

Government & Politics

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LOBBYING & HIGHER EDUCATION

Running for a Different Kind of Office

Politicians find new homes leading colleges, but does fund-raising savvy equal success?

By KARIN FISCHER

When Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida was re-elected in November 2002, few people expected his lieutenant governor, Frank T. Brogan, a rising star in state Republican politics, to leave the administration. After all, he was well positioned to succeed the term-limited Mr. Bush in 2006.

But less than a month after being sworn in for a second term, Mr. Brogan accepted the presidency of Florida Atlantic University, in Boca Raton, where he had earned a master's degree in educational administration.

"I saw it as a chance to get back home to my part of the state, to serve my alma mater, and to get back into education full time," says Mr. Brogan, a former state commissioner of education.

For Florida Atlantic, a growing 25,000-student institution spread across six campuses on the state's southeastern coast, Mr. Brogan's political experience outweighed his lack of a doctorate or college-teaching experience.

"I think we need good political access," Nancy Blosser, a trustee, said when Mr. Brogan was hired. "Obviously, he is a star in that regard."

Florida Atlantic's Board of Trustees is not alone in appointing a president known more for his political clout than academic achievements. Three of Florida's 11 public universities, including Florida Atlantic, have presidents with political backgrounds. And in recent years, search committees across the country have increasingly plucked new leaders from political ranks, including presidents for Boise State University, New Mexico Highlands University, and the University of Oklahoma, among others.

Picking a college president from government is not a new phenomenon -- Dwight D. Eisenhower was a popular war hero and potential presidential candidate when he was selected to lead Columbia University in 1948 -- but the practice appears to be growing in acceptance. Fifteen percent of college presidents now come from outside higher education, according to the American Council on Education, and in recent weeks, politically connected individuals have emerged as potential choices to lead two public higher-education systems, in North Carolina and Colorado.

No longer just the academic leader, a college president is now expected to be top executive, head fund raiser, and cheerleader in chief. The president is often the institution's top lobbyist, testifying before legislative committees, navigating regulatory hurdles, and wrangling appropriations in tough budget times.

Naturally, then, politicians' political connections, familiarity with government bureaucracy, and capacity for soliciting donations make them attractive to some colleges. While both public and private institutions have

recruited presidents from the political realm, those skills may be most important at state universities, where the effects of legislative decisions are often felt more directly.

"On the whole, higher education has lost opportunities by being too confined about the way we think about leadership," says Paul E. Lingenfelter, executive director of State Higher Education Executive Officers, an association of state officials at higher-education governing boards.

Still, Mr. Lingenfelter and others question whether statehouses breed good college leaders. Political candidates often have little understanding of the academic world and may not effectively articulate its values, like the importance of research and academic freedom, they say. Critics say legislators, who may not have experience managing anything larger than a campaign staff, may not always be able to run large and complex institutions. And they worry that colleges that emphasize the external fund-raising and legislative roles of a president risk losing sight of their core academic mission.

"There are a million subtleties in academia," says Theodore J. Marchese, a consultant with the Academic Search Consultation Service, a Washington, D.C.-based presidential-search firm. "People who devote their lives [to higher education] build great networks. They understand in their blood how it works. Outsiders often just don't know where to go for information."

Raising Money

Talbot D'Alemberte took the helm at Florida State University in 1994 and quickly found himself putting to use the political skills he had honed as a member of the Florida House of Representatives.

"Maybe the event on the calendar is a football game," says Mr. D'Alemberte, who led the university until 2003, "but what you're really doing in that time is hosting people in the box and doing legislative lobbying."

These days the biggest problem universities face is financing, says William A. Haggard, vice chairman of Florida State's Board of Trustees, who served on the search committees that selected Mr. D'Alemberte and his successor, T.K. Wetherell, a past speaker of the Florida House of Representatives. "If you don't have a president that knows the political process, you had better have a good lobbyist."

Former politicians can do more than secure public funds; they also bring experience from their campaign days raising private donations. Mr. Wetherell says he typically hits the road three days a week as part of Florida State's \$600-million capital campaign, which is scheduled to end in December. James W. Abbott, a former South Dakota state representative, announced a fund-raising drive the day he was inaugurated as president of the University of South Dakota, in 1997.

"I thought that would be where I could make the most impact in the shortest time," Mr. Abbott says.

Knowing the Political Process

One reason many powerful lawmakers are looking to college presidencies as second careers is that in recent years, several states have adopted term limits, leaving politicians without jobs, says Julie Bell, education-program director at the National Conference of State Legislatures. "We have seen it to be a rather common route," Ms. Bell says.

Douglas A. Kristensen was speaker of the Nebraska legislature and in line to lead the national organization of state lawmakers when he resigned in June 2002 to become chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Kearney. He cited term limits as a reason for his decision.

