

Education  
Services and  
Leadership  
Development



# Conducting a Successful CEO Search



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COLLEGE LEAGUE  
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Selecting the district's chief executive officer is one of the board's most important responsibilities. The CEO occupies the central role in a community college district. As the agent of the board and the embodiment of its authority, she or he is the most powerful and influential individual in the campus community, as well as the representative in the community of the district's values and mission.

Because the outcome of the selection process is so important, it should never be taken lightly or conducted in haste. The entire district—and particularly the board—will benefit from a comprehensive and thoughtful process that involves the appropriate constituencies of the institution and community and clarifies goals and priorities. Such a process allows the board to select a person it can support fully and establishes a foundation that enables the new leader to be effective.

The responsibility for the search process lies solely with the district board. The following material is provided to assist boards in conducting a search that best suits the individual needs, culture, and circumstances of the district.

The information describes the search for a chancellor or superintendent/president. Searching for a college president in a multi-college district is discussed at the end of the document.

## The Process

Laying a strong foundation for an excellent search begins by thoroughly planning the process to be used and exploring the type of leadership needed by the district. The search

process should be designed to hire the person who can best meet the particular needs of the district. The most common mistake boards make during a CEO search is acting too quickly and not giving adequate thought to what the district needs in a new leader. Boards should allow six to nine months for the entire process.

The following are important to address in developing the process:

- The process is acted on and controlled by the board. It includes broad and meaningful representation from interested constituencies.
- The timeline for the process is clearly communicated and allows for a comprehensive search and selection.
- All stakeholders are knowledgeable about the steps in the process and the responsibilities and authority of the board, consultant, and search committee.
- The search results in a broad, diverse pool of candidates.
- All candidates are treated graciously and fairly.
- The newly appointed chief executive has the opportunity to begin with a strong base of support.

## The Timeline

The timeline for the process should allow for sufficient time to recruit a substantive pool of applicants and assess candidates. However, after people are invited for interviews, time is of the essence. Decisions must be made quickly to protect the candidates and the district's interests. Lengthy intervals between interviews and decisions may result in the withdrawal of excellent candidates.



The process can take six to nine months, although the length of the search may vary considerably from district to district. Rough estimates of the times it may take to do different tasks are listed below. The tasks may overlap and are not necessarily sequential.

- Find and appoint an interim (if necessary): 2 – 6 weeks
- Hire a consultant: 4 – 6 weeks
- Design the process: 2 – 4 weeks
- Assess district needs and develop the job description: 4 – 6 weeks
- Appoint a search committee: 2 – 4 weeks
- Advertise and recruit: 6 – 12 weeks
- Screen applications: 2 – 3 weeks
- Determine who to invite for further review: 2 – 4 weeks
- Conduct first round of interviews and other assessments: 1 – 2 weeks
- Check references: 1 – 3 weeks
- Conduct final round of interviews and other assessments: 1 - 2 weeks
- Make the selection: 1 – 2 weeks
- Negotiate the contract: 1 – 2 weeks
- Notify other candidates: 1 – 2 weeks
- Welcome, orient, and support the new CEO: ongoing

## Cost and Budget

The cost of the search should be viewed as an investment in the success of the college. Consultant fees generally range from \$25,000 to \$160,000. Some consultants charge a fixed price, where others have a sliding scale depending on the financial resources of the institution.

In addition to consultant costs, expenditures may include advertising, candidates' interview expenses, and visits to candidates' home bases. Because the emphasis should be placed on securing the right person for the job, the board should be willing to allocate whatever expenditures are considered reasonable and necessary.

## Appointing an Interim CEO

There are a number of circumstances where it is necessary or preferable to appoint an interim CEO to serve between the time that the current CEO leaves and a new, permanent CEO begins. The most common circumstance is when the departure date of the incumbent CEO does not allow enough time to do a careful search. Many CEOs are able

to announce their retirement or plan to leave for a new position well in advance of their actual departure date; however, it is not usual for vacancies to occur relatively quickly, creating a time gap between the incumbent's departure and the new CEO's starting date.

Even when there is sufficient time between an announcement and the departure date, there may be circumstances that cause a board to appoint an interim CEO as a transitional leader. Having an interim CEO may be appropriate when the incumbent CEO has been a very strong and/or long time leader. There may need to be a significant period of time without a permanent CEO to allow the district to explore the culture and needs of the district and to avoid having the past leadership styles and the incumbent CEO overly influence the job description for the next leader. An interim CEO may provide a neutral environment in which the college community and board can define what type of leadership they need and conduct a search for that person.

