

# 14 points from the Presidential Search South Puget Sound Community College

*By: Dick Wadley*

## **1. Community college means community college. Honor the word “community.”**

A community college is a community asset. There is more to the college than one group or faction. In fact, there is a multitude of constituencies involved . . . more than I thought possible. Dealing with the politics of this varied constituency base is a difficult process. Each wants a piece of the pie and wants input on the next leader of the institution. Each constituency will have its own preferences, thoughts and agendas.

## **2. The people who apply are dedicated public servants of the highest level.**

They are highly qualified professionals. We wanted to treat them with respect, confidentiality and dignity. They trusted their careers to our institution and we owed them the duty of treating them in as professional a manner as possible.

## **3. Respect the various constituencies of the college by getting them involved in the selection process.**

Our commitment to the college was to have a group submit to us the five or six most highly qualified candidates. The Board did not see the candidates until the final selections were made. We trusted the community to provide us the names of the most qualified. In turn, we asked the community to trust us as we made the final selection.

## **4. Follow a well prescribed and communicated selection process.**

We created a Presidential profile, job description and required leadership skills

- We asked for input in a public form and finalized it in open sessions
- The input was used to form the basis for advertising and recruiting

We formed a Presidential Search Advisory Committee – 2/3 from the college. . . 1/3 from outside. A total of 21 people were on the committee.

- A trustee was named to chair the committee. I told them I would not vote unless to break ties.
- We received a total of 42 applications
- The consultant eliminated non-qualified or less qualified applicants
- This left us with 26 candidates for the Presidential search advisory committee. Each of the 21 committee members read each resume. At a meeting, each committee member gave an alphabetical list of top candidates. A consensus of the top 13 easily emerged.

The 13 remaining candidates were asked to submit a 20-minute video answering several questions. At this point, four candidates (all sitting Presidents) withdrew since there is a

“handicapping” system going on with the candidates. The videos were consolidated and given to the committee. Again, each committee member reviewed each video and recommended their highest five candidates in alphabetical order at a meeting. A consensus of the top candidates easily emerged. The committee had done its job very well.

All these deliberations were held in closed sessions since it was for the purpose of evaluating the qualifications of candidates for public office. At the last committee meeting they presented the final five candidates to the entire Board. Coincidentally, five is the same as the number of trustees and also the number of Presidential staff members!

#### **5. Keep Board control of the selection process**

At this point, we thanked the Presidential Search Advisory Committee for their work and dismissed the group. They had done what we asked and their work was finished. Then, we told them it was now their turn to trust the Board.

#### **6. Always put your best foot forward with these high-powered candidates.**

One of them will be the key to your college’s future. Treat the candidate as if he/she is the most important person on campus on the day they interview. Devote time to them out of respect for the risk they took in applying. This is a time to exchange ideas, thoughts and perceptions.

Each trustee was assigned one candidate to be the liaison person. The trustee made contact with the candidate; described the process the candidate would encounter; and served as a “friendly” face for the candidate. Also, each staff member was designated as host for one of the candidates. They made contact with the candidate, made arrangements for accompanying the candidate on the campus visits and gave the candidate a chance to establish a rapport with a key member of the staff. It also gave the staff members a boost of recognition.

For each candidate, the day on campus included a meeting with the outgoing president, a meeting with the Presidential staff, a meeting with key constituency groups, a tour of the campus locations and the community. There was also a public community forum where candidates were involved with a Q & A interchange with the public and associates of the college. The sessions were recorded and could be viewed later by people not making the meeting. After the one-hour Q & A, the candidate got a 45-minute break.

Then there was a rather intense structured interview session with just the Board. Each Board member asked questions in a specified area. The candidate also was given a chance to ask questions of the Board. After that, the candidate, spouse and the Board had a rather relaxing dinner.

#### **7. Keep asking for input . . . you can’t get too much.**

The Presidential Search Advisory Committee provided wonderful input and unanticipated strong consensus. Feedback from the consultant was invaluable. After each forum, all members of the

community were told to send emails to our consultant if they wanted to submit any feedback. The consultant “sanitized” the emails (eliminating reference to names of the submitters). As we deliberated, we had these comments available. These emails were a model of objectivity and clear thinking. Keep on asking “How is it going?”

