

Filling the Room at the Top: What It Takes to Conduct a Successful Presidential Search

by Rebekah Burch Basinger

Boards of trustees may delegate many responsibilities, but there's one task no other group within the seminary can or should assume. That's seeking for and hiring a president. Few activities are as consequential to the institution or a greater test of a board's performance. While one person alone isn't likely to make or break the future of a seminary, the quality (or lack thereof) of a presidency leaves a long-lasting mark on the institution. As Larry Greenfield, a long-time seminary president, wrote in *The Good Steward*, "Whenever the selection of someone who is to assume care for an institution occurs, the board takes responsibility for a school's identity, its purpose, and its work."

This is not to suggest that other stakeholders are excluded from the search process or that all board members are involved in everything that happens. It is usual practice for boards to entrust the details of the search to a committee that includes, along with a solid core of trustees, representatives from other constituent groups – including faculty, administrators, students, alumni and denominational officers. That said, however, it is essential that the full board be involved in the beginning stages of the search, setting direction for all that will follow, and again at the point of selection of the new president. The board cannot, indeed must not, delegate to other its major responsibility for naming a president.

Selecting a CEO is a "special case" for trustees (and the institution) each time it occurs. Fortunately, newcomers to the search process can turn for guidance to those who've asked and answered the question, "Who wants to be a seminary president?" In this article, I draw from the experiences of search committees at three seminaries – Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia, George Fox University -Western Theological Seminary in Oregon, and Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. The lessons learned in these places are summarized in the following four general observations about presidential searches.

1. Regardless the circumstances leading to a search, seeking for and selecting a president is a lot of work.
2. Time spent in preparing for a search is time well used.
3. A presidential search is as much about romance as it is about process.
4. How a search concludes is a harbinger of things to come.

The Grass Is Never Greener

It is likely that at some point during the search process, a board member or two will be heard to mutter, "This would have been a lot easier if . . ." At their moments of greatest stress, search committees can be excused for thinking there must be a less time consuming way to do the job. The fact of the matter is, however, there isn't. Regardless the circumstances leading to a search, seeking for and selecting a president is a lot of work – for the board as a whole and most especially for members of the search committee.

A thorough hiring process will take from 6 to 12 months (sometimes longer), and can involve as many as 9 to 18 meetings. It's important, then, that persons nominated to the committee understand the com-

Ever-Ready Boards

Even if a presidential search seems a distant possibility, the following action steps are worth considering.

Develop a policy on selecting a new chief executive now, before the need arises and as part of overall policymaking. It can be better thought out in calm than in crisis.

Ask the chair to have a conversation with the current chief executive about his or her plans for the future. This could be a routine question in the annual evaluation. Try to anticipate the timing and circumstances of a needed search.

Assign the board development committee or an ad hoc task force to research the topic of executive searches so that a good file is available when needed.

from Nonprofit Board Answer Book: Practical Guidelines for Board Members and Chief Executives by Robert C. Andringa and Ted W. Engstrom (National Center for Nonprofit Boards, 3rd Edition, 1999).

mitment they are being asked to make. “It’s crucial that all members be present and active in all aspects of the search,” Samuel Spencer, consultant to numerous presidential searches and a member of the In Trust board of directors, cautions. “If potential members anticipate a problem with attendance or full participation in the committee’s work, they should decline the invitation to serve.”

And that goes double for the committee chair. While all members are expected to devote themselves fully to their assignments, the role of the chair is especially demanding, as Carol Gilbertson learned through her experience with the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago search. “It sort of took over my life,” she recalls of the year-long process that coincided with her sabbatical from teaching and administrative responsibilities at Luther College. To this, Dea Cox, chair of the presidential search committee at George Fox University (of which Western Evangelical Seminary is a part), can add a hearty amen. At the height of the George Fox search process, the committee met as often as once a week – a schedule that kept the chair more than busy between meetings. Recently retired as a superintendent of schools, Cox was able to devote almost full time to the search – a fortunate happenstance that cannot be assumed in all places.

More often than not, committee chairs must balance the dual demands of their “day jobs” with the challenges of guiding a presidential search. So it is for Joseph Harvard, chair of a just-beginning search and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Durham, North Carolina. He speaks of his committee role as “an awesome responsibility” that he’s accepted as “something important” he feels called to do on behalf of his theological alma mater, Columbia Theological Seminary.

