

## Searching for a Dean: Getting the Qualities You Want

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### **Article:**

The dean holds a key position in a school of nursing. When this position is vacated, a search for new leadership becomes paramount for the organization. The report of Nichols, Bower, Collier, and Gray (1989) addressed searching for a dean and it was the only information found that focused primarily on the process. This article introduces a three-tiered ma used to evaluate candidates during a search process.

After receiving written recommendations from faculty and the acting dean in the School of Nursing, the Provost formed a Search Committee for Dean of the School of Nursing at our university during the one-year term of an Acting Dean. Members of the Search Committee designed a three-tiered tool to structure the search and evaluate the candidates' qualities. The search was efficient and culminated in unanimous agreement by the members an candidates to forward to the Provost.

### **Formation of Search Committee**

The Search Committee consisted of five of the 40 nursing faculty members, a community member who was a hospital president and a member of the School of Nursing's Advisory Committee, and the Acting Dean of the Graduate School. The Chair was a faculty member who was one of the four division chairs. A staff person from the Provost's office attended the meetings and handled clerical work and mailings. The committee chose to establish their own process and criteria for selection of candidates.

### **Process for Selection of Candidates**

The committee's charge from the Provost was to recommend the names of three to five candidates to him at the conclusion of their search process. To accomplish this, five meetings of the search committee were held. The first meeting included a review of the profile of the dean's position and development of advertising strategies. Faculty were asked by the Search Committee for their input into the qualities they desired in a dean. The faculty and Search Committee members' beliefs and values guided both the content and process for advertising of the dean's position.

In addition to the appropriate educational and experiential qualifications, the Committee valued the time-honored traditions of the University in research, teaching, and service. Participative leadership skills and interpersonal communication skills also were deemed important.

According to Hershey and Blanchard (1977), a curvilinear relationship exists between group maturity and two dimensions of leadership, labeled as task behavior and relationship behavior. Immature followers (in this case, faculty) need more task behavior from the leader; more mature followers need less task behavior and more relationship behavior; and the most mature followers need less of both task and relationship behavior. The Commit-tee's preference for candidates was most closely aligned with the second type of leadership style.

The profile of the dean's position, which reflected the desired leadership qualities, was sent to all graduate

NLN-accredited programs. Additionally, the position was advertised in five nursing periodicals: Nursing and Health Care, Nursing Outlook, The Journal of Professional Nursing, Journal of Nursing Education, The American Journal of Nursing, and in two chronicles of higher education: Chronicle of Higher Education, and Black Issues in Higher Education. The School of Nursing faculty also were asked for input into the process for identification of potential candidates.

### **Development of Assessment Tool**

While solicitation of candidates occurred, the Search Committee met for the second time to develop a three-tiered assessment tool for evaluation of applicant credentials and qualities.

### **First-Tier Criteria**

Initial criteria for candidacy included a doctorate, a graduate degree in nursing, eligibility for RN licensure in North Carolina, and administrative experience. If any of these qualifications were absent, the applicant was excluded from the pool of potential candidates. Thus, these criteria were known as the "knockout" criteria.

### **Second-Tier Criteria**

The second-tier criteria were designed using a fivepoint Likert scale. Applicants were rated on their administrative experience, research and scholarly productivity, teaching/educational experience, and service visibility. This tier was designed to measure attributes that could be determined from the candidate's letter of application and curriculum vitae.

### **Third-Tier Criteria**

Designed on the same Likert scale, the third-tier criteria were developed to measure leadership skills, interpersonal skills, vision for nursing and health care, know-ledge of trends and issues in nursing and health care, leadership style, commitment to liberal education, national visibility, and overall impression. These criteria guided evaluation of written recommendations and follow-up phone recommendations.

Based on the ratings on each of these three tiers, a recommendation of "consider," "hold," or "reject" was made along with a summary statement indicating the likelihood that this candidate could be appointed at the level of full professor.

