

LET THE DEANS SPEAK: DECANAL PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL  
RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

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By

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## ABSTRACT

In spite of the critical role academic deans play in universities (Del Favero, 2006; Dunning, Durham, Aksu, & Lange, 2007; Jackson, 2004), most of what we know about the Canadian deanship we know from an institutional perspective, including our understanding of the recruitment and selection process (Lavigne, 2018). This study explores how successful decanal candidates experience their recruitment processes, how these experiences inform their decision making within that process, and how the process can be improved to support the success of a new dean. Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to gather data about the recruitment process from a variety of directly related groups. Provosts, deans, and search firm representatives participated in this study. Each study participant had been involved in a recent decanal recruitment and selection process in one form or another. Eight of the 13 participants were sitting deans.

Participants all agreed that the search firm is central to the experience of candidates in a decanal search. Provosts, search firm representatives, and candidates alike confirmed that one of the firm's most important roles, in addition to their support of the search committee in the first stages of position profile and job description development, is initial outreach to candidates. Provosts also highlighted the important role of the search committee, although deans and search firm representatives did not always agree. Search politics, and their influence on the conduct and experience of a search were highlighted in various forms by all participants. The pivotal role of the provost was also noted.

By expanding upon Harvey et al.'s (2013) Reference Point Theory it became possible to further our understanding of how search firm representatives and other actors influence a decanal candidate's decision making within a search. The resultant findings have several important

implications for policy, practice, and theory. Given the importance candidates place on search firm representatives and the influence they have on the decisions candidates make within the search process, it is important for institutions to consider alignment between the philosophy of a firm and that of the hiring college, faculty, or wider institution. Institutions and provosts in particular also need to be sure that search firms have access to all of the details, pleasant or otherwise, about both the hiring college or faculty and the decanal position itself. A well-informed search firm representative can more accurately explain the position to candidates as they move through the search. A well-informed candidate can make better-informed decisions as part of that search. In future, including the perspectives of individuals beyond Western Canadian institutions would provide further insights into the decanal recruitment process on a national scale.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Universities are important social institutions (Austin & Jones, 2016) and intensely complex political organizations (Gmelch et al., 1999). As a result, leadership roles within universities, particularly mid-level leadership positions, are challenging (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Given this contextual complexity, it is essential to have robust recruitment processes that facilitate the placement of leaders who can succeed within a particular position and organization.

Academic deans are a central component of universities (DeAngelis, 2014; Rosser et al., 2003). However, the exact nature of their role varies based on one's perspective. If the dean's position is considered relative to the specific college or faculty they lead, they are generally understood to be senior administrators (Arntzen, 2016; Perlmutter, 2018; Wood, 2004). When considered in terms of the wider university, deans are typically thought of as mid-level leaders (Austin & Jones, 2016; Boyko & Jones, 2010; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Rosser et al., 2003). In spite of the conflicting perceptions of the dean's positionality, scholars agree that the dean is a central component of a university's leadership team (Del Favero, 2006; Dunning et al., 2007; Jackson, 2004).

As integral university leaders, deans are therefore fundamental to a university's success (Del Favero, 2006). Resulting from this centrality, the recruitment, selection, and retention of qualified deans who can successfully navigate external and internal processes and personalities is vital to the overall success of universities. However, academic understanding of the process by which universities currently recruit academic deans is dated and limited (Lavigne, 2016). Additionally, our partial understanding of the process itself is largely from the perspective of the institutions who hire deans rather than the decanal candidates who are the subjects of the recruitment and selection process (Boyko & Jones, 2010; Lavigne, 2016).

Gaining a more in-depth understanding of the process by which academic deans are recruited and selected in Canadian universities from the perspective of deans themselves is important for two reasons. First, there is a dearth of recent scholarship examining the recruitment and selection of academic deans grounded upon empirical data (Lavigne, 2016). There are a few theoretical and anecdotal arguments that highlight the importance of developing an understanding of how this process is carried out (Harvey, Shaw, McPhail, & Erickson, 2013), but to date these have largely focused on the Australian context, and no empirical data was uncovered as part of the subsequent literature review that supports such contentions. There is limited contemporary scholarship on the recruitment and selection of academic deans at Canadian universities in particular (Lavigne, 2016). Although some studies explore academic leadership in a Canadian context they are few and far between (Boyko & Jones, 2010).

Furthermore, none of the studies found that examine decanal recruitment focus on the process by which academic deans are recruited and selected. There are some studies that examine the process of presidential searches (Ferrare & Marchese, 2010; Howells, 2011; McLaughlin, 1990; Nason, 1984; Turpin, 2012), and while there is some applicability of the findings of these studies to the recruitment of academic deans, they are not universally applicable to decanal searches. While several institutional actors are involved in both processes, the overlap is not total, and for those who participate in both types of searches, their roles and level of involvement differ.

Second, while there is a definite lack of scholarly literature about the process overall, even less is known about the experience of the individuals who are at the center of the search process – the candidates themselves. By exploring how candidates perceive, experience, and recollect the recruitment process, it may be possible to develop an understanding of what attracts

candidates to certain positions. We might also begin to appreciate how institutions can work to support highly sought-after candidates throughout the recruitment process and how the process itself can position the ultimately successful candidate for initial success.

## **Background**

### **The Dean**

Academic deans are the individuals formally responsible for both the academic and administrative operations of a particular collection of schools or departments within a university (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009). Deans play a vital role in universities, and numerous constituencies attempt to exert their influence over decanal searches. The choice of a new dean has significant implications. Once appointed, an academic leader can choose to pursue a multitude of priorities ranging from an aggressive change agenda to merely maintaining the status quo (Hendrickson et al., 2013). As the needs of the institution will largely drive whether a new leader will be expected to pursue substantive change, maintain status quo, or anything in between (Hollenbeck, 1994), universities require different types of decanal candidates in different periods of their history. Universities need to find contextually appropriate deans to ensure success (Martin, 1993), but this success is largely reliant on how committees and search firms convey the needs of a college to candidates, and how candidates interpret and make decisions based on that information.

As senior leaders within their college (Morris, 1981) and mid-level academic leaders within the wider institution (Rosser et al., 2003), academic deans are largely responsible for facilitating the academic agenda of Canadian universities (Boyko & Jones, 2010). Their institutional fit, success, or lack thereof, thus affects students, staff, faculty, and senior administrators in a variety of ways. As academic deans are responsible for the oversight of the



core functions of a university as delivered through a college or faculty, they play a substantive role in determining how the institutional mission is carried out on a day-to-day basis (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009).

### **Decision Making in the Academy**

Influences on the decanal recruitment and selection process are varied and intricate. To understand how stakeholders can influence a candidate's perceptions of a particular position or institution it is essential to consider the Canadian academic environment in which these discussions and decisions take place. By employing Reference Point Theory (RPT) (Harvey et al., 2013), it is possible to gain a detailed understanding of how candidate decisions are influenced and shaped by the individuals involved in the recruitment and selection process. A close look at the specifics of the recruitment and selection procedures universities typically follow, including the role of the executive search firm, will further assist in enhancing this understanding given the contextual importance of process (Adrianna Kezar & Eckel, 2004).

### **The Executive Search Firm**

It is likewise crucial to develop a better understanding of the role executive search firms play in the recruitment and selection of academic deans. The first formal interactions a candidate has in the recruitment or even pre-recruitment phase of the process is often with an executive search firm (Lavigne, 2018). While Lavigne (2018) has demonstrated the influence external search firms can have on the development of job advertisements, over-emphasizing the managerial role of the dean's position in the Canadian university, the scholarly literature is largely silent on how these firms impact a candidate's perception of a given position beyond the job profile.

## **The Decanal Search Committee**

Decanal search committees also play an important role in conveying the particularities of a position to short-listed candidates (Harvey et al., 2013). Using all of the resources at their disposal, they work diligently to highlight attributes of the organization they feel will impact a dean in their role (Harvey et al., 2013). Even if we assume that all search committee members intend at the outset of their efforts to provide as accurate a description as possible of the organizational context in which the successful candidate will work, one search committee member's organizational reality may be significantly different from another's, or from that of a dean. Thus, the decanal candidate's awareness of an institution, and thus their decision-making frame, is to a large extent determined by the perspectives of search committee members and their interpretation of these perspectives (Harvey et al., 2013).

The experiences of decanal candidates in the Canadian context varies by institution, province, and region (Boyko & Jones, 2010). The constitution of search committees, the involvement of an executive recruitment firm, how widely the candidates can interact with both internal and external constituents all influence the perceptions a candidate develops of an institution and a particular position. Understanding how decanal candidates perceive and make decisions within the recruitment process affects numerous constituents both internal to and external of the university.

## **Recruitment in Other Contexts**

In spite of the lack of scholarly exploration of the decanal recruitment and selection process, there are studies of other, similar practices in both university and corporate contexts that can inform that of the decanal search. There is a recent body of knowledge focusing on the recruitment of university presidents (Brockbank, 2017; Ferrare & Marchese, 2010; Goldsmith,

1989; Howells, 2011; McLaughlin, 1990; Nason, 1980; Pulliams, 2016; Turpin, 2012) that has relevance to the recruitment and selection of academic deans. While the role of a president differs significantly from that of a dean, the context in which they are asked to lead is similar, and thus we can draw parallels between the two processes to understand better how an institution ultimately selects a new dean. However, while there is some transferability of findings from the context of other senior administrators on university campuses, the contextual specificity of a dean's search in comparison to that of a president does limit the degree to which such discourses can inform thinking beyond these specific contexts. Furthermore, the difference in organizational positionality also limits the transferability of findings. The political environment of a campus and where a particular position falls within that political dynamic impacts how a leader operates (Engwall, 2014).

Concern over the recruitment and selection of senior leaders within an organization is not exclusive to academia. Large public organizations and corporations also realize the importance of recruiting and selecting leaders who can successfully navigate the context of their host organization or institution (Gilmore & Turner, 2010). While the context of leading within a university does differ from a large corporation or other publiclyfunded organization, there are some similarities in the means by which these leaders are both recruited and selected, and the expectations of them once they begin in the role. These similarities are necessary to explore as the literature on corporate recruitment is well-developed in comparison to that of academic recruitment (Jackson, 2004).

### **Purpose**

In spite of the critical role academic deans play in universities, most of what we know about the Canadian deanship we know from an institutional perspective, including our

understanding of the recruitment and selection process (Lavigne, 2018). Assumedly, if the goal of a recruitment process is to identify the most contextually appropriate candidate for a given position at a particular time within a specific organization, an understanding of how the candidates at the centre of the activities perceive the process would be beneficial. The purpose of this study is to understand how we can enhance the decanal recruitment process based on the experiences and perceptions of successful candidates. The first phase of this study included gathering insights from two major constituent groups involved in the decanal recruitment and selection process, namely provosts who have served as search committee chairs and executive search firm representatives. The information they provided helped to frame and contextualize candidate experiences. The second phase included gathering perspectives from successful decanal candidates.

### **Research Questions**

Developing an in-depth understanding of how selected deans experience decanal searches leads to a fuller awareness of recruitment and selection practices overall. The following overarching questions and supporting subquestions guided this study:

1. Given the elements of a decanal search and the experiences of candidates, how can the process be enhanced to support the likelihood of deans' success?
  - a. How do the interactions with decanal search committees in the recruitment process shape selected deans' perceptions of the organizational and governance context of the hiring university?
  - b. How do selected deans perceive the role of the external search firm, particularly as it relates to their experiences as candidates?

- c. How do selected deans compare their lived experiences of the deanship to the details of the position and expectations of the successful candidate as communicated during the search process?
2. How can Reference Point Theory (RPT) inform our understanding of decanal candidates' decision-making during the recruitment and selection process?

### **Significance**

Although an integral player in the senior leadership of a university, the role of academic deans in the Canadian context has remained mostly overlooked by scholars. Some scholarly attention has focused on the position itself and has concentrated on accountabilities and changes in expectations of the academic leaders of colleges over time (Boyko & Jones, 2010; Lavigne, 2018). However, how these administrators are recruited and selected has received only marginal consideration. Furthermore, the scholarship that does exist on decanal recruitment and selection is only from the institutional perspective. The candidate's voice and perspective is absent. This exploration of the experiences and perceptions of successful candidates thus enhances and broadens the current scope of our understanding. The means by which the increased involvement of executive search firms has altered the fundamental relationship between candidates and the search committee beyond the position advertisement also remains unexplored until now.

While there is a limited body of literature that explores the recruitment of deans specifically, it is neither focused on the Canadian context, the candidate experience, nor empirically grounded (Boyko & Jones, 2010; Usher et al., 2009). Enhancing the limited literature on the recruitment and selection of academic deans within Canadian universities is thus an important endeavor as it fills a portion of the literature gap that exists. By focusing on the

experience of successful decanal candidates a more fulsome understanding of the search process overall is possible.

The general lack of scholarly literature focusing on the process of decanal selection has led to various assumptions of how the process plays out. For example, Harvey et al. (2013) supposed that the increasing frequency with which deans do not complete their initial appointment term was related to the increased involvement of external search firms in the selection process. Boyko and Jones (2010), in their overview of the Canadian decanal recruitment process, purported that institutional policies and procedures alone guide the conduct of searches. These assumptions, both positive and negative, can have a significant influence on not only how the process is carried out, but also on the manner in which a new academic dean is welcomed, supported, and trusted in their new role. Lack of clarity over the process, who is involved and who has power in it, can impact both collegial and university governance (Austin & Jones, 2016).

As the central actors in the process, candidate perceptions are vital considerations for institutions, search committees, and the executive search firms who support these committees. How candidates make decisions in this process, and the influences on these decisions may also serve as a means of enticing high-quality candidates to a position. Finally, combining the understanding of the recruitment and selection process with the expectations of a new dean allow for some insights to be drawn as to how the recruitment process prepares successful candidates for the dean's office.

Using RPT as a means of better understanding decanal candidate decisions within the recruitment process is also novel. Although Harvey et al. (2013) theorized that RPT could be used to understand how decanal search committees make decisions, the framework lends itself to

individual decision-making processes within organizations as well. In addition to better understanding the experiences and perceptions of successful decanal candidates, RPT enables an understanding of how these candidates ultimately make decisions in light of the information they receive from provosts, search firm representatives, and search committee members. Furthermore, RPT allows for an exploration of how the previous experience of candidates shape their perceptions of both the process itself and their interactions with committee members.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The University of Saskatchewan has employed me in various professional roles for just over nine years. In that time, I have worked for five deans in two colleges, and have experienced, albeit from a relative distance, two protracted decanal searches. As a result, and for the purposes of this study, I adopt an insider-outsider positionality. I am an insider of post-secondary educational systems and organizations, but an outsider in that I have never been a dean nor been directly involved in the search for a new dean.

What struck me throughout both of the decanal searches I observed firsthand was the process itself. Each search took longer than expected to get to the point where short-listed candidates were brought in for in-person interviews and college-wide presentations, and in both cases, the candidates who had made the initial shortlist were neither suited for nor particularly interested in the specific positions for which they interviewed. Both times employment offers were made, candidates turned the offers down, and the process repeated itself. I began to wonder how a not-inexpensive process, with many smart, pragmatic people involved, got to this point, and whether these were isolated incidents or not? Why were the candidates who were offered deanships by the Board of Governors ultimately turning them down?

Deans are an integral component of the university (Boyko & Jones, 2010). However, as an administrator participating in the recruitment process, albeit from a distance, it was evident that the various constituents who were involved in the selection process, from committee members to administrators, the acting or outgoing dean, and the wider faculty complement, all understood the particularities of the recruitment and selection process differently. There was always a great deal of buzz around who the candidates were and were not, but not much discussion around how the committee established a short-list and how the short-listing of candidates could affect the next stages of the selection process. Furthermore, aside from ensuring each candidate had relatively similar on-campus experiences, there appeared to be little interest in how the process was perceived and experienced by the candidates.

The possibility of a candidate being offered a decanal appointment but then turning it down was also never really discussed. In one situation when a candidate received a formal offer from the Board, but following a return visit to campus turned it down, there was a sense of utter shock and almost disdain that anyone offered the position would not accept it gratefully. There was certainly no substantive consideration given to how we as a college and as an institution might improve our processes to ensure we support candidates throughout the entirety of the recruitment process, whether we are presenting them with as well-rounded an institutional perspective as possible, or the extent to which we actively 'sell' the position.

As I progressed through the initial stages of my Ph.D. coursework, I came to think of the decanal recruitment selection process in terms of power. There are several power relationships at play in the process, both amongst on-campus stakeholders and between on-campus and off-campus constituents. These various power relationships can shape a particular candidate's experience of the process and ultimately their choice of accepting the employment offer if they



are the selected candidate. Whether such influences are perceived as positive or negative, it is important first to recognize the impact such power dynamics can have and then to raise awareness of these influences through such discussions.

In addition to better understanding the influencers on recruitment practices, understanding decanal recruitment and selection from the perspective of successful candidates furthers our understanding of the process overall. Elevating the profile of the recruitment and selection process also serves in part to highlight the critical and central role deans play in the general running of Canadian universities. Particularly as universities evolve and shift in attempts to stay relevant in an age of online delivery and increased competition, deans are expected to do more, fundraise more, and be increasingly visible (Hunsaker & Bergerson, 2018; Adrianna Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Rich, 2006). Given this situation, institutions have to work diligently to recruit top talent to the deanship, that is to sell the position.

These are the understandings, opinions, and biases I bring to this study, but my previous academic and professional background also influences my approach. Past experiences shape our interpretation of many of the social phenomena we experience (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). My first two academic degrees were in history, and it is interesting to note how this has shaped my approach to the study of educational administration. Interpretation, or hermeneutics, is also common in history, and I think this is, in part, why I am interested in understanding how successful decanal candidates interpret both the verbal and non-verbal communication they have with various institutional representatives during the search and selection process. My professional background also plays a role in my positionality. While I would by no means claim to be a political insider of the academy, I have enough experience working in higher educational institutions to know that things are not always as they seem, nor does everyone see and

understand things in the same way. Furthermore, I am always interested in what is not being said, or how the actuality of a situation differs from the official description.

### **Description of the Study**

An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the experiences of eight successful decanal candidates helped to develop a deep and rich understanding of the decanal recruitment and selection process in Canadian universities from the candidate perspective. Insights from three provosts and two representatives of external search firms further contextualized the individual candidate experiences. IPA allows for a methodical exploration of personal experiences (Tomkins, 2017). Leveraging components of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, IPA provides researchers with an opportunity to both raise awareness of and better understand the lived experiences of others (Noon, 2018).

IPA's primary focus is on the meaning individuals make in a particular context (Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2003). As such, employing IPA in the exploration of decanal search procedures supported the understanding of the process from the perspectives of the individuals central to the proceedings. Assumedly, the ultimate goal of decanal recruitment is to identify high-quality candidates who will flourish and thrive in a given role. Understanding how candidates experience and perceive recruitment activity is an essential aspect of enhancing our awareness of the process overall. Through increased awareness of the candidate experience, we might be able to augment recruitment practices to entice top-quality applicants and thus increase the likelihood of hiring the best possible candidate for a given position.

IPA studies typically use semi-structured interviews as a means of exploring the meanings individuals construct (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In this study, semi-structured

interviews enabled candidates and search firm representatives alike to convey the particularities and individual nature of their experiences within an overall framework that allowed for the extraction of common themes and comparison. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that interviews are a superior means of reconstructing past experiences. Interviews also enable the collection of facts, the identification of feelings and incentives, and are an opportunity for individuals to explain their own previous behavior (Silverman, 1993). In short, interviews provide a venue in which research participants can not only share their past experiences but convey how they perceived those experiences (Merriam, 2009). The interviews through which data was collected for this study took place either via telephone or an online video conference platform, dependant on the participants' preferences. Based on the information shared in these interviews, Reference Point Theory (RPT) provided a framework to support the analysis of candidate decision making.

### **Delimitations**

This study explored the experiences of and perceptions held by eight decanal candidates of the recruitment and selection process. By focusing only on the experiences of applicants who were ultimately successful in their application for a deanship a more fulsome understanding of what constitutes a successful process is possible. While the stories, experiences, and perceptions of academic deans at Canadian universities was the primary focus of this study, interviews with two executive search firm representatives who have direct involvement in decanal searches contextualized the experience of individual candidates into the wider Canadian landscape. External, executive search firms, specializing in academic searches, have an enviable vantage point in that they have experience working with many different colleges in several universities and are thus able to add perspective to the stories of individual decanal candidates. The goal of incorporating the views of the search firm was not to corroborate or contract those of the

successful candidates. However, as firms are an integral aspect of the search process, they were able to speak to their role in attracting candidates to particular position postings and to their role in shaping the candidate experience overall.

Provosts constituted the third subset of study participants. Three provosts shared their experiences of decanal searches. As chairs of decanal search committees they have significant power over the search process, and were able to share an institutional perspective on the process of searching for a dean.

### **Limitations**

Participants will have their own motivations for participating in this study. Those motivations may have limited the information and perspectives they shared. The simple fact that the candidates who were interviewed were ultimately successful in the process also influences their perception of the process. Time may also have reduced the strength of feelings they had during the actual recruitment process or the clarity of those experiences. In spite of the limitations of interviewing deans about their experiences as decanal candidates, they remain the best means by which we can better understand the process from the perspective of the candidate.

The willingness of search firms to openly share their insights and thoughts might also have had a limiting influence on data collection for this study as concerns of reputation, confidentiality, and market positioning undoubtedly influenced their willingness and ability to share details of certain aspects of their role. However, this study also served as an opportunity for search firm representatives to promote themselves and the value they add to the recruitment process. As academics are generally disquieted by the involvement of external search firms in the recruitment and selection process of academic leaders (Harvey et al., 2013), scholarly exploration of their perceptions of the process may help to at least reduce some of that angst.

## **Assumptions**

I believe that we develop varied, subjective meanings of our reality (Creswell, 2014), and that individuals have agency (Humphrey, 2013). I see reality as constructed based on the meanings and understandings humans develop through social interactions and experiences in the wider world (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Thus the diversity of perspectives we have is the result of each of us constructing the meaning of our realities based on individual experiences.

Additionally, I have my own views on the current state of the decanal recruitment and selection process. I assume that the formal position profiles or descriptions do not accurately reflect the day-to-day work of a contemporary dean. These views are based on my individual positionality, experiences, and perceptions. However, by recognizing these preconceived assumptions, I am confident that they did not bias the research process or findings; this was particularly important when conducting interviews. I want the stories and experiences of successful candidates and search firm representatives to be the central focus of this work. Although fully cognizant that whatever the final findings are will at least in part be a product of my own interpretation of these stories and experiences, I am hopeful that interviewees were able to tell their story and see their thoughts reflected in the final dissertation.

The central assumption of IPA that impacted this study is that research participants are able to adequately, coherently, and truthfully convey their experiences and their perceptions of those experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). A subsequent assumption of IPA as a methodology is that the researcher can engage deeply and meaningfully enough in the participant's world to become an insider of that world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). However, for this to be achievable, the researcher must be able to successfully employ a double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2003). For example, as a successful decanal candidate is attempting to make sense of their own

experience through the interview process, the researcher is making sense of the candidate's sense-making. For this to be possible, the researcher must develop a means of limiting the impact of their own perceptions and assumptions as the research participant shares their story.

### **Definitions**

A number of terms are presented in this study to convey particular concepts. While some of these terms are circumstance- and perspective-specific, others are general and may and often have alternate connotations dependent on the context. Below, these concepts are defined within the confines of this study in an attempt to clarify their usage in the pages that follow.

*Academic Dean.* Academic deans are the individuals formally responsible for both the academic and administrative operations of a particular collection of schools or departments within a university (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009). Deans have been understood by scholars to be both middle managers or mid-level leaders (Austin & Jones, 2016; Boyko & Jones, 2010; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Rosser et al., 2003) and senior administrators (Arntzen, 2016; Perlmutter, 2018; Wood, 2004). While these notions may appear to be in conflict, they are perhaps more so representative of the assessor's own positionality rather than the specific nature of the decanal role. When considered in the context of a College, deans are senior administrators. However, if considered in terms of the hierarchy of the wider university, deans are middle managers.

*Contextually appropriate dean.* A contextually appropriate dean fits within a given organization. Person-Organization (P-O) fit as Kristof (1996) highlighted is "the compatibility between people and organizations" (p. 4). This compatibility is evident when an individual possesses the skills, abilities, and experiences necessary to meet the needs of the organization. (Kristof, 1996).

*Executive search firm.* An external executive search firm performs both recruitment and search functions in support of a university's search committee. Executive search firms differ from recruitment consultancies, selection consultancies, and executive recruitment consultancies as used in the United Kingdom and Europe in that whereas these consultancies find, recruit, and select individuals on an organization's behalf (Clark, 1992), executive search firms support an organizational process and are not responsible for the ultimate candidate selection.

*External Constituents.* Individuals involved in an institutional process who are not formally employed by that organization.

*Internal Constituents.* Individuals involved in an institutional process who are formally (whether acting or appointed) employed by that organization.

*Organizational culture.* Schein (2010) argued that culture is learned by a group as it evolves. Turpin (2012) adapted Schein's (2010) definition to the context of a university. For the purposes of this study, organizational culture is understood as "the deeply rooted nature of the organization that is a result of long-held formal and informal systems, rules, traditions, and customs" (Turpin, 2012, p. 16).

*Reference point.* Individuals use specific targets or reference points in their decision-making processes (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996). When considered in relation to individual decision-making within organizations, these reference points are influenced by new and relevant criteria, institutional ethos, and previous individual experience (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996; Harvey et al., 2013).

*Search committee.* An institutional committee comprised of faculty, senior administrators, students, and external stakeholders as appointed by the provost or president

(dependent on institutional context) for a single search. Institutional policy and procedure documents typically outline the makeup of such committees (U of A, 2013; UBC, 2013; U of T, 2003; York, 2018).

*Success.* Definitions of ‘success’ are numerous. In this study, success will be defined as a contextually-specific phenomenon (Arntzen, 2016) dependent on one’s vantage point (Usher et al., 2009).

*Successful decanal candidate.* A successful decanal candidate is one who is ultimately successful in the hiring process.

### **Summary and Organization of Subsequent Chapters**

The recruitment of academic deans is central to the success of universities (Del Favero, 2006). However, our understanding of decanal recruitment in the Canadian context is incomplete (Lavigne, 2016). Developing a detailed understanding of the process by which institutions attract and select deans through the experiences and perceptions of successful candidates can therefore both further our awareness of recruitment practices and enhance institutional decanal recruitment activity.

This dissertation includes five chapters. In the current chapter, I present the central concerns of the study. Chapter Two is a review of relevant literature related to the decision-making in the university, the deanship, presidential and corporate search practices, and decanal recruitment. In Chapter Three I describe the methodology and methods used in this study. Chapter Four includes the full findings of this study. Finally, Chapter Five comprises a summary of findings; discussion of the findings in relation to relevant literature; and implications for policy, practice, theory, and future research.



## CHAPTER TWO

The overarching purpose of this study is to examine decanal recruitment and selection processes in Canadian universities from the perspective of successful decanal candidates, executive search firm representatives, and provosts. The recruitment and selection of academic deans in Canada has received little recent attention from scholars (Lavigne, 2016). Furthermore, there is a lack of attention given to how candidates experience and perceive institutional recruitment activity more broadly. Even though the nature of decanal searches and the context in which they take place are complex and varied, understanding how the candidates who are at the center of searches make meaning of their experiences and decisions within those experiences can help to, in part, clarify a complex and often misunderstood process.

The organizational, decision-making, and governance complexities of universities inform institutional processes (Hendrickson et al., 2013). Institutional culture further influences organizational activities (Erdem, 2016), including the recruitment of academic leaders. To achieve at least a partial understanding of the decanal recruitment and selection process, it is essential first to consider the context in which this activity takes place. An awareness of the situation, role, limitations, and expectations of a dean further enhances this contextual understanding. It is also important to consider the recruitment process itself. While relatively little scholarly literature focuses on the decanal recruitment process specifically (Lavigne, 2016), substantive bodies of research on corporate recruitment and presidential searches within the academy can inform this study. In this chapter I will explore the literature that is relevant to the study, and adds depth to the understanding of the central topics, such as the context of higher education, including institutional governance and decision making, the role of the dean, institutional culture, and the recruitment process in organizations and on campuses. I will

conclude with a presentation of Harvey, Shaw, Mcphail, and Erickson's (2013) Reference Point Theory (RPT) as a framework that has the potential to support our understanding of how candidate interactions with the search committee and external search firm influence their decision making.

## **Research Questions**

Influences on the decanal recruitment and selection process are varied and intricate. In an increasingly competitive world where global talent mobility is the order of the day, universities compete for academic leaders on an international scale (Engwall, 2014; Greenockle, 2010). As a result, search committees and institutions alike rely more heavily on external executive search firms to advertise senior positions and establish initial contact with candidates (Harvey et al., 2013; Usher, Macleod, & Green, 2009). How does this increased, outside involvement impact the experiences of candidates? Developing an in-depth understanding of how successful decanal candidates experience the search will lead to a fuller awareness of the process overall. The following questions guided this study:

1. Given the elements of a decanal search and the experiences of candidates, how can the process be enhanced to support the likelihood of deans' success?
  - a. How do the interactions with decanal search committees in the recruitment process shape selected deans' perceptions of the organizational and governance context of the hiring university?
  - b. How do selected deans perceive the role of the external search firm, particularly as it relates to their experiences as candidates?

- c. How do selected deans compare their lived experiences of the deanship to the details of the position and expectations of the successful candidate as communicated during the search process?
2. How can Reference Point Theory (RPT) inform our understanding of decanal candidates' decision-making during the recruitment and selection process?

### **Contextualizing the Dean**

#### **The University as an Organization**

Universities have evolved into one of the most complex societal organizations (Austin & Jones, 2016). The formal study of universities as organizations began in earnest in the 1960s (Hendrickson et al., 2013). Three of the most popular organizational theories to arise during this period and applied by scholars to university contexts were Cohen et al.'s (1972) organized anarchy theory, Weick's (1976) loosely coupled systems theory, and Mintzberg's (1979) theory of professional bureaucracy. Interestingly, all three models were proposed within the same decade to describe the context of modern universities.

Cohen et al. (1972) proposed their theory of organized anarchies as a description of the complex nature of universities. Organized anarchies, or universities that follow a garbage can model of decision making, are typified by three common characteristics (Cohen et al., 1972). First, organized anarchies operate based on shifting and uneasily defined preferences. Second, in an organized anarchy there is no widely held understanding amongst those internal to the organization of the processes by which decision making occurs. Third, there is no regular participation of individual organizational members in the decision-making process. Cohen et al. (1972) defined this as “fluid participation” (p. 1). In organized anarchies, organizational actors are involved sporadically in often poorly understood decision-making processes.

Very shortly thereafter, Weick (1976) identified another model. Weick contended that educational organizations could be considered as loosely coupled systems. Weick's (1976) idea of 'loose coupling' was adopted from previous work by Glassman (1973). When applied to educational institutions, this concept allows us to understand that while events or actions of and within an organization may be related, each maintains its own identity and separateness, whether physical or otherwise (Weick, 1976). The notion of loose coupling helps to explain that although the same overarching goals may motivate multiple units within a particular university, the execution of these goals will happen in different ways (Weick, 1976). For example, while the university president's office and the dean's office in a particular college may be loosely attached, this connection does not impinge on their individual unit identities. They may come together over specific projects, but this does not necessarily happen on a regular or prescribed basis.

Finally, Mintzberg (1979) proposed a model that could apply to professional bureaucracies. Mintzberg's (1979) understanding of the professional bureaucracy or adhocracy is also a valuable means of assessing decision-making in complex but stable organizational environments. Mintzberg (1979) highlighted five constituent groups that make up organizations — the operational core, strategic apex, middle, technostructure, and support staff. Hendrickson et al. (2013) further extrapolated Mintzberg's (1979) classifications to the university context and identified faculty members as the operational core, the president and vice presidents as the strategic apex, deans and department heads as the middle, professional staff as the technostructure, and custodial and maintenance staff as the support staff. This classification helps to clarify who is involved in organizational decision-making processes and the degree of this involvement.

Although each of these models differs substantially in how they portray the decision-making processes in organizations, they concur that organizations are complicated, convoluted, and difficult to understand entities. Universities easily fit into such a category, and these theories can support studies of processes that take place within them. The multifaceted and complex nature of universities also influences organizational decision making.

### **Decision Making in the Academy**

Descriptions of the decision-making processes in large organizations take several forms. Mintzberg et al. (1976) argued that a single, basic conceptual structure underlies all organizational decision-making processes, even those that ostensibly appear unstructured. However, in an examination of the decision-making process in the Canadian government, Pinfield (1986) suggested that organizational decision making can follow one of two pathways. When there is agreement amongst the decision makers within an institution about organizational goals, the progression typically follows a structured process. However, when there is no widespread agreement on organizational objectives, decision processes follow an anarchic model—that is decision makers base their decisions on inferences from the outcomes “of fortuitous combinations of problems, solutions, and participants in organizational garbage cans” (Pinfield, 1986, p. 365). The anarchic model highlights many of the contextual aspects of universities that are essential to consider when exploring decision-making processes in the academy.

There are also theoretical governance models that can help us to understand the structures of complex organizations. Weber's (1922/2002) bureaucratic model, Millett's (1962) collegial model, and Baldrige's (1971) political model each highlighted various aspects of organizations as decision-making bodies that are important to consider when exploring mid-level university

leadership. Identifying how and where decision making ultimately takes place is essential when developing an understanding of a decision-making process as central to the organization as the selection of a new academic dean.

While Weber (1922/2002) saw formal organizations as social groups committed to particular goals but structured hierarchically, Millett (1962) disagreed sharply in the case of universities. Universities, Millett argued, are more egalitarian regarding their organization. Faculty engage collegially as equal members of a single organizational entity (Millett, 1962). Baldrige (1971) maintained that neither the bureaucratic model nor the political model adequately addressed the complexity of the university. Universities are not simply either inflexible systems or calm and collegial arenas. The reality lies somewhere in between these two poles in the political acts of both internal and external constituents and the impacts these acts have on the university as an organization (Baldrige, 1971).

### **Academic governance.**

Bolman and Gallos (2011) combined theories of academic leadership and organizational learning to provide further insights into the twenty-first-century university as a decision-making organization. They used a framework developed by Bolman and Deal (1984) to create an understanding of colleges and universities as machines, families, jungles, and theaters. From this framework, they developed a catalog of the skills leaders need to be successful in this highly complex organizational structure.

The work of Bolman and Gallos (2011) is useful in that it summarized the lived experiences of senior administrators within public, non-profit universities and analyzed them through the lens of various organizational and leadership theories. While their work exclusively

focused on the American context, there is much applicability to the Canadian setting, as well. Issues academic leaders experience as a result of multiple constituencies, competing demands, collegial process, and complex governance structures transcend national boundaries. These matters are common amongst leaders at all levels within American universities in particular (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Bolman and Gallos (2011) recognized that to be strong and effective in this type of context a leader needs to be able to see one situation in multiple ways and from multiple perspectives. This ability to shift viewpoints is particularly useful when we consider university governance. As academic administrators frequently find themselves trapped between the opposing interests of senior administrators and faculty, the ability to see a particular situation from multiple perspectives is valuable (Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

Berdahl (1991), Birnbaum (1988), Kezar (1999), Kezar and Eckel (2004), Leslie and Fretwell (1996), and MacKinnon (2018) have all argued that academic governance in universities is becoming increasingly complex. To explain this complexity, Kezar and Eckel (2004) pointed to amplified pressures to engage the wider community, improve social conditions, and diversify the student body, all with fewer funds, and greater student demands. MacKinnon (2018) asserted that whereas universities historically have been thought of as ivory towers, removed and remote from the everyday influences of the broader society, contemporary universities are now more than ever immersed within the local, national, and in some cases international communities in which they situate themselves.

Austin and Jones (2016) theorized that we could understand universities as cultural entities. Adopting such a lens enables us to consider university governance as a socially constructed phenomenon that is reciprocally influenced by the structure and culture of an organization, and by the agency of those who operate within that organization (Austin & Jones,

2016). Austin and Jones contended that “the culture of a university is shaped by a confluence of internal and external forces that are interpreted to and by both internal and external actors” (p. 59). Erdem (2016) further highlighted the critical role of “values, basic assumptions and norms, leaders and heroes, symbols and language, stories and legends, ceremonies and customs” (p.257) in both the development and understanding of a university’s culture. Erdem articulated that the organizational culture of universities in general results in individual universities having unique individual cultures. The culture of a university also impacts how leaders are identified and selected, and how they function within the organization once appointed.

Antony et al. (2017) argued that universities are in many ways similar to other formalized organizations. Universities have organizational goals, employees, administrative structures and hierarchies, a specific culture, and external and internal stakeholders (Antony et al., 2017). However, universities do differ from other organizations in terms of their mission (Thelin, 2004). Hendrickson et al. (2013) challenged that there are three aspects of universities that make them different from other organizations. These differences can be differentiated at the typological, organizational, and contextual levels. At the typological level, these considerations include how the historical development and institutional mission of a particular university shapes the organization itself. Organizational level considerations include the normative behaviors that govern the culture of a university. Finally, the etiological circumstances of a specific university can help us to understand the institutional context (Hendrickson et al., 2013). The contextual diversity and complexity of universities influences both those who lead them and those who lead within them.



## **Leading in the academy.**

Eckel and Kezar (2016) further noted that the context of an institution “shapes how leaders act, the impact of those actions, and how others perceive the importance of those actions” (p.170). Birnbaum (1988) and Eckel (2003) added that the overall culture of a particular organization additionally influences governance processes. The loosely coupled nature of the university as a system impacts and limits the actual power and oversight of those who lead within it (Eckel & Kezar, 2016). As such, it is essential for leaders within the academy to be able to both understand and adapt to this complex context.

In addition to the conceptual framework of university decision-making overall promoted by Bolman and Gallos (2011), the characteristics of a specific university are also essential to consider when attempting to understand leadership within universities. Hendrickson et al. (2013) contended that effective leadership happens when leaders recognize and operate within the particular culture of the university in which they serve. However, not every skilled academic leader can fit in in every institutional context.

In addition to the environmental and situational contexts of post-secondary institutions, leadership styles and leaders themselves can also influence the execution of governance within a university. Schuster et al. (1994) stressed that leadership style impacts the effectiveness and efficacy of governance processes and decisions. An academic leader needs to be able to both adapt to the context of the university and develop and pursue a leadership style that encourages the individual members who constitute the organization to support them (Schuster et al., 1994).

Leadership in the university is generally agreed to be a process for influencing people and decision-making activities (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Gayle et al., 2003; Peterson, 1995). It is

important to note, however, that as the cultures of various universities differ from one another, so too does the process of leading within them (Gmelch & Wolverton, 2002). Hendrickson et al. (2013) argued that “universities [are] born from [an] organizational and evolutionary lineage that ranks among the oldest of humanity’s intellectual and social creations” (p. 21). In spite of this historical positioning, one of the central challenges of leadership within universities is that the context in which universities find themselves is continually changing (Gittell, 2017; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Rosser et al., 2003). To succeed in this challenging context, leaders need to understand how universities are structured and function, align their agenda with the institutional mission, and be able to identify precisely where decision-making powers rest within the organization (Hendrickson et al., 2013). Hendrickson et al. noted that while there is a substantive body of scholarship that explores leadership in higher educational settings, this is relatively narrow in scope, focusing primarily on the impact internal and external forces have on senior leaders.

