

# Harris Search Associates

I N N O V A T I O N + T A L E N T



## **A Guide to Effective Searches in Higher Education:** Roles, Responsibilities and Rewards

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## Two Phases, Six Steps Each - A Summary

### Phase 1: Organizing a Search

1. Plan around the “window of time” available for a search
2. Recognize the “seasons” of an administrative position search and incorporate fully into the charge to the search committee
3. Select search committee chair with credibility with both the institution’s senior leadership and faculty and a commitment to diversity
4. Heed all protocols and procedures for determining the size, representation, and composition of the search committee
5. “Work backwards” to establish a strict timetable for achieving not just recruitment but selection of qualified candidates from a richly diverse pool
6. Hire and use a search firm experienced in recruiting research administrators to identify a small group – typically less than 20 – well-qualified candidates: do not rely on the prestige of your institution

### Phase 2: Managing a Search

1. Use meeting agenda and time limits for all meetings of the search committee
2. Look first internally for potential candidates
3. Make effective use of technology, especially for interviewing semi-finalists
4. Develop and use questions that test candidates’ abilities to reflect, write and talk about fundamental issues of administering research activities
5. KISS: Use simple methods for evaluating and ranking candidates and making recommendations
6. Actively recruit candidates



## I. Improving the Search Process

This document describes ways universities can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their efforts to identify, recruit and employ talented leaders at both institutional and school or college levels.

With more than 475 searches completed, the consultants of Harris Search Associates appreciate very much the varied and distinctive cultures of universities as well as the different policies and procedures used to find and hire leadership. But our experience has also taught us that search processes are subject to similar circumstances and conditions that most - if not all - institutions can and should prepare for to ensure success.

Our view is reinforced by the insights that come from within universities, in this case, the insights of a veteran academic, Professor Sue Carter of Michigan State University. Professor Carter served as chair of a search committee and demonstrated the sort of clear-eyed leadership that makes working with colleges and universities an extraordinary opportunity to work with very smart people.

We offer this guide to prospective and client universities with an eye toward helping them with senior-level searches. Searches are complex and important tasks.

But we also seek to improve our services as well as our business. For instance, the important role search committees play means that a measure of committee cohesion and consensus can create better conditions for an efficient and effective recruitment of new leadership. Typically, however, search committees at universities are made up of persons selected, at least in part, as representatives of various stakeholder groups who will be affected by the person selected for an administrative post but do not necessarily view the position in similar ways.

In addition, search committees may be as small as 8-10 persons or as large as 22-28 people. Some members may be veterans of numerous searches, while others are serving for the first time.

As a result, there is little in the way of institutional memory, shared knowledge or experience, so early meetings are given over to "Search Committee 101" and the rules, roles and responsibilities of the various entities involved in a search, including the committee, the administrator to whom the committee will respond and the search firm. We intend for this guide to provide some of the information needed for launching an effective search more readily than might otherwise be the case.

We are also concerned that universities must now be able to justify better the expenses incurred in conducting a search, especially if a search firm is retained. We estimate the direct costs of a typical dean's search at a research-intensive institution to be somewhere in the neighborhood of \$160-175,000, not an insubstantial sum.

However, the opportunity costs and the indirect costs of searches that occupy a prominent part of the work lives of committee members for months are greater still. If this guide expedites or accelerates the search process and allows committee members to get back to their "real" jobs, then these costs can be reduced.



We began our discussions about assembling a guide for searches with the recognition that time is not an ally for seeking out, identifying and recruiting talented persons to take on complex and demanding administrative posts in research universities. The candidates most highly prized for these positions do not need a job and are usually deeply engaged with their current duties, often as researchers themselves. They may value greatly the contributions that good administration makes to the research enterprise and their own work, but they are happy to have someone else administer.

Moreover, the sorts of people who are sought out for administrative positions at research universities are usually senior professors at a stage in their lives where personal considerations – children, aging parents, spouse employment and career – may weigh heavier than professional ones. Ironically, then (but rightly), universities' human resource specialists admonish search committees to avoid completely asking candidates any questions of a personal nature, lest such questions be construed as a form of employment discrimination.

As senior, highly prized talent, research administrators are usually concerned that their prospective or actual candidacy for a post at another institution remain strictly confidential. But a search process of 6-8 months in which a sizeable number of people are involved makes it very difficult to maintain complete confidentiality. In fact, the longer the search process requires, the more likely that confidentiality will be breached.

