

Position on UM Presidential Search

UM Ann Arbor AAUP
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The University of Michigan refers repeatedly to the importance of values such as [transparency](#), [inclusion](#), [community](#), [shared governance](#), and [public engagement](#). Most recently, President Mary Sue Coleman stated that she and the Regents will prioritize “rebuilding trust,” and that she hopes “we will pledge to respect one another, listen to one another, and to care for one another.”¹ Trust, of course, requires transparency, inclusivity, and shared governance with stakeholders. In that spirit, we would like to see the presidential search process occur in genuine partnership with the campus community and for there to be transparency with respect to the process, timeline, and outcomes.

We believe that the search for the next president should be conducted in as consultative and open a fashion as possible, so as to maximize the chances of finding a leader who is good for all university stakeholders of our Ann Arbor, Dearborn, and Flint campuses. This involves two components: first, that the search committee itself include representatives from key stakeholder groups; second, that once the search narrows to 3-5 finalists, that a larger group of stakeholders be enabled to evaluate and engage with them, ideally by announcing finalist names.

We have heard that the Regents are planning to form a search committee that includes student, labor, and faculty representation. If the search committee does in fact address the first component of our request, we are glad and grateful. (If not, we would push for greater inclusivity in the search committee.) The remainder of this document focuses on the second component.

We suggest that, once a short list of 3-5 finalists is identified, their names be publicly announced and various constituencies be invited to engage with them. This would allow a broader range of UM stakeholders and Michigan residents that may not be fully represented on the search committee to engage with the candidates, consider their relative merits, and make their assessments known to the Regents prior to a final decision. In particular, the following groups should have the ability to assess candidates: (1) undergraduate students; (2) graduate students; (3) GEO; (4) LEO, including librarians/archivists/curators; (5) clinical faculty; (5) research faculty; (6) tenure-track/tenured faculty; (7) UM alumni; (7) staff, (8) the All Campus Labor

¹ Coleman, M. S. (2022). Priorities for the coming months. UM Office of the President, Jan. 27, 2022. <https://president.umich.edu/news-communications/letters-to-the-community/priorities-for-the-coming-months/>

Council, and (9) non-UM-affiliated local residents. Representatives should be drawn from all three campuses, the Medical School, the Athletic Program, and the cities where our campuses are located.

A public search also reduces the possibility of future public embarrassment, as problematic candidate histories, including from the candidates' previous institutions, are more likely to surface. Notably, both former President Schlissel and former Provost Philbert had histories that could have been raised and considered before they were appointed, had their searches been more open. We thus believe public searches should become standard practice at UM for key leadership positions, as they used to be.²

If finalist names cannot be made public, then an alternative is the following: **Once the finalists are selected, groups of *representatives* of key UM constituencies (as above) should be given a chance to examine and engage with each candidate and then provide comments to the Regents, including, if they wish, their relative ranking of the candidates.** Each group of representatives should be granted full access to the materials compiled for each candidate (as legally permissible), and they should have the chance to interview each candidate.

If confidentiality is to be preserved, we believe there are mechanisms to enable that, as detailed in the Appendix.

If finalist names cannot be made public, **we also believe that an attempt should be made to persuade the finalists to make the search public.** The finalists could each be asked whether they would be willing to switch to a public process. If all agree, the search could and should be made public at that point.³

To search finalists: We cordially invite you to demonstrate your leadership by requesting a public process. Keeping the process confidential telegraphs a poor message to the campus community, whereas participation in a public process would demonstrate the intention to develop a more transparent and participatory culture.

² Additional discussion about a public search, including a weighing of the pros and cons, is in the Appendix.

³ Some rationale that could persuade finalists are included in the Appendix.

Appendix: Rationale for a Public Search

We have carefully considered the arguments against a public search. In the end, we believe that the pros outweigh the cons. The most commonly cited reason for a confidential search – in which the entire process is secret until a final decision is made – is that we will lose qualified candidates who do not wish their home institutions to know they are considering a different job. President Mary Sue Coleman, for example, is on the record suggesting that she would not have considered applying in 2001-02 had the search not been confidential.⁴

But, while that argument sounds reasonable, it is largely anecdotal. Scholars who research university hiring practices find no evidence of a correlation between the public nature of a search and a loss of qualified candidates.⁵ All searches prior to Coleman's at UM were successful without confidentiality,⁶ including the 1996 search that resulted in President Lee Bollinger.⁷ Given the prestige associated with the UM presidency, we do not believe there will be a dearth of strong candidates, any more than we fear not having excellent candidates for Regent positions simply because they are publicly elected.

While trends suggest that confidential presidential searches are becoming more common,⁸ there are plenty of UM peers who continue to hold public searches: University of Utah,⁹ University of Wisconsin,¹⁰ to name a few. Most recently, faculty across Florida's public universities and colleges denounced a state bill that would allow presidential searches there to be conducted confidentially.¹¹

⁴ Woodhouse, K. (2013). Hunt for next University of Michigan president likely to be an intricate, top-secret search. Ann Arbor News. Apr. 28, 2013.

