News and Comment

College Presidents: Study Finds That Techniques for Hunting Them Could Stand a Lot of Improvement

Every year, for one reason or another, some 200 of the country's 2000 or so colleges and universities need new presidents. How do they get them? Well, according to a new study, the process often goes like a TV comedy adapted from Machiavelli.

The study, "How College Presidents Are Chosen,"* points out that in many cases the chief executives of our campuses are chosen with care, intelligence, and a systematic effort to locate and screen promising candidates. But, in the light of statements quoted by the author, Frederick de W. Bolman, it appears that hunting for presidents can often be a bizarre business, involving such things as a nominee who turned out to be dead and a candidate who arranged to sell his house in the mistaken belief that he was to be the next president. And it can be an ugly business, as witness the response of the chairman of a board of trustees which had recently selected a president: What would he do if he had to go through it again? "I'd resign," he said. "I very honestly would never want to live through such an experience again. . . . Exceptional pressures were brought upon members of the board. It was a dirty game, a haphazard game, a game without a rulebook."

Bolman, who conducted the study for the American Council on Education, was president of Jamestown, New York, Community College from 1951 to 1956, president of Franklin and Marshall College from 1956 to 1962, and is now director of special programs for the Esso Education Foundation. His study, based on surveys of 116 institutions that chose new presidents between 1959 and 1962, and on more than 100 confidential interviews, offers a fascinating series of anonymous quotes from the hunters and the hunted. Some examples:

On launching the search.

"Our selection procedure dragged on and on—primarily because R (the retiring President) did not really want to give up his job and therefore did not keep after the board."—A trustee.

"For security reasons, it might be best if a special subcommittee of the board would interview the most likely candidates outside the state."—A new president.

"The press behaved in the worst possible way. The frequent printing of rumors, as well as the constant harassment by reporters, was a significantly disturbing factor. . . . Worst of all, one or two nominees were actually knocked out of the running because they were given too much publicity by the rumor mill and in the press."—A trustee.

"We tried to keep our work secret, but the newspapers printed the names of four persons rumored to be under consideration. Faculty groups began to form behind these persons."—A trustee.

"We even held our meetings in an out-of-the-way location, where no one would recognize the persons whom we called in for interviews. If candidates' names were mentioned in any written material distributed to committee members, the papers were collected at the end of every evening, to guard against anyone's inadvertently carrying anything from the room which might cause a leak."—A trustee.

On the role of the faculty in selecting a new president.

"Let them think they are involved in the actual decision making—but make sure they are advisory only."—The chairman of a board of trustees' executive committee.

"Make sure that you get faculty people who have no desire for the presidency and no likelihood of being named as candidates. Otherwise you will discover that those who would really like to have the job will delete good candidates and tend to sabotage the entire procedure. Having served on two selection committees, I speak with conviction on that point!"—A trustee.

"Our faculty committee offered its services to the board. . . . The board did not call on us until one mid-summer's day; they were already in session. . . . Most of our committee members were out of town, but we did manage to round up three of them. The board gave us 45 minutes; they asked us how we felt the faculty could help them in searching for the new man. Next day, I read in the newspapers that they had selected the new president at that same meeting."—A professor.

Establishing the qualifications.

"Nearly 10 years ago, a member of the board asked me to come to see him. He told me, 'You're the kind of person to be the next president of the university. Now begin to think, dress, and act like it!' I suppose I've been running for the job ever since."—A new president.

"One candidate seemed singularly lacking in interest in financial affairs and particularly in fund-raising. He was looked down upon by both faculty and board members."—A faculty committeeman.

"The fact that one leading candidate was a bachelor constituted a problem. Why hadn't he married? Would campus complications ensue?"—A trustee.

"In one case, a wife completely unsold her husband, in our eyes. He was perfect in many respects. But his wife showed not the slightest interest in the university and was entirely preoccupied with bringing up her children. That was her right, of course, but she simply wasn't the gal to carry on here."—The president of a board of trustees.

Finding the man.

"The members of the faculty selection committee asked the faculty as a whole for nominations. This led to some field fighting. For example, the science faculties began to push for a scientist who would help get research funds from the government. Quickly, the social scientists and humanists on the faculty began to fear such pressure, and they began bringing pressure of their own."—A professor.

"By backdoor methods, we obtained lists of candidates considered by other colleges that were searching for presidents."—A professor.

"We excluded all small-college presidents from the list. They simply would not know how to get government funds for research."—A trustee.

". . . it was important to get an

* Available from the American Council on Education, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20036, 60 pages, $1.

outsider, in order for the faculty to prove to itself that it had the power and the potency to attract a great leader. . . ."—A faculty committeeman.

"One of the persons nominated to our original list was dead, it turned out. A committee member recalled seeing an obituary notice, some time before. Otherwise, there's no telling how long we would have continued to carry the name on our list of serious prospects." —A faculty committeeman.

