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UI group gathers info on next president; Kennedy dispels rumor

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URBANA — Board of Trustees Chair Christopher Kennedy has dispelled rumors about his candidacy for University of Illinois president.

Earlier this spring, the UI launched its search for President Bob Easter's replacement by assembling a search committee, hiring a search firm and, most recently, holding forums on the three campuses. Easter plans to retire next June.

Kennedy learned of the rumor — that he wished to be a candidate — earlier this month and wrote in an e-mail to board members the rumor was false.

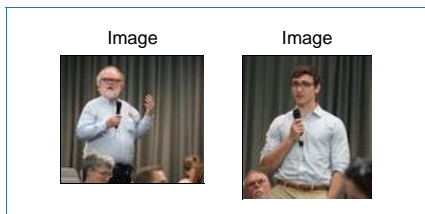
"I am confident that, with our committee, its great co-chairs and our process, we will attract a great new president to the University of Illinois (and it won't be me)," wrote Kennedy, who was unavailable for comment Wednesday.

Kennedy was first appointed to the UI board by Gov. Pat Quinn in September 2009 after several members resigned in wake of an admissions scandal. His fellow board members have annually elected him chair. Kennedy's term on the board is up in January.

The search committee for the next president is co-chaired by trustee Pam Strobel, a member of the board's executive committee, and UI physics professor Doug Beck. Two other trustees, James Montgomery and Rick Estrada, sit on the 19-member committee.



Photo by: Rick Danzl/The News-Gazette
Panel member Doug Beck answers a question during a town hall meeting at Beckman Institute in Urbana Wednesday June 25, 2014 to gather input about the University of Illinois' next president.



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"There are no names of current trustees who have been nominated or expressed a willingness to do this," Strobel said Wednesday after attending a forum in Urbana. The event was held to gather input from the campus community.

Although the Kennedy rumor has been quelled, it is true the university will consider "nontraditional" candidates for the position. That includes people who haven't always followed the typical career path in higher education, advancing from provost to

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chancellor to president.

Beck cited Rebecca Blank as an example. The former acting secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce was appointed chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison last year. Blank held several positions in higher education prior to working at the federal agency.

At the public forum Wednesday afternoon, UI Spanish professor Joyce Tolliver, a former chair of Urbana's Academic Senate, asked the search committee to focus on potential candidates who have an academic background. She said those candidates understand the culture of shared governance, which is the concept of faculty and staff advising administration and participating in discussions and decisions.

What many on campus learned after the short-lived tenure of former president Michael Hogan was "it's absolutely essential the president of this university be truly committed to shared governance," she said. During Hogan's presidency, some faculty criticized his leadership and management of the university and they opposed his centralization efforts.

"It would be extremely difficult, I think, to find someone who has that commitment and understanding (of shared governance) who does not have an academic background," Tolliver said.

Strobel said she tends to agree, "and yet at this stage anyway we are truly, truly being open to nominations of people who might come from a nonacademic background. We're not going to exclude them at this point in the process."

Said Beck: "Inevitably, someone who is different is going to generate more discussion but at this stage we're not excluding any categories or backgrounds."

Strobel chaired the search that led to Hogan's hiring and, in response to a remark Wednesday by retired professor Bill Brewer — who likened Hogan's tenure to "an airplane crash" — she admitted the hire "obviously was not the right choice" for the UI.

"I am working as hard as I can to deconstruct what we did," she said of that search.

"If something hasn't worked out, you'd be foolish not to examine what went wrong or what could we have done better. In the case of the example at hand, one of the things we can do a better job of is expanding the people we talk to, to gain more information about the overall experiences of that individual," she said.

This time around, the search committee will gather more research about a candidate, and use every tool possible to develop a complete picture of a candidate, Strobel said. She did not rule out using personality tests in the process. No final decision has been made in that matter, she said, but she does want a discussion among the search committee about it.

Strobel, a former executive with Exelon Corp., said she has used them in her own work with hiring people in key positions and has found that such tests can provide additional information on the style of how a person operates.

Up next

The presidential search committee will next meet July 11 in Urbana. At that meeting, members of the committee are expected to hear from President Bob Easter about the position and from Jim Applegate, the executive director of the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

The public forums held this week in Springfield, Chicago and Urbana have been taped and the comments will be forwarded to members of the search committee. In addition to co-chair Pam Strobel and Doug Beck, who ran the forums, there were three members of the search committee at Wednesday's forum in Urbana: Professors Roy Campbell and Nick Burbules and academic professional Kostas Yfantis.

Members of the committee will soon talk with current and retired chancellors and presidents and heads of national organizations like the National Academy of Arts & Sciences, asking for their advice, their view of the higher education "landscape" and their views of potential candidates, Beck said.

The committee also will soon conduct research on candidates.

About 60 candidates have been nominated from across the campuses and another

approximately 60 names have been gathered from various lists, Beck said.

He expects interviews with semifinalists to be held mid-semester and a set of finalists' names will be recommended to the board of trustees sometime later in the semester.

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