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So you want an open search? Tips for organizing

First, a clarification: an “open search” doesn’t mean publishing a list of every person who applies. Generally, only those applicants that the committee designates for the final shortlist – those who have a real shot at being offered the position — are asked to make their candidacy public by introducing themselves to the campus community through public presentations and open question-and-answer sessions.

Of course, we also want to see the entire search process animated by a commitment to openness, as reflected in the checklist on academic administrative searches.

Here are some tips for organizing for an open search.

Policy guiding searches

The best way to ensure an open administrative search is through collective agreement language requiring an open finalist phase in which academic staff have a right to attend presentations, ask questions, and submit written feedback to the search committee.

Whether or not sufficient collective agreement language already exists, academic staff must work to ensure that institutional policy articulates a robust commitment to openness, including by stipulating an open finalist phase. Academic staff should engage in policy development and review processes to insert this principle into the relevant policies and procedures.

- ❑ **Keep track of the policy review calendar** and prepare to participate
- ❑ **Support academic staff association members’ participation** in policy review by reminding them of submission deadlines, educating them about the importance of open searches, and offering information about core criteria for running an effective search on collegial principles
- ❑ **Prepare association input early** so that it can be shared with members well ahead of any deadline

What if there is no policy requirement for an open search?

If you are faced with an administrative search where the policy does not stipulate an open finalist phase and where the collective agreement does not (yet) require one, the association can use the following techniques to influence the search process.

- ❑ **Public statements about the value of an open search and the risks of secret searches**, whether in meetings about the search, communications to members, or opinion pieces for a wider public.
- ❑ **Input into search committee processes:** The association should submit its advice on the process to the search committee in the earliest phases of its deliberations, sharing its submission with members.
- ❑ **Opportunities for members to act in concert:** The association should facilitate the collective expression of members' desire to participate in an open finalist phase and should provide opportunities for them to engage in collective actions, including simple displays of solidarity, that call for an open search. These actions will foster greater awareness of the issues and will help to build a more organized membership.
- ❑ **Motions in appropriate collegial bodies:** Association members may propose resolutions to faculty councils, senates and other relevant bodies. Even where the senate is the ultimate target body, it may be useful to begin with subsidiary bodies, such as faculty councils (see [sample motion](#)). Resolutions passed by multiple bodies demonstrate broad support. Because faculty councils are open to all academic staff in the unit, motions at that level allow for widespread engagement and education about the issues. Motions at faculty councils can also prepare the ground for successful senate motions.

Educating members about the value of open searches

Academic administrative searches offer an excellent entry point into wider issues of governance as well as an opportunity for member organizing that will strengthen the association in all its collective endeavours. They have clearly identifiable outcomes with evident consequences. Searches tend to attract attention because

they are periodic rather than continuous, but they embody issues that also feature in more routine governance activities.

In addition to the activities listed above, associations can educate members about the value of open searches.

- Discuss the issue at member meetings.
- Write analytical communications for the membership.
- Contribute op-eds and letters to local newspapers and raise the issue in broadcast media interviews when the opportunity arises.
- Track – through your province’s access to information legislation if necessary – and share with members the costs of closed and corporatized searches. Costs include financial payments to search firms, the routine premature departure of academic administrators, and faculty time lost to repeated early searches.
- Maintain a page of governance resources on the association website.

Additional resources

CAUT policy statements

[Academic Administrative Searches](#)

[Collegiality](#)

[Governance](#)

[Openness and Transparency in Post-Secondary Institutions](#)

Evidence and arguments

Turpin, David, Ludgard De Decker, Brendan Boyd (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
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/capa.12087>

For additional examples of shortened presidential tenures, see:

<https://twitter.com/JuliaMWrightDal/status/1645422057616752643>

Lavigne, Eric and Creso Sá (2021). "The changing roles and qualifications of Canadian university presidents and provosts." *Higher Education* 81: 537-550
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-020-00555-w>

"Opening Up the Search"

<https://www.caut.ca/bulletin/2020/02/presidents-message-opening-search>

"The Cost of Closed Searches"

<https://www.aaup.org/article/costs-closed-searches#.YxeujCHMKqA>

"The Costs of Secret Presidential Searches"

<https://academeblog.org/2020/04/02/the-costs-of-secret-presidential-searches/>

OCUFA Report on Collegial Governance

<https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/2019-02-09-Governance-Report.pdf>

"Search Firm Contracts Aren't What Some Think, Researchers Find"

<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2016/06/17/search-firm-contracts-arent-what-some-think-researchers-find>

"Secret Searches and Faculty Fury"

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/08/23/faculty-anger-surrounding-several-presidential-searches-some-point-search-firms>

"College Headhunters, Accustomed to Secrecy, Find Themselves Under Scrutiny"

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/college-headhunters-accustomed-to-secrecy-find-themselves-under-scrutiny/>

"What Are College Governing Boards Getting From Their Search Firms?"

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-are-college-governing-boards-getting-from-their-search-firms/>

"MUNFA's Take on the Presidential Search"

<http://munfa.ca/munfas-take-on-the-presidential-search/>

"MUNFA's Take on the Premature Departure of Provost Strzelczyk"

<http://munfa.ca/munfas-take-on-the-premature-departure-of-provost-strzelczyk/>