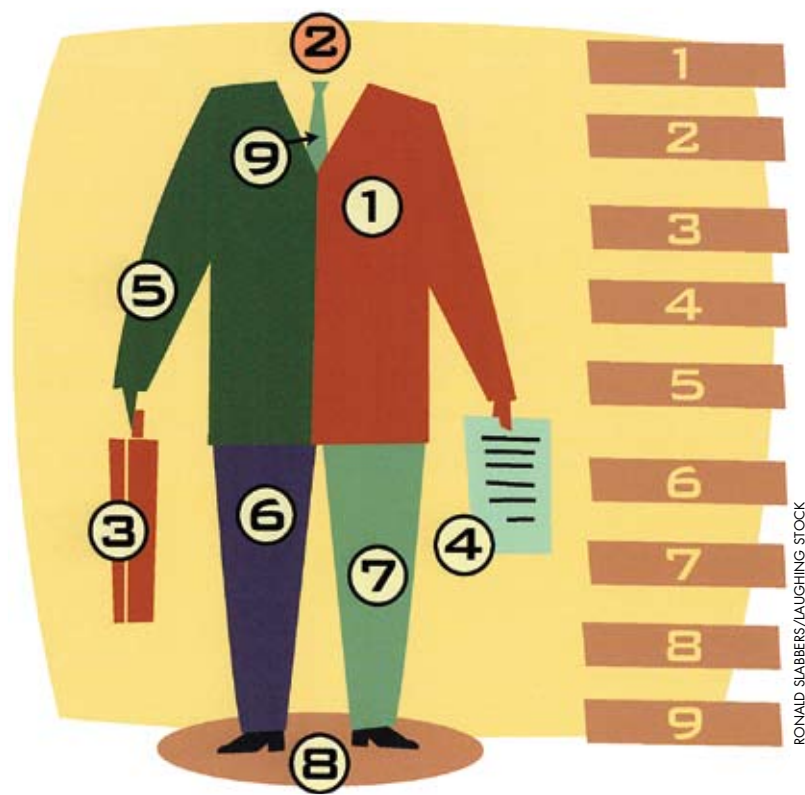


# Your Next Leader

BY DALE CAMPBELL

## Piecing together the executive search process



RONALD SIABBERS/LAUGHING STOCK

**T**rustees and presidents are in the midst of hiring the next generation of leaders for our nation's community colleges. Major leadership development initiatives are under way to address a projected shortage at the highest levels of college leadership—the result of impending presidential and senior executive officer retirements.

In 2006, the *Journal* reported on a paper I published through the FuturesLeaders consultancy entitled *The New Leadership Gap*, which confronted the potential problems likely to result from widespread retirements of community college leaders. This article expands on the initial findings of that research related to community college hiring practices.

More than one-third of the nation's public community college presidents participated in the study. The study found: 1) more than three-quarters of colleges conduct their own personnel searches for leadership positions; 2) colleges rely almost exclusively on reference checks and interviews in hiring; and 3) one-third of colleges offer no training to their search committees on interviewing. Additionally, research demonstrated that emerging hiring tools used by corporations could reduce costs and increase the effectiveness of a college's hiring process.

### Making a Good Hire

Poor hiring practices often come at a steep cost. A bad hire usually translates into lower morale and organizational productivity and can trigger the loss of other key college staff. Not hiring someone with the "person environment fit" necessary to succeed in a particular culture can result in the early departure of a senior administrator. Industry analysts estimate recruitment costs and loss to the institution equate to two to three times the cost of a senior employee's annual salary—to say nothing of the impact of an extended personnel search on organizational effectiveness.

Colleges sometimes employ executive search consultants to work with human resources departments to screen top candidates. Fees normally range from \$20,000 to \$80,000 per search for a community college CEO, or up to one-third of the employee's first year's annual salary. Only 18 percent of community college presidents reported that their college used staffing agencies or search firms in their selection process.

Seventy-seven percent of college presidents who responded to the survey said their colleges conduct in-house leadership searches employing the selection processes to initially screen applicants.

College presidents generally perceive the initial screening processes that their

colleges are currently using as effective. However, research on the screening processes that have the highest prediction of success raises some interesting questions for college leaders to consider.

