

## Some Best Practices for Search Committees

### A. The Chair's Role

The search committee chair acts as the committee's facilitator, official spokesperson, budget manager and liaison to the hiring authority. In most cases, the chair should not be the local representative of the hiring authority (i.e., the unit head) because that constitutes a conflict of interest. The unit head is the representative of the hiring authority that provides local oversight over the search.

In this role, the chair must communicate the committee's charge; articulate expectations for committee conduct; monitor the committee's budget; coordinate outreach efforts; manage communication with the University community, press, potential leads, and potential and actual applicants; ensure compliance with state and federal laws and University policy, and mediate conflict.

In addition to past search committee experience, a committee chair should be a person of integrity who is recognized for his or her commitment to diversity and ability to lead under potentially difficult conditions.

### B. Committee Size and Composition

Establishing a strong and credible search committee is essential for a successful search process. Because decisions are made most effectively and efficiently by groups no larger than 5-7 people, search committees should be limited in size. Search advisory committees (described below) can complement search committee activities.

Search committee members must be respected within the University community and their respective disciplines or professions. When possible, a majority of the members should have experience participating in successful searches and should be open-minded, committed to diversity and fair process, and able to negotiate conflict to achieve group results and knowledgeable in the area/field/responsibilities of the advertised position.

A diverse committee is more likely to withstand public scrutiny and to generate diverse candidate pools and finalist lists. Individuals from outside a hiring department or the University may be invited to serve on a search committee to share insights, challenge assumptions and bring lessons of experience from other perspectives, disciplines and organizations.

### C. Search Committee Roles and Responsibilities

Effective search committee members are well-connected, available to participate fully and consistently, and comfortable engaging in rigorous debate in order to effect the best outcome.

The most effective search committee members:

- Protect confidentiality of applicants and the decision-making process;
- Draw upon connections to support recruitment efforts;
- Participate fully and consistently;
- Challenge conventional assumptions;
- Treat all applicants in a thoughtful and respectful manner;
- Set aside biases and preconceptions in order to fully consider all those who may be qualified to assume University roles; and
- Give fair consideration to all applicants.
- Act promptly to ensure that top candidates are not lost to organizations who move quickly to hire top talent.

### D. Search Advisory Committees

A search process can be greatly enhanced by appointing a search advisory committee. Search advisory committee members are not asked to participate in regular search committee meetings or activities. Instead, they support a search process by sharing their connections and perspectives. A search advisory committee can support the important work of the search committee by representing constituent interests, providing applicant leads, encouraging nominations, and interviewing and welcoming candidates during campus visits and participating in celebrations that follow a successful hire.

### E. Decision-making

Clarity about "what are we deciding" is a key question for search committees (e.g., the hiring authority has requested the top three candidates in ranked order; the top five candidates unranked but with comments about strengths and weaknesses, etc.). Once the charge is determined, "deciding how to decide" should be the search committee's next task.

Will the committee vote, try to reach consensus, use negative voting, or provide majority and minority opinions? Contrary to what many believe, there is no one right way to make decisions and there are pros and cons to each approach. For example, while many committees believe in secret ballots, the anonymity that supports difficult decision-making may inhibit productive discussions about candidate strengths and weaknesses. The consensus approach feels friendlier, but sometimes results in a finalist list of mediocre candidates. When there are no clear finalists, the chair should have a conversation with the hiring authority about appropriate next steps.

A note about scoring matrices: Quantifying candidate qualifications through a scoring matrix is an appealing approach, but don't be fooled. The individual with the highest score is not always the best candidate. Scoring matrices are best used as a way to organize impressions of candidates in order to have broader conversations with other committee members (e.g., "I ranked her a 5, but you gave her a 1, why is that?")

**F. Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is the foundation of a credible search committee and trustworthy search process. The importance of maintaining strict confidence throughout the process cannot be overestimated. A breach of confidentiality threatens a successful outcome in two ways. First, it may result in the immediate termination of the search, a serious loss of time and money and potentially viable candidates. Second, it may cause the most qualified candidates to withdraw from the search, fearing that a premature disclosure of their candidacy will jeopardize their current positions. In short, confidentiality is an absolute requirement to be understood and honored by everyone on the search team, from the first meeting until the conclusion of the search.

**G. Communication**

An external communication plan should be discussed early in the search process. In general, it is best to designate one individual (usually the chair) to communicate with applicants, constituents, the press, and others who may inquire about a search process.

A committee communication plan should also be developed. Because written documents may be subject to public records requests, judicious use of written and email communication is recommended to protect applicant confidentiality and the integrity of the search process.