

MEMO

KORN/FERRY INTERNATIONAL



DATE: 10/28/2005
TO: Auburn University Board of Trustees
FROM: John Kuhnle
SUBJECT: Results of Campus Interviews October 5-6, 2005

Background

Auburn University is an important institution with world-class people and programs. My goal in the university's presidential search is to help the institution secure its rightful place among the leading universities of the nation.

As an executive search consultant my role is to assist the Board of Trustees and an appointed Presidential Search Committee in recruiting candidates who could be strong and effective leaders of Auburn University. My initial responsibility is to assure all concerned that the current state of the university will allow such a search to take place. Early steps in the search process have included my reviewing university-related documents and assessing the conditions within the university that will assure a successful search.

On October 5-6 my associate Ms. Elizabeth Dycus and I were on the Auburn campus interviewing representatives of a variety of constituencies to seek their understandings of the present state of the university.

Throughout the interviews a single issue dominated the discussion: will Auburn's record of internal controversy over accreditation, athletics, institutional governance, and other issues negate the presidency's appeal to qualified candidates? My findings listed below are based on these interviews.

Findings

1. Auburn University has much about it that is good or great, but in recent years its reputation has been overshadowed by negative publicity, deserved or not.
2. The university's ambitious capital campaign is being received with significant enthusiasm and anticipated success.
3. The provost and a group of strong and able deans are filling important leadership roles.
4. Auburn needs a strong new leader to continue restoring the university's rightful reputation.
5. The presidential search process must be publicly perceived to be open, inclusive, and broad.
6. Appropriate candidates should be professionally credible, from outside the Auburn community, and have an understanding and appreciation of current issues in higher education.
7. A high level of mutual suspicion and distrust exists among the various university constituencies (trustees, faculty, staff, students, and alumni).
8. Questions exist whether the current Faculty Senate speaks for the majority of the faculty.
9. Concern about the depth of faculty malaise is widespread.
10. The level of diversity throughout the University remains a shared concern.
11. Adequate communication among university constituencies is problematic. Many persons feel "disconnected" and that they live in professional "silos."
12. Several of the interim president's current initiatives, including academic program review, post-tenure review, and the university's strategic plan, are believed to require a process more inclusive of campus constituencies.

13. Two primary issues surround the proposed strategic plan.
 - i. First, there is widespread concern among the faculty about the current status of the proposed plan and its process. The appropriate roles of the Board, the administration, and the faculty in strategic planning should be reviewed and clarified.
 - ii. A second concern about the proposed plan is based on the assumption that a new President will wish to participate in the university's plan for its future. This concern raises the question of whether the completion of the plan prior to the selection of the new President will affect leading candidates' interest in the position.
14. The futures of the Experimental Station, the Extension Service, and the Auburn/Auburn Montgomery campus relationship need early attention.
15. The compensation of Auburn University senior administrators needs to be reviewed in comparison with leading US institutions. In recent searches for senior positions the lack of financial parity with other universities has cost Auburn the participation of highly qualified candidates. Unless this imbalance is rectified it will negatively affect this search and future searches for other senior administrators.
16. Questions have been raised whether the current leadership of the Alumni Association represents the larger Auburn alumni base.
17. The role of the trustees in Auburn's governance is an on-going issue. Questions abound regarding the proper role of the Board, the make-up of the Board, the Board members' allegiances, and the Board members' understanding of higher education.
18. The Board is perceived in recent years to have assumed an executive role and relegated Presidents to an internal campus-management position.

Conclusion

Auburn University, an institution with still-unrealized potential, is at a crossroads. Its recent history has been inordinately and publicly turbulent. For a successful presidential search to take place the current perception of Auburn will need to be overcome. Without significant change the present level of conflict, distrust and discord within the university will dissuade the most desirable candidates from participating in the search.

For Auburn University to reclaim its deserved reputation, a transparent and public review of the legitimate roles and authorities of the Board, the President, the Faculty Senate, the Alumni Association, and the Foundation is needed. With a public airing of these issues and consequent recommendations for change, the upcoming presidential search can provide the university with the opportunity to break from its cycle of recriminations among constituencies and allow the legitimate high quality of its nationally recognized programs, faculty, and students to be acknowledged.

If my recommendation is accepted, I will vigorously continue the necessary groundwork for the search while the review is underway. Once a review of the university is completed, its recommendations thoughtfully considered, and a search committee appointed, I will move with all deliberate speed to bring the process to a speedy conclusion. Without such a review and resultant change, I cannot proceed with a presidential search that will attract qualified candidates.

Nothing is wrong with Auburn University that cannot be fixed. It lies within the power of the university to make needed changes; however, even with these changes this search will be as challenging and as important as any I have conducted. I welcome this challenge.

Recommendation

I recommend that

- the Auburn Board of Trustees immediately retain a nationally recognized consultant to conduct a comprehensive review of the state of the university,
- the report and its recommendations be made public upon submission, and
- the Board consider the recommendations for implementation as soon as possible.