

How to Choose a University President

Burton Blatt
Centennial Professor and Dean
School of Education
Syracuse University

For whatever reasons, during the past several years I have been asked to consider becoming a candidate for several university presidencies. In all of those early instances, also for whatever reasons, I chose not to pursue the matter beyond a polite, brief letter expressing appreciation but disinterest. For whatever reasons, the "fisherman's lure" finally caught my attention, and thus I became a candidate. A few months ago, I received such an invitation from the Chairperson of a Presidential Search Committee representing an important state university. In addition to his invitation to become an active candidate and in addition to the usual request for curriculum vita and references, he asked me to lay out what I thought would be the strengths I could bring to the position. What follows is my unedited response:

Dear Mr.

I will be pleased to have my credentials examined by the Presidential Search Committee at _____. As you requested, I am enclosing a current curriculum vitae and, secondly, the names, addresses and telephone numbers of several references. For two reasons, I did not contact these references to indicate to them that you might be writing or calling them. First, I assume that you will follow through with some of these references only if the Committee has substantial regard for my candidacy. Secondly, I assume that your greatest interest in pursuing these references will be to find out what kind of a person I am, not necessarily who my friends are. In fact, if my candidacy does proceed to some level of saliency, I will be prepared to send you a list of all the faculty in our School, the Deans and central administrative offices in this University, and a long list of people around the country who have had professional dealings with me during the years. However, I have no interest in having you pursue the matter further unless my vita and whatever else you already know about me has created in your Committee genuine interest in my candidacy.

On your second item, "a personal view of the strengths you would bring to the position," I must admit that I found difficulty in dealing with the question. The request is almost like asking the author to review his own book. If he's determined to tell the entire truth, it comes out as either immodest or masochistic or, even worse, indecisive. Consequently, rather than answer the question directly, at the risk of telling you more than you want to hear, I'll express some ideas concerning what a search committee should be looking for in presidential candidates. I suggest that you then seek from my references opinions concerning whether I possess those qualities.

In one sense, university presidents must be all things to all people in the university. But even more fundamentally, they must remain true to themselves. The president represents the corporate body to its various constituencies--the faculty, students, staff, citizen groups, individuals. But he also represents the faculty, students, and others to the corporate body. He works for "headquarters," but he also works for the "troops." And because the university conducts a business, he does business. However, because the university isn't a business, the university president must not be a business man. Fundamentally, the university president is an academic.

How much power does the president have? How much power do deans have, or faculty members? There are enough people around the university who think presidents enjoy privileges not given to others. There is good reason for that perception. It is true! But there is enough misunderstanding about what those privileges are to suspect that the conclusion is more accurate than the supporting data. To be chosen as president of a university is a reward, an honor, a mark of respect from the faculty, the students, the Board of Trustees, and others. But it carries with it further rewards, the most obvious of which is a release from the normal obligations of faculty members and, for the most part, of deans and other administrators within the university. This release is not ordinarily spoken of as a reward. While a person may love his work as a scholar, he probably does not especially love his obligation to do that work. It is the obligation from which one is released upon becoming president. Thus, the first thing to be noticed about the office is that it gives the luxury of leisure. This may seem laughable given the frenzy that quickly develops in practice but, nevertheless, it is conceptually accurate. The president is an academician who doesn't have to work like one; and (in a sense) there is nothing (much) he has to do instead. That is, if we examine the specific powers and duties of a president, we may come up strangely empty-handed. There just isn't much of substance specified (please examine the position announcement which was transmitted to me in your letter of May 20). And what there is doesn't add up to anything like the perceived weight and importance of the office.

I would suggest that this represents an instance of cultural ambivalence. While we feel and respond to a need to describe a president's job in terms of work--and the more importance we wish to invest in it, the more work we ascribe to it--the job actually makes sense only as a privilege for the individual who is president and as a luxury for the community which has one. There's privilege in knowing that he can do a great many things, but his position is not dependent on actually doing those things. The privilege in being able to act out of one's wisdom is not extended to

many people. I'm not claiming that all presidents have wisdom, or that even the wisest presidents avoid all foolishness. The point is that presidents do indeed have the privilege of assuming responsibility for very important matters. Everybody knows this, but of course what some people call privileges others look upon as burdens.

What is the source of a president's power? Usually, his power (or what I prefer to call his privilege) is not something that could be read in a constitution or set of rules for a university, although there are such stipulations often found in the bylaws of university senates or boards of trustees. Certainly, there are traditions which are thought about as his responsibility and authority. We have to look elsewhere to explain the privileged position of the president. In a fundamental way, presidents are elected by the community and serve at the will of the community. It's a complex situation, but in the last analysis that is the way most presidents keep their jobs. The Board of Trustees, faculty, the students, other administrators are usually ready to give the president a great deal of latitude and opportunity to make decisions on behalf of the entire community. It's not because that is written somewhere but because that is what is expected of presidents.

