

Getting the Big Hires Right

Thomas J. Pfaff explores what is causing executive leaders in academe to leave their positions so quickly and why their replacements so often come from outside the institution.

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One out of six provosts lasts no more than a year on the job. As many as **half** of them stay in the position for only two to five years. Deans **average around just four years**. Presidents have dropped from seven years to under five, **with four recently dismissed** with little warning, each with no more than four years on the job.

Meanwhile, more than 80 percent of college presidents are **external hires**. By way of contrast, only about **30 percent of CEO hires** for major corporations are external hires, and some people believe that even 30 percent is too high.

Higher education is a long-term endeavor that is almost entirely dependent on human capital. It is difficult for short-term leaders to plan for the long haul and develop the human relationships and trust necessary for effective leadership. What is causing executive leaders in academe to leave their positions so quickly? And why do their replacements so often come from outside the institution?

The positions themselves may be flawed, but the hiring process may also be a good part of the problem. Academe appears to have an inherent bias in favor of external candidates and against internal ones, whose strengths may be in potential more than credential. But the skills required to be an effective college administrator are similar to those of business leaders. According to Claudio Fernández-Arújo, a senior adviser at a global executive search firm, in the *Harvard Business Review*:

"As business becomes more volatile and complex, and the global market for top professionals gets tighter, I am convinced that organizations and their leaders must transition to what I think of as a new era of talent spotting -- one in which our evaluations of one another are based not on brawn, brains, experience or competencies, but on potential."

Just as with business managers, the job of a dean, provost or president is increasingly changing and always complex, and past experience or credentials may not be a predictor of future success. In the same article, Fernández-Arújo puts forth five key qualities of "high potentials," or those who are likely to succeed as they move up in an organization: motivation, engagement, curiosity, insight and determination. In hiring in higher education, the focus should be more on these potentials than on particular credentials, acknowledging the fact that internal candidates have advantages -- especially if they are identified early and their potential is fostered within the academy.

Motivation. According to Fernández-Arújo, a leader is ideally motivated by "big collective goals," "shows deep personal humility" and is invested in "getting better at

everything they do." He observes that "if someone is driven purely by selfish motives, that probably won't change." Given short tenures and consistent movement, external hires often appear to be motivated more toward their next step and less invested in their current institution.

That stands in stark contrast to faculty members, even non-tenure-track faculty, who often spend 30 or more years at the same institution. It is possible that working to develop leadership talent among such faculty members would result in leaders who are more likely than external hires to be motivated by moving the institution forward, while also having longevity in the position. That, in turn, could lead to greater trust and more positive relationships between faculty and administrators.

Engagement. The enterprise of higher education depends heavily on personal interactions among faculty, staff, students and administrators, and it needs leaders who can connect with and motivate people. In short, higher education is a human capital business where feelings and morale matter. A single poor high-level administrator who creates negative feelings on the campus has a lasting impact, even long after that person leaves.

Internal candidates offer clear advantages over external candidates in that they have networks already in place, they don't need a year just to get to know their colleagues, they are fully aware of the history left by past administrators, and their own strengths and weaknesses are largely known to the campus. That allows a qualified internal hire to more quickly build and leverage the human capital necessary for leadership. Internal hires are also likely to be perceived as committed to the long-term, thus providing an incentive for the campus community to invest in them. Regardless of the candidate, the hiring process should involve asking candidates how they will engage the campus community and connect with people.

Curiosity. People tend to believe that external hires will bring fresh new ideas to the campus, yet often such hires simply bring knowledge of their past institution's

practices. That can result in changes that reflect a former institution, rather than those that fit the college's current time, place and culture. In fact, internal candidates are more likely to understand aspects of the institution that need to change. If curious and open to candid feedback, they will seek new paths for the campus they've long served that fit its goals and mission.

How do we identify curious candidates? Just because a candidate is a good scholar in their field does not mean they are broadly curious, nor does a long list of publications in a narrow area of interest. While a curriculum vita that is broad in both scholarly expertise and types of activities is a starting point, thoughtful interview questions are even more important.

