

Find the Right Fit: Hiring and Onboarding Presidents in Small and Rural Colleges

ABSTRACT

Small and rural community colleges require CEOs with a unique skillset, demeanor, and perspective. Trustees are tasked with finding and onboarding strong leaders to effectively lead in these environments. Members of AACC's Commission on Small and Rural Colleges will offer their perspective to help Trustees hire and onboard successful CEOs.



PANEL

Dr. Scott Mickelsen	President	smickelsen@dawson.edu	Dawson Community College
Dr. David H. Devier	President	ddevier@glenoaks.edu	Glen Oaks Community College
Mr. Rod Lopez	Trustee		Glen Oaks Community College
Dr. Michael Elam	President	melam072@halifaxcc.edu	Halifax Community College
Mr. Michael Felt	Trustee		Halifax Community College
Dr. D. Ryan Carstens	President	ryan.carstens@enmu.edu	ENMU – Ruidoso Branch Community College

INTRODUCTION

Quick Overview of Scenarios

There are aspects of living and serving in a small rural community and college that need to be considered when recruiting and hiring a college president in a small rural community. We need the right fit for all stakeholders. But how do you define, articulate, and successfully recruit for the right fit for your community and college?

Questions to Consider, as we begin the session:

1. Are you aware of, or have you observed, poor or unsuccessful examples of a presidential search or hiring process at a small rural college?
2. Are you aware of, or have you observed, good or successful examples of a presidential search or hiring process at a small rural college?
3. What do you think are some key characteristics to watch for when recruiting or onboarding a new president at a small rural college?

DISCUSSION

We have two scenarios to help catalyze the discussion.

Each of you has a copy of one of the two scenarios on the back side of this handout.

SCENARIO ONE

The president at a small rural college has fallen out of favor with the board, the staff, and the community. He began coasting a year or two ago; he retired mentally. There is not much direction nor vision happening at the college. After more than a year of frustration with the situation, the president is “retired” out, with a public announcement of departure that will be about six months in the future. So the board has time to consider a profile, posting, interviews, etc.

The board wants the next president to be engaged, not just sit in the seat. They would like someone who has experience in the national initiatives or effective practices that they hear about. They think that they should bump up the salary to compete with the larger colleges that seem to attract the “best” candidates. They create a presidential profile that reflects their ambitions.

A finalist is hired who comes to the small community with extensive experience in many effective practices. He is accustomed to the big city life and having his privacy. He quickly decides to spend his weekends out of town where his activities might be unknown and where he would not be recognized. This of course impacts his gradual connection (or lack thereof) to his local community and leaders, and his absence affects his ability to have an increased understanding and appreciation for the strengths and challenges of the community that his college serves.

Eventually the president has family and visitors come to town and they go out on a picnic with his college-aged kids and a collection of their college friends. A keg of beer is in the mix, a local photographer happens to notice them and an unflattering photo or two lands in the community paper. The local “brand” for the college and president is now shaped by this event and falls under question. The board eventually dismisses the president and must hire a replacement.

- What should the board do in the next search? How does the board craft a presidential profile that brings them someone who is engaged, but also who understands or even seeks the small and rural context? What should be written in the presidential profile to “attract” the right kind of individuals?
- What are the strengths and opportunities of the college and community? How might they be articulated in a position posting in order to attract the attention of the “correct” candidates who are likely to be attracted to those strengths and opportunities?
- Is there an expectation that the president lives in, and engages with, the community served by the college? How might that expectation be communicated in the profile and in the interview process? How might the search process expose each candidate’s comfort level with the local lifestyle?
- During the interview process, what kinds of activities and what types of questions can be developed to help the college and board more clearly see the personality, style, preferences, or inclinations of each candidate, in order to better anticipate a possible fit for the college and community?
- Based on the current state of affairs and needs at the college and considering the culture and needs of the small rural community, does the board need to find a president with a certain leadership style? How might the board study those implications, and how can the posting or profile be developed to attract candidates who more likely exhibit a preferred leadership style?
- How do you design and implement a search process that gives proper balance to “fit” and qualifications?