



Position Paper
September 2008

Dental School Dean Searches: Improving the Process

An Interview with Chris Martin, Principal, The 2HC Group, Advisors in Higher Education Executive Search, and Dr. Judith Albino, Senior Consultant, Academy for Academic Leadership and former President of the University of Colorado and Alliant International University

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Foreword

At the beginning of the 2008-2009 academic school year, many U.S. dental schools were facing a leadership transition. At one time, more than 20% of dental schools had a current opening or were preparing to search for a new dean. The Academy for Academic Leadership (AAL) asked Dr. Richard R. Ranney, AAL Senior Consultant and former Dean of the University of Maryland, Baltimore, Dental School, and of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, School of Dentistry, to interview Dr. Albino and Mr. Martin to get their thoughts on these uncertain yet exciting times.

*N. Karl Haden, Ph.D., President,
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Dick Ranney (DR): A number of dental schools currently have open deanships. We are also aware of several that are experiencing challenges in filling these posts. What are some of the challenges or pitfalls that arise in these senior leadership searches?

Chris Martin (CM): There are institution might face in attempting to execute a successful search. In my experience, five of the most common problem areas are: 1) having an inadequate candidate pool, 2) eliciting the interest of potential candidates, 3) clarifying roles and responsibilities of search committee members and ensuring strong search leadership, 4) having inconsistent candidate assessment and selection, and 5) lacking a formal onboarding process.

DR: Let's talk about each pitfall briefly. What are some ways to enhance what could be an **inadequate candidate pool**?

CM: As you both may know, the traditional method is simply to advertise the open position through various publications, but that approach simply is no longer sufficient. A number of factors have created more competitive markets, and these same factors have had an impact on available or interested talent. Moreover, individuals who may not be actively looking often are the candidates that a school wants, and special efforts must be made to bring these individuals into the pool. In my experience, the single best way to enhance the candidate pool is to increase personal contacts and appeals to potential candidates. Sometimes, of course, search committee members cannot commit the time to actively develop and contact a network of candidates. At other times, they simply don't know how to turn noncandidates into candidates. In some of these cases, it makes sense to bring some outside assistance into the search process.

JA: It's worth commenting on some of the special issues in the world of dental education and in searching for a dean of a dental program. It's beginning to seem that many likely candidates may not be interested in or may not feel prepared for these roles. I'm not sure if we know which of those more often is the case — lack of interest or lack of preparation — but the profession is beginning to acknowledge, examine, and try to

explain these factors. Certainly, it helps when a school and its search committee are able to define clearly not only what the dean will do but also what kinds of experience are appropriate for someone considering the role. Sometimes there are perceptions that schools know exactly who they want or that there are inside candidates who have an advantage. In any case, the best way to make candidates of people who might not otherwise apply is simply to reach out to them — directly and personally. The biggest mistake is to just sit and wait for people to apply.

DR: What are some specific ways to **secure the interest of potential candidates?**

CM: Most candidates enjoy a search that moves in a timely manner. You want to develop a clear and well-defined process, along with a timeline that is communicated in advance — not only to the committee members, but also to the candidates involved in the process. As a search consultant I spend considerable time developing a “performance profile” rather than just a typical job description. All involved leadership — especially the individual to whom the dean will report, as well as the search committee — must be active in developing the details. The performance profile should include information about the institution and the setting, the specific requirements of the position and the attributes needed for success, plus information pertinent to the area. A vibrant and clear feedback loop is also very important. That means paying attention to details for each candidate. You want to be certain that you know the candidates’ particular needs and really work to develop these people as candidates.

DR: That seems very important, indeed. Do these things differ substantially from one school to another?

