Vice President of Development Recruitment: The Effect of Applicant Institution Type

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Paul A. Winter

is Associate Professor of Educational Administration within the Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Human Resource Education at the University of Louisville (U of L). His research specialty is personnel recruitment and selection for educational organizations. He teaches doctoral courses in leadership and administration and coordinates U of L's Master of Arts in Higher Education Program. He earned his doctoral degree at the Ohio State University after a 16-year career as a private-sector business executive and university administrator.

Eric W. Wright

is Coordinator of the Gutermuth Elementary School Family Resource Center. Dr. Wright also teaches a Business Administration course at Indiana Wesleyan University. His research specialty is fund raising and education program evaluation. He earned his doctoral degree at the University of Louisville and has eight years of K-12 and higher education administrative experience.

Abstract

This study examined factors that influence the attraction of potential job applicants to position vacancies for vice presidents of development. As part of a recruitment simulation, a national sample of 144 randomly selected directors of development rated vice president of development positions depicted in simulated recruitment advertisements. Job rating was the dependent variable. The independent variables were job applicant institution type (public, private), job

vacancy institution type (public, private), vacancy endowment type (large, small), and vacancy alumni type (large, small). Directors of development at public institutions rated vacant positions significantly higher than did directors at private institutions [$F(1, 128) = 8.2$, $p < 0.01$]. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

Keywords:

fund raising, recruitment, vice president development, higher education

Author's Contact Address:

Eric W. Wright
2543 Kings Hwy
Louisville, KY 40205, USA
Tel: +1 502 485 9027
Fax: +1 502 485 6193
E-mail: ewright1@jefferson.k12.ky.us

Introduction

This study addressed the task of recruiting individuals skilled in raising funds from private sources to support college and university operations. Fund raising, hereafter referred to as development, is a

topic of increasing importance among development professionals, boards of trustees, postsecondary administrators, other members of the higher education community, and researchers specializing in postsecondary inquiry.¹ The interest in this vital administrative function derives from the growing importance of development relative to the funding of postsecondary institutions, the operational flexibility provided by nongovernmental funds, the competitive advantages large endowments provide, and the academic and other quality improvements that accrue to universities and colleges with large financial resources obtained from professional development efforts.² Our focus on recruiting vice-presidents of development is appropriate because of the growing importance of this position to institutional success. As Boland observed, “vice presidents for development are now generally included in the cabinets of college and university presidents. It is clear that fund-raising experts are crucial players in the work of institutions of higher education.”³

The highly competitive nature of development, and the sometimes unreliable state and federal funding of postsecondary institutions, created a new sense of urgency among college and university officials to recruit the best possible professionals to carry out the development task.⁴ Hall noted that, during the 1990s, many public research universities suffered government cutbacks in revenue and these cutbacks forced the affected institutions to (a) rely more on private funds and (b) exert greater efforts to recruit qualified development professionals.⁵ Turnover among development professionals is especially high in comparison with other

postsecondary positions due to the convergence of three factors: (a) competition among colleges and universities to recruit experienced development personnel, (b) competition between the postsecondary sector and not-for-profit organizations (e.g., philanthropic organizations) to acquire development talent, and (c) the retirement of members of the “baby boom” generation.⁶

Despite the importance of recruiting quality development professionals, there is no empirical research about this challenging issue. The vast majority of development staffing research addresses other personnel issues such as career patterns and turnover trends. This study was a first step towards examining development recruitment empirically using simulation methods applied in the private sector and in a limited number of studies about faculty recruitment in the field of education.⁷

The Importance of Recruitment

Private sector researchers, such as Heneman, Judge, and Heneman have long argued that the acquisition of human talent through recruitment is among the most essential administrative responsibilities accorded to organizational leaders.⁸ Although personnel recruitment has been a subject of intense empirical investigation in the private sector for most of the twentieth century, investigations about recruitment in the education sector are still relatively rare.⁹ Rebores decried the passive approach to recruitment often taken in the education sector and offered this caution to educational administrators: “It is a mistake to assume that the correct mix of people will be available to fill vacancies without making a concerted effort to find the most qualified

individuals to fill specific human resource needs.”¹⁰ In the interest of staffing educational organizations with better personnel, Rebore further exhorted educational organizations to adopt the aggressive and competitive practices used in the private business sector.

