

REIMAGINING

The Academic Leader Search Process



Search Well: Creating Search Committees Built to Succeed

Today, academic search committees face complex challenges, both internally and externally, including confronting unconscious bias, navigating group dynamics, and attracting strong candidates. It is time to reimagine how search committees do their work.

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Being on an academic search committee can be positive, onerous, or daunting. Your experience is heavily dependent on the constituency from which you were appointed, your role within the institution, and your familiarity with search processes.

There's more to the search process than meeting behind closed doors in boardrooms, asking a set of predetermined questions, or taking candidates on tour. The collective wisdom and diverse insights of the search committee are essential to its functioning. Yet search committees often come together without having a history of previous collaboration, constructive discussion, or success in making challenging decisions.

Clients tell us that group dynamics add complexity to the already complicated task of serving on a search committee. Committee members may not know one another and may have very different experience and levels of understanding of the role they are being asked to help fill.

Search committees can be derailed by bias, a lack of understanding of their role, or a desire to reach a speedy decision.



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Search committees are often advisory to the committee chair, who uses committee input to make a recommendation for approval by the institution's governance bodies. Search committees can be derailed when members don't understand their advisory role and assume that they are the ultimate decision makers.

Having led more than 150 leadership searches for universities and colleges nationwide in the last five years, we have witnessed firsthand that search committees function best when they take the time to establish how members will work together, including consideration of the committee's decision-making processes. The objective is to ensure that members build rapport and come together as a team while concurrently engaging in the foundational planning work of the search to allow the process to proceed in a timely and efficient manner.

Clients tell us that the intricacies of the search process can feel overwhelming.

In order to effectively prepare search committees, open dialogue and regular touch points should be designed into the process. It is not enough to send out documentation for search committee members to read. Part of building rapport among members is the opportunity to engage in conversation about the process. Roles must be clear, and expectations around the committee's role must be managed. In our experience, search committees are more successful when those leading the search process take time to:

- Develop a search plan that outlines how members will work together
- Discuss the approach to decision making in preliminary search committee meetings
- Address confidentiality and conflict of interest guidelines early to avoid issues later
- Establish a search communications protocol identifying who responds to queries or to candidates
- Review the expectations for soliciting faculty feedback and develop a plan to attain it
- Review search timelines
- Offer training or coaching to those who may be new to the process

The search committee chair plays a key role in managing the dynamics and pace of the search committee. Faster is not necessarily better, despite the urgency that committee members may feel. Clearly articulating committee roles, processes, timelines, and desired outcomes can be helpful in managing dynamics and ensuring committee members are realistic about the time required to make the right decision. This clarity benefits all, particularly those who have not been part of a search committee process before.

The committee chair has additional important responsibilities, in setting the tone for how meetings will be held, helping manage group dynamics, ensuring a safe space to deliberate, and encouraging equitable participation. Creating a safe space can take many forms, depending on the preferred approach and style of the committee chair, but at its most basic

can start with contacting members by phone or email to personally welcome them to the role and thank them for their time.

Preliminary meetings can be helpful in tabling topics before the more formal deliberative process begins. Search committee members may have questions about their role, handling confidential information, or how to conduct interviews. Reinforcing that conversations and discussions will remain confidential, that all questions and comments are welcomed, and that the voice of each committee member is valued are messages that can be used to establish a safe committee space.

Our experience tells us how vital it is to ensure that all those at the deliberation table feel that they have a voice. The search committee chair should be checking for who is speaking and who is quiet. Who is dominating the conversation? Are there opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback? Students and community or external members often report feeling intimidated by the academics at the table and are hesitant to ask questions or make comments. One way to encourage the free flow of dialogue is to conduct a roundtable check with each member. In this way, everyone has an opportunity to be heard and it reduces the risk of the conversation being dominated by a few participants.

Clients tell us that the intricacies of the search process, including ensuring the highest levels of confidentiality and managing the dynamics of internal versus external candidates, can sometimes feel overwhelming for committee members. Successful search committees stay the course. The “no failed search” clause featured in many search firm contracts should not absolve the search committee of its role in

making good and fair decisions. This requires investing the time, and being open for frank discussion, feedback, and thoughtful consideration of candidates in order to achieve a successful outcome.

