

PENNSYLVANIA'S STATE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Information on the presidential search at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania

Contact: Kenn Marshall, (717) 720-4054 or (717) 329-0809

While the presidential search process at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania has not yet advanced beyond the campus level to the Office of the Chancellor and Board of Governors—and we respect that—we wanted to address the recent events.

Our own knowledge of the circumstances align with the information provided in Council of Trustees Chair Bill McCarrier's message to the university community. We know that Ms. Mercer and Mr. Albert disclosed to the search committee their professional relationships with one of the presidential candidates. We once again confirm that the committee previously sought a determination from the Office of the Chancellor whether those relationships constituted a potential conflict of interest, and we determined there was no inherent conflict. Ms. Mercer and Mr. Albert did everything they should have to ensure integrity in the search process.

For context, it is important to understand—in accordance with Board of Governors policy—university employees always are included on the presidential search committee. Any time an internal candidate is part of the candidate pool there is the possibility—even the probability—that the candidate will have an existing professional relationship with one or more of the committee members. After all, universities are collaborative environments that foster working relationships. That does not mean there is a conflict of interest.

If you accept the argument that university employees should not serve on a presidential search committee if they could potentially benefit from the outcome, then no academic dean could serve on a search committee if the current provost is a candidate. Individuals with expertise in areas critical to university operations—such as finance or facilities—would not be able to participate when an administrative vice president is a candidate. Faculty could never serve on a search committee, regardless of whether there were an internal candidate, given that the president has authority over both tenure and promotion. Students would have to be excluded because of the president's ultimate authority over discipline.

To blindly remove all of these voices from the process would do an enormous disservice to the university. Instead, we trust the people in those roles to act ethically, as was the case at Slippery Rock, and to make the best decisions for the entire university.

There have been several instances in recent years where internal candidates have been considered during presidential searches, and those candidates had existing professional relationships with search committee members. Sometimes those candidates have made it to the final stages of the search; sometimes, they haven't. Our search committees have proven time and again they are able to navigate these kinds of normal situations.

It is important to note that Ms. Mercer and Mr. Albert were two of more than a dozen members of the search committee. Their voices on the committee are important, but are only a fraction of the votes required to move candidates forward to the Council of Trustees for consideration. Ms. Mercer and Mr. Albert acted ethically and with integrity in their service to the university.

Kenn Marshall
Media Relations Manager
Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education