"While a nominee met with the selection committee, his wife would be taken in tow by the wives of the trustees. They would show her the president's house, the town. . . . And they would evaluate her."—A trustee.

"After one interview, we asked the candidate to leave the room because we had other business to attend to. A little later he knocked on the door. . . . He told us he had just telephoned his home campus, had arranged to sell his house, and had secured the help of friends to pack suitcases and trunks. A most embarrassing moment for the board and for the poor guy, because while he was out of the room we had decided we weren't interested in considering him further."—A trustee.

Bolman offers no simple recipe for filling campus presidencies. "A president who might have been an institution's savior 20 years ago may bring about its ruin today," he states. "Or a man who would be ideal at the helm of one college or university might nearly cause a shipwreck at another." But he offers some guidelines, that are intended to make the selection process less haphazard. He suggests, for example, that, "before launching their search, the trustees should have a full and candid appraisal of the institution at this moment of its history." It should have a clear idea of the role it wants the president to play. And it should seek the faculty's advice, but not before there is a clear understanding of the faculty's authority and responsibility in the selection process. Bolman further suggests that a quest for candidates go far and wide, with names solicited from the heads of other institutions, from educational associations and foundations, and from other persons with "special knowledge of the field of higher education." The faculty and trustees committees, he suggests, should rank the candidates, and then the most likely candidates should be interviewed—preferably away from the campus. Finally, the top two or three candidates should be interviewed on campus before the final recommendations of the trustees and the faculty committees are submitted to the board.

Following Bolman's recommendations would probably improve the selection process at many institutions, but would be unlikely to remove the nonsense, the wheeling and dealing, and the dubious values that mark the presidential hunt at many institutions of higher learning.

The big and middling universities in this country have long since passed the stage where they are simply centers for acquiring and passing along knowledge. Just what is the role of the president at these places and at many of the smaller institutions that would be happy to emulate their growth? There's no easy job description, and this may explain the muddle that often develops when institutions go on a hunt for the man who is supposed to lead the way to preeminence in everything from football to government grants and contracts, without neglecting buildings and grounds, the alumni, the English department, or the parking problem.

—D. S. GREENBERG

Space: Administration Official Says Some Harsh Things about Scientists Opposing Moon Landing

Administration leaders have generally chosen not to engage in public controversy with scientists who question the high priority of Project Apollo, the moon-landing program. The reasons are probably twofold: it doesn't look good for politicians to fight scientists, and an open row would only serve to advertise the critics' arguments. But the sniping from the scientific community has been getting somewhat more intense over the past year, and just a few weeks ago one of the administration's leading space spokesmen, Edward C. Welsh, executive secretary of the National Aeronautics and Space Council, had some unusually harsh things to say about scientists who criticize the space program.

His forum was the New York Academy of Sciences, and though the press speculated that his goad was the anti-Apollo remarks contained in "The Integrity of Science," a report by the AAAS Committee on Science in the Promotion of Human Welfare, Welsh points out that he wrote his speech 4 weeks before the committee presented its report at the AAAS Montreal meeting in December. (The committee, chaired by Barry Commoner, of the University of Washington, St. Louis, criticized a number of government-sponsored research efforts as inimical to the "integrity of science." The Apollo program, it stated, was pursuing a politically inspired technological goal "in advance of the orderly acquisition of the related basic knowledge." And it criticized scientific advisory groups for defending Apollo on the grounds of "national prestige" and other nonscientific values.)

Without referring by name to the object of his criticism, Welch said, "[It] should be noted, that organized science has not always been outstanding for its courage, its vision, or its optimism regarding goals for human efforts. Elements of conservatism, parochialism, and even reactionary thinking do appear among scientists just as they do among many other groups in our society. Many important projects, later proved to be entirely feasible, have been reviewed earlier by distinguished panels of scientists and found wanting."

Continued Welsh: "Regardless of their motivations, the pessimists who cry out against aerospace research and technological endeavors have clearly set themselves against progress." Arguing that "science is only one element among the considerations which should shape policy goals in the field of aerospace," he said that "scientists should not set themselves up to judge the overall value of aerospace missions or aerospace hardware construction by narrowly comparing the dollars spent for space with what those same dollars might accomplish if devoted to other purposes, scientific or otherwise." And he added that, "since space expenditures seek broader goals than those of science, the comparison may well be invalid on the face of it."

Welsh explains that he was speaking for no one but Welsh when he made his remarks, and he described himself "as quite surprised that anyone got excited about what I had to say. I was simply trying to put some of the issues in perspective."

In any case, it would appear to be somewhat far-fetched to conclude that the administration is feeling bothered by scientific picking on the space program. With Lyndon Johnson wholeheartedly for going to the moon and with most of the capital investment for that project already paid for, it is going to take more than a few dissents to inspire Congress to toy with Apollo.—D.S.G.