Although interim CEO appointments may be made relatively quickly the process should comply with Title 5, Section 53021. Other basic questions to be considered are:

- What skills should the interim chief executive possess? What role will he or she play?
- How long should the interim be expected to serve? Should the board appoint an interim for a year or so who is asked to achieve certain goals, or should the interim be appointed just until the search can be completed?
- Should the interim CEO be appointed from within or hired from outside the institution? If from the outside, should a firm that specializes in providing interim executives be used?
- Should the board require the candidates for the interim position to disavow interest in the permanent position?

CEO search firms will assist boards to identify an interim CEO. Most observers of the process believe it wise not to appoint a person who could possibly be a candidate for the permanent position. By doing so the board may subject itself to criticism that the search and selection process for the new CEO was never truly open and fair.

Many interims are retired CEOs with successful track records or senior administrators with no interest in the top job at that district.

## The Consultant

The complex and highly structured process involved in seeking a new chief executive requires that it is managed by someone who has the necessary time, expertise, and knowledge of potential candidates. The decision whether to employ a consultant or to rely on district staff is best made at the very onset of the search. If the board decides to use a consultant, the person chosen can assist the board in parts or all of the phases of the search.

### Pros and Cons of Using a Consultant

Should a district hire a consultant to help the board and others with the search? Arguments against using a consultant include:

- Districts with good reputations will have the ability to attract a broad pool through their own recruiting efforts.
- The cost of a consultant may create negative reactions in the community and in the district.
- Strong consultants may “take over” the search process.
- An unethical consultant can manipulate the process so as to advance the consultant’s friends or professional cronies, or to eliminate others.
- Over-dependence on consultant may lessen committee and board involvement in final choice.
- A consultant may not have necessary understanding of the history and culture of an institution.
- It may be difficult to oversee the work of the consultant and to assure that work is being done.
- Unethical consultants may recruit people that may not be viable candidates for a particular district in order to have a sufficient number and a broad demographic mix of finalists.

The benefits of hiring a consultant include the professionalism, experience and contacts that good consultants bring to the process, thereby relieving district personnel, who are already very busy and are likely inexperienced in executive search, from this major and important responsibility. A well-connected consultant can often provide important information to decision-makers on the strengths and weaknesses of candidates not normally found on an application or uncovered in an interview. The help of a respected consultant with national and statewide contacts to recruit outstanding candidates is often particularly important for a district with a troubled image.

Consultants can:

- Help clarify and verify realistic institutional priorities and leadership needs.
- Help bring people together and lessen conflicts if the environment is politicized.
- Identify and recruit candidates who might not otherwise be applicants.
- Identify and avoid mistakes and problems.
- Conduct rigorous, extensive and consistent background checks.
- Offer support and reassurance to the search committee and board throughout the process.
- Save time in narrowing applicants to a manageable number for committee/board review.
- Monitor the process to ensure a high level of confidentiality.

## Recruiting and Selecting a Consultant

Recruiting a consulting firm usually involves requesting firms to submit proposals for doing the search. The request for proposals should outline the services the consultant is expected to perform, which may include such tasks as:

- Study, institution and determine college leadership needs and institution priorities.
- Assist in development of characteristics and qualifications needed in the next president.
- Advise on type of selection process to use.
- Prepare advertisements and brochure.
- Provide guidance in establishing appropriate internal and external communications.
- Provide clerical assistance for receipt of applications and letters to applicants.
- Screen applications.
- Recruit candidates to supplement the pool.
- Investigate and evaluate candidates.
- Work with board and/or screening committee during discussions of candidates.
- Assist board and/or screening committee in preparing for interviews and campus visits.
- Conduct reference checks and report information.
- Be available for general consultation by phone.
- Advise the board on contract issues, assist with the final selection, and help the board establish expectations between board and president.



The request for proposal should require firms to provide evidence of their “track record” in doing searches. The proposal may also include the background the board expects of the consultant, including criteria such as experience working with higher education, community colleges in general, and/or community colleges in California and/or that are similar in size and location. Additional preferences or requirements may include having worked with business and industry, being knowledgeable about state system and local colleges, or having been a chief executive officer.

The request for proposals should be mailed to firms that are likely to meet the criteria (see Appendix A). Once proposals have been received, the board reviews them and may ask consultants to make a presentation on how they would handle the search. Ideally, a board will have a list of questions and criteria that will enable the trustees to assess the experience, services and operating methods of the firms. Boards will want to know the success rate of prior CEO searches and explore the reasons for both the successes and those searches that had to be extended, where the candidate did not accept the offer, or where the new CEO left after a short period of time. The board should also:

- Meet the person who will be assisting this district, not just a representative of the firm.
- Discuss ground rules, operating procedures, and costs.
- Talk to people at other institutions where the consultant has worked.
- Ask about the extent of the consultant’s contacts and networks.
- Learn about the consultant’s track record in developing a diverse pool of qualified candidates.
- Know how many other searches the consultant and the firm will be handling simultaneously.

