

LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

It Has Improved Its Procedures for Selecting College Presidents

REPORT NUMBER 99134, AUGUST 2000

Audit Highlights . . .

Our audit of the procedures used by the Los Angeles Community College District (district) to select its college presidents disclosed that:

- In the past, the district followed selection procedures that were generally consistent with each other and allowed for involvement by the college community.*
 - Its revised procedures improve the accountability of the process, provide for greater community involvement, and are similar to those of other community college districts.*
 - The district has been slow to replace interim presidents. In four instances since 1995, the district has had an interim president at a college longer than state regulations permit.*
 - District costs to select college presidents have increased significantly, but are not out of line with costs other districts have incurred.*
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At the request of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, we audited the process the Los Angeles Community College District (district) uses for selecting the presidents for its nine campuses. This report concluded that, although the district followed its Board of Trustees (board) selection procedures, the district did not always hire presidents. In 1999 the district's board rejected the list of finalists forwarded to it by the search committees at Mission and Harbor Colleges and chose instead to appoint interim presidents. The district subsequently revised its selection procedures to increase quality controls and community involvement and conducted new searches that resulted in appointments of presidents at these colleges in 2000. Although the revised procedures are similar to those we identified as "recommended practices" and to those used by some of the 18 California community college districts we surveyed, we found several conditions relating to the selection of college presidents that can be improved. We also concluded that the district's costs to conduct a search process are not out of line with those of other districts.

Finding #1: The district's revised procedures do not explicitly include some recommended practices.

The district's new selection procedures for hiring college presidents, revised in September 1999, improved the accountability of the process by designating a person responsible for ensuring compliance with board procedures and by establishing timelines for the selection process. The new procedures also provided for greater community involvement by, for example, having a greater proportion of representatives appointed from the campus community with fewer board and district appointees on the selection committee. These procedures are similar to those used by some of the 18 California community college districts we surveyed and to those recently developed by the Community College League of

California (league), a nonprofit corporation whose voluntary membership consists of the 72 local community college districts in California.

The district should consider adopting those league-recommended practices that it is not currently using, such as establishing a budget for each search.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

In its one-year response to us dated September 14, 2001, the district stated that it had reviewed the league-recommended practices and while it had considered a number of ideas, the district stated that it generally follows the recommendations.

Finding #2: Although the district encourages open meetings on campus to present the candidates to college employees, students, and residents of the community, open meetings are not always held.

While not requiring such meetings, the district's procedures suggested that these are good opportunities for the committee members to assess how well the candidates and college community would work together and how effectively the candidates would deal with specific concerns at the college. The committee for the recent Harbor College search chose not to have an open meeting. We believe open meetings on campus are an important quality control, as well as an opportunity for more community involvement.

The district should consider making open meetings on campus a standard practice unless the search committee has compelling reasons why such meetings should not be held.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

On August 23, 2000, the board modified its rules to require open meetings to be held for the purpose of presenting presidential finalists to district residents and college faculty, staff, and students. Feedback from these meetings is provided to the board prior to its final hiring decision.

Finding #3: The district’s contract with its search consultant does not clearly specify the tasks to which the district and the consultant agreed.

Although the district opted to use a search consultant in the Mission and Harbor College searches completed in 2000, the contract between the district and its consultant was not entirely clear about the specific tasks to which the district and the consultant agreed. In one example, the contract called for the consultant to communicate with the board, but it did not specify the form or frequency of the communication. In fact, we found no written progress reports from the consultant. Although we have no indication of conflict between the district and the consultant over these contract provisions, more precise descriptions of deliverables in the future could forestall potential problems.

The district should ensure that contracts with search consultants include a detailed statement of work and consider including a requirement for consultants to provide periodic written status reports to either the chancellor or the board so the district may gauge their progress and value.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

The district indicated that its request for proposals distributed recently to potential search firms contains a detailed statement of the work of the consultant, and it calls for written status reports to be presented periodically to the chancellor or board. The district stated that these reports are now routinely submitted to the board in its closed sessions.

Finding #4: The district needs to improve its record keeping for its search activities.

