

# Academic leadership searches: evolving best practices

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**Abstract:** Conducting searches for new leadership at academic institutions is an important, often underappreciated, ongoing institutional commitment. Search committee recruitment strategies and processes have evolved to attain a higher level of consistency and equity in the recruitment of leadership. This trajectory toward 'Best Practices' is described herein. Institutional leaders are now exploring alternate models, including variants of centralization of the search process, to address the challenges found in the traditional academic search model. Also described is a unique approach – The Core Operations Administrative Team for Searches (C.O.A.T.S.) – which incorporates 'Best Practices' in academic searches, as well as building institutional 'search capacity'.

**Keywords:** recruitment, search committee, academic leadership

## Introduction

The search for a new leader at an academic institution is a propitious moment of great opportunity.<sup>1,2</sup> In addition to the obvious 'end game' of the successful recruitment of a new leader, the whole search process itself (if conducted with rigor and skillful introspection), presents an opportunity for a new direction and momentum for an academic department/unit for new resources, for the potential of new recruits once the leadership position is assumed, and for heightened national visibility for the institution.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 exemplifies the opportunities and benefits of an academic search. At face value, the search can lead to renewed attention and support for the department/institutional unit. A strong new leader can garnish new resources for the department, with the expectation that s/he will recruit a cadre of talented new faculty.<sup>2</sup> There is also the internal opportunity that the search presents – the opportunity for careful departmental introspection (many institutions conduct an internal or external review of a department in advance of the search) and the opportunity for faculty who serve on the search committee to learn more about the department/institution through this search process. This can be a leadership opportunity for residents and medical students – thereby also affirming the importance of education as a core institutional mission. Candidates, if treated well during the search process, can become 'goodwill ambassadors' for the institution. They will speak well of their experiences and they can be contacted later on for advice. This is a very human process. The search process also presents opportunities 'for the unexpected'. For example, you might interview a candidate for a position and later on s/he might become the top candidate for another position that you are filling subsequently. Thus, the search process has many opportunities that can benefit the institution and should be approached with business-like attention.<sup>1</sup> In business,

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**Table 1** Opportunities and benefits of an academic search

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- New Chair/Center/Institute Director
  - New direction/momentum for department
  - New resources for department
  - New leadership for institution
  - New direction/momentum for institution where needed
  - Potential other recruitments
  - National visibility for institution
  - New national ‘ambassadors’ for institution
  - Faculty advancement through participation in search process
  - Faculty and staff professional development
  - Enhanced institutional morale
  - Opportunities for ‘the unexpected’
- 

recruitment is considered as a premium activity, a process that is well documented and acknowledged.<sup>3–5</sup>

## What are ‘best practices’ in academic searches

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) has been a leader in defining and disseminating ‘Best Practices’ in academic searches.<sup>1,6–8</sup> The AAMC has provided three authoritative texts on this topic. The first text, ‘The Successful Medical School Department Chair: Search, Selection, Appointment, Transition’ (published in 2007), presents an overview of the entire search process and details the steps involved in each phase of the search.<sup>1</sup> The second monograph, ‘Leadership Recruitment Practices in Academic Medicine’,<sup>7</sup> describes current approaches and highlights that while the use of a search firm is variable across institutions, most institutions use a search committee. The monograph also highlights how alignment between the medical school Dean and the hospital CEO is crucial in the recruitment of a new leader. The third monograph, ‘Finding Top Talent: How to Search for Leaders in Academic Medicine’,<sup>8</sup> ‘drills down’ on the details of academic search committees and searching. It provides explicit guidance on many aspects of the search process. The book defines how the actual process of the search is integral to the success of the recruitment. In terms of ‘Best Practices’, ten ‘C’s’ of searching are articulated – these represent core aspects that are common to successful searches. These are:

- Continuity
- Communication
- The Charge
- Culture
- Candidates (and their competence)
- Chair of the search
- Composition of the search committee
- Conduct