Once the board is comfortable that the consultant will be able to understand the district’s needs and work well with the board and others involved in the search, the board should review the proposed contract and ensure that its expectations, the costs, and the timeline are clear.

## Assessing the District

As one of the first stages of the executive search, governing boards must conduct an institutional review in order to answer the most important question they face – what kind of CEO do we need? Many districts make the mistake of defining the qualifications for the chief executive without explicitly considering the needs of the institution and its future direction. The result can be a mismatch of talents, skills, experiences, needs and commitments.

A related question is “what kind of CEO can we attract?” Districts with major financial problems, a divided board, negative employee relations or disgruntled faculty groups, or other challenges and problems will have a more difficult time attracting high quality candidates. Boards in districts with major problems will need to emphasize the positive opportunities in the district and discuss strategies to address the problems. They may consider hiring an interim CEO to deal with major issues. If the board is dysfunctional, it should consider engaging in board development to increase its effectiveness: good CEOs do not want to work for dysfunctional boards.

The following list of questions may assist boards in conducting an institutional review:

1. Why does the vacancy exist?
2. What are the long-range institutional goals for students and the community? Is a change in direction wanted or needed to improve programs for students and meet community needs?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the institution's academic and student services programs? How effectively is the institution performing its mission?
4. What are the college's enrollment prospects for the future? How successful are its students? Should steps be taken to improve recruitment and retention efforts?
5. How strong are the administration, faculty, and staff in performing their responsibilities? Does there need to be increased attention to professional development?
6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the institution's fiscal condition? Are changes either wanted or needed? Does the new CEO need to be involved in resource development?
7. Is the current district environment conducive to faculty, administration and staff productivity and participatory decision-making?
8. How adequate are the facilities? What alternatives are available to meet the needs of the institution in the future?
9. Does the district have the whole-hearted support of the community or does its reputation need refurbishing?
10. How well has the present governance and management structure operated? Has the board provided clear, consistent and forward thinking leadership? If not, why not? What role will the CEO play in helping the board govern better in the future?
11. What kind of relationship does the board wish to have with the CEO?
12. What leadership style does the board expect from the new CEO to meet institutional needs? (Note: boards should avoid a common mistake made in identifying preferred leadership styles, which is to base preferences on what they liked and disliked in the prior CEO, rather than objectively assessing what the institution needs).

The district needs assessment results in statements that define specific challenges, issues, and opportunities that are facing the district in the next few years. Districts may need more attention to certain areas and less to others: assessments often identify strengths and challenges in institutional effectiveness, planning, fiscal management, resource development, academic programs, student services, community relations, facilities, human resources, economic development, and the like. For instance, the board may wish the district to establish new directions or work with the community or constituency groups in new and different ways.

## Identifying the Leadership Needed

The next step is to identify the particular professional qualifications, qualities, and special competencies that will ensure the district has the leadership it needs. It is tempting to develop an ideal, all-encompassing list of expectations; however, no one person “has it all.” The above process identifies the most important tasks facing the district and through this, the board establishes its priorities for the new CEO. These priorities and expectations influence the way the job is described in the announcement, and are what makes each CEO position unique.

The professional qualifications expected generally address educational achievements and the type of experience the person has. Expectations may be listed as “required” or “preferred.” Expectations for educational achievements and experience may be defined broadly or narrowly. The board should discuss the following types of questions:

- Is a doctorate required or desired? Does it matter what field the degree is in?
- How much administrative experience is required? Must it be “senior-level” experience (e.g., vice president or college president?) May the experience be at any level of education, including K-12 and universities? Should it be in public education? Does it need to be in community colleges, and specifically in California community colleges? What about executive experience in business, government, or industry?
- Should candidates have experience in teaching and/or student services? At what educational level?
- Are there specific areas in which experience is required or preferred, such as instruction, fiscal management, facilities construction, community relations, fundraising, or collective bargaining?

How a board defines its expectations determines, in part, how big the pool of applicants will be. A broad pool provides boards with the opportunity to consider a wide variety of skills, backgrounds, and experiences. Narrowing

the expectations may result in fewer applicants, but those applicants will be more likely to have the background the board has determined is necessary to lead the institution.

Those involved in the assessment also explore more specific qualities required to provide the necessary leadership. Some of these might include: being student-centered; focusing on student learning; conflict resolution skills; ability to facilitate communications among various college constituencies; commitment to institutional research and program improvement; active in the community and in building community partnerships; advocacy skills and support for professional growth of faculty and staff; knowledge about educational trends in technology, etc.

The board drafts a description of what is expected and the duties, responsibilities, and qualifications. The description becomes the basis for the search committee’s evaluation of candidates.

## Setting Search Parameters

*Contract Provisions.* Early in a CEO search process, boards should discuss possible contract provisions and engage in discussions with the search consultant and legal counsel about trends in contracts and what the board can do to ensure that the position is attractive to potential applicants. An attractive contract becomes a recruiting tool.

