

Recruiting Practices for Department Chairs and Center Directors in U.S. Medical Schools

The recruitment process of leaders at organizations in general,¹ and at academic medical centers in particular,² has been widely criticized as being ineffective and inefficient. The process by which leaders are identified for important roles in medical schools—department chairs, center directors, and other major administrative positions—traditionally has followed an “academic search” model, whereby the hiring authority delegates the task of searching and recruiting to a committee of faculty and administrative peers. Little is known about how these search processes work beyond conventional wisdom and anecdote. This *Analysis in Brief* provides descriptive data on the search and recruitment process for department chairs and major center directors at U.S. medical schools and describes the role of teaching hospital CEOs in recruiting clinical department chairs.

Methodology

This *AIB* is based on findings from two surveys. First, we administered a 32-item questionnaire about search practices for department chairs and center directors to 126 deans of fully accredited U.S. medical schools in January 2009.³ We achieved an overall response rate of 71 percent with 90 deans completing the survey. Second, we sent a six-item survey to the CEOs of 109 integrated teaching hospitals in February 2009 about the roles of the hospital CEOs in the search, recruitment, and appointment processes of the clinical department chairs at their affiliated medical schools.⁴ We received responses from

Table 1. Duration of Search Process for Department Chairs and Center Directors in U.S. Medical Schools, 2009

Duration	Clinical Chair	Basic Science Chair	Center Director
1 - 6 months	21%	21%	39%
7 - 12 months	48%	44%	21%
13 - 18 months	21%	18%	29%
19 - 24 months	3%	10%	7%
Over 24 months	7%	8%	4%
Mean	11.8 months	13.5 months	9.9 months
Range	2 - 45 months	1 - 47 months	2 - 27 months

79 hospital CEOs (72% response rate), 70 of which had seen at least one clinical department chair appointed since assuming their role as hospital CEO. The results from this survey are compared to those of a similar AAMC survey conducted in 2001 that also addressed the roles of hospital CEOs in recruiting medical school clinical department chairs.⁵

Results

Leadership Search Practices

Frequency. The survey of medical school deans confirmed the anecdotal impression that most medical schools are constantly recruiting new department chairs and major center directors. Of the responding deans, 79 percent had appointed at least one new clinical department chair, 54 percent had appointed at least one basic science chair, and 38 percent had appointed at least one new center director in the previous two years. Only 10 deans indicated they had appointed no one in these roles between 2007 and 2009.

The deans who had appointed new chairs or center directors were typically juggling multiple recruitments at

one time. On average, deans who had recruited new leaders had appointed about four new chairs or center directors during the previous two years, with appointments of clinical chairs being the most frequent.

Duration. A common perception of the search process in academic medicine is that it takes a long time, especially compared with other industries or professions.⁶ Our findings indicate that the average length of the search process for all department chairs and center directors was 11.9 months. Basic science department chair searches took the longest, with an average time of 13.5 months. Only one in five searches for new department chairs concluded in six months or less (see Table 1).

While these data set a baseline, they tell us less about the optimal length for leadership searches. How long *should* the search process take? In some circumstances, the dean may intentionally wish that the search process move slowly—if, for example, she or he wants time for an interim chair to develop the requisite skills or to allow for “healing” after a period of

Table 2. Selected Roles of the Teaching Hospital CEO in the Search and Recruitment of Clinical Department Chairs, 2001 and 2009

	2001	2009
Hospital CEO is consulted on the composition of the search committee.	48%	67%
Hospital CEO or a member of his/her senior leadership team serves as a member of the search committee.	60%	89%
Hospital CEO co-signs the offer letter with the dean.	45%	53%
Hospital CEO interviews each finalist for the clinical chair position.	89%	91%

turbulence. That said, anecdotal reports suggest that search processes can take longer than necessary because of difficulty in scheduling the search committee meetings and interviews and drawn-out negotiations with the first-choice candidate.⁶ Searches that go on for years may affect the momentum and morale of a department or center.

Use of executive search firms. The results demonstrated that medical schools use external search firms infrequently to aid in recruiting department chairs and center directors. Deans reported engaging external search firms for only 26 percent of clinical chair searches, 4 percent of basic science department chair searches, and 6 percent of center director searches.

Among clinical department chair searches, the use of a search firm shortened the length of the search. The average search duration for clinical chairs at medical schools that did not use a search firm was 12.5 months, but those that used search firms completed their task, on average, in 9.5 months.

Satisfaction with search process.

Across searches for clinical and basic science department chairs and center

directors, most deans were satisfied or very satisfied with the duration of the search (74%), performance of the search committee (91%), and quality of the candidate pool (73%), with some notable exceptions. High levels of dissatisfaction existed among deans regarding the number of finalists for these positions who were women and racial/ethnic minorities (only 34% and 21% satisfied, respectively).

Role of Teaching Hospital CEOs

Teaching hospital CEOs reported higher levels of engagement in many aspects of the recruitment process for clinical department chairs in the 2009 survey than did hospital CEOs in a comparable survey administered in 2001. As Table 2 indicates, hospital CEOs took more active roles in 2009 than they did in 2001 in helping to determine the composition of search committees, serving as members or having members of their senior leadership teams on search committees, and co-signing offer letters. In 2009, most hospital CEOs interviewed finalists for the position (91%), a rate essentially unchanged since 2001 (89%).

While Table 2 indicates a larger role for teaching hospital CEOs in recruiting new clinical chairs in recent

years, a notable percentage of hospital CEOs did not have roles in performance evaluations of those new chairs. The results showed that a small majority of hospital CEOs participated in evaluating the new chair's performance within the first 12 months (46% do so formally and 11% do so informally—for example, by sharing their opinions with the dean). However, 43 percent of hospital CEOs did not have any role in evaluating chair performance within the first 12 months of employment.

Conclusions

The results from the AAMC survey of deans on search and recruitment practices for department chairs and major center directors indicate that most medical schools are in a constant state of leadership recruitment, that these searches take a full year on average, and that most schools conduct the search “on their own” rather than employ executive search firms. The survey of teaching hospital CEOs showed that, compared with 2001, CEOs in 2009 were more engaged in recruiting clinical department chairs, but a sizable percentage did not participate in evaluating those chairs once they were in their positions.

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1 Fernandez-Araoz C, Boris G, Nitin N. The definitive guide to recruiting in good times and bad. *Harv Bus Rev.* 2009;87:74-84.

2 See, for example: Creasman, WT. Is this any way to choose a chair? *Acad Med.* 2001;76:1032-1034; Hoffmeir, PA. Are search committees really searching? *Acad Med.* 2003;78:125-128; Grigsby RK, Hefner DS, Souba WW, Kirch DG. The future-oriented department chair. *Acad Med.* 2004;79:571-577.

3 These schools have received full accreditation from the Liaison Committee on Medical Education. We did not include deans from new medical schools that were not fully accredited.

4 An “integrated” teaching hospital is under common ownership with a college of medicine or one in which the majority of medical school department chairs serve as the hospital chiefs of service. There are 117 integrated teaching hospitals in the U.S. Eight of these hospitals were excluded from this study because of lack of contact information, vacancy of the hospital CEO position, and unique appointments.

5 The AAMC administered this 2001 survey, which attained a 58% response rate, to the CEOs of 123 integrated teaching hospitals about their role in the recruitment of clinical department chairs.

6 Mallon WT. The search process in academic medicine: Perspectives of executive search consultants. Available at: <http://www.aamc.org/opi/leadership/searchconsultants.pdf>. Accessed August 15, 2009.