Collectively, then, these considerations for the amount of time entailed by searches add to our rationale for offering this guide. Universities are by constitution slower than most other institutional types to act. We are not so naïve as to suggest that the academic search process can be shortened in time by large amounts. We do think that process can be more efficient and more effective.

The Guide is organized around the activities universities can undertake as they begin to organize for a search. We then address how an institution can conduct the search in ways that improve the likelihood of recruiting a leader and doing so efficiently from a diverse pool of well-qualified candidates.

Our focus here is on university administrators who deal with research as a regular part of their duties – provosts/ chief academic officers, vice presidents for research, academic deans of colleges and schools, and directors of major research centers and laboratories.<sup>1</sup> We think it likely that much of what we offer here will pertain as well to searches for other senior-level posts in universities. But much of our work as a search firm in recent years has been with institutions in which research is a significant activity and we therefore feel more confident focusing on those particular institutional types and the administrators in them.

Jeffrey Harris  
Managing Partner

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1. Presidential searches are a special and distinctive sort of academic search. We encourage those interested in these to seek out the services and resources of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges ([www.agb.org](http://www.agb.org)), the American Association of University Professors ([www.aaup.org](http://www.aaup.org)), and the Association of American Medical Colleges, in particular William T. Mallon (n.d.) "7 fresh ideas to help searches for academic leaders succeed," ([https://www.aamc.org/members/gfa/faculty\\_vitae/179868/seven\\_fresh\\_ideas\\_for\\_academic\\_leader\\_searches.html](https://www.aamc.org/members/gfa/faculty_vitae/179868/seven_fresh_ideas_for_academic_leader_searches.html)).



## II. Organizing a Search

Academic leadership is different from that in business and government. The differences begin with the processes by which persons are sought out and hired. Whereas executive recruiters are regularly engaged by the boards of companies to find and recruit CEOs and CFOs in near-total secrecy with little or no involvement of employees, search firms are often used by universities to assist search committees made up of everyone from alumni, students, tenured and untenured professors to staff members and community residents. Finalists for leadership undergo a very public process before one is selected.

Given the involvement of so many people and the very public nature of academic searches, organizing a search for a vice president or a dean entails considerable thought and planning on the part of the leadership of a university. The circumstances that create the need for a search – establishment of a new unit within the institution and provision for its administration or retirement or dismissal of an incumbent, for example – can have marked influence on the sort of administrator to be sought and we include this as one of the elements that contribute to the particular “season” of the position for which a search is being launched.

Presidents and provosts have much to consider when the need for a search arises. In reflecting on critical decisions they made while in office, former campus executives are quick to cite their hiring of outstanding subordinates or rue the choice of a dean or the vice president not able to provide the leadership needed.

There is no recipe that assures a successful search: the process remains more art than science. But careful organization and a few critical choices can improve the likelihood of finding a small number of candidates who – if all goes well – makes the selection of a new vice president or dean a difficult choice because all or most of the prospects appear capable to doing the job and doing it well.

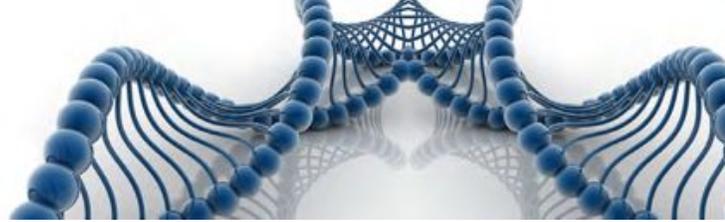
### **1. Consider carefully and plan accordingly around the “window of time” available for mounting a search.**

The academic year continues to hold sway, such that the typical search for a vice president for research or the dean of a school or college is launched during the fall term, continues into spring and is, everyone hopes, completed successfully before the summer hiatus of faculty. The candidate selected for the post then takes up her/his duties with the start of a new academic year and a budget established in the previous academic year.

Sometimes, however, a vacancy arises due to the departure of the incumbent in December or January of the academic year. In this case, cleaving to the traditional cycle of searching and hiring means the institution must either wait for the next academic year to begin a search or accelerate the search process with a launch in January or February. The former means the position will be occupied by an interim/acting official, while the latter requires expediting the search process in order for it to conclude in May or June. Again, self-consciousness of the opportunity costs of either choice is important.

