

## Who wants to be a college or university president?

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I only offered to teach two accounting and financial management courses during the delightful summer at a European government-supported university in Central Asia at the foot of the Himalayas, when they offered me the university president's position that needed to be filled. They were deeply distrustful of hiring a local. The offer felt like winning a \$90,000 640-horsepower *Porsche Cayenne* in the lottery when I was buying a *Volkswagen Jetta*, my wife taking the Porsche while I had to drive the pedestrian VW to the office as protection against the envy of less affluent co-workers, but their wives knew... "gimmy one too!"

Apparently, the aging outgoing president who was heading the university's hiring committee had determined that I was a fit, being a Westerner, a former banker, professional accountant and CEO of multinational companies with a decade of teaching and departmental chairmanships at prominent Asian business schools under my belt. The airline ticket was waiting at the check-in, but still I could not bring myself to go. Why?

For one, the university's campus in Kazakhstan's commercial center *Almaty* — or *Alma-Ata*, the "City of Apples," derived from the Kazakh word for 'apple' (алма) — sitting on a fault line was a refurbished brick and mortar building of Soviet times that didn't have a chance to withstand the long overdue and ruinous earth quake; the last one of 1911 had turned the city into a heap of rubble. My two little children were too young to have their lives cut short. Another reason was that I had understated my age when asked by the usual ten years, and they wouldn't have been pleased to find out.

Questions of age and sexual orientation — unchangeable personal characteristics — are taboo in the West, although an offer to become president now often includes the requirement to submit to a full physical examination, although the board cannot withdraw an offer based on the results of that assessment, said Robin Mamlet, a senior partner with the search firm WittKieffer. Worse yet, leadership candidates have been asked to submit to psychological testing, including consultations with a mental-health professional to evaluate leadership style and ability to build relationships.<sup>1</sup>

"Most troubling," says Kevin R. McClure, an associate professor at UNC Wilmington, is that "as the skill set for a president shifts from an academic leader to a business executive, the search process could become even less transparent than it already is. Boards, often composed of people with business backgrounds and political connections, may rely on their own experience in choosing a leader who has similar skills and experiences while shutting out faculty members with expertise in education and research."

Asian Institute of Technology's (AIT, Bangkok), founded in 1959 as SEATO South East Asia Treaty Organization's Graduate School of Engineering, seeking a new president beginning September 2023, advertised for one as both, academically qualified with equal emphasis on fund-raising skills, as a financier of sorts to keep the institute above water, paying for faculty and board their expected emoluments, granting him his share of a competitive salary; a kind of an "open-ended commission" from the cash he found and raised himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Kelderman, "Who Wants to Be a College President? A growing list of job demands is changing how leaders are hired," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 3, 2022 Eric Kelderman covers issues of power, politics, and purse strings in higher education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/who-wants-to-be-a-college-president>  
[eric.kelderman@chronicle.com](mailto:eric.kelderman@chronicle.com), twitter [@etkeld](https://twitter.com/etkeld).

<sup>2</sup> <https://apps.ait.ac.th/people/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Downloadable-Website-Advertisement-15-April-2022.pdf>  
retrieved 2022-05-16.

As advertised:

[AIT's] Qualified candidates will have the following profile:

- Ability to lead AIT as a self-sustaining and financially viable educational institution;
- experienced leader with interpersonal and management skills in a multicultural environment in higher education and research;
- distinguished academic/intellectual credentials with a deep understanding of academic advancement and research developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in the Asian region;
- track record of innovative fund raising from, among others, governments, donor agencies, corporations, foundations, and alumni, and monetizing intellectual property;
- understanding of finance with ability to manage challenging/complex budgets aligned with the Institute's priorities; and preferably with doctorate degree and at the age of 45 and above.

Meet Our President

September 5, 2018 @ 11:00 am - 12:30 pm



“Dr. Eden Woon, who assumed the position of President of AIT [Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok] on September 1, [2018] will meet the AIT family on Wednesday, September 5 at the Robert B Banks Auditorium in AIT Conference Center. Dr. Woon will use this occasion to greet the students, faculty, staff, alums, and other friends of AIT and to share how he envisions the Institute going forward and upward in his presidency. It is also an occasion where he will begin a regular exchange of dialogue with different stakeholders of AIT, as he believes strongly that any positive movement by AIT must be a team effort.” (Advertisement at <https://www.ait.ac.th/event/meet-our-president/> retrieved 2022-05-17)

The requirements for new hires of president have been changing even for the wealthiest and most selective institution by the

- coronavirus pandemic,
- widespread political backlash,
- enrollment declines,
- and the public's questions about the value of college.<sup>3</sup>

Robin Mamlet and Sheila Murphy (2021) itemize the college president's desired qualifications in their article, “7 (More) Qualities to Look for in a College President“:<sup>4</sup>

1. Leadership in times of intense social activism during change of the political tenor on campuses regarding issues of systemic racism or about campus buildings, statues, monuments that memorialize now-controversial figures, e.g., the removal of the statute of Robert Milligan outside the Museum of London Docklands 9th June 2020 following the death of George Floyd. Milligan was a prominent Scottish mercantile chamber member and slaveowner who was the driving force behind the construction and initial statutory sectoral monopoly of the West India Docks in London.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Kelderman (2022).