JA: The answer to that has to be both yes and no. One school will have different needs, and certainly these needs differ among schools. Having said that, however, there are some commonalities for the role of a dental

school dean. A survey recently conducted by AAL, which was completed by a majority of the current deans of U.S. dental programs, indicated — and this is not news to most of us in academic administration — that deans’ major challenges lay in the areas of budget and finance, including the need to be actively involved in fundraising. Many deans had never before had to ask for money, and now as deans they’re expected to raise substantial sums for their schools. It was also interesting to see that, when asked about aspects of the deanship for which they had been unprepared, many respondents indicated management of faculty as a challenging concern, although budget issues and fund-raising were indicated as the major challenges. Those are some of the things we to which we need to pay particular attention. We cannot expect that all candidates will come with experience that prepares them for these challenges, so we should think about how they can get those skills if they don’t already have them.

CM: To add to that, often another dean may be someone who can best help candidates understand what the challenges will be.

DR: Chris, when you say “another dean,” you mean a dean from another school in the university leading the search?

CM: Absolutely. The reporting authority, too, must be clear with the search committee about expectations. Ideally, some of these expectations would be presented in the form of a performance scorecard that clearly articulates the critical objectives over the short term (six months to a year) and the long term.

JA: I agree with that, Chris, and I also agree with your point about getting things on paper. But just getting things on paper isn’t the whole story. Candidates need to feel that there is real interest in them as individuals. They need to be “wined and dined,” if you will. They need to be treated as special and not just interrogated by countless groups of faculty, students, alumni, and administrators. We

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sometimes treat candidates as if they should prove to us that they're worthy of consideration even though we are the ones who have invited them to talk about the position. Instead of that attitude, we need to be *selling* them on the position, and, above all, we need to focus on who they are as individuals and what will help them to decide whether this is the right deanship for them.

DR: Judith, how do you feel about having the candidates make presentations of some type in front of the faculty or write something in advance about their educational philosophy?

JA: I think that's entirely up to the school. But it's similar to letters of reference — you don't expect something that's put in writing to be negative. You expect candidates to give you names of references who are going to give you good letters and positive recommendations. And so we would expect candidates to say the appropriate things about their philosophy or directions in dental education. I don't think it's particularly useful to have candidates spend a great deal of time on those sorts of things. But certainly we want to give them a chance to talk in a very honest and in-depth way about the issues and problems in dental education today. And setting up interactions with groups of faculty and other groups is one of the ways we do learn more about what candidates are really thinking.

DR: What about the issue of confidentiality in searches? Is there risk of limiting the willingness of individuals to participate if confidentiality is not provided?

JA: There is no question that some candidates shy away from searches where the names of all candidates are made public, and there are good reasons for that. Some may feel that it would put their current position in jeopardy. But we are sometimes stuck with state laws that do not permit us to operate in any other way. When that is the case, the most important thing is that the candidates know up front when and how much information

will be made public. In some states, every name even suggested in the context of the search committee must be published, while in some others, it is possible to maintain some confidentiality until finalists are named. This is usually not a problem for a private institution, but whatever the setting, the key is to make sure that candidates are not surprised. The same goes for seeking references or any other information about them. It should be a hard-and-fast rule that references are not pursued until a candidate has explicitly consented to that part of the process.

DR: Thanks, Judith. Chris, what are some of the issues a **search committee** must confront in achieving the mission of hiring the best candidate?

CM: First of all, everybody needs to understand his or her role. At some universities, committees will merely search, at others search and screen, and at still others actively recruit candidates and identify the most appropriate and qualified of the group. Committee members should function as representatives of the committee as a whole, not as representatives of the constituency from which they were appointed. Committee membership should be carefully considered, not only to be representative of those within the unit for which leadership is sought (although this certainly is important), but also of those who can serve best to find and attract candidates.

Many issues need to be clarified up front. Will there be a deadline for nominations and applications, or will the search continue until the best candidate is found? Where will interviews be held, and how many cycles will occur? Does the appointing officer want one name or several? These and a number of other questions need to be answered early on and to everyone's satisfaction. Finally, a committee needs support in carrying out its work, and above all, it needs strong leadership.

