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Casting About for a President

Everyone seems to believe, in private, that the presidency of a college or university is an impossible job to fill. The usual search committee can agree on the job description, but at the same time they are convinced that (i) whoever they pick will be unworthy of the institution and (ii) they do not want anyone who will ever appear on campus.

Typically, the job description does not acknowledge what everyone knows: no one connected with the institution wants a president to do the job described. The faculty does not want a leader in curriculum reform; the trustees do not want better management if it threatens such pet programs as intercollegiate athletics; and the students do not want to be straightened out by the president—which is what the alumni want him to do.

The characteristics mentioned in the typical job description divide into two clusters, those that would qualify the candidate for canonization and those that would make him a multimillionaire in the business world. However, if no one wants the president to appear on campus except for occasional visits, the second cluster of qualities, the management skills, are irrelevant to the job. That leaves as the crucial qualities required of a new president the humane gifts—sensitivity, awareness, appreciation, flexibility—that make for an effective spokesperson for higher education but have no practical consequence for the day-to-day running of an institution. We may go further and argue that even these qualities are not important for the presidency; here we can follow the advice of Machiavelli that "a prince . . . need not necessarily have all the good qualities . . . but he should certainly appear to have them."

A search committee that accepts the logic of this argument has its job immeasurably simplified: hire an actor as president. The job description might read something like this: "Wanted, character actor with wide experience playing professorial roles. Should be six feet or taller, have slim athletic build, look good in tweeds and casual sport clothes. Some skill in tennis, squash, skiing helpful. Must be able to read aloud with understated deep conviction, memorize parts quickly, have good memory for names, faces, quotations from Shakespeare, enjoy touring. Some possibility of improvisational and ad lib performances after first year."

There are drawbacks to the plan. One is that with so clear a job description for the president, it would be harder to blame him for the inadequacies of the faculty, administration, and student body and harder to keep him happy in uncongenial working conditions. A good actor with a strong script could move from the provinces to the big time very easily.

Also, some colleges might actually recognize that they *need* leadership from a president, that their need is vision rather than appearance. If an institution looking for a president should come to the conclusion that it needs more than a persuasive front man, it will have to eschew the beauties of this plan and try to find someone who genuinely has vision, energy, drive, and capacity to lead. And to persuade such a person to be president, the college will have to explain why anyone with all the required qualities should think of wasting them on a presidency. To demand all those management skills, the institution will have to demonstrate that it is willing and able to be managed; to expect all those good, humane qualities, it will have to demonstrate that it knows how to treat its leaders humanely, that its faculty, students, trustees, and alumni have a modicum of that sensitivity, openness, and understanding being demanded of the new president. And before being able to make demands of the new president, the institution's members will have to answer his question, "What's in it for me?"

On balance, it is probably easier to hire an actor.—PAUL A. LACEY, *Provost, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana 47374*