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Desperately Seeking Jischke

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Interim Iowa State president Richard Seagrave sits in the back of a room in the Scheman Building, looking more than a little nervous. He is about ready to talk to the Faculty Senate for the first time in his short tenure as top dog. A bystander would have a hard time telling what is making his hands shake the cuffs of his standard-issue dark suit. My guess is that the shaking is a result of having to speak in front of a group that contains many of former President Martin Jischke’s harshest and most vocal critics. Or maybe it’s because Seagrave lost his notes on the walk over from central campus. Either way, as he scrambles to reconstruct his remarks on the ATM receipts and other random slips of paper he has rescued from his pockets, I can’t help thinking that he reminds me a lot of ‘ol Dr. J.

Both have that slightly graying, academic hair. Both have doctorates in engineering. And, of course, they both wear that dark suit, the uniform of every university administrator. We’ll compare Jischke and Seagrave in more depth later, but for now, let’s concentrate on that dark suit, as in who’s going to fill the next one.

(I don’t think I have to go into this, but just to make sure we’re all on the same page, I recap. Remember Jischke? Yeah, well as of a couple months ago, he’s in Indiana at Purdue. For right now, former interim everything Richard Seagrave is filling in at Beardshear Hall’s ritziest office.)

What They Want

Well, to be honest, it’s probably going to be someone who has a lot in common with both Seagrave and Jischke. The state Board of Regents clearly loved what Jischke had done with the place. The board completely ignored his on-campus critics, lauded him as a visionary leader at every turn, and even decided to bend the rules to name the new honors building after the ex-president. They really dug the whole “number-one, land-grant university in the nation” pitch.

So it would only make sense that the board is going to be looking for a candidate with many of the same characteristics as Jischke. They want a clear, rational thinker, possibly with an engineering background, or at least someone with plenty of research experience. They want a consummate cheerleader who is willing to put in the long hours recruiting better students, faculty, and donors. Especially the donors.

But before the regents even get involved, a 27-member search committee will narrow down what will surely be an enormous list of applicants to a lean and mean four candidates. That committee, chaired by Dean of Business Ben Allen and consisting of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni, has already
begun the tedious, mind-numbingly slow process of getting the search ball rolling. What the committee has done already, establish the search criteria, is probably the most important thing they will do. The criteria set in writing exactly how the committee thinks the next president of Iowa State should act, think, and be.

Here seems like as a good place as any to make one thing clear about this story. You’re not going to get a whole lot of words coming directly from anyone’s mouth. The people who are going to be deciding whom our next president is and subsequently the people interviewed for this story are not the type of people who give really vivid, candid interviews. They love buzzwords like emphasis, focus, priorities, and diversiry. It seems their verb usage consists entirely of words like expand, provide, vision, and diversiry. It seems their verb usage are going to be deciding whom our next president is and subsequently the people interviewed for this story are not the type of people who give gobbledy-gook interviews full of academ­ic/corporate speak that sounds the same whether it is describing the search for the next ISU president or the lyrics of Eminem. They love buzzwords like emphasis, focus, priorities, and diversiry. 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“There’s more expectations for them as far as fundraising, which creates more contact with business, which makes local economic development more important, too. And while presidents have always been expected to work well with the state legislature, it’s just more essential. I don’t think it necessarily takes any more ability to be a president in these times; it just takes more time.”

I sat down with Seagrave one Monday afternoon and talked about what is expected of Iowa State’s president these days, and he agrees the position is much more demanding than when he got his first job in academia as an associate professor of chemical engineering at ISU in 1966.

“There is no average day. There isn’t any pattern or repetition, which makes every day kind of exciting,” he says, recalling one day when he had two meetings at the Memorial Union, two out at the Gateway, one in Coralville and a benefit soirée at the College of Design at night.

Seagrave worked often with Jischke, and he says he had doubted the former president when he estimated once that he worked 80 hours per week. “If I count the time I have to be president at some time at some function during the day, I don’t doubt him anymore.”

Many factors are responsible for increasing the amount of work a president must do to be successful at a modern university, Seagrave says, including the increased emphasis on recruiting better students, better faculty, and more money. Plus, some things are just different now, like searching for an athletic director to replace Gene Smith, who left for Arizona the old days, the president just called up his friend Joe and said, “You’re the athletic director.” We don’t do it that way anymore.”

Former President Robert Parks, the longest serving president in ISU history (1965-86), oversaw the campus during the Vietnam War era, no doubt ISU’s most turbulent years.

Parks was a different president for a different time, Madden says, a time when Iowa State College was trying to become Iowa State University, trying to move from being a small-sized technical school to a vast, large university with a diverse selection of available programs. Under Parks’ watch, many of the campus’ main buildings were constructed, such as Carver and Ross Halls. ISU was also being forced to deal with the same changes that the rest of the nation faced.