The chair, in addition to providing oversight for the week-to-week details of the search process, serves as the liaison between the board and the committee. The success of the board/committee relationship is determined in large part by the level of trust his or her colleagues have in the chair. That trust is nurtured by frequent progress reports from the chair that are detailed enough to show that the search is on schedule, but that don’t jeopardize confidentiality. In Gilbertson’s words, the chair’s role requires “communication and interpretation at every step of the way.”

Contrary to what some trustees think, using outside counsel doesn’t lessen the committee’s load. Whether the search is conducted by a consultant or a board search committee, the process is basically the same. “There are tremendous benefits in using a search

consultant, but lightening the committee’s workload isn’t one of them. Having the consultant with us didn’t relieve the committee of its responsibilities,” Gilbertson recalls. “In the end, it was the committee that had to make the tough decisions and sort through all the details.” And it is for this very reason some boards decide not to use outside counsel. As Columbia’s Joe Harvard explains, “Our board feels there are specific concerns around a seminary search that are hard for ‘outsiders’ to understand. We’ve decided it’s best to do this ourselves.”

At the end of the day, there’s no getting around the fact that a well-done search requires the best effort and many hours from all involved. But if you’ve just been asked to serve on a search committee, take hope. Having a hand in the selection of a new seminary president can be one of the most rewarding and joyful tasks a trustee will ever undertake.

Haste Makes Waste

It is to be expected that a board, when confronted with a presidential transition, will want to move the process along as quickly as possible. However, it’s important that trustees pause to prepare themselves and the seminary community for the task ahead. This includes thinking together about characteristics desired in the new leader. As a newsletter from a consulting firm advised: “To search means, first, to know for what you are searching.” A seemingly commonsense suggestion, to be sure, but one too often ignored by boards. Before a position description is drafted or an advertisement placed, board members should discuss the personal qualities and values by which candidates will be assessed, and then they will need to pare the list to something near reasonable. The National Center for Nonprofit Boards suggests that “this is probably the most important step in the process; can-

A FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION

Q. What’s the ideal size of a presidential search committee?

A. There’s no right or wrong answer to this question. The size of the committee depends upon the organizational culture of the institution. In our experience, however, search committees within seminary communities tend to be large (10 or members). For example, the search committee for the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago totaled eleven members, the committee at George Fox numbered eighteen members, and at Columbia Theological Seminary, a committee of 11 persons is guiding the search process.

didates who meet the basic qualifications will be screened and evaluated on the basis of these qualities and criteria.”

Achieving consensus concerning a new leader can be complicated by reluctance on the part of the seminary community to let go of what currently is. If it were possible, many boards would prefer a “clone” of the current CEO to the prospect of new leadership. At George Fox University, for example, where the school was thrust into an unexpected search following the death of a much-loved president, board members recall that “it took two or three meetings before somebody said, ‘We’re not replacing Ed Stevens (the previous president). We’re looking for the next president of George Fox University.’” Similarly, Harvard acknowledges the seminary community’s sadness over the coming departure of a respected leader. Yet he speaks confidently of finding the right person for the job at Columbia as the committee “relies on the spirit” for direction. Feelings of loss, grief, and sometimes relief are all legitimate, but very quickly the campus community needs to turn away from the past. It is the board’s job to encourage forward thinking.

After the board has completed the important background work, the next task is to put in writing the charge to the search committee. “It’s crucial that the board and campus community establish parameters for the search,” Gilbertson advises. To this Sam Spencer adds: “The instructions provided to the committee should be specific enough to move the process in the right direction, but flexible enough to allow for improvisation and creativity along the way.” A well-stated charge does exactly that. The statement delineates such things as the scope of authority delegated to the committee, the number of candidates to be delivered to the board for consideration, and the committee’s role in final negotiations with the chosen one.

An experienced search consultant can be of great help in shaping the charge to the committee, drawing from files of other searches and many year’s

experience. Even if a board decides against using a search consultant, there are ways to benefit from the experience and advice of seasoned searchers. It is a good idea to contact the boards of seminaries that have recently completed a presidential search. Most – as the committees at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and George Fox University discovered – are happy to share from their experiences, and that includes passing along the charge to the search committee. Additionally, print resources on the search process are available to boards, including some written specifically for theological schools (see the resource list included with this article).

