



# Preparing for a Presidential or Executive-Level Search in Higher Education: A Guide for Women in Leadership

## CONTRIBUTORS

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## INTRODUCTION

Even today, the majority of college and university presidents or chancellors are White men, with women representing only one-third of presidents and women of color representing just 12.5 percent of these leaders (Melidona et al. 2023).<sup>1</sup> Although the share of college presidents who are women has increased by about 10 percentage points since 2006, this group has not kept pace with the representation of women in other relevant populations—from undergraduate students to the college-educated workforce—who have increased to near parity if not majority levels (Fry 2022; NCES 2021). Given this surprising, persistent, and even systemic gender gap in the college presidency, identifying the most effective interventions to mitigate perceived and real barriers to this leadership position is critical.

Some of the recent findings from the American College President Study (ACPS)—published in *The American College President: 2023 Edition*—indicate that women may benefit from tools that assist them in identifying the right questions and in performing specific research on institutions where they might apply before taking a presidency or a chancellorship. For example, a higher share of women presidents than men presidents indicated that they did not receive a realistic assessment of challenges facing the institution during the search process. Similarly, a higher share of women presidents than men presidents indicated that they did not receive a clear understanding of the board's expectations during the search process.

Higher education leadership development programs such as the ACE Fellows Program, the Institute for Education Management at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and the Aspen Rising Presidents Fellowship Program provide guidance and support to individuals with an intended career path to the C-suite or the presidency. Women and women of color participate in leadership development programs such as these to better position themselves for executive roles in higher education. Indeed, ACPS data indicate a higher share of women presidents participate in these programs than men presidents. Yet, despite this increased level of preparation, the gender gap in the college presidency persists. The purpose of this publication is to be a resource for women as they prepare for executive level interviews in higher education, which we hope will help the sector reach parity in the college presidency.

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1 The 2022 American College President Survey likely oversampled Black or African American women due to the outreach strategy employed. Therefore, any application of data points to the entire population of college and university presidents should be done with caution. Please see the methodology in *The American College President: 2023 Edition* for further information (Melidona et al. 2023).

Developed by members of the ACE Women's Network Executive Council (WNEC), this guide is for women, women of color, and women-identifying candidates. It addresses the possible disconnects between these candidates and the search process, the institution, and the campus stakeholders. We hope current and future candidates find this information helpful on their journey to an executive-level position, a presidency, or even a second presidency.

The [ACE Women's Network](#) is a national system of networks within each state, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia with the goal of advancing and supporting women in higher education. The network is made up of the [ACE Women's Network Executive Council \(WNEC\)](#), state network chairs, institutional representatives, and presidential sponsors.

The WNEC supports state networks through mentorship and leadership development, and it serves as a liaison between the networks and ACE.

To get involved and connect with your state network, please use the [ACE Women's Network Directory](#) to find information for your state network's leadership.





## OVERVIEW OF THE EXECUTIVE SEARCH PROCESS

Congratulations on embarking on your journey to a presidency, chancellorship, or an executive-level position in higher education!

Perhaps you saw an advertised position that appeared to be a good match for your skillset and experience, or maybe you have received a message from an executive search firm inviting you to consider a particular position.

Whatever prompted your interest, your first steps are simple. Closely review the position profile and conduct some preliminary research about the institution, including location, size, demographics, programs offered, and various other characteristics.

Once you have reviewed this information, determine whether you want to apply. If so, it will be helpful to ask a colleague to nominate you, or contact the executive search consultant identified in the advertisement, position profile, or email invitation to schedule a brief, confidential conversation about the position. Typically, the executive search firm plays a crucial role in the search, so prepare for this conversation as you would for any job interview.

Talking with the consultant establishes a more personal connection; offers additional insights into the specific search, institution, and potential salary range; allows you to ask questions that emerged from the profile review or preliminary research; and enables you to hear the institution's priorities from the consultant's perspective. This information will be valuable as you consider applying and as you are crafting your letter of interest and any additional materials the executive search firm may request for the application.

The search consultant will present to the institution's contact a slate of interested and qualified candidates for consideration. Once the institution's search committee (generally comprising a subset of board members and representatives from campus) reviews all the application materials, the consultant will inform each eligible candidate if they have been selected to move forward to the next stage of the search process, which is generally known as the short list and often consists of probably eight to 10 candidates.

If you are included on the short list, this guide raises important questions and highlights relevant information that you can use to prepare for the initial interview with the search committee. The interview may be conducted face-to-face—usually at an off-campus site such as a hotel (especially in the case of confidential searches)—or virtually. If you are asked to participate in an in-person interview with the committee, you will likely be asked to make travel arrangements to meet on a specific date and time.

For a face-to-face interview, the search consultant will escort you to the meeting, which will usually begin with an opportunity to greet each of the search committee members. In either format (virtual or in person), the search committee chair will likely welcome you, thank you for expressing interest in leading the institution, and provide you with an opportunity to introduce yourself to the search committee. In this introductory statement, briefly thank the committee for the opportunity, and then present a compelling case for your interest in the institution and why you should be the next leader. For the next 45 minutes to an hour, the search committee will ask you about your experience related to the issues and priorities that are facing the institution as well as higher education more broadly. It is important to signal your level of interest by showing the committee that you have taken the time to learn about the institution. At the conclusion of the formal questions from the committee, be prepared to ask several questions of your own and then close the interview with a succinct statement or summary that demonstrates your continued interest, the unique value you would bring to the institution, and why you are an excellent match for the position.