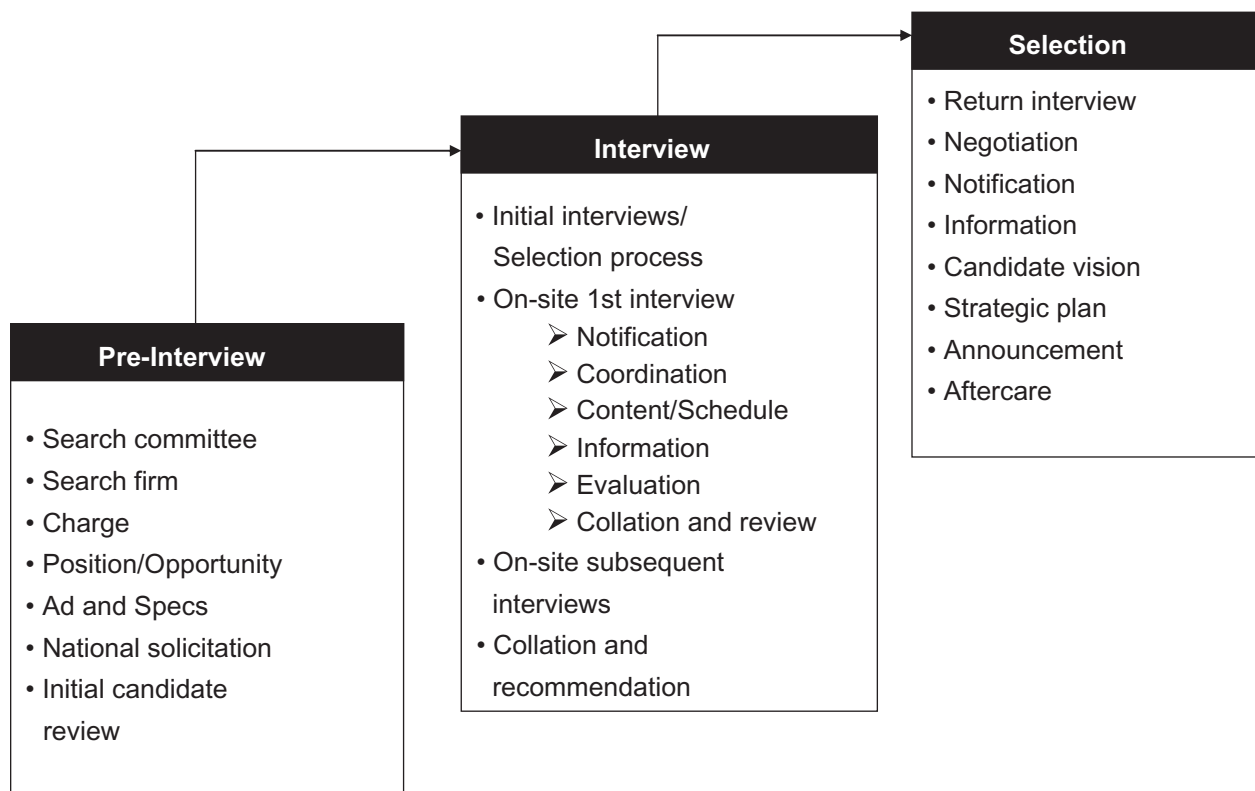
- Confidentiality
- Closure

While institutions vary in the extent to which they adopt formal processes, attention to these core elements of the process is required in order to achieve a successful search. The stages of the search and the elements of each stage are depicted in Figure 1.

## Academic searches and the role of the search committee

Institutions of higher education generally have guidelines and policies for the search process and recruitment of faculty and leadership that address federal law (equal employment opportunity and affirmative action), its commitment to diversity, development of the position announcement, recruitment resources (eg, discipline-specific and professional journals and publications and organizations that reach minorities and women) and search committee formation and responsibilities.<sup>8,9</sup> The composition of the search committee varies, but most often is comprised of 10–20 individuals.<sup>9,10</sup> Some institutions have explicit instructions as to the composition of the search committee, including specification of the number and distribution of faculty (eg, rank, department, school) to be selected to serve.<sup>10</sup> Many search committees do not include faculty from the department that is searching for a new chair. The overarching model for institutional searches consists of the Best Practices noted above. Similarly, institutional recruitment practices within academic medicine have traditionally followed an academic search model.<sup>8</sup> While the general guidelines and policies for recruitment and selection of faculty and leadership constitute Best Practices, the nuances of the practices, policies and guiding principles for recruitment of new leaders are search committee driven and are influenced by the culture and existing leadership of a given institution.

