

Search for UI president runs off the road

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So who are the primary stumblebums in the fiasco the search for a new University of Idaho president has become?

Are they the hired headhunters at Korn/Ferry International, who apparently failed to present the appointed search committee with candidates who wanted the job and the pay that went with it?

Are they the members of the search committee itself, who moved toward the top of the list candidates who have now rejected the job?

Or are they the members of the State Board of Education, whose dealings with the only two finalists brought to Idaho for interviews - Kansas State University Provost Duane Nellis and Montana State University Provost David Dooley - have ended with both finalists' withdrawals?

It would be unfair to choose at this point from outside the search, but of one judgment there is no doubt: As the people primarily in charge, the members of the state board cannot escape the title of stumblebums in chief.

With the announcement Monday that Dooley had joined Nellis in rejecting the job after talks with board members, the process to hire a replacement for former President Tim White turned into a debacle. One of the three second-tier finalists, Californian Ham Shirvani, removed himself in February, leaving only former Colorado State University President Larry Penley and an in-house candidate, UI Law Dean Don Burnett, still on the short list.

Burnett is a solid contender, although he was inducted to the search and presidents are rarely chosen from within their own campuses. But how Penley rose so close to the top is open to question. He has been without a post since November, when he resigned from Colorado State suddenly "to be free to pursue other positions in higher education." Nov. 5, the Denver Post broke news of his departure this way:

"Amid a growing chorus of criticism from faculty members and students, Larry Penley abruptly resigned Wednesday after more than five years as president of Colorado State University.

"On Monday, the university's Board of Governors held an impromptu executive session during which it evaluated Penley's performance. His resignation apparently is a result of that meeting."

According to the Post and other news sources in Colorado, criticism of Penley included charges of an opaque, top-down management style, excessive expansion of administration and skyrocketing tuition and student fees at a time classes were growing more crowded and less likely to be taught by tenured faculty members.

If that doesn't cause Idahoans to wonder what their statewide board of regents is looking for, Dooley's explanation for pulling out of the search should. He said he and the board "mutually agreed that our distinct visions for the role, scope and future of the University of Idaho were not the right fit at this time."

It was one thing when Nellis withdrew saying he wasn't offered enough money, but for a candidate to get this far while aiming in a different direction from the board is hard to understand.

It's time the board offered the public more explanation than President Milford Terrell's bland assurance Monday that "We will find the very best person possible to lead the University of Idaho now and in the future." This search has not been one to inspire Idahoans' confidence in the process, or in the board itself. - J.F.