Frequent changes within universities often add to structural and organizational complexities as well. Gittell (2017) contended that contemporary universities face continual pressures to change and redesign. Leaders require enhanced leadership skills to successfully navigate the pressures such organizational flux can bring. That only one-quarter of redesign efforts within post-secondary institutions are successful emphasizes the critical role a leader can play (Gittell, 2017). Gittell recommended leaders first make a case for the proposed change, lay the groundwork necessary for change, implement the change, and continue to provide ongoing leadership beyond initial implementation if an organizational shift is to be successful. While Gittell’s (2017) work does not acknowledge the impact of external or unexpected events on a

particular change process, it does highlight the importance of a leader being able to function effectively within a specific context.

The difficulties associated with leading through and during periods of change is not specific to the academic dean. Antony et al. (2017) contended that such issues and struggles are common at all levels of leadership within a university as no one person, group, or faction is ever able to control much on a given campus. As leaders settle into and become more experienced in their leadership roles, they are more often than not impressed by the limits of their positional powers and influences rather than by the extent of them (Antony et al., 2017).

The presence of faculty further adds to the organizational complexities of the university in comparison to other organizations (Antony et al., 2017). This complexity is particularly impactful for mid-level leaders as they regularly find themselves in the middle of the various competing demands and expectations of faculty and senior leaders in central administration (Antony et al., 2017). Working through the collegial process with tenured faculty in the highly unionized environment of a university is convoluted, and the dean of a college has little disciplinary power over the faculty they lead (Austin & Jones, 2016; Hendrickson et al., 2013).

### **Role of the Dean**

Boyko and Jones (2010) postulated that academic middle managers (whom they identified as deans) are ultimately responsible for ensuring universities can fulfill the increasing societal expectations of institutions of higher education and those who lead within them. The placement of this responsibility squarely on the shoulders of academic deans is understandable in that deans are arguably the most decentralized members of senior administration in the academy and thus the ones who have the most frequent interaction with the widest array of college constituents (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). However, in spite of the central role deans play, the

Canadian academic dean has largely been overlooked by scholars (Boyko & Jones, 2010; Lavigne, 2016).

Although there is a lack of contemporary literature focusing on deans working in Canada (Lavigne, 2016), Boyko and Jones (2010) developed an historical narrative that outlined the shifts in priorities in the role throughout the last half-century. Their chronicle helps us to better understand the evolution of the position into its current form. Before the 1960s, the dean's role was relatively straightforward. Deans primarily focused on academic affairs, faculty, and students. The 1960s saw the first attempts to decentralize power within the university, increasing the leadership and management responsibilities of academic deans. This shift towards a more managerial role continued into the 1970s. As Boyko and Jones (2010) noted, it was during this time that an increased focus on efficiency, or "more scholar for the dollar" began to appear regularly in the Canadian academy (p. 86). Throughout the intervening decades, the conceptualization of a dean as an administrator aligned with a university's senior leadership in opposition to department chairs and faculty also began to take hold. The evolution of the role continued into the twenty-first century, which has seen a marked increase in the perception of contemporary deans as senior administrators of the university (Austin & Jones, 2016; Boyko & Jones, 2010).

### **The Contemporary Dean**

Academic deans and the colleges they lead play a central role in the day-to-day operation of modern universities. Deans are largely responsible for driving institutional change (Del Favero, 2006). Jackson (2004) and Dunning et al. (2007) found that academic colleges are the epicenter of the majority of all administrative decisions within universities. Given this centrality

of the academic college in the modern university, the importance of the dean is certain. However, there is little commonality amongst scholars beyond this point.

Although several scholars have highlighted the importance of further exploring the role of the academic dean, few have offered a succinct definition of the position itself. Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, and Sarros (1999) asserted that “the academic deanship is the least studied and most misunderstood position in the academy” (p. 717). Whereas de Boer and Goedegebuure (2009) understood deans as *primus inter pares* (or first among equals), Wood (2004) saw academic deans as fulfilling the role of chief academic officers. Still, Rosser et al. (2003) thought of academic deans as middle managers when considered in the context of the broader university. When reflecting on his experiences as a dean, Pence (2003) concluded that the central function of the leader of an academic college was to turn “dilemmas into decisions” (p.40). Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) described deans in terms of the types of work they are expected to engage in, including planning, organizing, controlling, and leading.

Morris (1981) articulated the role of a dean in terms of responsibilities. Deans are both responsible for the stature of academic staff within a university and ensuring a specific college achieves the mandate established for it by central administration. It is this proximity to the service deliverers of a university — its faculty — that make the dean’s role unlike any other senior leadership position in the university. Bright and Richards (2001) felt that their time as deans was mostly spent attempting to “bridge the world of the faculty with the world of the administration” (p. 38). Deans are the highest officers of the university who maintain regular contact with individual members of the faculty in the execution of their formal roles (Morris, 1981).

DeAngelis (2014) went so far as to suggest that deans themselves are still mostly unclear as to what various constituents expect of them in their leadership roles. Del Favero (2006) furthered that the limited understanding deans do have of their positions is primarily established based on their past administrative experiences and former relationships with other academic leaders. The lack of clarity surrounding the role, even for a current dean, and thus the qualifications and background of those who can fulfill its requirements (DeAngelis, 2014; Del Favero, 2006), in part reveals one of the fundamental flaws of the decanal recruitment and selection process. With varying understandings and interpretations of the position and its role within the wider university, how can academic communities and search committees come together to convey the situation of the institution and college to decanal candidates?

DeAngelis (2014) advanced that the implementation of codes of professional responsibilities within institutions could assist in clarifying the role of dean and in specifying both the ethical and fiduciary duties of college leaders. Establishment of such systems would also help in the recruitment and selection process. If a higher percentage of college stakeholders are more aware of the formal expectations of a dean, they can more accurately share this information with those interested in future college leadership opportunities (DeAngelis, 2014).

### **Decanal job advertisements.**

Lavigne (2018) described contemporary deans based on information found in decanal job advertisements. In an examination of over 200 Canadian decanal job advertisements published between 2011 and 2015, Lavigne (2018) reported that universities most commonly expect deans to have leadership skills, personality, problem-solving ability, a robust scholarly record, contextually specific knowledge, values, and vision. These skills were typically described in greater detail than the role itself in the formal job advertisements. However, the most recurring

duties included in the postings reviewed were those related to collegial leadership, managerial responsibilities, and representation responsibilities (or acting as an ambassador for one's college). Fundraising, although integral, was more frequently emphasized at research-intensive universities than comprehensive universities. Furthermore, although there is the expectation that deans oversee the scholarly output of their college, they are not usually officially expected to contribute to the scholarship in their specific field of study while serving as dean (Lavigne, 2018).

### **Decanal Success**

Scholars have also explained the role of a dean in terms of an individual's success within that role (Alajoutsijärvi & Kettunen, 2016; Bess & Dee, 2008; Morris, 1981; Rich, 2006; Rosser et al., 2003). Morris (1981) argued that the success of a dean is determined by their ability to stroke, cajole, cultivate relationships with, and keep in line various constituents. To be successful in the contemporary university, deans must support and appease those above them in the vertical power hierarchy while attempting to persuade and coax autonomous faculty members within their college (Bess & Dee, 2008; Rich, 2006).

When attempting to define the role of an academic dean, it is important to consider how deans are perceived and what role those perceptions play in the collective understanding of what makes a dean successful on a particular campus. Developing a more fulsome understanding of what constitutes 'success' as a dean is not exclusive to recruitment literature. Rosser et al., (2003) argued that in light of the recent and increasing pressure on campuses to demonstrate their productivity and effectiveness there is renewed interest in formally evaluating academic deans. Based on surveys conducted in Carnegie doctoral/research-intensive universities in the western United States, Rosser et al., (2003) found that faculty and staff both perceived deans as

relatively efficacious, although faculty chairs (department heads) rated decanal effectiveness slightly higher. Individuals regarded deans of larger colleges as more effective compared to those who led smaller colleges (Rosser et al., 2003). In spite of the small sample size of this survey, the findings intimate that the group to which one belongs and the relative organizational proximity of the respondent to the dean in question impacts their perceptions of leadership — those who had less regular, professional interaction with a dean ranked them as less successful (Rosser et al., 2003).

Rosser et al.'s (2003) study demonstrated that perceptions of leadership effectiveness are measurable at both the individual and unit level. Impressions are important. As success in the role of dean is increasingly reliant on meeting the expectations of internal constituents, such findings are of significance even though they do not directly relate to the skills and abilities a dean needs to be effective in the role. A leader not only needs to be competent but also needs to be seen to be qualified (Perlmutter, 2018).

Perlmutter (2018) believed that surviving and thriving as a senior administrator in a university is primarily a result of good image management. Successful deans are expected to be in touch with their faculty, be physically present in the building, accessible as much as possible, and be seen to be caring (Perlmutter, 2018). However, simply because a senior administrator within a university appears to be busy does not always equate to accomplishing something worthwhile (Clark & Sousa, 2018). Deans who are unable to adapt their persona to suit the culture of their host campus have a difficult time in managing how internal constituents perceive them (Perlmutter, 2018).

The findings of O'Reilly and Wyatt (1994) align with those of Perlmutter (2018) even though nearly a quarter-century separates their works. In their review of business school deans,



O'Reilly and Wyatt (1994) found that the job of dean is almost impossible to perform well. Gmelch et al.'s (1999) findings were similar in that deans reported high rates of stress related to the positional tasks that form the bulk of the modern dean's workload. The findings of Gmelch et al. (1999) and O'Reilly and Wyatt (1994) confirm the need to pay careful attention to the recruitment process. Whereas Goodall (2009a, 2009b) claimed that past research success is the primary indication of future academic leadership ability, not every successful academic can survive and thrive in this type of context (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). In addition to having an impressive scholarly record, a prospective dean must have the ability to work long days, endure continual scrutiny, and handle stress well (Bright & Richards, 2001).

Martin (1993) explored how cultural alignment with a particular institution influences the perception of a dean's ability to succeed. Provosts and presidents, dependent on the institutional context, noted that effective deans are quick to assess, interpret, and situate themselves appropriately within the culture of the institution (Martin, 1993). Such leaders successfully connect and ingrain themselves within the mission of the broader university, are skilled managers, and strong strategic planners (Martin, 1993). Similarly, Pence (2003) and Rosser et al. (2003) argued that deans need to be able to lead and manage an increasingly diverse (in every sense of the word) faculty and be able to lead by example.

### **External factors that influence a dean's ability to succeed.**

There are also factors external to a particular dean that further influence their ability to succeed (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Usher et al., 2009). Usher et al. (2009) highlighted the difficulties universities themselves can pose to a dean trying to effect change. Universities move slowly, and faculty have a high degree of independence (Usher et al., 2009). Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006) likewise noted that as leaders move up in the organizational hierarchy of a

university, their positional power decreases. As such, thriving within the role necessitates that deans can adopt a leadership style whereby they influence faculty members within their college without the use of bullying or intimidation (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006).

In opposition to this notion of the dean as increasingly powerless, de Boer and Goedegebuure (2009) believed that the creep of private sector management styles into the university has heightened decanal power and expectations. Eurydice (2008) and Austin and Jones (2016) observed that the increase in the formal powers of deans and other senior leaders within the university has proceeded at the detriment of the collegial process. Arntzen (2016) has described this as a shift from perceptions of deans as leaders of colleges to deans as managers of colleges. In this new context, deans “need to offer service, be accountable, fulfill a moral role, act as a steward, build diverse communities with trust and collaboration and promote excellence” (Arntzen, 2016, p. 2070). That such opposing interpretations of the dean’s role exist within the scholarly literature further demonstrates both the lack of consistency in the understanding of the deanship and by extension the confusion with which decanal searches can begin. Without a generally agreed upon definition of the deanship in a particular context, how can a committee then communicate the requirements of the role to potential candidates in the recruitment process?

### **Recruitment**

Gilmore and Turner (2010) noted that one of the central tenants of good human resource management in any organization is the careful selection of new employees. Ellis (1995) likewise concluded that the recruitment and selection of staff at all organizational levels is one of the most meaningful tasks of human resource professionals in higher education. However, careful selection is especially important when considering the hiring of senior leaders within an organization.

In spite of the widely-agreed-upon importance of recruitment, Hollenbeck (1994) unashamedly reported that “executive selection decisions are often, if not usually, wrong” (p. 130). Although Hollenbeck (1994) studied the recruitment of senior leaders in corporate settings, such sentiments resonate equally in universities, particularly given the power dynamics and politics at play in the recruitment and selection process. For example, often when individual members of a decanal search committee cannot agree on an ideal candidate, a compromise candidate or neutral candidate (Lutz, 1979) is the result. Such compromise candidates typically do not align with the expectations the search committee had at the outset of the search, but they are selected because they are the only candidate a majority of the committee will support. Harvey et al. (2013) described this situation as a decanal search committee ultimately selecting a ‘camel’ when they had initially been looking for a ‘horse.’ The politics and personalities of the search committee can at times distort the process and outcomes beyond recognition. Fernandez-Araoz (2007) contended that although unsatisfactory hiring decisions will always happen, widely-communicated and clearly articulated organizational goals can reduce the frequency of poor hiring choices.

To enhance the likelihood of a successful hiring process, Fernandez-Araoz (2007) furthered that deciding what an organization is looking for in a new hire and formalizing this in one form or another is the first and most crucial step. This consideration includes an exploration of candidate attributes. While previous experience matters a great deal, overall intelligence, emotional intelligence, and personality must be considered, as well (Fernandez-Araoz, 2007). Once an organization knows what they are looking for in a prospective leader or manager, they have to decide where to look for them; this is where the executive search firm can lend their expertise. As Fernandez-Araoz noted, “in a perfect world, an organization would choose a

candidate from a large pool of highly qualified individuals. In the real world, many selection committees have at best one candidate who is qualified” (p. 160). Search firms increase the exposure of particular positions and use their networks to solicit applications from qualified prospective candidates (Bright & Richards, 2001; Dowdall, 1999; Ellis, 1995). Search firms rely heavily on position profiles or job descriptions to help convey both the details of a particular position and the overall culture of an organization to potential applicants (Jackson, 2004; Lavigne, 2016).

### **Job Descriptions and Leadership Mandates**

As noted above, job descriptions provide significant insights into an organization’s desires in a new hire. Stybel (2010) argued that as job descriptions are the basic building blocks of positional recruitment campaigns, an understanding of the fundamentals of job descriptions is another essential aspect of the recruitment process. However, a job description is by its very essence a contradiction (Stybel, 2010). Although often used to convey the details of a specific position to an audience external to the organization, job descriptions are often drafted with an internal focus (Stybel, 2010). In addition to such contradictions, job descriptions can often lead hiring committees to make hiring decisions based on what they wish for in an ideal future executive rather than what skills and abilities are essential for a given position (Stybel, 2010).

Stybel (2010) asserted that the official job description also serves as a means of establishing a general understanding of what expectations an organization has of a prospective hire. Furthermore, the construction of the job description acts as a venue for internal and external constituents alike to begin to develop a sense of what the organization is looking for in a prospective hire (Stybel, 2010). Leadership mandates, or internal documents that outline how a leader advances the goals of the organization, further assist those within the organization to

understand what they are looking for as a collective in a prospective hire (Stybel & Peabody, 2007). In the university context, building this collective understanding is particularly important because, as Arntzen (2016) and Stybel and Peabody (2007) noted, there remains a significant difference of opinion regarding what deans are responsible for amongst different stakeholders. Too often a new leader is given one mandate from those above them in the organizational hierarchy at a particular point in time, while those below them assume they should be working towards other, perhaps even conflicting, goals (Stybel & Peabody, 2007). Beyond the initial selection and hiring stages, such confusion over an executive's mandate impacts their ability to execute the responsibilities of their office effectively. The evolving nature of a university can also enhance this confusion. For example, a shift in organizational direction brought about by a new president or provost can also alter expectations at any point in a dean's tenure (Boyko & Jones, 2010).

## **Recruitment Firms**

### **The history of the external search firm.**

The use of executive search firms to assist in recruiting leaders in higher education began in the United States in the 1970s (Mottram, 1983). As presidential and other senior administrative search processes became more complex, and the pool of potential candidates widened, more and more universities in both the United States and throughout the world began to solicit support from executive search firms in the recruitment and selection of senior leaders (Mottram, 1983). Although the use of search firms was initially exclusive to presidential searches, the engagement of external support subsequently spread to a variety of leadership positions within institutions, including academic deans (Mottram, 1983).

## **The role of the firm.**

Ellis (1995) supported the use of external agencies in the recruitment and selection processes for executive vacancies in universities, provided that institutions can engage critically with such entities to ensure the firm is able to support the mandate of the search committee. Ellis (1995) noted that both standards of service and recruitment methods should be discussed with prospective firms beforehand. An institution should not necessarily use the same firm for all of its recruitment needs as attracting qualified candidates can vary by context and position (Pulley, 2005).

There are several benefits to using an executive firm to support a search. Mottram (1983), a former dean turned search firm consultant, argued that executive search firms help to not only improve the likelihood of a successful hire, but they make the hiring process more efficient in an academic context. Search firms help prospective candidates maintain confidentiality and help provide access to candidates who might otherwise not be aware of or interested in a particular position (Dowdall, 1999; Mottram, 1983). Mottram's (1983) exploration of senior level recruitment within the academy focused mainly on the benefits of using external search firms in academic searches. Although Mottram (1983) may have had a vested interest, as a representative of an external search firm, in extolling the virtues of search firm involvement in academic recruitment, it is interesting to note the aspects of the firm's involvement in the search that were the focus of his work.

Mottram (1983) concentrated on the notion that it was the search firm that determined whether a particular candidate was a good fit within an organization or not. Only if the firm approved would the CV be submitted to the committee for consideration. While the gate-keeper role of the search firm may have changed in the intervening decades, and in spite of his potential

bias, Mottram's (1983) identification of the search firm as an integral player in the process was well justified. As the number of universities has expanded and continues to expand, not only in Canada but around the world, the sheer demand for qualified individuals who can lead within these institutions further strengthens the centrality of executive search firms. The greater emphasis on the recruitment of external candidates (Engwall, 2014) similarly necessitates the use of external search firms to support the work of institutional search committees.

Although there are many valuable arguments for recruiting external candidates for leadership positions within universities, such as those outlined by Engwall (2014), there is no doubt that they face a greater challenge in adjusting to their new role in comparison with an internal hire. The introduction of New Public Management, or the application of the principals of corporate management within public institutions, has increased the desirability of external candidates for leadership positions within universities. Those within the academy who ascribe to the tenants of New Public Management believe that only leaders who come from beyond the confines of universities can reinvigorate the system (Engwall, 2014). In spite of the desirability of external candidates amongst some institutional factions, hiring committees struggle to ask relevant questions of external candidates as those participating on the search committee do not always have experience in the intricacies of executive recruitment and selection (Engwall, 2014). However, this is where the use of experts, facilitated by an external search firm, can be beneficial (Mottram, 1983).

In addition to their facilitative role, search firms also increase the level of awareness amongst potential external applicants for a particular position. Engwall (2014) noted that as the number of universities increases, so too does the demand for qualified university leaders, including academic deans. Especially for new universities, the pressures to recruit external

leaders is significant. Engwall contended that recently established universities look beyond their campus borders more frequently for future leaders as they have not had the time to attract and develop the necessary leadership capacities within their organizations. As institutions grow and develop, this becomes less necessary.

Ellis (1995) and Lamoreaux (2011) saw good executive search firms as willing to spend time at and with the people from the organization looking to fulfill a specific vacancy. Such firms are also willing to help in the development of the formal advertisement, willing and able to sell both the position and institution to prospective candidates, present the search committee with the full list of applicants, and tailor the entire process to the particular institution (Ellis, 1995). In short, there is a cultural alignment between the firm and the organization they are supporting (Lamoreaux, 2011). Both Ellis (1995) and Lamoreaux (2011) point to the value of a search and recruitment firm's awareness of the influence an organization's culture can have on a particular search. This recognition is especially important when exploring the role of external firms in academic recruitment given the variety of perceptions university constituents have of external search firms (Harvey et al., 2013; Usher et al., 2009).

### **Perceptions of external search firms.**

Usher et al. (2009) found that those directly involved in senior administrative searches within Canadian universities were supportive of the use of executive search firms. Firms help search committees save time, as they perform and support a lot of the initial work of the development the position profile, recruitment of applicants, and bring substantive market background knowledge to the process. Furthermore, firms help committees identify and attract candidates who might otherwise be unaware or uninterested in a particular position because of the way the search committee framed the posting (Usher et al., 2009).



The ability to attract candidates with different perspectives, compared to those on the search committee, may be one of the significant values of using an executive search firm. Firms assist universities in approaching hirings in ways that they otherwise would not — to consider applicants with certain backgrounds that they otherwise would not (Dowdall, 1999). Executive search firms also assist universities in attracting external candidates and in better understanding the values such candidates can present to particular institutions at particular points in their histories (Usher et al., 2009). Usher et al. (2009) contended that in spite of the increased risk, external candidates are particularly valuable to a university in senior leadership capacities when internal candidates for a particular position are not particularly well-liked, or when smaller institutions require help in building their capacity and reputations.

Clark's (1992) examination of the recruitment and selection of managers in the United Kingdom's private sector revealed that often the expectations and perceptions of organizations unnecessarily limit the value an external firm can bring to a search process. Clark (1992) found that many of the techniques firms used to assess potential candidates for particular positions had relatively low validities. However, firms continued to use these tools to align with client expectations. As the organizations hiring these firms to assist with recruitment and selection processes were not interested in exploring new and different ways of carrying out the process, there was no desire on the part of consultancy firms to develop more reliable methods (Clark, 1992). Employing alternative and additional tools has the potential to lead to external firms becoming more involved in the details of a search where they could potentially lend their expertise (Clark, 1992).

## **The Search Committee**

Search committee composition is another aspect of the recruitment and selection process that is important to consider. Sessa and Taylor (2000) found that as each committee member brings a different perspective to the process, as broad of organizational representation on the committee as possible is best. The use of broad-based selection committees not only helps to secure organizational buy-in but also provides prospective candidates with a more fulsome understanding of the organization (Sessa & Taylor, 2000). While comprehensive representation may be desirable in the corporate setting, it is imperative in a university.

Despite the benefits a plurality of perspectives brings to a committee and a search, there are downsides to the use of selection committees. If not adequately considered during its constitution, the politics of the committee can hamper progress (Sessa & Taylor, 2000). Vaillancourt (2019) assumed that large decanal search committees are often less effective in comparison to smaller ones as the individuals who comprise the committee do not feel personally invested in or responsible for the proceedings. When establishing a committee, the power dynamics of the group, the connections between members of the committee, and the power relationship between the committee and the ultimately selected candidate all impact the decision-making process (Sessa & Taylor, 2000).

Nusbaum (1984) postulated that for a selection committee to truly have the best possible chances of success they and the organization they represent must have a firm and clear understanding of precisely what they are looking for in a prospective executive hire. Similarly, organizations should also provide selection committees with adequate training and educational opportunities before the search begins (Nusbaum, 1984). Such educational opportunities can help the committee to understand not only what their roles are in the search, but exactly what the

expectations are for the new hire and the reach and effect of this new position (Fernandez-Araoz, 2007; Nusbaum, 1984).

### **Selection tools.**

The selection aids available to a particular search committee can also add value to the process and facilitate their work (Highhouse, 2008). However, such tools are only useful to the extent to which they are adopted. In spite of their usefulness, Highhouse (2008) found that many executive recruitment processes continue to rely heavily on intuition in place of decision aids. This avoidance of a more structured approach is mostly a result of hiring committee members not believing that the research underlying such tools is relevant to their respective contexts (Highhouse, 2008). For Highhouse this is one of the most significant failures of industrial-organizational psychology. The perpetuation of the myth of “intuitive expertise,” or the misplaced belief that an individual can accurately judge a candidate’s likelihood of success solely based on their intuition, is highly problematic when adopted by hiring groups (Highhouse, 2008, p. 337).

In spite of the difficulties and unreliability associated with intuition, the unstructured interview has been the most popular selection tool for well over 100 years (Buckley et al., 2000). Buckley et al. (2000) examined the efficacy of the interview in relation to selection and hiring. In general, they found that interviews have low reliability and validity (Buckley et al., 2000). While structured interviews are typically more reliable compared to unstructured in hiring processes, even when interviewers receive formal training, the interpretations and assumptions a potential employer can accurately make based on these interactions alone are limited. In spite of this, Buckley et al. surmised that interviews have remained a central component of hiring processes for over a century because they provide the opportunity for face-to-face interactions that humans

feel are valuable. For example, interviews offer an opportunity for a candidate to make an impression on the committee that would be largely impossible in other formats (Pulliams, 2016).

Finally, the very nature of search committees and the tools they do and do not use, whether in a corporate or educational setting, results in a highly subjective process; the individual observations of those on the committee and to a certain extent those of the individuals representing the search firm drive the CEO search process (Hollenbeck, 1994; Welch & Welch, 2007). These drivers are also evident in the decanal search process as well. The reluctance of committees to employ a more structured approach necessitates that the hiring decisions ultimately rest on the individual and collective interpretation of the candidates.

In spite of formalized tools at the disposal of search committees, in high-stakes hiring contexts, those involved in the hiring process usually rely heavily on 'gut instinct' (Welch & Welch, 2007). Welch and Welch (2007) were able to determine the frequency with which executives were able to make successful hiring decisions. They found that senior executives who had significant familiarity with executive selection made strong hiring decisions 75% of the time (Welch & Welch, 2007). That means that one out of every four executive searches studied by Welch and Welch was unsuccessful. Based on this success rate, one could assume that a group of faculty, some who may have no hiring expertise or experience at all, would have even less positive results.

In opposition to Welch and Welch (2007), Fernandez-Araoz (2005) advocated for limiting the number of individuals directly involved in the search. Restricting involvement in this way increases the likelihood of an equal assessment of all candidates in comparison to a standard set of benchmarks (Fernandez-Araoz, 2005). While this may be appropriate in the corporate setting, overly limiting the involvement of stakeholders in a decanal search may ultimately

impact the credibility of the candidate eventually selected. As with many other collegial decisions, the process and the breadth of consultation legitimates the results (Austin & Jones, 2016). Furthermore, with a smaller search committee, the probability that the candidate will receive a fulsome description of the institutional context in which they may work is reduced. While there are some applications of practice and process that are transferable from the corporate world to the academy, the particular cultures and missions of post-secondary institutions limit such transferability (Thelin, 2004).

### **Corporate Recruitment**

While the contexts in which an executive operates and leads within a corporation differs from that of a dean in a university, some similarities necessitate exploring corporate executive recruitment processes as a means of informing an exploration of decanal recruitment and selection. Jackson (2004), a former dean, underscored the similarities between deans and corporate executives when comparing the daily tasks most common to the two roles. Both positions are more than full-time jobs (Jackson, 2004). The role of both dean and executive includes networking responsibilities, executive duties, establishing productive partnerships, and demonstrating entrepreneurial efforts (Jackson, 2004). Although Meacham (2007) suggested that the role of dean is highly symbolic, that is the internal and external constraints of the academy limit their effectiveness, in comparison to middle executive managers in the corporate world, there remain important parallels between both the process of searching for a dean and a senior corporate executive.

Hollenbeck (2009) contended that we should think of the difficulties in executive selection as both a judgment and a decision-making problem. For Hollenbeck (2009), there is a correlation between the frequency with which executive searches fail and the exclusion of

industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists from the interview and screening process. I-O psychologists can assist selection committees and executive search firms alike to understand better how they make judgments and decisions in the selection process (Hollenbeck, 2009).

Fernandez-Araoz (2005) likewise concluded that unexceptional people too often fill top positions within organizations. However, Fernandez-Araoz (2005) emphasized that “many firms are either unaware of the problem, slow to react to it or severely hampered by a number of psychological obstacles” that prevent them from addressing the issue (p. 67). Before the short-comings of recruitment processes can be discussed within an organization, there has first to be an acknowledgment that the process is not achieving the desired outcomes (Fernandez-Araoz, 2005).

Hollenbeck (1994) considered CEO selections to have three general characteristics in common: each one is unique, the searches are largely carried out by novices, and the process although increasingly important is highly subjective. Hollenbeck’s (1994) characteristics apply equally to the search for a new academic dean. Searches for deans are unique in time and circumstance in that no college will be in the same position when hiring a dean as it was when it hired the previous one. As the needs of the college change, so too will the requirements and expectations of candidates and ultimately those who become deans. For example, if a college is searching for a dean at a juncture in its history when the outlook is positive, a dean who is willing and able to maintain the current direction of the college may be sought. However, if the same college is in the midst of a particularly difficult time where enrollments have fallen and research productivity is down, a dean who is suited to pursuing a change agenda may be desirable.

Decanal searches are carried out by novices in that those who participate, both selection committee members and candidates themselves, rarely have much experience in the conduct of executive searches (Harvey et al., 2013). Aside from the search firm representatives, it is unlikely that the faculty members involved in a given search will have any formal human resource training that will guide their approach. The nature of the collegial system encourages a diversity of perspectives on such committees (Austin & Jones, 2016), but at the same time, this almost ensures an entirely different search committee each time a particular college recruits a dean. Committee continuity, or familiarity with the process, also influences the experience of candidates themselves. After all, highly sought-after candidates have high expectations in terms of their experience with the recruitment process (Landberg, 2011). Whether positive or negative, the candidacy experience can be the first glimpse into the culture of an organization.

### **The candidate experience.**

Landberg (2011), in an exploration of executive recruitment in the financial services and insurance sectors, argued that as the executive recruitment process should be designed to attract the best candidates to a particular position, there ought to be more of an emphasis on enhancing the candidate experience. At the executive level, the recruitment process is as much about selling a position and an institution to prospective candidates as it is about identifying qualified candidates for the role. The ability to promote an institution and a position as a destination of choice is especially important when an external candidate is desirable (Landberg, 2011).

Miles and McCamey (2018) indicated that interest in how candidates perceive and experience the recruitment process is relatively new. Despite the importance of candidate experience, there is a dearth of research that explores the reciprocal relationship between candidate and hiring organization (Miles & McCamey, 2018). Miles and McCamey highlighted

that 60% of candidates who participated in their study reported a negative recruitment experience. Although they did not explore the impact this experience had on the candidates' decision-making process, the magnitude of their findings is noteworthy.

Candidate experience matters. Allden and Harris (2013) asserted that a positive candidate experience is essential to a company as a means of attracting highly-talented individuals to an organization and in fostering long-term engagement between the new hire and the organization (See also Kreissl, 2015; Wilson, 2011). A positive candidate experience is also significant for unsuccessful applicants (Barbedette, 2010). An individual who is not hired but had a positive recruitment experience is much less likely to speak negatively of the organization with whom they interviewed (Barbedette, 2010).

Kreissl (2015) defined candidate experience as including all aspects of the recruitment process beginning with the initial application through to the successful candidate's first day in the new role. Kreissl (2015) furthered that in addition to a hiring organization using the recruitment process to identify candidates for a particular job, candidates themselves use the experience to determine whether a specific company or organization aligns with their goals and interests. Finn (2017) noted that "in addition to the work, salary and culture, candidates evaluate opportunities based on how they have been treated during the process" (p. 239). To support a successful and positive process, it is also essential for the hiring organization to provide the candidate with as realistic of a position profile as is possible during the various stages of recruitment (Kreissl, 2015).

The experience candidates have in the recruitment and interview process also shapes how organizations market themselves as employers (Kreissl, 2015; Miles & McCamey, 2018). In the current age of social media and instant online communication, one poor candidate experience,



especially when an organization is recruiting for a senior leadership position, can be detrimental to an organization's future ability to attract top talent (Finn, 2017; Kreissl, 2015). In spite of the central importance of candidate experience, Kreissl (2015) found that a "high percentage of recruiters and HR practitioners don't even believe candidate experience is an important consideration" (p. 19). Carpenter (2013) contended that organizations that continue to overlook or do not realize the importance of fostering a positive candidate experience will find it increasingly difficult to recruit qualified, high-caliber applicants.

In addition to promoting the institution to prospective candidates, it is also essential to provide a detailed understanding of the organizational and cultural context in which the position exists. Gilmore and Turner (2010) claimed that hiring committees could place an increased emphasis on more structured and behaviourally based questions in the interview process as a means of further enhancing the candidate experience overall. By providing candidates with a more in-depth explanation of the specific organizational culture in which they will work they will be able to play an active role in determining whether the position in question suits their skillset (Gilmore & Turner, 2010).

The extent to which an external search firm is involved in the recruitment process can also shape the candidate experience. Landberg (2011) found that 70% of candidates surveyed reported a preference for being contacted by an external recruitment firm rather than the hiring organization directly during the initial recruiting stages. While some of this preference may be industry-specific, it is imperative to consider in light of Mottram's (1983) contention that one of the values of employing external search firms in the recruitment of leaders in academia is that it allows potential candidates to maintain a degree of anonymity until the latter stages of the recruitment process.

### **The cost of getting it wrong.**

Even with the involvement of executive search firms, recruitment proceedings can sometimes lead to the selection of a candidate who is unsuited to a particular leadership role. Despite the substantial literature focusing on the recruitment of corporate leaders, the actual process as carried out in various searches remains problematic. Gilmore and Turner (2010) found that the majority of corporate organizations they interviewed were genuinely interested in finding ways to improve their recruitment and selection processes because they understood how costly a poor hire could be in the long term. Likewise, Fernandez-Araoz (2005) postulated that companies need to do a better job of assessing the full costs of having the wrong individual in the wrong leadership position from the outset. Watkins (2013) calculated that the typical financial cost to the organization of a poor executive hire can equate to 15 times the annual salary of the individual.

Fernandez-Araoz (2005) categorized three organizational phenomena that have led to corporations struggling with senior-level hiring. First, the odds are generally against finding an external candidate who can easily and quickly succeed in the role. Second, there is no common understanding of what skills and abilities are needed for executive positions; thus hiring groups struggle to ask relevant interview questions. Third, although not as directly applicable in universities, individual executives typically over-emphasize the abilities of those whom they promote (Fernandez-Araoz, 2005). The first two organizational phenomena Fernandez-Araoz (2005) identified apply equally to universities. In addition to the enhanced difficulty faced by external candidates, the lack of common understanding of positions to be filled further impacts the process.

## **Recruitment in the University**

Over 40 years ago Kelly and Nelson (1977) noted that “in search of a process” might be an accurate way of describing how universities fill senior administrative positions. Although this assessment is dated, it remains relevant as there continues to be no common understanding of how future senior administrators and deans, in particular, are identified and selected within Canadian universities. That is not to say that all universities do or should follow the same process. However, an understanding of how the Canadian process plays out from the perspective of the candidates at the center of the activity can both further enhance the executive recruitment literature and help institutions to bolster their recruitment procedures to attract the most highly qualified candidates possible.

Smooth and efficient selection processes are central to an organization’s ability to attract high-quality candidates to a specific position (Hausknecht et al., 2004). Barber (1998) defined recruitment as the process of drawing people to an organization. Enticing prospective candidates to consider a specific position at a given institution takes many forms. Candidates learn about an institution in a number of ways. For example, positive word-of-mouth can enhance the attractiveness of a position (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009). Once a prospective applicant decides to apply, the more favorably they view the recruitment and selection process, the more likely they are to accept the position if offered (Hausknecht et al. , 2004). However, candidate perceptions of the recruitment process vary and are not well understood.

In spite of the lack of clarity surrounding candidate perceptions of recruitment practices, Mallory (2017) acknowledged that the risks and costs associated with selecting an ill-suited candidate for a senior administrative position are substantial. In addition to the financial implications noted above (Watkins, 2013), a poor executive hire can similarly impact

organizational performance and reputation (Mallory, 2017). As universities are largely reluctant to fire unsuccessful senior administrators for fear of legal penalties (Howells, 2011), poor senior administrative hires can have an even wider impact. However, the degree to which a specific search is seen as unsuccessful or successful is also highly contextual.

### **How to Define a Successful Process**

Whether a senior administrative search is considered successful or not depends on the definition of success commonly adopted within a particular organization and the vantage point from which it is considered. Usher et al. (2009) found that the single most significant factor in determining the success of the recruitment of a senior administrator within a university was how that particular institution defined success. The narrower the definition, the less likely those involved in the search were to identify it as having been a successful search (Usher et al., 2009).

One of Usher et al.'s (2009) research participants defined a successful university administrator as “functional in the position, has brought people along, has made some successful change that is beneficial but has a long-term vision, and is responsive to how the university is wanting to move” (p. 3). Such a definition of success points to two interesting concepts. First, success is not only context-specific, but the perception of whether one is successful or not is dependent on how a particular constituent interprets the priorities of a given organization. Second, if deans are members of senior administration, their success is highly dependent on their ability to fit within a given organization (Usher et al., 2009). Such a definition of success is also applicable to the recruitment process itself. A successful recruitment process achieves a previously determined end goal (it is functional), incorporates many perspectives and viewpoints, and identifies a candidate keeping in mind the long-term goals of the college and the direction of the university.

## **Presidential Recruitment**

There is a substantive body of scholarly literature focusing on presidential search processes (Ferrare & Marchese, 2010; Howells, 2011; McLaughlin, 1990; Nason, 1984; Turpin, 2012) that is relevant to decanal searches. As with deans, university presidents face unprecedented change and therefore challenge in their roles. Turpin (2012) contended that presidents encounter changing demographics, shifting educational demands, and increased scrutiny from governments and the wider public. Similarly, Rosser et al. (2003) argued that deans struggle with increasing public suspicion, the shrinking of government grants, and simultaneous increases in reporting expectations. The responsibilities of those selected as presidents and deans are similar both in terms of expectations and the environment in which they are expected to perform their duties. Turpin (2012) concluded that as a result of these increased expectations, boards and search committees charged with hiring the next president of a university need to look beyond academic credentials and effectively assess a candidate's previous experience, eagerness to learn, and fit within the organizational culture of a particular university. This notion of institutional fit equates to the notion of person-organization (P-O) fit as understood by organizational theorists (Kaufman, 2013; Turpin, 2012).

### **Person-organization fit.**

As the P-O fit of a leader, that is whether the leader has the necessary capacities and abilities to meet the needs of an organization, is a central component of retaining a motivated and dedicated workforce (Bowen et al., 1991; Kristof, 1996), this can be a major consideration for universities in the hiring of both a president or a dean. Empirical studies have demonstrated a relationship between positive P-O fit and increases in job satisfaction, commitment, and retention at various levels of an organization (Grey, 2017; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Verquer et al.,

2003). It should be noted that an underlying assumption of P-O fit is that the individual leader and organization share comparable basic characteristics (Kristof, 1996); thus, there is a risk of organizations perpetuating a homogeneity if focusing exclusively on P-O fit. In spite of the frequency with which executive search firms are called upon by universities to facilitate the recruitment and selection of senior leaders within the university (Usher et al., 2009), there has been little research to date that explores the relationship between the P-O fit of these leaders within universities and the role of the executive search firm (Turpin, 2012).

The perception of an organization by individual candidates is also a key aspect of P-O fit. Turpin (2012) found that individuals typically seek out positions and organizations that have values similar to their own. High-quality applicants under consideration for leadership positions within universities are as concerned with finding an organization that best suits them as they are with the details of the particular job (Rynes & Cable, 2003).

### **The importance of process.**

Process is also central to both the candidate experience and understanding recruitment and selection overall. Nason's (1984) ground-breaking work on presidential recruitment in the United States serves as the foundation for understanding the presidential search. The sole focus of Nason's (1984) work was the process. While there is some literature, such as Boyko and Jones (2010), Harvey et al. (2013), and Usher et al. (2009), that explores the recruitment and selection of academic deans, there is a definite lack of studies that focus on the process as carried out in the Canadian context.