In an interview, for example, candidates should be asked about the most recent books they have read rather than those they have written. Plenty has been written on the importance of reading and continuous learning. John Rampton has reported in *Entrepreneur*, [for example](#), that:

["During his five-year study of more than 200 self-made millionaires](#), Thomas Corley found that they don't watch TV. Instead, an impressive 86 percent claimed they read -- but not just for fun. What's more, 63 percent indicated they listened to audiobooks during their morning commute."

A key goal of any executive search should be to identify candidates who read beyond their academic discipline.

Hobbies and interests matter, too, as curious people are not just curious at work. For example, the *Rebels at Work* essay, ["The Rebel Gardener"](#), describes the connection between what is learned as a gardener and the skills required as a leader. External candidates may be just as curious as internal candidates, but an institution that wants

to develop a pipeline of future administrators can identify curious internal candidates earlier in their careers and give them opportunities to grow into leadership positions.

Insight. Insightful leaders are able to draw unusual connections from their engagement with the community in ways that provide distinct solutions to problems. Internal candidates again have a considerable advantage in having had time to get to know the institution's culture while seeing the challenges it faces. Insight requires time and reflection, and having been a longstanding member of a community contributes to having insight about how the place is functioning.

Interviews should strive to determine how reflection is part of a candidate's regular work. How do they allow their brains to process? During long walks, yoga or even a commute? How do they seek and obtain honest feedback from others?

Determination. A candidate's vita lists experiences and accomplishments, but rarely does it clarify how goals were accomplished. Solving difficult problems takes time, investment and commitment, and candidates who move from one big position to the next in a few short years simply lack the time to demonstrate the level of determination needed to do difficult jobs. Colleges are long-term endeavors and instantiating change takes a lengthy horizon.

A candidate's demonstrated determination predicts their ability to complete goals that may take many years to achieve. In other words, effective administrators ideally have a patient determination combined with a desire to stay at an institution over the long haul to see their goals completed. Asking candidates about a long-term project in which they worked to achieve change amid resistance should also be a standard part of any executive interview.

Hiram College president Lori Varlotta demonstrates the traits I've outlined in her [essay](#), "Getting Out to Learn What's Going On." She makes the case for

scheduling most of her meetings in other people's offices instead of her own, observing that "this roving leadership brings about personal and institutional benefits alike." In the article, she exhibits a sense of curiosity and insight through comments such as, "You can hear the darnedest things when sitting in the lobbies of the admissions, financial aid or athletics offices waiting for the dean, vice president or director with whom you routinely meet." Reviewing a vita and asking the usual questions about experience is insufficient to identify a leader who uses this type of approach to get to know their campus.

Internal candidates are often more likely to possess the five traits I've described and be able to align them with the institution's goals. More important, colleges can identify people with these traits sooner, and then foster and develop them in preparation for future roles at the institution. That will lead to **better administrative hires**, because -- again in Fernández-Aráoz's words:

"What makes someone successful in a particular role today might not tomorrow if the competitive environment shifts, the company's strategy changes, or he or she must collaborate with or manage a different group of colleagues. So the question is not whether your company's employees and leaders have the right skills; it's whether they have the potential to learn new ones."

Beyond this, internal candidates have other advantages, as executive recruiter Lucy Apthorp Leske notes in "**Hiding in Plain Sight**," such as a faster learning curve, continuity and stability, and cost and time savings if an external search is forgone. It is especially notable that institutions often lose well over a year of progress when an administrator leaves and the position isn't filled for months, as is usually the case for deans, provosts and presidents.

Institutional administrators should pay more attention to identifying and fostering internal talent by encouraging people who have the desired traits to take on new roles,

attend leadership development conferences and read a wide range of books on effective leadership. Current leaders must also encourage search committees to think more about potential and less about experience: who the person is matters more than the list of achievements on their vita.

The potential payoff of this perspective is that you will hire more administrators who have the potential to grow and change, understand the history of the place, demonstrate the curiosity and determination to effect change, and are committed over the long term to the good of the institution.

Bio

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