**8. It is the Board’s job, and only the Board’s, to chose the President. . .it can’t be delegated.**

After the Presidential Search Advisory committee was finished, we began meeting as a Board. The Board then took time to discuss, amongst ourselves and in closed session the qualifications of each candidate and how they related to the college and our mission. We did not select the final candidate in closed session. But, we had, if my memory serves me correctly, three meetings to discuss qualifications, needs, fit, and to think things through, to understand each other’s viewpoints and focus in on the final choice. Each Board member discussed each candidate from their individual perspectives. It was all handled with an effort to arrive at a common understanding of the college’s needs, reflect on the input we received and discuss our best judgments about doing the right thing for the future of the college.

**9. This is a highly public event. . .expect media involvement.**

The final selection was held in Open Session. The Open Meetings laws are applicable. Listen to your Assistant Attorney General. The media was present at the presidential profile session and each of the public forums. Plus, we did the final selection in an open session attended by a number of interested people in the college as well as the local newspaper. As our public discussion ensued, a single candidate was the unanimous preference of each Board member and the selection made. We passed a motion to extend an offer to the candidate and authorized the Board Chair to negotiate on behalf of the Board. But we did not have an acceptance. We quickly adjourned the meeting and called the candidate. During the negotiations and just 20 minutes later, the local media had the information on the paper’s website! This was BEFORE we had an acceptance or had a chance to notify the unsuccessful candidates. Unfortunately, one of the candidates found out she was not selected from the internet! As far as I’m concerned this was an embarrassment to the college and a slap in the face and a personal affront to the applicant.

I personally apologized even though it was a perfectly legal outcome. Imagine reading about the selection before hearing from the institution. This is one of the unintended consequences of the Open Meetings Act. Manage this carefully.

**10. It takes Board time to do this job right.**

It takes a long time. Having 5five candidate days is a daunting task for the campus as well as the trustees. I asked Barbara Clarkson, our Board Vice Chair, how she would describe the process and she said . . . “thorough and long.” Don’t underestimate the time involved and the need to appoint a trustee, or another person, to shepherd the process. It needs to be done right to avoid mistakes, address feelings and perceptions, deal with the inevitable miscommunications and to

provide support for the Board in this decision making process. Each trustee spent over 40 hours in the campus interview process alone. I was chair of the Presidential Search Advisory Committee and I figure I spent upwards of 100 hours involved in the process.

**11. Your reputation as a board is also on review.**

Understand part of the evaluation process is the candidate's perception of the Board. The reputation of the Board will precede the interview. Be sure you know your reputation and how to address questions about it. Perceptive applicants will ask questions to make sure they want to entrust their career to your Board. Personally, if I were a candidate and had a chance to be a leader at a prestigious institution, I would not take the job if the Board was recognized to be dysfunctional or did not know the difference between policy and administration of policy.

**12. Don't involve the current President in the selection process...much.**

The recommendation given to use by our consultant was to not have the President involved in the selection process at all. The feeling from him was the current President would have an emotional attachment to the institution as well as a vested interest in his/her policies and programs. That will make objectivity difficult. We ended up not asking for any impressions from him until after all the committee activity had been done and after we had reviewed and discussed the final candidates. We felt we owed him that. The outgoing President's input did not change the Board's decision.

**13. Your best candidate may not answer ads.**

Source of candidates. . internal, ads in Chronicle of Higher Education. We had some outstanding candidates because of the consultant's ability to "disturb" candidates who would not otherwise apply. This is another advantage of hiring a consultant. At least 10 of the candidates would not have applied but for the consultant.

**14. Understand there is a handicapping system that goes on amongst applicants.**

I mentioned earlier that four candidates withdrew. In talking with the consultant, he thought the withdrawals were because of the strength of the pool. Candidates talk amongst themselves and can pretty easily figure out who their competition is. So, rather than risk rejection, or having to notify their Board of their application, some will withdraw because of the strength of the pool. The stronger the pool the more this will happen. The candidates will know the competition.

In conclusion, the most important job of any trustee is to select the President. It is a very long and involved process to do it right. Our process is now complete and worked well for us. You may or may not find applicability in what I conveyed here today. But now, for us at South Puget Sound Community College, with great respect for the past, we move forward with new leadership into an exciting future. We are glad you are with you on your journey, Dr. Pumphrey.

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