“Jischke’s style was that of an engineer,” Madden says. "He wanted to understand the details of the budget and finance activities. He was much more of a number person. I think from my perspective, and I doubt I’m speaking for everyone, I think he moved the university in the correct direction.”

It was Jischke who finished the fundraising drive Eaton had begun, and it was Jischke who started the next one, which just wrapped up this summer and raised $458 million, far more than the $300 million goal.

To say Jischke increased private funding is like saying that Tiger Woods wins golf tournaments. Jischke blew the roof off private funding. “I would venture to say that when President Jischke went to an athletic event, he spent at least as much time talking to his guests as he did watching the game," Madden says.

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“You talk with people on campus and there are people who feel that he was too externally focused. I personally think that he brought the university out into the community in a much more formal way. Over the course of a year, 8,000 or 9,000 people were brought into the Knoll. Dr. Jischke would use the things they are going on to promote the university. He was much more heavily involved in the outreach programs. Those changes are more widely understood around Iowa than on campus.”

That’s something that is difficult to get a handle on when you’re stuck in Ames for four years or so, the effect our president may or may not be having throughout the state. Seagrave thinks one of the reasons Jischke was so harshly criticized by some students and faculty members, including the petition started by several faculty members last spring calling for a performance review of the president, is that it is often difficult to see the connection between what presidents have to do now and what they’ve always been expected to do.

“There’s a lot of people on campus who defend undergraduate education, but the president has to be a front person for all these other

**MANY FACTORS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR INCREASING THE AMOUNT OF WORK A PRESIDENT MUST DO TO BE SUCCESSFUL AT A MODERN UNIVERSITY, INCLUDING THE INCREASED EMPHASIS ON RECRUITING BETTER STUDENTS, BETTER FACULTY AND MORE MONEY.**

— RICHARD SEAGRAVE, INTERIM PRESIDENT

**BASICALLY WE WANT SOMEONE WHO WILL WALK ON WATER.”**

— BEN ALLEN, DEAN OF BUSINESS
things, too. These things are in place so that we can keep the quality of our undergraduate education high."

Well, does all this emphasis on the almighty dollar change the position of the presidency for the worse?

"That's for someone else to decide," Madden says.

"I don't know that it has to mean that presidents pay any less attention to faculty and student issues," Fields says.

"It’s not really good or bad, it’s just a fact of life," Allen says.

Only Seagrave is willing to portray the changes in an even moderately negative light. "If we were designing universities right now and wanted to make them ideal places, we wouldn’t design it where these other things were so important, like private fundraising and having to participate in an athletic system that pours millions of dollars through the television system into competitive sports. But we have to compete with our peer institutions. We have to. It’s those changes that have made the job of the president more visible in some places and less in others."

What They Want and How They’ll Get it

These changes will be the driving force in deciding who will be ISU’s next president. Firstly, the board is clearly going to want someone who can raise money at the Jischke level or better. Secondly, though, and perhaps more shocking, is that if the criteria are closely followed, we’re not going to get a Jischke clone.

No doubt in a response to some of the backlash of criticism that was hurled at the former president, we were designing universities right now and wanted to make them ideal places, we wouldn’t design it where these other things were so important, like private fundraising and having to participate in an athletic system that pours millions of dollars through the television system into competitive sports. But we have to compete with our peer institutions. We have to. It’s those changes that have made the job of the president more visible in some places and less in others."

"We had to change the criteria a bit to maybe accommodate a different type of person," Allen says. When listing the two top priorities of the incoming president, Allen first says things need to get friendlier down at the statehouse (no surprise there), but the second priority just seems courageously honest.

"Secondly, there is still some work in building trust on campus with faculty and students that needs to be addressed." It sounds pretty incredible coming from the mouth of an administrator like Dean Allen.

Of course, when you talk to Board of Regents President Owen Newlin, he’s a little less enthusiastic about the idea that Jischke had any faults. When asked whether the board will give any consideration to the criticisms of Jischke, Newlin has this to say: "We’re going to try to select the person who will do the best job as president. That will be based solely on who we think meets the criteria the best."

In a roundabout way, I guess that means he agrees with Allen, since Newlin says he expects the board to accept the search committee’s criteria as is, with no more than a few minor changes.

Newlin is also a big proponent of the university’s strategic plan, the king of kings when it comes to gobbledegook buzzwords. When questioned about what the board will be looking for in a presidential candidate, Newlin constantly refers me back to the strategic plan. I rephrase; he goes with the strategic plan. I rephrase again; he goes with the strategic plan lead the school through its years of social unrest, and Jischke was a good choice to do with the selection."

What They Want and How They’ll Get it

Again. Only when I ask directly about raising funds does he include that as an important part of the president’s job. It was a short interview.

Madden, who after serving nearly 35 years as an ISU administrator probably knows better than anyone how the regent mind works, has confidence in the board, though. He says Parks was a perfect choice to lead the school through its years of social unrest, and Jischke was a good choice to lead the school through its dollars through the television system into competitive sports. But we have to compete with our peer institutions. We have to. It’s those changes that have made the job of the president more visible in some places and less in others."

