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Presidential Search Should be More Open to Community

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An Open Process

Surely the most important responsibility facing the ECU Board of Regents is the selection of the university's next president. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that Chairperson Gary Abney kept his search and screening committee close; essentially a set of white Regents and best buddies.

"We need a clear outline of what we wish this university to become over the next decade," Abney wrote to the Eastern community. He's right, and that direction can only come from the Regents.

Perhaps nothing is more important to faculty than understanding what the Regents are looking for. Are we looking for a president who will preserve the *Essential Eastern* and our historical mission as a school of opportunity? Or are we looking for a president who will change that mission and remake the university into a new kind of 21st century institution? Will the next president be a politician, a scholar, or something else?

Changes in higher education prompted by Senate Bill 1 have already altered the nature of presidential leadership in the state. The Council on Postsecondary Education has redefined what it means to be a successful university. Declining state support and enrollment have made ECU more dependent upon tuition and our next president must be responsive to a new set of pressures. The leadership provided by the Regents on this crucial decision will determine whether we are a forward-looking institution, or not.

To his credit, Abney promised an open process which would involve representatives of all major stakeholders. But then the Regents chose to keep secret the names of the search firms that bid on ECU's RFP—a decision that while legal, did not contribute to openness, was not required by law, and prevented the faculty from sharing useful and potentially important information with the Regents (08-ODR-144).

The Regents' selection of Academic Search—one of higher education's most prominent firms—seems solid. But the campus would benefit from some reassurance following last year's exodus of a number of their top consultants due to "philosophical differences" as the company transitioned from a *nonprofit* into a *for-profit* organization. *Inside Higher Ed* reported that Academic Search was known for hiring former college presidents who work remotely with a central support staff (June 23, 2011).

Maybe there's nothing to worry about, but it is difficult to see how keeping secret the names of vendors served the best interests of ECU. Serving the interest of one's search firm is a bad habit to form—and a tough one to break—especially if the search and screening committee lacks the researchers necessary to fully vet candidates and validate the reports of the search firm. Absent that crucial component, the screening committee will quickly find itself at the mercy of Academic Search because they will possess all of the information.

Kentucky has suffered under this kind of circumstance before. In 2007, the Kentucky Board of Education found itself handcuffed when my blog *Kentucky School News and*

Commentary and the *Bluegrass Policy* blog uncovered numerous false claims being made by the person selected to become Kentucky's Education Commissioner. Since the Board had effectively outsourced its responsibilities to the search firm, and had not conducted any independent vetting, they were not in a position to rebut the firm's assurances that all was well. But all was not well. Under increasing pressure from the publication of a growing list of falsifications, the Board asked the search firm to look into the matter. But their "research" was limited to the candidate's references. They did not seek out contrary opinions or facts. Ultimately, the Commissioner-select resigned before taking office and the Board sued the search firm. Working with a different search firm in 2009, the Kentucky School Board was considering one finalist until *Kentucky School News and Commentary* published a creationist paper from the candidate's past that the search firm didn't know about.

No matter what the search firm does--or does not do--it is the Regents who remain responsible for the selection of Eastern's 12th president. The search and screening committee would greatly benefit from a few faculty researchers who might be called upon to discretely vet the top candidates and advise the committee before the Regents make any public announcement about finalists. It might go a long way toward breaking down any misperceptions that the process is insular, thus building confidence among the faculty, which is crucial to the next president's success.

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Si hoc legere scis, nimium eruditionis habes