now, it is exceptional for administrative searches to be run without them.¹

Moreover, profiting from every search they conduct, the consultants’ business model sits in tension with the goal of leadership stability, and there is evidence that turnover of senior academic administrators has increased in both Canada and the U.S.^{2,3,4,5} However, as Mariana Mazzucato and Rosie Collington note, it is the public institution and citizens that bear the costs of consultancy failure, not the consultants themselves.⁶

The costs are not merely financial. More frequent searches mean administrative disruption. They require academic staff time that might otherwise go to teaching and scholarship. An overreliance on consultants amounts to outsourcing core institutional functions and leaves internal capacities under-developed, “hollowing out” public institutions.⁷

Searches conducted in secrecy also erode trust. Disproportionate requirements for confidentiality undermine both academic freedom and collegiality for academic staff serving on the committee. Search records that rest with a private sector recruiter limit accountability.

In contrast, an open-finalist phase – where shortlisted candidates present themselves to the university community – allows that community to contribute to a decision that matters to it. It also provides committee members with additional information, not least an opportunity to see candidates engaging live with students, staff, and others. Robustly collegial searches allow those with the best knowledge and strongest interest in the core post-secondary mission to shape the process and contribute to an outcome that reflects the priorities of the campus community.

This checklist offers a guide that academic staff associations can use to assess and improve the search processes in their institutions.

Policy and Procedures Development

Criteria	Comments
Have the key requirements of policy and procedures been negotiated by or have the approval of the academic staff association, and are they incorporated in the collective agreement?	
Did the senate (or equivalent) approve the institutional policies and procedures that guide searches?	
Were the policies and procedures developed with collegial input?	
Is the search process consistent with the collective agreement, including concerning procedures for granting academic appointments and tenure to a successful external candidate?	

Search Committee Representativeness

Criteria	Comments
Does the selection of committee members uphold principles of equity, diversity and inclusion?	
Does the search committee reflect the institution's academic constituencies?	
Did election to the search committee follow an open nomination process?	
Does the academic staff association nominate a representative to the committee?	

Equity

Criteria	Comments
Do committee members receive equity training prior to committee deliberations?	
Do the position profile and recruitment strategy address equity, diversity and inclusion?	
Does the committee determine a consistent set of interview questions to be asked of each candidate?	

Collegial Control

Criteria	Comments
Is the search conducted without an external search firm? If a search firm is involved, did the committee alone decide to engage it, select the firm, and determine its involvement?	
Are the majority of committee members academic staff?	
Does the search committee elect its own chair?	
Does the search committee control the search process, within the parameters of established policy and procedures?	
Does the search committee determine the recruitment strategy and advertising plan?	
Does the committee receive all applications and retain sole control over long- and short-listing?	
Does the committee control the interview process?	
Do all committee members have full and equal rights of participation, including the right to ask initial or follow-up questions during the interview process?	
Was the appointed candidate recommended by the committee? ⁸	

Openness, Transparency, Accountability

Criteria	Comments
Is there an easy-to-locate, up-to-date search web page on the institution's website?	
Does the search committee set the degree and type of confidentiality at each stage of the search? Are potential applicants informed about the degree and type of confidentiality at each phase?	
If a search firm is engaged, were the relevant collegial bodies provided with a detailed rationale for why the committee thought it was needed?	
Do confidentiality agreements uphold principles of academic freedom? Are they posted on the search web page?	
Does the search committee draft the position description in consultation with the campus community, and does this receive approval by the relevant governance bodies prior to advertising? Is the possibility of a search internal to the institution included in these discussions?	
Does the committee invite the campus community to suggest potential candidates?	
Does the committee's short-list include at least three finalists?	
Does the search have an open finalist phase, with public presentations by finalist candidates, followed by question-and-answer sessions? Does each finalist meet with a diversity of campus groups including the academic staff association?	

Are there provisions for the campus community to provide meaningful input into the ultimate selection?	
Can committee members attach minority reports to the majority report?	
Is the search committee accountable to the relevant collegial bodies? ⁹	
Does the committee write a post-search report, addressing the number of applicants, profile of the applicant pool, cost of the search, and recommendations for policy and procedural improvements?	
Are committee members free to comment publicly on the search policy and procedures and position profile including about how these might be improved?	

Endnotes

1 Lavigne, E., & Sá, CM. 2021. "The changing roles and qualifications of Canadian university presidents and provosts." *Higher Education*, 81(3): 537-550

2 Ibid

3 Turpin, DH, De Decker, L. and Boyd, B. 2014. "Historical changes in the Canadian university presidency: An empirical analysis of changes in length of service and experience since 1840." *Canadian Public Administration*, 57: 573-588.

4 Lomonte, Frank. 2019. "The Costs of Closed Searches." *Academe*, 105 (2): 14-20.

5 Lavigne and Sá (2021) note that, as search consultants became routine, the typical advertised profile for senior academic administrators changed, adding "charismatic qualities," more familiar in the corporate world.

6 Mazzucato, Mariana and Rosie Collington. 2023. *The Big Con: How the Consulting Industry Weakens Our Businesses, Infantilizes Our Governments, and Warps Our Economies*. New York: Penguin.

7 Ibid

8 No candidate should be appointed without the committee's recommendation and the committee should have the right to recommend that none of the applicants be appointed.

9 For President and Vice-President (Academic) searches, the committee is a joint committee of the senate (or equivalent) and the board.