

# Contributing to the process

## Students help select university administrators

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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE  
NEWSPAPER

Report by  
**Charles A. Hahn**  
U. Editor

This is the first of several special reports about student issues and concerns scheduled to appear in *U. The National College Newspaper* this academic year.

The reports will be written or directed by *U.*'s editors on fellowship, with contributions from members of the American Collegiate Network.

This report about students' involvement in the administrative search process examines a key facet of student governance. It investigates how much input students have in the selection of officials at their colleges and universities and whether they do their part when given input.

In February, *U.* will publish a special report about job and career opportunities for graduating seniors in various job markets.

Design by  
**Jacki Hampton**  
U. Editor

Photos by  
**Tommy Comeaux**  
Louisiana State U.  
**Brad Camp**  
Kansas State U.  
**Lori Wasselchuk**  
U. of Minnesota  
**Eric O'Connell**  
New Mexico State U.

When Louisiana State U. student Suzette Kuhlow volunteered to serve on the committee to select her school's new chancellor, her expectations were modest. Perhaps she would have some influence. Perhaps she would learn something.

Eight months later, Kuhlow found herself leading finalists for the LSU chancellorship on tours of the campus, giving them their only view of the school in its spontaneous, unpackaged form. During this critical stage of the search, a student ran the show.

"Serving on the committee was definitely one of the best experiences I've had," Kuhlow said. "The university was trusting me with influencing these people's decisions."

Kuhlow is one of many students nationwide who help their schools select new officials.

Student representation on administrative search committees, which became widespread during the 1960s, is viewed by student leaders and administrators alike as a vital aspect of student governance.

However, while universities acknowledge the need to involve students, some students question whether their input is as significant as officials assert.

Also, many administrators and student leaders agree that despite the importance of searches, students often fail to show enough interest. Those willing to commit the time required by a search are scarce, and members of the student body frequently show little interest in searches or the activities of their own representatives.

In the case of Kuhlow, her involvement or influence could not have been much greater. Nor, in the case of a chancellor search, could the stakes have been higher.

The search lasted eight months, finally ending this past spring with the selection of William "Bud" Davis. Kuhlow was the lone student on the committee, which represented various university constituencies, including faculty and administration.

After months of screening resumes, the committee brought finalists to campus for interviews. Kuhlow found herself immersed in an increasingly intense process.

Some meetings lasted a full eight hours, and the committee occasionally met on Saturday.

The choice of Davis left Kuhlow satisfied with both the final decision and her experience on the committee.

"He's working with students, and he's making one of the issues I brought up, child care,

a school-wide priority," she said. "He's definitely living up to his campaign promises."

### Student input

Like Kuhlow, many students found that they were listened to by other committee members. "I don't know if it's some kind of ritual or what, but they always ask the student for questions and input," said Michael Hull, a Southern Illinois U., Carbondale student government leader who served on a committee that chose a new vice president for academic and budgetary affairs. Throughout most of the process, Hull said, he felt thoroughly involved and free to ask questions of candidates.

Hull chose to focus on issues he felt addressed the broad needs of the student body. "I asked questions along the lines of 'Why do you want this job?' and left the more technical questions to the faculty and administrators."

Sue Blodgett, a graduate student in entomology at Kansas State U., who served on a committee seeking a new vice president for research, focused on questions of recruitment and student needs. "We were looking at making Kansas State more grad-student friendly," Blodgett said. "I asked candidates questions about student stipends, day care, health insurance, and the flexibility of university rules and policies for students with special needs."

Like many other students interviewed for this report, Blodgett characterized her input as "equal" to that of other committee members. "The committee members were representing different concerns and constituencies, and I felt like I was able to effectively represent the concerns of students."

### The search process

Search committees are widely used at colleges and universities to select administrative officers. While the structure and composition of committees vary widely, the typical search body contains 10 to 20 members and represents a variety of constituencies, such as faculty, staff, administrators and alumni.

After a position has been advertised, a committee reviews applications and selects candidates to be interviewed. While decisions can be made by vote, typically a committee will seek a consensus through dialogue. Often, two or more candidates are recommended and the final hiring decision is left to the chief officer of the administrative area in question.

While resumes are reviewed, no information about specific candidates is divulged in

order to protect their current jobs. This secrecy has been known to agitate students, faculty, and other members of the university community hungry for information. However, many student representatives understand the wisdom of keeping candidates' identities secret.

"The prevailing argument for secrecy is there's a lot of media attention on searches," notes Bliss McCracken, a U. of New Mexico student serving on her school's presidential search committee. "Anytime the press reveals that this person or that person is a candidate, their current job could be jeopardized. Also, publicity can allow the search to be politicized."

After the field has been pared down, a slate of candidates is usually presented to the university community. Students and others are afforded the opportunity to meet candidates at public forums.

Committee members often develop rapport and a sense of common purpose that sometimes transcends the interests of their constituencies.

"It's almost surprising how rare it is to get student-faculty division based on what I've seen," says U. of Minnesota Professor W. Phillips Shively.

"Faculty and student members often work together to make a contribution to the process, and the student members often add energy and perspective."

### Some cite problems

Not all students paint such a rosy picture. Some argue that university personnel searches are too sensitive for adequate input, and that the few students who serve on committees are products of university tokenism.

Four high-level officials were selected at the U. of Wisconsin, Madison, during the past year. According to Jane Christiansen, campus news editor for the student newspaper, *The Daily Cardinal*, some students viewed the vacancies as a chance to shake things up. "This was seen as a chance to diversify which might come along once in a generation, and some felt that the university fell short," she said.