### **2. Recognize the “seasons” of an administrative position search such as for dean or vice president in a research university and incorporate fully information on priorities as well as duties and responsibilities in the charge to the search committee.**

While position descriptions and fundamental roles per se do not change all that often, priorities for a new dean or vice president can and do, often in significant ways. The importance of strategic planning or the need to devote time and resources to developing a spate of recent faculty hires, to cite two examples, change the kinds of



candidates to be sought.

Similarly, if the incumbent of a position is retiring after a long tenure, the priorities of a successor can be quite different.

A “position profile” for a search therefore needs to reflect clearly the near-term priorities for that position and should go well beyond the standard position description to convey to prospective candidates what are near- and mid-term challenges and opportunities for the new hire.

In issuing the charge to a search committee, the president or provost must be clear on a number of points, including the process and procedures for conducting the search and providing recommendations. But just as important is a clear depiction of what a strong candidate should “look” like and be able to do in the first 18 months or three years of her/his tenure as an administrator.

**3. Select a search committee chair who enjoys credibility with both senior leadership and research faculty and is committed strongly to diversity.**

Seldom does someone within a research university eagerly volunteer to chair a search committee for a new dean or a new vice president. Searches take up considerable

time, involve complex negotiated logistics, and place their chairs in the ambiguous position of trying to fulfill both the needs of the institution’s senior leadership and the expectations and aspirations of faculty whose organizational homes within the university are quite different from one another.

Add to these challenges the need sometimes to incorporate the specialized knowledge of professional staff serving on a search committee and the lack of enthusiasm for chairing such an entity is understandable.

Still, evidence is compelling that chairs make a difference and often a large difference in the success of a search. There is a specific set of characteristics that a search committee chair optimally should have in order to be both efficient and effective. Because the academy is complex and nuanced, an individual with a number of years in residence – minimally six or seven – will be able to maneuver best and negotiate on behalf of the search committee and the administration. Longer time in place for the chair assures that roles are understood and relationships up and down are in place.

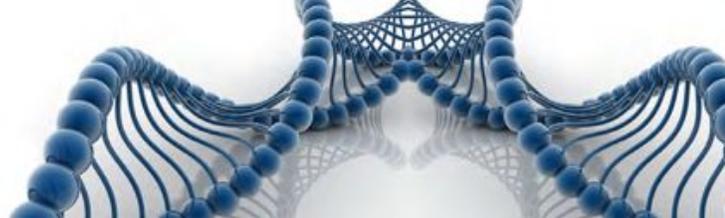
A chair with an open portfolio, one who moves fairly seamlessly through the various levels and membranes, is helpful. If she or he

has had experience in academic governance, all the better. After all, search committees exemplify the concept of shared governance. A clear understanding of that notion and its historical importance are valuable.

In order to be an honest broker, the chair must be an active listener. A good guide for operation is the “80-20 Rule.” In other words, the chair should listen 80 percent of the time, and talk only 20 percent. Committees need some airtime, and the chair must allow for that, with the understanding that all members need space to speak, and that no small group of members should dominate deliberations.

The search committee chair serves as what one who was tasked to the role calls “the bridge” among a complex mix of stakeholders, including the university’s leadership; faculty and - in the case of a dean – departments, staff, students, alumni and advisory bodies; the search firm when one is employed.

As such, a chair must be an effective communicator, very well organized, an “honest broker” among what are sometimes competing interests, a facilitator able to engage the committee members in meaningful ways in the search, something of a taskmaster in terms of moving the search process along, and, ultimately, the university’s initial



representative to the fortunate candidates who become finalists.

The effective chair is someone who brings to the role a commitment to diversity in general but a particularly keen determination to see the semi-finalist and finalist candidate pools representative of a full spectrum of gender, racial, and ethnic characteristics. Often, the search firm is tasked with insuring diversity, but a chair who insists on diversity carries much more weight with a search committee than any hired recruiter.

Does such a chair exist on every campus? We think so, albeit, not in great numbers. Candidates for search committee chairs sometimes bring to bear life and career experiences different from and in addition to the academic life.

For example, an individual who has experience in the academy, is tenured, but also has worked in industry or government can bring rich perspectives to the process. In a health way, these people are the outliers on campus, not totally identified with one or another of campus stakeholders. They have knowledge that extends beyond campus boundaries and a sense of business approaches that they have brought to the university. In doing so they often expand the “gene pool” of campus leaders.