At this point in the process, typically references will be checked before you and the other candidates meet the campus community. In most cases, you will have been asked for references as part of your application, with assurance that they would not be contacted without first alerting you. Now that you are past the initial interview, expect search consultants or search committee members to begin reaching out to your references.

After the initial short-list interviews, usually three to four candidates will move to the next stage of the process; this will generally involve either a full day or a day-and-a-half visit to the institution. It is important that you be authentic during this stage and that you evaluate the institution as much as they are evaluating you. It is also important to note that you may not advance to this stage of the process in your first search—ACE’s 2022 ACPS data found that 34.5 percent of women presidents had been a semifinalist in two or more searches before their appointment as president. The data also indicated that an average of 1.5 years elapsed between a woman’s first application and her appointment as a president or chancellor. So, you will most likely need to apply to several positions before you reach this stage of the process. Unfortunately, the process is not always linear and may take a lot of time and effort. Consider each interview as a learning experience and as practice for the interview in which you will be successful.

After finalist interviews, reference checks, campus visits, and background checks, one candidate is selected to be the institution’s next leader. In rare cases, a search fails—meaning that no candidate is selected from the finalist pool—and the institution will restart the search. You will be notified by the search consultant whether you are selected or not or if the search fails.

In recent years, a number of institutions have opted for confidential searches in which candidates meet only with the search committee and members of the board. This protects the anonymity of candidates who may hold executive-level positions at other institutions. Many institutions, however—particularly public institutions—can or must follow an open search process that cannot provide candidates with anonymity. In addition to interviews with the search committee, the finalist in an open search has the opportunity to meet with various constituent groups such as faculty, staff, students, and, most importantly, the institution’s board. Sometimes alumni, representatives of the institution’s foundation, and civic leaders are also involved in meetings or receptions. In these instances, it is important to understand the needs of each stakeholder group (see *College and University Constituents* on [page 15](#)).

For more information on public and confidential searches, see Jan Greenwood’s explanation in ACE’s publication *The Changing College President: Aligning Experience with Necessity* (Nguyen et al. 2024, 14).



## **BEFORE APPLYING: REVIEW THE POSITION PROFILE, FINANCES, AND STRATEGIC PLAN**

When you first become aware of a position, find the position profile online at the institution's website or the search firm's website. The position profile often shares an array of information that will help you begin to determine whether you want to apply. Some profiles may be web pages, and others may be pdfs for you to download. Follow the links that are provided in the profile, and make note of the linked information.

Position profiles commonly include a description of the college or university as well as its:

- Mission
- Vision
- Values, virtues, or mottos
- History
- Community, location, and region
- Demographics
- Strategic priorities

The profile will often state the qualities the institution is looking for in its next leader, the required and preferred qualifications for the position, the materials needed to apply, an overview of the search process, and the necessary contact information.

As you review the profile, pay attention to what is highlighted about the institution and the position. How does the institution brand itself? How are its values and mission conveyed? Also note what is not mentioned or featured. For example, does the profile use terms such as diversity, equity, or inclusion (DEI), or are these concepts simply implied? These areas may be important for further research, or they could be explored with the search consultant or during the interview process.



Review what details they share about the institution's location and its community. Do additional research on the area if you are not already familiar with it. Is it a place where you and your family are seriously prepared to move—emotionally, culturally, and financially?

Use the position profile to write your cover letter. Identify what resonates with you about the institution, the position, and the description of the desired leader, and then determine how those elements align with your skills and experience. Also, ensure that your résumé or curriculum vitae prominently highlights these areas, as well as your experience with institutions in the same sector (e.g., research intensive, liberal arts, community college, regional four-year). When the search firm and search committee look at your materials, they should be able to immediately see your skills and experience as a potential match for the role.

Before you apply to the position, you will also want to review financial information that can be gleaned from the Internal Revenue Service's (IRS) Form 990. All nonprofit organizations are required to complete 990-series forms, and these forms provide a high-level picture of the institution's financial standing as well as the pay of its executives—including the president at that time. While the most recent publicly available 990s may be a year or two old, they do still provide useful information on institutions' revenue and expenditures. This form is also useful for generating questions to ask the search firm or in the interview with the board or search committee.

You will also want to review the institution's most recent or current strategic plan. Strategic plans are typically used as road maps to guide an institution's decision-making and operations. Knowing what and who are emphasized in a strategic plan is an important window into the potential culture of an institution, how key stakeholders (such as board members) are thinking about success, and who is essential to that success.

If you don't see metrics and measurable goals outlined in the strategic plan, be sure to ask for plans that evaluate institutional success. Relatedly, if the institution is part of a system, you can research the metrics that are used in that system to evaluate its institutions.

Again, it is critical to pay attention to what is *not* mentioned as well as to what is mentioned.

- Are diversity, equity, inclusion, or belonging referenced?
- What student populations are not mentioned?
- How is support outlined for the faculty and staff who will help to realize the plan?
- Does the IRS Form 990 show that the institution has the resources to realize the plan?
- Who was or was not involved in the writing of the plan?
- What is the anticipated end date by which the plan will be realized? Will it happen before the new president arrives? Or will the new president be responsible for helping to realize it?

The review of the strategic plan will help you to determine whether you want to apply as well as to develop questions for the search firm and for the interview. It will also help you to draft your cover letter and tailor your resume.

