

## THE SEARCH FOR SIGNS OF INTELLIGENT SEARCHES

*What candidates and the people who search for them are doing wrong*

By Lee Burdette Williams

**S**EARCH RE-OPENED. Are there any sadder words in the language of academe? Each time I see that addendum to a posting in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I pause and ponder the story behind it. There's always a story, isn't there? A mediocre pool of candidates. A mishandled search. A political morass that scared away competent people. A candidate accepting and then withdrawing, maybe days before his or her anticipated arrival.

I have seen my share of botched searches and botched opportunities, and I've often wondered if there is something unique in the field of higher education, and more specifically, student affairs, that offers us so many stories of job searches gone wrong.

My friend Jan told me that she and others were once walking with a candidate she was hosting in a rather seedy part of town on their way to a restaurant ("a good one," she assured me). Along the sidewalk were several strip joints, and each had a barker outside, trying to lure patrons. The candidate turned to one of the barkers and screamed, "F\*\*\* you!" The candidate, Jan reported, was not offered the job.

Almost everyone has stories of the candidates from hell, as well as an equal number of stories of employers and institutions that treated candidates like prisoners of war and worse. But I'm an educator. Although I enjoy a good story, I inevitably ask myself, What can we learn from this? I've learned a lot, both about how to conduct myself as a candidate (screaming obscenities, for example, has been crossed off my list of strategies, thanks to Jan) and as an employer (trying to entice a promising candidate to discard any need for urban conveniences such as an airport within one hundred miles or ethnic restaurants). In the interest of our profession and my fellow professionals, I'll share some of these lessons.

Let's break this into two parts: candidate faux pas and employer egregiousness. Whereas the former connotes a certain lack of social skills, the latter betrays an institutional lack of . . . something. I'm not sure what. Tact? Intelligence? Professionalism? Whatever it is, it's troubling, especially at a time in our profession when good candidates can pick and choose from among positions.

**I** WAS IN MY OFFICE on the campus of a small, midwestern college, awaiting the arrival of a candidate who had chosen to drive the two hundred miles to our campus to interview. "Call me from Campus Safety when you get here, and I'll come get you. We'll have a dinner reservation at 6:30. You should probably plan on getting here around 5 so you have a chance to freshen up and stuff." It was now 6 P.M., and he was nowhere in sight. Finally, at 6:30, the phone rang.

"Hi. I'm here." No explanation, no apology. I walked down the street to meet him. He was waiting by his car, dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a sweatshirt.

"Hi," I said. "Gosh, we were worried that you got lost or something."

"Nope. I just left a little late."

"Oh. Well, we should probably leave for dinner soon. Let me take you to your room so you can change."

"That's okay. I'm fine."

So off we went, my staff and I (uncomfortably dressed in our best business clothing, hardly the norm for a group of campus activities staff) and our sweatshirt-clad

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candidate, to a rather formal restaurant. I'm sorry to say he was less uncomfortable with his dress than any of us.

His next day was worse. I had told him during a brief conference interview and later, on the phone, that in my year as director, I had worked really hard to reach out to students outside the Greek system and that I was looking to fill this position with someone who was willing to work for students both within and without the Greek system. I proudly mentioned that most of the students who would be attending his presentation that day would not be Greek, so even though he had a Greek background, he might want to downplay it. "Sure. No problem," he assured me.

His presentation began with an icebreaker—the old M&M's one, where everyone takes a handful of candy and then says one thing about himself or herself for each piece. (I should have just ended the whole process there, I know. I mean, a little originality pays big dividends at moments like these.) We went around the group and finally came to the candidate, who said, separating one M&M for each statement, "I have one pledge son . . . two pledge grandsons . . . two pledge great-grandsons . . . and will have my first pledge great-great-grandson in a few weeks."

The eight non-Greek students (out of nine) who were there looked bewildered, as I'm sure I did. (Fraternity and sorority members are assigned "pledge sons" and "pledge daughters" whom they mentor through the pledge process and into full membership.) Even the lone fraternity member was a little freaked out by this show of studliness.

The lesson, which I'm not sure he ever really got, was this: listen to the boss when she tells you about your audience. And, come on, dress up from the start! How hard is that? One of my staff members at the time recalled her own two-hundred-mile drive to campus for her interview and how she stopped at a gas station in town to change in the restroom lest anyone see her without panty hose. She, obviously, wrote this candidate off at the start, and I wasn't far behind.

**LET'S LEAVE BEHIND** candidates who've obviously never read *Miss Manners' Guide to Landing a Position in*

*Higher Education*. A greater concern is when employers have been equally lax in reading *Who Moved My Candidate?* or whatever the latest best-selling business book is.

Think about it. You've taken the time to craft the perfect job description. You've jumped through whatever hoops your campus requires to get a position and a search approved. You've spent the money advertising. You've spent more money to bring your candidates to campus. And then you put it all in the hands of someone totally incapable of managing a schedule or understanding basic business etiquette.

