

# How the **Executive Search Process** Is Failing **Higher Education**

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## Executive Summary

Higher Education is in the midst of the greatest challenges faced since WWII, having suffered eight consecutive years of enrollment declines, resulting in significant downsizing, mergers, and over 1,200 closures in the last ten years. While there are multiple strategies to address the external factors negatively affecting institutions of higher education (IHEs), the most critical element for ensuring that colleges and universities survive and thrive through the current contraction is the quality of their leadership. Unfortunately, the existing executive search model rarely delivers the kinds of dynamic, Game Changing leaders that higher education needs for the current complex, hyper-change, and turbulent operational reality.

Examples of what's wrong include:

- Traditional search firms filter applicant pools rather than broaden them and GameChangers are usually not part of their search process.
- Traditional firms typically utilize junior research staff with zero or little higher ed experience to conduct the initial candidate application reviews and thus fail to identify the most dynamic candidates.
- The search process is not actually aligned with the specific leadership needs of the institution.
- Applicants are discouraged from initial due-diligence conversations and from submitting additional materials that would set them apart (thus eliminating candidates who think differently and do more than the minimum)
- Even senior search consultants rarely have the executive and operational experience of the positions they are recruiting.
- Traditional search firms have weak networks outside of higher ed and often have recruiting restrictions on their networks within higher ed.
- Colleges and universities are very poor incubators for the leaders they need.
- Colleges are culturally and politically adverse to hiring “outsiders” or even insiders with orientations that might challenge the status quo.
- The traditional search process takes far too long (9-12 months).
- Traditional search firms are rewarded for presenting candidates that match existing institutional biases and cultural norms rather than those that actually meet the institutions leadership needs.
- Search personnel often have poor response rates to candidate-initiated contacts.

The broad failure of executive search in education to deliver the kinds of leaders that institutions need is not just a problem of service or value, because it is not simply about filling leadership vacancies. It is about effectively

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addressing an existential crisis and the imperative of presenting colleges and universities with the kinds of leaders they need to not only survive but thrive and build sustainable futures for all stakeholders. Fortunately, there is a better way that can deliver the value and outcomes that IHEs desperately need.

## Introduction

In the last five years I have been closely involved in over three dozen executive searches in higher education as a consultant, advisor, applicant, and search firm client, attempting to fill positions in my own organizations. I can count on one hand the searches that generated the kinds of candidates the institutions needed and truly brought value to the client. I have also had in-depth conversations with mid and senior level leadership in eight different search firms as well as with multiple executive level individuals in higher education institutions and related professional organizations about the search process. In short, it is clear that the typical executive search practice in higher education is broadly broken, compromising the ability of colleges and universities to hire the leaders they actually need.

Of course, some internal recruiting operations and external firms are more effective than others and, as noted above, several of the dozens of searches I had insight into resulted in good outcomes for the clients. On balance, however, as the leadership needs of colleges and universities have become much more complex and the profile of an effective leader has become much less aligned with traditional higher education skills sets, the search process in general has grown less effective. One reason, that has nothing to do with search firms, is that higher education simply does not produce the kinds of leaders in any volume that its institutions broadly need. In fact, the academy is not only a poor incubator for building leadership skills in critical areas such as change management, entrepreneurialism, innovation, risk taking, business acumen, etc., individuals with those profiles are often seen as threatening to the status quo and usually don't last long in academe.

## The Disconnect Between What Colleges Need and Whom They Hire

Earlier this year, the Chronicle of Higher Education hosted a conference about the criticality of an entrepreneurial mindset for effective leadership in contemporary higher education. On one of the panels, Dr. James Koch, professor emeritus at Old Dominion U., noted that, "As I look at colleges and universities today, the leadership tends to not be composed of risk-takers. I think that is a function of the way deans, provosts, and presidents are selected. Any individual out there in the age of Google, who has offended any major constituency, or thought about things in a different way, or has written about things in a different way, is likely not to get selected. They're out. Well, that eliminates a healthy portion of individuals who think entrepreneurial thoughts. I've evaluated perhaps 50 presidents, and that runs as a common string through the institutions that are failing."