After you review the institutional profile, budget information, and the strategic plan, it is helpful to review any publicly available campus climate assessments and to do a deep dive into the institution's website, institutional data, accreditation, structure, policies, and programs. If you are not able review these elements prior to applying, you will want to review them before your interview process.

## CAMPUS CLIMATE ASSESSMENTS

As you prepare to interview with an institution, consider looking for publicly available campus climate assessments. A campus climate survey measures how faculty, staff, students, and visitors feel welcomed and supported by an institution regardless of their race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity (SoundRocket 2024). Socioeconomic status and age are often factors as well. In an act of transparency, some colleges and universities will make assessment results available to the larger campus community so that systems, structures, policies, procedures, culture, and other climate factors can be more closely examined and ideally addressed by leadership.

Campus climate assessments speak to several important factors you will want to consider in your search, such as sense of belonging, psychological and physical safety, support for and equitable treatment of people from varying backgrounds and identities, or instances of discrimination or harassment. As you review the campus climate assessments, consider:

- Is it clear who was included in the assessment? Was it just students? Or was it also faculty and staff? Are there differences among these groups?
- Are the data disaggregated in a way that points to potential climate concerns among different populations? Is there information or a plan to address the potential climate concerns?
- What questions might the data in the campus climate report raise that you can address with the search consultant or in the interview process?
- Are there updates available as to how the campus addressed results of the campus climate survey?

## WEBSITE, DATA, AND ACCREDITATION

As you begin your research on an institution, visit the institution's website. Keep in mind that the institution's website is its front-facing tool for prospective students, faculty, and staff—what message does it relay? To whom are they trying to appeal?

Maintain a critical eye as you review the website. What is pictured? Who is pictured? How easy or hard is it to find the information you are looking for? What data does the website display? What data are you unable to find? Some candidates will sign up to receive more information as if they were a prospective student. What materials does the institution share? What messages do those materials relay? What messages might be missing?

You often can find the student newspaper or other student publications online. Similarly, local newspapers may highlight major happenings on campus in a way that the institution itself will not convey. These materials can give you another perspective of the institution.

You can learn about the student, faculty, and staff profile of the institution by visiting the [National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System \(IPEDS\)](#) or The Education Trust's College Results database tool at [collegeresults.org](#). By examining this data, you can learn the institutional profile of the faculty, staff, and students. What are the institution's graduation rates for students by race and ethnicity, Pell Grant recipients, and those who do not receive aid? What is the total cost of attendance? What is the average net price for students? What were the institution's new hires by faculty or staff category and by race, ethnicity, and gender?

IPEDS and [collegeresults.org](#) share a lot of interesting information that may not be readily available on an institution's website. While some of this data may be a year or two old due to IPEDS collection and posting cycles, it will help illuminate what data may be missing from an institution's website and what questions you may want to ask your search consultant or different constituents during your interview process. Useful data to review include:

- Acceptance rate and yield rate
- First- to second-year retention rates

- Four- and six-year graduation rates
- Average cost of attendance
- Tuition discount rate

You also will want to review the institution's accreditation. Ideally, accreditation information should be immediately available by searching for "accreditation" on an institution's website. If you are unable to discern from an institution's website whether it is accredited, who its accreditor is, or when it is next up for reaffirmation, you can check the U.S. Department of Education's Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs (DAPIP). This database will display the institution's accreditor and most recent reaffirmation, as well as when it is next up for review. DAPIP also provides copies of the documentation the institution received from the accreditor during its last review. Additionally, any special programs that are accredited are listed in this database as well. You may also want to check the accreditor's website to determine the history of past accreditation actions for the institution. All of these factors will have an impact on the president or senior leader at some point during their tenure. Questions regarding accreditation could be directed to the search consultant or different constituents during the interview process.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS**

Finally, you should understand the organizational structure of the institution. Noting where different positions report can inform your questions for the search consultant and stakeholders during the interview process. For example, what positions will report to you? What positions report to the chief academic officer? To whom does student life, campus police and security, the head of athletics, the head of enrollment management, or legal affairs report? Understanding the institution's organizational structure will guide your questions with the search committee and stakeholders.

You also may want to review faculty or employee handbooks prior to interviewing. The information in these documents may inform your questions about various policies or programs for the institution's faculty or staff. Sometimes these documents are readily available on the institution's website. If they are not, you may want to ask the search consultant if they can secure copies for review. Also, you may want to consider reviewing student government and organizations' handbooks. These will lend insight into how student organizations are funded and how they are recognized, and they will frame how student engagement is supported on campus. These documents are especially useful in informing the questions you may want to ask faculty, staff, or students during the interview process.



## KEY GROUPS: THE BOARD, SEARCH COMMITTEE, AND CONSTITUENTS

This guide highlights the roles of the board of trustees, search committee, and constituents (faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community members); these are the groups that typically participate in interviews at various stages of an open search process for presidents and chancellors.<sup>2</sup> For executive-level searches that are not at the president or chancellor level, only a portion of the board may participate.

### THE BOARD

The majority of presidents report to the institution's governing board, and a successful presidency is highly dependent on that relationship.<sup>3</sup> The board is responsible for the annual evaluation of the president, compensation review, and terms for bonuses and increased compensation. The board's support is crucial—especially when navigating change or a challenging environment. Mutual trust, respect, and clear, two-way communication are the foundation for the strong, positive working relationship that you will need for a long and effective presidency.