There are also consultants around who specialize in helping boards get started in the right direction with a presidential search. This was the way the board at Columbia Theological Seminary chose to go. Shortly after Douglas Oldenburg announced plans to retire from the presidency in June 2000, board members invited Neeley McCarter to lead them in a day-long planning retreat. Harvard tells how McCarter assisted the board in organizing the search process, in shaping the committee, and in developing the charge to the committee. “In that one day, we were able to lay out the time-line for the entire process. The board has asked the committee to bring one candidate to them by early spring. That’s our assignment, and we move forward confident in the trust of our colleagues,” Harvard states.

The opportunity to select a new president — if done right – can be the means by which a board renews its understanding of and commitment to the purpose and work of the seminary. It’s also a time for celebrating past leadership while embracing coming opportunities for change and new possibilities. There’s no need to rush the process. Faithfulness, prayer, and hard work will see the committee through.

The Importance of Keeping Confidences

Recently I was surprised – as I am sure was he – to read in the local newspaper that Pennsylvania’s Secretary of Education, Eugene Hickock, had been nominated for the presidency of Hillsdale College. Over the next few days, the secretary devoted much press time to denying interest in a college presidency and voicing continued commitment to his current job. It’s certain that even if he had entertained thoughts about that particular presidency, a careless word by someone inside the search had shut the door on the possibility. As my grandmother was apt to warn, “Loose lips sink ships.” Casual talk is hard on searches as well.

After long months preparing for the “real” work of selecting a president, it is a relief when applications finally appear. In their excitement, committee members

A FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION

Q. Who should be represented on a presidential search committee?

A. The intimate nature of seminary communities encourages wide representation. In addition to several trustee members, it is usual for seminary presidential search committees to include administrative, faculty, student, alumni, and denominational representatives. In most instances a trustee chairs the committee.

A FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION

Q. What about using a search firm?

A. As competition for top talent has grown keener and the lives of volunteers busier, the use of outside search consultants is on the rise within the seminary community. And increasingly, boards credit the decision to use a consultant as key to a successful search. Nonetheless, this is not a decision to be made lightly. In fact, there are situations where it simply doesn't make sense to bring a search firm into the mix. For example, when candidates must come from within a specific denominational group or where obvious candidates already are known to the institution, there's no point in spending money on a consultant's fee. On the other hand, if the universe from which candidates can be recruited is far reaching and the committee has limited experience with or time for screening and qualifying applicants, a good search firm is usually worth the fee charged.

can be tempted to “brag” about the quality candidates in the pool – the ultimate faux pas in any search. Sam Spencer warns that “confidentiality has to be dunned into the heads of committee members. Leaks can put good candidates at risk,” and especially so within the close-knit world of theological education. Although just getting started with their work, the search committee at Columbia Theological Seminary has gotten the message about keeping mum. “We don't plan to discuss our work beyond the confines of the meeting room,” Chairman Harvard states. “We have a good committee and a high trust level between us and the campus community. That gives us room to do our work quietly and in complete confidence.” It's to be expected that faculty and others (including trustees) will be curious about who's being considered. However, it must be assumed that with the search committee, no news is good news.

A Committee of Suitors

As the search proceeds, out of a stack of fifty to 100 applications, it's likely that less than ten of the would-be presidents will emerge as viable candidates. Of that group, the top two or three prospects may have to be persuaded to let their names stand in the search. It's helpful, then, if at least some members of a search committee are adept at the fine art of romancing candidates. A good consultant can also help in the wooing process. “Bruce Alton, the consultant with whom we worked, was a great help in encouraging candidates to think about their gifts in light of the situation at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago,” Gilbertson recalls. Likewise, at George Fox University, consultant Robert Dingman, was instrumental in bringing a diversity of candidates into the applicant pool. “Bob is well-connected in the circles from which we were seeking candidates. Although we had to push him a bit on women applicants, overall he did a good job for us,” Barry Hubbell, a member of the search committee, states.

With outside counsel or not, in the end it is the committee's task to sort through the applications and decide which of many candidates to pursue. And that means going well beyond the resume and a friendly conversation. What the committee sees on paper and even feels from an interview are useful to the process, but they are not sufficient for a good decision. At some point, it is necessary to ask permission to contact persons not listed as “official” references. This includes the current employer – if that has been off-limits previously – and persons recommended by the original references. Robert Dingman, in his book, *In Search of a Leader: The Complete Search Committee Book*, writes: “If the committee is correct that this is God's [one] for us, a thorough check of references will confirm that fact.”