DR: What makes a good search committee leader?

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JA: Certainly, experience helps, and a strong understanding of the process is important. The chair of a search committee needs to be able to speak for the hiring authority, at least to a significant extent. He or she needs to be able to relate what the hiring authority is looking for in a dean. Chris alluded to this earlier, but it's worth restating: one of the best ways to make sure that a potential dean feels comfortable is to have another dean chair the search and host interviews. After all, a person in that position knows what it's really like to be a dean at that institution. And it adds a personal touch when someone who has "been through it" is shepherding the candidate through the paces. It also means that someone who understands what is required of deans at that particular institution is available as a sounding board for the candidate. It helps a candidate to become comfortable with the process.

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And there's another reason that I like that approach to selecting a search committee chair — a dean from another school usually has a level of leadership skills that makes him or her comfortable in the role, knows how to use those skills to best benefit the search, and understands how to use the skills and experience of a search consultant if the institution has decided to go that route. Moreover, if there are factions within the searching school, a dean from another school will be seen as an independent and neutral voice, serving to depoliticize the process as much as possible.

DR: And I expect that it's important to treat all candidates in the same manner. What can be done to ensure reasonable consistency in the **candidate assessment** and selection process?

CM: First, interview questions should be developed in advance. Questions should be designed to elicit responses that will clearly indicate how well a candidate's knowledge, skills, and abilities match the qualifications identified in the performance profile and performance scorecard. Second, when the questions are scored, committee members should agree in advance on the criteria for those

scores. For example, what level of experience would warrant a maximum score as the candidate is graded?

Selection criteria should be based on elements identified in the performance scorecard — actual knowledge and demonstrated skills and abilities needed for the position. Criteria that are not reflected in the performance profile or performance scorecard and are not essential for satisfactory job performance should not be used. For example, years of experience might not be used as criteria, since candidates should be allowed flexibility to demonstrate job knowledge, skills, and abilities, whether acquired through formal education, work experience, or even a variety of life experiences.

When the pool seems small, committees may need to be encouraged to look beyond the "usual suspects" — perhaps instead of just looking at sitting deans and associate deans or chairs, they'll want to look at others in the profession who have management experience, or even individuals who do not have dental degrees, for example.

And, although we advocate a somewhat standardized approach to interviewing, it also is important to stay open to unique directions that individual candidates may prompt in the interview process. By asking open-ended questions, we learn far more about a candidate's readiness for the position than we would otherwise.

JA: I like that dual approach of being clear about what the criteria are in an objective way combined with staying very open to the uniqueness of each candidate and things that may not be captured in a highly standardized process.

CM: And a well-developed and well-chosen search committee can leverage those two things in a constructive way that creates greater chances of a successful outcome.

DR: At the beginning of this interview you mentioned developing a formal **onboarding process**. I take it that this is something that happens once the hire has been made?

An effective onboarding process, as it's often called in the corporate world, can help ensure success by providing coaching and assistance as a new dean plans and strategizes, reaches out to constituencies, finds appropriate administrative support, and begins his or her new responsibilities.

JA: Yes, recruiting and hiring a successful dean extends beyond the signing of the contract. A new dean's orientation really ought to be more than, "OK, here's your office, here's the lounge, here's your computer, and the bathroom is down the hall." An effective onboarding process can help to ensure success by providing coaching and assistance as a new dean plans and strategizes, reaches out to constituencies, finds administrative support, and begins his or her new responsibilities. This approach is often used in the corporate world. Most large companies consider it essential, but it is used less frequently in higher education — unfortunately so in my opinion. If we are willing to invest time and energy in identifying our leadership, we should be equally willing to offer them the resources to ensure that their leadership is successful.

DR: Isn't reaching the level of a successful candidate and being vetted through the search and interview process enough to ensure that she or he is ready for the job and has a reasonably good chance for success?