Search committees are a relatively recent development in academic searches. Prior to the 1970s, positions in higher education were chosen through the personal knowledge of candidates. Academic and administrative positions in higher education were first advertised nationally when *The Chronicle of Higher Education* began ‘Positions Available’ in 1970. Other professional journals began to list advertisements for positions over time. Now, most professional journals include advertisements for academic positions. Initially, search committees served in an advisory role to boards of trustees selecting new chief administrative positions. Search committees evolved to meet several needs:



**Figure 1** Stages and Core Components of an Academic Search.

federal and state legislation, a more participatory approach and to enlarge the pool of qualified applicants. Over time search committees roles began to take on a more active role including recruiting candidates, checking references and interviewing.<sup>11,12</sup>

The issues and complexity of the modern search process for an academic chair have been documented.<sup>7,8</sup> This increased complexity, balanced with the other demands on faculty time, contributed to the substantial commitment of members of the search committee. In 2001, Sheretz, estimated the cost of a typical national search for a departmental chair to be \$63,000.<sup>13</sup> The major component of the cost was faculty time involved in the search. Other expenses included advertising, transportation, and lodging. Hoffmeier questioned whether faculty was willing and/or able to put the time needed into searches. Biebuycka and Mallon speculated that external search consultants would replace search committees as faculty search committees were stressed by the time commitment of the search process.<sup>1</sup>

Mallon identified seven problems associated with the traditional academic search recruitment process.<sup>6</sup> These problems are: 1) the search process does not sufficiently address what skill sets, characteristics and competencies the new leader is expected to possess prior to the start of the search; 2) the process of creating the search committee (eg, too large,

composition and commitment of committee membership) may impede the search process; 3) the understanding and interpretation of the Dean's charge by committee members (eg, skill set of position and/or role of search committee); 4) the search process is often too passive; 5) scheduling of search committee meetings and candidate interviews can be slow and negatively impact the search process; 6) committee confidentiality breaches, internal and external to the institution; and 7) the search process might not be conducted with a high level of professionalism typically seen in other areas and processes in academic medical centers.

As search committees have increased participation of woman and minority faculty members in the search process, there was hope that there would be more academic leaders from these under represented groups. A 2002 report from the AAMC indicated the number of full time female medical school faculty members increased from 1995 to 2001 from 25% to 28%.<sup>14</sup> Full professors who are women increased from 10% to 12% during the same time period. Yet close to half of the medical students are women. On average there are only 21 women full professors per medical school. In 2001, female chairs constituted approximately 8% of chair positions in basic science and clinical department.

The 2009 AAMC report 'Leadership Recruitment Practices in Academic Medicine' shows that most searches

for departmental chairs are still performed by faculty search committees without the use of external search firms.<sup>7</sup> A typical search for departmental chairs and center directors has a mean duration of 11.8 months, 13.5 months and 9.9 months for a clinical chair, basic science chair and center director respectively. The duration of search ranged from 1 month to 47 months. While the search committee is a core component in academic searches, medical schools that used external search firms for clinical chairs had an average duration of search of 9½ months – almost 3 months shorter than those using search committees alone. However, the adoption of external search firms by medical schools varies according to the type of academic recruitment. Mallon and Corrice note that search firms are used in searches for 26%, 4% and 6% for clinical chairs, basic science chairs and center director searches respectively.<sup>8</sup> When surveyed, overall academic medical centers use search committees for 85% of clinical searches and use external search firms for 26%. This suggests that in many instances search committees are used in conjunction with external search firms.

## Search committees and institutional search processes

At most institutions, the recruitment of a new leader involves forming a search committee, led by a chair who is most often chosen by the Dean or relevant supervisor.<sup>10</sup> When the search is successfully completed, the search committee is disbanded. Typically, when another institutional search begins a new search chair and search committee will be constituted. This may – or more often may not – include participants from a prior search committee.<sup>8,10</sup> Thus, the commitment to building institutional ‘search capacity’ is variable. With new search committee members and a new chair appointed on each occasion, there is limited opportunity to build ‘institutional memory’ and to strive for consistency across searches over time. On the other hand, having the same participants and/or ‘centralizing’ the search process has its own considerable downsides – lack of qualified expertise for repeated searches, faculty over-commitment and search committee member burnout, excessive ‘control’ of searchers, lack of appreciation of the uniqueness of each search and its customer base, and considerable potential ‘fixed’ costs infrastructure. Some institutions achieve continuity by having the Chief of Staff as a ‘permanent’ member of search committees. A staff member in the Dean’s office may also provide administrative support to search committees. Alternatively, some institutions have a dedicated ‘recruitment office’ that runs the search and

oversees the search committee. For most institutions, the search committee and the search process is temporary and it is administered out of the department/unit seeking a new leader, with the search committee being disbanded once the search is complete.