While the final contract will not be settled until the board and finalists discuss their expectations and needs, the board should set general parameters for salary, benefits, contract length, moving allowance and other contract provisions. Boards in areas where housing costs are high may wish to explore alternatives to ensure that excellent candidates will be able to accept the position.

Having a general idea of the parameters for the position provides important information for the consultant and potential candidates. Potential candidates will be able to learn if they can “afford” to apply. The final negotiations with the successful candidate can be conducted with clear understandings on both sides.

*The Candidate Pool and Finalists.* The board may set criteria for how widely the position is advertised and to what groups. It may wish to set parameters for the number and quality of applications that must be received before screening starts. Most boards reserve the right to extend the deadline date and/or to consider nominations and applications up until the time that the position is filled, which allows for additional recruiting if the initial pool is not adequate.



Boards should also establish a minimum number of finalists that the committee should recommend for board consideration. The “ideal” number varies depending on the district circumstances, but pools of three to eight names are common. Setting a low number can limit the board’s ability to evaluate a variety of finalists; setting too high a number could result in candidates being included who may not be competitive. Boards also often retain the right to consider one or more semi-finalists whose names may not have been forwarded to the board, and that right should be clearly established and communicated to the search committee at the beginning of the process.

**Equal Opportunity Employment.** As equal opportunity employers, districts want interested applicants to have full and fair opportunity to compete for positions. Ensuring equal employment opportunity involves creating an environment that is welcoming to men and women, persons with disabilities, and individuals from all ethnic and other groups protected from discrimination. Boards may wish to affirm their commitment to equal opportunity and set parameters that require recruitment and selection practices to be quite inclusive and open. Diverse pools of applicants ensure that search committees and boards have the opportunity to identify semi- finalists and finalists who represent the richness of California’s population.

## The Search Committee

Common practice in community colleges is that the board appoints a search committee to advise the board and conduct the initial phases of the search. The average committee is composed of 10-14 people, and may include faculty, administrators, classified staff, students and representatives from the community. The board should set some criteria for the skills and knowledge of those on the committee, including awareness about the demands of the position and needs of the district. Recommendations for representatives from different constituency groups usually come from the groups themselves; however, boards may reserve the right to request additional recommendations that better meet the criteria.

When making committee appointments, boards should consider the knowledge the members will bring, as well as the importance of having a well-balanced committee that represents various perspectives and backgrounds. The committee should consist of people who are committed to seeking candidates who will provide the best leadership possible for the district and meet the priorities set by the board.



There are different points of view on whether trustees should be members of the district search committee. On one hand, having one or two trustees as members provides oversight and a link between the search committee and the board and ensures a trustee perspective throughout the process. On the other hand, since trustees have the final say as members of the board, they play a dual and potentially conflicting role by being on the search committee. It is very difficult for individual trustees to avoid being perceived as representing board opinion even when they are acting as individuals.

Boards can avoid the potential conflicts role by clearly defining the leadership they are seeking as well as the parameters for the process, and then delegating responsibility for initial screening and assessment to the consultant and committee. If the direction from the board to the committee is clear, there is little need to have trustees on the selection committee.

The role, responsibilities and authority of the search committee and consultant (if any) are established by the board and clearly communicated to the committee. The chair of the search committee may be appointed by the board or selected by the committee itself.



Citrus College

Members of search committees are assuming an important responsibility and must agree to conduct themselves with integrity. They must be willing to maintain the confidentiality of the process. Orienting and training the committee includes thoroughly communicating its responsibilities, ensuring that it understands the search process and principles, educating the members about the board's expectations of the chief executive and the qualities that are needed in the role, and discussing how to evaluate applications and conduct interviews. Committee members may be required to sign a memo of understanding regarding their responsibilities, and may be removed if they violate confidentiality or otherwise fail to perform their duties.

The functions of the committee may include:

- Participating in the assessment of district leadership needs;
- Making suggestions to the board on the job announcement and recruiting process;
- Reviewing applications and narrowing the field of candidates to those who they wish to consider further;

- Assessing the semi-finalists (generally through interviews), and recommending to the board the finalists.

The names that the committee forwards for board consideration are those whom the committee believes best meet the qualifications and could serve as the chief executive for the district. The committee may forward their comments on the candidates, but the candidates should not be ranked.

### The Job Announcement

The job announcement is the statement of the district expectations and qualifications and talents candidates should possess. Since it is the primary resource in recruitment activities and assessing candidates, care should be taken to ensure the job announcement effectively communicates these qualifications and expectations. Boards may wish to review some examples of job announcements prior to finalizing their own.



Job announcements often include the following:

*The Position.* Briefly describes the position and its primary functions, such as educational leader responsible for all district operations and assuring that the district is administered in accordance with board policy. Describes the chief executive officer's relationship with the board of trustees and her or his authority within the district.