CM: Not necessarily. Whether you're looking at the corporate world or the higher education setting, newly hired leaders fail for many reasons, including failure to build necessary relationships, having a controversial leadership style, or being unable to clarify expectations. A formal process, perhaps one led by an outside consultant in the coaching format Judith mentioned, can be used to work with the new hire for six months to a year once onboard to facilitate critical areas for success, such as:

- accelerating organizational learning and knowledge transfer by focusing the leader on critical, high-impact objectives necessary for success;
- building and leveraging relationships and networks with key stakeholders to gain the support necessary to achieve goals;
- receiving constructive assessments

or feedback and coaching on leadership style, strengths, and development needs to address potential negative outcomes and support success in the new role;

- building a six-month (or twelve-month) roadmap that identifies opportunities to deliver early results and outlines clear goals and ways to achieve them to increase the leader's ability to make a positive impact on the organization's performance.

JA: That is a really good description, Chris, and I would add that having an onboarding process also can help ensure that the new dean gets good feedback and some help in reading the field on how his or her first actions are being received by the faculty, students, and others in the community. And that's extremely important because it is lonely in top leadership jobs, and there are not always people who are both close enough, objective enough, and also willing to risk letting the dean know how she or he is being viewed and what the perspectives are on his or her leadership. Getting that kind of feedback is really important and can make the difference between demonstrating effectiveness early on or perhaps stumbling and not achieving the success we'd like to see among all dental school deans.

CM: I certainly agree with Judith's assessment. What you hear in formal settings, meetings for example, is not necessarily what's being talked about around the water cooler. And it's very important to have effective communication to help the dean succeed.

DR: Very good, thank you! You've both provided some excellent advice for the process of searching for and hiring a dean. Before we close, do you have any last bit of wisdom to impart?

CM: As the role of the dean becomes more complex and the pool of candidates becomes smaller and more competitive, assistance from a consultant in the search process is a wise investment. When you add to

these challenges the other demands on the time of search committee members, outside assistance in any capacity is worth considering — whether it's consulting with the search committee, enhancing the active networking for additional candidates, or shepherding the entire process — and certainly for the onboarding process.

JA: Searching for a new dean should be an exciting time for a school, but it often is also an anxiety-producing time. Many uncertainties are opened. Having a good search process in place, one in which everyone has confidence, one that is clearly proceeding in a way that will ensure a good result, helps everyone in the school to identify with the excitement — the new beginnings, if you will — that a new dean represents. And that is an important part of the role that search processes play in the ongoing life of any institution, and particularly a dental school.

About AAL

At AAL, Dr. Judith Albino works extensively in the areas of planning and evaluation, leadership and board development, and executive coaching. Dr. Albino has served as president of two higher education systems, the University of Colorado, a public research university, and Alliant International University, a private nonprofit university with multiple campuses in California, Mexico, and Kenya. Her higher education experience also includes service at the dean and vice-presidential levels, and she has spent more than twenty-five years as a faculty member in schools of dentistry and medicine, as well as departments of psychology and educational psychology.

AAL is a collaborative of scholars, educational specialists, and consultants providing services that help academic leaders pursue educational excellence, the application of knowledge, the discovery of ideas, and the quest for lifelong learning. The AAL team strives to build long-term relationships based on superior service, mutual trust, and intellectual inspiration,

and provides customized professional development and consulting services for academic health care executives, educators, practitioners, institutions, and associations.

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About The 2HC Group

Chris Martin is founder and principal of The 2HC Group. He has more than a decade of experience providing executive search services at the highest level to clients in a wide range of industries and functional specialties. Chris currently focuses on client assignments in higher education and collegiate athletics.

The 2HC Group is a leader in executive search consulting. The 2HC team, in collaboration with AAL, provides executive search and human capital consulting services to higher education institutions. Consulting and search engagements are tailored specifically to the client's needs. Each new assignment is based on a partnership designed so our consultants understand every aspect of your organization and culture.

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