We found no evidence suggesting that candidates had been evaluated unfairly in the recent Mission and Harbor College searches. However, the search committee did not always appropriately document its evaluation process. In some instances, we were unable to determine what criteria the committee used to evaluate candidates it had interviewed. Although we saw interview questions, district staff responsible for the conduct of the process could not provide us with any summary of interview evaluations or evidence of whether the finalists were selected by the committee solely based on the interview questions or if other criteria were used.

We believe that the tasks a selection committee undertakes are not only important to ensure that the most qualified individuals are selected as finalists, but also to demonstrate that the process was conducted in a fair and equitable manner. When there is an incomplete record of some of the procedures used in the selection process, the district may not be able to assure critics of the process that the selection was carried out in an appropriate manner.

We recommended that the district archive search documents to demonstrate the district's compliance with all required procedures and to memorialize the process for subsequent searches.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

The district reports that it is archiving the records of recent presidential searches, and holding records of currently active searches, to ensure the information is available for future review.

Finding #5: In the last five years, the district has had four interim presidents whose appointments exceeded the one-year limit.

According to a provision in the California Code of Regulations, no interim appointment of a president may exceed one year in duration. This provision is designed to protect colleges against interim presidents who may prefer to assume caretaker, rather than leadership, roles, and who may be reluctant to make long-term decisions. In addition, if the board appoints an interim president without receiving community input, actions taken by the interim president may have less community support.

Although the regulations allow the California Community College Chancellor (state chancellor) to approve an extension of up to one year for interim appointments if a district demonstrates a pressing business need, the district has not submitted any requests for extensions during the last five years. According to data provided to us by the district, Mission and Pierce Colleges had interim presidents for 25 months and 27 months, respectively, and Harbor College had an interim president for 18 months. The current president of Southwest College is also an interim president, a position she has been filling since August 1996.

The district should perform selection procedures promptly to avoid having interim presidents serve longer than the California Code of Regulations allows. If the district cannot meet this timeline, it should request a waiver from the state chancellor, demonstrating

that it has a pressing business need to continue operating with an interim president. We also recommended that the district develop procedures for selecting interim presidents and submit them to the board for approval. Also, the district should consider whether appointing an interim president who may apply for the position is appropriate.

District Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The district reports that it intends to perform selection procedures promptly to avoid having interim presidents serve longer than the California Code of Regulations allows. In cases where longer service by an interim president is required, the district plans to seek the appropriate waiver, indicating the business need for the arrangement. Regarding the selection of interim presidents, the district believes its interests are best served if it retains the flexibility to devise selection procedures that conform to applicable circumstances as they arise, and refrains from adopting a fixed procedure. The board also articulated its position on the issue of appointing interim presidents who may later become applicants for the regular position. Whenever the board appoints an interim president it will make a determination on the matter based on the totality of the circumstances existing at the time. In its one-year response to us dated September 14, 2001, the district stated that it had used open selection processes, which are similar to the regular presidential selection process, to hire interim presidents.

Finding #6: The district does not have a system to track the costs associated with the search for each of its college presidents.

Although the district was able to provide certain cost information upon our request, it generally does not have a system to track costs associated with each search. The district's costs of selecting a president have risen significantly in the last year, from an average of \$6,200 for the searches ended in 1999 at Harbor, Pierce, and Mission Colleges, to \$32,000 or more for the searches completed in 2000 at Harbor and Mission Colleges. The Harbor and Mission Colleges searches, which were repeated because of the district's failure to appoint presidents in 1999, were more expensive in 2000 largely as the result of increased travel expenses for candidates and the district's decision to hire a search consultant. However, although the district's search costs increased, its expenses were still comparable to those of other districts performing similar searches.

The district should develop a system to separately track all costs associated with each presidential search. This will allow the district to determine if costs are reasonable and to budget appropriately for future searches.

District Action: Partial corrective action taken.

In its one-year response to us dated September 14, 2001, the district stated that it plans to implement a major upgrade of its accounting system within the next year or two and anticipates that its ability to track the costs of presidential searches will improve greatly. In the meantime, the district is implementing a method of identifying expenses related to individual searches using a simple spreadsheet approach.