At Northeast Ohio Medical (NEOMED) University, a recent

search for an active researcher who would also serve as a department chair was co-chaired by another department chair and the vice president for research. This arrangement enabled the department chair co-chair to gain valuable experience leading a search without having to assume the role in toto, but also served practical purposes – e.g., staff support, logistical arrangements – and insured direct communication and alignment with the interests and priorities of the University’s executive leadership.

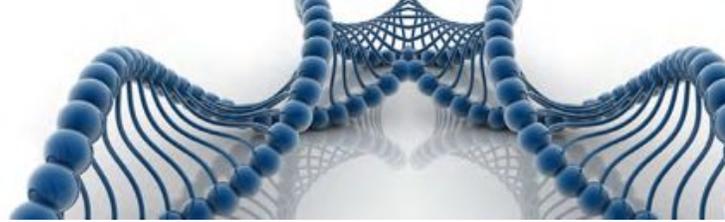
While NEOMED University’s relatively small size may facilitate a search committee co-chair arrangement, the operation of the committee and its ultimate success in attracting an outstanding candidate suggest that a co-chair format could serve other institutions, including larger ones.

The number of persons on a research university campus – even a large one - who possess all of these attributes is limited. Indeed, so few are these that chairing important searches becomes a second job for some as they are selected again and again for the role. Moreover, the attributes that contribute to their effectiveness as search committee chairs also are the characteristics of good administrators and even the most efficient among them can only take on so many duties.

#### **4. Heed all protocols and procedures for determining the size, representation and composition of the search committee.**

Most universities have in place established policies and procedures that guide the creation of search committees due, in part, to shared governance that has evolved over time. And because federal funds in the forms of grants and contracts are such prominent elements of these types of institutions, federal law and regulations also inform employment practices.

The desire to get a new dean or vice president in place by short-circuiting protocols is a bad fix – and for two reasons. Protocols are constructed so that all parties who are entitled under shared governance to be at the table are precisely there. Further, and just as important, protocols afford the institution multiple views of the candidate. Because these people must report to a variety of constituencies, it is critical that there be some agreement that that will be the case. A dean who is too faculty-centered may not be effective in working with the provost, and a vice president of research dedicated chiefly to following the guidance of the president may not be able to function well with deans and faculty who report to her.



**5. Work backwards to establish a strict timetable for achieving not just recruitment but selection of qualified candidates from a richly diverse pool**

Achieving time savings begins by setting ambitious but realistic end dates when the search is complete and the appointee is officially named. From there, the task becomes one of working backwards to identify who must be involved when and then locking in dates for interviewing finalists, negotiating the terms of the appointment, garnering all needed approvals, and announcing the appointment.

This step is enhanced by recognizing that time is never an ally of a search for anyone involved, including the finalists, the search committee, and the institution's executive and its governing body. As one wag once noted, only jugged hare improves with age. He went on to observe that very few people elect to consume jugged hare anymore.

The other ingredient for accelerating a search is to build diversity into the search from the start and not when the candidate pool is nearly established and being considered. Virtually every college and university expresses concern for and commitments to enhancing the diversity of student bodies, staffs, faculty and administrators but too

often end up having to rush to achieve some sort of representation in candidate pools of under-represented groups in semi-finalist and finalist pools.

The commitment to diversity is best revealed by building it in from the very outset and throughout the search, beginning with a president or provost admonishing a search committee to make diversity a guiding light to the search process, then continuing with a chair and a search firm (if one is enlisted) both of whom are experienced and have had success in diversifying candidates and hires.

**6. Hire and use a search firm that is sufficiently experienced in recruiting research administrators to identify a small group, typically less than 20 qualified candidates**

Search firms can relieve a substantial load of work from the search committee, for whom such service is the third or fourth priority in a busy calendar of work. The number of firms with work only or mostly in higher education is not especially large, but that has not pre-empted some from becoming specialists in certain types of position searches. The advantage of such specialization is that such firms are familiar with some, perhaps many potential candidates from previous

assignments and can bring that knowledge to bear in assembling relatively quickly a diverse, very qualified pool of 20-25 candidates, from which the search committee can select semi-finalists and/or direct the firm to seek out additional candidates.<sup>2</sup>

Most universities are careful not to hire the same firm repeatedly for searches and we think that practice is a good one. In considering potential firms for a given search, campus leaders need to go beyond the standard criteria of the number of searches completed recently and the firm's familiarity with the institution. At a time when change is the byword of higher education, most if not all universities and colleges are rethinking what they have done for decades, so the best firm may be one that demonstrates an ability to study carefully both the internal and external factors that are influencing the institution and perhaps moving it in new directions.

