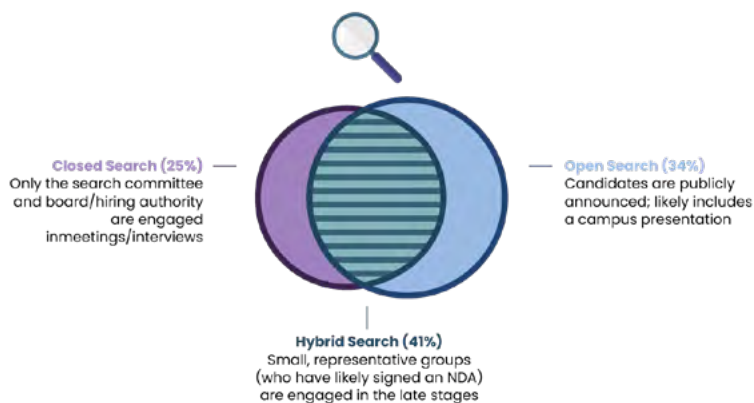


# Open, Closed, or Hybrid? Confidentiality and the Presidential Search

## Ryan Crawford

The question arises in every presidential search: How public should the recruiting process be in its final stages? My honest (but potentially unsatisfying) response as an executive-search consultant for more than 15 years: It depends.

The process that is right for one campus may not be right for another. Our responsibility as search consultants is to clearly present both the available options and their potential impacts. But it's ultimately the trustees and those leading the search who must decide and communicate their rationale to the campus.



When it comes to confidentiality, we see three types of searches, broadly defined:

1. An *open search* is one in which the search committee does the initial vetting of candidates and then selects finalists who will come back to the campus for public visits. This includes an announcement of names and a public presentation, with no assurance that a finalist's candidacy will

not get back to their current employer. Of the more than 70 presidential searches WittKieffer completed over the last four years, 34 percent have been open searches. The majority of those were at public institutions where state regulations required that multiple finalists meet with the campus community.

2. A *closed search* is one in which only the search committee and the board engage with the candidates over the course of the search process. In the past four years, 25 percent of our clients have chosen closed presidential searches.
3. A *hybrid search* is one in which the search committee does the initial vetting and interviews of candidates and then identifies finalists who will meet with select groups representative of key campus constituencies (e.g., faculty members, students). These groups commit to maintaining the confidentiality of the finalists, typically through a nondisclosure agreement. This process can take many different forms and it is the one we have seen clients choose the most (41 percent) over the last four years.

As you weigh which process — and which degree of openness — is right for your institution, here are the three key factors to consider:

### How involved should campus groups be in the search?

Every institution has its own history to consider. Still, a “we’ve-always-done-it-this-way” mentality should not be the leading factor driving your decision on going

public in a leadership search. You also must consider the current environment at the institution. What are the campus expectations of how public the leadership search will be, and how much information will be shared as it progresses? How do those expectations align with the governing board's preference? How might the search process, and the degree of openness, affect the next president's transition into the position?

Open searches lead to significant campus debate and discussion across a variety of constituents. Hybrid searches can vary greatly in terms of how involved and informed various groups are during the end stage of the process. In some hybrid searches, a very narrow group of people (members of the departing president's cabinet, at a minimum) interacts with the finalists. Other hybrid searches are open to a broad array of constituents, such as [one recent search](#) in which every faculty member had a chance to participate and meet all of the finalists after signing a nondisclosure agreement.

If your institution is going to invite people to participate in the search, you must consider the type of input you would like to receive and how much weight it will carry. Search committees and boards can gather campus feedback in a variety of ways — including anonymous surveys, group debrief sessions, and individual conversations.

Outside of the search-committee members, people on the campus often have limited time with finalists and in a structured setting — a public presentation, for instance. That gives the attendees a glimpse into the candidate's leadership, but a narrow one at best.

It's important that the search committee absorb feedback from other constituents but their feedback is only one of many considerations. Ultimately, the search committee and the trustees will have had the most intensive interactions with the finalists across a variety of settings. And the board could very well select a candidate who does not have strong support from professors, students, or other constituents. In that case, it must be prepared to explain and champion its decision.

Campus involvement isn't just about opening up the search so that constituents can provide feedback on candidates. It's also an effective and oftentimes necessary recruitment tool to give the finalists enough information about the institution.

The evaluation aspect of a search works both ways. Candidates are gauging the institution to understand if their leadership skills and experience align with the goals of the place. Ideally, the search committee is representative of campus constituents. But further engagement with campus leaders, professors, staff, alumni, and students provides finalists with helpful details and context around the budget, enrollment, priorities, and organizational culture of the campus, and gives a sense of its people and values.