For Mr. Kristensen, understanding the legislative process has actually proved more useful to him in his new job than political connections, since mandatory retirements mean fewer familiar faces when he returns to

the capital. "For every day you're out, there's someone else you don't know," he says.

Of course, a political background can also mean political baggage. In Massachusetts, the head of the public-university system, William M. Bulger, a former president of the State Senate and a Democrat, resigned his university post in 2003 after Gov. Mitt Romney, a Republican, threatened to eliminate his job. Mr. Abbott, who took a leave of absence from the University of South Dakota to run for governor in 2002, lost, and now has to navigate a state government presided over by his opponent.

"I'm sure I upset people," says Mr. Abbott, a Democrat, although he notes the state's Republican-dominated legislature this year set aside \$1.8-million to complete construction for a medical school on the campus.

What's more, political insiders who become presidents can face higher expectations when it comes to garnering state appropriations. After opposition by faculty members helped kill a proposed chiropractic college at Florida State University earlier this year, Governor Bush, as well as some lawmakers who supported the creation of the college, proposed slashing a \$9-million appropriation to the university, a move interpreted by many as political payback. Many faculty members worry that Florida State will end up paying a political price in the final budget, despite Mr. Wetherell's lobbying.

"It was advertised that his legislative experience would be a great asset," says Jack T. Fiorito, president of Florida State's faculty union. "Well, not yet."

Whether a candidate with a political background is the right choice ultimately may depend on the needs of the particular institution, says Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. A former lawmaker could be a good fit for a college that wants to improve its relationship with the state legislature, for example, but disastrous for a college that wishes to shore up its academic profile.

At Florida State, some faculty members were concerned that the choice of Mr. Wetherell, a former college-football player, would do little to help the university establish an academic reputation comparable to other top public universities, says Jim Cobbe, who leads the Faculty Senate there.

"People know Florida State as a football school, and they don't know what else we do," says Mr. Cobbe, who remains concerned about the university's reputation two years after Mr. Wetherell's appointment.

Mr. Callan also worries that appointments of former lawmakers may be influenced by political leaders' lobbying or result from a search process that is less than serious. He points to Parris N. Glendening, who, while governor of Maryland, expressed interest in becoming chancellor of the state's university system. Mr. Glendening ultimately withdrew his name after critics said it would be a conflict of interest for him to be considered because he had either appointed or reappointed all the members of the system's Board of Regents, which was to make the selection.

"I worry about politicizing of the process," Mr. Callan says. "It looks like patronage."

A Way Station

With former lawmakers keeping their fund-raising and lobbying muscles limber as college presidents, some campus observers have also questioned whether the job, particularly at prominent public institutions, is just a way station to a future political career. At Florida Atlantic, trustees sought to eliminate concerns that Mr. Brogan might use the presidency as a political steppingstone to run for governor or the U.S. Senate in 2006 by signing him to a six-year contract.

At the University of North Florida, Judith L. Solano, a professor of computer science who leads the

university's faculty association, was one of the loudest critics when the Board of Trustees there considered naming John A. Delaney, the mayor of Jacksonville and a friend of Governor Bush, as the university's ninth president in 2003.

"I felt that for our university he was not the best bet," Ms. Solano says. "We were on the cusp of changing and growing, and I thought it was important to have someone with experience in higher education to guide us."

Mr. Delaney got the job, though, and now Ms. Solano is one of his biggest boosters. She praises the president's accessibility, energy, and willingness to defer to others on many academic matters.

"He didn't come charging in here like a bull in a china shop trying to change everything," Ms. Solano says.

For his part, Mr. Delaney, who read broadly about college leadership before taking the job, says he stepped back and tried to take his time learning the university culture. He initially focused on areas he felt were his strengths as a former mayor, working to increase the university's share of state appropriations and seeking to save money by increasing efficiency. The university ended up saving more than \$1.2-million, a portion of which will go to faculty pay raises, Mr. Delaney said.

College presidents who do not come from traditional academic backgrounds say one of the biggest challenges is learning about the nuances of university life. Mr. Abbott, for example, says he inadvertently offended faculty members early in his tenure at South Dakota when he left university-senate meetings as soon as he had delivered his report, as he had done at legislative hearings.

He says he had to trust his academic vice president to "tell me when I'm flat out all wet."

Although some politicians-turned-presidents do have academic backgrounds -- Mr. Wetherell holds a doctorate in educational administration and previously served as president of Tallahassee Community College -- many say they rely on a strong academic vice president or provost to handle academic matters.

But the college can lose out if a president is "intimidated by or stays out of academic life," says Mr. Marchese, of the Academic Search Consultation Service. "That means there is a whole level where presidential leadership is lacking."

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