I now come to the core of my commentary. Most of a president's power comes from the expectation that he will speak the truth. The price he has to pay for that privilege is small compared to the opportunities: those who are expected to tell the truth about serious matters must not expect always to be taken seriously. Consequently, presidents speak about mission with the same breath that they speak about budget. And they are oftentimes alone in the community when they try to speak the truth about teaching. Why is it that students evaluate professors but professors themselves are reluctant to engage in such work? Professors have a great deal to lose in speaking the truth outside of their narrow disciplines. Students don't have as much to lose. And while presidents can be in jeopardy for speaking on subjects outside of their disciplines, they are in greater jeopardy if they don't. Presidents are expected to tell the truth. Hence, presidents are expected to evaluate deans and other administrators, examine the quality of teaching, and in general form and express judgments, suggestions, and recommendations. Such broad powers are obtained most directly from the expectation that the president has a luxury to be truthful and that the community was wise enough to hire a president who is not only honest but has good judgment.

Presidents can be foolish by treating a problem openly that would better be treated discretely, and by dealing with what should be a general concern as if it was a small or private matter. But this is not a problem that is indigenous to universities and their presidents. Doctors and lawyers and other people have difficulty deciding not only what to tell the community but what to tell a patient or client. What exacerbates such indecision is the perception that people don't want to know what is "good" for them and what is "bad" about them. We don't know what people want to hear about their futures, their problems and their mortality. We don't know if people can be taught to hear bad news as well as good news. But at a university, the president must be a reliable messenger, of good and bad news alike.

I have tried to discuss what seems to me to be the primary characteristic which should be looked for in selecting a president: judgment. And it is exactly that same quality that usually determines the kind of authority a president has. If a president's judgment is perceived to be good, there usually is a lot of freedom and leeway to make important decisions about the university. If his or her judgement is mistrusted, there is little authority a president has other than those narrow, specific duties assigned to him by a Board of Trustees. As I think back and look around today, it seems to me that the presidents I have most admired seemed to have been able to say what they wanted to say and do what they wanted to do without incurring the wrath of too many people. The presidents I have least admired didn't seem able to do very much or, for that matter, say very much of interest to the community. And although I have never formally examined this issue, it is my impression that those presidents who seemed to get things done worked under exactly the same rules as those presidents who didn't seem to get things done. It isn't the rules or even the traditions that give a person academic authority. More than anything, power seems to follow those who don't seem to grab for it but use it naturally. It also seems to be least objectionable when the person exerting it knows that the privilege is in being entrusted with power, not in having it to use for one's own ends.

Now that I've laid out my general conception of what to look for in a university president, I want to list a few questions which you might consider asking about specific candidates. In a way, I'm answering your second question to me with this list of qualities which I believe a president should have, but which you will have to ask others to comment upon insofar as my own candidacy is concerned:

- a) Is the person honest, open to criticism and advice?
- b) Does he have incorruptible dedication to the scholarly tradition?
- c) Does he trust people in a way that challenges them to live up to his trust? Does he have a way of eliciting strong performance from people, oftentimes performance of which people did not know they were capable? And in the same vein, is he able to identify (discover) new roles for people, possibly neutralizing areas of strain and opening new avenues of productivity?
- d) Can he offer criticism without wounding people? Is he able to accomplish a change in organizational structure and personnel functions decently and sensitively?
- e) Does he keep current on all of his communications and the administrative details of his work, regardless of tidal-wave dimensions?
- f) And despite whatever other responsibilities he has, is he able to maintain personal contact and familiarity with the members of the community?

As I said at the outset of this letter, I may be giving you much more than you actually wanted. Possibly, one reason for the verbosity is the admission that I've recently completed a book about universities, what they're like, who people them, where they're going, where they should be going (In and Out of the University, Baltimore: University Park Press, in press). The other reason has to do with the fact that I've been thinking off and on for several years about the university presidency. During the past few years, I've been asked to consider several presidencies, but either because at the time I was too new to my current position as dean here or because I didn't feel that particular presidency was suited to my interests, I have been reluctant to submit my candidacy for such a review. Your letter interested me much more than any of those earlier inquiries.

You volunteered to provide additional information. At this time, it would be helpful if I could examine the catalogs of your Graduate School and, possibly, one or two of your undergraduate colleges. Of course, if you would like further information from me, don't hesitate to call or write. However, I want to reiterate a request made earlier. If the response to your inquiry is one of many submitted to you, and if in your Committee's opinion I still remain one of many candidates, not especially noteworthy in comparison to most of the others, please don't pursue the matter further with inquiries to the references attached.

I am interested, but only if you are very interested.

Sincerely,

For whatever reasons, I wasn't offered the position. Notwithstanding, I hope the Presidential Search Committee considered my gratuitous advice. As friends and family sometimes comment to me, not sympathetically every time, "Always the teacher!".