Although Nason (1984) was among the first to explore presidential searches, Goldsmith (1989) was one of the first to study the role of external consultants in the presidential search

process. McLaughlin and Riesman (1990) identified both the advantages and areas of concern associated with the use of external consultants in presidential searches. While an effective search consultant quickly understands the values and customs of a particular institution and incorporates this knowledge in their conduct of the search, a search firm approaching a university search with a mostly corporate mindset can severely handicap the search in its entirety (Riesman, 1990).

Birnbaum (1988) described the process of searching for a university president as a central ritual in the life of the university. The success or failure of the presidential search process is directly related to the breadth of consultation and interest amongst the university's constituents (Ferrare & Marchese, 2010). Decanal searches are likewise important processes in the life of an academic college. To better understand the role recruiting a university leader plays in the formation and evolution of the organizational culture, a clearer understanding of the process itself is essential.

The process by which presidents are recruited and selected also impacts how the wider university community perceives them. Howells (2011) highlighted how poor selection policies and procedures can lead to difficulties in a presidential search and negatively impact the early tenure of the new president. Prolonged searches that stray from the prescribed guidelines, hire search firms not suited to the particularities of the search, and are secretive can have disastrous impacts on the president ultimately selected. Broad institutional support for the recruitment process can lead to support for the new president at the commencement of their appointment (Howells, 2011).

Brockbank (2017) likewise noted that the success of a president is strongly correlated to the degree of involvement of both the institution's trustees and faculty in the recruitment and selection process. The widest feasible participation of stakeholders allows consideration of the

broadest possible array of opinions, contributions, and perceptions. Extensive participation not only enables the selection committee to have a more fulsome understanding of the leadership qualities most desired in a prospective candidate (Brockbank, 2017) but allows many stakeholders to have a vested interest in the process itself. After all, the more constituents are involved directly in the process, the fewer who can later complain about the process or the candidate ultimately selected as a result of that process. Broad participation in the search also enables candidates to develop a more fulsome understanding of the institutional culture of a particular university.

### **Institutional culture.**

The culture of a university directly impacts the recruitment and retention of the president (Turpin, 2012). Schein (2010) intimated that culture was learned “by a group as it solved its problems” (p. 18). Turpin (2012) defined organizational culture as “the deeply rooted nature of the organization that is a result of long-held formal and informal systems, rules, traditions, and customs” (p. 16). From these definitions, we can further add that not only does a university’s culture influence the recruitment of those selected to lead within it, but this selection process (or organizational problem to be solved) has a reciprocal influence in shaping the culture as well. Schein (2010) encouraged scholars to study organizational culture in qualitative terms. In the same way, Schein (2010) and Morgan's (1997) notions of organizational culture apply to universities in the context of recruiting senior leaders (Turpin, 2012).

### **Decanal Recruitment**

As with presidents, a university’s organizational culture also influences decanal searches. Gmelch (2004) contended that when it comes to the hiring of academic deans, most universities fail more often than they succeed. Failure to hire a dean who can thrive within the ambiguous



and highly politicized academy is problematic for universities that are under increasing pressure to perform (Jackson, 2004). To mitigate the institutional risk such recruitment failures can result in, Harvey et al. (2013) argued for a move away from the use of executive search firms. While their solution may appear overly reductionist, it does point to the concerns members of the academy have over how academic deans are recruited and selected, and who exerts power in the process. Nagy (1989) explored the political pitfalls of decanal searches and argued that there were five facets of the search where politics had the potential to impact the process: the definition of the position, the structure of the search, the timing of the search, the evaluation of candidates, and the negotiation with candidates.

### **Power.**

Politics and power play a central role in the day-to-day operations of universities. However, the formal academy regularly disparages notions of power as an organizational phenomenon (Bess & Dee, 2008). Bess and Dee (2008) argued that members of the academy typically portray universities as “citadels of rationality,” upholding reason and humanistic values (p. 540). In such an environment it is often easier to ignore the influence individual power can have in the collective and individual pursuit of organizational goals and agendas than it is to consider how power impacts decision-making processes critically.

Too often we unnecessarily define power in exclusively negative terms and thus avoid serious discussions of its role in formal organizations (Pfeffer, 1981/2010). However, it is impossible to understand organizational phenomena without fully considering the role power plays within that specific context (Pfeffer, 1981/2010). There are various notions of power. Kanter (1979/2010) defined power in terms of effectiveness and capacity within an organization. Marx (1867/2015) and Dahl (1957) argued in slightly more Machiavellian terms that power

denoted the ability of one individual or group to get another individual or group to do something they otherwise would not (Miller, 1984). French and Raven (1959/2010) similarly understood power as concerning influence. Each understood power as a central facet of formal organizations. If we assume that power is an essential aspect of organizational functioning, we can also argue that power and politics play a role in both how universities select academic deans and the extent to which, once installed, those deans can further their agendas.

The process of recruiting and selecting an academic dean is central to the success of a university (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). The institutional importance of this process also means that various stakeholders, both internal and external, have a vested interest in who ultimately becomes dean of a given college. As such, many of these constituents attempt to exert their power to influence the outcomes of the process. This power struggle amongst participants within the university exemplifies the attempts for influence that Mintzberg (1983/2010) and Pfeffer (1981/2010) identified in organizations more generally.

### **The power players.**

A number of external and internal players are involved in the process of recruiting and selecting an academic dean in addition to the candidates themselves. Harvey et al. (2013) identified the recruitment firm, the institutional search committee, senior administration, and faculty as those actively involved in the decanal recruitment and selection process. They also recognized students and donors as constituent groups. However, as neither students nor donors exert a significant amount of power in the process (Planas et al., 2011; Taylor & Machado, 2006), they will not be considered here. Focusing on how these influential constituents exercise their power and influence, and how such power struggles shape the candidate experience enables a fuller understanding of the process itself.

Overlaying Harvey et al.'s (2013) identification of actors in the decanal recruitment and selection process with Mintzberg's (1983/2010) description of organizational power players enables a deeper understanding of precisely how power and influence affect the decanal search process. Mintzberg (1983/2010) recognized ten groups of organizational influencers, which he divided into internal and external influencers. While some of these groups, particularly the external influencers, do not readily map onto the constructs of Harvey et al.'s model (2013), several of those players who constitute the internal coalition do. Mintzberg (1983/2010) contended that the internal coalition includes top management (senior administration), operators (faculty), and middle managers (deans). These groups have a particularly loud voice when it comes to organizational decision-making, and the outcomes they achieve represent the broader goals pursued by the university.

Mintzberg (1983/2010) further argued that there was an eleventh influencer — organizational ideology. In universities, organizational philosophy typically manifests itself in institutional mission, vision, and values (MVV) statements (Ellis & Miller, 2014). While Harvey et al. (2013) did not explicitly address the role MVV statements play in the decanal recruitment process, they are important to consider as Harvey et al.'s explanation of the process presupposed the existence of an underlying institutional ethos. As Mintzberg (1983/2010) noted, this organizational ethos can provide high-level direction to all institutional representatives.

### **The decanal recruitment process.**

Boyko and Jones (2010) provided an outline of the policies and procedures that govern the process by which academic deans are recruited, selected, and appointed in Canadian universities; however, this was a high-level overview with little procedural details. Furthermore, Boyko and Jones (2010) did not consult with deans themselves as part of this project. Of the 30

institutions they surveyed, 19 struck internal search committees to oversee the process, three institutions used elections to select a dean, and at a further three institutions the president themselves made a choice, with varying degrees of input from faculty (Boyko & Jones, 2010). The majority of institutions Boyko and Jones (2010) examined followed largely democratic procedures with, although to varying degrees, active involvement of faculty on search committees. It is interesting to note, however, that they made only a passing reference to external search firms supporting the search committees in the Canadian context. While this may merely be a result of the high-level nature of the study, it is also perhaps indicative of the minimal influence Boyko and Jones (2010) felt search firms had on the process overall.

Twombly (1992) understood the two overarching goals of hiring an academic dean to be forming a candidate pool and matching these candidates with the goals and requirements of the hiring college. For Twombly (1992), the decanal screening process was mostly ritualistic. Through the process of meeting with and interviewing candidates, members of the selection committees were able to develop a better understanding themselves of the needs of their college and thus the required skills of a prospective dean. While Twombly's (1992) study focused exclusively on American institutions conducting decanal searches in the Midwest, there are parallels in the process these institutions followed and those observed by Canadian universities.

There are three generally agreed upon stages in the overall recruitment process—generating qualified candidates, maintaining the status of these candidates, and converting the best of these candidates into a new employee (Dineen et al., 2002). Contemporary western universities all follow very similar recruitment and selection processes to fill vacant deanships (Harvey et al., 2013; see also Twombly, 1992). These similarities are often evident in institutional documents.

First, the provost's office or president's office strikes a selection committee representative of the university community (University of Alberta, 2016; University of British Columbia, 2013; University of Saskatchewan, 2011; University of Toronto, 2003; York University, 2018). This committee includes faculty, senior administrators or their representatives, a representative of the students, and potentially other external stakeholders, depending on the particular context (U of A, 2016; UBC, 2013; U of S, 2011; U of T, 2003; York U, 2018). For example, the search committee working on selecting the next dean of a business school would likely include some external representation from the local business community. At some institutions, the U of S (2011) for example, a representative of the Board of Governors also serves on the search committee.

While university policy may dictate what constituents must participate on a given search committee, the selection of at least a portion of the individuals who represent these constituencies is primarily open to the discretion of the provost or president (U of A, 2016; UBC, 2013; U of S, 2011; U of T, 2003; York U, 2018). The implications of the flexibility of these procedures are noteworthy. French and Raven (1959/2010) contended that agents exert both legitimate and reward powers within a given system. If we assume that leaders within a particular university system are in fact agents at work within that system, the provost, president, or designate wields considerable power in determining who participates on the search committee. Appointment to such a committee can be a reward in and of itself. French and Raven (1959/2010) noted that appointments and opportunities could serve as a means of rewarding loyal supporters. Conversely, it is unlikely that a provost or president would select a search committee member who is frequently and publicly in opposition to the professed mission, vision, and values of the institution and its leaders.

Second, an external search firm is selected to support the search committee. Of the institutional policies and procedures reviewed, only one decanal search document noted who was responsible for the selection of the search firm. York University's (2018) procedural document specifically stated that the president names the search firm that will support the institutional search committee in their work. At Canadian universities, Boyden Canada (n.d.), Brock Higgins (n.d.), Laverne Smith and associates (n.d.), Odgers Brendtson (n.d.), or Perrett Laver (n.d.) typically fill this role.

The identification and selection of an executive search firm provides a further opportunity for those involved in the initial stages of the pre-search process to exert their influence over the situation. This influence is a result of their legitimate power as leaders within the organization (French & Raven, 1959/2010). For better or worse, the ability to select the search firm that will facilitate the logistics of the search is one of several means by which the provost or president can influence the early stages of the search process.

Harvey et al. (2013) believed that the third step of the recruitment process included the search committee performing a high-level needs assessment of the college or faculty in search of a dean. At this stage, the search committee, supported by the firm, has the opportunity to discuss the position and the requirements of prospective candidates with a representative of senior administration and the council of the college in question (York U, 2018). However, the majority of institutional documents reviewed were silent on the details of how a selection committee prepares for launching a search (U of A, 2016; UBC, 2013; U of S, 2011; U of T, 2003).

Harvey et al. (2013) postulated that in the fourth phase of the process, following the initial establishment of a search committee and a cursory analysis of the needs of the college, the executive search firm supports the committee in managing the advertisement of the position and

pre-screening applicants to establish a list of potential candidates to present to the search committee. Executive search firms specialize in identifying and placing leaders within the private sector (Skokic & Coh, 2017). While the skills, abilities, and talents needed to succeed in those roles have some similarities to those required of a successful academic leader, they are not synonymous. Although several parallels do exist, the context in which a dean leads is different from that of a mid-level corporate executive, as described by Nadler and Tushman (1990). For example, a corporate vice-president can terminate those who hinder their ability to advance their mandate or who disagree with their strategic objectives. Working through the collegial process with tenured faculty in the highly unionized environment of a university is more convoluted. The dean of a college has little disciplinary power over the faculty they lead. This lack of positional authority results in a power dynamic that is entirely unlike anything in the corporate world (Bess & Dee, 2008).

Several of the perceived advantages of using external search firms also highlight many of the concerns associated with their use in the recruitment and selection of academic deans. While the brand recognition of a particular recruitment firm can undoubtedly assist in raising the profile of a position at a relatively less well-known institution, relying exclusively on the firm's database or 'filing cabinet' (Harvey et al., 2013) list of candidates can limit the autonomy of a decanal search committee. Dowdall (1999), a search consultant with a large American firm who specialized in the recruitment of university deans, vice-presidents, and presidents, noted that "we (...) influence the selection because of our knowledge of individual candidates' strengths and weaknesses, and because of our experience with the search process" (np). Search firm involvement can thus result in an initial shortlist that is more likely to include candidates who fit

the general requirements of the position and identify themselves as interested in becoming a dean than those who meet the specific needs of a particular vacancy in an individual college.

Fifth, following receipt of the list of applicants from the search firm, the committee typically makes their first formal contact with those whom they have short-listed (Harvey et al., 2013). An in-person visit to campus may follow this initial phone call or video conference (Harvey et al., 2013). It is at this stage of the recruitment process, as understood by Harvey et al. (2013), that the search committee begins to have direct interaction with the candidates. With the search firm no longer playing the role of go-between, this interaction allows search committee members to conduct their own assessments of the candidates. This ability to enhance their awareness of candidates further strengthens their power as both individual members of the selection committee and as a group.

In comparison to the earlier stages of the process that are led mainly by the external search firm, the increased frequency of direct contact between candidates and the committee increases the power of committee members at this particular stage of the process. The informational power of actors within a particular system ebbs and flows dependent on the context (French & Raven, 1959/2010; see also Raven, 1965). As actors in a specific context, it is only at the stage where the committee gets to interact with the candidate directly and not through the search firm as an intermediary that the balance of informational power begins to shift from the recruitment firm to the search committee.

Institutional search committees do not themselves have the authority to hire academic deans (Harvey et al., 2013; U of A, 2016; UBC, 2013; U of S, 2011; U of T, 2003, York U, 2018). Rather, the culmination of their search efforts is a hiring recommendation to the provost or president. The provost or president, in turn, makes the final hiring recommendation to the



Board of Governors, who formally offers the chosen candidate the decanal position. However, the guidance the provost or president gives does not have to align with that of the search committee (Harvey et al., 2013; U of A, 2016; UBC, 2013; U of S, 2011; U of T, 2003, York U, 2018). French and Raven (1959/2010) ascribed legitimate power to leaders within formal organizations. As institutional leaders, the provost or president has the ultimate authority to recommend a candidate to the board, whether it aligns with the recommendation of the search committee or not.

Gibney and Shang (2007) contended that provosts and selection committees ostensibly look for three key candidate characteristics when reviewing the application files of and meeting with prospective deans. These include leadership abilities, the ability to access outside resources, and the academic qualifications to be appointed as a tenured full professor at the university in question (Gibney & Shang, 2007). However, in spite of the centrality of these characteristics, the overall importance of candidate likeability cannot be overstated (Gibney & Shang, 2007).

Likable candidates are hireable candidates.

### **How Effective is the Process?**

In an examination of the decanal recruitment and selection process in 32 colleges in the United States, Lutz (1979) demonstrated the extent to which candidates and search committee members were unsatisfied with the outcomes of the decanal recruitment and selection processes in which they were involved. In his study, Lutz (1979) found that only half of current deans would reaccept the position offer if they had the opportunity to repeat the process. Likewise, only half of the over 100 search committee members said they would rehire the candidate they initially chose (Lutz, 1979). In just 50% of the hiring processes reviewed would those involved have made the same decision. Although we should note that Lutz's (1979) work focused

exclusively on searches conducted without the support of an external search firm, it is interesting to note how unhelpful those directly involved in the recruitment and selection of deans found the process, including candidates themselves.

### **Understanding the recruitment process**

Influences on the decanal recruitment and selection process are varied and intricate. To understand how these influences impact the candidate experience and a candidate's decision-making process it is essential not only to consider the environment in which contemporary deans operate but decision making within this context. By employing Reference Point Theory (RPT) it is possible to gain a detailed understanding of how individuals involved in the recruitment and selection process influence, shape, and inform a candidate's decisions.

### **Strategic Reference Point Theory (SRPT)**

Fiengenbaum et al. (1996) developed SRPT as a means of predicting decision-making within organizations. Fiengenbaum et al. (1996) postulated that individuals use specific targets or reference points in their decision-making processes. How decision makers use a particular reference point is dependent upon their background knowledge and where they see themselves or their organization in relation to that point (Fiengenbaum et al., 1996). For example, if an individual sees themselves in a better position relative to a particular reference point, they are more likely to be risk-averse in their decision. Alternatively, if they perceive that they are worse off than the specific reference point, they are more likely to be inclined to choose actions that involve greater risk (Fiengenbaum et al., 1996).

SRPT built upon Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) prospect theory for outcome prediction. However, whereas Kahneman and Tversky (1979) focused on organizational-level considerations, Fiengenbaum et al. (1996) advanced this initial thinking to better understand the

drivers and motivations of individual decision making within organizations. SRPT helps us to identify and understand both the antecedents and consequences of the decision making that takes place within organizations (Shinkle et al., 2012).

SRPT makes two assumptions that are relevant to this study. Firstly, SRPT assumes that the strategic goals and direction of a particular organization, as communicated by an institution's representatives, are the primary motivators of an individual's decisions (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996). Secondly, SRPT presupposes that each member of an organization has a similar understanding of both the organization to which they belong and the goals of that organization (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996).

Fiegenbaum et al.'s (1996) assertion that institutional priorities are the primary means by which organizational decision makers establish reference points has direct implications for this proposed study. The role such organizational goals play again reiterates the critical position of provosts in building a decanal search committee and setting the working parameters of the group. Whether formally or informally, overtly or covertly, knowingly or unknowingly, the messages institutional leaders convey to search committee members shape how committee members interact with candidates (Harvey et al., 2013), and thus the impressions (reference points) candidates develop.

### **Reference Point Theory (RPT)**

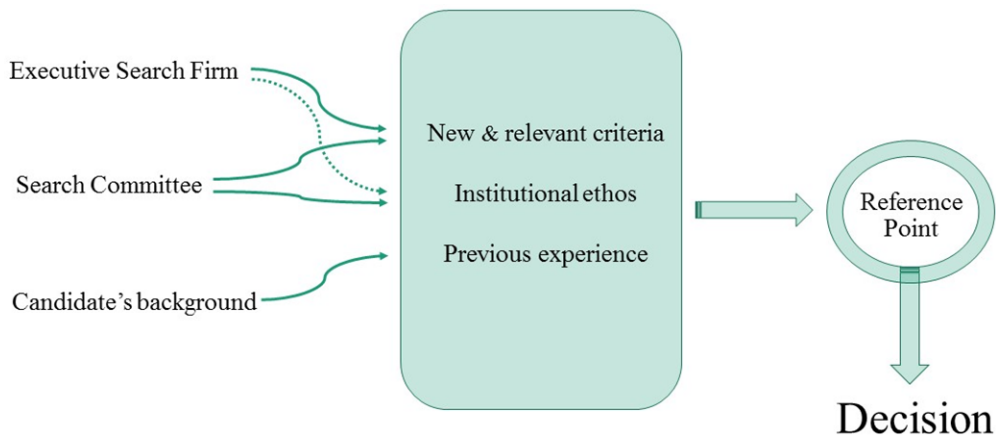
Using SRPT to understand processes that take place within universities helps to clarify how the past experiences of individual members of the university community influence their decision-making processes. Harvey et al. (2013) adopted Fiegenbaum et al.'s (1996) SRPT, theorized its application to the decanal recruitment and selection process, and renamed it RPT. Harvey et al. (2013) proposed using RPT as a means of understanding the decision-making

process of search committee members. Considering how those involved in decanal recruitment and selection processes make decisions enables a more fulsome appreciation of the process overall.

Members of a university community who are involved in the decanal search and selection process make their decisions based on a variety of criteria, established in light of previous experiences (Harvey et al., 2013). Individuals within university communities have varied perceptions of the university as an institution and thus make decisions based on a multiplicity of influencers. Decanal candidates, both those internal and external to the university, likewise have varied understandings of the institution based on both their backgrounds and the organizational information accessible to them. Given these similarities, RPT may also help us to understand better how decanal candidates experience recruitment activities, how these experiences influence their creation of decision-making criteria (or reference points), and how such reference points affect the ultimate decision they make — whether to accept or decline the offer of a deanship (see Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1**

*The candidate decision making process (Usunier, 2019). Based on Fiegenbaum et al. (1996); and Harvey et al. (2013).*



Measuring power within organizational structures can be problematic. For example, Pfeffer (1981/2010) found that in general power is difficult to operationalize and measure. This difficulty is in part a result of the discomfort typically elicited by discussions of power within formal institutions. However, shifting the terminology used, from a focus on ‘power’ to ‘reference points,’ may encourage and promote a more comfortable and inclusive dialogue. Employing RPT as a tool to evaluate what influences decision-making in organizations in a way democratizes the discussion of institutional power. How decanal candidates assess the information presented to them by search committees and external search firms is critical to understand in terms of the role power plays in institutional decision making.

Harvey et al. (2013) proposed RPT as an appropriate means by which to study the process of selecting an academic dean and to understand why search committees choose external candidates over internal contenders. However, RPT can also serve as a framework to organize our understanding of how the context of higher education, expectations of the dean, and recruitment practices inform successful candidates’ understandings of the recruitment process. By exploring the use of RPT to create a consciousness of how candidates establish reference points and thereby make decisions, it is possible to raise awareness of who influences the decision-making process of the candidates and how this influence has the potential to impact both the process overall and the dean’s ultimate success in the role.

### **Summary**

The complexity of universities directly impacts organizational decision-making activities (Austin & Jones, 2016; Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Whether we think of universities as organized anarchies (Cohen et al., 1972), loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976), or adhocracies (Mintzberg, 1979), one common theme has emerged from the extensive scholarly study of

universities as organizations — they are convoluted and difficult to understand. Decision-making processes within universities further affect the conduct of decanal searches. The juxtaposition of organizational hierarchies and collegial governance processes shapes the organizational culture of each university differently (Erdem, 2016). These cultural similarities and peculiarities influence both the perspective those involved in the search bring to the task and the context of the search.

While there has been limited scholarly exploration of decanal recruitment and selection (Lavigne, 2016), the process by which senior leaders are recruited and selected in other contexts can inform the understanding of the decanal search process. Hiring skilled leaders is important in many organization contexts, including corporations (Fernandez-Araoz, 2005; Fernandez-Araoz, 2007; Hollenbeck, 1994; Hollenbeck, 2009; Landberg, 2011). Mid-level corporate leaders are responsible for many tasks that are similar to those of academic deans (Jackson, 2004). Furthermore, substantive work has also focused on the process of searching for university presidents (Ferrare & Marchese, 2010; Howells, 2011; McLaughlin, 1990; Nason, 1984; Turpin, 2012). Although the roles and expectations of presidents differ from those of deans, the literature on presidential searches can also advise this study as both decanal and presidential searches are carried out in similar environments.

The theoretical framework used in this study builds upon Harvey et al.'s (2013) RPT and adapts it to the Canadian context enabling us to begin to appreciate at a deeper level how the decanal recruitment and selection process plays out and what motivates and who informs successful candidates in their decision-making process. By understanding how candidates make decisions, we can better comprehend the process overall. As the decanal search at a procedural level has been largely overlooked by scholars, and no scholarship was found that explores the

candidate voice, this study fills a gap in our understanding of how candidates pursuing mid-level leadership positions within the academy experience and perceive recruitment and selection practices.

## CHAPTER THREE

In this chapter, I will outline my own positionality and assumptions, discuss IPA as a methodology, and outline how IPA and RPT were used in this particular study. The purpose of this study is to understand how we can enhance the decanal recruitment process based on the experiences and perceptions of successful candidates, provosts, and executive search firm representatives. The context in which these searches take place, the role of the provost, the involvement of external search firms, and the participation of institutional search committees all impact the experience of the candidate. Developing an in-depth understanding of how successful decanal candidates experience the search will lead to a fuller awareness of the process overall. The following overarching question and supporting questions will guide this study:

1. Given the elements of a decanal search and the experiences of candidates, how can the process be enhanced to support the likelihood of deans' success?
  - a. How do the interactions with decanal search committees in the recruitment process shape selected deans' perceptions of the organizational and governance context of the hiring university?
  - b. How do selected deans perceive the role of the external search firm, particularly as it relates to their experiences as candidates?
  - c. How do selected deans compare their lived experiences of the deanship to the details of the position and expectations of the successful candidate as communicated during the search process?
2. How can Reference Point Theory (RPT) inform our understanding of decanal candidates' decision-making during the recruitment and selection process?



## **Ontological Assumptions**

The research endeavor is in many ways a fundamentally personal one. Individual ontology, epistemology, and axiology guide and direct the progression of research from project inception, through question development and data collection, to analysis and dissemination (Cohen et al., 2011). Creswell (2014) defined ontology as the nature of reality. Individuals create their own reality based on the meanings and understandings they develop through social interactions and experiences in the wider world (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Creswell, 2014). It is the actions of individuals and the intent behind these actions that help us to understand human behavior (Cohen et al., 2011). As such, understanding how individuals in a particular context perceive and experience institutional processes is central to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the overall activity. For example, understanding how successful decanal candidates, provosts, and search firm representatives experience and make meaning of the recruitment and selection process is important in developing a more fulsome understanding of institutional recruitment activities.

The idea that humans construct reality through interactions with each other is not new. Crotty (1998) argued that the application of hermeneutics to the understanding of human events has heavily influenced our understanding of the nature of being. The use of hermeneutic methods, motivated by a desire to ‘read’ human interactions and interpret these in meaningful ways that lead to a greater understanding of reality, has significantly impacted the interpretivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998).

## **Epistemological Assumptions**

Creswell (2014) succinctly described epistemology as “how we know what we know” (p. 54). The social constructivist approach, often aligned with interpretivism, understands humans as

developing varied, subjective meanings of their realities (Creswell, 2014). We continually reconstruct these definitions, understandings, and world-views in light of new information. There is no limit to the number of realities in a given context as each individual understands the context differently in light of their previous experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The social constructivist seeks to understand the complexities of these multiple realities (Creswell, 2014). However, our own positionality always influences this understanding to a degree as the only way to interpret the social world is to employ our own experiences and constructs to understand the person, group, organization, or community we are studying (Humphrey, 2013).

This social constructionism arose in direct opposition to positivistic perspectives. Whereas the positivist assumes that the only relevant knowledge ('facts') held in societies derives from the scientific method, interpretivists acknowledge the reality that there are multiple and equally-relevant ways of knowing (Burgess & Newton, 2016). The historical origins of the interpretivist approach are an important part of understanding the epistemological assumptions of the paradigm. The establishment and evolution of interpretivist approaches in opposition to the dominant positivistic paradigm is proof in and of itself of the importance of recognizing multiple ways of knowing in furtherance of knowledge in a given field (Cohen et al., 2005).

Crotty (1998) identified multiple epistemological assumptions of social constructivists. Firstly, we construct meanings of the world around us through both our engagement with objects in the world, and through our continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of that engagement. Secondly, we engage in this knowledge creation process informed by the dominant historical and social perspectives predominantly embraced by our culture (Crotty, 1998). Thirdly, and related to this, meaning is always social and the result of interactions in and between human communities (Crotty, 1998). Meaning is context specific. While there are potential

commonalities between meanings made in various situations, circumstances, organizations, and localities, universal truths are not applicable in all contexts.

These epistemological assumptions have wide-ranging implications in my research. As a researcher, I am aware that my own background, views, and experiences play a role in shaping what research projects I conduct, what data I elect to collect, how I obtain it, and the construction of new knowledge based on that data. Face-to-face interviews with successful candidates, provosts, and search firm representatives provided an optimal environment for these individuals to share their unique experiences and understandings of this particular process in detail. However, as individuals within these various groups perceived and experienced the decanal recruitment process in different ways, the semi-structured interview format was rigid enough to allow for general topic areas to be addressed, but flexible enough to enable the interviewees to guide much of the conversation.

### **Axiological Assumptions**

The focus of interpretivist studies is the individual (Cohen et al., 2005). Only through developing a deep understanding of the individual can we expect to establish a coherent interpretation of the world in which they live. Cohen et al. (2005) contended that “the central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience” (p. 22). To achieve this depth, interpretivist researchers must go to great lengths to understand the person or persons whom they are studying (Cohen et al., 2005).

Humphrey (2013) defined axiology as having to do with the realm of values. An understanding of the value of a given study, and what we as researchers hope to gain out of the process for both ourselves and the subjects of our research, can have a significant impact on the conduct of that investigation. The value of or motivation for this particular body of research is to

develop an understanding of how individual decanal candidates themselves experience and perceive the recruitment process. While most of the work to date that explores decanal recruitment has focused on institutional perspectives, as the assumed goal of the process is to recruit high-quality individual deans, the details of how individuals experience the process is an essential aspect of decanal recruitment.

Exploring how individuals perceive and understand their experiences as decanal candidates can further our understanding of senior administrative recruitment practices within universities. Crotty (1998) contended that developing an understanding of a given phenomenon through the ‘hermeneutic circle’ is more succinctly described as building an understanding of the whole through acquiring an in-depth perspective of each component part. In the context of recruiting academic deans, we can extrapolate this concept to enhancing our understanding of the decanal recruitment and selection process overall through exploring the experiences and perceptions of the individuals involved.

The interpretivist methodology as applied in the educational administration context usually falls somewhere on an ‘insider-outsider’ continuum. Humphrey (2013) postulated that those who are ‘insiders’ in relation to the field or context, but ‘outsiders’ concerning the specific profession or aspect of a given context they are studying typically accomplish the most original research in education. My position as an ‘insider,’ that is working in a professional capacity within a Canadian university, is beneficial in that it provides me with a wealth of background knowledge and organizational experience that is specific to the context. However, I am an outsider in that I have never served in academic leadership, nor have I played any formal role in the recruitment and selection of an academic dean. This ‘insider-outsider’ positionality is of

value in that it allows me to have an awareness of the systems and organizations involved, but at the same time positions me externally to the specific issues I explore.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as a methodology, accounts for both the experiences of the research participants and the researcher. Phenomenology in very general terms is a philosophical means by which we can explore human experiences (Smith et al., 2012). Husserl and Heidegger, although both emphasized slightly different approaches, are seen as the founders of phenomenology (Vagle, 2014). While Husserl argued for a complete focus on the experience under investigation, Heidegger contended that while the experience is of central importance, we cannot begin to understand experiences if we do not also consider the situational context (Smith et al., 2012). To achieve this contextual understanding, Heidegger postulated, a researcher can make use of the hermeneutic circle (Large, 2008). Crotty (1998) understood the hermeneutic circle as a valuable means of furthering an understanding of the whole through a detailed awareness of the individual parts that comprise the whole. While some scholars such as Freeman and Vagle (2013) have more recently situated phenomenological methodologies in the critical or radical paradigms, phenomenology's traditional placement is within the interpretivist tradition (Lather, 2006).

Although heavily influenced by psychology, phenomenology is not about attempting to understand the psychological processes that underlie the human condition. However, phenomenological studies do, as Vagle (2014) highlighted, try to understand how individuals experience objects or phenomena in the world. As the decanal recruitment process plays out in the real-world setting of the university, IPA can facilitate an exploration of the experiences of those involved in the associated activities. How candidates experience the various phenomena of

institutional recruitment activities, and how provosts and external search firm representatives perceive the candidate experience, is dependant on a variety of factors—individual background, previous leadership and recruitment experience, and their interactions with search committees. Semi-structured interviews facilitate the open sharing of these types of details.

Vagle’s (2014) assertion that there is no one way to construct a phenomenological research process also emphasizes the flexibility of the methodology and the non-linear nature of research studies. Multiperspectival IPA was used in this study. The multiperspectival design allowed me to gather data about one particular event or process from a variety of directly related groups (Larkin et al., 2019). While single-perspective IPA studies are highly valuable as a means of understanding how individuals experience a particular process, these are largely one dimensional (Larkin et al., 2019). As Larkin et al. (2019) have noted, by concentrating on the “synthesis, integration, or resonance between the findings” (p. 186) of individual participants a fulsome and multifaceted awareness of a process is possible.

IPA is an appropriate analytical approach when a researcher is interested in exploring how individuals experience or perceive a particular situation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA focuses on analyzing patterns of how individuals make meaning in a given context rather than attempting to produce a theory of that process (Larkin et al., 2019). Thus, IPA research questions are typically ‘how’ questions (Smith & Osborne, 2003). Furthermore, research questions in IPA studies are usually broad and open (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2003). This openness facilitates a degree of flexibility that is essential when a researcher is interested in the rich detail(s) of an individual’s experience (Smith & Osborne, 2003).

IPA is especially suitable when a researcher is interested in exploring complexity, process, or both (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA studies usually involve small sample sizes as the aim is to be able to provide detailed analysis about a few specific cases rather than general claims (Smith & Osborn, 2003). There are many methods by which data suitable for IPA analysis is attainable including personal accounts, diaries, and interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2003). However, most IPA studies employ semi-structured interviews as the preferred means of data collection (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Smith and Osborn (2003) underscored the value of semi-structured interviews in facilitating a dynamic dialogue between interviewer and interviewee where the direction of the conversation can shift as need be.

Following the data collection for this study, analysis took place. The overarching goal of IPA studies is to understand the meaning research participants make of particular events, situations, or experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). From thematic developments within individual cases, researchers move to analysis between and across groups of related cases (Larkin et al., 2019). Sustained engagement with the transcription of the interview is the best way for the researcher to achieve such an understanding (Smith & Osborn, 2003). By first identifying themes in specific interviews, and then connecting or relating the themes of individual interviews to each other, the analysis can explore, compare, and contrast the experiences of each interview participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

### **Methodology**

The philosophical beliefs held by a researcher have significant methodological implications as well. Interpretivist scholars are interested in the individual. Humphrey (2013) argued that interpretivist researchers commonly employ face-to-face interviews. Using their own empathy, familiarity with the subject of the discussion, and positionality, interviewers can

develop a rich, subjective understanding of the experiences and interpretation of those experiences recalled by the participant in furtherance of their own understanding of a given situation (Silverman, 1993). An interview enables a researcher to obtain, as Merriam (2009) emphasized, “the informant’s perception of the phenomenon of interest at that particular point in time” (p. 114). As previously noted, Smith and Osborn (2003) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) highlighted the semi-structured interview as the preferred method of IPA researchers as it allows for gathering a necessary depth of detail from the subject of the interview.

### **The Semi-Structured Interview**

Phenomenological studies, and IPA studies in particular, require “rich” descriptions of an individual’s experiences (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 6). Only through rich stories can researchers begin to appreciate the essence of an individual’s experiences (Dahlberg, 2006). The purpose of gathering rich data is not to support truth finding or to corroborate data obtained from other sources. The purpose is to gain as deep of a sense of how the interviewees experience a particular process as possible. To be able to understand the process from their perspective, a level of granularity is necessary.

Merriam (2009) advised that the information a researcher is looking to obtain should dictate the choice of research method. Semi-structured interviews were the primary means of data collection for this study. Semi-structured interviews provide an ideal venue in which research participants can share their detailed thoughts about a particular subject in a relatively free-flowing manner (Merriam, 2009). The fluidity of this method allows research subjects the opportunity to guide much of the discussion—an essential aspect when exploring the thoughts of an individual.



Interviews are a valuable method through which we can explore the experiences and perceptions of individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, there are many facets to the process that require consideration in an effort to maximize the interview's usefulness. At their most basic level, interviews are social and relational interactions (Cohen et al., 2011). While it is not the interviewer's role to agree with everything said by an interviewee, it is essential that a researcher is able to contain their own feelings and thoughts so that they can establish a rapport with the interviewee and limit the influence their own bias may have on the interview process (Kvale, 1996).

In addition to the interviewer's interactions with research participants, their familiarity with the subject matter under discussion can also impact the progression of the interview. Cohen et al. (2011) defined this knowledge base as the cognitive dimension of an interview. To facilitate discussion and strengthen the rapport between interviewer and interviewee, the interviewer must have a substantial and broad understanding of the discussion topics (Cohen et al., 2011).

### **The dynamics of the interview**

Additionally, the dynamics of an interview are important to consider. Cohen et al. (2011) highlighted that such considerations could include "how to keep the conversation going, how to motivate participants to discuss their thoughts, feelings and experiences, [and] how to overcome the problems of the likely asymmetries of power in the interview" (p. 422). These aspects of the interview are particularly important for IPA. As the focus of an IPA study is the experiences and perceptions of research participants, establishing an environment in which the interviewee feels comfortable to share their actual thoughts about a given process is essential (Smith et al., 2012).

It is also important to consider how power relationships may impact the process of gathering data for this study. Merriam (2009) asserted that the process of interviewing can be understood as engaging in a dialogue with research participants. However, as Kvale (2006) has countered, interviews are at best a one-way dialogue that sees the interviewer adopt a position of relative power.

Kvale (2006) further articulated that the interviewer establishes the parameters of the interview, interprets the data or experiences shared in the interview, has the ability to manipulate that data, and ultimately has total control over how that data is interpreted. Such a power dynamic is particularly important to consider in this specific context as there is a strong juxtaposition between the legitimate, organizational power of the interviewees in their professional roles (deans) compared to that of the researcher (administrator). Although the research subjects had a significantly higher degree of legitimate organizational power in comparison to myself, this shifted in the confines of this study. The interviewer, although not always overtly, directs the conversation in an attempt to achieve the broad-based goal of the interview (Kvale, 1996). However, deans, by virtue of their position, are more often used to directing the conversation. Thus to ensure a productive interview, I had to pay close attention to the verbal cues of research participants to navigate the possible stumbling blocks that can emerge. By gently and subtly guiding the conversation, and being open to redirection and shifting my previously established line of questioning to suit the direction the individual participants took the discussion it was possible to prevent these shifting power dynamics from negatively impacting my ability to explore the broad topics and deep level of details that were integral to this study.

## **Constructing and Preparing for the Interviews**

In addition to considering the potential dynamics of an interview, further preparatory steps are also helpful in increasing the likelihood of a productive interview. Choosing interview participants is the first step in preparing to gather data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given the nature, context, and my own positionality, for this study, purposeful sampling was used. The objective of purposeful sampling is to select participants who can provide “information rich” data (Gall et al., p. 178; Patton, 2015, p. 46). In purposeful sampling, research participants are targeted simply based on their ability to share their insights about the topic under exploration (Patton, 2015). The goal of purposeful sampling is not to identify a sample that is fully representative of a given population (Gall et al., 2007), rather it is to be able to develop a rich understanding of the experiences of select individuals.