During your tenure as president, you will want to develop close working relationships with the chair of the board and two to three members of the board who chair key committees. Depending on the type of institution, these committees could include the finance, academic affairs, or real estate committees. The institution may also have a foundation or presidential advisory committee. These bodies often include former board members who are still very influential and who may be among the institution's top donors.

Throughout the search process, it is vital to assess the composition of the board, how trustees relate and interact with you, and whether you feel confident in your ability to establish trust and connection with them. The search process offers multiple opportunities for you to gain insight into not only individual trustees but also the entire board. A board member will likely chair the presidential search committee, and one or more additional trustees will represent the

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<sup>2</sup> This guide uses *board of trustees* as an all-encompassing term for bodies that govern a college or a university. Other terminology could be board of visitors, board of overseers, governing board, or board of regents.

<sup>3</sup> The exception would be if an institution is part of a system and its president reports to the system president or chancellor.



board on the committee. You should be especially attuned to the search committee chair; that individual is someone whose leadership and counsel are valued by the board, and this will often become your first close board relationship.

If you are a finalist, your most important interview is with the full board of trustees, as this group ultimately selects the successful candidate. For public institutions within a multicampus system, you may interview with a local board as well as the president or chancellor of the system, with the system's board making the official decision and appointment.

For most institutions, the members of the board of trustees are listed on the institution's website along with their photo and information such as their current or former employer and title, hometown, and—if the individual is an alumnus or current student—year of graduation. Some colleges and universities highlight additional biographical details in their profiles. As you review these board member profiles, consider:

- How diverse does the board of trustees appear to be based on the information available? Think of diversity in many ways: race and ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, country of origin, and variety of professional careers. Many boards are largely composed of local business professionals. Many alumni or professionals from a single sector will set a different tone and approach for the board than a board with more diverse experience.
- Do the demographics of the board appear to reflect the student population served by the institution? The local community? The faculty and staff?
- Are board agendas, minutes, or recordings of their meetings archived and available on the website? These documents can provide insight into issues of importance, recurring topics of discussion, and, perhaps, board culture. If recordings are available, it is highly advisable that you review a few of these before your interview. The level of engagement of boards varies from institution to institution. The same is true for the board's general understanding of how colleges work. You can get a good sense of both by seeing how board members interact with one another and with institutional leadership in these videos.
- How are board members appointed, and what is their term length? In many cases, trustees of public colleges and universities are appointed by the state's governor or legislators, or they are elected by the populace for a specific period. Board members of private institutions vary quite a bit and can include alumni who have been identified by the board's governance or nominating committee and elected to serve on the board. Board size also varies, with an average of 12 members at public institutions and an average of 29 members at private institutions (Kelchen 2018).
- Are any of the trustees active in national associations such as the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges or the Association of Community College Trustees? What does board development and training entail?

A lack of demographic diversity (e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity) within the board may raise questions as to how open and supportive the board will be of the institution's next leader. However, it is important to note that demographics alone are not necessarily indicative of the level of support they will give the president. You should listen and watch for cues in their responses and behaviors as you interact with individual trustees and the board as a whole. Additionally, carefully observe how board members interact with and show respect for one another—especially if there are faculty and student trustees.

You may have an opportunity to introduce some questions throughout the interview as you respond to specific queries from trustees. Toward the conclusion of the interview session with the board, you will have a limited amount of time to pose questions to them. You may only be able to ask three to five questions, so be strategic about what you ask. We advise questions on topics that have risen to the top of your priority list as a result of your interactions with the trustees and other campus constituents. You may also want to ask questions around areas for which you would need greater clarification if you were offered the position.

As mentioned, reviewing the strategic plan, the most recent public accreditation reports, and the most recent public financial statements (e.g., IRS Form 990) should be a part of your preparation for your interview with the board. You

can demonstrate that you have reviewed these by asking specific questions related to your findings. Your preparation will be noticed by the board, and your specific questions will also give you a sense of how involved and aware the board is of their strategic plan, accreditation, and finances.

The answers to the following questions should become known during your interview process:

- If you will be the first woman president or first president of color, it is important to know how the board will respond to issues of discrimination as they arise during your presidency. Are they prepared to support you? How will they support you? Will they need training in recognizing microaggressions and bias? This can be addressed through asking about the annual training for board members.
- Depending on the state and political climate, the board may have a DEI committee or have DEI goals written into the committee charges. If the committee composition, bylaws, and committee charges are not easy to find, ask to see them.
- Are equity, inclusiveness, and belonging embedded in the institution's strategic plan and goals and priorities—for not only students but also personnel? How does the institution's budget support those goals?
- How does the institution's strategic plan address success for all students, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, or background? How does the institution's budget reflect that commitment?
- How has the institution handled student protests? How has it dealt with faculty, staff, or student strikes? Does the board have an official stance on freedom of speech and academic freedom?
- Has the institution conducted a campus climate survey recently? If so, how has the board discussed the results and taken any action? If not, would the board encourage the new president to consider conducting a climate survey? Why or why not?
- How did the campus respond to the accreditor's DEI standards in the most recent self-study (if applicable)?
- Have they described any campus programs that support leadership development for underrepresented faculty and staff?
- Does the board routinely receive reports regarding student demographics and the success rates (retention, graduation, etc.) for various student populations? What do they do with that information?
- Does the board routinely receive reports addressing faculty and staff demographics and retention or turnover rates? How do they utilize this information in decision-making?
- What are the board's strategic vision and priorities for the institution?
- What is the institution's fundraising strategy, and how aligned is it with the overall strategic plan? What are the key sources of philanthropic support, and how engaged are major donors and alumni in contributing to the institution's mission? What is the fundraising history?
- How does the board articulate the role of the president in the institution's fundraising efforts and strategy? Is there a current fundraising campaign? Will a new campaign be initiated with the new president coming on board?