Relevant successful searches are good indicators of a firm's capacity to render services. At the same time, evaluating the diversity of semi-finalists and finalists – diversity in all its respects, including current home institutions of candidates – may

2. The search firm, Storbeck Pimentel & Associates, provide very helpful information on selecting a search firm; see <https://www.storbeckpimentel.com/selecting-a-firm/how-to-select-a-search-firm/>



indicate the firm is not only drawing upon names from data bases but actively seeking to develop a pool from which candidates may be identified who bring something different, something new to a post.

Of late, some institutions use searches as an opportunity to signal their attractiveness by seeking a large pool of candidates – hundreds, if possible. Public relations aside, however, hundreds of candidates necessitate considerable review by the search committee and, based on our experience, convey a message that the university is not altogether clear of what set of skills and experiences are sought in a position.

Moreover, we have observed that searches where the size of the pool in and of itself becomes a goal and some search committee members are adamant that they wish to see and review all applicants' credentials seldom do so when confronted with curriculum vitae of 30-35 pages for 85-plus candidates.

If a search firm is deemed advisable, select one and allow them to do their work and what they are both experienced in and good at.

What's more, a search firm is able to inquire after personal and family considerations that often trump professional ones. University may not ask such questions of prospects or candidates, so the firm serves a

valuable end by asking after and learning about circumstances such as a spouse's career needs, caring for elderly parents or the adolescent child's reluctance to even consider moving.

By handling these concerns with great care and circumspection, a firm can assist candidates and a potential employer to determine what the needs of the former are and what the client's capacity to respond is.

### III. Managing a Search

An academic search has many moving parts throughout its duration, including what amounts to a series of handoffs of responsibility from one group to another. Managing a search thus becomes a challenge in its own right. Some old-fashioned tools, a bias for simplicity, and the persistent reminder that the best candidates seldom need a new job – these can keep a search on target and – perhaps – ahead of schedule.

#### **1. Use meeting agenda and adhere to them and to time constraints for all meetings of the search committee**

Ask anyone serving on a committee how important agenda are to ensuring meaningful participation, good use of time, and the bringing

of closure to questions and debates, and most will concur that agenda are essential to effective committees, particularly those charged with searches. Among the functions agenda perform for meetings are –

- respecting members' time
- reminding committee members of where they are in the search process and timeline, thereby enhancing awareness of the need for progress in the search
- focusing on specific outcomes of a given meeting in light of the overall search timeline and necessary steps
- setting realistic but "hard" limits on starting and stopping times
- establishing needed action and assign tasks to pertinent parties to be completed by set dates

#### **2. Look first internally for potential candidates, especially those serving as acting or interim holders of the position for which the search is intended**

It is not at all unusual in academia for an acting or interim dean or vice president to wind up being appointed permanently to the post. Indeed, some research universities are known to hire from within quite frequently.

This practice, however, does not seem to disabuse acting and interim incumbents and other internal persons of real doubt as to whether their candidacies will be given anything more than scant attention by their colleagues. As a result,



internal candidates do not submit applications for administrative posts, considering it a waste of time and effort.

The committee and its search firm (if one is used) are empowered to seek out and encourage candidacy for persons qualified for research administrative positions and the limits for such effort should not be seen as beginning at the outskirts of campus. Accordingly, internal candidates ought to be afforded the same consideration as are external ones. Indeed, many research universities invest in leadership development either of their own provision or that of others, so encouraging and actively recruiting graduates of such development efforts seems not only appropriate but wise.

### **3. Make good use of technology, especially for interviewing semi-finalists**

Only a few years ago, videoconferencing was viewed suspiciously by candidates and search committees alike, seen by the former as placing a premium on sound bites and appearing telegenic and diminishing the interpersonal skills of candidates to committees.

Today, as noted by Terry Curry, Vice Provost for Academic Human Resources at Michigan State, candidates' comfort and facility with videoconferencing and

other forms of communications technology are deemed important attributes of anyone seeking an administrative position at a university with activities underway around the globe. He and others involved in recruitment also point to the considerable cost savings achieved by videoconference interviews of semi-finalist candidates instead of face-to-face airport or on campus interviews.