Once a sample population has been identified, the next stage in the interview process involved preparation for the initial interviews. For an interview to be productive, the interviewer must establish a detailed understanding of the concepts, topics, or procedures to be explored in the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such background knowledge helps to increase the likelihood of developing a quick rapport with the interviewee (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Preparation also included consideration of the overall structure of the interview. Semi-structured interviews assume that individuals experience and understand that experience of the world in different ways (Merriam, 2009). A particular strength of the semi-structured interview lies in the blend of methods of structured and unstructured interviews (Merriam, 2009). As the focus of this research project is understanding the similarities and differences of individuals’ experiences, the overall structure combined with the relative fluidity of discussion topics and ability to pursue particular streams of consciousness as raised by the interviewee of a semi-

structured interview is ideal. If the purpose of phenomenological interviewing is, as Marshall and Rossman (2006) contended, to unearth the essence of individual experiences, the method that we select to achieve this goal must allow for a certain degree of in-situ flexibility.

The importance of design applies to the interview questions as well. Merriam (2009) described strong questions as “those that are open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon” under exploration (p. 99). The stories that research participants share during the course of the interviews can be particularly valuable and rich as data sources. However, for an interviewee to be willing to share such personal and perhaps even at times emotional information with a researcher, it is essential to develop a strong rapport early and quickly in the interview process (Merriam, 2009).

### **Analysis**

Analysis is the next phase of an IPA study. Smith and Osborn (2003) advised that analysis in a multiple participant IPA study should begin with the initial participant interview. Larkin et al. (2019) further added that the initial analysis should also be done group by group. The researcher reads the initial interview transcript numerous times, making notes and establishing an early list of themes. Some sections of the interview text may be richer than others, leading to more themes emerging from particular parts of the interview as compared to others (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The themes should be of a level sufficiently high enough to enable connections to theory and across cases, but granular enough that they can easily relate to what was said in the interview(s) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Following the establishment of themes in the first transcript, these themes are then listed in a separate document (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The transcript is rechecked to ensure the final list of themes is representative of the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The themes are then ordered in a way that makes sense to

the researcher. Elimination of some themes can and may take place at this stage of the process (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Following the establishment of themes from the initial interview transcript, the researcher continues to analyze each subsequent transcript within that group (Larkin et al., 2019). The list of the overall themes of the group are added to in an effort to highlight the similarities and differences in the particular experiences and perceptions of individual subjects (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This progressive analysis will ultimately result in a final list of themes that leads to the categorization of broader major themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

After all of the transcripts from the first group have been analyzed, the analysis moves on to subsequent groups. In turn, each group of transcripts are reviewed following the process noted above until all interview transcripts have undergone analysis (Larkin et al., 2019). Following the analysis at the individual and group level, the researcher then works to identify consensus, conflict, complementarity of concepts or observations across cases, and differences in interpretations of similar events (Larkin et al., 2019).

The flexibility of an IPA study means that there is no requirement for every thought or experience shared by a participant to result in a theme or subtheme (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The number of themes that emerge from a transcript or specific group of transcripts is entirely related to the richness of the experiences shared (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Clusters of related subthemes that emerge and reoccur through the course of analysis lead to the establishment of overarching themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003). At the same time, themes or subthemes that do not fit within the developing structure nor are particularly rich can be removed (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The final list of themes and subthemes that result from data analysis are the result of the researcher prioritizing all insights collected. (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The prioritizing of data is not

accomplished solely based on the prevalence of themes within the data, but also considers the richness of the relevant sections within the transcripts and how those themes help to highlight other aspects of the study (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Multiperspectival IPA can facilitate a researcher's development of themes, connections, and conflicts both within related groups and across groups (Larkin et al., 2019). As Larkin et al. (2019) postulated the primary aim of Multiperspectival IPA "is to produce an account that capitalizes on multiplicity and offers a plausible interpretative perspective on how the participants' lifeworlds interact and overlap" in a specific context (p. 192). It is this lived experience of a particular process that is of interest in this specific study. As it was this lived experience of a particular process that was the central focus of this study, Multiperspectival IPA was an ideal methodology.

After categorizing the perceptions and experiences of provosts, search firm representatives, and decanal candidates into themes, a modified and updated RPT was used to develop an understanding of how these perceptions and experiences influenced the creation of candidate decision-making criteria (reference points) during their search processes. Decanal candidates make their decisions based on a variety of criteria, established in light of previous experiences (Harvey et al., 2013). By highlighting how various stakeholders within a search can influence the development of a candidate's reference points it is possible to understand the influence of an institutional process on a particular decision (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996; Harvey et al., 2013).

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study is multifaceted. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that for naturalistic inquiries trustworthiness can be considered in terms of credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A qualitative study is credible if the findings and interpretations of the researcher resonate, at least in general terms, with the research participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability, although not of primary importance for Lincoln and Guba (1985), can also indicate the trustworthiness of findings. However, in naturalistic inquiries, transferability is limited to contextual and temporal similarities. For example, if conclusions were found to be valid in a specific context at a certain point in time, the lack of total transferability to another similar context does not necessarily mean that the original finds are any less trustworthy.

Although transferability was not a central focus of Lincoln and Guba (1985), Smith et al. (2012) explored transferability in detail, but focused exclusively on IPA studies. They maintained that there are two ways to think about transferability. Transferability can be thought of as either theoretical or empirical (Smith et al., 2012). The theoretical transferability of an IPA study is demonstrated by a reader's ability to, as Smith et al. (2012) indicated, "make links between the analysis in an IPA study, their own personal and professional experience, and the claims in the extant literature" (p. 51). If these connections are possible, there is transferability.

Rich, clear, and context-specific analysis supports the empirical transferability of a given IPA study (Smith et al., 2012). Such clarity enables readers to determine the transferability of a given study to other similar contexts, people, or processes (Smith et al., 2012). For example, the findings of this study may have some transferability to understanding the recruitment experiences of decanal candidates in comprehensive Canadian universities. Although slightly different, the context of a comprehensive university and a research-intensive university in Canada do have similarities. The processes may be quite similar as well, occurring in similar organizational structures, and supported by many of the same external recruitment firms.

Furthermore, the candidates themselves may also have similar backgrounds and comparable skillsets in comparison to those recruited to lead academic colleges in research-intensive universities. While the experiences of no two successful decanal candidates will be the same, an awareness of how three provosts, two search firm representatives, and eight candidates have perceived and experienced the process can inform further understanding of that process in similar contexts.

Dependability and confirmability are also important considerations when pursuing naturalistic inquiries, including IPA studies. The findings of this study can be considered as dependable if the chosen methodology aligns with the research questions, goals of the project, and researcher positionality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A project is further considered to have increased dependability if inquirer bias is acknowledged and does not unnecessarily limit the scope of a project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Conversely, confirmability focuses primarily on the data that results from a particular study as opposed to the researcher conducting the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability is possible to determine in this study through reflexive journaling and a confirmability audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The importance of alignment between the particulars of a specific IPA study and the general themes of the relevant literature is also a central aspect of confirmability (Smith et al., 2012). While how successful decanal candidates experience the recruitment and selection process will enhance the understanding of the process overall, broad themes in the extant literature can also confirm the general themes extracted from individual accounts of the process. Although the institutional perspective dominates current research, parallels are possible. By enhancing the existing literature with the voice, perspectives, and experiences of the individuals



at the centre of the process, not only will this confirm general themes in the current scholarship, but it will expand these themes to include differing viewpoints.

There is no one means by which trustworthiness is or is not determined. Freeman et al. (2007) contended that this diversity is essential for supporting trustworthiness or validity, particularly in qualitative studies. For Vagle (2014), when considering phenomenological studies, validity is always related to the engagement of a researcher, the phenomenon under exploration, and the research subjects. In phenomenological studies, it is possible to determine validity by one of two means. First, Giorgi's (1997) concept of bracketing or phenomenological reduction is key. Bracketing encourages the researcher to set aside their previously conceived notions and knowledge of the phenomenon under exploration as a means of preventing those assumptions from impacting the current study of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). Bracketing ensures that it is the research subject's experience that directs the data gathering as opposed to that of the researcher. This approach supports the quest for trustworthiness not in the sense that the data obtained from research participants is true, accurate, or necessarily valid, but it ensures that participants can share the experiences and perceptions of a given phenomenon that they want to share and that they believe are relevant (Vagle, 2014). The researcher does not unnecessarily limit or bias the scope of the inquiry (Vagle, 2014). For example, in this study, I bracketed or set aside my previously established notions of the recruitment process. This bracketing not only impacted the questions I ask in interviews but also my approach to the discussion as a whole.

Second, and related to the idea of bracketing, is the notion of bridling (Dahlberg, 2006). Dahlberg (2006) noted that bridling is useful as a means of restraining previous understandings of a given situation or phenomenon so that they do not unnecessarily limit the breadth of a research project. The act of bridling one's perspective is ongoing throughout a project. In an IPA

study, bridling allows the perceptions, experiences, and understandings of the research participants to guide the study, rather than those of the researcher. While researcher positionality is an important part of any IPA study, particularly in the analysis phase, bridling allows for that positionality to be held in check when appropriate (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2014). Bridling also speaks to the reflexivity and openness of a study and provides the researcher an opportunity to take a step back to see a phenomenon in an alternate way (Freeman et al., 2007). As Vagle (2014) noted, bridling allows researchers to cull their own agency.

Although similar in intent there are important differentiations between bracketing and bridling. Dahlberg et al. (2008) highlighted that whereas bracketing looks backward, limiting the impact of previous perspectives on a current study, bridling is innately forward-looking. By bridling our understanding, we reduce the likelihood that we will jump to conclusions when attempting to understand a current phenomenon (Vagle, 2014). Bracketing is an attempt to section off our previous notions of a current topic so as to limit undue influence on the research process. In this study, I used reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to facilitate the bridling of my assumptions to ensure I focused exclusively on the perceptions and experiences shared by the successful decanal candidates and search firm representatives.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical aspects of the interviews are also important considerations for interviewers to reflect on before conducting interviews. Cohen et al. (2011) identified informed consent and confidentiality as central ethical considerations for researchers when employing interviews. Participants for this study were provosts, search firm representatives, and successful decanal candidates who were willing to share their experiences and perspectives. Those who participated in this study provided written consent. Consent forms (Appendix E) also detailed the parameters

of the study, and benefits and potential risks associated with participation in the study. No compensation was provided to any research participants in this study, and participants had the ability to withdraw at any time. Ethics approval was achieved through the process established by the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Confidentiality and anonymity were respected with the use of pseudonyms for participants and the redaction of particular details from any published quotes. Copies of the invitations used to solicit participation in this study are attached (Appendix A, B, and C).

### **Research Method**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified general phases of the interview process that can inform the conduct of this particular study. These phases can be separated into the pre-interview preparation, the during-interview procedures, and the post-interview actions. Attention to each of these phases is essential to ensure a researcher is well-prepared for the gathering of information through interviews.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that a pilot interview improves the likelihood of successful interviews. The pilot interview I conducted at the outset of this project allowed me to test the usefulness of my interview protocol in a real-life situation. It also provided a guide as to the approximate duration of each interview. The question protocol was revised slightly and updated based on this initial pilot, and I used the pilot experience to inform subsequent interviews.

After completion of the pilot interview, necessary revisions to the interview protocol, and receipt of ethics approval, I began to contact research participants (Appendix A, B, and C) and the participation of those who wished to share their experiences as part of the study was confirmed (Appendix D). The scheduling of interviews accommodated as far as possible the

research participants' schedule and format preferences. Interviews took place via telephone and online video conferencing platforms.

I employed my own positionality, understanding of the decanal recruitment and selection process, and awareness of the situational context in which the research participants work day-to-day—the university—to support the gathering of data through interviews for this study. While such background knowledge can also lead to biases, IPA does provide means by which the interviewer can check these biases. Through bracketing and bridling my own biases, as noted above, I held any preconceived notions, whether positive or negative, in check throughout the participant selection, data gathering, and analysis portions of the research project.

### **Participant Selection**

Three separate groups of individuals were invited to participate in this study. Provosts, representatives from executive search firms, and successful decanal candidates were asked to share their experiences and perceptions of the decanal recruitment process. Purposeful sampling, as described by Gall et al. (2007), was appropriate for this study. Using my own contacts, relationships, and knowledge of the Canadian academic landscape, I worked to identify three provosts, two external search firm representatives, and eight successful decanal candidates who were interested in sharing their experiences, could share substantive details, and had time for interviews and potential follow-ups in their busy schedules.

Potential participants were initially contacted by email (Appendix A, B, and C) to gauge their interest in contributing to this study. Sitting provosts and deans from western Canadian U15 universities all received the initial email invitation. Outreach to potential participants was limited to western Canadian U15 institutions to ensure all participants were situated within similar institutions and regional contexts. As Smith and Osborn (2003) highlighted, in an IPA study, it is

important to find a group of participants who experience the particular process under investigation in relatively similar contexts. However, to ensure some breadth of experiences amongst participant deans, deans from colleges of varying sizes and organizational structures (departmental and non-departmental) were invited to participate. The goal of a multiperspectival IPA study is to have a group of participants who are similar in that they all experience a similar process, yet their individual positionalities enable them to have diverse perspectives (Larkin et al., 2019). Provosts and deans who were on a leave, administrative or otherwise, were excluded from participation. Outreach to search firms was less straightforward. Initial email invitations were sent to the individuals identified as responsible for academic searches on the websites of various firms, which was typically followed by some internal redirection to individuals with first-hand experience of decanal searches. Interviews were scheduled with those individuals who responded that they were both interested and available to participate in the study.

Participation was limited to these three groups (provosts, search firm representatives, and successful decanal candidates) as these groups are all central to the same phenomenon, that is the decanal search process, yet can bring multiple perspectives to the study. While there are other individuals and stakeholders involved in decanal searches at various points of the process, to ensure adequate consideration could be given to the reflections and experiences of participants, the decision was made to limit participation to these three groups. Containing the scope of the study in this way aligns with the recommendations of Smith and Osborn (2003) and Larkin et al. (2019).

Smith and Osborn (2003) furthered that IPA studies should be conducted on relatively small participant groups. IPA studies in general typically have a total participant group of less than 15 individuals (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Three provosts, two search firm representatives,

and eight successful decanal candidates comprised the total participant pool for this study. The small participant pool not only allowed for a detailed analysis of their individual experiences, but a comparison and detailed exploration of the experiences across directly related groups (Larkin et al., 2019).

### **Interviewing Participants**

Preparation for the interviews with all participants involved reviewing the literature that informed the development of the previous chapter and the particular recruitment and selection policy or procedural documents within the public domain from each research participant's institution or firm. Following this initial preparation and the scheduling of interviews, the initial interview occurred. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that at the outset of the interview, the interviewer should remind the participant of the purpose of the interview as a means of helping both parties to settle into the conversation. Beginning an interview with basic, descriptive, and neutral questions can help to facilitate this brief working relationship (Merriam, 2009). Starting the interaction with straight-forward, low-stakes questions can help both interviewee and interviewer to become comfortable with one another (Merriam, 2009). I followed this approach as close as possible in each interview, which also enabled a smoother transition from greeting and introduction to interview as opposed to beginning with highly specific or political questions.

Interview questions for provosts (Appendix F), search firm representatives (Appendix G), and successful decanal candidates (Appendix H) progressed from general or biographical information to specific topics, but the transitions were free enough that the interviewee could lead the line of questioning based on their stream of consciousness. The interviews continued

until we achieve saturation and repetition of information began, which usually happened at the 60 to 90 minute mark, although some interviews ran longer.

Once the repetition of information began, as per Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions, interviews were concluded. The conclusion of the interviews also presents an opportune time for the interviewer to provide a brief high-level summary of what they believe to have been the main themes of the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hearing the interviewer describe what they perceive to be the salient points of the conversation serves two purposes. It allows the interviewee to correct any misinterpretations and provides them with an opportunity to add any thoughts they previously overlooked (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I largely followed this practice as well, although sometimes, dependant on the length of the interview, did this more than once throughout the course of our discussion.

After the interview, the participants were sincerely thanked for their time and provided with details regarding the next steps. This information included a summary of their overall commentary, a request to provide any relevant additional information or corrections, and contact information should they wish to add or remove any content from their initial interview. Following transcription, each interview participant received a copy of the interview text via email, and was given an opportunity to make any changes. Research participants also had the opportunity to withdraw their consent for participation in the study at any time.

The interview process, informed by the pilot interview, also included obtaining consent (Appendix E). Given that this project focused exclusively on the perceptions and experiences of provosts, search firm representatives, and successful decanal candidates, the risk of interview participants not being able to provide informed consent was relatively low. However, confidentiality is assumedly a greater concern. Given the relative smallness of the Canadian

higher education system and the often times intensely political nature of the position itself, the individuals who did participate in this study wanted to ensure their identities and the information they share were treated confidentially to ensure privacy. To ensure the confidentiality of research participants, pseudonyms replace the actual names of interviewees, and any published materials will include aggregate information as far as is possible. Where direct quotes are used, any and all identifying information of either the individual or the institution in question was removed.

### **Transcription**

Post-interview, the audio-recording of the discussion were promptly transcribed by the Social Sciences Research Labs at the University of Saskatchewan. Following my own review of these initial transcriptions, participants received a copy of their interview transcript and had the opportunity to provide clarification, correction, or to withdraw from the study. This process again followed that suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Once participants reviewed the transcripts and any necessary changes were made, they received an updated copy of the transcript (if necessary) and signed and returned the transcript release form (Appendix I).

### **Summary**

IPA provides an opportunity for researchers to explore how individuals perceive and experience a given process. By employing Multiperspectival IPA as a methodology and semi-structured interviews as the method in the specific context of decanal recruitment and selection, it was possible to gain a deep and rich understanding of how provosts, search firm representatives, and successful decanal candidates experience and make meaning through their involvement in the recruitment mechanisms of various universities. Incorporating Multiperspectival IPA with RPT allows us to not only understand how successful candidates



experience the recruitment process but gives us insights into how these experiences affect candidates' decisions as part of that process.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Decanal recruitment is integral to the success of universities (Del Favero, 2006). In spite of this importance, our understanding of decanal recruitment in the Canadian context remains limited (Lavigne, 2016). Enhancing our understanding of the means by which institutions recruit and select deans through the experiences and perceptions of those involved in the process including provosts, search firms, and successful candidates can both further our awareness of recruitment practices and enhance institutional decanal recruitment activity.

The following overarching questions and supporting subquestions guided this study:

1. Given the elements of a decanal search and the experiences of candidates, how can the process be enhanced to support the likelihood of deans' success?
  - a. How do the interactions with decanal search committees in the recruitment process shape selected deans' perceptions of the organizational and governance context of the hiring university?
  - b. How do selected deans perceive the role of the external search firm, particularly as it relates to their experiences as candidates?
  - c. How do selected deans compare their lived experiences of the deanship to the details of the position and expectations of the successful candidate as communicated during the search process?
2. How can Reference Point Theory (RPT) inform our understanding of decanal candidates' decision-making during the recruitment and selection process?

As discussed in Chapter Three, research participants were identified by purposeful sampling (Gall et al., 2007). As summarized in Table 4.1 three provosts, two search firm representatives, and eight successful decanal candidates participated in this study. Semi-

structured interviews were held with each of the candidates, varying in length between 60 and 90 minutes, in October and November 2019. One provost provided responses via email due to the busyness of his schedule. All interviews were transcribed by The Social Science Research Laboratories at the University of Saskatchewan.

Three provosts from Canadian U15 universities and representatives from two Canadian executive search firms with experience supporting decanal searches participated in this study and provided context to the insights and experiences shared by current deans. Provost James from Oak University and Provost Greg from Spruce University have been in their respective roles for between two and three years. Provost Doug from Elm University has been in his position for over eight years. Given the nature of U15 universities and the role of the provost, further biographical information may identify research participants. To further ensure anonymity, the provosts have been given pseudonyms that are not necessarily reflective of the gender with which they identify. Both search firm representatives have been working in the area of executive searches, including decanal searches, for about 15 years. The limited number of search firms who support academic searches in Canada and an effort to ensure the anonymity of these two participants prevents further details from being shared about the search firm representatives who participated in this study.

Eight successful decanal candidates who are also sitting deans at Western Canadian U15 universities participated in and were the primary focus of this study. Each dean is referred to only by a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Dean John has been dean of his faculty at Poplar University for just over three years. He was appointed to his current position after serving as acting dean for a one-year term. Prior to his time as an acting dean he held various administrative

positions at Poplar including associate dean, director of graduate studies, and director of a research center.

Dean Margaret began her current appointment at Maple University just over two years ago. Prior to her current position she served as the dean of a similar college at another Canadian university from which she was recruited into her current position. She also has previous experience as an associate dean and acting dean at her former institution.

Dean Gordon acquired significant leadership experience prior to his academic career as a professional sports coach. After more than a decade working in a university abroad as both an acting and interim dean, he returned to Canada to assume his current deanship at Pine University. He is in nearing the end of his second and final term as dean.

As another two-term dean, Dean Nathan is in the final year of his deanship at Burch University. Prior to his decanal appointment he served in two different associate dean roles, coordinated graduate programming in his college, and served as an administrative director. Dean Nathan has spent his entire career at Burch.

Dean Matthew also acquired a significant amount of leadership experience outside of the academy. Following his military career, he held a faculty position and served as an associate dean abroad. He returned to Canada to assume a deanship, which he held for over 10 years. Following that deanship, he assumed a second at Cherry University and is nearing the completion of his second term there. He was recruited to Cherry while a sitting dean.

Similarly, Dean Jane developed many of her senior leadership skills abroad. After having served as both an associate dean and vice president for research she returned to Canada to take

up her current deanship at Mahogany University. Dean Jane was recently renewed in her current position for a second term.

Dean Andy has held various administrative and leadership roles within both Canadian universities and academic institutions abroad. Prior to his current deanship at Willow University he served as undergraduate director, graduate director, department head, dean, and vice principal academic in various institutions. He is at the end of the second term of his deanship.

Finally, Dean Michael is in the first year of his current deanship. Prior to assuming this role at Rosewood University, he served as a dean at another Canadian university. He also has experience as an assistant, associate, and acting dean. He has worked in various universities across the country.

**Table 4.1:** *Participant summary*

<i>Deans</i>	<i>Provosts</i>	<i>Search Firms</i>
John	James	Sally
Margaret	Doug	Fred
Gordon	Greg	-
Nathan	-	-
Matthew	-	-
Jane	-	-
Andy	-	-
Michael	-	-

Following extensive conversations with research participants and as outlined in Chapter Three, the analysis in this multiperspectival IPA study began with the initial provost interview transcript. An early list of themes was developed after several reads of the first transcript, and

then added to and further refined as subsequent transcripts of interviews with provosts were reviewed. This progressive analysis then resulted in a list of themes specific to participant provosts. The same process was followed for both the transcripts of interviews with search firm representatives and the successful decanal candidates who participated in this study. The themes established within each group were then compiled into an over-arching list of general themes.

While the strength of themes and subthemes did vary slightly by group, there were definite commonalities across participant groups. Although the points of emphasis differed slightly between participant groups, participants remarked on the airport interviews and campus visits, search committees, the politics of searches, candidate background and preparation, and candidate fit. Deans and search firm representatives were quick to comment on the ambiguous role of search committees as well. The role of the search firm was a frequent topic raised by deans, provosts, and search firm representatives alike, including the firm's involvement in initial outreach to prospects, ensuring a smooth process, and establishing an initial candidate list. All participants remarked on the centrality of the search firm in the decanal search process in one form or another.

### **The Centrality of the Search Firm**

Search firms play an increasingly key role in the conduct of decanal searches in western Canadian U15 universities. Each of the eight deans who participated in this study discussed, often at length, the centrality of the search firm in their experience of the recruitment process. Whether their perception of the search firm was positive, negative, or somewhere in between, they each considered the wide-ranging involvement of search firm representatives as integral to their recruitment and selection process.

## **Decanal Perceptions of External Search Firms**

Dean Margaret noted that search firms “generate interest in the position,” and help prospective candidates “see themselves in the position description” by “connect[ing] their strengths and talents” to what a particular faculty or college is searching for at a particular time (p. 10). Beyond those initial pre-application conversations, as Dean Nathan highlighted, the

search firm [also] has a role to play in helping navigate the creation of the short list and reaching out to candidates and kind of keeping all of that in play while the committee does its work. And then of course you get to the short list and they have a role to play in helping both convince people it might be a great opportunity and [as] a conduit back and forth between the university and the candidate (p. 7).

External search firms, as perceived by successful decanal candidates, are central to the search process.

The importance of the role the search firm plays in decanal recruitment is evident from the beginning of the search. Dean Jane commented that “it really is those individuals who are making those calls from the search firm that play such a huge role in the candidate pool that gets decided on” (p. 9). The importance of those initial calls by search firm representatives to individuals whom the firm is aware of or whom the committee has identified as prospective applicants was remarked on by a significant majority of participant deans.

Several participants noted that they had not initially been interested in or aware of particular searches until first contacted by the search firm (Deans Andy, Gordon, Margaret, & Michael). Dean Margaret remarked that she can always tell when a search firm has done their

homework prior to their preliminary contact. In reference to the initial communication that led to her current appointment she commented,

this search consultant knew a lot about me already, when she reached out to me that first time, she knew my research interests, she knew the work that I had been doing at [my previous university]. I was very impressed actually with the depth of her knowledge already (p. 10).

Candidates were also well-aware of the amount of energy firms exert in making that initial contact and the importance of persistence on the part of the firm. When Dean Margaret originally expressed her disinterest in the current deanship she now holds at the time she was initially contacted by the firm, the firm continued to pursue the possibility.

The woman that was my contact from the search firm, she was exceptional at her job, obviously because I uprooted my family and move to Maple, right? So she sent me the position description right away and she said ‘well take a look and let me know if you have questions or if there is anything in that position that’s of interest. And I do want you to know that, again, we’ve been really encouraged to reach out to you. Maple University is very interested in you.’ So I looked at the position description and it actually really resonated with me, so I did follow up (p.2).

Recruiter persistence is key, especially when trying to recruit a sitting dean to an alternate deanship. However, not all search firms are equally prepared.

When reflecting on what the role of a search firm should be in relation to decanal searches in Canada, Dean Jane recalled a negative interaction with a firm who recently reached out to her regarding a potential decanal opportunity.



The other day, a couple of months ago now, I got called about a position to see if I was interested. I was actually, I had seen that job and talked to a colleague of mine and they had asked me to recommend them and so when they called me I said, ‘oh well very funny that you’re calling because I actually want to recommend somebody for this position.’ But the person was just, I can’t even explain it, she was just, she put me off. I thought to myself, ‘I don’t even know that I want to recommend this person now but I’ve already done it and I definitely would never apply for this job.’ And I can’t quite remember what it was she said, it was sort of the ambivalence about the position that sort of exuded from the way she was describing it that made me think, ‘yeah, no way’ (p. 9).

Not all initial outreach by firms has positive outcomes.

Five of the eight deans who participated in this study were recruited to their current positions while they were sitting deans at other institutions. From their reflections, it is evident that the search firm, and their ability to facilitate these initial confidential conversations is particularly invaluable. Dean Jane admitted that “once you’re connected to a search firm then they know about you and they call and say, ‘oh, this would be a good position for you,’” but they do this confidentially (p. 10). As Dean Gordon described, “you don’t really need to be seen as looking for other jobs” (p. 5). The ability of a search firm to proactively engage with those individuals whom they may be aware of and who may be interested in alternate opportunities reduces the likelihood of an individual’s interest in leaving their current position making it out to the wider community (Dean Gordon).

### **The search firm and proactive, confidential outreach.**

The role of the search firm has become even more important in recent years. As a majority of the deans interviewed noted, individuals are no longer applying for deanships on their own, rather they are waiting to be contacted by recruitment firms (Deans Gordon, Nathan, Jane, Andy, & Michael). Whereas candidates used to proactively express an interest in a particular deanship, they now wait for an institution to first express an interest in them through a search firm. Dean Gordon argued that the fundamental role of the search firm has changed. Whereas the employment of search firms was initially motivated by a university's desire to extend the reach of their search,

now it's become the de facto recruiting [mechanism], it is recruiting. We're gonna recruit you into this position - so much so that the people out there are waiting to be recruited as opposed to apply[ing]. Even if they see the job they say well I'm gonna sit a bit, see if they get ahold of me. So it's taken on a bit of a life of its own (Dean Gordon, p. 17).

The search firm's role has evolved based on their more proactive recruitment stance.

The increased centrality of the search firm, as perceived by deans, has also led to firms fulfilling a candidate screening role (Deans Andy, Gordon, Jane, Michael, & Nathan). Dean Nathan commented that firms

have a role to play in some initial screening...just verifying that people have the right credentials and the background that might fit for a dean. Maybe having an initial conversation that helps assess whether that person is a jerk or not....and to, in the end, produce a list of potential candidates (p. 7).

This screening or filtering function provides firms with an opportunity to influence the search process as well.

Dean Michael proposed that search firms exert their influence over the candidate screening process in two distinct ways. First, they make significant efforts to convince the university's search committee that the candidates they bring to the committee are the best available (Dean Michael). Second, the firm must also be able to make the institutional search committee comfortable with the list they bring forward (Dean Michael).

Some participants did indicate a concern over the impact this pre-screening and selection of candidates has on the decisions made by the search committee. Dean Gordon explained,

sometimes the committee sees a medium list and a short list. Sometimes they see a long list, a medium list, and a short list. But rarely do they see everybody...I was approached by Beech University to be the dean there about five years before I was contacted by Pine University, so it would have been 2000 and I was very willing to go back there....so I was approached by a search firm on that and went yeah, yeah I'd be interested in that. Then I happened to be going to Beech coincidentally to be giving a keynote at one of the national conferences that happened to be being held in [a] hotel, but as I was there I stopped in to the University 'cause at that point I still had a couple of... professors that I knew from the days I was there and one of them said oh well you need to go and see Fred. Fred's on the search committee, he'd really like to talk to you and I went oh okay, so I went and saw Fred and Fred goes 'well I'm on the search committee, would be really interested to talk to you about the dean job,'

and I said ‘well I’ve already been contacted by the recruiter, I’m not in, no longer considered.’ And he goes ‘oh ?’ (p. 18).

Gordon’s experience highlights how the activities and goals of the search firm can at times diverge from the overall goal of the search committee.

### **Search firms as the only path to a U15 Canadian deanship.**

Hiring an external search firm to support senior executive hiring processes is standard practice amongst U15 universities. When asked to describe their recruitment process into their current deanship, a serial dean responded, “I’m sure you know better than I do that the Canadian institutions work by, you don’t go from one university to another, to a negotiated decision, without a consultant” (Dean Michael, p. 2). In moving to his current position Dean Michael further added that “it was the consultant who determined that this would be, who knew my background and thought that I would be a good fit for this particular position” (p. 2). Having met the particular consultant as part of another search in which Michael had been involved, albeit at the periphery, he was already a known entity when the search firm began to recruit for his current deanship.

Search firms meet, interact, and have lengthy conversations with prospective applicants and candidates long before search committee members do. The deans who participated in this study understood this preliminary screening or filtering function to be standard practice in decanal recruitment at large universities in Canada. As Dean Michael recollected, “I didn’t meet with anybody from the hiring committee or from the university until actually I got to sort of the preliminary interview,” or airport interview (p. 4). Four of the eight deans who participated in this study first learned about the deanship they currently hold through a search firm (Deans

Andy, Gordon, Jane, Margaret, & Michael). All eight of the deans applied and had the initial phase of their interest in and application to their positions facilitated entirely by search firms. Each candidate, aside from the two who were internal candidates, initially learned about the institutions they would eventually work for through the search firms involved. Dean Jane articulated just how impactful the initial contact by a search firm can be, particularly for a candidate who is not fully convinced that they are interested in a particular position. In her case, “a 15-minute phone call turned into a 90-minute phone call and when I hung up from that phone call I had been convinced that I should put my name in the hat” (Dean Jane, p. 3). The perceptions candidates developed of search firms throughout their recruitment processes had lasting impacts.

### **Candidate perceptions.**

When asked about any strengths of their own individual recruitment journeys to their current positions, six of the eight deans who participated explicitly referenced the search firm as the most significant strength of the process from their perspective (Deans Andy, Gordon, Jane, Margaret, Matthew, Michael, & Nathan). As Dean Matthew recollected, “they [the search firm] were the epitome of professionalism, they knew the briefs.... they kept me fully sort of apprised every stage of the way, they were wonderful to work with” (p. 3). One dean, who had a negative experience with his search firm representative listed the search firm as a significant weakness of the process. As Dean John pointed out, “the search firm screwed up when I made the long list, they forgot to tell me that I was supposed to have a presentation prepared for my interview” (p. 3). In spite of this negative experience, John still saw how he was treated by the search firm as central to his experience.

The treatment of candidates by the search firm and their representatives or “handlers,” as Dean Jane (p. 5) referred to them, throughout the search process has significant implications. As Dean Margaret stressed, “had I not been treated as well as I’d been treated [by the search firm’s representative], had there been red flags for me through the process, it’s very likely I would have made a different decision” (p. 12). Provosts also recognize the centrality of the search firm in how deans experience the search.

### **The Search Firm and the Provost**

In Canada, there are only a small number of executive search firms who support decanal recruitment (Provost James). However, provosts are increasingly reliant on the search firm to facilitate and support a number of aspects of decanal searches. Provost Doug asserted that it would be “almost impossible to search for a dean nowadays without having” a firm involved (p. 15). Provost Greg suggested that “most prospective [decanal] candidates learn about positions through search firms” (p. 1). Provost James contended that using a search firm is one of the biggest strengths of the decanal recruitment process. Provosts, as the individuals who chair decanal search committees, and thus oversee the search, are primarily responsible for the selection of the search firm that will support and facilitate a decanal search.

The fit between a provost, institution, and search firm is also a theme that emerged from interviews with provosts. When asked about how he selects a search firm, Provost Doug explained,

I’ve worked very closely with one firm, we work very well together. They know me, I know them. On occasion, I’ll pick someone different just to make sure I’m keeping them honest. But it’s my decision which search firm I’m going to use (p. 4).

There has to be a match between the provost and the firm (Provost Doug).

As Provost Doug continued to discuss the relationship that develops between a search firm and a provost, the importance of the role of the search firm became further apparent.

Provost Doug added,

The search firm that I have worked with has essentially built the University...they understand the institution in their DNA.... they've hired the right people. Not surprisingly, I would hire the search firm that got me hired because they were superb, and I knew how they treated candidates (p. 15).

Provost James likewise commented that he pays special attention to how search firms approach candidate interaction when considering what firm to hire for a particular search.

Each of the three provosts interviewed remarked on the crucial role of the search firm in establishing initial contact with prospective or desired applicants and managing that outreach (Provosts James, Doug, & Greg). Provost James furthered that search committees are

not really expecting people to apply to [the] ad. So it's really the tap on the shoulder and that's where search consultants are crucial. So often they are talking to people who aren't looking, who may not even be interested at all initially but as they're talked to a little bit more and told about the opportunity and the reason why the search consultant thinks they might be a good fit, that's often where we get people (p. 5).

Provost Doug noted that search firms often use him as an example of the importance of recruiter outreach. "The search firm we employ always uses me [as an example] because they came to talk to me 12 times [about becoming a provost], I said no every single time and I

said yes on the 13<sup>th</sup> time” (p. 13). Search firms and their initial outreach to potential candidates can have a major influence on the direction a search takes and who makes the initial list presented to the search committee.

### **Search firm as sole source of contact**

Provosts were also clear that they only want the search firm reaching out to prospects. For example, if search committee members have someone in mind whom they think would make an ideal dean, they are encouraged to provide that information to the search firm (Provosts James & Doug). It is the search firm who then makes initial contact with that individual to both see if they are interested in the position and to determine their suitability, based on the position profile and job advertisement (Provost James & Provost Doug). Having a search firm make all initial contact also supports the search committee’s efforts to maintain the confidentiality of anyone expressing interest in the position – particularly important in today’s context. Provost Doug explained that

we don’t want the search committee to reach out. Because that’s where you get into trouble with confidentiality, so I mean people know some people. They might say, ‘hey I know somebody. I can call them or something.’ I leave that to the search firm because I don’t ever want there to be even a whiff of a scandal (p. 13).

Search firms as the initial point of contact for the vast majority of candidates have the opportunity to frame the search and present the institution to prospective candidates from the outset.



## **The search firm and the candidate list.**

A search firm's involvement in the initial candidate outreach also provides them with an opportunity to play a central role in establishing the initial list of candidates that is ultimately presented to the search committee. As Provost James explained, when discussing the search firm's creation of the long shortlist,

we rely quite heavily on the search consultant to sort of tell us about how they came up with their list. So they might come in, if we're lucky, with a list of 25 people...

They can convey in part who seems really interested, they can tell us a little bit more about the person that may jump out than what's on their CV (p. 4).

Provost Doug confirmed that in the searches he chairs the firm develops a candidate list that is brought forward to the search committee. "There are usually, I would say, depending on the search, anywhere from 30 to 40 viable candidates" that the search firm brings forward. "We narrow that down typically for [the] first round [to] five or six" (p. 3). The list that a firm brings to the committee is the result of significant effort and a major component of the role of an external firm in supporting a search (Provost Doug & Provost James).

### **Search firm's commentary**

Search firms also perceive that one of the primary reasons universities hire them to support a decanal search is their ability to reach out to prospects and potential applicants. Sally, a representative from a Canadian search firm specializing in academic searches, commented that "proactive outreach" is what universities expect when they hire a search firm (p. 2). Fred, a partner with another Canadian firm working in the area of academic searches, was slightly more direct in his explanation of the outreach process. "There's a reason that

you're paying an external provider like us to support the search, right, so we have an active job in [the] identification of candidates" (p. 2). Fred continued that his firm typically employs four major resources to assist in the identification of potential candidates: partner knowledge and network, relationships with global partners, a global talent database, and "fresh mapping" (p. 2).

Partner knowledge and network refers to a firm's knowledge of, in this particular case, decanal roles, the Canadian higher education landscape, and the contacts a firm has made working with individuals within that sector, sometimes over the course of years (Fred). Relationships with global partners (for large search firms) and global talent databases also enable firms to see if any potential candidates currently working with other branch offices (in the case of multinational firms) may have the skills and background necessary for the position (Fred). Whereas relationships and networks are often less formal, a global talent database is a more structured repository of information from both successful and unsuccessful candidates involved in previous searches conducted by a firm (Fred). Finally, "fresh mapping" was the term used by Fred to describe a process whereby search firm employees are continually mapping out where academic leaders and potential academic leaders are, the institutions and roles they currently serve in, and how long they have been in those roles (p. 2). Advertisements are also used, but less and less in recent years. Unless universities want to "make a splash," they typically opt for online publications as opposed to print publications (Fred, p. 3).

Despite advertisement efforts in a variety of forms, Fred suggested that 90% of potential decanal candidates are proactively approached by search firms.

A lot of these people are busy people. If they're engaged in their jobs, often – unless they're really unhappy – they're not checking these journals all the time. And so it's our job to kind of raise their head a little bit to this opportunity and part of the magic in why they [universities] hire [us] is sometimes with these relationships that we have...to be able to call and say, 'you need to look at this role and here's why,' are on the added benefits you would hire a search firm versus just try to put out an ad response on your own (p. 3).

Firms use the networks they have established through the conduct of previous academic searches to assist in identifying potential candidates for other searches.

If no one within a firm's current network is interested or suited to a particular position, as Fred describes,

we also need to use judgement on who looks really strong for the role and maybe that person, even if we don't have a relationship and we've sent an initial note to them, we may know we need to pursue them. So in that case we become a little more aggressive to at least make sure that we've had conversations with them to present the opportunity, because clearly we can't know everybody. But there's people that might be awesome for a specific role and you have to go get 'em (p. 3).

The ability of the firm and their representatives is key in this regard as noted above by Provost Doug and Dean Jane.