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### A Broken Process

Although traditional academic search firms cannot be faulted for the short-comings of a thin internal higher education leadership candidate pipeline, they often make a bad situation worse because their primary function on the front end of searches is *not* to generate broad, diverse applicant pools. It is to *filter people out* using formulaic criteria. There is often a critical lack of imagination causing candidates with powerful backgrounds in stated areas of “game changing” need (vision, strategy, risk taking, innovation, human capital development) to be eliminated due to having less experience in what are commoditized skills (accreditation, facilities, budgeting) or simply because they are not products of the traditional higher education pipeline. Firms also tend to assign junior employees, who have never worked in higher education management or in a higher ed environment at all, and who do not fully understand the demands on leadership in those same environments, to review and filter applications before more senior consultants begin to evaluate them. And, amazingly, even senior consultants and partners often lack C-level experience and operational expertise related to the position being hired. This is not always true, but it is common. Relatedly, search firms have historically almost exclusively sourced candidates from within higher education and their networks outside of higher education (where many of the most qualified candidates are) are usually very weak. Even the typical search firm network within higher education is further limited due to non-competes they have signed related to previous searches! Moreover, although this is not openly stated, search firms are generally rewarded for bringing and placing candidates that validate the client institution’s culture and biases, not that actually meet the leadership needs of the organization.

The combination of these historic factors and those below result in searches that are highly compromised from the beginning and prone to failure from the outset.

### Filtering Out the Best Candidates

I had a conversation with a lower level search firm employee who was assigned to a national search for a president with all of the buzzword qualifications: Innovative, visionary, entrepreneurial, strong people leader, etc., etc. However, it became clear through our conversation that the firm was only entertaining candidates with a STEM background (that was not mentioned in the position announcement). My comment to her was something to the effect that, “you realize that the universe of potential candidates with the stated attributes is far larger if it also includes people without STEM backgrounds. Moreover, the institution is already full of folks with STEM backgrounds. If that’s where the university gets value from the new president, then it’s leaving the lion’s share of potential on the table.” Her answer was simply that the search firm had determined that the institutional culture was so pro-STEM, that they would not accept a new president (and thus candidates) without that background. Like the unwritten STEM requirement, most traditional searches include unwritten requirements that ultimately serve to filter out the most dynamic (and nontraditional) candidates.

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I was speaking to an employee of a search firm representing a community college district CEO search on which I was advising and I asked about the process for submitting materials beyond the basic CV, cover letter, and references noted in the position announcement. I was told, astonishingly, that they would not accept any additional materials because that would not be a “level playing field” for other applicants who had not gone beyond the minimum. (This is a search firm that conducts a huge number of community college searches across the country annually and had shared the same message twice previously.) I suggested to the employee that the Board of Trustees would probably prefer candidates that went beyond the minimum and that, in any case, once hired, the CEO would not operate on anything resembling a level playing field. I have engaged with at least three search firms that regularly deny applicants the opportunity to submit more than the minimum materials. This is most common in searches for public institutions. My guess is that the boards of these institutions do not even know that the search process they’re paying for frequently denies them candidates with the most compelling application materials.

A recent position announcement in the Chronicle of Higher Education said, “To ensure consistency and fairness to all candidates, please do not submit materials other than those requested. Please only upload requested documents using respective document name labels. Uploading extraneous materials, unless specifically requested within this posting, may result in your application not being reviewed.” Another president search, in explaining limits on the length of cover letters actually said, “Consistency between applicants is important to the integrity of the search process.” Really? It is evident that these requirements exist solely to reduce the administrative burden on those who must evaluate applications and *overtly compromise* the goal of generating high quality applicants. In fact, it suggests that creating a diverse and compelling applicant pool is probably not an objective at all! In short, the search process is being sold as a value added, customized service, when it most often functions as a cut and paste commodity.

There is no question that, for some attractive positions, the volume of applicants can be high, and review of applications can be very time intensive. Furthermore, some applications are clearly “Hail Marys” and do not fulfill basic requirements. Having said that, the need to “whittle down” the pile of applications to the number that will be interviewed, often results in poor work and poor judgment. I have personally seen more than one case in which an applicant whose application was discounted out of hand by the search firm, later being hired for the executive position because their materials were shared with the committee separately from the search firm process. A recent example of this was a case in which a search committee member referred to a cover letter as “brilliant” that the search firm *didn’t even read* because it was “too long!”

