The Dean Search Process

I. Announcement of a Deanship or Similar Vacancy

A. The provost and the faculty of the college—usually the College Advisory Council—develop a search procedure under the shared responsibility mode (See Bylaws for Academic Governance Section 2.1.3.2)

1. The search committee is typically composed of no more than 10 members (it can be smaller or larger) and includes college faculty, staff, students and other interest groups in and outside the college. The provost may add additional members to ensure, among other reasons, diversity in composition. Various models are available electronically (see Attachment B).

2. Confidentiality in deliberations is of the utmost importance to ensure retention of a strong candidate pool.

3. At each stage of candidate screening by the search committee, the Provost may choose to keep a candidate in for a second review. If not included by the search committee in the next review, the candidate is dropped. Usually there is agreement that a candidate cannot be added to the final on-campus interview group.

4. All searches are conducted in accordance with the University’s diversity and inclusion policies. The Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives (13) reviews the search plan and clears candidates for participation in the on-campus stage of the search.

5. Negotiations on details involve the Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Human Resources (or designee) on behalf of the Provost and the College Advisory Council.

B. An important issue is whether the search is open to candidates nationally and internationally, or is internal (usually only to tenure system faculty currently appointed at MSU).

C. Once appointed or elected by one of the various participating groups, the immediate tasks of the search committee are to:

1. Appoint a committee chair—usually someone with experience chairing a committee and moving things along. In some cases, the Provost may decide to appoint the
chairperson and the other various committee assignments (this appears as a provision in the search procedure).

2. Decide on process issues: what is a quorum, voting procedures or by sense of the meeting, whether electronic participation or the use of absentee ballots is permitted.

3. Develop a statement of criteria and expectations for the position along with information about the College and University to be the basis for a position posting. Identify other methods to share information about the vacancy and as a basis for evaluation of the several candidate credentials. This statement is developed jointly with the Office of the Provost.

D. In an open search, a search consulting firm is engaged (in most cases) by the University. The search firm is selected by the Office of the Provost with advice from the search committee.

1. Unless the consulting firm has been used before and has a good sense of MSU from prior involvement, the firm reviews University materials and interviews key people and group on the campus to gain insight into the University and the specific qualities sought in candidates as they seek to generate a candidate pool. In most cases, the document described in C.3 (above) is developed by the consultant with the advice and counsel of the Office of the Provost and the search committee.

2. Initial and continuing dialogue with the consultant and the search committee is important to address issues and to support the consultant in doing their most important job—generating a strong candidate pool. Such dialogue should include, but is not limited to, the following:

   a. General advice from the consultant on searches

   b. How active a role the consultant proposes to play in the search, apart from pool generation and what role is appropriate from the University’s perspective.

   c. What role the consultants play in actively encouraging candidates to pursue the vacancy. What materials do they have or need to play such a role effectively.

   d. In general, what role do the consultants expect or wish to play through the process, especially the screening of candidates.
3. After the selection of on-campus finalists, the consultant will gather more detailed reference material. It must be determined if search committee members will be expected to gather reference information under the supervision of the consultant or if the consultant compiles the reference interviews.

a. Normally, references of this kind go directly to the Provost to assist him/her in making a final decision; although a summary of comments may be provided to the Provost at the final search committee meeting with the Provost.

b. Consultants will give guidance for candidate interviews. For example, what can and cannot be asked of candidates.

c. In an internal search, the Provost (Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Human Resources) and the search committee will develop a posting, and a criteria and expectations statement with an understanding that the posting is to be shared widely within the University by electronic or other means.

II. Screening Candidates --normally occurs in several stages with the consultant (if any), the search committee, and the Office of the Provost playing roles).

A. Stage I: screening the general pool generated by the consultants/advertisements. Nominations for the vacancy, etc., is normally based on a CV and statement of interest. In some cases individuals may choose to submit only a CV and not be a formal candidate. Consultants (if used) may have comments and may suggest a list of unqualified candidates (in their judgment), to be dropped out at the beginning. The search committee will review these recommendations. All ad hoc applications and nominations collected by search committee members should be forwarded to the consultant. The search committee and the Office of the Provost receive the complete list of candidates. As stated in I.A.3. (above), the Provost may choose to keep candidates on the list even if the search committee decides to drop them at various stages of the process.