*Information on the District and College(s).* Provides potential applicants with basic information about the district and may include history, size, campus locations, mission, values, and notable accomplishments.

*Region and Communities.* Provides highlights of the area served by the college, including the cities and communities, population, recreation and cultural opportunities, and other important characteristics.

*Challenges, Issues, and Opportunities.* Highlights the major issues that the district will be facing in the foreseeable future. Candidates should be aware of the district's special goals and needs. For example, a major planning effort may be needed in order to develop partnerships with business and industry.

*Duties and Responsibilities.* Includes the general duties required of all chief executives in planning, finance, policy formulation, community involvement, etc., and may include specific duties related to specific issues, when appropriate.

*Professional Qualifications.* Includes the educational background and experience that is required and preferred. Describes the most important qualities the new CEO is expected to have to address the challenges, issues, and opportunities.

*Application Process.* Applicants are generally expected to submit a letter of application that includes how they would address the challenges and opportunities identified in the job and how they meet the preferred professional and personal qualifications. They are also asked to include their resume and the names of people who will serve as references. The date when the review process will begin is included, as well as any notice that applications will be considered until the position is filled.

*Compensation.* Includes the benefits, but generally does not contain salary information. Job announcements usually state that the compensation is competitive and negotiated with the board.

## Recruiting Candidates

No matter what the reputation of the district is, successful boards recognize that even their marvelous institutions have to actively recruit for candidates. The board should make clear to the consultant or staff member who is managing the recruitment process that great potential candidates should be contacted and encouraged to apply. Recruitment is more than sending out the job announcement and waiting for applications.

The quest for an outstanding chief executive begins with identifying a pool of outstanding candidates. The consultant or person charged with the responsibility for managing the search will use a number of approaches to create a talented pool of applications.



## Announcement

A simple, attractive brochure supplies the pertinent information about the state, district, community, and position that candidates need to determine whether they are both qualified and interested. The brochure should be widely distributed to other community colleges, universities, and associations, as well as key educational

leaders in universities and associations, and individuals who are identified as particularly capable.

## Advertising

Advertisements describing the opportunity are placed in newspapers and magazines read by candidates the institution wants to apply. Advertising need not be limited to publications that target community college and higher education personnel if the board wishes to consider leaders in government, business, and industry.

## Personal Contacts

While advertising in periodicals and distributing brochures will attract applicants, many excellent candidates are functioning successfully in their present positions and may need to be encouraged to apply for the position.

Nominations should be sought through personal contact from knowledgeable persons who understand the institution and its needs. Successful administrators at similar institutions should be encouraged to apply. Chief executives known to have good personnel development practices should be contacted for names of employees or former employees who might apply. Finally, strong prospects who initially decline invitations to apply should not be disregarded but vigorously pursued.

Trustees should not actively recruit candidates. They should provide the names of potential candidates to the search consultant or responsible staff members, and may encourage excellent candidates to apply. However, they should stop short of advocating for specific candidates in the recruitment phase. Active recruitment or advocacy can be interpreted as favoritism and can taint the process.

## Confidentiality

Confidentiality is crucial throughout the search process. This is particularly true in making direct contact with personnel at other districts.

- Allow only the consultant, designated manager of the process or search committee chair and his or her staff to receive and respond to inquiries and applications. Individual board members and search committee members should never ask candidates to send an application directly to their home or office.



- No member of the committee should seek information on a candidate unless specifically directed by the consultant or staff member managing the process. One of the most common breaches of confidentiality occurs when committee members call their counterparts at the home base of the candidate, thus invariably alerting the candidate's campus or employer.

## Narrowing the Field of Candidates

After receiving applications, one of the first tasks is to identify and set aside those candidates who do not meet the minimum qualifications listed on the position announcement. This may be done by the consultant, the district staff member responsible for the search, or the committee (or a subcommittee). In addition, the pool is evaluated to ensure that it has an adequate number of applications. If not, the search may be extended and more applications sought.

Applicants who will not be considered further should be notified at this time.

## Selecting the Semi-Finalists

Next, the search committee reviews the qualified applications. Using the criteria listed in the job announcement and a system for assessing the applications, the list of candidates is narrowed further to those who, at least on paper, have the experience and skills necessary to succeed in the job.

As the pool is narrowed, care should again be taken to ensure that there are a sufficient number of candidates and that the pool includes a sufficient variety of candidates. If these two conditions are not met, the board should seriously consider extending the search.

Next, the committee should determine the top candidates and identify semi-finalists to be invited to be involved in further consideration. The number of those invited to interview can vary widely, depending on the district and the pool. At this time, calls may be made to the institutions listed on the application to verify experience and education. However, these calls should not violate the confidentiality of the applicant.

Those who are not selected for interviews should be informed in a timely manner and treated with courtesy and respect.