The following are questions about additional relevant information. Seek clarity from the board if this information does not become apparent during the interview.

- What should the institution look like in three, five, or 10 years?
- What gives you the greatest sense of pride in the institution?
- What are the greatest challenges facing the new president?
- What is the role of athletics on campus? How is the role of president perceived in athletics?
- What are your first priorities for the new president? What does a successful first year for the new president look like to you?

- What would you like to see the new president address in the first six months of their first year?
- How would you help the new president to quickly establish important contacts in the community and region?
- How will the board support the president's continued leadership development?
- What does the presidential performance review process include? How often is it conducted?

You also should be prepared to answer questions from the board. Some of these might include:

- Why are you especially interested in leading this institution?
- Describe your proficiency with institutional finances and budget preparation. What is the largest budget for which you've been responsible?
- What is your experience with fundraising?
- Describe how you would develop connections and advocate for your institution with state legislators and federal congressional delegation.
- What experience have you had in managing a campus (or organizational) crisis?
- Provide an example of a difficult or challenging situation that you successfully addressed (but use a professional challenge—not a personal one).
- Describe a challenging professional decision you had to make and the process you used to reach that decision. Was it successful? How did the campus or your colleagues react?
- Describe a large organizational initiative that was *not* successful. What did you learn about yourself as well as about planning and implementation processes that you would bring to your next initiative?
- If you were offered the position, what would keep you from accepting it?

## THE SEARCH COMMITTEE

Search committees are an integral component of the search process. Although every committee is different, they tend to share several commonalities. Committee members are selected to represent the campus community that you are considering leading. By studying the composition of the committee, you can learn a lot about the power structures and the guidance of the college or university.

Presidential search committees are largely composed of board of trustee members—the people who serve as the president's boss. The board chair, if on the committee, usually serves as an *ex officio* member, while the vice chair (the incoming board chair) frequently serves as the chair of the presidential search committee. Thus, the chair of your search committee is the person who is most likely to serve as your next supervisor.

Larger search committees attempt to be representative of the many stakeholders on campus. The committee composition will provide you with a sense of the important priorities for the institution. For example:

- Faculty members represent the various disciplines or the faculty senate. They are seeking a president with the academic gravitas to serve as their leader.
- Student members of the committee are seeking someone who is relatable and who will be responsive to their educational needs.
- The chief financial officer will frequently serve on the committee to assess the candidate's fiscal acumen and experience.
- Other senior cabinet members may be included, such as someone from student affairs as well as the general counsel.
- Athletics department staff being included is often indicative of the relative stature of athletics at a particular institution.

- Alumni members of the committee bring a unique perspective as former students, and they often serve to ensure that the next president will honor institutional traditions, strengthen alumni relations, and enhance the institution's reputation.
- A local resident or elected official may be included for colleges and universities that play an integral role in their local community.

Generally, the search committee will make a recommendation to the board of trustees about who should be the next president; the board of trustees (or its executive committee) will make the final hiring decision. It is important to remember that faculty and students are not the hiring authorities—this role is reserved for the board. To paraphrase a common observation made by search consultants, convincing the faculty and students about your effectiveness as an academic leader can't help you very much, but they can really hurt you. Though you will want to impress all members of the committee, you should be particularly cognizant of your connection to the board members.

To prepare for your interview with the search committee, research each committee member. Contemplate who they are and who they represent, as well as any other salient information. Candidates should be wary of committees that do not have balanced representation from campus constituencies. An imbalance could demonstrate that the institution is lacking diversity in its various forms or indicate that a constituency is overrepresented in a particular manner. For example, a committee dominated by lawyers may indicate that an institution is navigating numerous legal crises at this time, while a committee with a heavy representation of finance personnel may be indicative of the current fiscal challenges an institution faces.

The first time you meet with the search committee is generally as part of a larger pool or the short list, which may range in size from eight to 10 candidates. In preparation for this initial meeting with the search committee, you should review the institution's IRS 990-series forms from the past several years, with special attention paid to revenues and expenses as well as any unexpected changes or swings. You will also want to review [collegeresults.org](http://collegeresults.org) or the institution's IPEDS data before this meeting.

Conduct an online news search for the institution and its leaders, including the morning of the interview in case there are any late-breaking news stories. Again, you should also review the student newspaper. This media review will add additional contemporary and local context and alert you to any potential scandals or challenges. The search consultant and the institutional profile will generally provide a sense of the campus climate, and any other issues or concerns that the board or committee has at this important inflection point for the institution. Think about questions that might explore these timely issues and how you might touch upon them in your opening statement to the search committee.

As you prepare for this first interview, also take a critical eye to your own online presence and any information that might be uncovered during a background check. If there is an item online or in your history that requires explanation or context, raise it in advance with the search consultant. There should be no surprises.

Your opening statement should be carefully prepared and tailored to the particular leadership opportunity. It is your chance to convey why your skills and experiences combine to make you the perfect candidate for this position, yet it is perhaps more important to convey what draws you to *them*. Committees want to know that you have taken the time to get to know the institution; further, they will want to know why you have become deeply attracted to leading their institution. After your opening, which you should limit to five minutes or less, expect a round of questions from committee members.