With presidential searches in a seminary setting, there's more going on than career choices and leadership decisions. Returning again to Larry Greenfield's chapter in *The Good Steward*, we are reminded that “at the heart of the Biblical witness is the notion that a sovereign God calls specific human beings to fulfill particular responsibilities of administering the creation according to God's will and purpose.” Prayer, discernment, and calling all play a part in seminary searches, and most especially when the position being filled is that of president. Nonetheless, it is important that the committee do its best to present the institution in the best possible light. First impressions are important, and this is not the time for false modesty. While the committee will want to be scrupulously honest in its presentation of the seminary, there's nothing wrong with putting the school's best face forward. The institution must look, act, and be worthy of the high caliber leadership being sought.

As the search draws to a close, there are ticklish issues to be addressed – chief among them the issue of salary for the new president. Money is the bane of many a relationship, and no less so in wooing and winning the heart of the committee's first choice candidate. Gilbertson speaks with appreciation of the role the seminary's consultant played with money talk. “Bruce was very helpful in negotiating the compensation package, as was the treasurer of the board,” she recalls. In those situations where a committee must go

it alone in setting salary and other benefits, it is wise to assign a small group from within the search committee to handle the discussion. Their task should include gathering comparative salary data from a selected group of similar seminaries (the Association of Theological Schools can help with this). The chairperson also needs access to the candidate's current salary and benefits. Other details to be addressed once a new president has been selected include a starting date and how and when he or she will be introduced to the campus community.

The search process is a lot like a courtship, with both sides doing their best to win the heart of the other. Indeed, a successful presidential search may be as much about romance as it is about process. Without a doubt, it is about calling and prayer.

The First Day of the Rest of a Presidency

At long last, a president has been selected and with relief, the committee prepares to pack its bags and return to life as usual. But wait. There are important tasks yet to be done. How a search concludes, including the way the board and campus community handle saying good-bye to the departing president and welcoming the new leader, is a harbinger of things to come. A new president should be concerned if a seminary is less than sensitive to the feelings of the previous CEO, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the transition. It's a good idea to establish a separate transition committee to oversee the details of both the going and the coming. In this moment of special change, perhaps more so than at any other time, a seminary community has opportunity to model God's love at work under stress.

A FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION

Q. What should we expect to pay for outside assistance with our search?

A. The costs of working with a consultant vary considerably depending upon what it is a board asks the consultant to do. It is possible to bring a consultant in for a few days at the beginning of the search process to assist the board in laying out the time-line and overall plan of action. This is an inexpensive way to go (\$1,000 to \$2,500 per day of service). A full contract, obviously, costs a lot more, ranging from \$20,000 to \$65,000 and up. As a rule of thumb, the National Center for Nonprofit Boards suggests that organizations hiring a firm to conduct the entire search can expect to pay a fee equivalent to about a third of the annual salary for the position, in addition to other expenses incurred during the search.

A second important detail to which the search committee must give attention is how the new president will be evaluated in the years to come. It may seem less than civil to talk about performance reviews before the person has begun to perform. Yet a clearly defined review process is the best welcome gift the committee can give the newcomer. The National Center for Nonprofit Boards advises: "A new team is being built, and it will be built on clear expectations, mutual respect and trust, and commitment to the values and goals of the organization." It is even better if presidential evaluations are linked to self-assessment on the part of the board. Such a step bespeaks mutual expectations and commitments.

Finally, once the decision has been made and announced, there are left-over housekeeping details to be addressed. It's important to send letters to the other candidates, thanking them for their interest and letting them know the outcome of the search. It's also a nice touch to send thank you letters to persons who nominated candidates to the search. This shows good institutional manners. Care should be taken to clean out and secure all files associated with the search. Confidentiality is as important after the search as it was during the process. The committee chair might be asked to write a summary report of the search process that includes recommendations for a future board to consider when it again becomes necessary to seek a new president. And last, but not least, the committee should gather for a time of celebration and thanksgiving for a search well done.

Leadership within theological schools is a unique and precious calling, and few there are who receive it. Fortunately, as Sam Spencer reminds board members, it only takes one. For Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, that one was James K. Echols; at George Fox University, the man of the moment was H. David Brandt. At Columbia Theological Seminary . . . Well, the final outcome in that search remains with God. And for Joe Harvard and others on the search committee, that's a comforting assurance indeed.

This article appeared in the New Year 2000 issue of In Trust: The Magazine for Leaders in Theological Education.