In a recent candidate survey conducted by KBRs, candidates revealed that part of their decision to pursue an opportunity included the make-up of the search committee and the level of confidentiality of the process. Search committee members may have formed a bond as a result of the process and may feel comfortable discussing the process outside the privacy of the meeting room. It should be reinforced that any information that is shared has the potential of derailing the search process. Imagine an internal candidate finding out in a coffee lineup that five people are being interviewed. This kind of information leakage can cause candidates to doubt the integrity of the selection process, and underscores the importance in maintaining confidentiality throughout the entire search process – even after the search has concluded.

Our experience tells us that managing bias requires open, honest dialogue.

One often overlooked factor for the search committee to consider is that it is serving as a first point of contact between potential future leaders and the institution. The way candidates are treated by committee members can help applicants decide whether your institution is a place they want to be. As much as the search committee is assessing the candidate on a number of criteria, so too is the candidate evaluating

the institution and its leadership. Given this dynamic, factors such as body language, tone of questioning, and interpersonal interaction should be considered by the search committee.

The committee must align its approach to attracting and assessing candidates with the principles of equity, transparency, and fairness that are fundamental in the academic context and to the broader institutional mission.

The selection process can be fraught with varying points of view and this is when bias can creep in, whether conscious or unconscious. Whose voice dominates search committee deliberations? Is it the tenured faculty member or a department chair? How do you ensure that student voices are equitably considered? How do you make certain the selection process is not biased in favour of an internal candidate or a potential leader who has had a previous relationship with the institution?

Managing bias requires open, honest dialogue about what to watch for and how to do it. Bias can start before the committee is formed, with deliberations around who gets to serve. The pesky issue of fit can influence deliberations and decisions, with search committee members being selected in order to avoid confrontation and to maintain status quo. Search committee outcomes often reflect this reality.

How can you effectively address bias at the outset of the search process?

- Provide coaching and training on the impacts of bias

- Share perspectives openly and with as much evidence as possible
- Listen to understand; avoid making rash judgements
- Allow everyone to speak
- Be open to changing your mind; practice critical self-awareness
- Commit to reaching unanimity but be open to achieving consensus
- Be aware of the institution's commitments around equity, diversity, and inclusion
- Clarify and widely communicate the ideal candidate profile early in the process
- Remain focused on the selection criteria in all decision-making

In some cases, the provision of training and guidelines to support diverse and inclusive committee discussions is initiated by the search committee chair in collaboration with an institution's human resource leadership. Increasingly, executive search firms like KBRS offer committees the training and guidance needed to manage potential biases in decision-making.

Serving on a search committee can be a rewarding experience, especially when a committee's work results in a successful leadership hire. The decision to participate in this complex process should be taken with due consideration to how your role and contribution on the search committee will positively influence decisions and outcomes and help move the institution forward.





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Diversity champion, strategic advisor and Academic Search Partner with KBRs, Amorell Saunders N'Daw has extensive experience as a senior administrator with one of Canada's largest universities. She has provided search and recruitment leadership and support to academic institutions and not-for-profit organizations. During a 12-year career at the University of Toronto Scarborough, Amorell served on hiring committees across multiple departments, providing advice about making the recruitment process more inclusive and diverse.

OUR TEAM IS COMMITTED TO YOUR ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP SUCCESS.

KBRs has been a strategic talent advisor to universities and colleges across Canada for more than 40 years. Our approach is shaped by four important principles: our deep understanding of academic leadership, our ability to facilitate strong committee decisions, our exceptional candidate care, and our commitment to successful long-term partnerships. Over the past five years, our firm has conducted more than 150 leadership searches for universities and colleges nationwide.

One of Canada's largest independently owned executive search firms, we pair the flexibility and focus of a boutique firm with the research and rigour expected of a multinational organization. Our team of partners and recruitment professionals focused on academic search are informed by an Academic Advisory Council of past-presidents of Canadian universities and colleges.

We work in partnership with Lee Hecht Harrison Knightsbridge, which has 27 offices across Canada and is affiliated with Knightsbridge Amrop's 80 offices in 50 countries, giving us both local presence and global reach.



Join the conversation. We are committed to working with our clients to improve the academic leadership search process ingrained in today's institutions and know that change takes time and collaboration. We believe our efforts will be strengthened by the contribution of diverse perspectives, including yours. We want to learn more about your experiences with the search process and to discuss ways to further improve the approach. What challenges are you facing? What successes have you had? What insights have you gained? We invite you to connect with our Academic Search Partners at Reimagining@KBRs.ca.

Read more. Find our *Reimagining the Academic Leader Search* series at www.kbrs.ca/reimagine

