



Executive Recruitment

Searching for the perfect fit

Women are increasingly being tapped to fill positions at the highest levels in academia and business, although the overall percentages remain low compared with the total number of such positions.¹ Women now occupy 20% of U.S. college and university presidents' offices² — double the number in 1986, but still offering plenty of potential for growth (see "Women at the Helm" sidebar, next page). For women interested in the opportunities offered by leadership positions, it can be helpful to know what mechanisms institutions use to identify candidates. In many cases, institutions call on the assistance of executive search firms. And executive search firms rely on broad networks of contacts.

If you've not had reason to work closely with executive search firms you may not be familiar with the array of services they provide their clients. Most likely you have not considered the expertise and experience executive recruiters, sometimes colloquially referred to as "head hunters," bring to their work. Recently, I talked with executive search consultant Laurie Pohl. Laurie is with Educational Management Network/Witt/Kieffer, a leading search firm serving colleges and universities, research institutions, and academic health centers seeking to recruit senior-level professionals. Laurie's current position, and her past professional experiences, gives her an unusual vantage point for observing the processes institutions use to identify senior-level administrators and chief executives that could be helpful to those of you interested in climbing the administrative career ladder. Furthermore, those of you considering careers be-

yond the bench may find Laurie's work an attractive alternative to the lab!

Within a few minutes of talking with Laurie I was fascinated to learn that she began her professional life as a biophysical chemist. The lane changes she's made traveling her own career path are proof-positive that training in the sciences can enhance, rather than limit, opportunities. Laurie believes many of the interests and abilities that make a good scientist readily transfer to

academic administration and the executive search profession. Organizational skills, an analytical mind, good communication skills, and knowing how to ask the right questions serve one well whether at the bench or behind a desk.

Laurie first considered making a switch from bench science to academic administration for several reasons. Although satisfied with her research faculty position as an NMR spectroscopist in the Chemistry Department of the University of Virginia, Laurie was intrigued by what she saw as opportunities in academic administration. A natural problem solver and manager who enjoys working with other people, administration seemed a way to put her talents to task while further honing her skills. Deeply committed to the mission of higher education, she saw working in central administration as an opportunity for an individual to contribute to overall institutional policy. Laurie also saw administration as offering a career track where she could continue to grow and advance professionally with some degree of geographic stability. When the University of Virginia awarded Laurie a Presidential Fellowship (modeled on the ACE program³) in recognition of her leadership potential she welcomed the opportunity to gain valuable first-hand executive administrative experience.

In the decade after her fellowship, Laurie advanced steadily in the University of Virginia central academic administrative offices, ultimately serving as Chief Planning Officer and Executive Assistant to the President. In this position, among her myriad responsibilities was implementing Vir-



Laurie Pohl

ginia 2020, a university-wide long-range planning and assessment effort. As a member of the president's cabinet she gained familiarity with each of the independent threads that woven together create the fabric of a university — knowledge that would perfectly suit her for her present position in executive recruiting.

Laurie mentioned that she learned an important message from her mentors — careers don't just happen. Rather, they require attention and nurturing to remain healthy and thriving. Laurie recommends periodic "career reviews" that include asking trusted peers and mentors to help you assess your strengths and those aspects of your skills that could benefit from improvement. It is also important to evaluate when you might be ready to move to the next level. These career-management activities are important even when you are not considering a change. Although Laurie was not actively seeking a new position she was open to a new challenge and the offer to join Witt/Kieffer coincided with a time when she was prepared to take her career in a direction that offered novel professional experiences while still allowing her work to retain its commitment to serving the goals of higher education. From a personal perspective, she was also ready to exchange the somewhat rural, college town air of Charlottesville, VA, for a more bustling, urban life in Boston.

What does Laurie's position entail? In general, executive search firms are retained by an institution needing to fill one or more senior positions. Laurie describes working on senior-level recruitments as intellectually challenging because defining the desired characteristics of a new president, provost, or other pivotal senior positions is more thoughtfully accomplished when preceded by a review of the institution's vision, values, traditions, strengths, and weaknesses. Laurie particularly enjoys making sure the ability to judge the success of the recruitment is discussed early in the hiring process. She encourages her clients to carefully delineate by what time frame and by what criteria they will determine the goodness of fit of important personnel recruitments.

Once the position's description is fully vetted by the institution, recruiting begins. The first step is when a search committee is charged with identifying and evaluating potential candidates. Laurie explained that the composition of the search committee is critically important to the outcome, particularly for women and minority candidates. Then the fun really begins — seeking nominations. Search firms use a variety of outreach tools including advertising in journals and special interest periodicals and mailing the job description to individuals likely to know potential candidates. Search consultants also call on the vast network of per-

sonal contacts they build through colleagues, meetings, referrals, and participation in activities sponsored by national organizations (like AWIS!). It is always worthwhile to spend some time talking with search professionals when they contact you — this is how you become part of the network of potential candidates and candidate sources.

