

## Take Back Our University: *MUNFA's Take on the Presidential Search*

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Memorial University has recently embarked on one of its most critical decisions: the selection of a new president. Whoever is chosen will have enormous influence on our institution, playing a powerful role in setting our direction for as long as a decade.

By extension, a presidential search invites collective stocktaking and renewal. What core values should help us set our course? What kind of campus community do we want to be? How should we balance our priorities and obligations as a public institution of education and research? How can we strengthen our contributions to this province? What qualities are needed in the person who can take us where we want to go?

The [Presidential Search Committee](#) recognizes the importance of these questions to its work, as reflected in its consultation [survey](#) and [meetings](#). However, if we are truly to take advantage of the opening created by the search for our next leader, the university community must be empowered to contribute meaningfully beyond this initial stage.

MUNFA is therefore dismayed that the Presidential Search Committee appears set to conduct its selection process in secret, revealing Memorial's new leader only after the final decision is made. We do not think this is the route to selecting the best possible candidate. Perhaps worse, it represents the further erosion of principles that have long defined the public university: [collegiality](#) and [openness](#).

It's not too late to change the process.

MUNFA's take is that the ultimate short-list of candidates should be announced to the university community, with each making a public presentation on their vision for the university and answering questions about how they propose to take us there. Members of the University community should then be given a chance to share their assessments of the final candidates with the search committee.

### **Is there any argument for secrecy?**

Supporters of secret searches justify them on the basis of individual candidates' privacy rights. To the extent that they consider the institution's best interests, advocates of secrecy have one main argument: some strong candidates may opt not to apply in the face of public exposure.

Yet as the [Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations](#) (OCUFA) and the [American Association of University Professors](#) (AAUP) both note, no evidence has been offered to support the claim that closed searches produce a stronger candidate pool. Instead, the AAUP goes on to argue, closed searches damage universities' ability to serve the public interest and hamper universities' ability to recruit the most appropriate academic administrative leader for the institution.

The AAUP urges universities to "resist calls for closed, secretive searches and reaffirm their commitment to transparency and active faculty engagement." Similarly, the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#) (CAUT) calls for an "open and transparent appointment process," for the appointment of both university presidents and vice presidents (academic).

### **Why openness matters**

It is reasonable to maintain confidentiality at the initial application stage. But once candidates make a short-list of two or three, there is a very good chance that they will become our next president, a position they could hold - it bears repeating - for up to ten years. Memorial's new president also stands to be one of the [best-paid](#) public employees [in this province](#).

At this point, individuals' desire to shield themselves must be balanced with the good of the university and the diverse publics it serves.

After all, a university's president is its main representative. Whoever holds the job will strongly direct institutional strategy and policy, including the allocation of resources. The president will play a pivotal role in shaping Memorial's relationship with government and our public image. The president sets the tone for labour relations, collegiality, and the relationship between senior administration and the academic ranks, as well as students and staff.

In short, the president affects every aspect of our daily work lives as teachers and librarians, researchers and community leaders.

We deserve the opportunity to hear from presidential aspirants about their vision for our future, how they will take us there, and why they are qualified to do so. How (well) do they understand our university and province? How do they handle a public presentation? How do they engage with faculty, students, staff and community members? How do they handle challenging questions? In other words – and it would benefit the search committee to see this in action too - what is their presidential style?

Finally, as valuable as community feedback on the presidential finalists would be for the search committee, an open process would also be a tremendous asset to our new president. After all, a president who has talked and listened to faculty, staff and students is likelier to enter the job with the good will of the community. Looking at it another way, it's much easier to adopt an oppositional or even hostile stance toward someone who you've had no part in choosing.

### **What makes a good president?**

We encourage all MUNFA members to share their perspectives with the Presidential Search Committee.

For our part, we want a president who sees the role less as that of a corporate CEO than as chief steward of a *public university*: a community of scholarship with a core mission of higher education and research, whose members share in our own governance for the wider good of the institution and its publics.

That means a president who sets ego aside for the good of the institution and works with us, rebuilding confidence in this institution as a leading member of it.

It requires a willingness to tackle all the ways in which the governance of this place is currently *not* shared and not working well, from a governing board that operates in opacity and excludes faculty participation, to a Senate that is rarely enlivened by faculty engagement, robust discussion and disputation. We need a president who understands the value of a strong faculty union not only for protecting academic workers' rights but also for defending and strengthening academic freedom and serving as a conscience for the university.

Most of all, we want a president who can be Memorial's champion, articulating – to us, to government and to the wider community - why the university's vaunted [special obligation](#) to the people of Newfoundland and Labrador means that this province needs a strong comprehensive teaching and research university, ready and able to offer an academic education to the many, enabling them to be fully engaged citizens of our province, our country and our world.

This is a job that is simply too consequential to be filled in secret.