## Evaluating the Semifinalists

The purpose of the evaluation is to identify whether or not the person has the skills and qualities required to lead the institution and fulfill the expectations, and to determine the extent of the “fit” between the candidate and the position. The evaluation process is also an opportunity for candidates to learn about the institution, position, and expectations, so that they may make an informed decision about their commitment to the institution.

Committee members are responsible to study the candidates’ applications and resumes prior to meeting with the candidates. They then have a solid foundation for their evaluation of the applicants through the process. The committee should receive training on sound interview principles, including practices that assure equal opportunity.

Prior to the interviews, candidates should have access to strategic plans, financial reports, accreditation reports, minutes of board meetings and key college committees, personnel policies and collective bargaining contracts, student newspapers, and other appropriate information. They should have every opportunity to learn about the institution and its specific challenges and opportunities.

## Meeting with the Candidates

The primary method of evaluating semi-finalists has been an interview with the search committee. However, many colleges have expanded the evaluation process and include strategies such as a series of interviews with key people on campus, “in- basket” and scenario exercises, and presentations on simulated problems. All of these are designed to assess the skills of the candidates in different

situations. The strategies used in the evaluation process should allow candidates to apply creative and critical thinking and express their educational and management philosophy.

Consultants and human resource professionals have many resources to help develop interview questions and exercises. Sample questions are:

- How do you ensure the focus on students and their needs is paramount?
- How do you assure yourself of faculty quality?
- What campus and off-campus activities have provided your greatest source of satisfaction?
- What is more important: for the college to enhance the individual student or serve the broader needs of society?
- How do you define “leadership”?
- Who determines the objectives of the college and how they are evaluated?
- How can the college best meet the needs of the local community while at the same time being accountable to state interests?

Sample exercises may include:

- Make a presentation on your accomplishments as chief executive as if it were two years from now.
- Give the outline of the speech you would make at the first all-district meeting.
- Participate in an “in-basket” exercise in which a series of situations and scenarios are presented and the candidate is asked to respond as if he or she were going through the “in-basket.” The situations may be based on ones that are likely to happen at an institution and should be varied enough to assess skills in community relations, handling crises, responding to employees, dealing with personnel problems, planning, and the like.

All candidates should go through the same evaluation process. The processes used and questions asked must be related to the position. If there are concerns that a question or strategy may be “too personal” or somehow inappropriate, consult with human resource specialists or legal counsel.

## Reference Checks

Checking references and obtaining additional information about the candidate are very important parts of the process. They enable the committee and the board to gain further insight into the candidate's experience, strengths, and qualifications.



References may be called prior to potential semi-finalists being invited for interviews. If problems are identified through the reference checks, the person may not be invited for further consideration. While this practice prevents wasted time and costs, it may be difficult to maintain confidentiality and prevent rumors about why a person was not invited.

References may be called after the invitation has been extended and prior to the semi-finalist being evaluated. It may be possible to explore questions arising from the reference checks at the interview, although care must be taken to treat all candidates the same.

Generally, most reference checks are conducted after the semi-finalist has been interviewed and gone through other assessments. This allows those doing the checks to follow-up on any questions that came up during the assessment process.

No matter when it is done, contacting the references must occur only after permission from the candidate is obtained. Colleagues who are not listed on the candidate's reference list but who have worked with the candidate may be contacted, but this is always done with care and only with the knowledge and approval of the candidate.

Conducting reference checks is the responsibility of the consultant and others skilled in and designated to do the reference checking. Reference checks require sensitivity and the ability to elicit good information through interviews: people that do them have had training in those skills and are dedicated to maintaining a high level of confidentiality. Search processes have been damaged and districts tainted by committee members, trustees, and others who are not responsible for reference checking secretly calling people at the candidate's home institution or talking to others about semi-finalists.

Reference checkers carefully summarize and share the information they learn with the committee. They elicit important information from the references about the person's qualifications related to the expectations of the position, and will seek clarification on issues that were raised during the candidate's visit.

Information gained from references is used by the committee to assist it in determining the finalists. Each committee member must accept information about the candidates in strict confidence. Only the consultant, fellow committee members and the board of trustees should be briefed on the information communicated by the references.

## Selection of the Finalists

The criteria used to select the finalists are based on the needs of the institution defined in the early stages of the search process. The finalists should be selected as soon as possible after the visits with the semifinalists. Every effort should be made to reach a consensus among committee members on which of the candidates would have the best chance of success if appointed CEO.

The number of finalists depends on direction from the board, but there are at least three and maybe up to eight. Finalists are not ranked when they are forwarded to the board.

## The Final Evaluation

The board should meet with the chair of the search committee and consultant to hear a detailed presentation on the search process, general information on the candidate pool, descriptions of those who were considered as semifinalists, and the list of recommended finalists. This meeting is a closed session allowed by the Brown Act.