Sally described the outreach and efforts to attract prospective candidates as largely done through "information sharing" (p. 5). However, as Sally described, once candidates express an interest, search firms work

with them to try and understand their candidacy and how it might align so we can give advice to the committee. But we're also working as the candidate starts to advance to interviews to support them in both presenting themselves well but also really discerning whether this is the right opportunity for them (p. 5).

Firms find themselves very much in the middle of this process. They assist institutions to find candidates, one of whom will in most cases progress through the recruitment and hiring process to a deanship, but at the same time they are helping candidates to secure positions that meet their needs and career aspirations. As several of the successful candidates who participated in this study recognized, the relationship between candidate and search firm can be a close one (Deans Andy, Gordon, Jane, Margaret, Matthew, & Michael). As well, provosts establish close working relationships with the firms as they work (often over the course of years) on various searches with a single firm (Provost Doug).

A firm's representative also has to be able to build trust with the individuals whom they recommend to institutional search committees. Candidates are often nervous about coming forward in a public way at the initial inquiry stages of their potential candidacy, and thus must trust that the firm will keep their expression of interest confidential until an appropriate time later in the process. Sally explained that potential candidates

want to manage the risk of putting their names forward.... The risk is not job loss because they do have tenure. It's not about job loss. The risk though is about their effectiveness in their ability to lead. When we engage candidates they know they have a level of confidentiality until they get quite deep into the process. They also have, they would believe they have, an honest broker who will tell them the truth about the institution...the institution can't be its own honest broker (p. 8).

Candidates appreciate the “honest broker” role firms play, according to Sally. This “honest broker” role also extends to situations in which a particular candidate may not be suited to a particular position.

Sally went on to describe that most candidates do appreciate when she explains to them that based on her assessment they are not well suited to a particular position. While prospective candidates may be disappointed by this, they are also pragmatic enough to appreciate the frankness as they do not want to waste the time, effort, and emotions expended in a search at this level (Sally). Search firms also employ these conversations as opportunities to continue to get to know these prospects in case the firm is engaged to recruit for another position, for which the individual may be better suited (Fred).

Although firms may use their interactions with unsuccessful candidates to further develop their network for future searches, the primary goal of any search is to identify a candidate who can be successful in a particular role (Sally & Fred). Assessing this suitability also includes sharing both the good and the bad of a position with candidates. When discussing a particularly complex recent decanal search, Fred recollected that the candidate “knew she was walking into a pretty hot potato place, but our job is also to sell a little” (p. 9). Fred framed the position to the candidate as follows:

if you look back and if you change around this college, a) what personal satisfaction do you get out of this, and b) ...if she wanted to move on to a bigger place, this would be a pretty good story to tell, right.... There’s a way of spinning the positive but we try to be pretty factual about some of the challenges too. It doesn’t do anybody any – actually it’s hugely detrimental to get a dean that doesn’t fulfill their term (p. 9).

Fred continued to describe that it is important to ensure candidates not only know about the good aspects of a deanship, but that they are aware of any challenges that exist. For many firms, there are financial implications to consider as well. Fred noted that his firm offers a one-year guarantee – “we redo the search if it’s not successful, for free” (p. 9). Part of warranting a successful placement is ensuring a positive candidate experience throughout the recruitment process, but particularly during the initial (airport) interview and subsequent campus visit.

### **The Airport Interview and Campus Visit**

Fred’s description of the campus visits he typically oversees is highly reminiscent of a stage manager describing the organization of a major production. From Fred’s perspective, the campus visit is as much about helping the candidate to imagine themselves working and living in this community as it is about the committee getting a better sense of the candidate. The formal and informal lunches and dinners out, touring the campus (preferably in summer or fall), setting up meetings with local relators, high-end airport pick-ups and drop-offs, and meetings with as many campus and community stakeholders as possible all help to sell the institution to potential candidates (Fred). As Fred concluded, for “a lot of these people [who] are coming from international centres and stuff, you need to show them that this is the right sort of spot” (p. 9). However, campus visits are also exhausting for the candidate (Deans Gordon, Jane, & Margaret).

In spite of the importance of campus visits, provost, search firms, and decanal candidates alike also recognize the demanding nature of these two- or three-day visits (Sally; Provost James; Deans Jane, John, & Margaret). For example, when asked if there was anything she would change about her recruitment process, Dean Margaret responded that the “intensity” and pace of

the full-day campus visit was “exhausting” (p. 11). As she continued, “by the end of the day, I know I’m no longer at my very best and even just to spread it out and I know often times it is a test as well of a candidate’s ability to kind of rise to the occasion,” but it might not necessarily be the best way of assessing the full capabilities of a candidate (p. 11). As Dean Margaret continued, it is

trial by fire...I think it potentially is a deterrent for some candidates and I would hate to see good people not put their name forward just because of the way that searches can unfold, that intensity over the day or the two, the two days...some people just don’t want to go through it because it is kind of like running a gauntlet (p. 11).

Dean Margaret also noted that these types of recruitment visits are all-consuming, leaving little time to meet any other family or personal commitments during both the actual days of the visit and the advanced preparation for the visit (p. 11). Dean Gordon had a similar experience. He flew in from abroad and began a three-day interview process the following morning that included a panel interview, a number of dinners and meetings with a variety of stakeholders, a presentation, and a final interview at the end of the three days (p. 4).

For Dean John, although his recruitment experience was “less scary” than he had initially expected, it was “more exhausting” (p. 2). Despite this exhaustion, however, he felt that the search process and the campus visit in particular did not give him a strong understanding of what the deanship is like at a human level. As John recognized, the search process “gives you an intellectual sense of what the dean is but it doesn’t give you a strong emotional sense of being a dean and that emotional part is really, really important” (p. 6). The campus visit provides the opportunity for candidates to interact with the committee and community at a human level.

In many ways, the “airport interview,” or initial confidential interview with the search committee prior to the typically more public campus visit, often sets the tone for subsequent meetings and the campus visit (Dean Jane). Dean Jane remarked on the difficulty of presenting an accurate version of one’s self during these events. When referring to her “airport interview,” she remarked,

I do think that it’s really hard for people to be their natural selves in the search process, particularly in the airport interviews. You’ve flown in, you’re probably tired, you’ve had one night in a hotel which usually means you didn’t sleep well...I think it’s an awkward process and what gets weeded out are those people who can’t handle that and not necessarily the people who are right for the job (p. 10).

Deans who reflected on the busy nature of the campus visit or airport interviews found them to be exhausting exercises (Deans Gordon, Jane, John, & Margaret).

Provosts are likewise considering if the condensed two- or three-day campus visit is the best means of assessing a prospective dean’s fit within a given institution. Provost James remarked, “we pack in a lot in two days...usually by the end they are exhausted and rightly so. But I do sometimes think ‘oh is this the best way?’” (p. 7). Although the visits are condensed for a variety of reasons, including the practicality of scheduling, James often finds that two days “just isn’t long enough” for a campus visit (p. 11). He noted that having more time with the candidate over a period of a couple days would help him to get a better sense of the individual and it would provide candidates with a more fulsome understanding of a particular campus and university as well (p. 11). Furthermore, these two or three days of continual interviews may not necessarily be useful in assessing candidates in the way that is hoped. As James remarked,



what I've heard from some candidates is they feel like, you know, if you're good at interviews and that kind of responding to questions, it's a process that works for you. But if you're somebody that likes to go away and think about things and maybe want to re-enter the conversation and have more of a dialogue, it's not a process in which you're really going to shine. So does the process mirror what happens when you are dean? A bit, but there are other scenarios too that it doesn't capture and [we] don't get to see those other parts of a person [in the current process] (p. 11).

The campus visits as they currently unfold are largely attempts to make the best out of a non-ideal situation.

### **Ensuring a welcoming atmosphere.**

Provost Doug exerts a significant effort in ensuring short-listed candidates have as good of an experience during their campus visit as possible. In spite of the high-pressure nature of the visit, small things that can be controlled and attention to detail can be highly impactful for the candidate. For example, when referring to a past recruitment, Provost Doug remarked that the search firm knew the candidate's spouse played guitar, but because of airline restrictions, they were not able to bring one with them, so the firm arranged for a guitar to be waiting in their hotel room when they arrived – “the small things make a massive difference” (Provost Doug, p. 13). These types of kind, personal gestures can be quite impactful.

Attention to detail is also critical to ensuring the campus visit is as stress-free as possible for candidates. From the driver who picks the candidate up at the airport and tours them around the city, to the realtor who helps with the potential housing search, Provost Doug is adamant that he wants his institution to “look like an institution where people care about one another” (p. 14).

Through the campus visit, Doug contended, “I want to make everybody *really*, really want to come here” (p. 14). But does the process in its current format actually achieve these objectives?

Although search firms are largely responsible for organizing the campus visit and ensuring things run as smoothly for the candidate(s) as possible, the two search firm representatives interviewed as part of this study also acknowledged that campus visits are still an ordeal for many highly qualified candidates. Sally described a campus visit as largely insufficient in achieving the intended goals of stakeholders (p. 9). As she contended,

these appointments are multi-million-dollar decisions and we say to a person, ‘fly from wherever you live and land the night before. We’re gonna pick you up at 7:30 in the morning and we’re gonna run you through a gambit of interviews with people you’ve never met before where each one of them is judging you from eight [in the morning] until eight at night.’ Now an extrovert ends the day buzzed. Lots of academic leaders are not extroverts. By 2:00 they just want to curl up in a ball, but we’ve plugged this dinner at the end of the day. I think the problem is that our assessment is a blunt instrument. How are we assessing, and have we set the context to really assess what it is we think we’re assessing at that point? Often it’s we’re trying to find out if they can engage us. An introvert after 12 hours, they’re not going to. Does that mean they can’t? No, but they are imperfect situations (p. 9).

Fred agrees that while it is important for candidates to meet as many individuals on campus as possible, sometimes the brief two-day campus visit is overdone (p. 9). These meetings are mostly used, rather than to give the candidate a sense of the institution, as an opportunity for as many campus stakeholders as possible to assess the candidates. And while this is important, as Fred

highlighted, consensus from large groups on a decision of such magnitude is nearly impossible to achieve; so the value from that perspective is also limited.

Campus visits often offer candidates an opportunity to interact with the search committee in person for the first time. While airport interviews may have provided an initial opportunity for some members of the committee to meet the candidate, these meetings are brief. The campus visit and associated activities provide the committee with an opportunity to get a better sense of the candidate, and the candidate of the committee.

### **The Search Committee**

Deans interviewed had various reflections on their experiences with the search committees involved in their recruitment and selection processes. However, unlike their experiences with the search firms, there was much less of a consensus on the role of the search committee. Furthermore, search committees seemed to make less of an impression on successful candidates when compared to search firms. When Dean Jane was asked to recount her experiences with the search committee she responded, “I’d never really thought about the search committee before...they don’t give you any information...the search committee serves the chair of the search committee but does not necessarily serve the candidate” (p. 5 - 6). Although Dean Michael admitted that the committee “gave me honest answers to the best of their ability,” (p. 4) most of the information he received from them had already been relayed by his contact from the search firm.

Dean Matthew was fairly nonchalant about his interactions with the search committee. In comparison to the high importance Matthew placed on the involvement of a search firm, when asked about the search committee, the response was brief – “they were fine too, I mean I didn’t have, I mean I had lots to do with them when I appeared before them, but outside of that,” their

impact was not significant (p. 4). Dean John admitted, “I go back and forth on whether the search committee is worth the amount of money that gets spent on them” (p. 4). However, John continued that “the search committee does [do] a good job at narrowing down a range of people that would be good fit for a faculty” (p. 4). Committees also play a role in assessing the relational skills of candidates.

Dean Nathan described that based on interactions with prospective candidates committees can develop a better sense of the soft skills of prospective candidates and ensuring “jerks” are culled from the short-listed candidate pool (p. 8). As the job of dean is primarily “relational in nature,” soft skills are incredibly important (Dean Nathan, p. 8). Dean Andy concurred, declaring that

only the faculty members themselves can understand the kind of model of leadership that makes sense for them at the time. I think that committee members whether it’s at a faculty, deanship search level, or department level, have a sense of the personality, the kind of leader for that time and that place (p. 10).

Search committees play a significant role in assessing the contextual fit of prospective deans (Dean Andy).

Deans also recognize that search committees can be a significant source of information for both the search firm and the candidates themselves. Dean Gordon considered the search committee as informants to the search firm - “they gotta inform the recruiting agency in terms of what they’re looking for because the recruiting agency could drop the ball.” (p. 17). Conversely, Dean Margaret saw the search committee as a group that could expand upon the information provided to candidates by the search firm. As Margaret continued, the committee “provide[d]

kind of real life examples of particular things in the context of the faculty because they live in it and work in it in a way that the search consultants are not able to do” (p. 4). The committee was able to “drill down and give me more information on things that were already happening in the faculty that the search consultant just wouldn’t know because that’s really just down in the weeds” (p. 5). Deans Andy, Margaret, and Matthew added that it was through the committee that they began to understand the politics of the faculty. Andy claimed that his final decision on whether or not he would accept the appointment if offered was largely based on his time meeting with the committee and other campus representatives. After initial interactions with the search firm, “everything was going to depend on the meetings with the committee and the meetings then with the individuals at Willow University” (p. 5). Committees can provide a glimpse into the culture of an institution.

Dean Jane, who had served in a senior leadership role at other institutions before her current appointment, and thus had previous experience successfully navigating the senior administrative recruitment process, viewed the search committee more as a potential source of cultural insights if candidates know how to access this information. She purported that

the only thing search committees do as a candidate that I would say is useful is react at certain times to things involuntarily.... those subtle cues, if you can take them in, I don’t think every candidate has the capacity to take them in, but if you’re that kind of person you can read a lot from a search committee (p. 5).

Jane used search committees as sources of information.

In addition to providing further insights into the life of a faculty or college, search committees play a role in communicating the excitement of an institution and acting as

ambassadors of that institution. As Dean Nathan posited “of course that whole committee has to share the excitement and sense of direction and opportunity for the position itself, and they have to communicate that to the candidates” (p. 8). Dean Matthew advised that

in a good search, it’s a two-way sales process where the committee is trying to sell itself, the [law] school, the faculty, the university, to the candidates. Because even if the candidate doesn’t get the job, you want that candidate to go back thinking, ‘God I wish I’d gotten that job. Boy it’d be so exciting to work there.’ A well-run committee behaves, wears a marketing hat, a sales hat (p. 7).

When one of the committee members does not share this view, it is immediately noticeable to candidates. Matthew recollected, with an increased level of animation, that one of the members of his search committee did not represent the institution in the best light.

I remember doing my presentation to them, you know she’d scowl all the time. That’s in fact an accurate representation of her personality. That’s what she’s like as a colleague! She’s miserable, but I was thinking, ‘what?’ At the time I’m thinking, ‘why the hell Cherry University did you put that person on this committee?’ You know? That’s about the worst kind of marketing pitch you could make! (p. 8).

Search committees also market their institution simply by the way they interact with each other and interact with candidates.

Regardless of their opinions on the value of search committees, successful candidates did agree that as the nature of the decanal role has shifted in recent years, so too has the role of the search committee. Deans are expected to do more than ever before, and thus committee selection is more complex. As Dean Nathan asserted, with heightened

expectations of 'the dean' that now include increased responsibilities for fund development, more nuanced regulations around freedom of expression, and escalating labour relations and human resource issues, "the task of selecting the right candidates is probably a bit trickier than it used to be. I think the committees have more to consider" (p. 9). In addition to the increasing complexity of search committee decisions, provosts have specific expectations of search committees and give special consideration to their constitution.

### **The provost and the search committee**

Not surprisingly, provosts' reflections on the search committee focus on different aspects of their involvement when compared to those of successful candidates. Provosts were much more focused on the process of establishing a search committee and ensuring everyone on that committee has a mutual understanding of the task before them. Provosts again rely heavily on the search firm in this regard. The constitution of search committees is heavily reliant on institutional policy, although the provost does have a certain degree of latitude to ensure all important constituents are represented adequately. Provost James detailed that he's

looking at who's on the committee, who's been chosen from the faculty...what's the diversity balance and so I will adjust that. For example, add more women to the committee. I'll also, I ensure that there is a dean or two on the committee so that they can bring that perspective of what the role is like and I think that's important too as we get into the interview because potential candidates are kind of asking...who are my decanal colleagues?...And then the stakeholders, the outside stakeholders are really important. So that's also what I pay attention to. (p. 6).

Provosts have significant freedoms in who they appoint to sit on a search committee (Provosts James & Doug).

Once committees are established, search firms are quickly integrated into the process. As Provost James remarked, “once the committee is constituted we’ll have a meeting with a search consultant and explain the process since most faculty members haven’t worked with a search consultant” before (p. 2). Two of the three provosts interviewed highlighted that they also ensure each search committee they chair undergoes unconscious bias training (Provosts James & Doug). Provost Doug listed this as one of the committee onboarding activities:

when the selection committee is formed and we have hired a search firm, we have a first meeting of a search committee and in that first meeting, we already have a draft job description and a draft profile. I take them through the search process, we talk about confidentiality, we always do implicit bias training (p. 3).

Initial meetings often, although not always, can include the outgoing dean of a college (Provosts James & Doug).

Some provosts do invite the outgoing dean of a college or faculty to meet with the search committee during the initial stages of the recruitment process. However, this is both dependent on the institution and the outgoing dean. For example, if the outgoing dean was not being renewed, it would be unlikely that they would be asked to speak with the committee (Provost Doug). If they were retiring, and the provost felt they could add value to the recruitment process, they might briefly meet with the search committee. Provost James reported that he “typically invite[s] the outgoing dean to come and speak with the committee” (2). Outgoing deans can be asked to speak to a number of issues including their perspective on the current situation of the college as well as what they see as being central to ensuring the college or faculty’s success five to ten years in the future (Fred). Fred saw that the outgoing dean could help, at least in part, to give both the committee and candidates a



better sense of what exactly a day in their life is like, and thus the skills needed to make a future dean successful. However committees are largely reluctant to involve outgoing deans. Fred attributed this to “the element of suspicion [and] that cynicism that exists within universities. While outgoing deans do in some cases meet with the search committee or at least interview with the search firm tasked with finding their replacement (Dean Nathan was a few minutes late for our initial conversation as he had just finished up his exit interview with the search firm), outgoing deans almost never have any formal interactions with prospective candidates, regardless of the circumstance of their exit.

Provosts also described the involvement of the search committee in the drafting and development of position profiles and job advertisements. Provost Greg noted that although there are “many, many factors to consider, and on any search committee there are numerous opinions about what is important,” there are certain factors (experience, academic experience, fundraising experience) that must be considered (p. 2). As noted above, the search committees Provost Doug chairs always review the profile and job ad at one of their first meetings, but they “take about four or five days after that meeting on email massaging the ad, and once it’s ready to go, [they] send it out. And then [they] spend another four or five days massaging the position profile” (p. 3). Provost James noted that the search firm is also involved in the development of the position profile at his institution. The committee “create[s] a position profile with the search consultant” (Provost James, p. 5). After the position profile and job ad are created, the search firm does their outreach work, typically culminates in a long-short list of candidates presented to the search committee for their review (Provosts James & Doug).

As referenced earlier, Provost Doug postulated that out of the 200 to 300 individuals approached by the search firm in any decanal search, there are typically 30 to 40 “viable candidates” presented to the committee (p. 3). The committee then works to further reduce that group to five or six in the first cut. Provost James concurred that five to six candidates typically make the first cut and move forward to the initial interview with search committee members (p. 6). Following those initial interviews, as James highlighted, “[we] choose two or three that we want to invite back for a two-day visit where they do a public presentation and have a variety of meetings with different stakeholder groups” (p. 7). Doug noted that in his searches they usually have three to four individuals who proceed to the campus visit stage.

One particular point of interest that Provost Doug commented on, which is by no means standard across institutions, is that it is not until he is working to shortlist candidates with the committee during the second cut that they discuss whether the search will remain closed, or transition to an open process. Provost Doug continued that

following all first-round interviews we decide what we’re going to do. We decided whether we move forward with an open or closed process. We go down to the final three to four. If it’s a closed competition, they always meet with the president, myself, [and] the VP R[esearch] individually. They have another committee meeting that goes into more depth...and we take them on a tour of Elm University. We also have either a Dean’s dinner or a Dean’s lunch, they’re sort of – what would I say – those are highly confidential meetings. If we are open, we do all of that plus a public presentation on vision along with some critical meetings with say the group of current

administrators in the faculty, some professors, some staff; and then we collect all that feedback (p. 3).

Regardless of whether the search is closed or open, confidentiality is key for Provosts James, Doug, and Greg.

Confidentiality of process, particularly when searches are closed, can become a significant issue for the provost overseeing a decanal search if breached. Provost Doug remarked,

I've actually kicked people off our committee if confidentiality is breached. I say confidentiality is important not only so the search firm can go out and guarantee it to the candidates that are coming in, but also for the people who are on the search and selection committee, because they often start to get pressured three-quarters of the way through the process (p.5).

The pressure comes primarily from faculty colleagues curious as to what stage of the process the committee is at and who the short-listed candidates are. Doug continued to explain that if questions of and pressure on committee members continues, he encourages them to let him know and he sends

an e-mail out to the community. Just, 'here we are with the search process, this is where we are. You should be notified by X. This is what we are shooting for in terms of process.' Or, 'we're into the second round of interviews. Hope to be able to tell everybody soon what's going on' (p. 5).

Interest in decanal searches, particularly if the search is closed, is typically high amongst members of a faculty or college.

## **Selling and assessing fit.**

Part of the role of the search committee includes both selling the institution to prospective candidates and evaluating the fit of those candidates within the organization (Provosts Doug & James). For example, Doug frequently reminds search committee members that they are in “full on sell mode” throughout a search (p. 12). However, the more informal interactions with short-listed candidates that bring about these opportunities for committee members to “sell,” are also opportunities for candidates to better assess how they would fit within a given university.

The informal aspects of the final short-listed candidates’ visits to a university campus, including lunches and dinners with faculty, fellow deans, and other campus community members, are also used as opportunities for both candidates to assess whether they could see themselves within a particular institution, and for provosts and committee members alike to continue to assess the fit of candidates as they observe their interactions with prospective colleagues (Provost James). Provost James contended that these meetings allow candidates to get a “broader perspective” than would otherwise be possible in a formal interview process (p. 7).

These more informal activities also typically include a one-on-one conversation between the provost and prospective dean. Provost James reported that these opportunities are invaluable. These chats give a leader a better idea of how prospective deans have worked with others across a university and allow the provost to, as James remarked, “reinforce my view that the role [of dean] is not only about being a voice or advocate for the faculty but joining the senior leadership team” (p. 7). The opportunity for candidates to meet individually with provosts is highly important as although search committees make a recommendation on which candidate should be offered the position, it is usually the provost’s decision.

Both Provost Doug and James remarked on the advisory nature of the search committee – that is decanal search committees provide recommendations as to who should ultimately be hired as dean rather than having the power to appoint deans themselves. Provost Doug highlighted that at his university, it is ultimately the president who makes the final decision on which candidate to recommend to the board of governors, taking into consideration the advice of the search committee and provost. However, as Doug was quick to point out, “essentially the president and I have never disagreed on a candidate going forward because I keep the president informed every step of the way” (p. 4). Fred articulated this policy and procedure more succinctly: at “the end of the day, the provost makes the call...The provost has to give the recommendation forward to the president. The president has to approve along with the board chair, but it’s the provost’s decision, it needs to be clear” (p. 9). As Fred’s remark highlights, search firm representatives are highly attuned to the institutional policies and procedures that govern decanal searches. During various stages of the search, search firms are also highly integrated with the search committee and their work.

#### **The search committee as understood by the search firm.**

Although the provost is typically the primary contact for search firms (Provosts Doug & James), search firms and their representatives work closely, particularly at certain points of the search, with the members of the search committee as well. However, both search firm representatives involved in this study identified search committees as barriers to effective decanal searches. When asked if there were any gaps in decanal searches in Canada, Sally highlighted two common themes she sees in her work with universities. The first is the lack of preparedness of search committees for the task at hand. As Sally outlined, “for these searches, which are multi-million-dollar decisions, you put together a committee of people who...have

never worked together as a group before... You give them a timeline, you shine a public spotlight on it, and you say 'go'" (p. 6). There is no standard training for committee members, the process itself "doesn't build in a lot of time for getting to know one another," nor for creating an environment conducive to working as a team (Sally, p. 6).

The second issue Sally discussed in relation to the search committee was that no matter how involved a particular faculty member, community constituent, or even dean from another college or faculty may be, they will not, nor should they be expected to, understand a particular deanship and what it takes to be successful in that particular role. As Sally continued, although one of the significant advantages of committee searches is that you have multiple perspectives around the table, in a dean's search "you've got a group of people who largely don't know enough, who all have equal voice in the decision. That committee structure has great value but its application as the forum for decision making throughout the process is imperfect" (p. 6). Sally argued that the process itself, as followed in the vast majority of Canadian universities is fundamentally flawed: "assessing leadership talent is not something people are born with... This notion of 'first interview, hour and a half, we'll decide who goes forward,' it's a very imperfect way of making that decision... We're applying the same strategies for assessing talent [we used to use]" (p. 7). Fred was also overly critical of the decanal recruitment process most Canadian universities follow.

Fred highlighted the search committee as a flaw of the decanal recruitment process as it currently plays out in U15 universities. However, whereas Sally focused on the ability of the committee and committee members as a central flaw in the process, Fred felt that committee process was the largest detractor. Streamlining the process or establishing a schedule at the outset and ensuring the committee follows it, could, he argued, enhance the group's efficiency.

Provosts, Fred thought, needed to be more forthright with the committee in saying “we’re going to constitute a committee and you guys need to be here or we’re going to proceed,” as opposed to trying to accommodate each committee member’s schedule. (p. 10). Fred continued,

we end up having searches that are taking eight months and we are losing candidates because it was the right candidate but you couldn’t get the group together. And you got two people that are saying, ‘well you know this is conference season so I’m not going to be there.’ And remember, the candidates are kind of from the same ilk, so the candidates are often doing conference trips and all this stuff. It’s painful to do all that. I think that is the number one detriment (p. 10).

In addition to his critique of the timeliness of committees, Fred also highlighted that far too often committee members focus predominantly on the negative aspects of a college when conveying information to candidates.

As Fred noted, too often it is easier for committee members, particularly faculty, to focus on the negative attributes of an institution, forgetting the positive aspects. In discussing some of the more informal aspects of a candidate’s campus visit, for example, when a few faculty members from the search committee give a candidate a campus tour, Fred commented, “that shouldn’t be the first place that dirty laundry is put out...If the candidate asks questions, [committee members] should feel obligated to answer truthfully. The problem is...most of the people [who] are happy and think that things are great, don’t come out to play,” that is they are not involved on search committees (p.10). Those who serve as search committee members usually, in Fred’s experience, are more likely to have negative views of a faculty’s current direction. Fred continued that there is no problem in sharing both the positive and negative attributes of a college or faculty with a prospective dean, but search committee members

“shouldn’t feel the need to be the biggest cheerleader nor should they be the person that gives all the dirty secrets about what’s going on around the college” (p. 10). Search committee members need to be able to balance their own interests with those of the wider faculty and university. The issues of search committee effectiveness are further compounded by committee confusion over the exact role of a dean (Fred & Sally).

Sally was quick to note that in addition to lack of committee training, the number of traditionally qualified potential candidates is also significantly less than in the past. Search committee expectations have not kept up with the skills and background that enable a dean to succeed, so there is a misalignment in how committees are assessing candidates (Sally). Fred concurred, indicating that a committee’s frame of reference for assessing prospective deans needs to be further examined. Although he felt it “sacrilege” to even mention it, “there needs to be an examination a little bit around how we [are] evaluating actually a dean’s ability to run an organization” (p. 10). Fred felt that without having these types of hard and often uncomfortable conversations, institutions will start to find that there are no qualified candidates with relevant experience interested in decanal roles.

### **The Politics of Searches**

Search politics can become evident to decanal search candidates in a variety of ways. The nature of the search process, perceptions of internal and external candidates, and influence of institutional politics all help to convey the underlying political situation of an institution to candidates. An institution’s or committee’s approach to whether a search is open or closed is often the first glimpse candidates have into the politics of the hiring college or faculty.



## Open Versus Closed Searches

One of the final comments Fred made in his interview pertained to the level of discomfort most search committees, colleges or faculties, and institutions as a whole have with closed searches, identifying the failure of institutions to engage in closed searches at the decanal level as one of the top three flaws with deans' searches (p. 10). This future reality of closed searches at the decanal level was something Fred felt institutions needed to become more comfortable with to avoid losing the best candidates. Provosts and deans alike also remarked on the shift over the last few years towards closed searches at the decanal level (Deans Andy, Gordon, & Nathan). As Dean Gordon stated,

there seems to be a real desire now to make these appointments as confidential as possible. And on the one hand I get that...If you're coming in to be the dean and I was dean somewhere else I would not necessarily want it to be known that I'm doing this until I'm more ready to tell my boss. As I said, I don't want to be seen by my boss to be somebody who is looking...I think it weakens your position and yeah, they're not really committed to be here. But the funny thing of course with [it] being confidential is that it's just, it's not very open to the faculty...I'm not sure if it's right or wrong, it's just interesting and it does cause much discussion I think within the faculties and I know that that discussion is taking place now as I'm being replaced because they will do a quasi-confidential [search]...and they did with me...so the whole confidentiality thing is interesting, because I see on one hand what they're trying to do, but on the other hand it means the faculty doesn't necessarily get the full view...there's a great deal of suspicion about the process" (p. 15-16).

In spite of the suspicion that surrounds closed searches, it is usually the preferred format of decanal candidates, particularly those who are also sitting deans at the time of putting their name forward in another search.

Dean Nathan also mentioned the apparent shift to closed decanal searches. From his perspective, this shift is largely a result of candidates not wanting the broader community to be aware they are contemplating a position change, particularly candidates who are already sitting deans (Dean Nathan, p. 3). Nathan continued,

I've got mixed reaction[s] to it. At a faculty level, I think that those more public discussions and presentations are really helpful for the entire faculty and representatives of the faculty to help select the right person. In a closed process, you don't get those opportunities and you have to place far more trust in the competency and perspective of the elected members from the faculty. By the same token, a closed process probably gets applications from people who would not otherwise apply. So I think you get a better pool in a closed process but the actual selection I think is a bit fraught with risk (p. 3).

Fred concurred that closed processes result in a much higher caliber of candidates, but universities remain reluctant to move to fully closed searches for deans.

Some U15 institutions are experimenting with quasi-closed searches. Dean Matthew's search process was "semi-closed" as the final two short-listed candidates were both sitting as deans at other institutions (p. 3). When asked why the process was closed, Matthew declared

we were both sitting deans and we both asked, we both didn't want it to be known because had we not gotten the job it would have been problematic. What the university

did as they said that anyone that wanted to meet with us could, but they'd have to sign a confidentiality agreement. It was the perfect win-win (p. 3).

Although the search committee decided to carry out the remainder of Matthew's search process confidentially midway through, other institutions decide to have a closed process from the outset.

Prior to his current appointment, Dean Andy was completely unaware that open decanal search processes existed in Canada, although this was not his first decanal appointment (p. 3).

Andy continued,

as soon as my name was put forward at Willow University as one of the three [short-listed candidates], it went up on the Willow website, which I didn't know was going to happen and immediately all the google alerts of my colleagues around [my, at that time, current university] went off. I found myself in an open process, and they made a Willow University announcement to the campus, they announced the identities of the candidates, so I came into that environment of an open hiring (p. 3 – 4).

When asked about how he felt engaging in an open search, Andy indicated that he was okay with it in the end. However, had he not been the successful candidate, he would have had significant concerns as it would have considerably damaged his position at his now former institution (Dean Andy).

While reflecting on the overall impact of open versus closed searches, Dean Andy again recognized the tension that exists. Although he agreed that closed searches are usually best for the candidates involved, university communities and faculty associations in particular have other views. A situation is developing where, as Dean Andy asserted, "university administrators and leaders understand the value of discretion," while faculty associations still want a totally open

process (p. 4). Moving to a situation where deans were hired in complete secrecy would lead to increased suspicion not only amongst the wider community, but amongst faculty specifically (Dean Andy). As Andy articulated, faculty would have “recourse to say this has all been done by backdoor deals, in hotel rooms...as a public corporation it’s kind of critical to dispel that, so I think in Canada, in public institutions, we just have to live with the consequences of that” (p. 4). That is not to say that open decanal searches are the norm outside of Canada.

As an applicant from out of country, Dean Jane was only comfortable with an open decanal search “because it was so far from the radar of anybody at home” (p. 4). However, now that she is firmly established in the Canadian context, she would not consider letting her name stand in another open search (Dean Jane). For Jane, the difficulties associated with open searches did not end once she started the job. As Jane recollected, “what I found difficult was that the internal candidates were made known to me and I was instructed that it was up to me to make up with them....so that was a little bit awkward” (p. 5). Open searches can be fraught with internal faculty politics, but also ensure wider participation in the process.

### **Provosts and open versus closed searches.**

Two of the three provosts interviewed as part of this study raised the issue of open and closed searches. Provost James argued that the interactions between candidates and a wide variety of campus stakeholders, particularly public presentations, during the interview process is the best way of helping candidates to assess how they would fit within the college or faculty (p. 7). James continued, “I am hoping through that they are also hearing more about the culture of that particular faculty and I encourage them to use that as a time to get that information because there is only so much that I know and I learn so much about faculties as I go through this process and want them to learn that as well” (p. 7). However, the view that it is necessary for a

prospective dean to interact with a broad range of stakeholders as part of their interview process in order to understand the culture of a particular faculty or college is not universally shared. At institutions where the open or closed nature of the search is largely dependent on the candidates themselves, this can have significant implications.

Provost Doug indicated that whether the searches he oversees are open or closed is determined by the candidate pool:

essentially if you have sitting deans in a search that are applying to be a dean here, very typically they will not be willing to go into an open process...They're concerned about what their home institution might think – I'll give you an example. As provost, if one of my deans was in another search, I would question their loyalty to our institution. I'd also wonder why they were doing that. And I'd wonder if they were doing their job if they're thinking about going elsewhere.... It's just typical that if you have sitting deans in a pool, you wouldn't probably go open (p. 4).

In his lengthy tenure as provost, Doug remarked that approximately 50% of the searches he has overseen have been closed (p. 4).

While faculty would typically prefer more open search processes, they are not always willing to give up the benefits of a closed search (Provost Doug). Provost Doug explained that if faculty had their druthers, they would absolutely want to go open. They typically want to meet their new leader, they want to talk to them. They want to get a feel for who they are. All those good kind of things, right? But...the bottom line is, you have a decision to make, are you willing to go open knowing you might lose some of your best

candidates?...No search committee [that I've chaired] has agreed to do that. They always err on the side of wanting the best candidates in the pool (p. 4).

That is not to say that all sitting deans will opt for a closed search if given the option.

Although most sitting deans prefer closed searches, some understand the importance of openness in the academy and will choose an open search (Provost Doug). Candidates have articulated to Provost Doug that they feel it is important for the search to be open for their own benefit. Some candidates feel that it is best for both the faculty and themselves to develop as much of a sense of each other as possible, and an open search facilitates that possibility (p. 5). However, as Doug concluded, for "a sitting dean to do that, really rare" (p. 5). Search firms also commented on the debate surrounding open and closed decanal searches.

### **Search firms and open searches.**

Sally asserted that, at least in the institutions she works with, decanal searches are still largely open (p. 4). However, Fred indicated that in his experience more decanal searches are becoming more "non-public" than in the past (p. 7). When asked what was motivating this shift, Fred responded

I absolutely know the motivation. If I can be candid with you, the academic philosophy or aspiration around freedom of movement and this academic purity or however you want to say it, around the openness, doesn't work among a lot of management teams. So I can give you a direct example of a provost that told deans that if [one of their deans] participated in a public presentation at another institution that basically signaled that they no longer wanted to be part of their organization and deal with the consequences (p. 7).

These sentiments coincide directly with the thoughts of provosts and deans as well. No dean wants to be seen to be looking for another job (Andy, Gordon, Jane, Mathew, & Michael) and no provost is overly keen to have one of their deans actively engaged in a search at another university (Provost Doug). Thus, confidentiality is hugely important to those who allow their names to stand in a search.

As Fred highlighted, only one candidate can win, and even when institutions are clear in their expectations of confidentiality in an open process,

nobody listens to that, they don't make anybody sign confidentiality agreements that come from the faculty [or college]. Everybody picks up the phone. There's YouTube. There's a huge amount of risk for somebody that's sitting in a qualified job. And I would make an argument to you that there are more senior administrators that are acting like corporate businesspeople today than in the past around how academic freedom works and all that sort of stuff. So there's a real risk [to the candidates] (p. 7).

Fred provides an example from a recent search he supported. One of the candidates was also a sitting dean at another U15 university. She was particularly keen to ensure her candidacy remained confidential as she'd previously been told by her provost that if it ever came out that she had been involved in a decanal search at another institution, her career was over (Fred). Fred sympathizes with candidates in this type of situations who "still have to go through all this shit" (p. 11). The process is not always a civil one.

In Fred's opinion, faculty members are the one institutional hold out preventing decanal searches from being conducted as entirely closed searches (p. 7). As he illustrated,

faculty [don't] want to give up this because faculty look and say we can do American Idol and we can choose our boss. Who wouldn't want that? But [the] reality [is] these jobs are becoming more and more complex. I understand what the academic philosophy around open practice is, but you're losing probably at least on every search two to three strong candidates that probably would put their name in a closed search that wouldn't in an open one because they're in a good situation where they're at (p. 8).

Interestingly, in Fred's experience, the faculty members who are the strongest proponents of open search processes are also the most upset when they learn that their current dean is considering other opportunities – “so you're screwed either way [in an open process] unless you get the job” (p. 8). Furthermore, as Fred contended, the attributes of an open search often lauded as important (public presentations by and interactions with a candidate) may not even impact the ultimate outcome of a search.

Despite the often vigorous debate that happens within search committees and faculties or colleges hiring a dean, Fred contended that he feels the ultimate decision in a search (which candidate is recommended for hire) would not typically change based on whether the search was open or closed. In his experience, a search committee's recommendation is only influenced when a candidate does particularly poorly in the public presentations and interactions that accompany an open search (Fred). Whether a candidate is internal to the faculty or college can also impact the outcomes of the search.

### **Do Internal Candidates Have an Advantage?**

Deans, provosts, and search firm representatives alike agreed that the positionality of a candidate, that is whether they are internal or external to the university, impacts how they are viewed by search committees and how they experience the search. However, while deans



understood that internal candidates had an advantageous position, provosts and search firm representatives disagreed. Two of the eight deans who participated in this study were internal candidates – that is, they held prior appointments at the same institution in which they are now dean. Dean John certainly felt that his internal status gave him an advantage in the search process. As he knew all 16 members of the search committee, he found the process “much less scary than it would have been” (p. 2). Even the dinner with other senior administrators was less intimidating than it could have been as he was personally acquainted with each of them (Dean John).

When asked if he felt that he was treated any differently in the recruitment process because he was an insider, John responded “yes, and by design actually” (p. 4). The committee discussed how his experience of the search process would differ from external candidates, and the “feelings and experiences” he would have as an internal candidate being considered for a leadership appointment (p. 4). Again, John commented that this special treatment was quite helpful in reassuring him of his choice to let his name stand in an otherwise often daunting process. When asked if he felt that he had an advantage as an internal candidate in the search process, Dean John remarked that “even with all the baggage that comes with being an internal candidate, it is [an advantageous position]. It’s yours to lose. It’s almost an insurmountable advantage” (p. 8). Dean Matthew concurred that internal candidates almost always have an advantage in a decanal search.