### **Review of Application Letters and Vitae**

During the third meeting of the Committee, letters of application and curriculum vitae were reviewed using the second-tier criteria. While individual committee members' ratings of the applicants varied using the Likert scale, generally there was consensus about the relative strength of the applicant in any particular area. At this level of the screening process, potential candidates who had pronounced deficits in administrative experience or any of the three areas making up the mission of the University—teaching, research, and service—were eliminated from the selection process. The Chair of the Committee was then directed to obtain letters of recommendation from the remaining applicants' references. The letter asked references to appraise, in particular, the candidate's leadership skills, interpersonal skills, and leadership style.

### **Review of Letters of Recommendation**

At the fourth meeting, letters of recommendation were reviewed using the third-tier criteria for evaluation. Members found the criteria helpful in evaluating the recommendations, but it was difficult to apply the Likert scale to some of these criteria. Also, ability to manage budget emerged at this point as worthy of consideration, although it had not previously been viewed as a major criterion.

### **Telephone References**

To validate and elaborate on the writ-ten recommendations, the chair was delegated the task of soliciting telephone interviews with a sample of the references each candidate had given. Before telephoning, the chair reviewed each candidate's vitae and written references again to identify the information needed on each candidate.

Generally, the information missing on candidates was related to human relationship skills. Because the faculty strongly believed that excellent interpersonal relationships were critical to the success of a dean, the committee tried diligently to ferret out this information. Hegyvary and de Tornyay (1991) noted that:

Interestingly, the characteristics that impress deans' search committees and faculty tend to be conceptual and technical performance in relation to academic achievements and entrepreneurship'. However, this may be a paradoxical reason for choosing a dean, because the skills that may be most central to being a successful dean fall into the human realm. Conceptual and technical skills are essential, but their effective expression is based on skill in human relations (p. 42).

The candidates' conceptual and technical skills were easier to determine from vitae and written references than were human skills.

The following questions/statements were organized to obtain the general data needed through telephone interviews:

1. What was/is the faculty's general impression of [the applicant]?
2. Describe her leadership style.
3. What are her strengths?
4. What are her weaknesses?

Following these questions, specific questions in such areas as employment discrepancies and questions generated from written references were asked about particular candidates.

The chair then decided which references to call. Each candidate had five written references; two of those were chosen for verbal references. One person was chosen who would be expected to have access to information about the candidate's human skills, specifically relationships with faculty, and leadership style. The other reference was chosen based on specific information needed.

When each of the references was called, only one was contacted with the initial call. For all others, a message was left regarding the purpose of the call and appropriate times to call back. All of the references were cordial, helpful, and prompt in returning calls. Establishing the purpose for the call and a time schedule appeared important for securing the needed information.

Without exception, all the data needed were gathered and put into a format that had been developed by the committee. The report contained the candidate's name and position, reference's name and relationship to the candidate, responses to the four general questions, responses to specific questions, and closing comments. These comments were written almost verbatim to give committee members and the Provost the actual flavor of the conversation.

### **Selection of Candidates**

The written reports of the telephone interviews were circulated to committee members prior to the final meeting, when the committee selected four candidates who best met the established criteria. The decisions on candidates' names to forward to the Provost were clear and unanimous. The Provost decided which candidates to bring to campus and ultimately whom to appoint as dean.

### **Campus Visits**

Each candidate followed a similar schedule while on campus, which included transportation to and from airports and motels by faculty; meals with faculty; and meetings with the Provost, Chancellor, deans of other schools, and with the college faculty and selected community representatives with special interests in the School of Nursing. There were also efforts to sell the position, school, and university to the candidates. They toured the campus and city and were linked with faculty who had similar interests (research, clinical specialty, etc.) for

some functions. For the session with faculty and community members, each candidate took the initial 15 minutes to address the topic "Current Issues in Nursing and the Role of Nursing Education in Dealing With These Issues"; at least an hour of questions, answers, and discussion followed. All faculty, deans, and others who had an occasion to meet and hear the candidates gave written feedback to the Provost about the candidates. The Provost asked for strengths.. specific concerns, and other comments.

### **Summary**

The committee had a strong sense of accomplishment when they submitted the names to the Provost. Both the process and the screening tool worked well for the search process.

### **References**

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