This report is valuable for a number of reasons. Trustees learn from the search effort the types of educational leaders interested in working for their district. The search committee completes its work with the sense that its effort was appreciated and its recommendations carefully considered. And finally, the board needs information on all semifinalists if it retained the authority to interview one or more semifinalists whose names may not have been forwarded by the committee.

(The board should exercise caution in considering for final interviews those candidates originally rejected by the search committee. While committees can miss good candidates, such a step risks alienating members of the committee with whom the board and new CEO must work.)

After having received the report and accepted or developed a list of finalists, the board should establish a schedule for its evaluation and selection. The board should allow sufficient time for thoughtful consideration, but should ensure that the process moves along in an efficient manner. Board evaluation usually includes further reference checks and interviews with the candidates, and may include other activities such as finalists' visits with campus and community leaders, presentations to the campus community, and/ or site visits to the candidate's place of employment. If necessary, the purposes of and information sought from each activity should again be reviewed, clarified and discussed by the board and its consultant.



### Final Interviews

The final interview should be carefully planned. The finalists have met the committee’s high standards—now the board must determine which of the qualified finalists has the leadership skills that best meet the needs of the institution. The board interview focuses on qualities and skills that the board requires of its institutional leader, including the ability to work closely with the board.

Trustees should be thoroughly prepared for the interviews, having reviewed all application materials, background information, and reference reports. They may wish to keep their own notes on each of the candidates.

Interviews should be limited to one or two a day and be conducted in an informal atmosphere. While the board should work from a list of questions to ensure that all areas of concern are covered, trustees and candidates are encouraged to ask questions about areas of individual concern.

### College and Community Meetings

The finalists also may be invited to meet individually or with groups of key institutional and community leaders. Assessments from these meetings can be added to the information considered by the board.

A few districts have asked all finalists to make a presentation to the college community. This provides an opportunity to view the finalists “in action” in front of a group; however, there is a downside to this practice. Members of the college community may favor a person that the board does not select, thereby creating potential dissatisfaction.

### Site Visits

A visit to the candidate's current work site can provide the board and others with a better understanding of the candidate's experience, particularly if the candidate's home institution is quite different than the board's district. Site visits generally do not provide substantively more information about a person's skills and qualities than do thorough reference checks. Therefore, they may not be worth the time and cost involved, unless there are specific reasons for a visit.

### Making the Choice

Voting to make a contract offer to a candidate should not be taken until all board members believe there has been ample opportunity for full expression of their opinions. One approach is to eliminate quickly those candidates with no support among trustees and concentrate discussion on those remaining. The vote to offer a contract is confidential as it is part of contract negotiations.

It is best, of course, if trustees can come to a unanimous decision. The position of chief executive is difficult at best, and the successful candidate will need the full support of the board in the years ahead. Trustees should keep in mind that the ultimate goal is not for the board to select “my candidate,” but to hire the best candidate for the entire institution and to ensure that the person is successful.

If a board has one or more members in firm opposition to a majority choice, it may have to proceed without consensus. However, every effort should be made to make a job offer only after all board members have agreed to support the new CEO. If there are differences, the candidate should be informed when offered the position.

To avoid possible embarrassment and wasted time, it is suggested that once the board has made its choice, the chair should ask the successful candidate whether he or she would accept an invitation to be chief executive, assuming agreement on a contract.

If the answer is "no," the board must reconsider the list of finalists. If "yes", the board has two options. First, to agree immediately on a starting date, draw up a contract, and sign it. Or, second, schedule a final meeting with the candidate in two or three days to give the candidate and board time to reflect on any expressed concerns or questions before a contract is signed.

After the candidate agrees to enter into a contract, the board votes in closed session to appoint the new CEO. This vote, including the salary and benefits, is then announced at a public session of the board.

## The Contract

A well-crafted contract ensures clear communication, expresses the institution's values, may serve as a recruiting tool, and is evidence of the board's desire to support a good CEO. Contracts protect the district's and the CEO's interests: they are accountability tools to assure the public that district resources are wisely used.

Boards should ensure that the contract and employment practices are among the positive factors that attract and retain a good CEO. Boards should not risk losing a good CEO (or discouraging potential candidates) because of non-competitive contracts and practices.

The board and the candidate or their legal representatives negotiate the final terms of the contract. The board develops a proposed contract, using advice from the district's attorney and the consultant. Often, the candidate relies on an attorney to review the contract and may request adjustments to the board's proposed contract.