Research by Bain & Mabey (1999) about successful hiring decisions focused on the relative validities of a number of methods used in selection. On the scale, a score of 1.0 represented a perfect prediction of job success. The relative validities of the methods are as follows: References (0.10), Unstructured Interviews (0.25), Structured Interviews (0.35), Personality Questionnaires (0.40), Work Sample Tests (0.46) and Assessment Center Approach Scores (0.60). No single assessment method comes close to predicting that a college will make a successful hire. However, our research found that,

currently, community colleges rely upon the employee selection processes that have the lowest prediction of making a successful hire. Colleges could significantly enhance the predictive validity that they will make a good hire by building in a few additional assessment tools, many of which are already used in the corporate sector.

### Bellwether Trends from Business

Community college leaders have embraced succession planning and development as key models colleges can use in helping their institutions address the leadership gap. The business sector can also serve as an example to improve college hiring practices. Business leaders currently employ a wider variety of assessment tools to increase the probability of making strong hires. Forty percent of median-sized companies report using personality questionnaires, and 32 percent use simulations in addition to interviews in hiring processes. This compares with just 4 percent of community college leaders in our study who reported using these tools.

### New Tools for Hiring

Behavioral interviews and personality questionnaires used worldwide in the business community could prove valuable in strengthening the community college search process. This is particularly crucial given the large numbers of anticipated openings due to retirements of senior and mid-level leaders and the risk of institutions making bad hires. Some of these tools include:

- **Competency or structured behavioral interviews** designed to link specific criteria required to succeed in the job to a candidate's level of competency or performance in those criteria.
- **Personality or work style questionnaires** designed to assess a candidate's preferred style in the workplace. These exercises typically take 45 minutes to complete online. Once done, a report is generated on a candidate's self-assessment of his or her preferred team, leadership, associate and selling styles. A metric known as the Occu-

pational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ), from human resource specialists SHL, is the current industry standard. More than 1,000 companies use the OPQ worldwide in executive selection and development.

### Everyone Has a Role to Play

How key players can improve the search process

- **Trustees and presidents**—Create a climate that values human resources decisions as an investment in the future of the institution. Encourage the adoption of new tools proven successful in other industries to improve the likelihood of making successful hires for the college.

- **Human resources officers**—Look outside higher education associations to your counterparts in business and industry and to the Society of Human Resources Management and learn from their experiences. There are a number of tools on the market. The most widely known instruments are used for team building and do not have the reliability and validity to be used in the selection process. The instruments used in hiring require they be interpreted by industrial/organizational psychologists or professionals trained to interpret personality data. Firms usually provide a training process in which you can develop the expertise to interpret the assessments in house, or you can outsource this segment of your selection process.

- **Business officers**—Unbundle your current executive search request for bids if you use external executive search firms to assist you in hiring. These firms tend to focus on recruitment and helping colleges find a diverse and highly qualified pool of candidates. Currently, no firm that specializes in community college executive search includes behavioral-based interviewing or work style questionnaires in their services. Request specific bids requiring that firms demonstrate the reliability and validity of the instruments they use in hiring and their ability to hold up under legal challenges.

### Return on Investment

Finding the right people doesn't come cheap. The key for community colleges is to reap a solid return on their investment.

External executive search firms, though expensive, use a number of tactics colleges often replicate. The process relies heavily on personal interviews with search committees and reference checks. Research, however, shows that these assessment methods have the lowest prediction of job success (0.25 and 0.10, respectively).

Personality or work-style questionnaires are more affordable and will typically cost an institution \$150 to \$350 per assessment for five to 10 job finalists—plus an estimated consulting fee of \$3,500 a day. The college has the option to develop the expertise to interpret the personality questionnaire in-house, cutting or eliminating consulting fees altogether, making this option more cost-effective with a 0.40 prediction of job success.

No matter what process a college chooses, one truism cannot be ignored: Hiring the right person at the outset for any administrative position is crucial to the future of a college. No one method in the selection process is perfect. It is important that colleges use multiple methods to maximize the validity of the process and assist the college in making a good hire. As Kenneth Burke, a trustee at St. Petersburg College in Florida and past president of the Association of Community College Trustees, once asked, "Why wouldn't any college want to build these tools into their hiring processes, as long as they are cost-effective, if it would help them make a better decision?" Why, indeed?

DALE CAMPBELL is professor and director of the Community College Leadership Consortium at the University of Florida and author of *The Leadership Gap: Model Strategies for Leadership Development*.

### REFERENCES

Bain, N., and B. Mabey. 1999. *The People Advantage: Improving Results through Better Selection and Performance*, 30-45.