"I learned an awful lot from the faculty, staff, and leadership I met," one finalist told me after small-group sessions in a hybrid search. "It really helped me think about what I would need to do early in my tenure to be successful."

### **What level of confidentiality will develop (or inhibit) the candidate pool?**

The clear downside of a more-public process is its impact on some candidates' willingness to put themselves forward for the job. We live in a time where information and opinions are ubiquitous and have the potential to live on the internet forever. In a shortlist of four finalists, each of them must seriously weigh the risk versus reward of pursuing a position that they have a 25 percent chance of getting. Some candidates may view their odds of being selected as even lower if there is a strong internal candidate among the finalists.

Sitting presidents are considered to be the group least likely to pursue another presidency in an open search. Each has a lot at stake in their relationship with their current board and in their ability to raise funds and advance strategic goals — all of which is jeopardized when word gets out that they threw their hat in the ring to lead another institution.

But we also see leaders in positions further down the

organizational chart who cannot be public finalists for similar reasons. I regularly speak with provosts, vice presidents, and deans who are concerned about the reaction of their current boss if word got out, or worry about how the news would damage their relationship with their faculty. Others have put themselves forward in a public search before and, in doing so again, fear being seen as not committed to their institutions.

“My president is supportive of me taking this step in my career, but being a public finalist in a search again would cause too much disruption on our campus,” one sitting provost told me after having recently been named as a finalist in a presidential search. In an environment in which administrative turnover has become more frequent, the decision to be a public finalist can have real consequences for one’s career and ability to lead at their current institution.

There are ways to minimize the impact on candidates. In an open search, their names and résumés can be put behind an internet firewall that requires credentials to access. But that can be of limited help, given that names can easily pass through the gossip network. Likewise, presidential searches often have media attention that can lead to names being widely publicized.

Even in hybrid searches that utilize nondisclosure agreements, the possibility exists of confidentiality being breached. As a general rule, the more people involved in a search, the less likely confidentiality will be maintained. These are factors that candidates have to weigh in their pursuit of a new role.

Comparing candidate pools across dozens of searches, my fellow consultants and I can say, unequivocally, that an open search narrows the candidate pool. But that does not mean that a great candidate cannot be found within that smaller pool. An institution simply has to weigh that reality against how its campus culture values openness in a leadership search.

### **How much will confidentiality inhibit the vetting of candidates?**

A key argument in favor of an open search is that it allows you to leverage networks to investigate each

finalist’s background. Once a name is announced publicly in an open search, it’s common for administrators, professors, and staff members at the hiring institution to reach out to friends and colleagues at the candidate’s current and former employers. Or, hearing news of the search, people from the candidate’s present and past may also reach out to the search committee, the board, or others with unsolicited (and sometimes anonymous) information about a finalist.

The danger is that, while some of the information coming forth will be insightful and valuable, another portion of it could be misleading, false, and damaging. When candidates have been in administration long enough, odds are high that they will have made their share of unpopular decisions. Critics affected by those decisions may have an ax to grind. Difficult choices are the norm for leaders these days and few people know all of the context behind what may have driven a particular decision.

Such negative reports are unavoidable in an open or hybrid search. Certainly they should be vetted further but they should not be an automatic disqualifier. That is equally true of negative media reports: There is often more to the story than what was published. We regularly read unfavorable articles that offer one side of the story, but not the candidate’s version of events. There are many personnel and other sensitive matters that a leader cannot and should not discuss publicly.

Consider the sources of negative information and their motivations. Do they seem to be trying to discredit one finalist in favor of another? We see that occur when a particular campus group is out of alignment with the broad direction of the institution or the perspectives of the board.

Ultimately, the search firm, search committee, and board should be deeply engaged in the vetting process. They are responsible for exploring potential problems and assembling a well-rounded picture of the finalists over the course of the search process. Most search consultants have national networks that can be leveraged to the advantage of clients. However, we also encourage search-committee members to leverage

their networks and be involved in the vetting process. A thoughtful, coordinated approach can lead to a thorough and equitable vetting of candidates.

Boards and search committees must weigh a variety of factors in deciding which shape their presidential search should take. For some institutions, a more-open search provides an opportunity for healing or demonstrates a commitment to shared governance. For others, a seasoned leader may be required to move the institution forward and confidentiality will help attract more of those candidates. The hiring of a president is perhaps the most significant charge of the board, and that body will have to make the decision that it believes is in the best interest of the campus.

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