What's more, videoconferencing makes far fewer claims on the time of candidates and committees, by eliminating most of the logistical difficulties of scheduling and travel by multiple candidates, thereby making it possible to interview more candidates.

Finally, the technology of videoconferencing is considerably simpler than was the case only a few years ago and its cost substantially lower.

### **4. Develop and use questions that provide insight into candidates' abilities to reflect on and talk about fundamental subjects of administering research activities**

Examinations are the very stuff of education and their use often carries over to searches and the interview format used with semi-finalists and finalists. Typically, the setting is not

all that different from the oral exams usually required for completion of the doctorate, albeit, in the case of search interviews each candidate is asked the same set of questions as every other candidate interviewed for the position and their responses compared for their respective "goodness of fit." The ability to respond to questions under pressure is an important attribute of most administrators, so the format makes good sense.

At the same time, we think search committees benefit from the ability to pose questions in advance of a videoconference or face-to-face interview, allow time for the candidates to reflect and develop brief responses, and then compare the depth and articulation of the answers. After all, a thoughtful, articulate exposition on key issues or questions is every bit as important for an administrator as is thinking and talking on one's feet extemporaneously.

We therefore advocate on behalf of an interview format that includes both types of questions and answers. In addition to the content perspective afforded by such a format, it also serves to inform a committee about the candidate's personal notion of what constitutes "brevity."



**5. KISS – Forego elaborate means for evaluating and ranking candidates and focus on acceptability rather than attempt fine differentiations among candidates**

Practice holds that search committees' ultimate task is to bring forward the names of candidates they deem to have met the requirements and expectations of a position as set forth in the position profile, not rank the candidates based on quantitative criteria. The evaluation of candidates for administrative appointment remains more art than science, yet committees are known to spend considerable amounts of time and energy debating the meaning and importance of very small differences in values that are seldom products of valid or reliable quantification.

**6. Talent must be recruited (not just survive scrutiny) at even the most prestigious hiring institution and the strongest candidates do not need and often are not looking for a new job**

A handoff of sorts takes place when a search committee recommends and the administrator responsible for the search accepts those recommendations. At that point, the institution and the search committee need to move from identifying to

recruiting candidates. Questions and important questions need and should continue to be asked of finalists, but efforts should also involve making the case for why the position and the university are good places to be.

As noted earlier, the people sought out as candidates for administrative positions already have good jobs. Most are not seeking a new post. Indeed, their success in their current positions – while contributing to their attractiveness as candidates – serves to encourage them to stay put and continue their successful record.

What's more, the demographics for many of these candidates place them at a stage of life when family and personal matters and responsibilities make moving difficult, sometimes very difficult. A partner with a successful career may not want to give that up to accompany the candidate or is in a field that even a university town cannot readily accommodate.

Elderly parents and adolescent offspring can make moving a challenge.

At this point in the process, a search firm can play an important role noted earlier: first, by inquiring after and being aware of both professional and personal considerations about relocating and, then second, sharing this information in a timely and appropriate way with the hiring

institution so that all parties are accorded the respect each deserves and the capacity of the university to make accommodations given a chance to do what it can.



These are interesting times for colleges and universities. Higher education is now the subject of television and movie presentations and the respected magazine, *THE ECONOMIST*, devoted its July 4, 2014, cover to the traditional mortarboard and the arresting title, "Creative destruction: Reinventing the university." And the tone of such treatment is one of skepticism bordering on cynicism. Higher education, it sometimes seems, has lost its luster, at least in the popular press and media.

On the other hand, the evidence is compelling that research, discovery and invention are the drivers of innovation and a global economy. Attending and completing a college education remains the best insurance for success in a world of constant change.

Both facets of higher education carry sufficient weight to make their contradiction of one another understandable. And whether one's opinion leans towards one or the other, the fact remains that colleges and universities need the best leadership that can be found. Thus the search for talented leaders is well worth the effort, particularly if the search is one that makes the best, most effective use of the collective insights and wisdom more often than not assembled for that purpose.

Handwritten signature of Sue Carter in black ink.

Sue Carter, J.D.  
Professor of Journalism  
Michigan State University

Handwritten signature of Richard Skinner in blue ink.

Richard Skinner, Ph.D.  
Senior Consultant  
Harris Search Associates



# Harris Search Associates

I N N O V A T I O N + T A L E N T

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