B. Screening: There needs to be a way--usually electronic--for the search committee to review candidate materials. Consultants usually have means to provide such access. Prior to the screening there also needs to be a meeting to do a collective review of materials and re-review the criteria and expectations document. Consultants can tell the committee a likely time period when they wish to share the pool with the committee. Since committee members have other responsibilities, it may be hard to get all members to meet at the same time. Electronic means of access should be provided, usually by the relevant dean’s office staff and by the Office of the Provost, collaboratively.
C. Screening procedures: Initially—while there are other methods—each member rates candidates as: 1) keep 2) more information needed or 3) drop—based on an assessment of candidates’ materials and on notes taken in individual reviews. Candidate ratings should be compiled collectively and sorted with regard to the three categories. As a rough rule of thumb, between 50 and 67% of those rated as “keep” should stay, although account should be taken of the degree of support obtained. For those identified as more information needed, that information should be identified for the consultant to obtain. The collective rating should be discussed by the group. Committee members should have a chance to argue to keep candidates on the “drop” list in. At this stage (as a rule of thumb), three votes of support (on a committee of 10) should keep people off the “drop” list and retained for further review. There are other ways of sorting things out. There should be a summary of reasons why candidates were dropped at each stage which will assist in the required review of the various pools by the Office of Inclusion, etc. 

D. Step II: after discussion, the goal is to identify a number of 10 to 12 (not more) individuals to interview “off-campus”. In practice, this means a SKYPE interview or similar technology, but off-campus interviews are possible. In some cases, if the invitation pool is a large fraction of the general pool, but small in absolute numbers, all may be invited for an on campus interview with the search committee only.

E. Action and information needed in this stage: The committee chair plays a key role to address these issues via a separate meeting or electronically. It is useful for the chair, perhaps with a couple of members, to circulate drafts of what needs to be done. It can be done with the full committee, but this may be hard to arrange. Consultants will be contacting candidates to schedule the interviews so all of this must be done quickly.

1. Format for the interview involves one hour: 45 minutes for committee questions and 15 minutes for candidate questions. (It can be less, but not much.)

2. Questions should be derived from the list of criteria and expectations (See l.C.2. above). There should be general questions which all candidates should answer, and some follow-up questions. These vary by search, but there are some model questions available (see Attachment C). Time is well spent on this as it helps to prepare for on-campus interviews.

3. There should be a general procedure for asking questions. Either by one person—the chair, or by rotation of committee members (the most usual procedure). If the latter, members have assigned questions in advance.

4. Ask the consultant for advice on approaches; how to put candidates at ease and what to ask or not ask. Dress code for committee members in Skype interviews is important.
5. Arrange for tech support and a suitable room for committee members. In most cases, colleges have IT professionals who can work closely with Provost’s Office staff. Arrange for on-site technical support during the interviews as technical glitches are common and interview time should not be wasted. Scheduling of these interviews may spread over several days. Not all search committee members can be present. Arrange for those unavailable to attend in person or attend electronically.

F. Conclusion to Stage II

1. Committee members should take notes during the off-campus (Skype) interviews and reconvene to screen down to a list of candidates for on-campus interviews. One approach (there are others) is to have each member designate a “top five group” (which assumes that the off-campus (Skype) interview set is not more than a dozen). Those unable to attend should send the chair their “top five” list electronically for inclusion on the general list.

2. Discuss the general list which is likely to produce a “top five” list larger than 5 (which is not a magic number of on-campus participants, but it is reasonable). Smaller numbers run the risk of candidates dropping out; larger numbers raise costs, burdens on-campus scheduling, and lengthens the search which may encourage dropouts. (These numbers are case-specific and may be negotiable). A consensus of past MSU dean searches is that 5 is an outside number and four might be better. This winnowing process usually takes a little time, and effort should be taken to summarize the strengths and weakness of each candidate. This will provide input into the committee’s final recommendations to the provost, as well as providing input to the Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Human Resources in the review with the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives (see 3 below).

3. The list of proposed on-campus candidates will be reviewed by the Office of the Provost with the Office of Inclusion, etc., (13) whose endorsement is necessary to secure permission for on-campus interview invitations.

G. Stage III- On campus interviews

1. Early preparation (before the on-campus list is determines) is needed. Once the finalists are identified, consultants want to determine dates of their campus visit. The chair of the committee has key responsibilities. Key questions include who the candidate shall see when on campus. Key and required interviews are with the President and Provost. Their involvement, along with the timing of an on-campus presentation, are the centerpiece events around which other college and University participant interviews must be scheduled. In preparing an on-campus interview schedule, each college has their own needs. There are common lists available of individuals and groups involved at University and College levels (see Attachment D). In consultation with the Associate
Provost, the committee chair should produce a draft list of College interview participants for committee commentary on a short time-line. (A committee meeting may perform this role, but may be difficult to schedule on a short time line.) The specific appointment times are usually handled in collaboration with the Provost’s Office staff and the College dean’s office staff. Early on, it should be stressed with consultants that an on-campus visit normally involves two complete days. Preferably, candidates arrive on the evening of day 1 and depart at the beginning of day 4.