Contracts cover the term of contract, salary, duties and expectations, benefits and other compensation, leaves, and termination. Many contracts also include clauses on the following issues:

- Rollover provisions
- Process for salary increases or negotiations
- Evaluation process
- Other compensation, which may include annuities, deferred compensation, retirement packages, and insurance
- Housing allowance or loan, automobile or expenses, memberships, etc.
- Any rights to faculty or other administrative position should the CEO position end
- Rights to consult and engage in outside activities
- Leaves: vacation, sick leave, and professional development/sabbatical
- Requirement for regular medical exam
- Home/auto office equipment: computers, fax, cell phones, telephone lines
- Separation processes and protections



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When negotiating the contract, boards should be flexible within the general parameters set early in the process. Different CEOs have different needs, which may vary depending on where they are in their career. New CEOs may desire housing and moving assistance, support for professional development, and longevity incentives. Those in the last decade of their careers may be interested in packages that boost retirement income, and may wish to roll auto and expense allowances and the like into salaries.

Contracts that show support for and benefit the CEO are not limited to salaries and benefits. Items such as home and travel office equipment (cell phones, computers), annual health exams and health club memberships, and consulting days provide support for the CEO and may make it easier for the person to do the job. Housing loans and allowances have been used in other states, and are recently becoming a consideration for California boards given the high cost of housing in some areas.

Negotiating the contract requires the board to be aware of contract issues that may cause problems. The initial salary should be competitive with other districts, reasonably related to salary levels of other administrators, within the districts' budget, supported by the public, and reflect the community served. The initial salary sets the tone for future salaries; many contracts have clauses in the contract that provide for increases, longevity incentives, and/or bonuses to prevent the need to do a separate "catch up" salary increase.

## What to Avoid

A CEO search can be harmed by a variety of problems. Boards are advised to address the following issues if they exist and as soon as they become aware of them.

- A dysfunctional board
- Problems with the preceding president, particular a bad ending to the contract
- Lack of discussion and/or agreement on the leadership needs of the district
- Lack of experience or education in how to do a search
- Inadequate time and resources for the search
- A search consultant that doesn't understand the district
- Failure to respect confidentiality
- Political interference in the search
- A committee that ignores the board's charge to it, or the failure of the board to give an adequate charge to the committee
- Insensitivity to constituent and stakeholder needs
- Poor leadership by the board chair

- Having unclear rules for the process or changing the rules in the middle
- Unclear expectations and mixed messages to candidates by the board, consultant, and committee
- Not supporting the new CEO once hired

## The Brown Act

The Brown Act provides that closed sessions of the board may be held to consider the appointment or employment of a person. Closed sessions allow the board and candidates to avoid undue publicity or embarrassment for a candidate and allow full and candid discussion. Therefore, candidate interviews, meetings in which specific candidates are discussed, and contract negotiations should be closed sessions. As discussed above, maintaining confidentiality is essential to protect the candidates and the professional reputation of the district.

However, meetings that are not about specific individuals must be held as open meetings, such as when the board discusses the search process, sets the parameters for compensation, explores the leadership needs of the district, and approves the job description and announcement. After the contract has been offered and accepted, and the board takes action in a closed session, the announcement of the action is made at a public meeting.

## After the Selection

Once the selection is made, there are four very important steps to take:

1. Notify the remaining finalists and semi-finalists immediately by phone and then in writing by the board chair. The reputation of the board and district will be enhanced by gracious, thoughtful contacts.
2. Announce the selection and introduce the CEO. News conferences and releases, receptions, and inaugurations are all important events and rituals. Each board member should seize every opportunity possible to introduce and welcome her or him to the community.
3. Hold a planning session for the new CEO and board to affirm the goals and expectations for the first year. This session establishes the foundation for the CEO evaluation process, which should also be developed early on. Informal sessions with the new CEO are also helpful to reach common understandings on how trustee and board questions and concerns should be handled.
4. Appropriate staff should be instructed to destroy all search materials no longer needed and return all confidential papers to the candidates.

## College Presidents in Multi-College Districts

Many of the principles and considerations in searching for a chancellor or superintendent apply to searches for college presidents in multi-college districts. However, boards in multi-college districts generally delegate responsibility for the search to the district chancellor; the board plays a more distant role.

Consultants are somewhat less likely to be used to assist in searches for college presidents, although they may be used for portions of the search, such as recruitment and reference checking. The chancellor of the district often assumes responsibility for many of the tasks that a consultant carries out.

The governing board is involved planning the search and assessing the college's leadership needs. It helps develop and approves the position description. However, search committees are comprised of college personnel, and perhaps a representative or two from the immediate community.

Boards vary in the extent of their involvement in the evaluation of the finalists. Some direct the chancellor to forward two or more candidates for board review. Other boards delegate full authority to the chancellor and direct him or her to recommend the president to the board for hire. The approach the board uses depends on the organizational structure, history and culture of the district.

## A Final Word

Recruiting, selecting, hiring, and evaluating chief executive officers are among the most important responsibilities of any board of trustees. We encourage boards to take these duties very seriously. The quality and performance of the institution are at stake.

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