Theoretical Framework

Breaugh operationally defined employee recruitment as a process that “involves those organizational activities that (1) influence the number and/or the types of applicants who apply for a position and/or (2) affect whether a job offer is accepted.”¹¹ Our research focused on the decisions made by applicants for vice-president of development vacancies prior to the initial employment interview, such as the decision to apply for the job. Research about decisions prior to the initial employment interview is scant. By making these types of applicant decisions a research focus, we responded to the call by Rynes for empirical studies about this phase of the recruitment process: “most recruitment research has been conducted subsequent to the first employment interview. As such, little is known about the determinants of job applicant behaviors.”¹²

Three recruitment models from the private sector recruitment literature guided the choice of the independent and dependent variables analyzed in this study.¹³ These three models are consistent in casting the job applicant’s rating of a position vacancy as a dependent variable influenced by other variables cast as independent variables. The Schwab Employment Process Model emphasizes the influence of job applicant characteristics on such recruitment outcomes as applicant decisions to apply

for a position vacancy and accept a job offer.¹⁴ The Schwab et al. General Model of Job Search and Evaluation also casts applicant characteristics as salient influencers of applicant evaluations of position vacancies.¹⁵

The Rynes and Barber Model of the Attraction Process postulates that organizational recruiters operate within certain contingencies that impact recruitment outcomes.¹⁶ Among these contingencies are labor market conditions, characteristics of the position vacancy, and characteristics of the hiring organization. An underlying postulate of the Rynes and Barber model is that, in a given recruitment context, organizational characteristics impact recruitment outcomes such as the decision to accept an interview for the job and the decision to accept a job offer. Consistent with the above three models, we cast applicant rating of the job as the dependent variable in this study. We used an individual characteristic (applicant institution type) and three organizational characteristics (vacancy institution type, endowment size, and alumni base size) as independent variables in an experimental design involving univariate analysis of variance.

Purpose

College and university directors of development role-played as job applicants for vice-president of development vacancies described in simulated recruitment advertisements similar to those placed routinely in such higher education print media as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. We examined decisions made by applicants prior to the initial employment interview (e.g., decisions to apply for the job) to respond to a research call by Rynes: “Applicant decisions are

critical to organizations; if individuals do not apply, there will be little opportunity to influence their choices through recruitment activities. However, most recruitment research has been conducted subsequent to the first employment interview. As such, little is known about the determinants of job application behaviors".¹⁷

The factors investigated were: type of institution where the study participant was employed (public, private), type of institution advertising the position vacancy (public, private), size of the endowment at the institution advertising the position vacancy (large, small), and size of the alumni base at the institution advertising the position vacancy (large, small).

Research Questions

Our literature review identified job vacancy and applicant institution type (public versus private), endowment size, and alumni base as possible influencers of applicant attraction to development positions. The research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

1. Does applicant institution type (public, private) influence applicant ratings of a vice-president of development job described in a simulated recruitment advertisement?
2. Does vacancy institution type (public, private) influence applicant ratings of a vice-president of development job described in a simulated recruitment advertisement?
3. Does job vacancy endowment size (small, large) influence applicant ratings of a vice-president of development job described in a simulated recruitment advertisement?
4. Does job vacancy alumni base (small, large) influence applicant ratings of a vice-president of development job described in a simulated recruitment advertisement?
5. Do interactions among applicant institution type (public, private), vacancy institution type (public, private), vacancy endowment size (small, large), and alumni base (small, larger) influence applicant ratings of a vice-president of development job described in a simulated recruitment advertisement?

Methods

This research involved both a recruitment simulation and a factorial experiment.¹⁸ The participants reacted to jobs described in eight simulated position advertisements describing vacancies for the position of vice-president of development. The participants rated the jobs rendering composite scores analyzed via a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ completely crossed fixed-factor analysis of variance with 16 equal cells ($n = 9$).

Recruitment simulations

This study was a recruitment simulation similar to simulations performed both in the private sector and the education sector.¹⁹ The majority of the recruitment simulations involved an experimental design with univariate analysis of variance being the most common data analysis procedure. The education studies frequently focused on simulating recruitment media such as recruitment videos, recruitment advertisements, and job description postings.²⁰ The researchers then had education professionals (e.g., faculty, administrators) role-play as job applicants reacting to descriptions of a

position vacancy depicted in the simulated recruitment medium. Researchers used the content of the simulated recruitment medium to manipulate characteristics of the job vacancy (e.g., salary, location) which served as independent variables in an experiment that frequently involved analysis of variance. The usual measure for the dependent variable in such studies was applicant rating of the job depicted in the recruitment medium.