<sup>4</sup> Robin Mamlet and Sheila Murphy, “7 (More) Qualities to Look For in a College President. Here are the leadership traits that campus search committees want in a chief executive right now.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 9, 2021 [www.chronicle.com/article/7-more-qualities-to-look-for-in-a-college-president](http://www.chronicle.com/article/7-more-qualities-to-look-for-in-a-college-president) retrieved 2022-05-16.

2. Crisis management. From the Covid pandemic’s crisis, colleges and universities will either emerge stronger or perish. Presidents must not only care deeply about the needs of the people in the organization but must also be able to respond to their needs without shortcuts.
3. College promotion. A pervasive idea among more and more parents is, that if their son or daughter can find a good job out of high school, can’t that substitute for a four-year bachelor’s degree? (“Why can’t my kids go to work at GM or Google and get a vocational education there?”) A study by Georgetown University found that the pay gap is narrowing between college graduates and people who are either high-school graduates or have only limited higher education. Today’s presidents must therefore be convincing advocates of the long-term benefits of a college degree, must be a highly public and countervailing voice to influence local and national conversations.
4. Partnerships. As opposed to the past for struggling institutions to hold hands in the dark, college partnerships of today’s framing is, “We are in a position of strength by engaging fellow institutions, not to overcome constraints, making course corrections, or plugging holes, but to do something collectively that a single institution cannot do well on its own.”

The author of this article advises to join AASBI as a purposeful accreditation agency to publicize and promote the worth of the institutions’ academic degrees and their students’ preparation for a first professional designation or degree.<sup>5</sup>

***“What is a First Professional Degree?”***

“First professional degree is though an academic degree; but with a syllabus that is crafted for enabling the students for a meticulous occupation or line of work, segments where intellectual research and School/College/University related activities is not the profession, however it focuses more on occupations including,

- accounting,
- legal practice,
- health care,
- dentistry,
- optometry,
- pharmacy,
- social work,
- engineering,
- religious ministry,
- education.“

5. Freedom of opinion and expression. Academe’s reputation as a place of ideas — where freedom of thought and expression enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Humans Rights is especially valued and protected — is being challenged, in particular in authoritarian countries including P.R. China and Russia, as well as countries with religious blasphemy laws (Pakistan) imposing long prison sentences, even punishable by death (Saudi Arabia).<sup>6</sup> Universities in such counties ought not to be recognized/accredited by academic/professional accreditation agencies. (Prominent US associations of collegiate schools of business international do recognize; AASBI explicitly does not.)

<sup>5</sup> School and University <https://www.schoolanduniversity.com/degree-options/graduate-degree/first-professional-degree>

<sup>6</sup> Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. — “More than ever, search committees value [presidential] job candidates who have shown they know how to tread carefully among conflicting perspectives on all sides of an issue while remaining effective advocates for the open discourse that is the lifeblood of academe.” (Robin Mamlet and Sheila Murphy (2021).)

6. Diplomacy. Trustee's (rightfully so) often favor agility and quick, decisive action, while faculty members (rightfully so) may favor shared governance and their right to weigh-in on matters of institutional importance. "A sobering statistic: Faculty participation on presidential search committees has dropped recently for the first time in a century. As a result, presidents must negotiate a fine line, engaging with two parties that are often at cross-purposes and mistrust each other."
7. Expeditiousness. Academic tradition favors discourse, deliberation, and inclusiveness, but today's presidents must make more decisions in shorter order. The notion, that faster is better is "a tangible reality of today's higher-education leadership that has crept-in from the corporate world."

Authors Mamlet and Murphy summarize, that presidential candidates must be qualified and able to meet inherent contradictions in the must-have lists that search committees grapple with every day:

- The faculty wants a scholar.
- The board wants a money-raising entrepreneur.
- Students want an uncompromising advocate of diversity and inclusion.
- Lawmakers want reassurance that political correctness will not rule the day.

Consequently, the average tenure of a college president in the United States was 6.5 years in 2016, down from 8.5 years in 2006; and it is getting shorter.

According to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU's) data covering the past five years (2012-2017), presidential tenures lasted four years or less for 45% of member institutions, the reason being that "the agenda for leadership is so dynamic and is changing more quickly than it was in the past," says Lucy Leske, a senior partner with Witt/Kieffer's Higher Education Practice.<sup>7</sup> "In 2012 the president of the University of Tulsa was fired after 74 days, and in 2013 the president of the University of Wyoming was forced to resign after less than six months on the job.

In 2020, the University of Wisconsin System's search for a new president failed when the single finalist dropped out due to 'process issues' and public opinion. The cost of the search was more than \$216,000."<sup>8</sup>

The literature shows that humans' experiences and competencies are right for a particular agenda, writes Karen Bowman. They need to reinvent themselves when the agenda is complete, or to come up with a new agenda. "You couple that with how quickly things are changing in higher education, and it's rare that you'll see an individual who can reinvent themselves and recreate an agenda five or six times over."

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Doss Bowman, "Are University Presidents Leaving too soon?" American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Summer 2017 <https://www.aascu.org/MAP/PublicPurpose/2017/Summer/TheErosion.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Judith Wilde and James Finkelstein. "A fundamental change in hiring college presidents is unfolding. Presidents are growing more diverse and staying for shorter stints, 40 years of hiring show. But using search firms in hiring may be the real change." HIGHER ED DIVE 15 November 2021 <https://www.highereddive.com/news/a-fundamental-change-in-hiring-college-presidents-is-unfolding/609978/>