I was being interviewed at a small college in Maryland for a position as director of campus activities. Things seemed to be going well, until I was left alone with the person who was secretary in that office, my escort to lunch. We walked to the dining hall, where I was meeting a group of students. As we walked up to the cashier at the entrance, the secretary turned to me and said, "It's four twenty-five." At first, I was puzzled. I looked at my watch. I thought it was 12:15. But when the cashier put out her hand, I realized what she meant. I dug in my purse for a five-dollar bill and paid for my lunch, then quickly caught up with the secretary, who introduced me to the students. So what's a few bucks, right? Candidates often have to pay for airfare and hotels and await reimbursement (and sometimes don't get it, especially if they turn down an offer—forget the fact that the institution completely misrepresented the position, the community, or the salary). I wasn't offered that position, which was okay, because honestly, the food wasn't that good.

But at least they had provided me with an escort. I interviewed at another small college in Pennsylvania, and I'm pretty sure that part of their strategy for determining the worthiness of candidates was to see who could find their way around campus with no assistance, following a schedule that left no time between interviews, and meeting with interviewers who seemed determined to keep talking well past the start time of the next interview. At one point, during a campus tour given by a student tour guide (and in a group of prospective students and parents), I realized I was on the far side of campus, a good ten-minute walk from my thirty-minute time slot

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with the dean of the college. I slipped away from the group and ran to the administration building (no easy feat in heels and a skirt), had my meeting with the dean, and walked out into an empty outer office. I looked at my schedule: lunch in the faculty dining room with four faculty members. I stopped a custodian. "Which way to the faculty dining room?"

"I think it's in the student union." Okay, I knew where that was. What I didn't know was the names or descriptions of my lunch companions. I stood at the door of the dining room, looking for a group of four with an extra chair at their table, hoping someone would be watching for me. No such luck. I finally started walking around the room, which had about twenty tables occupied (unfortunately, almost all with parties of four—what was this, I wondered, lunch or a bridge tournament?), asking, "Um, are you expecting a candidate for lunch?" until finally, after about eight tables, someone said yes.

Sometimes it doesn't even get as far as a campus interview. One colleague told me about interviewing with an employer at a conference. This colleague had earned her bachelor's and master's degrees at Purdue, as fine an institution as one might find in terms of the quality of the student body. The interviewer, she said, asked her how she would make the adjustment to working with students who were "highly intelligent, academically motivated, and serious about their studies after being at Purdue for such a long time." I was impressed that an interviewer could accomplish so much—insult the candidate's education and employment experience as well as her alma mater, impugn her own intelligence and knowledge of our field, and lose a prospective candidate—with one question.

Which brings me to another point. Placement at national conferences is, in many ways, a gate-keeping task. An employer will interview maybe thirty candidates to try to fill a position, and that employer is the first impression many candidates will have of that institution. So why do some schools send representatives who have either little enthusiasm for the institution (and may, in fact, be searching for a new job themselves) or minimal conversation skills?

What I've learned from either managing or being part of a number of searches on the employer end is that you (1) send your most charismatic and enthusiastic person to meet prospective candidates, (2) invite them to campus quickly, and (3) when they're on campus, treat them like royalty. So what if they're interviewing for an entry-level position? This candidate could be talented enough to be your institution's future vice president. Or this person could be the future vice president at a cam-

pus down the road with a permanently sour taste in her mouth about your institution because once she interviewed on your campus and was left to wander alone, rather pathetically, in the faculty dining room looking for someone to eat with.

HERE MAY BE some institutions out there that have more candidates than they can manage, places people are so desperate to work at that there's little concern for how a candidate is treated during the search. I've never worked for one of those, but I suppose they exist. And to them I say, "Please continue to treat candidates like third-class citizens. Listen indifferently over a table at placement. Give them inaccurate information. Confuse them with some other candidate because you don't take the time to review their résumés before meeting them. Give them a closing date for the position; tell them you'll call the next day; then don't. Invite them to campus but at your convenience, not theirs. Send them to lunch with a faculty member who's just been denied tenure. Call them and offer them the position, and ask for a decision the next day, even if they're about to leave for another interview. And for God's sake, don't pay their moving expenses! This gives the rest of us a chance. Thank you."

To candidates, I say, "Look, I know that the suit and tie thing isn't you, but get the job first, then worry about expressing your inner slob. Don't print your résumé on silly paper. Don't accept an interview unless you're really interested in our university, and, please, do some research ahead of time. We are ten miles west of nowhere. We're not ashamed of it—we actually like it, but boy, does it irritate the heck out of us to hear you say, 'Wow . . . you're really in the sticks.' If we tell you the salary range, and it's not adequate, then let's just part friends. Don't stay in our pool hoping we'll offer more because you're so great. That's not always an option. And last, if you accept a position with us, we'll expect to see you soon after. We'll assume that once you've accepted, other offers are moot. If you decide not to come because some school closer to a beach or a romantic interest finally finished its search and offered you a position, well, keep this karmic fact in mind: what goes around comes around, and one day you'll be the desperate dean whose new director of residence life calls the day before RA training begins to say he's not coming.

To the rest of us, muddling about, trying to find the perfect jobs and the perfect employees, I say this: although learning from our own mistakes is noble, learning from the mistakes of others is a lot less painful. And when it comes to the strange dance of the job search, there's plenty of learning to go around.