Participants and sampling procedure

The focal population for this research was 1,072 directors of development from a database of 2,044 CASE members holding director positions at private and public four-year colleges and universities in the

United States. The sample size derived from a power analysis conducted according to procedures recommended by Cohen.²¹ The parameters for the power analysis were: a planned effect size (omega-squared = 0.06), a predetermined level of significance (alpha = 0.05), and a specified power level (power = 0.80). The purpose of the power analysis was to minimize the probability of committing a Type II error; that is, failing to detect significance when significance exists. Descriptive statistics for the participants appear in Tables 1 and 2.

Independent variables

This study examined the influence of four nominal scaled independent variables on director of development ratings of jobs described in simulated position advertisements for a vice president of development job. The independent variables were: (a) applicant institution type (public, private); (b) vacancy institution type (public, private); (c) vacancy endowment size (small, large); and alumni base (small, large). Participant self-reports on a biographical data sheet operationalized applicant institution type (public, private).

Our rationale in selecting applicant and vacancy institution type was twofold. First, vacancy institution type appears to be an important variable because of the differences between public and private institutions. These differences (e.g., size, governance structure, sources of funding) may well cause development professionals to prefer either one type of institution or the other. If such preferences existed this would produce an interaction effect with development professionals at private institutions preferring jobs at private institutions, and public development professionals at public institutions

Table 1: Nominal scaled descriptive data for study participants (*n* = 144)

Variable	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Gender		
Male	62	43.1
Female	82	56.9
Race		
African American	3	2.1
White American	131	91.0
Hispanic American	3	2.1
Native American	2	1.4
Asian American	4	2.8
Other	1	0.6
Education		
Bachelors	68	47.2
Masters	65	45.1
Doctorate	11	7.7
Jobs		
Annual Fund		
Yes	41	28.5
No	103	71.5
Development Officer		
Yes	83	57.6
No	61	42.4
Foundation Officer		
Yes	15	10.4
No	129	89.6

Table 2: Interval-scaled descriptive data for actual study participants (n = 144)

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Age (years)	42.9	9.7	25–67
Development experience (years)	9.7	7.0	1–36
Director of development experience (years)	3.8	4.5	1–28
Number of colleges worked	1.8	1.8	1–20
Years at current institution	5.8	5.6	1–29
Participant alumni base (1000s)	99.2	339.8	1.1–4,000
Participant endowment size (\$million)	371.0	733.0	1–4,500

preferring job at public institutions. Such an interaction would also limit the size of the potential applicant pool for vacancies at both private and public institutions. Prior to conducting this study we consulted with practicing development professionals about the possibility of investigating institution type, and feedback from these discussions suggested institution type (applicant and vacancy institution type) was an important factor to examine.

Our discussions with senior development professionals also surfaced endowment size and alumni base as variables important to development professionals. The feedback we received suggested these variables might be interesting from several perspectives. Some professionals we interviewed perceived large endowments and large alumni bases as institutional strengths, making development jobs at these institutions attractive and jobs at institutions with small endowments and small alumni bases less attractive. However, other officials expressed a different view, indicating that jobs at institutions with small endowments and small alumni bases could be more attractive than jobs at institutions with large endowments and large alumni bases because of the potential to make a greater impact at institutions that need

major growth in both their endowments and alumni bases.

The method used to operationalize alumni base and endowment size in the simulated position advertisements was to select median scores from the low quartile (small) and the high quartile (large) of the alumni base and endowment of US colleges and universities ($n = 791$) reported by the Council for Aid to Education.²² Using median scores resulted in alumni and endowment levels that provided a realistic high–low contrast without including outliers at either the high or low end of the alumni and endowment distributions.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable was applicant rating of a vice president of development job described in a simulated position advertisement. The measure for the dependent variable was a composite score composed of ratings for these three items: (a) “How likely would you be to apply for the job of vice president of development described?”; (b) “If offered, how likely would you be to accept an interview for the vice president of development job described?”; and (c) “If offered, how likely would you be to accept the job of vice president of development described?” These items had five-point

Likert-type scales (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely) summed to form an additive composite score.

Data collection

The methods to collect the data were those recommended by Dillman for mailed instruments.²³ CASE members (*n* = 1,072) holding director of development positions received one of eight randomized simulated position advertisements by mail. Individuals became study participants by completing and returning a biographical data sheet and a job evaluation form after reading one of eight simulated position advertisements for a vice-president of development vacancy.

Results

A total of 663 directors of development responded to the mailed instruments, yielding a 61 percent response rate. The overall coefficient alpha for the composite score was 0.92.

Table 3 contains a summary of the cell means and standard deviations from the

ANOVA procedure. The ANOVA results appear in Table 4.

The ANOVA detected a main effect for participant institution type [*F*(1, 128) = 8.22, *p* ≤ 0.01]. Participants located at public institutions (*M* = 9.0) rated the job significantly higher than did participants located at private institutions (*M* = 7.3).