Senior level recruitments consume significant resources on the institutional side and often require substantial career and life changes for the candidate so they are not undertaken lightly. Positions and candidates can seem like a good fit on paper, but making a real match often depends to some extent on intangible variables. For instance, a small liberal arts college desiring to increase its share of federal research dollars may start with the notion that it wants its next CEO to have major research university experience. What it may not have considered is whether individuals excelling in such environments will truly have the right temperament for a student-centered culture. Sometimes, Laurie works to get the search committee members to recognize when they might be using code phrases to stand in for the characteristics they really want. Clarifying this difference can identify the really *essential* criteria for the position. She can also help broaden the pool of viable candidates by encouraging committees to

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Women at the Helm of Some of U.S. News' Top 100 Universities

<i>Name and University</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Website</i>
Shirley M. Tilghman Princeton University	<i>Molecular Biology</i>	http://www.princeton.edu/pr/smt/bio.html
Marye Anne Fox North Carolina State University	<i>Organic Chemistry</i>	http://chancellor.ncsu.edu/
M.R.C. Greenwood University of California-Santa Cruz	<i>Biology</i>	http://ucsc.edu/administration/mrc/biography/index.html
Mary Sue Coleman University of Michigan	<i>Biochemistry</i>	http://www.umich.edu/pres/coleman/
Joan R. Leitzel University of New Hampshire	<i>Mathematics</i>	http://unhinfo.unh.edu/president/profile99.html
W. Ann Reynolds University of Alabama-Birmingham	<i>Developmental Biology</i>	http://www.uab.edu/uabbio/reynolds.htm
Karen Holbrook Ohio State	<i>Zoology</i>	http://www.acs.ohio-state.edu/presidentialsearch/holbrookbio.html
<i>Social Science</i>		
Judith Rodin University of Pennsylvania	<i>Psychology</i>	http://www.upenn.edu/president/rodin/
Nancy E. Cantor University of Illinois-Champaign Urbana	<i>Psychology</i>	http://www.admin.uiuc.edu/oc/chancellor/cantorbio02-03.pdf

consider outstanding, but somewhat unconventional, applicants.

Laurie does caution those intrigued with the idea of becoming a chief executive to consider that governance takes a toll. It is important to disassociate the job titles from the work. Life as a senior administrator means having little or no control over your own time. CEOs must also be comfortable taking the heat; the issues they deal with often require obtaining broad consensus and rarely can such decisions make every constituent happy. CEOs must delegate to survive so they rely heavily on the people put in place around them without relinquishing ultimate responsibility for whatever happens.

How do candidates come to the attention of executive recruiters and search committees? The answer is easy — networking, networking, networking. Expand your circle of contacts at your institution, in the professional associations to which you belong, and via other social and community activities.

How might a scientist acquire the combinations of skills and experience sought for executive positions? By engaging in institutional and professional society service. Laurie acknowledges that women in the sciences can easily become overburdened with requests to serve on committees, etc. She suggests selecting those duties with opportunities for you to demonstrate to others your ability to successfully accomplish a task. If you see something that needs doing and have a plan for getting it done — take charge! Women do not always realize how transferable the strategic planning and conceptual development skills used in teaching, managing labs, and committee work are to other environments. Laurie thinks there are many women well-qualified for top positions and noted that women candidates do quite well in searches — when they are represented in candidate pools!

Today, there are also more voices — both men's and women's — on search committees insisting that finding the right candidate means diversifying the candidate pool, opening doors for qualified women and minorities.

One thing to keep in mind is that most senior academic positions do require that you possess a terminal degree in your field of work. In the sciences, this means a PhD

Laurie explained there are a number of career tracks in research and health management, regulatory affairs (such as the EPA), institutional compliance with state and federal regulations,⁴ policy work, funding organizations, and non profits (such as voluntary health organizations, environmental watchdog groups, etc) where masters-level science training and good management and communication skills are very much in demand.

And what about life as an executive recruiter? There are tradeoffs in every career and Laurie was very forthright when I asked her to balance the things that are wonderful

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about her position with the more challenging aspects of her job. On average, Laurie travels two to three days a week. Travel at that pace makes juggling family and other life demands difficult. Laurie finds the schedule she maintains manageable in part because she does not have children. In fact, she recently had to find a new home for her dog! Laurie loves her new home in Boston, but has had limited opportunities for exploring her new environment. The unpredictability of her travel makes it very difficult to engage in community activities or volunteerism. An avid exerciser, she concedes it takes discipline to maintain fitness while on the road. Room-service dinners, late nights, and hotel mattresses all take their toll. In any line of work where you are providing services to clients it can be difficult to protect your own time. Increased security at airports means a fair amount of down time, and although the miles Laurie logs earn her frequent flyer privileges — these privileges don't protect her from delays and cancellations.

Laurie strives to keep her intellectual

interests alive both in and outside of work, good advice to anyone whose work requires great attention to detail, as an antidote to the occupational hazards of being overly concerned with "process." Laurie finds her work rewarding. It calls on her training and experience, while building the strengths she has in organizational problem solving. Most importantly, it fulfills her desire to work on behalf of higher education. Helping institutions make key hires of talented individuals responsible for the educational opportunities of the coming generations is exactly where she wants to be right now. Laurie also takes pleasure when qualified women are recruited into leadership positions.

An important component of the AWIS mission is to be a network. AWIS members are women (and men!) at every rung of the career ladder, working in a wide variety of science and technical fields. Membership in AWIS opens the door to mentoring and contacts. AWIS's local chapters and its national activities offer a number

of ways to both acquire and demonstrate leadership skills. From editing or writing for *AWIS Magazine*, to serving on the national board, or organizing workshops and local chapter activities AWIS offers women the chance to broaden their career prospects. Think you've got the organizational and management skills needed to make a great college president? Getting involved with AWIS could be just the way to get noticed! ♦

References

1. <http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/mnt/html/women/business10.html>
2. See http://www.acenet.edu/news/press_release/2000/09september/college-president.html
3. See <http://www.acenet.edu/programs/fellows/>.
4. See profile of Washington University School of Medicine's Denise McCartney in "The Road Taken," *AWIS Magazine*, Winter 2003.

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"Find out what you like doing best and get someone to pay you for doing it."

— Katherine Whitehorn