### A Long, Tedious Process

A related structural problem with most executive searches in higher education that compromises the most dynamic candidates is simply the length and tedium of the process. Both institutions and search firms conspire to create a process that can last a year or even more from initial posting to actually making a hire. A nine-month search is relatively fast and six months is almost unheard of. This matters because the most compelling candidates also tend

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to be the most engaged in other activities and are often from the private sector. Putting candidates through multiple layers of review, often in front of constituents motivated by nearly polemic agendas, and stringing them along for up to a year is simply not feasible for most candidates who are not already employed in other traditional institutions, functioning themselves on an academic calendar. While search firms will argue that this is another example in which they are at the mercy of the institution's calendar, it is still common for those firms to take four or five months to present vetted candidates (through a flawed vetting process, no less).

College and university searches fail to hire the best leaders, even in the rare cases in which the process actually produces the best candidates, because the process simply takes too long. The same phenomenon happens in the private sector, but the dynamic involves weeks, not months.

## Lack of Formal Leadership Assessments

Even if the process were less time consuming, not one of the more than three dozen executive searches I had visibility into involved assessments for leadership style, personality, etc., although one search included an assessment of basic math skills! In the current operating environment, it is simply impossible to identify, let alone hire, the right leaders without a deep understanding of what an institution needs related to its specific strategic, operational, and cultural challenges and opportunities. Search firms and committees often mistakenly believe that the job description addresses the institution's leadership needs (it does not), resulting in candidate reviews that fail to assess applicants' fit with the organization's actual needs and "must haves."

## Lack of Responsiveness to Potential Applicants

Another way in which traditional academic search firms fail their clients is through what is typically very poor responsiveness and follow through. Although anecdotal, in my experience (I've kept track) any communication with a traditional higher education search firm has about a 60% chance of receiving a response. While more than half, that still means that well over a third of outreach is never acknowledged. How many candidates or potential referrals are forever lost due to a simple failure to answer emails and voicemails?! This is particularly problematic because the most sophisticated candidates are unlikely to send "blind" applications without at least an initial discussion about the position being recruited. As with other issues, some firms are very good at responding to and allowing time for inquiries, while others are terrible. However, extrapolating over multiple firms and searches, the 40% non-response rates applies to hundreds of searches over an academic year! Response rates from institutional HR departments are slightly better.

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## Inability to Assimilate the Type of Candidates that Can Deliver Change

Interestingly, I have discussed the significant shortcomings within the executive search process with the leadership of more than half a dozen different firms and they are quite aware of how many searches essentially fail (either the hire does not match the requirements, there is deep dissatisfaction among some stakeholders, or within a couple years of placement, the institution needs a replacement executive). However, they also claim that to the extent to which they circumscribe their presentation of candidates, that is driven by restraints on the institutional side. In other words, according to the search firms, the client institutions claim they want dynamic, game changing executives—but not really. When push comes to shove, the institutions are not culturally ready to hire folks who are missing certain markers of traditional higher education “membership” and whose leadership style and approach might create dissonance among some constituencies. While there may be some truth to the search firm perspective, they are similarly culpable as a result of the candidate filtering process described earlier. Moreover, a primary reason that a client institution would pay significant retainer fees to an “expert” vendor is to increase the likelihood of getting a top rung leader. Imagine if any other vendor charged top dollar, then knowingly delivered a sub-par product! Regardless, while institutions of higher education are broadly able to articulate what they need from executive leadership, they struggle mightily to actually hire those kinds of leaders.

## In House Searches vs. Retained Searches

In my experience, institutions that conduct searches in-house, without a traditional search firm, are far more likely to connect with the kinds of candidates that meet their needs. Of course, it is time and resource intensive, but the absence of the “middle-man” and the concomitant filtering process, seems to result in a much more effective outcome. This seems to be because the folks who are embedded in the organization (and who drafted the position profile) have a much more internalized sense of what the desired candidate actually looks like. Internal searches are also much less likely to bar candidates from submitting more than the minimum in an application. While internal searches are less likely to source candidates who aren’t looking for a new opportunity, that tends to be compensated for by a more effective candidate evaluation process. Importantly, retained (external) searches are not inherently inferior. The problem is the way they are typically conducted. Most executive searches in education would generate better results with the assistance of a search firm if the firm simply followed best practices.