2. The other key item --again, chair involvement is important-- is to reach agreement on the desired topics of the candidate’s talk and provide early notice to the candidate (see Attachment E for an example). Steps should be taken to select an appropriate room for the talk, with consideration made for IT support for each candidate’s presentation. Normally, such assistance is provided by the College Dean’s office staff. Frequently, there is a request for a video recording of the presentation. The candidate must give written permission for this in advance of his/her public presentation.

3. There should be a discussion of and an agreement on what additional materials are provided (in a timely fashion) to finalists, in addition to a posting and other consultant material. Samples of material used in other searches are available. Candidates may ask for and receive financial material relating to the College and to the University, as well as other special requests.

4. Candidates need to be ferried around campus to many appointments. Provost’s Office and College staff can do some of this, but committee members will be expected to assist.

5. Arrangements must be made to collect comments from those interacting with candidates. University level interviewers’ comments will be collected via the associate provost. Various college groups can communicate through committee chairs to the search committee chair. Those attending general sessions should have access to a system like Survey Monkey or similar systems. This system is provided by the Office of the Provost and survey results are collected by a person designated by the search committee from in the college. Summary information is provided to the search committee and the provost, but not beyond these individuals, to ensure confidentiality. (There are alternative survey-gathering approaches which colleges can use, but Survey Monkey or like systems work well and result in time saving.)

6. In the posting there is a statement that candidates are expected to qualify as a full professor with tenure in a department of a College or another University academic unit. Thought should be given about how relevant departments wish to interact with candidates and provide input. It is important not to neglect this matter because if it is not addressed, it can derail an otherwise successful search. Approaches vary--sometimes the relevant department chair reviews a CV and has a discussion with the
candidate. Alternatively, there is a meeting with the department advisory committee or other appropriate entity. A formal job talk is rarely, if ever, included in the on-campus interview process. In most cases it is clear, but be sure to ask the candidate's preference for a tenure home.

7. The University now has a practice of inviting spouses/partners to visit with each on-campus finalist. Not all will accept the invitation, but the offer should be extended to all. A designated person should make contact with the spouse or partner and arrange a general introduction to the campus and community, as well to address special needs and interests. This is a valuable dimension of recruitment and is the responsibility of the Office of the Provost.

8. The committee meets after all candidates have departed, reviews structured comments from Survey Monkey, etc., system and collects commentary from individuals and groups interviewers. Deans’ and central administration interviewers' commentaries go to the provost, usually collected by the associate provost for academic human resources, as do external references processed through the consultant. The search committee engages in discussion to determine ratings, pros and cons for each candidate.

III. Search Committee Meets with the Provost--soon after all information is gathered.

A. Prior to the meeting, the search committee will have prepared a report based on its deliberations. The report can be oral or written (see Attachment F). In any case, it will serve as a discussion between the Provost and the search committee. The report, using a rating system like the following (others are available), rates candidates as acceptable or unacceptable. This is accompanied by a list of strengths and weakness compiled by the committee. Candidates SHOULD NOT be ranked 1, 2, 3, etc., because there may not be much difference between candidates. Neither the College or the individual recruited wants to be labeled as a specific number. The committee, through written or oral commentary, can be clear as to preferences without a numerical labeling of candidates. The search committee chair comments initially on the report or presents it. Other members are welcome and expected to engage in a dialogue with the Provost on the candidates. The Provost will ask questions and participate in the dialogue.

B. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Provost rarely declares his/her position on which candidate he/she intends to recruit for the position. Normally the meeting concludes and the Provost deliberates, further checking references, interacting with the consultant and consulting with administrators, including the president. There may be need for another meeting with the committee. The Provost makes his/her decision on which candidate he/she intends to recruit and informs the committee. The general outcome of the recruitment negotiations also are shared with the committee. Other candidates in the final pool may have to be considered for the position and this requires another meeting(s) with the committee.
C. After agreement is reached with a candidate, the proposed appointee often has a follow-up visit and will interact with University and College administrator groups. At this point the candidate’s spouse/partner may visit to explore the community, housing options, and professional opportunities. The spouse or partner may or may have not visited East Lansing earlier, but in either case, should be invited back.

D. Until an announcement on a consummated search, confidentiality is the watchword of the day. The MSU Board of Trustees makes the final decision on the recommendation of the president for the appointment of a dean.

Central files of materials (examples attached) to be kept in the Provost’s office for future searches:

1. Sample postings and list of criteria and expectations (Attachment A)
2. Samples of search committee memberships (Attachment B)
3. Samples of off-campus (Skype) interview questions (Attachment C)
4. Lists of campus participants in on-campus interviews and sample of campus schedules (Attachment D)
5. Sample materials to be shared with candidates before the on-campus visit (available in the Provost’s office)
6. Sample topics for on-campus interview candidate presentations and the structure of such talks (Attachment E).
7. Samples of search committee final reports (names redacted) including ratings and lists of candidate strengths and weakness (Attachment F).

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