In preparation for these questions, re-read the search prospectus carefully and note the key specifications for the position. You should expect one question for each of the key areas outlined. Be prepared to answer questions about:

- Your experience in fiscal management and prioritization
- Your experience around strategic planning
- How you have raised or will raise an institution's brand identity



- Your knowledge around strategic enrollment management
- Your commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging
- Your involvement and experience with fundraising (from individuals, foundations, federal agencies, and industry partners)
- How you have and will foster academic excellence
- Your experience with crisis management

You will want to outline your experiences and responses to these questions, which will help to ensure that you deliver confident responses full of specific details. Committees very much appreciate examples when candidates discuss their expertise and experiences.

You will receive additional questions that will be reflective of the institution and its needs. For example, a liberal arts college will want to explore your commitment to its mission. A faith-based institution will want to hear you reflect on your faith and how it inspires your work. Minority serving institutions may ask questions around their specific status type (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions). Other questions may arise from an institution that wants to build or highlight its research focus, be an urban anchor institution, or place its emphasis on serving transfer or first-generation students. Expect to see the points of pride demonstrated in the prospectus reflected in the search committee's questions to you. In addition, questions from the committee will also be indicative of the board's points of concern, whether they center around strategic enrollment management or your prioritization process for needed capital improvements. Your responses should be clear and succinct, with specific examples. Given the short time frame of the interview, you should work to keep your answers to roughly five minutes each.

The five or 10 minutes at the conclusion of this initial interview are generally reserved for your questions. Through your questions, aim to provide a sense that you are simultaneously aware of the fundamental challenges facing the institution yet inspired by the exciting opportunities ahead. This is not a time for bland and generic questioning but rather a time to let your intelligence, perceptiveness, and vision shine. If there is a student on the committee, posing one short question to them can be a powerful signal of your interest in and focus on student success. You should listen carefully to all of their responses and seek to inspire a true conversation.

As you are interviewing with the search committee, be sure to observe the interactions among committee members. Note the interactions between the trustees (especially the vice chair) and the chief financial officer, as they will generally have long-standing relationships that have been forged in their work on various board subcommittees. Do the people seem to be enjoying each other, or are they engaged in a power struggle? Observe and listen to whether this is a community of people that you would like to join. Remember that just as they are interviewing you, you are also interviewing them. Conclude your interview with a warm statement of appreciation for their time and conversation. If the meeting is in person, take the time to quickly shake hands with every committee member in the room.

After the first-round interviews, a smaller pool will be advanced. There may be three to five semifinalists that move forward into an intervening round of interviews depending on the process for the search, but eventually a final group of two or three finalists will be invited to a campus interview (which may be on or near campus). If you have a significant other, inquire whether there is a role for them during this interview; some institutions will have an itinerary for them as well.

For the final interview with the presidential search committee, be prepared to:

- Give an opening statement that shifts from covering basic content areas, such as finance or strategic planning, to a more in-depth exploration of your vision for the institution as it moves forward.
- Assess the challenges ahead for the next president.
- Impart what may be part of your early plans to move the institution forward.

After your opening responses to their prompts, the committee will typically again engage you with questions, and at this point your interactions should reflect the potential future reality and convey your belief that you may be their next president, and you are interacting with your future board and constituents. Questions at this stage will now shift onto a deeper and more concrete plane. Be prepared for questions such as:

- What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities for this institution in the next year, and how will you position it for success?
- How would you prioritize your time and energy during your first 90 days as president?
- Imagine you've just been named as our next president. When announcing your appointment, how would we introduce you in less than five minutes? Who are you, and how does your story and experience prepare you for this role?
- What is your vision for the institution in 10 years? What looks the same, what looks different, and what steps will you take to move us there?

Your responses should maintain an upbeat, positive energy while remaining clear about the challenges ahead. Strive to keep your answers balanced and convey a sense of your philosophical approach, illustrated with specific examples from your past experiences and imbued with a sense of optimism for the institution moving forward.

At the conclusion of the interview, the search firm will generally provide time to socialize with the committee. Before you leave, be intentional about acknowledging and thanking every person in the room.

## **COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CONSTITUENTS**

As a part of the interview process and especially during the finalist stage, be prepared to meet with various constituents at the institution. Each group of stakeholders may have different viewpoints of the leadership position, and building rapport across these constituents is an essential component of the final steps in the search process.

During the finalist search process, the candidate will participate in constituent sessions; these may vary from informal meet and greets to formal presentations with question and answer periods. Formal presentations typically address the candidate's vision for the role, strategic priorities, and responses to specific institutional challenges. You will be given topics for the formal presentation. Sometimes these presentations are also informal gatherings that offer you an opportunity to connect on a more personal level and showcase your interpersonal skills and adaptability. All sessions provide stakeholders with a chance to see how each candidate might fit into the campus culture.

As you prepare for the constituent sessions, read the recent meeting minutes from the faculty senate, staff senate, student government, and other governing bodies. These shared governance bodies shape the academic and operational policies of a university. Start by reviewing recent initiatives and decisions from the faculty senate and paying attention to key priorities such as academic freedom; diversity, equity and inclusion efforts; and resource allocation. Also make note as to whether the faculty is unionized. This research will provide insight into the issues that matter most to faculty and how the governance structures either support or challenge the university's mission. During constituent sessions, consider ways to connect to the priorities of these internal stakeholders. Engaging with a wide range of constituents demonstrates respect for shared governance and the complexity of an institution.

