

EDITORIALS

A costly hire

The next president of the University of Illinois will hit a financial jackpot.

If the rules of the economic marketplace are good enough for big-time university football coaches, there's no reason why they wouldn't apply equally when hiring a university president.

That's why the UI can look forward to paying a pretty penny to retiring President Robert Easter's replacement when trustees approve the choice at their Nov. 14 meeting.

How pretty? Well, Easter's salary takes the No. 10 spot in the 14-team Big Ten, and he's earning total compensation of \$552,000.

Coming in at the top spot in the conference is Penn State's Eric Barron, who's collecting \$1.2 million. Nebraska's Harvey Perlman holds the bottom rung on the salary ladder at \$380,000. Considering that former UI President Michael Hogan's base pay was \$650,000 when he left, the next UI president could easily top \$700,000 a year.

Times have changed and the moneyed elite have grown ever more prosperous. Then again, entertainment and sports stars, media moguls, hedge fund managers and other high-profile professionals also are earning mind-boggling sums. Obviously, it pays big-time to have a talent that's in demand.

How much the UI will pay and how it will be structured is the question of the day for UI officials involved in the search for Easter's successor.

By current standards, Easter's compensation is a bargain. He's a UI lifer who started on the faculty and worked his way up. Hired as an emergency replacement for Hogan, Easter took the job out of loyalty.

That will not be the case for his successor, and it raises some negotiating issues.

Where will the next president come from and what is that individual earning now? What sort of incentives — aka "golden handcuffs" — will the university insist on to ensure a tenure of reasonable length? How badly does this unknown individual want the job?

In other words, is this a prestige post, a salary grab or both?

Most important, how many really good candidates are available to fill this important position? The fewer there are, the higher the cost will be.

One thing's for sure. Whoever is eventually hired will, in the eyes of many, be paid too much, and no amount of explaining about how difficult and important this job is will persuade the critics otherwise.

A bigger question than the money, of course, is just who is under consideration and whether that person is a worthy choice.

Easter's two predecessors — Hogan and B. Joseph White — submitted shotgun resignations. One was felled by the Category I admissions scandal and the other by a series of self-inflicted wounds that demonstrated he was the wrong guy for the job.

Those results show there are no guarantees that the UI will get what it will be paying plenty for. In that respect, it's easier to decide the quality of coaching hires — their win-loss records speak for themselves.