Dean Nathan likewise acknowledged that although a degree of familiarity with a particular candidate and their personal style can be a disadvantage, status as an internal candidate remains a significant advantage (p. 4). As Nathan contended,

my gut says it was an advantage just because I was a known commodity. I think you know, I got a great working relationship with colleagues here so I think they had a level of comfort with me perhaps and respect for me...on the other hand, there are always people in a large faculty that may not like the way you work or your personal style...but overall, I'm guessing it was an advantage for me (p. 4).

Search committees are usually risk-averse and tend to favour safe choices (Dean Matthew).

Although search committees are often extremely excited at the outset of a search by the prospect of finding a new dean with fresh ideas who can really shake things up, at some point in the search the academics' "risk aversion comes to the fore" and the committee turns to an internal candidate (if one is in contention) that is more of a known entity (Dean Matthew). As Dean Matthew illustrated, committees will reason, "well we know Sam or John or Jane, and better the devil you know than the one you don't know. So unless the internal candidate is a real disaster, they've got an advantage" (p. 7). However, in Matthew's experience, that is not the only reason internal candidates are in an advantageous position. If a committee knows that an internal candidate may not be the best option, they may still select them simply so they do not have to deal with a "pissed off" colleague for the next five years (Dean Matthew, p. 7). Matthew always avoids allowing his name to stand in a decanal search if there is an internal candidate. However, as he continued, "it's different if there are two internal candidates," then they may offset one another, and that actually might enhance your chances" (p. 7). For example, Dean Margaret was the first external dean in the nearly 80-year history of her faculty. In her particular case, the committee was specifically looking for someone who did not have all of the political baggage typically associated with internal candidates (Dean Margaret).

## **Provosts and internal candidates.**

While deans understood internal candidates as having a significant advantage in decanal searches, provosts did not necessarily share this perception. Provost James countered that internal candidates can be disadvantaged as the search committee is far more likely to make assumptions about their abilities than they would with an external, unknown candidate. Furthermore, these assumptions committees make are based on their interactions with the individuals in other roles and not necessarily reflective of their ability to be a dean (Provost James). Provost Doug furthered that “people think they know you and they have no idea of who you’ll be as a leader” (p. 5). James noted that these type of assumptions about certain candidates is partially what led him to establish mandatory unconscious bias training for all search committees. As he articulated, “we do work so that they [the search committee] have to try and check their assumptions and to treat each internal and external candidate fairly” (p. 4). Provost Doug highlighted that respect is particularly important when considering internal candidates. Doug sees an internal candidate allowing their name to stand as taking “tremendous courage,” and thus it is the committee’s and institution’s responsibility to be “very respectful of the internal candidate. We’re very clear that we treat them exactly the same way as we do an external candidate. It’s just part of what we do” (p. 5). This treatment includes the same assurance of confidentiality, which is particularly important in the case of an internal candidate who may not want their initial candidacy to be known by the entire faculty or college (Provost Doug).

In spite of these efforts to ensure an equitable process across candidates, Provost Doug related that internal candidates face two common disadvantages. Firstly, internal candidates come with far more “baggage” than externals (Provost Doug, p. 6). As Doug explained,

everybody in the faculty knows who they are, and they've either seen them in a situation, seen them do a particular thing, might have a personal experience with them that is either positive or negative that can colour their glasses in a particular shade (p. 6).

Furthermore, as committee members have never observed the individual in the top leadership position, their conduct in these previous situations may have little bearing on their potential conduct as dean (Provosts Doug & James).

Secondly, Provost Doug commented that while internal candidates should know the context of the university and particularly the faculty in which they are situated, "the disadvantage is they think they know it and they don't pay attention enough in terms of talking about it in an interview... They rely on people around the table to know that they know instead of actually addressing it" (p. 5). In addition to the influence candidate assumptions can have on committee decisions, provosts also have their own preferences at various points in the evolution of a college or faculty as to whether an internal or external candidate would be most appropriate (Provost Doug).

Provosts regularly find themselves in situations where they prefer an external candidate or vice versa. For example, as Provost Doug highlighted, "there might be times when I might favour an external candidate, and I might say to the committee, "of course we're going to be open for anybody to apply, but it might be time in this faculty to have an external candidate" (p. 9). Doug concluded that if he feels a college or faculty could use some "fresh blood or fresh ideas," he has no hesitation in making his views known to the committee (p. 9).

### **The search firm's perspective.**

Search firm representatives share the view of provosts in that they feel internal candidates are largely disadvantaged in decanal searches. Sally suggested that although internal candidates are often seen by committees as lower risk compared to “appointing someone from outside,” they still have to overcome the deficits of being an internal candidate (p. 9). Sally emphasized that it is human nature playing out in an institutional process – “people we know less about we overestimate the positives and people we know more about we overestimate the negatives” (p. 9). Such biases often creep into committee decisions.

### **Institutional Politics**

In addition to the internal politics of a search itself, decanal candidates also remarked on the impact politics within the wider academy can have on a search. Dean Michael observed that the politics of senior administrative hiring have had a direct impact on previous searches in which he has been a short-listed candidate. Decanal positions remain largely dominated by white men, so being a white man trying to become a dean in this context can be a disadvantage (Dean Michael). As Michael explained,

I think we're scrutinized much more than it may have been the case before, or maybe the case in the future. And so in my own particular case I lost positions that I wanted to have because of my gender...but of course I'm not gonna complain about it because I have a very good position here [now] (p. 9).

While such considerations can have an impact across institutions, the politics within institutions, although different, are also alike. Candidates who are able to understand these similarities can use this experience to their advantage in a search.

Decanal participants were quick to point out that while institutional politics can be slightly different between institutions, politics are politics. When discussing the politics of searches, Dean Jane explained that,

the politics are the same everywhere...I would say that it's all the same players, just different faces... At my former institution there was a guy, I'm going to make it up, John Smith, and here his name is Morgan. It's the same guy doing the same stupid shit but they have different names, so the politics are the same, the players are different, but the havoc that they wreak is the same (p. 5).

Jane described how she deployed her own understanding of college politics and navigating difficult personalities from her previous experience in her first interview with the search committee for the position she now holds. She was able to quickly assess the politics of the committee in the first interview and cultivate a rapport with a faculty member who had developed a reputation for being particularly nasty with other candidates. Jane continued,

this guy said something [in the interview] and I said, "Oh my god you're a physicist!" And he said, "How did you know?" Then we ended up joking around quite a bit and so he would make a little joke at things and so it cut the tension, and then it turns out that we grew up a couple blocks from each other in Toronto. It was very funny. The rogue element who was not being nice or politically correct in many of the other interviews was absolutely adorable in my interview so it was very funny (p. 6).

A decanal candidate who is able to quickly assess the politics of who is who on a search committee can better position themselves in relation to the committee. However, committees do not always readily offer up much in the way of political insights to candidates during a search.

Dean Jane contended that the reason candidates are often shielded from the true political reality of a deanship, faculty, or university in the search process is largely a result of institutional efforts to protect their reputation. The circumstances surrounding the previous dean's departure can also have a significant impact on what is shared with the incoming dean throughout the search. Sometimes the previous dean leaves because of problems or big issues they were faced with, but incoming deans are rarely informed of those (Dean Jane). Jane explained that usually human resources, out of protection for the institution and the individual, do not always do a good job of letting you "know the minefield that you're walking into," (p. 6) so candidates are largely responsible to do a little digging on their own. Dean Nathan noted that the dinner organized as part of his campus visit was particularly useful as a means of developing a better understanding of the organizational culture and politics that are often glossed over or intentionally covered up in the formal interview process. Furthermore, it provided Nathan with a better opportunity to reflect on the personalities of fellow deans that he would work with in this new role should he be the successful candidate.

### **Transition and onboarding.**

A shift in the onboarding process where, in certain situations, there was more of an overlap between the outgoing and incoming dean might also help to make new and incoming deans more aware of the politics of their faculties and colleges. Dean Nathan remarked that

there's not much of a transition process and certainly I don't think there is any overlapping time typically and I think that would really benefit both the new dean and the faculty that the new dean is inheriting...I think that overlapping set of conversations would be really helpful (p. 6).

In reflecting on his transition into his current role several years ago, Nathan noted that he is still in regular contact with his predecessor and although they did discuss the position after he had been announced as her replacement, he still teases her “that there are many things she forgot to warn [him] about in taking this job on.... having a longer transition would have been useful” (p. 8). Other deans noted that there were some surprises in their first few weeks in the role that a more robust transition process could have eliminated.

Dean Gordon recalled that when he began in his role as dean there were a few faculty members “camping out” near his office to explain to him how things should be done (p. 7). These individuals had obviously not got the answer they had wanted from his predecessor and were waiting to make their case to the new dean (Dean Gordon). Gordon furthered that “there’s just so much unknown” stepping into these types of leadership positions that any information deans can have access to before or during the first few weeks of their term is highly advantageous (p. 7).

Part of the lack of political awareness deans find themselves faced with in the early tenure of their deanships, particularly if they are external candidates, is a result of the lack of awareness of search committee members who convey this type of information to candidates during the search process (Dean Margaret). As most search committee members, certainly those representing the faculty, do not necessarily have a broad view of their faculty or university, they are unable to convey the “whole picture” to candidates (Dean Margaret, p. 7). Nor are deans, especially first-time deans, always aware enough of these types of issues to even begin to ask the right questions in the search process (Deans John & Margaret).



## Candidate Background and Preparation

The professional background a candidate brings to the decanal search process not only influences their interpretation (experience) of the search, but also their conduct within the search. Deans who have gone through decanal searches before have different interpretations of the search process and appear to be more comfortable manipulating the process to ensure it meets their needs and expectations. Six of the successful candidates who participated in this study had previous experience in administrative roles equivalent to that of a dean or higher. While three of those six obtained this experience outside of the Canadian context, it nonetheless helped to prepare them for their current roles. Deans that had no previous experience at the decanal level, however, recollected that even with experience at the associate dean level, entering into a deanship is “really trial by fire” (Dean John, p. 2). Previous preparation at more junior levels is questionable preparation.

Contrary to many of the deans who participated in this study, Dean Nathan understood that there is a logical progression through the academy to the deanship and that more junior-level administrative roles adequately prepare individuals to be deans. As Nathan described when recounting his conversation with a mentor about whether he should put his name forward for his current position,

we realized together that I had fulfilled almost every administrative role in the faculty other than dean at that point. I had kind of built a career path through those roles and got a lot of experiences that definitely supported me as I became dean and settled into the job...it was terrific preparation for what I do now (p. 1).

This was Nathan’s first decanal appointment. In spite of his assertion that he was prepared to assume the role, Nathan did concede that in retrospect, and as highlighted earlier by Deans John

and Margaret, there were questions during the actual recruitment and search process that he did not know he should have been asking. He continued, “you learn things as you settle into these roles that you, if you got a chance to go back, that you’d ask more about” (p. 4). Individuals who had served as dean prior to their current appointments appeared to be more aware of the types of questions to ask during these searches to better understand the nature and context of individual roles.

Dean Jane highlighted that her senior leadership experience helped her in the recruitment process from the beginning, including her understanding of the position profile. Jane claimed that

when you read something you read it through the lens of your own experiences, so when I read the job description I knew what they meant when they said ‘dealing with HR issues.’ Right? I know what that means whereas if you hadn’t been in a dean’s office before or hadn’t been in an executive leadership position before, you might not really know what that means. (p. 7).

Previous senior leadership experience is key to being a successful senior leader (Dean Jane).

Despite the importance Dean Jane attached to previous administrative experience she feels that universities still rely too heavily on prior success as a researcher as an indicator of potential success as a senior administrator. She identified that the skillset of a researcher and an administrator, although they at times can overlap, are two distinct skillsets. Jane stressed that if institutions continue to attempt to recruit strong researchers to deanships,

they’re not necessarily always going to get the skilled administrators, the collaborators, the collegial colleague. They’re going to get a competitive, self-interested, driven

researcher!...Deans are over everything, they're over student experience, they're over classrooms, they're teaching, facilities, HR, fund development, you name it, IT. And so researchers who have not had administrative experience before I think are at risk of failure to a greater extent than those individuals who've come in with some kind of administrative background. I would even argue that being a chair of a department does not necessarily set you up for success as a dean (p. 12).

However, in many ways the mentality of preparation is not one that is widely encouraged in academia.

Dean Jane furthered that "being thrown into the deep end without ever having swam before...that's a badge of honor in academia" (p. 12). From graduate students teaching their first class, neophyte researchers to administrators, academic institutions do not always emphasize or encourage preparation and development into those types of positions (Dean Jane). In spite of the lack of a direct correlation between research experience and administrative success, Jane still feels that the researcher status remains tied to credibility as a senior administrator.

Dean Andy also highlighted the tension between being a researcher and an administrator, and which provides more experience relevant to the day-to-day work of a dean. Although decanal candidates are expected to have a research profile, a dean's deliverables do not include carrying out a robust research program (Dean Andy). Andy noted that his previous experience with a budgeting model that Willow University was adopting just as he was beginning as dean was perhaps the most valuable experience he brought to the senior leadership team. As he described, "they were just about to change their budget model to the model that I had helped to usher in [at my previous university] ... That's where I like to play. I like to take academic missions and translate them into the budgetary resources" (p. 6). Andy's robust and highly

regarded research program did little to prepare him for the intricacies of overseeing a new budgeting model.

Dean John contended that his academic background did in part prepare him for some aspects of the senior administration, particularly the human resource-related responsibilities of a deanship:

I would say [that] my academic background has prepared me to deal with the emotional stuntedness that a lot of faculty members actually have. So very ego drive, very me, me, me, me, very why is this happening to me as opposed to getting them to stand back and think about how the work that they're doing fits within a broader strategic plan...so I think my academic background, it gives me a lot of street cred so they take me seriously when I make comments about changes that I want to make, but the other thing it does is prepares me for how obstinate faculty in particular can be (p. 7).

Human resources are a principal component of the modern-day deanship.

Previous experience in a decanal role can better prepare an incoming dean to work through important human resource issues. Dean Michael noted that his previous experience as a dean, particularly at Apple University, provided him with an opportunity to better collaborate with colleagues across campus (p. 2). Michael continued that leveraging his ability to work with both students and faculty across a campus has allowed him to bring people together across disciplines in his current role, which he has found “incredibly empowering and fruitful” (p. 2). The ability to facilitate such collaboration is essential in large colleges.

Prior senior administrative experience becomes particularly important when considering deanships of large and complex colleges or faculties. As Dean Margaret noted, her previous

experience as the dean of a smaller faculty (in comparison to her current position) was an excellent learning opportunity (p. 2). She furthered that

it was really important to have had that leadership and administrative experience prior to taking up the decanal position at Maple University...in terms of the size and the complexity, I think it would have been very difficult to have taken that role on without any previous decanal experience (p. 2).

Despite this previous preparation, Margaret sometimes still finds that there is a “level of intensity” in her current role that is unlike anything she experienced in her previous deanship (p. 7). She emphasized that she was aware of the expectations and how they differed from her previous university, including “philanthropy, donor relations, advancement, that kind of work,” but she simply was not “fully aware of all the time and energy that that would take” (p. 7). Had she not held a deanship prior to her current position, she worries that the expectations would be too much for her (Dean Margaret).

Even with robust previous experience, Dean Andy also found his current position “particularly grueling in the first years” (p. 10). The lack of operational support within his new faculty did not help his situation. Andy continued, “I think having had deanship preparation was really helpful” (p. 10). When asked what best prepares an individual for a deanship, Andy concluded

I think it is helpful to have someone who’s had [a] serious executive kind of role rather than say someone who’s run a centre, or served as a graduate chair, just because [of] the number of personnel issues that you have to resolve, the number of authority crises, the budgets. If you don’t have the executive capacities, it’s hard to walk into a deanship. It’s

nice to have that proven already in a similar kind of job whether it's at a smaller level, small deanships somewhere, or a [chair] of a department. You're taking chances if you select deans who haven't had at least that (p. 11).

Andy added that one of the most shocking aspects of the position for new deans is the volume of issues to address and problems to solve. However, his previous experience as a dean helped him to develop strategies to quickly acclimate to his current position. As Andy pointed out,

by the time I had been a dean for six years, I pretty much had developed systems: working with teams, making sure portfolios were in place, doing really good planning, goals and objectives planning, and delegating what I needed to delegate, bearing down when I need to bear down. Some of this was coming instinctively so that part of the job was not a surprise to me. However, again...if I had not had that experience as a dean and walked into [my current] faculty at Willow University, I would have been absolutely, terrifyingly overwhelmed, from which I may not have recovered (p. 8)!

Previous experience as a dean was particularly useful for Andy as he assumed the leadership of one of the largest faculties of its kind in Canada.

When asked about the best preparation for a deanship, aside from having held a previous deanship, Dean Margaret noted that universities

need to do a better job [of] mentoring people earlier in their career into leadership roles. Kind of a gradation of leadership. You can start in a coordinator position or an associate chair position, but the mentoring has to be there and also creating opportunities for leadership development work.... for me, I often just felt parachuted into the roles without

having had opportunities to really think about what it means to be a leader and to develop my own kind of philosophy of leading (p. 12).

Although Margaret did not reference developing her leadership skills outside of the academy, some participants made specific mention of the value of leadership experiences in other contexts and how these can better prepare academics for many aspects of decanal positions.

Dean Matthew had been a sitting dean for 11 years prior to his current appointment. However, he also attributed much of his leadership skill to positions held outside the academy. Matthew remarked that his experience as a leader in the military is “100% relevant to what [he] do[es] now” (p. 1). He continued,

military leadership is all about getting people willingly to do things, in fact, things that might involve threatening their life that they don't want to do. Those skills that I acquired, imperfectly I'm sure, but those skills that I acquired in the service are critical to how I'm a dean (p. 2).

Dean Gordon likewise attributes his leadership competencies to roles he has held beyond universities.

Dean Gordon felt that his time as a head coach of a professional sports group provided him with an excellent opportunity to hone the leadership and managerial capacities necessary for a dean. As he explained,

I was running a program, so financially I understood how to run programs, I understood how to recruit. I had volunteer boards that I had to work with, so I had to figure out how to get along with people...professional coaching in a club situation like that, I think it just gave me a fairly thick skin for criticism...So I think it was pretty important because

you're always in a hot seat as a club coach that is hired by a board [as is a dean] (p. 2 – 3).

In spite of a lengthy tenure as a leader in sport, Gordon described himself as a reluctant leader within the academy.

After Dean Gordon assumed his first academic position, leadership within his faculty was not something he considered. For the first ten years of his academic career he avoided any type of leadership role (Dean Gordon). Despite Gordon's attempts to avoid leadership positions, as he described,

ironically, I was petitioned by my colleagues within my then faculty to step up to a leadership position not because I wanted it, I didn't...so I put my hand up and got the associate dean role and ironically for me I actually quite enjoyed leadership (p. 3)

within the academy. Following his time as associate dean and subsequently in a dean-like position abroad, Gordon found himself involved in a Canadian decanal search.

Dean Gordon made a direct connection between his previous leadership and administrative experience and his ability to leverage the search process to his advantage. He felt that his experiences better prepared him to ask the questions, all budget-related, he knew he needed answers to during his search process in order to determine whether he would accept the position if offered. As Gordon explained,

I did ask for the financial records of the company, of the faculty, so that I could look at where it was financially. I asked for a list of profits, understood where that was...I kind of knew what I was getting into, so in a lot of ways I wasn't naïve (p. 6- 7).



Based on his prior experience running both a sports program and a faculty, he knew that his ability to deliver in the position if selected would be heavily dependent on the financial situation of the college (Dean Gordon).

Dean Gordon concurred with Deans Andy, Jane, and Margaret in that his previous experience and success in developing a research program did little to prepare him to be a dean. Gordon challenged that,

for me, what I learned and what I did in research prepared me for part of this job...I understood all that and I came into a research-intensive university where they valued that, so I think I needed that track record.... but I would just say that the breadth of knowledge that's needed to do the dean job extends beyond research (p. 8)

into human resources and finance. As he continued, a dean needs to be “somebody who can interact with individuals at the individual level, somebody who has an understanding of the system so they can have a horizon” (Dean Gordon, p. 8 – 10). A dean who has all of these skills and abilities is often said to be the “full package,” as described by Gordon (p. 9).

The concept of the “full package” was also raised by Dean Nathan. Reflecting on his own experiences as a dean, he stressed the importance of people skills. Deans need to be able to successfully navigate difficult human resource conversations and faculty politics (Dean Nathan). Although these may be some of the most important skills that contribute to being a successful dean, they are not usually evident on a CV (Dean Nathan). Fundraising is also becoming more essential in the “full package” skillset for a dean and is heavily reliant on good interpersonal skills as well (Dean Gordon). Dean Gordon asserted that fundraising has become a major

expectation within the last five years, is often written directly into a dean's employment contract, and currently comprises at least 25% of his time.

### **Is it possible to be fully prepared?**

Given the demands on a dean's time and the broad range of expectations associated with the position, it is interesting to consider whether candidates can ever really be truly prepared to step into a decanal position. When asked if she felt prepared to assume her current role, Dean Jane had an interesting response. She continued,

I think that no matter what your previous experiences are you're never fully prepared for that which you don't know, unless you're one of those people that don't know what you don't know. What I mean by that is if you're arrogant enough to think that you know everything you will always feel prepared, so if you are cognizant of the fact that there is so much that you don't know, that it's okay not to be prepared...I guess I would suggest that, nope, I was not prepared! Not at all! But that's okay and I shouldn't have been prepared. I was prepared for faculty outbursts at council meetings, I was prepared for attitudes, I was prepared for the dealing with the sort of administrative dynamic of a university. But what you're not prepared for are the things you haven't experience before (p. 2).

While one can prepare for certain types of situations in a leadership position, the contextual specificity of an event makes each instance different.

Even with several years of decanal experience prior to his current deanship, Dean Andy noted that there are things about a faculty you will not and should not find out until well after you've accepted the position. As Andy described,

I felt I had a grasp of some of the critical pieces, I understood the structure, some about the governance, [and] the budgetary realities... [however there were a] myriad of...smaller issues that I was going to have to chip away at with a hammer, a sledgehammer, and I wanted to understand all of that. And that's part of moving [a] faculty like this forward, you really can't do it unless you understand where these issues lie and where the impediments are. That stuff, that was what I needed to learn, and of course there are parts of that that people cover over and keep you from encountering at least for a year, and in some cases there were things I didn't realize for four or five years. I mean I understood the critical, the big picture, but the details? Oh my god that takes you a year or more (p. 7).

When deans do "crash and burn in the job," as Dean Andy described it, personnel issues are usually the area where unprepared individuals typically struggle the most (p. 11).

A dean is particularly likely to fail, Dean Andy claimed, if they push too hard...or they bring their vision to a group that doesn't want to be led, they just can't read, they have no EQ or emotional quotient. They can't read motivations and they end up in conflict and it's usually that kind of thing that stalls deans and results in early departure (p. 11).

However, if a dean can surround himself with a competent and driven professional staff, if they are willing to invest time upfront to ensure that infrastructure is in place, "things really begin to hum" (Dean Andy, p. 12). The ability of an incoming dean to understand the context of their new faculty or college is important. Decanal candidates also recognized that the fit of a particular dean within a specific college or faculty is also a significant consideration in the search process.

## Candidate Fit

Candidates understood that not all great academic leaders can be great in every leadership position. Context impacts how a dean leverages their previous experience in positioning themselves for their next role (Dean Matthew). Dean Matthew noted that leadership has a temporal and situational aspect to it. For example, he was a significantly different dean at Bamboo University in 2000 than he is at Cherry University in 2019. While his previous experience certainly informs his current practice, the context necessitates a slightly different approach. Sensitivity to the politics of a university and or region is also important for a dean. The ability to anticipate how a president or provost will respond to a government announcement can positively position a prospective dean. However, as Matthew purported, that ability only comes with considerable experience in a decanal role.

The fit of an individual, within a certain institution and college or faculty, also contributes significantly to their success in that role. As Dean John recalled, the search committee decided he would be the best fit for the position. He continued,

I have a particular kind of professional autobiography and I have a particular background that lends itself really well for leading this faculty. I know that there are people out there who are outstanding scholars, have a far higher profile than I do, but they don't have the particular mix of history and personality that I have (p. 10).

It is the candidate's responsibility to convey their background in a compelling yet truthful way to the search committee who then should decide who would be the best fit for the position (Dean John). A central figure on the search committee, particularly when it comes to assessing fit, is the provost.

## **What do Provosts Look for in a Prospective Dean?**

The primary skillset a prospective dean must have are those skills and abilities related to leadership (Provost Doug). When recounting the general themes that often come up through the course of search committee discussions, Provost Doug described that often search committee members are hesitant to consider individuals who do not have the research profile or history of grantsmanship expected in a future dean (p. 6). However, Doug is quick to remind committees that

we're not actually hiring a researcher, we're hiring a leader... the most important thing we can do is hire leaders. They have to be able to have good oral and written communication skills. They've got to enable and facilitate people's jobs. I always look for people who see the glass half-full. I look for people who have had leadership experience [as an associate dean, department head, or even the director of a research centre] (p. 6 - 7).

Doug feels that such positions provide opportunities to develop the necessary budgetary experience, ability to delegate, and management skills that are essential for a prospective dean.

Despite Provost James's lengthy focus on the importance of previous administrative experience, he did note that it is important, when considering what prepares a future dean, not to be overly rigid in terms of what forms of experience can potentially support an individual as they prepare to be a dean. So much of this work to identify what type of candidate a search committee is looking for and what type of background these candidates have is, as Provost Doug postulated, decided upon during the initial meeting(s) of the search committee. Does the dean require a Ph.D., or would the committee consider an applicant with a "doctoral degree in practice?" (p. 10). Doug tries to stimulate conversation in discussing the necessary background of future deans

with a search committee simply to try and get the committee thinking beyond the scope of their familiarity. For example, as he noted,

Always I try to use a non-standard, non-traditional hire as an example...and then we start to really define what you're looking for, so you're not really closing the door on non-traditional candidates if they have this in their background...You know, I usually have in my back pocket, 'well what about this school in Toronto,' or 'this school that's really rocking it down in the US has a dean that, you know, doesn't have an academic background. Has this kind of background.' And so I really try to push the boundaries and be purposefully provocative in these meetings to get them thinking outside the box (p. 10).

When asked if this type of approach has been successful in the past, Doug responded that it usually works in two ways. One, "it really helps to narrow down what are the absolute[ly] critical features that they're [the search committee] looking for," and it helps them to also distill what previous experience the prospective dean requires (p. 10). For example, Doug noted that typically the dean of a graduate school should have a robust record of working with and supporting graduate students.

Above all, Provost Doug placed a high degree of importance on decanal candidates having prior senior-level administrative experience and noted that this experience has become even more essential in recent years. During his tenure as Provost, Doug has seen significant changes in the role and expectations of dean. Partially as a result of more "regulatory and audit requirements," an increased emphasis on advancement and "fund development," and increasingly complex human resource issues, the position itself in the Canadian environment has changed (p. 6).

Provost Greg also commented on the changing role of the dean in recent years. As he described, “I have observed that recruitments for deans in recent years have become more and more focused on fundraising and entrepreneurial skills and experience, and less on intellectual leadership in the discipline” (p. 1). Greg also noted that he looks for “meaningful experience” in prospective decanal candidates including prior leadership, administrative, strategic, human resource, and fund development experience (p. 2). Candidates also need to be able to demonstrate progression in terms of the level of complexity and responsibility in previous roles (Provost Greg). As Greg highlighted, “there must be at least some instances of singular leadership on initiatives, otherwise it can be difficult to assess the contributions of the candidate” in the search process (p. 2). A prospective dean can acquire such experiences through several roles within the academy.

The role of dean includes both championing the individual college and being able to understand and further an institutional agenda (Provost James). Provost James noted that individuals interested in becoming dean usually begin to gain this type of experience as department heads or associate deans. While an understanding of the Canadian context is important, prior administrative experience does not necessarily have to be obtained within Canada (Provost James). Sometimes those perspectives imported from other national contexts can question and challenge the current state of affairs, which is a good thing (Provost James). James feels that exposure to the administrative tasks and issues present within academic leadership positions helps a new dean acclimate to their new role quicker. It also makes his role as supervisor easier.

Provost Doug highlighted the importance of a dean’s ability to balance the demands of a college or faculty with the overall good of the university as a whole; however he also pointed to

the importance of a dean serving the faculty he or she leads. Doug recalled a conversation he had years ago with a colleague when they were discussing their incoming dean. Doug continued:

one of my biggest lessons in university leadership came at the faculty level. We had a very family-oriented faculty at the university when I was there. It was one of the best in the world but it was a very highly collaborative place. And a new dean was hired – I was the associate dean academic at the time. The dean came in and was actually autocratic in the first six weeks...I was walking into a meeting with one of my academic mentors and she turned to me and said, ‘I wonder when the dean is going to recognize that he works for us and not the other way around?’...and that statement has stuck with me because quite frankly that’s what university leadership should be (p. 7).

The personality and approach of a dean is key.

Provosts and decanal search committees have also begun to consider more purposefully a candidate’s experience with fund development or advancement in recent years (Provost Doug). Provost Doug argued that although fund development has and will become increasingly more important for deans, he cannot expect that individuals coming into those roles have substantial background in that area unless they have previously served in a dean-like role. However, he always tries to assess, in his brief one-on-one chats with the final short-listed candidates, “personality, [the] ability to make a point, [the] ability to concisely put into words what would be required in front of a donor, and whether or not they’re passionate. Then I assess their ability to be coachable” (p. 8). If a candidate has these qualities, they can develop in this particular area (Provost Doug).



Provost James noted that in spite of the centrality of previous administrative experience to the potential success of a future dean, he has recently observed that those individuals who are interested in serving as deans are often unprepared in this regard. When asked to provide further details as to what he classified as administrative experience, James commented that administrative experience is demonstrated through effective communication skills, the ability to work collaboratively and productively with faculty and staff, and to work through difficult human resource issues, including navigating those “challenging personality issues” that often arise within the academy (p. 3). James continued that in a typical decanal search

you attract people who are strong researchers, who are great teachers, who have really strong academic records, but at the end of the day the majority of their time as dean is going to be [spent working] on some of those other interpersonal issues, so I’m looking for [someone with experience with] that...I wouldn’t say that...a predictor of success as a dean would be to be a Canada Research Chair because I do think there’s a certain lack of exposure to some of the administrative challenges [in that role], so I don’t see that as being a direct correlation (p. 3-5).

Search firms likewise observed the importance of decanal candidates having robust administrative experience.

### **Search Firms and Candidate Experience**

Institutions are increasingly interested in hiring deans who can demonstrate a strong track record of progressive administrative experience, especially as it relates to human resources (Fred). Sally insisted that the centrality of people management to decanal roles cannot be overstated. Sally continued that people skills may be the most critical element of a strong decanal candidate – “people skills, I think, are fundamental to a great decanal candidate. Budgeting they

can learn, curriculum they can learn, all those things, they can learn” (p. 10). Despite the centrality of prior senior administrative experience, both Sally and Fred highlighted that if candidates have a gap in their background as it relates to the position of dean, it is usually in area of human resources.

Fred provided more historical context to the increasing lack of administrative preparedness amongst decanal candidates commented on by search firms and provosts alike. He argued that while there is still significant interest in decanal positions, interest in departmental chair or headship positions is significantly less than it has historically been (p. 5). As Fred reasoned, “if you don’t want to be chair, then you’re probably not going to be associate dean. [If] you’re not going to be an associate dean, you’re probably not going to be a dean.... the real problem is how do you get enough candidates to be dean if you don’t have enough candidates to be chair” (p. 5)? Fred also referenced the tension between administrative experience and demonstrated research ability that both deans and provosts underlined.

Often an individual who has a strong research agenda and record of attracting large grants does not necessarily also have the time or space to develop the administrative capacities so central a successful deanship (Fred). Likewise, a candidate who may have a strong record of administrative leadership may not have had the time to develop a robust research program (Fred). Fred explained that he has observed this conflict play out in many decanal searches:

for individuals that moved into administration too quickly because they enjoyed it, they were penalized [in the search process] because they didn’t have the research credibility of individuals that had less administrative experience because they focused on their research and those individuals were actually worse administrators because they had very small track records on being in administration (p. 5).

While unable to provide a solution to this apparent contradiction, Fred did note that this tension between research and administrative experience was highly prevalent in the recent decanal searches he has supported. Furthermore, as search committees are often comprised of a sizable number of faculty members who have more experience with research than administration, committees are incorrectly prioritizing research experience (Fred).

Part of what brings this tension to the fore as of late is that institutions have different, and even heightened expectations of deans than they did in previous decades (Fred). When looking to the future of institutions, based on recent conversations with a couple of provosts, Fred felt that deans are going to be called upon more and more to make difficult budget decisions and fundraising expectations will be higher. Fred postulated that

in the future, the dean's going to have, continue to have, stronger and stronger business skills versus research skills, but you can't get to the party if you don't have the research skills. As long as they're leading faculty that are research oriented, I think that's going to have to be important (p. 6.).

However, research experience provides little opportunity to prepare academic leaders to develop these types of business skills (Fred).

### **Personal Considerations**

While the skills and abilities of a candidate are often central to their ability to do the job, several deans also mentioned the impact of personal or familial considerations on their decision to move forward with particular recruitment processes. Accepting a senior administrative position such as a deanship is often a decision that impacts more than just the individual.

Assuming a decanal role may necessitate moving to a different city, uprooting children and spouses or partners from their current situations.

Dean Margaret shared that the decision to accept the position was not hers alone. As her partner is a professor, there had to “be a good fit” for both of them (p. 12). One of the aspects of her recruitment that Margaret appreciated the most was how welcomed and supported her husband felt in the process and later transition to a new university. Conversely, Dean Gordon had to leave his adult children, who had grown up abroad, an ocean away to accept his deanship. However, following lengthy discussions with his spouse, they decided that the move would be a good opportunity for both of them and decided to move forward despite the family separation that ensued.

Dean Matthew also referenced familial considerations when exploring the possibility of relocating to his current institution. As a parent of a child with some special needs, he was keen to ensure that the city they would call home if he accepted the position would have the supports and resources they needed. As he confirmed, the institution “went out of their way” to help us learn about the options here during our campus visit (p. 5). Dean Andy’s family was particularly interested in the possibility of relocating to their current city, so as Andy expressed, “we jumped” at the opportunity (p. 3). The location of Dean Michael’s current appointment was likewise a significant consideration for both him and his spouse as they looked for institutions located near major airports to ensure they could travel relatively easily to see family (p. 8).

### **The search firm and the individual.**

The two search firm representatives who provided input to this study seemed to be particularly aware of the impact and influence a candidate's personal background can have on both their experience of the search and the decisions they make within the search. Both Sally and Fred highlighted that they try to establish close personal relationships with all prospective candidates as they move through the recruitment process. Dean Jane confirmed this, noting that she still remains friends with the individual who was her primary point of contact during her recruitment process. Search firms were also quick to note in agreement with Provost James that, particularly at this level, highly qualified candidates typically have their choice of institution and position, so sometimes it is the small, personal details that make the difference.

Fred was also quick to highlight that part of this positive personal candidate experience is ensuring a timely process, including the responsiveness of the search firm to candidate inquires, timeliness of meetings, and timeliness of decisions. Dean Gordon underscored that following his campus visit he was offered the position while on his return journey home. The speed with which the committee made their decision and communicated that decision was noteworthy for him and influenced the enthusiasm with which he accepted the offer.

### **Summary**

All study participants agreed that the search firm is central to both the smooth running of the search itself and the experience of candidates in a decanal search. Firms work closely with candidates, provosts, and search committees as they plan, coordinate, and facilitate the search for a dean. Participants also highlighted airport interviews and campus visits, the search committee,

the politics of searches, candidate background and preparation, and candidate fit as they recounted their various experiences with recent decanal searches. While the importance and strength of these themes varied by participant group, there were emergent themes both within and across participant groups.

## CHAPTER FIVE

This chapter includes a summary of the study, review of the findings, and discussion of those findings in light of related literature as discussed in Chapter Two. Implications for policy, practice, theory, and future research are then presented. Finally, the study's methodology is reconsidered and concluding thoughts offered.

### Study Summary

Over the course of the past few years I have developed an increasing interest in how academic deans are recruited, selected, and appointed. These interests have led to this study and exploring how successful candidates themselves experience their recruitment processes, how these experiences inform their decision making within that process, and how the process can be improved to support the success of a new dean. A Multiperspectival Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Larkin et al., 2019) methodology was employed to develop an enhanced understanding of the candidate experience. The following overarching question and supporting questions guided this study:

1. Given the elements of a decanal search and the experiences of candidates, how can the process be enhanced to support the likelihood of deans' success?
  - a. How do the interactions with decanal search committees in the recruitment process shape selected deans' perceptions of the organizational and governance context of the hiring university?
  - b. How do selected deans perceive the role of the external search firm, particularly as it relates to their experiences as candidates?

- c. How do selected deans compare their lived experiences of the deanship to the details of the position and expectations of the successful candidate as communicated during the search process?
2. How can Reference Point Theory (RPT) inform our understanding of decanal candidates' decision-making during the recruitment and selection process?

Chapter Two included an overview of the relevant literature related to decanal recruitment. I explored the university context in which decanal searches take place and the influence that context can have on senior administrative searches. Additionally, I considered the role of the dean, recent changes to the role, and considered notions of decanal success. Finally, I reviewed senior administrative recruitment processes and practices in both universities and the corporate sector, including the involvement of external recruitment firms and internal search committees.

Data collection was achieved through semi-structured interviews. The research questions of this study provided a framework and structure for the individual interviews with participants, but the fluidity of the semi-structured format allowed research participants to direct most of the conversation within the parameters of the interview schedules. I conducted interviews with participants that can be divided into three sub-groups including eight successful decanal candidates, three provosts, and two search firm representatives. The deans and provosts who participated in this study were all from Western Canadian U15 institutions. Both search firm representatives work for national search firms. A list of themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews is included in Table 5.1. The ✓ symbols that appear within the table represent the emergence of a particular subtheme amongst a specific participant group. As discussed in Chapter 3, themes and subthemes were identified as per the recommendations of



Smith and Osborn (2003) based on my prioritization of the data, richness of related passages within the transcripts and the prevalence of themes and subthemes within the data.