Although there was student representation on the search committees, some student leaders asserted this made little difference. According to Meghan Henson, co-president of the Wisconsin Student Association, the WSA's call for new blood went unheeded. "The administration didn't listen to us this time and they rarely do," Henson said. "One student's voice on a committee can be easily outweighed."

However, Mary K. Rouse, dean of students at the U. of Wisconsin, defended the level of

student input and noted that the WSA has control over which students serve on committees. "Every constituency, including students, ought to have a say in the affairs of the university," she said.

Paul Mickley, a student at Central Michigan U., served on the committee which chose a new vice president for university relations. Mickley expressed some skepticism about how much input he had despite calling the search "a good experience."

"The people in charge listened and took my views into account, but whether they did much with it I don't know," Mickley said.

The committee ultimately selected Russell Herron, a candidate from within the university.

Even where students do get meaningful representation, the impact they have can vary. At the U. Minnesota, for example, a student consultative committee found its choice for vice president of academic affairs overlooked by the administration.

"I was disappointed, but I understood that the vice president had to have the support of the faculty and deans," said Eric Huang, chairman of the eight-member student committee charged with providing a student recommendation.

Despite the disappointment, Huang characterized the amount of student input as adequate. "I'm happy with the president's response to our request for student involvement. He's interested in allowing more student input."

### How many students?

Whether there is a nationwide trend toward more student input is difficult to estimate.

"Almost 15 years ago, it was difficult for universities to not have students on committees. Students were active and they had an agenda," said Ted Marchesy, vice president of the American Association for Higher Education. "Today, it is politically possible to have no students on a committee."

AAHE produces "The Search Committee Handbook," a guide provided to colleges and universities. The handbook recommends having one or more students on as many search committees as possible. This has many benefits, Marchesy said, including possibly legitimizing a search in the eyes of the student body.

"We don't have a flat-out rule, but to me there should be a presupposition that there should be students on committees, partly because it makes the committees more effective and partly because it's a learning experience for the students."

Student input is often more effective when

more than one student serves, he said. "If you have one student, it's like being the token minority. It's so much better to have two or more."

At the U. of New Mexico, student leaders have sought unsuccessfully to provide for multiple students on the university's presidential search committee. "I feel that one student can't represent the broad interests of the student body," said Marc Montoya, editor of the university's student newspaper. "It was brought up by student leaders that one isn't enough, but that was brushed aside."

Another advantage of multiple representation, Marchesy said, is that it allows students to feel more comfortable amidst faculty and administrators. Kuhlow, although warmly welcomed by the chancellor committee, felt intimidated at first. "The first day I walked in I was terrified because there were a lot of high-caliber people on the committee," she said.

### When should students serve?

Although the AAHE handbook recommends one or more students on all search committees, Marchesy says there is debate at colleges and universities over what positions most require student input. "Everyone would agree that there should be students on a search committee for the dean of students. Should there also be students on a search for the director of the computer center? Well, maybe."

At Central Michigan U., according to Vice President for University Relations Russell Herron, "There are some committees that are much more visible to students. Our students have varying degrees of input depending on what the position is."

The number of students and the process by which they are chosen is sometimes determined by university-wide policy, although in other cases practices may vary from college to college or department to department.

An example is Indiana's Ball State U., according to student government adviser James Marine. "The decision to put a student on a search committee is typically made by the ranking officer in a particular area," he said.

### The question of apathy

One question continually raised by skeptics is that of student apathy toward the search process. Are significant numbers of students really interested in serving? And does the student body at large really care?

Many student leaders concede such ques-



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tions are legitimate. Most search committees meet at least an hour a week initially and then more frequently during a search's latter stages, and to find students willing to take on such a commitment is not easy.

The situation at New Mexico State U. is symbolic of problems nationwide. "A lot of people in the student government are anxious to volunteer, but you want to find a balance between the people who are overextended and the people who haven't volunteered as much before," said student government Vice President Mike Antiporda.

"We couldn't possibly find a student for every single position that opens up, but for the larger positions, we try to."

At Southern Illinois U., students serve on virtually every search committee formed. As a result, said student body President Tim Hildebrand, it is difficult to find enough students to serve.

"It seems like there are about 3,000 searches every year," he said.

The problem is often underscored by minimal attendance at the public candidate forums which occur toward the end of searches. According to Herron, "not many students showed up" at his public address during the vice president for university relations search at Central Michigan U.

"For a lot of students, administration is not foremost in their minds. They have a lot of other things tugging at their time, social concerns, academic concerns, etc.," Herron said.

Wisconsin Dean of Students Rouse said student apathy at colleges and universities mirrors that in the general society. "There is not as much student involvement and participation as I would like, and I could generalize the same thing with the American population," she said.

Others argue that concerns about apathy have been blown out of proportion. "For the longest time I've been hearing complaints about student apathy," said the U. of New Mexico's McCracken. "But I've found that people are willing to participate if they know what's going on. Once people learn more about a search, they're more interested."

This controversy may have caused some student representatives to be held to unreasonable standards of participation. Faculty members who are quiet on committees are not immediately labelled as apathetic or uninterested, AAHE's Marchesy notes.

"I've seen students not doing anything next to faculty members not doing anything, and then afterward you hear, 'So we have students on committees, and they don't do anything.'"

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