WHAT WOULD BE SO WRONG WITH HIRING A PRESIDENT WHO NOT ONLY HAS A RÉSUMÉ THAT SAYS HE CARES ABOUT STUDENTS, BUT WHO ACTUALLY CAN LET THE STUDENTS KNOW IT?
January and February. You who might be ready for a list of prospective candidates, up and comers conduct a second round of interviews in November and December. They will submit searches every year, and his job is basically to announce some criterion suggesting that candidates have an understanding of these new technologies and will be gung-ho about keeping ISU wired to the hilt.

But how exactly is this whole thing going to work? The applications are presumably flowing in as I write and as you read. The actual process of collecting and sorting the applications will be done by a man named Bill Funk from a firm called Korn/Ferry International out of Dallas. Guys like Funk handle hundreds of these searches every year, and his job is basically to assist the search committee and act as its front man for applicants, since none of the committee members have either the time or the experience to handle those duties. He also will form a list of prospective candidates, up and comers who might be ready for ISU, and will submit that list to the search committee.

The committee members will sort through which applicants they want to interview and conduct those interviews in November and December. They will submit four unranked finalists to the board, which will conduct a second round of interviews, probably in January and February. You can most likely expect an announcement sometime in February. The search process is confidential, although I know that many reporters are not too happy with that and will probably do whatever it takes to find out who is in the running.

And Now For the Fun Part

This is what I’ve been waiting for the last 3,500 words. What I think the next president should be like. I’ve already covered what kind of person the next president will be, but I can’t help but add my own two cents. And I have one simple, very basic suggestion: Try to get somebody who students can actually like.

To illustrate my point, let’s talk about why although Martin Jischke and Richard Seagrave have similar backgrounds, they come across as completely different people. When I was on the Daily’s editorial board, Jischke would come in once a semester and talk to us about campus issues, the Daily’s news and editorial coverage, the weather, whatever.

One thing I noticed is that Dr. J never seemed comfortable for the first 30 minutes or so he was talking with us. After he relaxed, he would be much better, and at times, actually charming and engaging.

I’ll never forget the time when we were talking about Veishea toward the end of one of these meetings, and he readily offered up that he “occasionally enjoyed a Manhattan or two.” It was classic, and it drove home the point that Jischke is not the fun police; he was simply forced into a position by circumstances beyond his control. When he concentrated on settling down and turning off his internal censor and talked to us like we weren’t out to get him, he came across as a real human being, an actual person with a beating heart and a curious mind. But his natural instinct clearly was to say as little as possible in as polished, buzzwordish manner as he could.

Taken at face value, Jischke didn’t seem too concerned about students.

When I sat down with Seagrave, I found the opposite to be true. He seemed to feel constrained by the interview process. He picked his words very slowly and incredibly carefully, often pausing, seemingly balancing what he should, could, and would say. His internal censor was not nearly as quick as Jischke’s. He talked about how he had to trick students into seeing him now that he was the president, and it appeared to actually bother him that he had He couldn’t relate to your average student, and I’m not sure if he even wanted to. I have no doubt he did indeed care about undergraduate education, and the money he raised in Campaign Destiny put $100 million in undergraduate scholarships, according to Newlin. That’s pretty impressive.

But how many students actually ever even saw the guy? I know it’s a busy job; I just spent several pages writing about just how busy it’s gotten.

But all it would take is one hour a week. Put it in the schedule. Just hang out where students are. Walk back and forth from Beardshear to Curtiss, stopping to talk to people and just chit-chat. It’s not like you’re up for election, you don’t need to kiss babies, but it would make such a mark on ISU students if you just put in some face time. That’s how you work the donors, stopping in here, dropping in there, making a call now and then, letting them know you still want their money. Don’t the students deserve at least a little of the same rare treatment?

Of course we do. And there is a possibility that we’ll get someone who will give us that treatment. Because despite all the rhetoric and despite all the insistences that the president’s main goal will be the undergraduate students of ISU, the one language the next president will have to be fluent in is schmoozing for the big bucks.

That’s why Newlin kept referring me back to the strategic plan. The only way to accomplish becoming the best is to raise money like you’re the best. Nearly every concrete goal in the strategic plan would require more money to succeed. At the base of almost all of the expectations of the next president will be the intense need to make this school bigger and better, and subsequently to raise huge sums of money. I find it hard to believe the board is going to give serious consideration to any candidate who members don’t think can raise funds by the millions on a regular basis.

The good news is, though, that if a candidate comes along with the ability to haul in private gifts and lobby in Des Moines and he or she also happens to actually enjoy being around students and showing that he or she cares, the board will probably fill ISU’s top suit with a real human being. I suppose that’s the best we can hope for.

Dave Roepke is a senior in journalism and a senior editor for Ethos. Last summer he interned at the Omaha World Herald, which makes him cooler than you.

photo by Sarah Fackrell