## Short Cuts with Integrity

Although relatively rare, I have also seen search firms communicate information to applicants that is actually false. This has happened in cases in which the firm does not know that I am working directly with the client and therefore have “inside” information. This is more likely to happen on the front end of the process when the firms are looking for ways to tell an applicant why she or he was not selected for an interview or any further evaluation.

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I have also experienced simply false statements about finalists as well, such as when a search partner said that they were no longer reviewing candidates because they had presented finalists to the client, when I knew that the search committee had rejected the finalists and told the firm to restart the search!

### Traditional Vetting Process Turns Away Dynamic Candidates

Although there are statutory and/or regulatory requirements in some public institutions that are unavoidable, the reality is that many of the most compelling candidates simply won't subject themselves to being "outed" as candidates early in the process, putting their current employment and relationships at risk, before they have any confidence about the hiring outcome.

Relatedly, within the context of what is "required" in the vetting process, it is not reasonable to expect candidates to please half a dozen different constituent groups in a "consultative" vetting process that lasts 9 or 12 months or more from application to decision.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, there is growing evidence that the executive search process in Higher Education is simply broken, with little evidence that traditional search firms and those responsible for recruiting senior leaders at colleges and universities are actively resolving these issues. More worrisome is that there seems to be little accountability for failed searches or bad hires and they seem far too complacent with the status-quo in the midst of the greatest challenges faced since WWII.

This is not exclusive to higher education, but is particularly acute in the academy. We see this in the dramatically decreasing average tenure of higher education chief executives: from about 12 years down to 6 (it's actually lower than 6 years if we include interim placements and institutional closures) and the number of searches that "fail" outright in the sense that the client institution has to engage a subsequent search for a filled position within a couple of years or less. It is also becoming much more common for searches to be "extended" because the process simply doesn't produce enough adequate candidates. A recent review of community college searches on the Chronicle of Higher education, for example, showed that nearly a quarter had been extended beyond the initial deadlines. As an interesting aside, the search firms report in their conversations with me that they are as "busy as ever," but that is not for good reasons—it is in response to the high level of executive turnover and "failed" searches.

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## Why Failure Matters

The current reality is not just an “annoyance” or an expensive, less-than-ideal situation. It is profoundly problematic because the search process is broadly failing at precisely the time in which institutions of higher education desperately need dynamic leaders with the skills and traits to navigate complex, hyper-change, and even turbulent environments. It is an existential risk factor for all of academe and is likely contributing to the growing number of mergers, closures, and downsizing across the higher education landscape.

## A Better Way

So, what must change to right the executive search process for Higher Education?

- First, within higher education institutions, there must be a significant cultural shift resulting in a fundamental openness to nontraditional candidates that are not members of the club and that don't look like the people hiring them.
- Second, search firms have to actually provide the value-added, customized service that they are selling and, critically, they must completely change the front end of the process from filtering out candidates to creating a broad and diverse pool that actually reflects the needs of the client.
- Third, searches must be conducted from the beginning by partners who are actually operational experts at the level they are recruiting, producing genuinely dynamic executive candidates.
- Fourth, the vetting process for candidates must be more respectful of confidentiality, more streamlined, and much shorter.
- Fifth, higher education must produce a better pipeline of talent. This is a long-term proposition to produce far more internal candidates with the appropriate skills, experience, and orientations relevant to contemporary leadership needs. That is a profound structural and cultural challenge, but ultimately, the academy cannot meet the volume of its leadership needs without a robust pipeline of both internal and external candidates.

## Summary

While the traditional executive search process is broadly failing higher education, it doesn't have to be that way. There are best practices, that if employed by search firms and educational institutions, will generate GameChanging candidates, providing the leadership that IHEs need in these very challenging times. As noted previously, executive search is not simply about filling vacancies. It's about contributing to solving an existential crisis in higher education, of which leadership is a key component.

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