

Letter from Elizabeth Berry, former chair of the History Department, on the Report of the Regents Working Group on Chancellor Search and Selection.

The "Report of the Regents Working Group on Chancellor Search and Selection" includes 17 recommendations. Critical to me is #13, as follows.

13. Utilize the selected search firm to conduct the initial screening of applicants. After the search committee develops the job description and Challenges and Opportunities paper, the search firm should conduct the initial screening of candidates for consideration by the full search committee for initial interview. Rather than expending precious hours of faculty time researching backgrounds, credentials, and experiences of applicants who may not be interested or willing to become candidates, faculty screening should be targeted to individuals who are most viable and interested in becoming candidates for the chancellor position. The search firm should initially screen all applicants who are recommended by stakeholders.

Whoever wrote this paragraph appears unfamiliar with how searches to fill major leadership roles at UC are conducted. The text refers twice to "applicants." By definition, an applicant is a person who has applied for a job and, thus, declared an interest in it and a presumptive willingness to take it. Almost invariably, moreover, an applicant has provided material—at a minimum a *Curriculum Vitae*—that describes "backgrounds, credentials, and experiences." The text also refers twice to "candidates." The term is capacious but normally designates applicants who have moved into active consideration following review.

In fact, there is at present no application process for major leadership roles at UC and, hence, no "applicants." (Nor, it follows, is there an applicant pool that can be systematically reduced to "candidates" for subsequent scrutiny.) Instead, there is a nomination process that produces nominees. Nomination normally occurs through a Web portal that permits any party (a stakeholder, community member, serious or non-serious outsider) to suggest any number of persons for consideration. Interested individuals may also self-nominate. The authors of the 17 recommendations appear unaware that limitless nomination opportunities for all parties are already the norm. (Recommendation #2 mistakenly states that: "Current policy does not reflect current practices nor the need for the entire search committee to collectively engage a broader stakeholder network in the process of identifying the most promising chancellors.")

Still, it's important to note, nominations through the Web portal were a surprisingly small fraction of the total when I served on the Academic Advisory Committee for a major search. Then (and I suspect now), the overwhelming majority of nominations came (and come?) from the head hunters assigned to the search. Yet all they provided in my experience was a list of names, without either written information (such as CVs) or evidence of interest in the job. So, yes, members of the AAC—in the language of #13—spent countless hours "researching backgrounds, credentials, and experiences" of people scarcely "willing to become candidates." Our only research tool was the Web, since we were forbidden to reach out to nominees or to anyone—colleagues, deputies, potential referees—with knowledge of them. Although we could ask the head hunters to make specific inquiries, they seldom did so, even upon repeated request. The main role they assumed was interjecting into discussion tireless remarks about the pros and cons

of their own “nominees.” (Which invites questions about how head hunters draw up their lists, whether they promote “clients,” and how they are paid and regulated.)

In the end, the AAC on which I served put together long-short-lists and short-short-lists in the dark. We had no real dossiers on nominees turned candidates. We had no reason to believe those candidates wanted the job. We knew far more about candidates for appointment as assistant professors in our various departments.

I myself favor an application process to fill leadership positions (including proactive encouragement of potentially superb applicants). Failing that, and assuming continuation of the nomination process, recommendation #13 that head hunters “should initially screen all applicants” to target “individuals who are most viable and interested in becoming candidates” is not only errant (there are no “applicants”) but both fearsomely vague and strangely naive. Search firms are commercial enterprises committed to their own bottom lines. They might, indeed, perform valuable (new) services by compiling robust dossiers on nominees (hence freeing others from this formidable work) and exploring their interests in appointment (hence reducing the likelihood that short lists will be dominated by decliners). “Screening” is another matter. If it means anything other than highlighting obvious non-starters and obvious contenders, the recommendation shifts the crucial decisions about long and short lists from stakeholders to hired guns accountable not to campus constituencies but corporate shareholders.

The trust of the Working Group in head hunters suggests innocence about the role they have played in the past and the complexity of their financial concerns. It also suggests distrust of the faculty members who carry out the university’s mission and typically serve for decades. The logic is baffling. As is a background theme in the 17 recommendations—that the Regents desire a larger role in leadership decisions. They already have the power of decision and, in my experience, engage profoundly in the many meetings preceding it. They alone, of course, interview finalists and control the very composition of the roster. Substituting head hunters for AACs as screeners is a path not toward greater authority over the appointment process, already complete, but marginalization of the people who teach UC students and serve under officials chosen by the Regents. Head hunters do neither.