



Search for college heads proving costly Exhaustive job searches yield internal candidates

By: Laura Krantz

When the University of Massachusetts Lowell found itself in need of a new chancellor this year, after Martin T. Meehan left that post to lead the UMass system, trustees hired a top-notch recruitment firm to conduct an international search.

Last week, the college [announced it had found the perfect choice](#):

UMass Lowell hired Jacqueline Moloney, Marty Meehan's No. 2, to replace Meehan after a \$97,529 search.

Jacqueline Moloney, Meehan's number two, who had been in the adjacent office the whole time. The search cost taxpayers and students \$97,529.

It was not the first recent case of an area public college conducting an expensive nationwide job search only to end up choosing a winner who was nearby all along.

In fact, it has been a banner year for internal candidates in the state's public higher education system, casting a spotlight on the price tag for filling those jobs at a time when the system faces intense budget pressures.

The search for someone to lead the UMass system — the job that ultimately went to Meehan, then the UMass Lowell chancellor — cost \$148,000. Bridgewater State University and the Massachusetts Maritime Academy chose internal candidates to replace retiring presidents last fall and this spring, respectively, also after paying search firms to circle the planet. (Those cost \$80,000 and \$62,000.)

In addition, the Department of Higher Education hired one of its own as the new commissioner, at a search cost of \$58,500.

Four more public college presidential searches are underway, all led by firms making between \$35,000 and \$125,000. One school, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, paid \$90,000 for a search earlier this year, but the chosen candidate withdrew and the North Adams school expects to pay that much again for a second search.

"Sometimes these searches happen and it's pretty well a fait accompli that somebody has been prepared to take over leadership, and it's pretty much a national search in name only," said

Paul Reville, the state's former secretary of education and a current Harvard professor, who believes hiring search firms, in the end, is a good thing.

UMass board of trustees chairman Victor Woolridge defended the use of search firms, and the hiring of internal candidates. "In order for us to look you in the face and everybody else in the face and say she's the right person, we have to have a process," Woolridge said.

Search firms have access to a wider pool of candidates, know who is looking, who might be a good fit, and they have time that volunteer search committees do not, search firm executives say.

"The best candidates rarely apply to a position," said John Muckle, a principal at Isaacson Miller, the firm that performed the searches for higher-education commissioner and UMass Lowell.

Boston is a hotbed for presidential search firms, because there are so many colleges. Witt/Kieffer, Archer-Martin Associates, Greenwood/Asher & Associates, and Korn Ferry are big names in the industry. Many are paid a third of the first-year salary of the person hired.

The use of firms wasn't always a given at universities, and some Ivy League colleges still do not use them. Since the mid-1990s, however, they have become expected at most other schools and are also used to hire development directors, athletic directors, deans, and provosts.

"Now it's the odd situation where there's not a search firm," said Bill Funk, a pioneer in the industry who founded a Texas firm focusing on higher-education consulting.

Arguments exist for both insiders and outsiders to lead colleges, Funk said. Internal picks understand the campus culture and have community connections. However, insiders may be more hesitant to fire longtime friends and carry out ambitious changes, and sometimes stay at a school longer.

The presidents selected lately from within the colleges boast long résumés and experience on their campuses. Moloney, an alumnae of UMass Lowell, rose through the ranks and is credited with overseeing many of its successful programs.

The new presidents at Bridgewater State University and Massachusetts Maritime Academy worked under longtime leaders who retired this year.

Frederick W. Clark Jr., a Bridgewater alumni, former aide to the late congressman John Joseph Moakley, and a state university lobbyist, served as Bridgewater's executive vice president and vice president for external affairs since he joined the college in 2011.

“Fred was diligently building his skill set for any of the state university presidencies,” said Louis Ricciardi, the Bridgewater board chairman during the search and now a board member of the university’s foundation. Ricciardi said he has known Clark for 25 years.

Francis X. McDonald, the new president at Mass. Maritime, was promoted last year to executive vice president as the former president announced his retirement. An alumni, McDonald has worked at the school since 1994.

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The situation of Carlos Santiago, who replaced Richard M. Freeland as higher education commissioner last month, is slightly different. A Puerto Rico native, he held top posts at public universities in Wisconsin and New York before coming to Massachusetts in 2013.

Even before the UMass Lowell search began, many considered Moloney well qualified to be chancellor, Nancy Donahue, a member of that search committee, told UMass trustees at Moloney’s confirmation this month.

“People would give you a wink and a nod and say, ‘You know who’s the best person for the job,’ ” Donahue said. “We thought she would be, but when we saw all the candidates. . . [Moloney] had no gaps in her résumé.”

Although UMass Lowell hired a national firm, it was a shortened search that lasted less than two months and yielded only one finalist. The hunt’s haste and summer timeframe no doubt affected the quality of candidates, said one expert close to the search.

“You don’t get the diversity of talent in two months that you would get in six months,” said the expert, who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to discuss the Lowell search.

Funk, the Texas consultant, said internal candidates are selected in about 20 percent of searches he performs. He said search committees and boards of trustees often coalesce around a familiar face.

“It’s kind of like the devil you know versus the devil you don’t,” he said.