Complete the same preparation that you did for the board and search committee by looking at the institution's enrollment trends, top-ranked programs, strategic enrollment goals, and areas of concern such as retention rates, graduation rates, and demographic shifts regarding campus constituents. For example, understanding the institution's processes and priorities around enrollment management will help you speak knowledgeably during your interviews and offer strategies for future growth.

The goal of a constituent session is to allow time for the varied perspectives and, simultaneously, provide you with critical information about the institution's strengths, needs, and challenges. Sample constituent sessions might include:

- **Students:** Understanding students' aspirations and challenges is key to shaping student-centered policies. Listen to their experiences at the institution and their concerns about academic programs, student services, and campus life.
- **Faculty:** Faculty members are deeply involved in academic and research priorities. Pay attention to their concerns about institutional support, communication, research funding, and academic freedom.
- **Administrative Staff:** University staff are critical to the daily operations of the institution. Gain insight into their work environment, professional development opportunities, and challenges they face.
- **Student Affairs Staff:** These individuals have a close connection to the student experience outside the classroom. Their input on student support services, diversity initiatives, and student well-being is crucial to understanding the broader student experience.
- **Vice Presidents and Direct Reports:** These high-level meetings will give you a glimpse into the leadership culture, strategic vision, and internal dynamics of the institution. Be prepared to discuss how your leadership style complements existing leadership structures.
- **Open Forums for Faculty and Staff:** In these larger sessions, address questions about your vision, leadership style, and approach to collaboration. Be ready to discuss a wide range of topics from academic priorities to operational efficiency.
- **Shared Governance Representatives:** Understanding the role of individuals who represent shared governance groups in shaping policies and procedures will provide valuable insight into institutional dynamics.
- **Alumni and University Foundation:** Engaging with alumni and foundation representatives will help you to understand the university's external relationships and how well the institution supports and leverages its alumni network.

Be prepared to ask different constituent groups relevant questions. It is important that the audience feel your focus on their group and your drive to understand their needs. Some sample questions for constituents include:

- **Students:** What student needs are or are not being met? What are students' expectations for the president's role (or executive-level role)? What are the strengths of faculty from the student point of view? How might students and faculty collaborate? What are students' wants for the university? What challenges do students experience?
- **Faculty:** What is the institutional culture? What do faculty see as top priorities for the role? What recent challenges have the faculty faced? What are points of pride and successes among the faculty?
- **Staff:** How would you describe the institutional culture—specifically, what are working relationships like between the staff and faculty? What resources and support do the staff need to excel in their jobs? What challenges are faced in the daily operations of the institution? What are points of pride and successes among the staff?

The interview may also include open forums with a variety of constituents in attendance. You may have time to present qualifications, experiences, initial goals, and more. You will also have time to answer questions from the various stakeholders, but it is helpful to predict some questions and topics. Aim to provide both substantive and specific responses by incorporating examples from your career and experience. Some sample questions include:

- What is your leadership style?
- How do you approach transparency and communication?

- What would be your top priorities in the first three months? Six months? One year?
- What draws you to this role at this institution?
- What are examples of the ways that you support work-life balance for faculty and staff?
- What is your approach to strategic planning? How would faculty and staff be involved?
- How would you form partnerships with businesses, employers, and other members of the surrounding community?
- What is a recent initiative that you guided? What was the outcome?
- How do you approach shared governance?
- What are two to three core values that impact your daily work? Why did you pick these values? Provide examples.
- How do you approach situations that may conflict with your values as a leader?
- How do you approach budget management?
- How will you work with members of Congress and their delegations to represent the institution? At public institutions, how would you work with local and national legislators on issues related to higher education and funding?
- What are your expectations for faculty teaching, research, and service?
- How will you manage your time internally with the campus and externally with the community?



## RESOURCES

The following resources may be helpful as candidates prepare for their interview and for leadership in higher education.

### REPORTS

*Best Practices in Higher Education Presidential Search: Recommendations and Guiding Principles for Recruiting Exceptional Academic Leaders:* Published by executive search firm WittKieffer, this report is a resource for those who are conducting searches, yet candidates can utilize this guide to peek behind the curtain of the search process and to learn how effective searches are conducted.

*Competencies for the College Presidency: A National Study of Effective Leadership in Higher Education:* The result of a 12-month project sponsored by Academic Search, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the American Academic Leadership Institute, and the Council of Independent Colleges, this report “examines presidential leadership competencies salient to the current context based on data from sitting presidents at a sample of primarily bachelor’s degree-granting colleges and universities. The study included survey responses from over 700 college and university presidents and four focus groups with 14 current presidents.”

*A Framework for Advancing Anti-Racism Strategy on Campus:* The National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education created a framework to help advance anti-racist strategies on campus. This resource can help guide candidates as they think critically about the institution and its structures, policies, and procedures; how it allocates resources; and how it promotes student success, pedagogy, hiring, promotion, programming, training and development, and more. It provides probing questions and areas for concern that candidates may want to consider in their search. You must be a member of NADOHE to access this resource.

*The Invisible Checklist: Ascension Implications for Women of Color Leaders:* This ACE brief analyzes interviews with several women who have aspired to the presidency. Through pseudonyms, researcher Ashley Gray outlines the invisible checklist women of color leaders have encountered on their journey to the presidency. This brief can be helpful to candidates who are identifying barriers on their own journeys to the presidency.

