



Leonore Fleming, Ph.D.
President

Utica University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP-UC)

October 16, 2022

Ms. Heidi M. Hoeller '91, Chairperson
Presidential Search Committee
Utica University Board of Trustees

Dear Chairperson Hoeller:

Transparency and shared governance are essential to the success of Utica University.

The Governing Board of the AAUP-UC therefore strongly urges the Board of Trustees to reconsider its decision to conduct a confidential search for the next Utica University president. **We ask that the entire faculty and other members of the campus community be given the opportunity to meet with all finalists for the position of President of Utica University.** Our reasons follow.

First, confidential search processes run counter to AAUP best practices, which recommend that candidates meet with faculty and students **“to contribute to the candidate’s understanding of the culture of the institution...[and]...determine each other’s suitability.”**¹ Meeting with “a representative group of constituencies” and visiting the campus incognito is no substitute for true campus engagement. The erosion of transparency and shared governance in this confidential search process threatens the future success of any new president appointed in this manner, and ultimately threatens the future success of this institution. Utica University will not thrive if it lacks the trust and support of the campus community.

Second, while some university search firms claim that confidential processes are necessary, there is little evidence to support this claim. Yet, there is significant evidence that confidential searches can have unintended consequences that are detrimental to an institution.² For example, there is no assurance that search firms are performing complete background checks and doing their due diligence. In fact, “research by George Mason University’s James Finkelstein has documented that only about half of all presidential headhunting contracts promise any background checking beyond calling the candidates’ self-provided references.”³ A confidential search process prevents the Utica community from accessing information about the candidate, including any negative information that might come to light after the appointment has been announced. As reported by *Inside Higher Ed*, “Michael Poliakoff, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, said secrecy often benefits the potential candidates for the search and the search firm but is not beneficial to the institution itself.”⁴

¹ www.aaup.org/statement-presidential-searches

² <https://aaupmason.org/blog/the-costs-of-secret-presidential-searches>

³ www.aaup.org/article/costs-closed-searches

⁴ www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/08/23/faculty-anger-surrounding-several-presidential-searches-some-point-search-firms

Finally, the standard practice at Utica University is to fill positions by way of open searches that are grounded in the norms of shared governance and public accountability. Given this departure from our standard process, we are left to ask what, exactly, justifies such a shift in procedure? While the search firm “recommended the committee undertake a ‘confidential search’ process to potentially broaden the prospective pool of qualified candidates,”⁵ we ask the Board of Trustees to consider whether the types of candidates a confidential search attracts are indeed the best candidates for this job. Given the importance of transparency and shared governance on this campus, **is a confidential search the best way to attract those candidates who would be a “good fit” for Utica University and who can understand and appreciate our campus culture? The answer is no.**

In sum, according to the AAUP, “Searches for presidents and other chief academic officers should have an open phase that allows individual faculty members as well as faculty bodies to review the credentials of finalists, ask questions, and share opinions before a final decision is made.”⁶ Therefore, the AAUP-UC Governing Board requests that the presidential search committee and the Board of Trustees **reconsider their decision to undertake a confidential presidential search and conduct an open and fully transparent final selection process.** In so doing, the Board of Trustees can reaffirm its commitment to transparency and shared governance. Furthermore, such an action can demonstrate regard for the faculty’s collective, meaningful, and central role in upholding the mission and success of Utica University.

Sincerely,



Leonore Fleming, Ph.D.

President

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Cc: Mr. Robert A. Brvenik '77, Chairperson, Board of Trustees

⁵ October 7, 2022 “Presidential Search Update” from Heidi M. Hoeller: www.utica.edu/presidential-search

⁶ www.aaup.org/report/confidentiality-and-governance