



Funk leads search for LSU chief

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While Bill Funk is putting the finishing touches on his new company and Web site, he also is beginning to identify possible candidates for the LSU System presidency.

Although the LSU Board of Supervisors and a president search committee will make the hire, Funk is the person quietly controlling the early phases of the search process entirely behind the scenes.

It is a process Funk and the Board of Supervisors hope to keep private until a list of about three finalists are named in the spring, he said.

Some are criticizing that plan, arguing it should be more open and inclusive.

Funk, of three-month-old R. William Funk & Associates, was introduced as the LSU search consultant, or “headhunter,” earlier this month.

Search committee chairwoman Laura Leach, an LSU supervisor from Lake Charles , described Funk as “our guiding force.”

Members of the search committee have agreed that only Leach will publicly comment on the process.

LSU System President William Jenkins announced earlier this year that he plans to retire. Jenkins has said he will remain in office until his successor is found.

The new president will oversee 11 institutions, including Louisiana ’s flagship university in Baton Rouge , four other academic campuses, two medical schools, a law school, agriculture center and 10 public hospitals. The system’s annual budget is about \$3 billion.

Funk recently left major executive search firm Korn/Ferry International after 14 years and nearly 300 higher education administrative searches nationwide, including more than 60 sitting presidents and chancellors.

Funk, who is being paid \$80,000 plus expenses by the LSU Foundation, describes himself as the nation's "premier recruiter" for major flagship universities. He has been described as the "guru of higher education recruiting" by The Chronicle of Higher Education.

In recent years, the roles of headhunters have become more crucial to universities, for better or worse.

They help colleges cast wider nets for potential candidates and gauge their interest in advance while advising the university on "best practices" throughout the search and interviewing process.

"I'm a proactive agent for the committee to reach out and see where there's interest," he said in an interview. "I nurture and cajole their interest in LSU.

"So I add people to the pool who otherwise wouldn't be candidates."

Prefers secrecy

Funk's practice of conducting mostly private searches until the end of the process — to avoid scaring away potential candidates — has generated some controversy.

"I think you have to have it completely confidential, at least until you have the final three or four finalists, or you'll have a much less distinguished pool to choose from," Funk said.

But Funk said he has conducted both open and private searches successfully, including at Florida State University, a state known for having the most open searches to the public.

Sitting presidents at other universities are unlikely to apply for public searches because of the appearance that they are trying to leave their current jobs, Funk said. So you only end up with provosts, deans and vice presidents in more open searches.

The LSU System needs a president who has leadership experience in a complex university system, Funk said.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a nonpartisan think tank, said he is disappointed LSU does not plan a more open search for the head of a system owned by the public.

"The public should have full view of the entire process from beginning to end," Brandt said.

A strong pool of candidates should be possible even if the names are learned by the public, he said.

LSU physics professor Ravi Rau said he is concerned about the trend at LSU of relying on headhunters and keeping information out of the public domain and even away from the people on campus. Secrecy was already a problem with the hiring of Chancellor Sean O'Keefe, he said.

A handful of faculty serve on the search committee, but even they do not get all the information about potential candidates, he said.

Headhunters should attract more candidates, Rau said, not control the whole process.

Leach, on the other hand, said "privacy is exceedingly important."

"If I was a sitting dean or something," Leach said, "and I wanted to apply, I wouldn't want my employers to think I'm not happy where I am."

A glitch in Tennessee

While Funk has had many successes, one of his most public negative experiences was the downfall of

University of Tennessee 's John Shumaker, who resigned 14 months after Funk served as the search consultant in his hiring in 2002.

Funk said he was unfairly made a "scapegoat" by some.

The search process was criticized to an extent for being secretive. Criticism heightened after allegations of lavish spending of state funds by Shumaker, including using the university plane to visit a woman in

Alabama .

But hiring Shumaker, who was president of the

University of Louisville , was seen as a coup at the time and lamented by many in Kentucky , Funk said.

There were extensive background searches, and Shumaker had a great record. Unfortunately, Funk said, Shumaker began a downward spiral after going through a divorce after being hired.

Tennessee Board of Trustees Vice Chairwoman Andrea Loughry said, "Mr. Funk did everything we asked him to do."

But she said university officials decided the next search had to be conducted more openly. Funk was not the best person for that job, she said.

The board ultimately hired John Peterson, a provost at the University of Connecticut , who remains president today.

Funk later publicly criticized that search as being too open.

Process just beginning

Funk said he is working on the “infrastructure” of the LSU search and has not begun contacting potential candidates.

The university is beginning to accept nominations, and formal advertisements for the job will begin running soon, he said.

In January, the search committee can slowly begin narrowing the field of candidates. At some point in February, he said, there could be a “short list” of 10 to 15 people. Then background research will begin.

That will be cut to about eight semifinalists, he said, who will be interviewed by the search committee.

At this stage, Funk said, he has even seen candidates wear fake moustaches to avoid being seen as a candidate on an interview.

Eventually, a group of two to four finalists can be publicized in March or April before a final selection is made by the Board of Supervisors, he said.

For now, Funk said, he is eager to delve more into the search process and the unique Louisiana culture to ensure the right fit is found.