*Voices from the Field 2023: Experiences of Women Presidents in Higher Education:* This ACE report highlights interviews of five current and former women presidents to offer insights into career pathways and advice for aspiring presidents.

*Whiteness Rules: Racial Exclusion in Becoming an American College President:* Published by College Futures Foundation, this report discusses California’s leadership ecosystem and how racialization happens in presidential searches within this system. The report outlines the structural biases, and the toolkit outlines potential solutions. Candidates may find these resources helpful whether navigating a search in California or another state.

### ONLINE RESOURCES

*CUPA-HR Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Maturity Index:* This tool is designed to help higher education take meaningful steps to develop their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts around faculty and staff. It is not a climate survey, but it can be used as a tool by candidates to think about questions around practices that help sustain and create an inclusive campus. It is typically taken by several people at an institution, and the results are used as a starting point for discussions to build an inclusive campus.

*GuideStar:* If you are looking for 990s or to learn more about the institution you are considering, this site supplies valuable and complete information with important data and insights on all nonprofits. There are both free and paid versions.

“The Importance of Mentorship, Sponsorship, and Allyship”: This blog post from FasterCapital helps to distinguish mentorship, sponsorship, and allyship for women in leadership. It outlines these terms in the context of importance, benefits, choice, and networking, and clarifies how to identify a good mentor or sponsor.

## ACE PROGRAMS

**ACE Fellows Program:** This program offers a unique and transformative opportunity for aspiring leaders in higher education. During their fellowship year, ACE Fellows will dive deep into a dynamic curriculum, engage in hands-on learning, and collaborate on impactful activities.

**ACE Women’s Network:** This national system of networks within each state, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia advances and supports women in higher education. Each network is led by a state chair who works with institutional representatives and at least one presidential sponsor to develop programs that identify, develop, encourage, advance, link, and support women in higher education careers within that state.

## PODCASTS

**dotEDU:** ACE’s podcast discusses developing and key higher education public policy issues impacting colleges, universities, and students across the country. Special guests have joined the podcast to discuss topics such as student voting, campus protests, and climate change. This podcast will help candidates remain current about key issues that are facing higher education.

**Greatness Podcast:** This podcast pulls together guests (many of them women) as leading thinkers around creating greatness, particularly as it relates to things such as organizations, teams, and leaders. It covers topics including delegation, leadership, confidence, and imposter syndrome and could be helpful to leaders at various stages of their journey.

**Women at Work:** This podcast from Harvard Business Review has several seasons that highlight important considerations for women leaders. With topics such as assertiveness, balancing parenting, and sexism, this podcast could be helpful for women both in their day-to-day work and as they consider whether to apply for a presidency.

## BOOKS

***A Leadership Guide for Women in Higher Education*,** by Marjorie Hass: This book by the president of the Council of Independent Colleges and president emerita of Rhodes College reviews the unique challenges women face as they move into senior leadership roles at colleges and universities. Candidates will find this book to provide “frank, supportive advice they need to advance in their careers and lead with excellence.”

***Brave Women at Work: Lessons in Leadership*,** edited by Jennifer Pestikas and Hope Mueller: This anthology of leadership lessons from women leaders inside and outside higher education will provide candidates the opportunity to learn from and identify with the leaders’ trials, errors, and setbacks.

***Leading from the Margins: College Leadership from Unexpected Places*,** by Mary Dana Hinton: This book by the president of Hollins University and president emerita of the College of Saint Benedict discusses “why people from marginalized backgrounds may be uniquely qualified to become effective higher education leaders, and how they can get there.” Candidates will find guidance for embracing their leadership potential and discover strength in unexpected places.

***LGBTQ Leadership in Higher Education*,** edited by Raymond E. Crossman: In this book, Crossman brings together 15 currently serving or retired LGBTQ presidents and chancellors in higher education to explain why, to whom, and how LGBTQ leadership matters. In essays ranging across 12 topics, including intersectionality, mentorship, feminism,

self-care, coming out, heteronormativity, and partners and spouses, the essay authors address why LGBTQ leadership matters at this moment, and—more broadly—why diversity, inclusion, and equity in leadership are important in meeting today’s challenges for higher education and human rights.

*On Being Presidential: A Guide for College and University Leaders*, by Susan R. Pierce: For anyone navigating the complex world of higher education leadership—or aspiring to do so—this book is an engaging guide. Pierce offers a wealth of practical advice, cautionary tales, and commonsense strategies for thriving as a college or university president.

*Spotlighting Female Leadership: Strategies, Stories, Perspectives*, by Devorah Lieberman, Fernando León García, and the International Association of University Presidents: This e-book “highlights the leadership experiences of ten female presidents, chancellors, and rectors from diverse higher education institutions that are part of the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP). . . . Each leader contributed insights on their institution, tenure, career trajectory, gender dynamics, successful strategies, and advice for current and aspiring female leaders.”

*Tools and Techniques for Aspiring College Presidents*, by Quincy Martin III, Deborah Baness King, and Matthew A. Cooney: This book provides a practical guide to navigating the path to college leadership. It covers topics such as academic governance, leadership development, data analytics, strategic planning, and student affairs and serves as a resource for educators, administrators, and researchers in higher education.

*Women in the Higher Education C-Suite: Diverse Executive Profiles*, by Lisa Mednick Takami: This book provides candidates with the opportunity to learn from a diverse cross-section of women leaders who have succeeded in higher education administration. It “explores personal narratives of a diverse group of women CEOs and senior executives serving in two-year and four-year public and private colleges and universities.”

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