

COMMENTARY

Starting the search for the next W&M president

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Only twice in the last 26 years has the College of William and Mary held a search for a new college president. The first in 1991 gave us Tim Sullivan, a jewel in the crown of our history. The second in 2004 gave us Gene Nichol, a dead fly in our historical punchbowl.

The most recent iteration of the Presidential Search Committee, tasked with finding the next college president to follow Taylor Reveley when he retires in June 2018, met for the first time on April 21.

Held in the afternoon and attended only by members of the committee, staffers, one guest speaker, one Flat Hat reporter and myself, the meeting was not crowded.

Truth to tell, I came in with low expectations, having written extensively about the Nichol debacle and having seen more than my share of incompetent members of the Board of Visitors.

I am delighted to report that my low expectations were not

entirely justified.

First, rather than a hasty, pasted-together plan for finding a new president, the committee's chairman, Tom Watkins (also vice rector of the Board of Visitors) has spent the last two years re-searching best practices for a presidential search. He has spoken extensively with university representatives all over the country who have held searches and were happy to share what works and what doesn't.

The committee is following what appears to be a solid, thoughtful, business-type plan for the search process, well-articulated and designed for maximum transparency and accountability to all stakeholders: alumni, students, faculty, staff, the commonwealth and the general public.

According to Todd Stottlemeyer, rector and vice chairman of the committee, the Board of Visitors went through every document of the Nichol search process to ascertain where improvements could be made and have acted accordingly, highly conscious that many

errors were made in 2004-05.

Second, the committee may enjoy the wisdom and guidance of Robert Gates, college chancellor since 2012 and former president of Texas A&M University, now adviser to the committee. His book, "A Passion for Leadership," was waiting for each committee member as they sat down to work at this first meeting.

Third, the first speaker to address the committee was a member of the attorney general's office, who explained the Freedom of Information Act requirements for public committees, specifically citing what makes a meeting legal or illegal. It is impossible to overstate how important this concept is and how often it was violated in the past.

The search is defined by three phases: Phase one is the listening phase, where committee members meet with constituency groups to hear what they most want in the next president. This phase has commenced and will last through August, at least.

Phase two will be building a pool of candidates in September

to November this year. A consulting firm will offer candidates based on parameters given to them by the committee, but anyone may self-nominate or nominate another person.

Phase three will be narrowing the pool of candidates to the three best choices in November through February 2018. The goal is to deliver names of the top three candidates to the Board of Visitors by Feb. 15, 2018.

A subcommittee has been named to research and recommend a consulting firm, an optional resource in the search process but one the chairman, vice chairman and the attorney general's representative said would be "foolish" not to use.

The commonwealth requires state institutions to use an approved list of consultants; the question is, of course, whether any firm on that list won approval through dubious means.

Since the commonwealth requires it, it must be used, but the value of that list is yet to be determined. Happily, the committee is not limited to the candidates the consultants suggest.

The members of that subcommittee are John Littel, Lynn Dillon, Jim Hixon and Julie Agnew.

In short, the committee appears to be doing all the right things as leaders of the search process. The only low expectation that manifested itself was the obligatory concern about diversity and inclusion, with no mention at all of the pursuit of academic rigor and excellence — or seeking true intellectual diversity in the curriculum or faculty.

The next meeting is scheduled for June 14, followed by meetings on July 12 and Sept. 12.

Because of the confidential nature of the hiring process, much of what the committee will do must be out of the public eye, but the committee is committed to keeping as much information as possible in front of anyone who cares to look for it.

Here's hoping we get another jewel in our crown.

Bruno is an alumna of the college and author of "William and Mary and Tyler Too: a biography of Lyon Gardiner Tyler," due out in 2018.