Discussion

Fund raising has become a significant administrative function for higher education, and obtaining financial resources to meet specific educational needs is an essential responsibility for college and university administrations.²⁴ Attracting qualified, capable, and motivated development professionals is important because these individuals create funding opportunities not available through state and federal governmental sources. This study is the first to examine, empirically, director of development reactions to simulated recruitment advertisements for the job of vice president of development. The study

Table 3: Summary of cell means and standard deviations (*n* = 144)

Participant institution type Vacancy institution type	Public Public	Private Public	Public Private	Private Private
Endowment small, alumni small				
M	7.8	6.1	8.2	8.1
SD	3.9	3.4	3.1	3.7
Endowment small, alumni large				
M	9.3	6.6	9.2	6.9
SD	3.3	3.7	2.9	3.4
Endowment large, alumni small				
M	10.3	7.8	7.8	8.3
SD	3.4	3.9	4.2	3.5
Endowment large, alumni large				
M	8.6	7.4	10.4	7.2
SD	2.9	3.0	3.9	3.8

Note: Mean and standard deviations are based on additive composite scores. Coefficient alpha = 0.92

Table 4: Analysis of variance for applicant rating by participant institution type, vacancy institution size, vacancy endowment size and vacancy alumni base

Source of variance	df	SS	MS	F
Applicant institution (AI)	1	100.00	100.00	8.22*
Vacancy institution (VI)	1	2.78	2.78	0.22
Vacancy endowment (VE)	1	8.78	18.78	1.54
Vacancy alumni base (VAB)	1	1.00	1.00	0.08
AI × VI	1	5.44	5.44	0.45
AI × VE	1	0.11	0.11	0.01
AI × VAB	1	18.78	18.78	0.54
VI × VE	1	5.44	5.44	0.45
VI × VAB	1	1.00	1.00	0.08
VE × VAB	1	2.78	2.78	0.23
AI × VI × VE	1	0.44	0.44	0.04
AI × VE × VAB	1	0.44	0.44	0.04
AI × VI × VAB	1	21.78	21.78	1.79
VI × VE × VAB	1	18.78	18.78	1.54
AI × VI × VE × VAB	1	9.00	9.00	0.74

Error 128 1,556.67 12.16

Total 143 1,763.22

**p* ≤ 0.005

results have implications for recruitment practice and future research.

Implications for recruitment practice

A main effect for participant institution type indicated that participants located at public institutions rated the job significantly higher than did participants located at private institutions. It is important for university and college recruitment officials to be aware of this information. Across all types of institutions (public, private) directors of development at public institutions are more willing to pursue vacancies for vice president of development jobs than are directors of development at private institutions.

The above finding would appear to indicate that public directors of development are more mobile than their private director counterparts. Accordingly,

regardless of where recruiting officials are located, they should announce position vacancies to public, as well as private, directors of development if the recruitment goal is to maximize the size of the initial applicant pool. Why public directors of development are more flexible in their job pursuit orientation is open to question. We speculate that the more specialized mission and intimate atmosphere of many private colleges and universities may foster greater institutional attachment among development professionals working at private institutions, thus making private development officials less mobile.²⁵

Some college and university recruiters might speculate there would be an interaction between applicant institution type and vacancy institution type, with applicants from public institutions preferring jobs at public institutions and

applicants from private institutions preferring jobs at private institutions. This was not the case, which would appear to make the pool of viable job applicants available to recruiting institutions larger than it would be if most potential job applicants preferred to pursue jobs at institutions similar to their current employers (i.e., an interaction involving public-public and private-private job preferences).

The lack of significance for the endowment and alumni base variables should also be of interest to college and university recruiters. Some recruiters might believe job applicants will consider a high endowment and alumni base as a desirable indication of institutional attractiveness (i.e., “I would be going to a good place”). Conversely, other recruiters might believe a low endowment and alumni base are advantageous because this would represent an opportunity for the applicant to make an impact. The study findings, however, indicate endowment and alumni base, whether they are large or small, do not appear to be either advantages or disadvantages in terms of attracting qualified applicants for development vacancies.

Future research

The task of investigating factors that influence the recruitment of development personnel has barely begun. Future research might focus on other categories of variables suggested by Rynes and Barber such as monetary recruitment incentives (e.g., signing bonuses, enhanced retirement benefits). Colleges and universities do use signing and performance bonuses to attract development professionals,²⁶ but the impact of bonuses relative to recruitment outcomes is still unsupported

with empirical data. Bonuses may also include noncash incentives (i.e., tuition reimbursement) that add to the quality of life of development professionals.