<http://www.annarbor.com/news/university-of-michigan-presidential-search/>

⁵ Wilde, J. A. and H. Finkelstein. (2017). The role of confidentiality in presidential searches. Chronicle of Higher Education, Apr. 30, 2017.

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-role-of-confidentiality-in-presidential-searches/>

⁶ University of Michigan. (n.d.) U-M Presidential Search Committee confirms four finalists. Michigan News. (date uncertain) <https://news.umich.edu/u-m-presidential-search-committee-confirms-four-finalists/>.

⁷ Prior to a 1999 Michigan Supreme Court decision, presidential searches were required to be public (Woodhouse, 2013).

⁸ Stripling, J. College headhunters, accustomed to secrecy, find themselves under scrutiny. Chronicle of Higher Education, June 10, 2014.

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/college-headhunters-accustomed-to-secrecy-find-themselves-under-scrutiny/>

⁹ University of Utah Communications. (2021). 3 finalists named in U presidential search.

<https://attheu.utah.edu/facultystaff/3-finalists-named-in-u-presidential-search/>

¹⁰ Meyerhofer, K. (2022). UW System names 2 finalists in presidential search. Wisconsin State Journal, JAn. 15, 2022.

https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/university/uw-system-names-2-finalists-in-presidential-search/article_e4cb1e73-9dbf-505b-a30d-1296c73ee040.html

¹¹ Kumar, D. (2022). Faculty groups blast Florida bill to make presidential searches more secret. Tampa Bay Times, Jan. 25, 2022.

<https://www.tampabay.com/news/education/2022/01/25/faculty-groups-blast-florida-bill-to-make-presidential-searches-more-secret/>

A key benefit of a public search is that any negative prior histories are more likely to be revealed. Former President Schlissel, who came from Brown University, appears to have left its students unhappy with his indifference to sexual assault on campus¹² – reporting of which only came to light *after* he was appointed UM President.¹³ The WilmerHale report on former Provost Philbert cites *many* people who were aware of his misbehavior, and who might have questioned his candidacy had they had the chance to provide input. In both cases, the searches were confidential, with the chosen candidate announced only after a decision was made.

We also maintain that any candidate unable to withstand public scrutiny, to explain their ambitions to their home institution, or to endure the potential embarrassment of not being selected would not be ready to serve in the very public and demanding position of leading UM. Meanwhile, there are potential benefits for finalists if their names are announced.

It is no shame to be a runner-up to be president of a large, prestigious university such as UM. In fact, it might even provide a professional boost: Of the three other publicly announced finalists in the search that resulted in Bollinger, Larry Faulkner went on to become President of UT Austin,¹⁴ and Carol Christ is currently Chancellor of UC Berkeley.¹⁵ Their careers appear not to have been hurt by being passed over; it even seems possible that being acknowledged as a credible candidate for UM made them more visible candidates for analogous positions elsewhere. Such benefits could even be augmented by UM if we were to allow all candidates to make speeches about their visions that could be professionally recorded and posted publicly – an opportunity to be asked to give a speech about one’s vision for public higher education.

Appendix: Maintaining Confidentiality During Finalist Interaction with UM Constituencies.

If the Regents are unwilling to publicly announce the finalists, an alternative would be to allow UM constituencies to have representatives meet with the finalists with reasonable assurances of confidentiality. All representatives involved in the process could sign a confidentiality agreement with respect to all finalists’ names and personally identifiable information.

¹² Iadipaolo, D. (2014). While serving as Brown U provost, U-M President Schlissel did little to stem campus “rape culture,” critics claim. Ann Arbor Independent, Sept. 9, 2014. <https://www.a2independent.com/2014/09/09/while-serving-as-brown-u-provost-u-m-president-schlissel-did-little-to-stem-campus-rape-culture-critics-claim/> Brown University faculty have also conveyed through private communication that Schlissel had authoritarian tendencies as Provost there, as well.

¹³ Lesko, P.D. (2014). Days after U-M’s President Schlissel starts job, Feds launch Title IX investigation into sexual violence at Brown U. where he was Provost. Ann Arbor Independent, July 22, 2014. <https://www.a2independent.com/2014/07/22/days-after-u-ms-president-schlissel-starts-job-feds-launch-title-ix-investigation-into-sexual-violence-at-brown-u-where-he-was-provost/>

¹⁴ Wikipedia. (n.d.). Larry Faulkner. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Larry_Faulkner

¹⁵ UC Berkeley. (n.d.). Biography. Office of the Chancellor. <https://chancellor.berkeley.edu/chancellor-christ/biography> .

One open question is, Which aspects of the candidates and their interactions should representatives be allowed to disclose to their constituents? Our suggestion is to allow representatives to discuss candidates and their qualities in an anonymized form, in informal and/or verbal communications (i.e., without transcription or recording). Additionally, each set of representatives should be allowed to write and release a statement to their constituencies that describes their interactions with the candidates and their final recommendations to the Regents in a way that does not compromise candidates' identities. Those statements could be required to undergo review by the Regents or appointed delegates, to ensure confidentiality.