**Table 5.1:** *Summary of study themes and subthemes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Deans</b>	<b>Provosts</b>	<b>Search Firms</b>
<b>Centrality of the search firm</b>	• Central to making or breaking a search	✓	✓	
	• Importance of the firm's role in initial outreach to prospects	✓	✓	✓
	• Importance of the firm in leading the process and making it as smooth as possible for the candidate		✓	✓
	• Significance of professional and consistent candidate treatment	✓	✓	✓
	• Expectation that the firm develops the initial list presented to committees	✓	✓	✓
	• Influence of the fit of the firm with institution/provost		✓	
	• Significance of the coaching role of the firm			✓
<b>Significance of airport interviews and campus visits</b>	• Impact of exhausting nature of the interviews/visits	✓	✓	✓
	• Agreement that there must be a better way	✓	✓	✓
	• Understanding that the current format is used because it is a representation of what days as a dean are like	✓		
	• Importance of giving candidates the opportunity to interact with multiple stakeholders and get a feel	✓	✓	✓

	for the place (if an open search).			
<b>Ambiguous value/role of search committees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of significance for candidates</li> </ul>	✓		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vagueness around role in candidate selection</li> </ul>	✓		✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Valuable role in providing candidates insights into the politics/culture of a faculty. A source of information. Work to sell the institution to candidates.</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Important role in supporting the provost in selection (strictly in an advisory capacity)</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beneficial in giving voice to faculty in the process (representation)</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inadequate venue for decisions of this magnitude</li> </ul>			✓
<b>Influence of search politics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Varied understandings of open and closed searches</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Influence of academic hiring politics</li> </ul>	✓		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding of the similarity of politics between institutions, but importance of context</li> </ul>	✓		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ambiguous role of the outgoing dean</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Necessity of access to budgetary information</li> </ul>	✓		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived advantages of internal vs. external candidates</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of understanding the politics of academic hiring</li> </ul>			✓

<b>Importance of candidate background and preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Value of previous senior administrative experience, but necessity of strong research profile</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognition that strong research profile does nothing to prepare individuals for the deanship, yet prospective deans are still judged based on their scholarly outputs/profile by committees/faculty</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agreement that the best preparation for a deanship is a deanship</li> </ul>	✓	✓	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of mentorship</li> </ul>	✓	✓	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Value of external leadership experience</li> </ul>	✓	✓	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledgement that there have been changes in the role</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Role of personal experience</li> </ul>	✓		✓
<b>Implications of candidate fit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impression that leadership success is contextual</li> </ul>	✓		✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectation of provost that a dean fits within the wider university and around the dean's table, but also a dean's ability to represent their faculty</li> </ul>		✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significance of the dean's relationship with provost</li> </ul>		✓	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of a dean's relationship with faculty</li> </ul>		✓	

<b>Centrality of the Provost</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to control so much – selection of firm, constitution of committee members (within confines of collective agreements and institutional policy)</li> </ul>		✓	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of ‘liking’ individual candidates</li> </ul>		✓	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledgement that the provost ultimately makes hiring decisions and process decisions</li> </ul>		✓	✓

### **Findings**

Each participant in this study has been involved in a decanal recruitment and selection process in one form or another. Eight participants were sitting deans and thus successful decanal candidates in at least one search, although five had been involved as candidates in multiple successful searches for senior administrative positions within various universities. Three participants took part in decanal searches as provosts and thus have overseen several searches from start to finish. Finally, the two participants who were both representatives of their respective search firms are regularly involved in supporting decanal searches across Canada. Participants shared their experiences, from their respective vantage points, of the decanal recruitment process.

### **Centrality of the search firm.**

All participants agreed that the search firm has a pivotal role to play in searching for and recruiting a dean in Canadian U15 universities. Provosts, search firm representatives, and candidates alike confirmed that one of the firm’s most important roles, in addition to their support of the search committee in the first stages of position profile and job description

development, is initial outreach to candidates. Successful decanal candidates described the importance of the firm in developing their initial awareness of a particular position and helping them to decide whether they would be a good fit for that position. Many of the successful decanal candidates who took part in this study first became aware of their current deanship through a search firm.

As participants noted, this initial outreach combined with the screening and vetting function of firms gives them an essential role in the development of the initial candidate list presented to search committees. While deans and provosts focused primarily on these outreach and vetting functions fulfilled by a search firm, search firm representatives added further details to their role in the preliminary stages of a search. Firm representatives understand their initial role in a decanal search as two-fold. They want to reach out to as many qualified candidates as possible in each search and as a direct result of this outreach provide the committee with the most robust list of potential candidates as possible. Given the global nature of talent mobility in academia, this is no small feat. Firms leverage connections made through earlier searches and national or international networks to connect with every candidate whom they believe has the potential to meet the expectations of the search committee and provost as listed in the position profile and job description.

Once the initial list of candidates is agreed upon by the search committee, the firm has a role to play in stewarding the process and each of the candidates within that process. The duality of this role was commented on by participants. Deans noted how they worked closely with the search firm representative assigned to them as they developed their candidacy for a particular position. A coaching relationship can often develop, and search firm representatives acknowledged that even if a candidate may not be an ideal fit for the current search they are

supporting, they may be a good fit for a future search. Search firm participants and deans alike remarked on the particularly close relationship that can develop between the firm's representative and a candidate during this often months-long process and the influence this relationship can have on the process. Participants noted that this relationship can be a source of reassurance to candidates, but it also provides firms with a better opportunity to get to know more about the candidates should the candidate be unsuccessful in a particular search and be a potential candidate in a future search facilitated by the same firm. At the same time, firms are expected by provosts to represent the interest of the institution and support the search committee in deciding upon the best candidate for the deanship in question. Sally and Fred both noted that firms only receive payment for their services after the ultimate selection of a new dean.

Part of the firm's role in ensuring both the professional treatment of candidates and consistency of treatment across candidates is organizing both initial airport interviews and campus visits. Here again, there was consistency across participant groups. All participants confirmed both the vital role the firm plays in organizing the activities associated with these two stages of the process and the acknowledgement that both stages are by no means ideal opportunities in which to evaluate a prospective dean's abilities, nor to showcase an institution. Decanal candidates remarked that, particularly for anyone who has had to travel to the interview or campus visit and begins tired or jet-lagged, the process can be exhausting. While there was acknowledgement by all participants that these types of activities serve some value in that they can give prospective deans an idea of the pace of a decanal role, they are so condensed in time and space that no one gets an opportunity to reflect on the experiences and activities until the visit is over. Airport interviews and campus visits can start to give candidates a better sense of the culture of a faculty or college and a university, but the extent to which this is possible also

depends on whether the search is open or closed. Candidates and search firm representatives also highlighted that campus visits can be anywhere between one and three days of back-to-back meetings with members of the search committee and others. While certain personality types may thrive in such intense environments, they are not an ideal venue for candidate or committee decision making of such magnitude.

### **Search politics.**

Candidates and search firm representatives noted that interactions with the search committee are often the earliest first-hand exposure a candidate has to the politics of a search. An awareness of the politics of decanal searches and how they can ultimately influence the outcomes of a search was common amongst all participants. What the participants in this study understood as search politics can be further subdivided into four general themes including open and closed searches, the politics of hiring in academia, the decisions around internal and external hires, and candidate background.

While all participants were aware of and understood the reason faculty members still largely support open decanal hiring processes within the academy, they also agreed that open hiring is no longer ideal in the current context. Provosts are increasingly vocal about their dislike of current deans exploring possibilities at other institutions. This has led many sitting deans, who are often the first target market at the outset of a decanal search, to shy away from allowing their names to stand in open searches. However, as many participants noted, the ideal decanal candidate is someone who already has experience in a dean or dean-like position. The reluctance of search committees to move to fully closed searches can thus prevent the most highly qualified candidates from putting their name forward. Deans, search firms, and provosts all agree that often a closed search is the best choice for recruiting top talent, but search committees and

faculty members within the academy are, as understood by participants in this study, not yet fully supportive of a closed search.

In addition to the tensions around open and closed searches, the politics of decanal hiring and search committee decisions was also touched on by participants. All participants understood that the type of dean a college or faculty looks for is the result of the position and situation of that specific college at a specific point in time. While many if not all the short-listed candidates in a search may have the necessary skills and competencies for a given deanship, the fit of an individual with a provost, or within a college and wider group of deans on campus is also a significant consideration in the final choice.

Participants in this study also discussed the role a candidate's positionality, that is whether a candidate is internal or external to the institution, plays in how the search committee sees them. While participant provosts and search firm representatives understood that internal candidates are always at a disadvantage in a search, candidates felt that the opposite was true, including two who were both internal hires. Some participant deans even mentioned that if they are approached by a search firm about a particular job competition, one of the first questions they ask is whether an internal candidate is involved. If the answer is yes, they automatically remove themselves from consideration as the internal advantage is almost insurmountable.

In addition to the internal or external nature of a candidate, other aspects of a candidate's background as they relate to decanal searches were raised by all participants. All participants noted the importance of prior administrative experience. While the best preparation for a deanship appears to be a previous decanal role, prior administrative experience at the department head or assistant or associate dean level was understood to be advantageous as well. Prior administrative experience, particularly in the areas of budget or finance and human resources, is



essential for a future dean. However, successful decanal candidates, provosts, and search firm representatives alike agreed that the current conduct of decanal searches does not always emphasize the importance of such experience nor provide opportunities to evaluate those qualifications of candidates. Participants felt that search committees still rely too heavily on a candidate's prior research program as a predictor of administrative success. Although all participants did acknowledge that, at least currently, a research profile does give a dean a certain amount of credibility, particularly when leading a research-intensive faculty, there is very little direct correlation between the skills necessary to be a strong academic and the abilities required to be a successful dean. All participants argued that institutions and search committees need to further explore shifting their frame of reference and expectations of decanal candidates to better align with the actual day-to-day work of a dean and the deliverables of the position.

Participant deans and provost were also quick to highlight that committees should not necessarily limit themselves to considering only a candidate's previous experience within the academy. Often, as both deans and provosts highlighted, candidates can develop significant and valuable leadership experience beyond the academy that directly translates to the functional responsibilities of a dean. The recent changes in the decanal role, with increasing emphasis on fundraising, budgetary, and human resource concerns, have further strengthened this point. All participants noted that because of both the decline in traditional decanal candidates and the mismatch in skills and experience of traditional research-oriented candidates with modern-day deanships, committees need to become more open to considering candidates with robust senior administrative experience obtained outside of the academy.

As well as the significance of having the necessary background and preparation for a position, decanal participants highlighted the influence personal considerations can have on their

decision whether to move forward in a search process or accept a position if offered. From the needs of a candidate's family, spousal hire opportunities, to the necessity to relocate for a position, there are several factors that can influence a dean's perception of a particular position. Search firm representatives and provosts acknowledged these considerations, emphasizing the importance of a candidate's experience during the process, especially for highly sought-after candidates, and the influence this may have on their future decisions.

All participants mentioned the importance of fit between a given decanal candidate and the hiring college or faculty. For participant deans it was important that the goals and objectives of the position and the wider institution aligned with their personal goals and strengths. Provosts remarked that in addition to a dean fitting within their own college or faculty, the fit of a dean within the wider leadership of the university is also essential to consider. From the provost's perspective, not only is a dean responsible for leading a college, but they must also further the goals and objectives of the wider institution and work collegially and collaboratively with their fellow deans. Although deans mentioned that a successful dean must also be able to foster and develop a relationship with faculty members, particularly important for an external hire or someone who has come in after a tumultuous period, provost and search firm representatives did not remark on this aspect of fit. However, search firms noted the importance of fit between a provost and a dean. While deans themselves also acknowledged this, search firm representatives understood that as the provost typically makes the ultimate hiring decision, the rapport between a decanal candidate and provost, or the fit of that candidate, is critical both to a candidate's success in the search process and the later success of their deanship.

### **The search committee.**

The role of the search committee in the decanal search was addressed by each group of participants; however, the responses both within participant groups and across participant groups varied significantly. Successful decanal candidates largely found the search committee insignificant in their search experience, noting that search committees simply give faculty a voice in the search process. Individuals who had prior successful experience as decanal candidates did note that while the search committee does not convey much information to a candidate that has not already been shared by the search firm, they can give candidates insights into the politics of a faculty or college. Decanal candidates acknowledged that search committees may have a role to play in candidate selection, but strictly in an advisory capacity to the provost who chairs the committee.

Provosts noted that search committees, although advisory by nature, do assist with the development of the position profile, job description, and in giving both the provost and candidates a realistic sense of the activity within a given college or faculty. Provosts remarked that they often learned a great deal about a particular faculty during a decanal search, and this primarily happens through their regular interactions with the search committee. Provosts observed that one of the main objectives of the search committee is to assist in selling the position and institution to short-listed candidates.

The selling function of the search committee, as highlighted by the provosts who participated in this study, also reveals provosts' assumptions that most of the information sharing is done by the search firm prior to the candidate's interaction with the search committee. Provosts understood that the role of the search committee, following the initial work to develop the hiring documents, centers on confirming the short-list presented by the search firm and

interacting with candidates during both the initial (airport) interview and campus visit. While there was an acknowledgement that a portion of the committee's role is evaluative in nature, there was greater emphasis placed on committee members' roles as institutional salespeople by participant provosts. The committee works to sell the position, institution, and city to prospective candidates. As provosts remarked, many of these candidates are highly-sought-after individuals, so the small touches (a friendly campus tour or enjoyable dinner with the search committee and fellow deans) can make all the difference. Search committee members are also expected to be on their best behavior. Provosts are aware that candidates use their interactions with search committee members to help determine the culture of an organization and their potential fit within the community. While provosts do not want search committee members to hide the reality from candidates, they certainly expect them to put their best foot forward.

Contrary to the views of provosts, both search firm representatives who participated in this study had somewhat negative views of decanal search committees as currently utilized in searches. They both understood involvement of search committees as having a damaging influence on the process. Based on their experience with multiple decanal searches each year, these concerns can be divided into three categories. First, search committees (especially large committees) are not an ideal venue for decision making. Second, usually only those faculty members who have negative views on the current state of a college or faculty put their names forward to serve on a search committee. While the provost can appoint certain members, faculty associations or councils always have representatives. As these individuals are often overly negative about their institution and the process, they can leave a bad impression on the candidate. Third, involving a search committee in the process can elongate search timelines, often unnecessarily, which leads to losing the top candidates in a search. Both participants felt that

while they understand the importance of broad consultation and decision by committee within the collegium, a better option must be available.

Search firms were also quick to point out the consultative nature of the search committee. While search committees are constituted to support the provost in a search and often recommend one final candidate, the provost is not bound to accept the committee's recommendation or bring it forward to the president or board of governors. The advisory nature of search committees also left both search consultants and candidates questioning the ongoing value of search committees in decanal searches. The time and monetary costs associated with search committees is not insignificant. However, questions as to the return on these investments persist.

### **Centrality of the provost.**

The provosts who participated in this study provided significant insight into how they understand their roles in decanal searches at Western Canadian U15 universities. Provosts are ultimately responsible for the conduct of decanal searches and have significant influence over the process. The participant provosts noted that they have the responsibility to both select the search firm and constitute the search committee (within the confines of institutional policy). Furthermore, as committees only make hiring recommendations to the provost, they are also responsible for the ultimate hiring selection and recommendation that goes forward to the president or board of governors. Given their central role, the degree to which a provost likes a particular candidate, and their background can significantly influence the outcomes of the recommendation made to the president or board of governors and thus the outcome of the search.

Search firms likewise see the provost as a central actor in the decanal recruitment process. Both firm representatives noted that while in some instances their search contracts are

processed and ratified by an institutional procurement office, it is the provost who selects the search firm. The search firm works for the provost, and thus firms have a vested interest in maintaining and fostering their relationships with provosts across the country. Firms were also quick to highlight that as the decanal hiring decision in actuality rests with the provost, they are sure to regularly keep the provost apprised of how the search is progressing. These updates usually take the form of a meeting between the provost and search firm prior to the wider search committee meetings.

While decanal candidates themselves certainly understand that the provost has a very important role to play in the decanal search, participant deans did not dwell on the provost's involvement in their respective searches. Candidates noted that the one-on-one meeting with their prospective provost that is usually included in the campus visit is useful as a means of better understanding the personality of their future boss and beginning to understand the leadership culture on campus. However, by that stage in the process, aside from seeking further clarification on budgetary and financial issues, candidates did not have many additional questions related to the position itself for the provost as the firm usually answers them earlier on in the process.

For candidates and provosts alike, the search firm is an integral player in the decanal recruitment process. Despite this significance, there remains a limited understanding of their involvement in decanal searches and the role firms play in the candidate experience. Furthermore, for those who have not been directly involved in a senior administrative search, there remains little understanding of the role of the search firm in general.

## **Discussion**

Hollenbeck (1994) and Welch and Welch (2007) contended that the individuals who actively participate on search committees and search firm representatives drive executive search processes. The Provosts (who chair search committees) and search firms who participated in this study agreed with these sentiments as they relate to decanal searches. The extent to which the search committee is an active driver of the process remains unclear as the three groups of participants in this study, deans, search firm representatives, and provosts, all had differing understandings of the role of the search committee and the extent of their involvement.

### **Contextualizing the Dean**

Berdahl (1991), Birnbaum (1988), Kezar (1999), Kezar and Eckel (2004), Leslie and Fretwell (1996), and MacKinnon (2018) have all argued that academic governance in universities is becoming increasingly complex. Kezar and Eckel (2004) observed that this complexity has amplified pressures on senior administrators to engage the wider community, improve social conditions, and diversify the student body, all with fewer funds, and greater demands. Boyko and Jones (2010) highlighted how this shift has impacted the deanship. Deans are increasingly seen as senior administrators of the university, rather than academic leaders (Boyko & Jones, 2010). Dunning et al. (2007) and Jackson (2004) confirmed that academic colleges or faculties, led by a dean, are where the majority of institutional administrative decisions are made and executed. Thus, the expectations of deans as administrative leaders have increased in recent years.

### **Candidate background and the role of the dean.**

The provosts who participated in this study have a similar understanding of the role of a dean to that of Boyko and Jones (2010) and this informs their understanding of the background

experience necessary for an individual to succeed as dean. The background and previous experience of a decanal candidate is a central focus of recruiting a dean. Provosts who participated in this study noted that they are looking for a dean who can quickly adapt to their new role while requiring the least amount of direct support from their supervisor. That is not to say that provosts are uninterested in supporting their deans, but they are pragmatic enough to realize they have little time to hand-hold new hires given the busyness of their schedules and the scope of their positions. They look for candidates who have robust prior administrative experience (HR and finance), preferably in a previous decanal role, and someone who can seamlessly fit into the wider circle of deans on campus should they need support with any context-specific issues that may arise. The provosts who participated in this study had a very similar understanding of institutional or P-O fit, as it relates to deans, to that of Bowen et al. (1991), Kaufman (2013), Kristof (1996), and Turpin (2012); that is, the fit of a leader is key to ensuring a committed and engaged workforce.

Finally, provosts look for a prospective dean who will support the executive leadership of the wider university and is able to take both an institutional and college-level perspective on issues. Bess and Dee (2008), Boyko and Jones (2010), Lavigne (2018), Rich (2006), and Tabors (2019) highlighted this duality of purpose that is central to the successful dean. Whereas de Boer and Goedegebuure (2009) saw the dean as first among equals, participant provosts clearly understand that a central aspect of the role includes fulfilling the responsibilities of a senior leader on campus. While there is an understanding that a dean should have some academic and research experience to give their candidacy credibility, provosts were unanimous in confirming that this had little impact a candidate's suitability for a deanship or their decision on who they



ultimately recommend for hire. Provosts do not hire deans to be researchers or scholars; they hire deans to be leaders.

Search firm perceptions of what is important in a decanal candidate's background align with those of provosts. Whereas Goodall (2009a, 2009b) proposed that prior academic success was the primary predictor of success as a senior administrator, search firms see prior senior-level administrative experience as a strong predictor of success in a future deanship as did Sapp and Crabtree (2018). As the ultimate goal of a search firm is to place a dean who will be successful in their role, firms know that the bulk of a dean's time is occupied by addressing administrative, human resource, and financial issues and concerns. The consultant's role is to match the personality and experience of a candidate with a position that suits them, a position in which they fit. In alignment with Martin (1993), Pence (2003), and Rosser et al. (2003), both search firm representatives noted that in addition to prior experience, the fit of a candidate is particularly important to ensuring they can successfully navigate the culture and politics of increasingly complex and diverse organizations. Search consultants are hired to find someone within their list of contacts who is interested in a new position, and has the skills and experience to succeed, and fit within that position.

So much of the success of a candidate in a decanal role, as conveyed by the participants in this study, is strongly correlated to how they fit within a given organizational culture. Turpin (2012) applied Schein (2010) and Morgan's (1995) understanding of organizational culture to senior administrative searches within universities. Although Turpin (2012) applied these concepts exclusively to presidential searches, there are similarities in decanal searches as well. A prospective candidate must fit within a particular organizational culture to be successful in a deanship. For search firms to be able to reach out to those prospective candidates who have the

highest likelihood of fitting in, they must have a strong and detailed understanding of the culture of an institution and college or faculty, which in turn has to be accurately conveyed to candidates by both a provost and search committee.

As is the case with provosts and search firms, decanal candidates are also interested in whether a particular position fits their personality, skills, and abilities. Rynes and Cable (2003) argued that highly qualified applicants for senior positions within universities are as concerned with how they will fit within the job and the organization as they are with the details of the position. Once successful candidates are aware of the particulars of the position, they then begin to assess their own fit within the position and college based on the information they are presented with and gather on their own.

Although DeAngelis (2014) and Del Favero (2006) contended that deans themselves have a limited understanding of the nature of their positions, the deans who participated in this study were quick to recognize the importance of prior, senior administrative experience when considering the best preparation for an incoming dean. Deans also understood that this prior administrative experience does not necessarily have to come from within the academy. Gittell (2017), Rosser et al. (2003), and Turpin (2012) argued that modern universities are in a continual state of flux. Leaders require enhanced leadership skills to successfully navigate the pressures such frequent organizational change and uncertainty can bring. Provosts, search firms, and some decanal candidates themselves argue that in such a context the value of senior leadership and prior administrative experience beyond the academy is perhaps now more relevant preparation for a future dean than ever before.

Engwall (2014) noted that such external hires can have a particularly difficult time adjusting to the university context. However, as deans understand the role as primarily

administrative, someone who has developed the necessary leadership and senior administrative abilities outside of the academy may have an easier transition into a decanal role than someone from within the academy whose experience has primarily been research-related. Again, in alignment with the findings of Bertrand (2018), decanal candidates identified that strong research backgrounds did little to prepare them to be a dean, but prior administrative experience, whether acquired within the Canadian academy or beyond, was seen as the most useful. Deans who assumed larger and more complex faculties or colleges conveyed the value of previous smaller deanships in helping them develop and hone their skills, but their sole focus was on the opportunities such experiences provided to bolster administrative capacities, rather than a deeper understanding of the culture and politics of the academy. While participants did note that the culture and politics of an institution should dictate the approach a new dean takes, aligning with Perlmutter's (2018) findings, they identified administrative skills and experience as the most important skillset for a dean.

Deans recognized that some degree of research and publication experience and profile is necessary to be considered for a decanal role, as a means of gaining credibility with faculty, but they did not associate those skills as directly related to the day-to-day tasks of a dean. Perlmutter (2018) and Sapp and Crabtree (2018) highlighted that to be successful as a senior administrator, one has to manage their image. A senior administrator has to gain the respect of faculty (and thus have some research and teaching experience) and be seen as well-suited for an administrative role (Sapp & Crabtree, 2018). Successful deans would further that this image management begins in the recruitment process. Prospective deans currently need some level of research experience to be seen as acceptable by search committees and faculty colleagues, but they also

need to convey and demonstrate to both search firms and provosts that they have the necessary administrative capacities to succeed in the position.

The deans who participated in this study and held multiple, successively complex deanships argued that the more administrative experience an individual has, the less likely they are to be overcome by the complexity of a new decanal position. Bright and Richards (2001), Gmelch et al. (1999), and O'Reilly and Wyatt (1994) all noted the intricacy of decanal roles and the high incidence of stress amongst deans. However, while O'Reilly and Wyatt (1994) claimed that a dean is very unlikely to thrive in the role given this complexity, prior experience and a gradual introduction to senior administrative roles can result in highly successful deans.

## **Recruitment**

Throughout the course of this study, whether in conversations with provosts, search firms, or successful decanal candidates, it became increasingly clear that the decanal search process is becoming more and more a process of attracting qualified applicants to consider these positions. Such findings align with those of Barber (1998), Hausknecht, Day, and Thomas (2004), and Van Hoye and Lievens (2009). Whether institutions find themselves overrun with applicants or struggling to identify more than one qualified applicant (which appears to be more often the case), rather than a passive activity, contemporary decanal recruitment is very much an active process. From the initial sharing of the position profile with prospective candidates via the search firm, to bringing short-listed candidates to campus so the search committee and provost can sell the position, wider institution, and city, searches are highly involved processes with high expectations of all involved. Although not clear in the institutional policies reviewed as part of this study, a significant portion of this work falls to external search firms.

## **The recruitment firm.**

Boyko and Jones (2010) provided a high-level overview of the institutional policies and procedures that govern the decanal recruitment and selection processes in Canadian universities, which more often than not includes the employment of an external search or recruitment firm. Usher et al. (2009) contended that the employment of search firms to assist with senior administrative searches within Canadian universities was supported by those directly involved in the searches. Such sentiments were common amongst the participants in this study as well. Decanal candidates saw the firm as an integral part of their search and recruitment experience. In alignment with Mottram's (1983) study, decanal candidates were quick to highlight the involvement of the firm as one of the most important aspects of their recruitment process, whether they thought the firm did a good job or not. While candidates were appreciative of the coordination efforts of the firm in terms of arranging meetings and visits, they made particular and repeated mention of their appreciation of the firm in keeping their candidacy confidential as far as possible and in being a source of information, providing them with specific details of the position, college or faculty, and institution.

As Landberg (2011) noted, strong candidates prefer their initial contact regarding a particular position to be with a search firm, but they have high expectations of search consultants. Miles and McCamey (2018) highlighted that 60% of candidates for senior administrative positions had negative recruitment experiences. However, as seven of the eight deans who participated in this study reported that their experiences with and perceptions of the search firm and consultant(s) involved in their search were positive, the application of Miles and McCamey's (2018) findings to decanal searches may be limited. Alternatively, the difference in responses may simply result from the fact that the candidates referenced in Miles and

McCamey's (2018) study were both successful and unsuccessful in their respective searches, while this study only included candidates who were successful in a search.

Engwall (2014), McDade et al. (2017), and Mottram (1983) noted that institutions hire search firms to increase the efficiency of the process. Dowdall (1999), McDade et al. (2017), and Mottram (1983) additionally pointed to the roll of the firm in both broadening the scope of a search and ensuring the confidentiality of candidates who allow their name to stand. While these findings resonated with participants from all three sub-groups in this study, there was special emphasis on the role of the recruitment firm in ensuring the confidentiality of candidates, particularly amongst decanal candidates and search firm representatives. Participant provosts and search firm representatives were quick to point to the value of search firms in enhancing the efficiency of a search and in broadening the scope of searches, particularly important in the current context, but these attributes seemed to be less significant for decanal candidates themselves. While Riesman (1990) and Harvey et al. (2013) noted that the corporate mindset firms bring to senior administrative searches within universities makes some constituents uneasy about their involvement, neither provosts nor deans raised such concerns in this study.

Engwall (2014) and McDade et al. (2017) contended that the broadening of a search, often achieved through a search firm, is especially important as a means of bringing external candidates into the process. However, provosts agreed that external candidates, while appropriate sometimes, are not always ideal hires. The context and climate of a particular college, combined with its recent history, largely determines whether a provost is keen on an external hire. Ellis (1995) and Lamoreaux (2011) noted that strong recruitment firms spend time with stakeholders, getting to know the organization and the role in question. Through the course of their interaction with the search committee and provost, search firm participants confirmed they play a very

important role in first helping search committees to identify what they are looking for in a future dean, and in putting that down on paper, including whether an internal or external candidate is best. Both search firms and provosts remarked on the centrality of the development of position profiles and advertisements that result from this process in identifying prospective candidates. These findings align with those of Jackson (2004), Lavigne (2016), and Stybel (2010). Firms then use these search documents to narrow down the pool of potential candidates they will approach to those who have the necessary skills, background, and experience. These documents also help consultants to provide a quick snapshot of the position to potential candidates during that initial phase of outreach.

Harvey et al. (2013), Lavigne (2018), and Usher et al. (2009) identified search firms as responsible for the first formal interaction with candidates during the recruitment or pre-recruitment phases. Bright and Richards (2001), Dowdall (1999), and Ellis (1995) furthered that firms use their network to broaden the scope and reach of a search. Provost and candidates prefer and expect firms to first determine who to approach as a prospective candidate in a search and then to make the initial contact with likely prospects. Mottram (1983) added that the firm, through these initial interactions, determines the potential fit between the candidate and the institution in the recruitment process. Aside from those decanal candidates who were internal hires, candidates assumed that the firm played a role in determining the fit of candidates within a given institution; this was also the expectation of participant provosts. As part of a firm's efforts to broaden the scope of a search, provosts expect them to play this initial filtering role and save the committee the time of sorting through every potential candidate. Search firms likewise understood these functions to be a central component of their value proposition.

Although Clark (1992) questioned the validity of the assessment tools firms employ to develop the initial candidate lists they present to search committees, no participants in this study raised that concern, or even gave much consideration to how a firm decides whether a candidate might be a good fit for a particular position or not. One provost and both search firm representatives highlighted the general dearth of qualified potential deans in the current context, so they appear happy when they are presented with or able to present a list of more than one strong candidate.

A firm's ability to assess and understand the context of a college or faculty and broader university is key in their efforts to both communicate positions to prospective candidates and determine their potential suitability for a role. Jackson (2004) and Lavigne (2016) highlighted that it is the firm who communicates the overall culture of a university to prospective candidates. To this end, Lamoreaux (2011) noted the importance of cultural alignment between a search or recruitment firm and the institution. Harvey et al. (2013) argued that such alignment was impossible due to the very different nature and values of search firms and academic institutions. Participant provosts were particularly aware of the importance of a firm having experience working with and knowing about a particular institution as it relates to their ability to reach out to suitable candidates.

A firm that is aware of a university's particular context and culture can be very effective. Participant provosts expect firms to treat candidates well in the process, giving them a glimpse into the welcoming and supportive culture of the wider institution. Particularly in the case where an institution is trying to attract high-caliber candidates, their experience of the search and perceptions of the culture of a campus community is important and directly related to whether they will accept the position if offered. These sentiments align closely with the findings of



Allden and Harris (2013), Kreissl (2015), Miles and McCamey (2018), and Wilson (2011). Although Kreissl (2015) noted that such sentiments are not common amongst professional recruiters, both search firm representatives who participated in this study went to great lengths to convey the importance they place on candidate experience and the direct correlation that experience has to the likelihood of highly qualified candidates accepting positions at the end of the recruitment process.

Search firms are keen to ensure, as far as is possible, a successful hire. A poor hire, that is a dean who does not meet with the expectations of the provost and is unable to succeed in the role, is costly both for the search firm and the hiring institution. Mallory (2017) and Watkins (2013) highlighted that these costs can be financial, performance-related, or reputational. Such costs extend to the search firm as well. Firms typically provide a guarantee to the hiring institution, so if the dean fails for any reason within the first year, the firm will redo the search for free, which is costly (Fred). Furthermore, the Canadian academic community is relatively small (15 provosts of U15 universities). Firms are keen to develop and maintain a positive reputation amongst U15 provosts and their respective institutions for smooth processes and successful hires.

### **The Search Committee**

Provosts described search committee members as integral in both developing the position profile and job advertisement, and then getting to know candidates and sharing information about a particular college or faculty with them. Brockbank (2017), Howells (2011), and Sessa and Taylor (2000) contended that it is important to have a broad range of perspectives that represent the diversity of the organization on a search committee. The politics of a search committee are also important to consider from the outset (Sessa & Taylor, 2000). Provosts were particularly

aware of the importance of a search committee's composition. Provosts who participated in this study see it as their responsibility to ensure search committee composition aligns with institutional policy, which often results in larger committees. Participant provosts were also keen to ensure those members on the committee represented the diversity of the faculty in question and would do a good job of showcasing or selling the institution to prospective deans. Provosts like committees that will, to their minds, represent the institution well.

Decanal candidates and search firm representatives had a distinctly different understanding of the role of search committees as compared to those of provosts. While both decanal candidates and search firms understood the necessity for search committees given institutional policies and politics, at best search committees were seen as insignificant in the search process and at worse a hindrance to the process. Candidates and firm representatives discussed search committees as simply a group that had to be included in the process rather than providing any value to that process. Candidates and search firms described the involvement of search committees in similar terms to Twombly (1992) and Birnbaum (1988) who remarked that search committee involvement is largely symbolic or ritualistic. For candidates and firms, the important screening and information sharing happens between the candidates and the firm, and later the candidates and the provost. According to study participants, the search committee was insignificant in this regard as far as successful candidates and consultants were concerned. The lack of importance deans and search firm representatives ascribed to search committees is in direct opposition to the findings of Boyko and Jones (2010), Harvey et al. (2013), and McCarthy (2019), as well as the provosts who participated in this study.

While Sessa and Taylor (2000) and the institutional decanal search policies of various Canadian U15 universities (U of A, 2016; UBC, 2013; U of S, 2011; U of T, 2003; York U,

2018) describe the value of broad-based selection committees, Vaillancourt (2019) highlighted that large decanal search committees are often less effective in comparison to smaller ones as members of a large committee do not feel personally invested in or responsible for the proceedings of that committee. Search firm representatives also alluded to difficulties with large committees, but their concerns were primarily practical. For example, the larger a committee, the more complex scheduling meetings and interviews becomes, the longer the process takes, and thus the more likely it is that a strong candidate with multiple prospects will be lost to another institution.

Nusbaum (1984) proposed that if a search committee has a clear understanding of what they are looking for in a prospective hire, the likelihood of a successful search increases. Fernandez-Araoz (2007) and Nusbaum (1984) found that training and discussion opportunities for search committee members prior to the search commencing further supports the probability of an effective search. All provosts interviewed were particularly keen to ensure that committees had the opportunity to discuss, learn, and develop an understanding as a group of what they are looking for in their next leader (dean) as part of these initial meetings. Provosts also highlighted their efforts to provide training opportunities to each search committee, particularly around decision making, prior to the search getting under way in earnest in part as an effort to reduce the influence of bias or decisions based on instinct. They acknowledged, as have Highhouse (2008), Hollenbeck (1994), Hollenbeck (2009), and Welch and Welch (2007), in relation to corporate recruitment, that the current search committee decision format is highly subjective.

Search committee members bring diverse backgrounds to a search process. However, the extent to which these backgrounds influence the ultimate impact of the decanal search committee on the candidate's decision making process in the later stages of the search is unclear. Candidates

who had participated in multiple searches were aware that the committee can provide insights as to the politics of the college or faculty, which is undoubtedly useful and can factor into candidate decisions. However, by the time a candidate meets with a committee, they have acquired most of the information about the position from the search firm representative. While some of the details shared during the airport interviews or campus visit may further shift or refine the reference points candidates have established in the process, the extent to which the committee plays a significant role in influencing these reference points in the later stages of the recruitment funnel appears to be limited.

### **The Politics of Searches**

The politics of a decanal search can manifest in a variety of ways, including the very format of the search. The topic of open versus closed searches emerged and reemerged over the course of my conversations with deans, provosts, and search firm representatives. All participants agreed that decanal searches are becoming increasingly closed on several levels in Canadian U15 institutions. While institutional policy at several institutions requires candidate names be publicized, this appears to be happening later in the process than in the past, and often when searches are open, anyone who meets with the candidates must sign a nondisclosure agreement to help the candidates keep their candidacy as confidential as possible. All individuals who participated in this study fully understand the reasoning behind this, and many see this shift as a positive change. According to the decanal participants, candidates prefer closed searches as their interest in a particular position remains confidential as long as possible. Search firms are central in supporting candidate confidentiality, as Dowdall (1999), McDade et al. (2017), and Mottram (1983) attested. While a closed search may strengthen the caliber of applicants for a particular position, such a search has broader process implications.

A closed search results in significantly increased power for the provost, search committee, and search firm. As no one beyond this group is aware of the short-listed candidates, there is less lobbying for or against candidates from within a faculty. Alternatively, as only the provost, search firm, and search committee are aware of who the candidates are, there is less transparency around the selection process. Given the importance of process within universities, and the importance of broad participation of stakeholders in that process within collegial governance systems (Birnbaum, 1988; Brockbank, 2017; Ferrare & Marchese, 2010; Howells; 2011), a closed search would undoubtedly lead to increased suspicion amongst faculty members and severely limit the effectiveness of the candidate ultimately chosen to be the next dean. Brockbank's (2017) examination of presidential searches, most of which have moved to entirely closed searches, had similar findings, noting the correlation between broad participation of campus stakeholders in the recruitment process and success of the candidate selected. While there is a push for closed searches from many involved in the decanal process, those who have a strong understanding of university and faculty politics understand that a process that is open to some extent is necessary for credibility both of the process and of the candidate selected. Given the current hiring context, universities need to find a balance between strong applicant pools and satisfying political niceties. To this extent, more flexible institutional policies would afford provosts and search committees an opportunity to determine which approach is best for each individual dean's search, according to all participants in this study.

Whether a candidate is internal or external to the university also impacts the outcome of a search. The theme of internal and external candidates and the perceived advantages they might have in a search arose as part of this study. Participant provosts and search firms understood internal candidates to have far more baggage than external candidates, and thus were less likely

to be ultimately selected. Decanal candidates, however, often argued that internal candidates have such an awareness of the culture and politics of a faculty or college and the wider university that it is almost always an insurmountable advantage compared to other candidates in a search. Fernandez-Araoz (2005) agreed, contending that executive searches are typically unlikely to identify an external candidate who can quickly and efficiently succeed in a given role.

Austin and Jones (2016) understood universities as cultural entities. This culture can both impact how a leader conducts themselves within that organization (Eckel & Kezar, 2016) and the governance process of that organization (Birnbaum, 1988; Eckel, 2003). While internal candidates certainly have an increased awareness of the culture of an institution, if an external candidate can notice these cultural queues throughout the search and adapt to the specific culture of an institution, they can position themselves in perhaps an even more favorable position than an internal candidate. They are aware of the culture politics but have none of the baggage of an internal candidate.

That serial deans in this study were more adept at noticing and capitalizing on the nuances of culture and politics in the various stages of their respective search processes is not surprising. Leadership in universities is generally understood as a process for influencing people and decision-making activities (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Gayle et al., 2003; Peterson, 1995). While the cultures of various universities and leadership within those universities differ from one another (Gmelch & Wolverson, 2002), a dean who was successful in one context, based on their prior experience and exposure to academic politics, has a significant advantage as a prospective leader in another. This finding aligns with the participant deans' point of view.

In addition to an awareness of the politics and culture of the college or faculty, part of setting an incoming dean up for success, as noted by participants, is an accurate understanding of

the day-to-day details of the role. Austin and Jones (2016), Boyko and Jones (2010), Bright & Richards (2001), DeAngelis (2014), Del Favero (2006), Gmelch et al. (1999), Goedegebuure (2009), Lavigne (2016), Lavigne (2018), Morris (1981), Rosser et al. (2003), Wolverton and Gmelch (2002), and Wood (2004) have all written about the role of the dean. However, as outgoing deans remain largely uninvolved in the search and recruitment process, new deans often spend the first period of their deanship simply bringing themselves up to speed with the details of the specific role they have assumed.

Barton (2019), MacKinnon (2018) and Oppong and Odura-Asabere (2018) argued that universities do not place a strong emphasis on succession planning; these beliefs were confirmed the participants in this study. Although the involvement of the outgoing dean has the potential to ease the transition of the incoming dean, thus lessening the burden on the provost and fellow deans to assist their colleague in the initial phases of a new deanship, no provost mentioned the outgoing dean's involvement as a potential transition or succession support. There appears to be an underlying assumption that one deanship should have a firm end date, the next dean should assume the role the following day, and any substantive interaction between the two borders on the improper. Despite these preconceived notions, there is merit in further examining an enhanced role for the outgoing dean, if circumstances warrant, in the decanal search process.