Given the empirical nature of this study, we were unable to discover a precise reason why public directors of development are more mobile than their private director counterparts. This result suggests the need for future studies about the mobility of public development directors versus private directors. A research approach that could reveal the reason for the difference in mobility would be to apply qualitative research methods, including personal interviews, that query development directors about factors that influence their willingness to relocate to a new institution.

As explained in the “Recruitment simulations” subsection above, we chose an analysis of variance design because this approach had revealed important findings in previous recruitment simulations. It would be useful for future studies to employ a correlation design involving multiple regression analysis. Multiple regression analysis would allow researchers to examine a larger number of independent variables than is feasible with the experimental approach we implemented.

Finally, future studies might also address additional development positions not examined in this study, including senior, mid-level, and entry-level positions. Another avenue for future investigations might be to examine the effectiveness of alternative sources used to generate applicants for position vacancies. These sources include recruitment advertisements, recruitment websites, internal employee referrals, and executive search firms. And, finally, demographic

variables of interest for future development research might include gender, race, age, and prior job experience.

Limitations

As is the case with all research, this study was subject to limitations. Two limitations relate to the research design. The simulation technique we employed was patterned upon prior recruitment simulations that employed analysis of variance. Analysis of variance places limitations on the number of independent variables one can examine. A second limitation relating to the simulation technique is that applicants reacting to jobs under actual recruitment conditions may have reacted differently than did the participants in this research study. However, we chose the simulation approach because studying applicants under actual conditions poses enormous difficulties in terms of acquiring sufficient numbers of participants and gaining access to a highly sensitive and confidential process.

Conclusion

Positions such as vice president of development are now essential to the financial success of colleges and universities.²⁷ Yet there is little empirical research about recruiting development personnel. This study demonstrated an experimental and simulation approach investigators might use to expand the body of research about recruiting development professionals. It is hoped that the methods demonstrated here will stimulate additional investigations. Greater effectiveness in attracting development professionals is critical to higher education, and further recruitment research will provide a greater

understanding of the recruitment factors colleges and universities should focus on to make their efforts to acquire essential human talent more effective.

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Practitioner's Perspective

What prompts someone to apply for a job? The answer to that question is more often derived from the applicant's current life and/or employment circumstances than the specifics of the position for which they have applied. As the development job market tightens, successful recruitment depends more and more on the attraction of individuals *not* seeking a change. Whether this search is managed internally, and promoted through traditional advertising, or externally through the efforts of an executive search firm, the challenge remains the enticement of qualified candidates to apply for the job. The research of Paul Winter and Eric Wright—focused specifically on the post of vice-president for development—zeros in on that key moment; the preinterview factors that affect an applicant's decision to submit a resume. Postinterview factors were not addressed. Their findings help to debunk some intuitive assumptions and provide valuable recruitment insight for those seeking to fill such posts.

The truly subjective factors influencing one's decision to pursue a particular position, such as preferences to live in an urban environment, near family, warm climate, and so on, are nearly impossible to aggregate. There are, however, some notable trends identified through this study. Two in particular are (a) the greater tendency for turnover at public institutions than at private institutions, and specifically for directors at public institutions to pursue vice presidencies at private institutions; and (b) the minimal influence of the size of an institution's endowment and alumni population in an applicant's decision.

With regard to the public vs. private issue, one might assume a tendency to stick with what you know. The study found, however, a greater tendency of directors at public institutions to make a move to private institutions—indeed a greater tendency to make a move in general. As this is the first empirical research on this topic, it is difficult to judge whether or not this trend has evolved with the profession, or whether this is the result of the current state of affairs within many state systems.

On the issue of endowment and alumni population, again, one might assume that the competitive advantages a large endowment makes possible from a student/faculty recruitment standpoint will translate to the recruitment of senior development professionals. Further, a larger alumni population could be perceived as offering a greater fund-raising opportunity. Surprisingly, however, neither had a meaningful impact in the application decision of those candidates who participated in the study. This would seem to imply a greater weight placed on the quality-of-life characteristics of a particular institution or position.

Although the study focused on the recruitment of vice presidents, the results help to shape our thinking on recruitment of all senior-level positions. Considering the enormous value of long-term relationships in the realization of substantial gifts, and in light of the nature of this market, this study and others reinforce the value of hiring well and investing in the professional development of our staffs. Although this valuable research data will help to reap the harvest of competing institutions, there may be longer term value in growing your own.

Joseph G. Hall

Associate Vice President for Advancement, The George Washington University, USA