## Building institutional ‘search capacity’: the medical college of georgia as an example

The strategic foci of recruiting, developing, and retaining senior leaders are constants in an academic health center (AHC) and are essential to stability, growth, and succession planning. The Medical College of Georgia (MCG) School of Medicine (SOM) appointed its 28th permanent Dean (DDM), in July 2006. As the nation’s 10th longest standing medical school, the SOM enjoyed a venerable 178-year history and a reputation for stability. Yet, during its first 157 years, the position of dean or interim dean had turned over 25 times. Moreover, the school’s most recent 20 years had been characterized in part by 12 turnovers in Dean or interim Dean. Further, an institutional program facilitating faculty early retirement 10 years ago resulted in significant faculty attrition that disproportionately impacted the SOM. Although education and research programs remained stable, uneven continuity in leadership had diminished not only the school’s ability to recruit outstanding faculty and leadership, but had also negatively affected its morale and culture. The new Dean (DDM) recognized the importance of leadership stability and in recruiting – and retaining – new talent.

Acknowledging talent as the primary asset in a knowledge-driven enterprise, the new Dean created a new SOM leadership position in 2007 dedicated not only to rebuilding organizational capability to recruit leadership talent, but also to developing leadership skills in existing faculty. In addition, the Associate Dean for Leadership Development was charged with purposefully linking SOM initiatives with national initiatives of the AAMC.

As a 2008 Fellow of the AAMC Council of Deans, the inaugural Associate Dean for Leadership Development, the first author (PFB) studied strategies for successful leadership search and selection, and organizational best practices required to search and selection, including infrastructure and administrative processes. As one of seven members of the AAMC Leadership Search and Selection National Advisory Committee, the Associate Dean had direct access to innovative practices evolving in AAMC institutions on a national level. Upon recruitment of an Office of the Dean

Chief of Staff (DD) in 2008 to build strategic planning capability, the Dean created a link between leadership development and strategic planning. An early initiative of Associate Dean for Leadership Development/Chief of Staff Partnership was creation of the Core Operations Administrative Team for Search (COATS), chaired by the Associate Dean for Leadership Development.

COATS is an organizational team charged with collaborating locally and nationally toward developing, implementing, evaluating, and refining strategies for SOM leadership search and selection; best practice administrative processes that support not only search and selection strategies, but also the individual search committees charged with strategy implementation; metrics to evaluate quality assurance and efficacy of search strategies and support processes; and mechanisms to maintain innovation and continuous improvement in SOM leadership search and selection.

## COATS philosophy, format, and responsibilities

Central to the COATS management model is the philosophy that high-level search strategy is interdependent with supporting administrative processes; and that optimal search coordination and outcomes require management of strategy and support activities as a whole.

Accordingly, the charge of COATS is comprehensive and ranges from broad strategy development, execution, and critical evaluation; through search detailing, including development of candidate briefings and institutional marketing materials; strategic selection of candidate interviewers and design of itineraries; and candidate visit logistics and concierge-quality service and hospitality.

The COATS Team is chaired by the Senior Associate Dean for Leadership Development (PFB) and facilitated by a newly created position of Leadership Administrative Assistant (NDC); its composition includes both standing and rotating members and is based on the co-equal needs for stability and innovation in institutional processes. Table 2 shows COATS Team composition. On average, COATS has comprised (in addition to the core members) of the Search Chair and co-Chairs of two searches that are ongoing, as well as the associated administrative assistants. The COATS approach has also evolved into providing institution-wide 'consultations' for searches. That is, the Chair of another search (eg, an Endowed Chair search rather than a Departmental Chair search) can seek support in conducting their search. Search Chairs and co-Chairs hold meetings of their search

**Table 2** COATS Team Composition

Standing members	Rotating members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SOM Senior Associate Dean for Leadership Development (COATS Chair)</li> <li>Chief of Staff, Office of the SOM Dean</li> <li>Leadership Administrative Assistant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Representing Active Leadership Search Committees:</li> <li>Committee Chairs/Co-Chairs</li> <li>Committee Administrative Coordinators</li> </ul>

committee at a schedule that is determined by the search committee. The frequency of meetings of the search committee typically varies according to the stage of the search.