Lamoreaux (2011) also noted the importance of the outgoing CEO's involvement in the recruitment and selection of their replacement as a means of increasing the likelihood of identifying a candidate who aligns with the culture of the hiring organization. While some search consultants or search committees do interview the outgoing dean (assuming the departure is amicable) as part of the decanal search process, this is typically the limit of their formal involvement in the search for their successor. In situations where the outgoing dean is involved,

they are typically asked to provide a high-level overview of what they see as the big challenges or opportunities the incoming dean will have to be aware of over the next five years (Dean Nathan & Provosts James & Doug). However, the outgoing dean's involvement is only standard when they are leaving the position on good terms, and rarely is there any substantive or longer-term interaction between the outgoing and incoming dean (Dean Nathan and Provost Doug). Only if the new dean is an internal candidate, the outgoing dean has chosen to leave the position, and there is a degree of good will between the two individuals is there any substantive interaction or overlap. Where this overlap occurs, there is a significant transfer of organizational and institutional knowledge that can be beneficial to the incoming dean. Barton (2019) remarked that new senior leaders within the academy find such opportunities to interact with fellow leaders invaluable as a learning opportunity. However, substantive interaction between the incoming and outgoing dean was only mentioned by one decanal candidate as a transition support. Incoming deans typically look to their provost to get a fuller sense of their new responsibilities.

### **The Provost**

The provost has a significant influence over a candidate's experience of and decision process within a decanal search. My conversations with the provosts who participated in this study, particularly Provosts James and Doug, provided significant context within which to understand the thoughts and observations of successful decanal candidates. While provosts understand the importance of strong recruitment practices in securing successful leaders, in agreement with Ellis (1995) and Gilmore and Turner (2010), they were also quick to note that the processes universities employ remain imperfect. Provosts typically oversee multiple decanal searches in any given year. They have been involved in successful and unsuccessful searches. As the supervisor of the incoming dean, they potentially have the most invested in the search. A



strong hire supports the provost in their role; a weak or ill-suited hire can be a significant nuisance and even distract a provost from their own role and agenda.

As provosts have such a substantial stake in decanal hiring, they can exert a significant amount of power and influence in the search. In addition to searching for the leader of a faculty or college, they are also searching for an employee who reports directly to them. Provosts hire the search firm that will support the search. Despite Ellis (1995) and Pulley's (2005) cautioning, provosts typically work with one or two firms with whom they have established a relationship and feel comfortable. One participant provost noted that he most often uses the firm that managed his own search and recruitment process for his current position as he is familiar with their approach to and support of candidates.

Gibney and Shang (2007) argued that provosts look for deans who have leadership skills, the necessary academic qualifications, and are likeable. While the provosts who participated in this study did emphasize such attributes, they also place a strong emphasis on the importance of prior senior-level administrative experience for prospective deans. The importance these provosts placed on the administrative background of a future dean confirms the claim of Arntzen (2016), Austin and Jones (2016), Boyko and Jones (2010), de Boer and Goedegebuure (2009), Hendrickson et al. (2013), Perlmutter (2018), Rosser et al. (2003), and Wood (2004) that the role of dean is one of administrative leadership. Sutton (2019) remarked that there is often a perception amongst members of the academy that faculty members move into senior administrative roles simply because they are no longer able to teach or publish; administration is seen as a fallback. In direct contradiction to such assertions, all participants in this study confirmed the skills necessary to succeed in a senior administrative role such as a deanship are actively developed through extensive prior experience.

Provosts in this study noted that they look for candidates who have a significant record of robust administrative experience (especially if hiring someone to lead a large or major faculty within an institution). In furtherance of finding candidates with the necessary administrative pedigree in an often-small pool of traditionally qualified candidates, provosts appear increasingly comfortable considering candidates who have developed their administrative abilities outside of the academy. Although there is agreement amongst provosts that such candidates still need to be academically qualified, this is a notable shift in perception. While Engwall (2014) agreed that such external candidates can often have stronger administrative credentials, they are often less familiar with the politics and culture of the academy. The possibility of developing decanal capacities outside of a university resonated with candidates; however provosts appear to be the drivers of this culture shift within their institutions.

Participant provosts were keen to ensure the search process supports as far as is possible the likelihood that a search will be able to identify a candidate with the necessary background, personality, and experience for a given deanship. They wanted to be certain that their search committees are both well-suited to showcasing their institution, and of a similar mindset to themselves. In alignment with the findings of Barber (1998) and Hausknecht, Day, and Thomas (2004), provosts understood that as recruitment is a process of attracting individuals to a particular role, a smooth and positive candidate experience of the process is key. Although provosts do rely to a great extent on the search firm to coach the committee throughout the search, the provost sets the tone at the outset when constituting the committee, ensuring the committee has a clear understanding of the situation of the college, the potential selling features of the position, and the type of candidate that is their goal.

Provosts were well-aware that, as Hollenbeck (1994) contended in relation to CEO selections and Harvey et al. (2013) proposed in relation to dean searches, decanal searches are largely carried out by novices. The collegial system fosters diversity of perspectives on institutional committees (Austin & Jones, 2016), but that also means that faculty members who sit on a decanal hiring committee rarely have much experience supporting executive search processes, and thus need clear directions and strong support from the outset. Participant provosts were increasingly aware of the importance of providing search committee members with at least limited training opportunities in advance of the formal launch of the search to support best practices in decision making. However, provosts acknowledged that such exercises are only a first step towards developing the necessary decision-making capacities of decanal search committees. Buckley et al. (2000) and Highhouse (2008) found that many senior administrative and executive recruitment and selection processes still rely heavily on intuition and ‘gut decisions’ in place of more structured decision aids when it comes to candidate selection. Based on the insights of the provosts who participated in this study, this largely remains true of decanal searches as well.

Finally, as the search committee’s role is solely to make a hiring recommendation to the provost (Harvey et al., 2013; U of A, 2016; UBC, 2013; U of S, 2011; U of T, 2003, York U, 2018), the provost has significant latitude if the committee does not make the recommendation the provost was expecting. While provosts made it clear that they typically will try to influence the search committee’s thinking or deliberations much earlier in the search if they feel things are deviating from their preferred path, they were fully aware that the ultimate selection decision lies with them.

## **Implications**

The details provosts, search firm representatives, and successful candidates shared as part of this study were numerous. The resultant findings have several important implications for policy, practice, and theory. I present these implications in the ensuing sections.

### **Implications for Policy**

There are three specific implications for decanal recruitment policy in Canadian U15 universities that result from this study. First, given the recent changes participants noted in the senior administrative recruitment landscape, institutional leaders have the opportunity to revisit the benefits and disadvantages of open and closed searches for their specific institutions. Institutional policies should be explicit not only as to whether the search is conducted in an open or closed manner, but the degree to which it is open or closed. For example, if the initial short-listing of candidates is done by the search firm, and then the second round of short-listing is determined by the committee to establish the top one to three candidates who are invited for a campus visit that includes a presentation open to a limited group of faculty, is that an open or a closed search?

Having more explicit reference in policy to whether a search is conducted in an open or closed manner will help facilitate the process in several ways. First, all involved stakeholders including the provost, search committee, search consultant, prospective candidates, candidates, and faculty members will have a clearer understanding of the search process. Provosts, search committees, and search firms will know the definite parameters within which the search is to be conducted. Prospective candidates and candidates will know for certain whether the search they will be or are involved in is open or closed, and if open, at what stage it will become open. Finally, clearly outlining this aspect of the decanal search in institutional policy will clarify the

process for all stakeholders. These details can help to both reduce the suspicion with which the process is often viewed by campus community members and the demands on the provost and search committee members who often find themselves being approached to provide such details midway through a search.

Second, clarifying the role of the committee may also prove useful, particularly as search firms and their consultants become much more active in the initial recruitment and selection aspects of a search. Provosts, search firm representatives, and successful decanal candidates all had varying understandings and perceptions of the search committee and their role in the search. However, it is clear that the role of the committee has changed in recent years as external firms become more active supporters of the search process. Again, a policy update or revision can help to clarify the role of a search committee in a decanal search, which may lead to a more uniform set of expectations across participant stakeholder groups.

Third, enshrining and detailing the role of the search firm and their consultants into policy would further help to regularize the involvement of the search firm. Whereas search firms were initially hired to support institutions with the administration of a search and prospective candidate outreach, their role has expanded well beyond this narrow scope in recent years. Clearly articulating the expectations and deliverables of the search firm in policy would help to clarify their role in the search and the degree to which it is now expected that they support the provost, search committee, and individual candidates. Search firms have a robust expertise with which they can support the decanal recruitment process, but institutions need to clarify what they expect of firms at an institutional level if uniform conduct of firms and their consultants is desired across searches.

## **Implications for Practice**

A review and updating of institutional policy will also inform the practice or process of decanal searches. Including more explicit details as to the conduct of searches, and the role of the search committee and the search firm will give all involved constituents a better grasp of the process from the outset. As such details relating to roles and responsibilities of the committee will no longer have to be reviewed in depth at the commencement of each search, those initial committee meetings can be used to provide search committee members with increased training opportunities regarding group decision making that provosts have identified are still lacking. This time could also be used to establish a better understanding of the position of dean itself and the necessary background of a future dean. As participants noted, there remains confusion amongst committees as to the importance of prior administrative experience compared to a strong record of research or grantsmanship for incoming deans.

The largest implications for practice of this study relate to the candidate experience. The findings presented here clearly highlight the importance of how candidates experience (enjoy) their recruitment process and the strong correlation between this experience and their decision to accept an offer of employment. Candidates understood the search firm and their representatives as the individuals most directly responsible for their experience of the search. As such, institutions need to carefully consider the firms they employ and how the reputation and conduct of a firm and its search consultants impacts candidates' perceptions of the universities who hire them. Finding a search firm to support a search that understands both the goals of a particular search and the wider institution is the first step towards identifying candidates who have the necessary skillset and personality to fit within a given institution. To actively and accurately represent and present the hiring institution to prospective decanal candidates, consultants need to

have the most fulsome understanding possible of the university as a whole, the faculty or college the new dean will lead, and of the provost.

Search committees and provosts need to be frank with search consultants about both the positive and negative attributes of a given deanship not only so that the consultants can accurately convey the specifics of a position to prospective candidates, but to aide in their identification of prospective candidates. For example, if a consultant knows that a college is facing some difficult financial times on the horizon, they will limit their search to individuals who have a significant amount of financial experience, those who have previously inherited a unit that has been in financial trouble and have turned things around, or those who are comfortable with and have a record of successfully working in an environment of financial constraints. Alternatively, if a faculty or college is plagued by a poor organizational culture where faculty support for senior administrative goals is nonexistent, a firm will look for possible candidates who may be comfortable not always being liked, or who have a different personality or approach compared to the current dean. However, without knowing the specific context of the position they are hiring for, a firm does not know that these considerations should factor into their outreach and search process.

In addition to the search firm's role in conveying the specifics of a position to potential candidates, they are also central in coordinating and hosting both the initial airport interview and subsequent campus visit. Although all participants acknowledged the importance of the campus visit as an opportunity for candidates, the search committee, and the provost to get a better sense of each other, there was also agreement that in their current form campus visits are exhausting for candidates. If institutions wish to continue with these types of in-person interaction with candidates, a review of the timelines of campus visits is appropriate. For example, if the

candidates who have traveled were given a day (or even two depending on the length of their journey) prior to the start of a campus visit to get themselves settled, they would be well-rested heading into the campus visit and thus able to process their experiences more fully. Furthermore, the search committee, provost, and other campus stakeholders would get a better sense of the individual as they behave on a regular basis, rather than how they conduct themselves when they are exhausted and potentially jet lagged.

### **Implications for Theory**

As I considered and reconsidered the understandings and perceptions provided by the participants in this study, I began to see ways in which these insights could further enhance our theoretical understanding of decision making within decanal searches. Harvey et al. (2013) proposed RPT, an adaptation of Fiegenbaum et al.'s (1996) SRPT, as a means by which we could better understand the various influencers of decision making within the decanal search process. Although Harvey et al. (2013) limited the application of RPT to the decision making of the search committee, there are applications to the candidate decision making process as well. This study demonstrates that RPT can serve as a framework to organize our understanding of how the context of higher education, as outlined by Cohen et al. (1972), expectations of the dean, and recruitment practices inform successful decanal candidates' decision making within the recruitment process.

The updated theoretical framework that is the result of this study outlines how a short-listed candidate's initial understanding of the politics and culture of the hiring context (institutional ethos), and information relevant to their position and the search (new and relevant criteria) is conveyed through search firm representatives, the provost chairing the search, and the search committee throughout the search (see Figure 5.1). The extent to which this information is



shared by each of these three sources or group of sources varies dependent on the stage of the search and is informed by a candidate's own understanding and interpretation of organizational information and institutional components as described by Cohen et al. (1972). Such information, insights, and knowledge, when combined and understood through the lens of a candidate's previous personal experiences, shapes the reference points candidates establish as part of the search, which in turn inform the decisions they make within the search process.

### **The search firm.**

Recruitment firm representatives influence the decanal search process in a variety of ways throughout a search; they are central to the experience of candidates. They decide which prospective candidates they reach out to and are the initial sources of information for the vast majority of candidates. This knowledge that firm representatives obtained primarily through their initial interactions with the provost and the search committee, shapes and frames the search for candidates. Candidates process this situational knowledge, which when filtered through their individual experiences helps them to develop the reference points they employ when making decisions within the context of the search. Rather than playing a purely facilitative role, search firms have a significant influence over not only the candidate experience but also a candidate's decision-making, as a result of the firm's deep involvement in the search process.

### **Provost.**

Provosts too have a significant impact on a candidate's decision making in a search due to the powerful position they hold. By bringing together Harvey et al.'s (2013) categorization of actors in the search and recruitment process with Mintzberg's (1983/2010) classification of organizational power players, particularly the internal coalition, a more fulsome understanding of

the role the provost plays in decanal recruitment begins to take shape. Provosts are typically the most senior administrator (or top management) involved in the decanal recruitment process. They are active chairs of decanal search committees, frame the search for the search firm and search committee, and receive the recommendation of that committee. French and Raven (1959/2010) contended that leaders within an organization are given influence because of their legitimate power within that organization. Provosts, as leaders within the university, use their legitimate power to guide and direct the search process. They exert their power in a variety of ways to ensure the best possible hire for the institution, for the college or faculty, and for themselves.

One of the means by which provosts exert their legitimate power is by controlling the information shared with both the search firm representative supporting the search and the search committee. Provosts frame the search for these two stakeholder groups, which in turn establishes the parameters of information available to and shared with candidates. If provosts believe that a dean needs to function as a senior administrator, rather than a scholar or member of a college or faculty, they convey the importance of robust administrative experience to the other stakeholders involved in a search. The importance a provost places on an administrative skillset will likewise influence how a search firm identifies and describes a position to prospective candidates. The provost's perceptions will influence what aspects of the position the search committee chooses to highlight and emphasize in their interactions with short-listed candidates. All of these interpretations are passed along to candidates at various stages of the search as the institution and position are described to them first by the firm's representative, and later by the search committee and the provost.

In their face-to-face interaction with short-listed candidates during the latter stages of a search, provosts are able to further define what they believe are the essential components of the position in a way that neither the search firm representative nor search committee members can. As the dean's supervisor, the provost's voice is often the loudest and has a significant influence over the reference points a candidate develops and confirms in the final stages of a search. Because provosts also chair the search committee, they have the legitimate power to steer the direction of the meetings and the direction of the search.

### **Search committee.**

In their role as chair of the search committee, provosts are involved in all stages of a search. Participant provosts highlighted the centrality of the search committee in developing two of the seminal documents that guide and inform a decanal search, the position profile and job advertisement. These documents are used by search firm representatives as they convey a description of the position to prospective candidates and candidates themselves as they initially consider the position and gather information. Even though candidates argue that the search committee is largely ornamentation and does not provide much value to the search process, provosts and to a degree search firms attest to at least the committee's initial involvement in framing the search. Through the search committee's involvement in developing the position profile and job advertisement in the early stages of the search they, indirectly, inform candidates about the position and the institution. Candidates make use of such information throughout their recruitment process. Combined with other details they learn in the later stages of the search, the details indirectly conveyed by the search committee further inform the reference points candidates establish and thus the decisions they make in the search process.

Although the search committee's involvement may not be overt in the initial stages of a search, it is no less impactful. However, the extent to which the search committee informs a candidate's thought process in the later stages of the search remains unclear. Some participant candidates who had been involved in more than one search identified that the committee can provide limited value in helping candidates develop a better understanding of faculty or college politics. However, the extent to which candidates found this valuable or not was highly dependent on their previous individual experiences, which informed their ability to process and consider such information. Figure 5.1 depicts the influence search committees, search firm representatives, and provosts have on how candidates process the information they acquire during a search, and the influence such information has on the reference points they ultimately establish within a search.

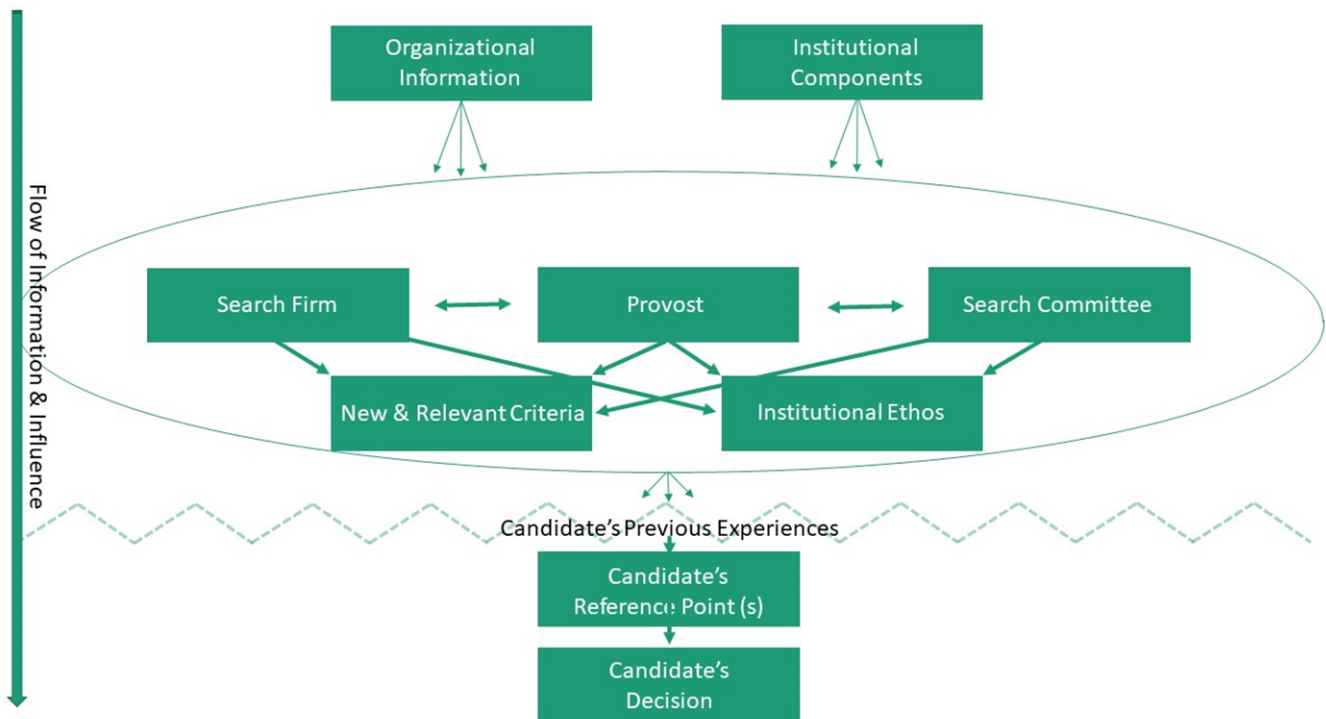
### **Summary.**

Harvey et al. (2013) applied RPT to the decanal selection process in the Australian context to further our understanding of how individual search committee members make decisions within that context. The use of RPT in this study as a means by which to understand the decanal candidate decision making process is novel and an expansion of Harvey et al.'s (2013) original conceptual framework. Whereas Harvey et al. (2013) solely focused on the search committee member decision making process, building upon their initial work, it is possible to better understand the means by which candidates make decisions within the decanal search process.

Based on the perceptions shared by participants in this study, search firm representatives, provosts, and search committees are the major vectors through which information flows to candidates in a decanal search. Influenced by their awareness and understanding of

organizational information and institutional components, firm representatives, provosts, and search committees provide candidates with details of the position and an understanding of the context in which the occupant of that position operates. Firm representatives, provosts, and search committees share new and relevant criteria and convey the institutional ethos in their varied interactions with candidates throughout a search. While the influencers of a candidate's decision making process within a search are not exclusively limited to search firm representatives, provosts, and search committees, these three constituent groups were repeatedly mentioned by participants and are thus the primary focus of this conceptual framework. However, the influences of others, including family, mentors, colleagues, and others external to the search process do help to shape and inform a candidate's previous experiences and decision making.

**Figure 5.1:** *The candidate decision making process (Usunier, 2021). Based on Cohen et al. (1972), Fiegenbaum et al. (1996); and Harvey et al. (2013).*



The explicit inclusion of organizational information and institutional components as direct influencers of how search firms, provosts, and search committee members communicate details of the position to short-listed candidates is also a further expansion of Harvey et al.'s RPT. As demonstrated in Figure 5.1, this information sharing begins with the initial outreach of a search firm representative, through the meetings with the search committee, to conversations during the final stages of a search with the provost. Candidates gather details throughout a search and consider them through the lens of their own experiences. Insights gained are then filtered through a candidate's previous experiences, and subsequently employed to create reference points. These reference points are then used to inform a candidate's decision making processes as they relate to the search, including the ultimate search decision, accepting the decanal appointment if offered.

As demonstrated in Figure 5.1, the reference points candidates establish throughout the duration of a search have a direct impact on whether they accept a decanal appointment if offered. In addition to further expanding the use of reference point theory and its application to candidate decision making in decanal searches, the theoretical findings resulting from this study have implications for practice. As candidates use the information they gather in all stages of the search to inform their development of reference points, the importance of the initial approach and later outreach of search firms becomes doubly significant. Decanal candidates spend the majority of their time involved in a search working directly with the search firm's representative. Only in the final stages of the search, once short-listed, do candidates have the opportunity for any substantive interactions with members of the search committee. Until this point in time all of their reference points have been established based on their own experiences and information provided exclusively through the search firm representative.

The decanal candidates who participated in this study identified the search firm's representative as the individual most directly related to their experiences within the search. The firm's representative is typically the first point of contact for candidates and they support the ultimately short-listed candidate throughout the duration of the search. Many participants noted the close relationship that can develop between candidate and firm representative during the often lengthy course of the search. Given the importance candidates place on these individuals and the influence they have on the decisions candidates make within the search process, it is important for institutions to consider alignment between the philosophy of a firm and that of the hiring college, faculty, or wider institution. Institutions and provosts in particular also need to be sure that search firms have access to all of the details, pleasant or otherwise, about both the hiring college or faculty and the decanal position itself. A well-informed search firm representative not only has a better idea of what type of prospective candidates to initially contact at the outset of a search, but they can more accurately explain the position to candidates as they move through the search. A well-informed candidate, that is a candidate who has been exposed to accurate information about the hiring organization throughout the search, can make better-informed decisions as part of that search.

### **Future Research**

All provosts and successful decanal candidates who participated in this study were from Western Canadian U15 universities. In future, it would be valuable to include individuals from institutions in Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes. Broadening participation would enable further exploration of the decanal candidate experience across regions within Canada and comparisons among those regions. The role of department heads or chairs in the decanal search process was neither raised by study participants nor a focus of this study. As part of a

geographical expansion of this exploration, considering the role and influence of these individuals within the decanal search would also be valuable.

Participant provosts tangentially remarked on how they develop a better understanding of the particular situation and context of a college or faculty prior to launching the search for a new dean. However, the formality or extent of such environmental scans was left unexplored. Considering this aspect of the pre-search activities could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the search process overall.

It would be particularly interesting to explore how the sudden and unexpected shift to work-from-home policies at many Canadian universities as a result of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted the experience of candidates in the midst of decanal recruitment processes. The shift to virtual recruitment brought about by COVID-19 has the potential to significantly alter the candidate experience and their ability to interact with institutional stakeholders in traditional formats. The inability to arrange campus tours, the impact of virtual interviews, and the elimination of face-to-face interactions between candidates, search committees and search firms have transformed how universities recruit. Exploring how these recent changes have been perceived by candidates can further inform decanal recruitment practices when Canadian campuses are able to fully return to in-person activities.

Furthermore, as noted by the study's participants, the role of the search committee in modern day decanal searches remains largely ambiguous. Provosts see the committee as central to the search. Search firm representatives perceive search committees as a hindrance to the process, and successful candidates are unable to point to any specific value committees bring to the process. However, the voice of individuals who have participated in Canadian U15 decanal search is missing from the literature and former search committee members were not part of the



participant pool in this study. Exploring how search committee members view the decanal search process and the experience of candidates would further add to this body of knowledge and could help to further refine the theoretical framework proposed as part of this study.

Data collection for this study concluded prior to the intensification of the Black Lives Matter moment in mid-2020 and the associated renewed emphasis of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) considerations within North American universities and institutions more broadly. Participants likewise did not raise these issues in any substantive detail during interviews. In future, explicit exploration of how a refocus on EDI has influenced the experiences of those involved in decanal searches would be valuable as an enhancement of the findings of this study.

### **Reflections on Methodology**

Throughout the course of this study I was particularly impressed by the research participants. Despite their hectic schedules, they were eager to take part in this study and give of their time. During the interviews, they were engaged, focused, and their advanced preparation for our discussion was evident. In many ways I was caught off-guard by their frankness. I was initially hesitant to conduct these interviews over the phone or via an online video conferencing platform, but quickly discovered that it was relatively easy to develop a rapport with individual participants that led to their openly sharing their thoughts, experiences, and perceptions. The often colourful language employed by several participants and degree of animation during the course of our conversations made data gathering not only enjoyable but fruitful.

With this as with any IPA study, there are limitations. The reader must remember that the focus of this study is the reflections, perceptions, and experiences of the three participant groups as they relate to decanal searches in Western Canadian U15 universities. While relevant institutional policy did inform this study and was referenced by participants from time to time,

decanal search policy was not the primary focus. Although a clearer understanding of how decanal candidates perceive and experience the search process can and arguably should inform institutional policy, that is not the major focus of this work.

In retrospect, I would have shifted the order of the questions in the interview schedule slightly. The second last question I asked each of the successful decanal candidates was about what would have enhanced their recruitment experiences. This response typically elicited strong recommendations and led participants to refer to previously covered topics. Although this was in many ways valuable as a means of summarizing their experiences, I think including this type of question earlier on in the schedule may have served to prime participants for subsequent questions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This IPA study explored how successful decanal candidates understand and make meaning in search and recruitment processes. Combined with the perspectives of provosts and search firm representatives, a more fulsome understanding of the influence the search process has on candidate decision making within the search has developed. This understanding has several key implications for policy, practice, theory and research in the area of decanal recruitment, academic leadership, and decision making within these contexts.

The journey of this project from initial idea through to data collection and analysis has been rewarding on a number of levels. Not only has it provided me with an opportunity to develop personally and professionally, but I hope it has contributed to the body of knowledge and literature focusing on decanal recruitment. I also hope that it will serve as an impetus for institutions to consider or reconsider the influence their recruitment processes have on the candidate decision making that takes place within those processes.

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## Appendix A: Provost Email Invitation

Dear Sir/Madam

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study titled: *Let the deans speak: Decanal perceptions of institutional recruitment practices*. This study will explore how decanal candidates experience and perceive the recruitment process as carried out in Canadian universities. However, given the nature of decanal searches in Canada, I would also like to include the perspective of provosts in this work. As the chairs of search committees, provosts are in an enviable position to provide institutional-level insights to contextualize the specific stories of decanal candidates themselves. I will not ask you to comment on specific searches, rather to provide insights into the academic recruitment landscape within your institution. You can find a list of the interview questions attached to this email.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute individual interview. The interview will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. We can either meet in person or via an online video conferencing platform (Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.). The interview will be electronically recorded.

Several steps will be taken to protect your confidentiality. The interview transcripts will NOT contain any mention of your name or institutional affiliation. Any published materials will include aggregate information as far as is possible. Where direct quotes are used, any and all identifying information of either the individual or the institution in question will be removed.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty. Your right to withdraw data from the study will

apply until data has been aggregated. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the host institution. Should you agree to participate, ethics approval will be sought from your home institution as well. If you would like more information about the study or are interested in participating, please contact me as per below.

Best wishes,

Marc

Marc Usunier

Ph.D. Candidate

Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan

306-966-1837

[Marc.usunier@usask.ca](mailto:Marc.usunier@usask.ca)



## Appendix B: Search Firm Representative Email Invitation

Dear Sir/Madam

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study titled: *Let the deans speak: Decanal perceptions of institutional recruitment practices*. This study will explore how decanal candidates experience and perceive the recruitment process as carried out in Canadian universities. However, given the nature of decanal searches in Canada, I would also like to include the perspective of external search firms in this work. Search firms are in an enviable position to provide national-level insights to contextualize the institution-specific stories of decanal candidates themselves. I will not ask search firm representatives to comment on specific searches, rather to provide insights into the academic recruitment landscape in Canada and how search firms support decanal searches in an increasingly globalize and mobile academy.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute individual interview. The interview will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. We can either meet in person or via an online video conferencing platform (Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.). The interview will be electronically recorded.

Several steps will be taken to protect your confidentiality. The interview transcripts will NOT contain any mention of your name or institutional affiliation. Any published materials will include aggregate information as far as is possible. Where direct quotes are used, any and all identifying information of either the individual or the institution in question will be removed.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty. Your right to withdraw data from the study will

apply until data has been aggregated. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

This study has been reviewed by, and received approval through, the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan. If you would like more information about the study or are interested in participating, please contact me as per below.

Best wishes,

Marc

Marc Usunier

Ph.D. Candidate

Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan

30-6966-1837

[Marc.usunier@usask.ca](mailto:Marc.usunier@usask.ca)

## Appendix C: Successful Decanal Candidate Email Invitation

Dear Sir/Madam

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study titled: *Let the deans speak: Decanal perceptions of institutional recruitment practices*. This study will explore how decanal candidates experience and perceive the recruitment process as carried out in Canadian universities. You can find a list of the interview questions attached to this email.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute individual interview. The interview will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. We can either meet in person or via an online video conferencing platform (Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.). The interview will be electronically recorded.

Several steps will be taken to protect your confidentiality. The interview transcripts will NOT contain any mention of your name or institutional affiliation. Any published materials will include aggregate information as far as is possible. Where direct quotes are used, any and all identifying information of either the individual or the institution in question will be removed.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until data has been aggregated. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the host institution. Should you agree to participate, ethics approval will be sought from your home institution as well. If you would like

more information about the study or are interested in participating, please contact me as per below.

Best wishes,

Marc

Marc Usunier

Ph.D. Candidate

Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan

3066-966-1837

[Marc.usunier@usask.ca](mailto:Marc.usunier@usask.ca)

## **Appendix D: Email Response to Interested Participants**

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project. The next step is to schedule a time for us to meet for the interview.

Please indicate your availability for the following 90-minute windows:

- XXXXXX
- XXXXXX
- XXXXXX

If none of these times work for you, please let me know a time that is convenient and I will try my best to accommodate your request.

During this time you will participate in an individual interview which will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location (or via an online platform) and will be electronically recorded. I have reattached a list of the interview questions for your convenience.

Several steps will be taken to protect your confidentiality. The interview transcripts will NOT contain any mention of your name, and any identifying information will be removed. All interview information will be securely stored and only accessed by the researcher.

Please review the attached consent form before our scheduled interview. If we are meeting in person, we will review and sign the consent form before beginning the interview. If we will be meeting by video conference, please review, sign, and return this consent form by

email prior to our interview. The interview will not move forward until the signed consent form is received.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until data has been aggregated. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the host institution. If appropriate, should you agree to participate, ethics approval will be sought from your home institution as well. If you would like more information about the study or are interested in participating, please contact me as per below.

I have reattached a list of the interview questions.

Many thanks,

Marc Usunier

Ph.D. Candidate

Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan

30-6966-1837

[Marc.usunier@usask.ca](mailto:Marc.usunier@usask.ca)

Appendix E: Participant Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

College of Education

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION  
EDUCATION.USASK.CA

Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

**Project Title:** Let the deans speak: Decanal perceptions of institutional recruitment practices

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Vicki Squires

**Purpose of the research:** The purpose of this study is to understand how we can enhance the decanal recruitment process based on the experiences and perceptions of successful candidates, provosts, and executive search firm representatives.

**Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time. The interview will be audio-recorded and will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and location. During this interview you will be asked a series of questions. These questions are designed to allow you to share your experiences and perceptions of the decanal recruitment and selection process.

**Potential Risks:** There is a risk to participants that those who know them may recognize them from something they describe in their interview.

**Potential Benefits:** While there is a limited body of literature that explores the recruitment of deans specifically, it is neither focused on the Canadian context, the candidate experience, nor empirically grounded (Boyko & Jones, 2010; Usher et al., 2009). Enhancing the limited literature on the recruitment and selection of academic deans within Canadian universities is thus an important endeavor as it will fill a portion of the literature gap that exists. Furthermore, developing the body of literature that does exist provides an opportunity for universities and search firms alike to give greater consideration to the candidate perspectives when considering their overall recruitment practices.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** Your participation in this study is voluntary. The information provided in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and the researchers will ensure not to disclose identifiable information. Furthermore, the researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion by limiting the length of quotes used in any reports, presentations, or publications. Every effort will be made to ensure that all participant data, including personal and potentially sensitive information, will be kept in the strictest of confidence.

The interview will be audio recorded. You may request the audio recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview with no rationale or reasons required of the participant. Recordings



will only be used to transcribe the interview. After the interview, and prior to data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript to add, alter or delete information as you deem fit. Participants will be encouraged to return the reviewed transcription within 21 days following its receipt.

The transcripts and research results will be stored securely on the USASK server with only the researchers having access to the raw data. The collected data, following the removal of any and all identifiable information, and research results will be safeguarded and securely stored for a minimum of five years post-publication at the University of Saskatchewan. Paper files will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Dr. Squires, and electronic files will be securely stored on the USASK server. After five years, post-publication, have lapsed, the data will be properly destroyed.

The consent forms and master lists of participants that include any identifiable information will be stored separately from the transcripts and audio recordings so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses. Your name will not be used on the transcripts or audio recordings. The consent forms and master lists will be stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's university office and will be destroyed appropriately when data collection is completed and the information is no longer required.

Please put a check mark on the corresponding lines that grants your permission:

I grant permission to be audio taped:

Yes: \_\_ No: \_\_

**Right to Withdrawal:** You are free to decide not to enroll in this study. You can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You are free to withdraw from the interview until the interview data has been collected and this withdrawal will not affect how you are treated. All data will be aggregated within 2 months of your interview and at that time it will no longer be possible to remove your specific data. After this, it is also possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred. If you do choose to withdraw from the study your interview data associated with the study will be deleted and destroyed.

**Follow-up:** To obtain results for the study, please contact Marc Usunier at 306-966-1837 or by email at [marc.usunier@usask.ca](mailto:marc.usunier@usask.ca).

**Questions or concerns:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered either before agreeing to participate or during the study; please contact Marc Usunier at 306-966-1837, or by email at [marc.usunier@usask.ca](mailto:marc.usunier@usask.ca).

**Researchers:**

Marc Usunier, a student in the Educational Administration PhD program in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan, is conducting this research project.

This research is being conducted under the supervision of the Principal Investigator:

Dr. Vicki Squires

Associate Professor

Educational Administration, College of Education

University of Saskatchewan

Phone: 306.966.7622

Email: [vicki.squires@usask.ca](mailto:vicki.squires@usask.ca)

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board (ID# ). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

SIGNED CONSENT:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
_____	_____	
Researcher's Signature	Date	

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researchers.

#### ORAL CONSENT

I read and explained this Consent Form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

---

*Name of Participant*

---

*Researcher's Signature*

---

*Date*

## Appendix F: Interview Schedule for Provosts

### Biographical questions:

1. Tell me a bit about your professional background.
2. How long have you been in your current role?
3. As provost, how many decanal searches have you chaired?

### Recruitment experience:

1. In the time you have been involved in decanal searches, have you seen a shift in the landscape of Canadian academic searches – particularly decanal searches?
  - a. If so, how has the environment changed?
2. Does the context of a particular college influence your oversight of the search? If so, how?
3. How do prospective decanal candidates typically find out about a specific position?
4. What/is there a standard time frame in which a dean's search is conducted?
5. From your perspective how is the organizational context of a college and the details of a particular decanal role usually conveyed to prospective candidates?
  - a. Through the search committee, written materials, search firm, combination?
6. As a provost, how important do you think candidate experience is?
  - a. What is your goal in terms of candidate experience?
7. Any other relevant material you would like to add that we haven't already covered?

## Appendix G: Interview Schedule for Search Firm Representatives

### Biographical questions:

4. Tell me a bit about your professional background.
5. How long have you been involved in supporting executive searches within universities?
6. How many Canadian decanal searches would you say you or your firm has been involved with?

### Recruitment experience:

8. In the time you have been involved in decanal searches, have you seen a shift in the landscape of Canadian academic searches – particularly decanal searches?
  - a. If so, how has the environment changed?
9. Does the context of a particular university influence your conduct of the search? If so, how?
10. How do prospective candidates typically find out about a specific position?
  - a. Do they approach you or do you approach them?
11. What/is there a standard time frame in which a dean's search is conducted?
12. From your perspective how is the organizational context of a university and the details of a particular decanal role usually conveyed to prospective candidates?
  - a. Through the search committee, written materials, search firm, combination?
13. As a firm, how important do you think candidate experience is?
  - a. What is your goal in terms of candidate experience?
14. Any other relevant material you would like to add that we haven't already covered?

## Appendix H: Interview Schedule for Successful Decanal Candidates

Biographical questions:

7. What is your academic background?
8. Is this your first decanal appointment?
9. Have you worked at any other universities prior to your current position?
  - a. If so, do you feel your external experience has impacted/influenced you in your current role?
10. What leadership experience have you had in the academy previous to your current role?
  - a. do you feel this experience has prepared you for your current role? If so, how?

Recruitment experience:

15. How did you hear about your current position or were you approached by the hiring institution/search firm?
16. How long was your recruitment process?
17. How was the position communicated to you throughout the recruitment process?
  - a. How did you feel the external firm facilitated your understanding of the position?
  - b. How did you feel the search committee facilitated your understanding of the position?
  - c. Did you have unanswered questions about the position during your recruitment?
  - d. How did the position as explained to you during the search compare to the realities of deanship?
18. What did you learn about the institution and college you now work in through the recruitment process?
19. What (if any) were the strengths of the recruitment process?



20. What (if any) were the limitations of the recruitment process?
21. What (if anything) would have enhanced your experience?
22. If there was one thing you could change about your recruitment/selection experience, what would it be?
23. Are there any other details about your own person, place, or space that you feel are relevant to your experiences of the search process that you would like to share?

Appendix I: Transcript Release Form



**Title: Let the deans speak: Decanal perceptions of institutional recruitment practices**

**Researcher: Marc Usunier**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with [name of the researcher]. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to [name of the researcher] to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of researcher