

## *Book Review*

**Judith Block McLaughlin and  
David Riesman.**

***Choosing a College President:  
Opportunities and Constraints.***

**Princeton, NJ: Carnegie  
Foundation for the Advancement  
of Teaching, 1990, 377 pp.**

Among the current spate of books that have been published on academic life in America, this volume is well worth reading. Presidential searches up to this point have been largely unexamined; the subject is therefore a timely one that deserves scholarly attention. Sharp and perceptive in their analysis, the authors provide a balanced and comprehensive treatment of this phenomenon based on their pioneering work in this field. The book is written by two scholars whose experience and observation are more than enough to give them something of an insider's perceptiveness. Drawing on numerous in-depth illustrations, they explain why searches are important and why many of them go awry.

When a college or university president departs from office, a critical period of transition ensues with the academic community spending a great deal of time and emotional energy trying to find a suitable successor. Looking for the particular kind of leadership required is a very challenging and difficult assignment. Because the presidency is conceived to be the cardinal position in the academic enterprise, and as such the initiating and driving force in the decision-making process, the trustees view the selection of a new president as their ultimate responsibility. Within the total scheme of things, it is probably the single most important act that they perform. For their part, it is a thoughtful exercise in judgment; nothing is more steeped in institutional protocol or more sensitive politically. Consequently, the search for a chief executive officer is accorded top priority and shrouded in relative secrecy.

As the authors point out, there is no magic formula for conducting a presidential search. A lot depends upon the innate wisdom and collective experience of those involved. The procedures are fairly simple and straightforward. Ideally, the board of trustees appoints a broadly representative search committee, whose primary function is to identify a pool of potential prospects and narrow the field to a slate of finalists. Consultants who specialize in executive recruiting are often hired to help in this endeavor. If compliance with affirmative action does not always place the competition on a level playing field, it occasionally gives constituencies the opportunity to make the claim of virtue by recommending either a woman, a black person, or a Hispanic person. Adherence to the sunshine laws in various states guarantees the openness of the search, but these statutes generally create more problems than they solve. The search committee, which is advisory in nature, makes its recommendations to the appointing authority. In the last stages of deciding among the serious contenders, the governing board selects the person who, in their judgment, is best suited for the job.

Few searches work out perfectly. Many, if not most, are beset with tensions and controversy. Much can go wrong, and it often does. Mistakes and unforeseen circumstances are almost bound to occur. Some searches are disrupted by leaks to the press and the hazards of premature publicity, while others suffer from political intrusion and manipulation. Some suffer from the folly and foibles of human judgment, usually ending in dismal failure. This is what happens when the trustees pick the wrong candidate, who will inevitably prove unsuitable. Still other searches are notably successful, resulting in an admirable choice that satisfies nearly everyone. Failures are dramatic and illuminating, but successes add to understanding.

In conducting research for their book, McLaughlin and Riesman investigated more than two hundred presidential searches. During the ten years of their collaborative effort, they interviewed

numerous presidential candidates and search committee members, including trustees, faculty, students, and alumni. Their comparative study covers a broad spectrum of American colleges and universities—public, private, large, and small—along with a good geographical spread. What sparks the book are the many enlightening questions that the authors have asked and answered about the search process. These give the reader some perspective about how members of the search committee are chosen, what committee size is most desirable, what procedures help prevent breaches of confidentiality, and how search committees go about selecting a consultant and evaluating candidates. The chapter dealing with the impact of sunshine laws underscores how detrimental such legislation can be to the outcome of a given search. Not only are good candidates sometimes forced to withdraw from the competition, but the premature disclosure can also be potentially harmful to their careers. Searches conducted in the state of Florida provide an excellent case in point.

Although the authors insist that theirs is not a “how-to-do-it” manual, the book is filled with practical advice reinforced with theoretical analyses. Furthermore, they provide us with five detailed case studies of actual searches, which they use to illustrate as vividly as possible the human dramas, political struggles, and moral dilemmas involved. Throughout, McLaughlin and Riesman skillfully weave their case illustrations from the interviews of prominent figures as well as from search documents and memoranda, correspondence, contemporary newspaper stories, and informed personal accounts. Frequently, they incorporate additional testimony provided them privately by the participants themselves—thus enriching their narrative with exclusive, behind-the-scenes insights that give the book an edge of realism that otherwise might not be there.