Standing members of COATS ensure institutional memory/continuity and transfer of knowledge, while rotating members ensure the introduction of new perspectives/innovation; and also develop the skill sets of promising faculty and administrators, thereby creating new value for the institution.

## Interplay between COATS, the search committee and the search firm

The emerging model used at the Medical College of Georgia School of Medicine to recruit institutional leadership encompasses 'Best Practices' of recruitment (meticulous attention to the '10 Cs' of conducting searches and to the process of the search) and also uses a search firm. COATS leadership maintains continuity over time with the search firm. This also facilitates the engagement of the Search Chair/co-Chair with the associate from the search firm. The benefits of a centralized search process are multiple. Significant attention to details and to the processes of the search is viewed as critical to a successful outcome; an active search process is everything.<sup>6</sup> Considerable time and attention is given to identifying the skill set and competencies that the position will require. An identified group of diverse (eg, racial/ethnic, gender and rank) faculty from varied departments are infused into search committees along with other faculty. Search committee members are educated about the relevant department (eg, structure, functions) and a departmental SWOT analysis is conducted to identify its strengths and challenges. SWOT analysis findings are incorporated into the welcome letter, a review of the Medical School's values, mission and strengths and the relevant department, sent to candidates prior to their first campus visit. The COATS committee partners with the search committee and its Chair to develop an interview itinerary

that will provide candidates with an informative and candid view of the school and department as well as one that will address candidate needs like partner and/or family regarding school visitations and meeting with real estate agents. Unlike traditional academic searches, the centralized process ensures that the search process is consistent between search committees, is systematic, well coordinated, strategic and in line with the dean's expectations and charge to the committee. The centralized search process helps brand and message the values and culture of the institution both internally and externally.

## Progress and evolution of COATS

COATS has evolved to a highly collaborative and structured team. The standing agenda of each weekly COATS meeting reviews prior week search committee and interview activities, including a debriefing and critical review of outcomes and recommended contingencies for improvement; prospective planning for each search and candidate interview on weekly, monthly, and quarterly horizons; and discussion of ad hoc initiatives and projects.

COATS faculty and support staff members share a single discussion of search strategy, methods, and detailing. Deliberations are based on a high level of trust and often include content considered to be highly sensitive. This collective and inclusive approach has proven to be highly effective at identifying qualitative institutional dynamics and relationships – unique to each search and candidate – that may impact the search process. Considerable value is added to search and selection by creating an ongoing opportunity to manage potential opportunity and risk proactively. Based on principles of learning organizations and the acknowledged value of faculty-administrator partnerships, the COATS platform ensures integrity, quality, consistency, and timeliness of high opportunity/risk activities and personal interactions that directly influence an institution's capability for recruitment of outstanding faculty and leaders, as well as its 'word of mouth' reputation – the equivalent of national marketing.

Although this process is intuitive and may appear to be systematic, we do not yet have comparative outcomes across searches. Such data from recent searches is currently being compiled. Additionally, another broad outcome is the extent to which this process enhances the recruitment practices across departments and institutional units. Thus far, the focus has been on searches at Chair and other leadership levels in our School of Medicine. It may be desirable to extend this to other schools within our institution. This would be a more

cost effective use of personnel involved in this process. Ultimately, metrics such as 'better recruitments' (it is presently unclear what exact metric this might be), 'shorter duration of searches', and 'less costly search' would represent measurable outcomes. It would also be useful to benchmark these against comparable searches at other institutions of similar profile. Irrespective of the methods chosen to support an academic search, we recommend that institutional leadership acknowledge and invest in strategies that focus on the actual process of the search committee – and not just the final outcome of a successful recruitment. Process management across searches and over time does require some allocation of personnel as well as an institutional commitment to performance improvement. Excellent resources already exist to support such efforts.

## Conclusion

Searching for leaders in academics is a serious business. Apart from the considerable cost, this activity consumes considerable and ongoing institutional efforts. Defining and implementing processes that can provide consistency across searches and that can inculcate Best Practices is a worthy and likely cost-efficient endeavor. It also serves as a platform for institutional development and learning – an aspiration of every academic institution.

## Disclosure

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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