
Naming of next UI president: 'I anticipate it would not be very long'

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The next University of Illinois president, whoever it is, will walk into an office full of challenges.

A state awash in red ink. The prospect of significant budget cuts without an income tax extension. Precarious credit ratings. A decline in research funding. Tuition rates beyond the reach of many families.

All of those issues were on the table when UI officials interviewed candidates to replace President Bob Easter, who is set to retire June 30.

"I think it's going to be a challenging position," said physics Professor Douglas Beck, co-chair of the 19-member presidential search committee.

Beck spoke to The News-Gazette on Thursday as UI trustees deliberated in closed session about their choice for the next president, along with other personnel matters.

Beck and other UI officials declined to say whether the board made a decision Thursday, but an announcement could come as early as this week.

The board's original goal was to make a selection before Thanksgiving, and finalists were interviewed on Tuesday. Trustees spent more than five hours total in closed session Thursday, adjourned quickly after the executive session ended and left with little comment.

"At this point, there's nothing to be told," Trustee Edward McMillan said Friday. "I anticipate it would not be very long."

He and other officials declined to say how many finalists were interviewed or provide details on the candidates themselves. The committee started with about 200 names to consider.

UI spokesman Tom Hardy said the search committee is on track to name a president before the semester ends and "ideally before the Thanksgiving holiday," less than two weeks away.

Beck said the committee considered non-traditional candidates during the search, and discussed whether to include people from a "pure business or pure political" background.

"We did consider some interesting possibilities that I'd say had mixed backgrounds" in academia and business or politics, he said.

Several high-profile university searches in the last few years drew on the political sector, including former Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels at Purdue University and former secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano at the University of California system in 2013. Florida State University recently hired state Sen. John Thrasher as its next president.

Several Big Ten hires this year, however, went to candidates from academia, at Ohio State, Penn State and Michigan.

Beck, who co-chaired the search committee with Trustee Pamela Strobel, said they adopted the same approach used during the chancellor's search that led to the hiring of Phyllis Wise in 2011. That involved having "multiple conversations" with every serious candidate.

"Of all the people we were most interested in, Pam and I both talked to them, on multiple occasions, and the committee saw them," he said.

As part of its preparations, the panel also interviewed current and former university presidents and the heads of national higher education organizations, such as the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, the Association of American Universities and the American Council on Education.

"The community is relatively small. Those folks know everybody," Beck said. "When the same names come up multiple times and people speak highly of them," that's significant, he said. All the finalists were in that category, he said.

Beck said the search committee talked with the candidates about the state's economic condition, college affordability, access and the decline in research funding nationwide.

"We weren't going to put forward anyone who we weren't completely convinced could do the job," he said.

UI officials again provided a sober look at the state's financial picture at Thursday's meeting. Losing the "temporary" income tax increases approved in 2011 would cost the state about \$2 billion in revenue, which could mean a 10.6

percent funding cut for the UI. That's \$70 million annually, according to UI Vice President and Comptroller Walter Knorr.

The UI may have to absorb more costs for employee pension and health-care benefits to help resolve the state's pension crisis, Knorr said. The state's pension debt is projected at \$100 billion, and if state courts overturn a reform measure last spring that shifted more costs to retirees, legislators may have no other choice, officials said.

Beck said universities in other states such as California and Michigan in some ways are in worse shape, hit with precipitous budget cuts with "no opportunity to see it coming."

Illinois still gets a fairly sizable portion of its funding from state government, including tuition income, but that's probably going to change, he said.

"We don't have a big window, but we have a bit of an opportunity to try to figure out a new path forward," Beck said. "We have to become much more engaged with the business community, with cultural institutions and civic institutions of the state."

Some recent Big Ten university presidential hires:

Ohio State: Dr. Michael Drake, former chancellor of University of California, Irvine

Base salary: \$800,000

Hired: June 2014

Penn State: Eric Barron, former dean at Penn State and former president of Florida State University

Base salary: \$800,000

Hired: February 2014

Michigan: Dr. Mark Schlissel, former provost at Brown University

Base salary: \$750,000

Hired: January 2014

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