
PROLOGUE

“I Want to be President of the University of Oklahoma because . . .”

A tendency exists among many who chronicle the histories of universities to organize their material into subtopics by president—i.e., “The Boyd Years,” “The Brooks Years,” “The Bizzell Years”—as if everything that occurred, good or bad, was attributable to the chief executive of that period. I hesitate to label this practice unfortunate because I’ve used the device myself. Classification by presidential era is handy, neat, manageable and—to some extent—justified.

Each president does more than simply set the style and tone for the institution during his tenure; he sets the agenda. His priorities become the institution’s priorities; his hirings and firings, organizing and reorganizing, approvals and disapprovals, policies and prohibitions determine the nature of the infrastructure that remains when he departs.

Richard L. Van Horn, who announced his resignation on October 14, effective on July 31, 1994, at the end of his current contract, has had a profound effect on the University of Oklahoma. He came to an institution simultaneously trying to prepare for its centennial celebration, recover from the athletic scandals of the decade and cope with declining state revenues. He persevered under difficult conditions.

As president, he changed the face of the University with his insistence that OU’s survival is dependent upon becoming a major research university, his budgetary realignment, his efforts to privatize a number of internal operations, his emphasis on private support for programs throughout the University, his choice of a near-total slate of new deans and other top administrators. Certainly without his continued support, OU’s remarkable progress in endowing faculty positions and recruiting National Merit Scholars

would have slowed considerably.

Van Horn’s stated intention is to return to the classroom as a full professor in the College of Business Administration; his field is information systems and management strategy. He will receive his contractual \$100,000 signing bonus for completing five years in the presidency. After a leave of absence of up to one year to refurbish and update his research and teaching skills, also guaranteed in his contract, he will be paid approximately \$100,000 annually, roughly equal to the highest paid professor in the college (his presidential salary was \$152,880), an office and a half-time secretary. Should he at any time become ineligible for regular faculty fringe benefits, presumably by virtue of accepting other employment, full health insurance coverage commensurate with those of a 20-year retiree would continue.

Obviously wishing to avoid an “interim” situation, the Board of Regents lost no time in launching the search for Van Horn’s successor. Advertising has been placed and the composition of the search committee announced (although, as *Sooner Magazine* goes to press, not the actual membership). The Regents will name seven at-large members, and five OU faculty, each with one vote; two OU staff with 1/2 vote each; and three students with 1/3 vote each.

And what will these as-yet unnamed individuals seek in a new president? The published qualifications must be fairly standard for the position:

*A dynamic, articulate and experienced leader, with exceptional drive and stamina, a distinguished record of executive level accomplishment, preferably in higher education with some in the private sector also desirable;

*An understanding of and a strong commitment to excellence in teaching, scholarship and research;

*Demonstrated scholarly accomplishments, including an earned doctorate or its equivalent; knowledge and understanding of the role and function of a comprehensive public research university;

*A solid commitment to the principles of accountability and the policies and directives of the Board of Regents;

*A strong commitment to the affirmative action goals and objectives;

*Private fund-raising experience;

*Commitment to free expression and the basic principles of academic freedom;

*Ability to articulate goals internally and externally;

*Ability and willingness to make difficult decisions and to assume responsibility for those decisions;

*Evidence of physical and intellectual strength, energy and enthusiasm;

*Strong interpersonal and leadership skills; personal integrity, dignity and compassion.

Lofty but admirable; nothing to quibble with here. Anyone possessing such attributes would make a veritable paragon of a president. And undoubtedly most potential presidential candidates will feel fully qualified under these criteria. So just in case the members of the search committee and the Regents find more than one paragon, they should have a tie-breaker ready. In the time-honored tradition of educators everywhere, perhaps the applicants could write essays on why they *want* to be president of the University of Oklahoma—not what it would take to get them here, but why they really want the job.

Is it important that the presidential hopefuls have ties to Oklahoma or the Southwest, as some suggest? Well, at least they should be willing to tie in. They don’t have to be native sons or daughters—but they do have to be adoptable. —CJB