It is natural then to ask: Do searches really make a difference? This central question is addressed squarely by the authors. They frame their question more broadly by asking a series of other questions:

Just as there is argument as to whether presidents make a difference, so there

is corresponding debate as to whether searches matter. Can a search be organized so that it will identify the person most appropriate for the institution? Does a “good” search produce a “good” president? Or is the outcome of a search basically random? Is the search merely a ceremonial activity, having little or no bearing on the quality of the person selected as its conclusion?

The answers to these questions convey important messages about the obligations of trustees to each other and to the faculty, students and alumni; but moreover, they require us to think hard about the role of the search itself. How does one predict the future leadership potential of a particular candidate? The relative effectiveness of a president’s leadership involves such things as his personal qualities, his formal or informal authority, his communication skills, the reputation he acquires, his ability to raise funds, and the respect he commands both inside and outside the academic community. The president’s role is enormously varied, especially at a public university with a multicampus system. Whether a president will prevail in a dispute over policy (or even whether he or she will be significantly involved) is the result of a subtle combination of factors, not of any single determinant.

Even under the best of circumstances, a president’s life is very difficult and demanding. There is the busy daily schedule, the constant fiscal and political pressures, and the never-ending social and speaking engagements that intrude upon one’s personal life. Some incumbents do not last long in the position. Burnout and political interference are the principal factors that account for the high rate of turnover. These aspects of the problem make the search doubly difficult.

Searching for someone with the “right stuff” is somewhat akin to following the yellow brick road while trying to find the Wizard of Oz. Given the stresses of a presidency, the rapid turnover, and the paucity of capable and experienced leaders who are willing to assume such a position, the task is not easy. The axiom that “it takes leadership to find leadership” certainly

applies. By definition, those who serve on search committees must be good judges of people. Even so, they are bound to view candidates differently and to have different perceptions of the qualities most desired in a new president. In practice, they find it hard to arrive at consensus, which is one reason why small search committees are preferable to larger ones.

The search process is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. This activity has many salutary effects in energizing trustees, faculty, students, and alumni. A presidential transition provides them with a unique opportunity for institutional learning. They must examine the problems and priorities the institution faces, consider what sort of leadership is desired, and evaluate the credentials and experiences of candidates accordingly. There are dangers, however. The most important of these is outside political interference that may rob the academy of its autonomy. There is also a tendency to look for an absence of negatives in candidates rather than the presence of positives, which leaves the search committee guessing about the candidates' real strengths and weaknesses.

Circumstances and constituencies change between presidential successions. So even when we want to do better, we know less than we should about what works and why. And what works in the private sector does not necessarily work in the public sphere. Seeking an appropriate balance between process and outcome is a constant but healthy challenge. In the end, of course, that is what really matters: the pivotal question is not what mistakes we have made in the past, but what we have learned from them. On these and other issues, McLaughlin and Riesman offer some sober advice:

We believe that the search matters, both for its process and for its outcome. This is not to suggest that there is an inevitable connection between the success of the search process and the success of the person chosen by that process. As in all other human enterprises, consequences are not necessarily related to intentions. A search conducted with wild irrationality may nevertheless

produce an effective candidate, while another search conducted according to what is generally considered good practice may end up with a disappointing blowhard, a charismatic faker, or a secret alcoholic. What is optimal, however, is both a good search process and a successful selection.

Social scientists in general and political scientists in particular will want to plumb the underlying assumptions of this book. It covers a wide range of topics including university governance, leadership, authority, the dynamics of small group behavior, and so forth. The key to a successful search depends to a large extent upon the "representativeness" of the process and the participation of the major stakeholders. To quote McLaughlin and Riesman again, "Like perhaps no other event in the life of an institution, the search for a president reveals the politics, protocols, and promise of the American academic enterprise." Even more revealing is the distribution of power among the major players and constituencies. Depending upon how this power gets played out, the outcome will be influenced accordingly.

One final comment. Choosing a *College President* offers not a cram course on searches, but rather a candid, thought-provoking primer on the ways to use experience and to determine how best to make decisions that will lead to a productive search. For those who seek to govern, to manage, and to exercise authority in this area of academic life, the book imparts important lessons. To the extent that the case materials provide for broad understandings of the search process, they are valuable for heuristic purposes. While exploring this genre of work, McLaughlin and Riesman have produced a masterpiece of craft. In sum, they have set a high standard for others to emulate. Theirs is an exemplary landmark study.

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