aaup Penn
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

Reforming Penn's Nonrepresentative Presidential Search Process

In 1920, only 13% of American colleges and universities reported faculty involvement in presidential searches. Resulting from years of faculty-led efforts to strengthen shared governance, that number sits at 88% today.[1] Anchoring the selection of university presidents in a democratic process built on inclusion of faculty and students fosters the selection of leaders most suited to the needs of a given university, including both the academic needs of faculty and students and the responsibilities of the Board of Trustees.

It is with this framing that we express our profound disappointment with the composition of Penn's current Presidential Search Committee. The initial announcement[2] from the Chair of the Board of Trustees describes a committee composed of seven trustees and only two faculty members. Further, there are only two women on the committee, neither of whom are faculty. It is also our understanding that one of the two faculty members was added to the committee selection pool *post hoc* in an unusual process bypassing normal Faculty Senate procedures at the request of the Trustees.[3] We are further dismayed to learn that compromises proposed to partially address these issues by Faculty Senate leadership[4] were also swiftly rejected.[5]

The trustees have the power to raise the standards of the presidential search process. Indeed, the current presidential search process was developed only recently,[6] before the selection of President Magill, and was itself bypassed in the selection of President Jameson. It utterly fails to reflect the spirit and diversity of our campus, with minimal inclusion of faculty, the selection process of which was nondemocratic, and denies representation from the student body entirely. Past presidential search committees averaged a nearly 1:1 ratio of trustees to faculty and more often than not included students; for example, the committee that selected President Gutmann included 9 trustees, 8 faculty members, and 4 students.[7] We cannot fathom why this search was initiated with such apparent disregard for the longstanding precedent of effective search procedures that resulted in the sustained tenures of successful past Presidents including Amy Gutmann and Judith Rodin. We are even more alarmed by the rapid refusal of the compromises proposed by the Faculty Senate that would have come at very little cost to the Trustees.

Serving as the President of the University of Pennsylvania is an extraordinary privilege that coincides with tremendous responsibility. An effective president must serve not only as the chief executive presiding over university operations, but must also act as the chief academic officer,

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[1] https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/fall-2021/2021-aaup-shared-governance-survey-findings-demographics-senate-chairs-and

[2] https://president.upenn.edu/presidential-search

[3] We do not intend this as any comment on the suitability of said faculty member, only as a process abnormality that further inserted the Trustees into an otherwise largely democratic faculty selection process within the Faculty Senate.

[4] https://www.thedp.com/article/2026/10/penn-presidential-search-committee-faculty-student-representation-concerns

[5] https://www.thedp.com/article/2026/10/penn-presidential-search-committee-faculty-senate-discussion

[6] https://archives.upenn.edu/digitized-resources/docs-pubs/trustees-minutes/minutes-2009/june-19/

[7] https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v50/n26/consult_committee0323.html

ensuring that we adhere to our core mission of advancing discovery and opportunity toward a better future for all. **We are saddened to express that we do not believe the current search committee is equipped to identify the exceptional candidates needed to meet these criteria.**

A new president should not want to lead a campus that sees their selection process as illegitimate. Confronting the multiple crises facing higher education requires strengthening shared governance and public trust rather than eroding it. Penn can and must do better. **The Board of Trustees must course correct by reshaping the composition of the search committee to accurately reflect the significance of students, faculty, staff, and the gender composition of our university.**