

Getting Constituents Involved – Meaningfully -- in a Head Search

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**Search Committee for New Head of Civil Engineering
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Abstract.

A successful search for the Head of a large department like Purdue's School of Civil Engineering depends on "buy-in" from the various constituent groups – faculty, staff, and students. In previous searches of this type, the faculty and staff were asked early in the process to suggest qualities and characteristics that the next Head should have. It should be no surprise that the qualities on the list generated by faculty and staff could not ever be found in any single individual. The list was of limited use.

In the most recent search, a member of the search committee had a different idea: Why not ask for questions that should be asked of candidates as they visit campus for their interviews? Because the search committee wanted a meaningful contribution from each constituent group, a paper survey put into mailboxes or an email request did not seem adequate. Instead, the Nominal Group Process (NGP) was used in three separate NGP sessions that were convened on the same day – one for professional and clerical staff, one for faculty, and one for undergraduate and graduate students. Each had its own format, to suit the nature of the constituents and the time of day at which it was held.

This paper explains how the NGP sessions were conducted and how the results helped keep the search process focused and organized.

Introduction.

A successful search for the Head of a large department like Purdue's School of Civil Engineering depends on "buy-in" from the various constituent groups – faculty, staff, and students. In Purdue's case, the size of each group was large – about 70 faculty, 55 staff, and 500 students. An important element of the "buy-in" was getting meaningful input from these groups as the search process continued. In previous searches of this type, the faculty and staff were asked early in the process to suggest qualities and characteristics that the next Head should have. The intent was to use these qualities to help the committee screen applicants and seek other candidates. It should be no surprise that the qualities on the list generated by faculty and staff could not ever be found in any single individual. (An excerpt from the list of 17 qualities created

for the Head search in 2000 is shown in Exhibit 1.) Because the list consisted of so many extraordinary qualities, it was of limited practical use to the search committee.

Exhibit 1. First Ten CE Head Search Selection Criteria in Year 2000

1. Ability to maintain and extend national and international visibility of Purdue
2. Outstanding leadership
 - Service leadership style
 - Help other people do their jobs
3. Outstanding administrative capabilities
 - Able to manage people
 - Able to manage resources
4. Proven abilities in research
5. Proven abilities in teaching
6. Innovative individual
7. Thorough understanding of present status of the profession
8. Clear vision of the future of civil engineering and for the School of Civil Engineering
 - Experience in civil engineering practice is desirable.
9. Strong abilities to promote sponsored research and educational program
 - Able to coordinate research activities within and outside Purdue
 - Demonstrates interdisciplinary skills
 - Facilitates connections between faculty and major sponsors and has experience with major sponsors
10. Strong abilities to lead development activities

When it came time to request input for a list of characteristics in the most recent search, a member of the search committee – one of the youngest members – had another idea: Why not ask for questions that should be asked of candidates as they visit campus for their interviews? Because this suggestion came so early in the search process, the idea at first seemed quite premature. However, as the committee members thought about it, the idea seemed to be a more useful alternative to generating the usual list of unachievable ideal qualities. It was possible that the questions would reflect the concerns of each constituent group and give the search committee more practical guidance than the list of ideals.

Because the search committee wanted a meaningful contribution from each constituent group, a paper survey put into mailboxes or an email request did not seem adequate. Instead, another member of the search committee suggested the Nominal Group Process (NGP), a community involvement technique that is frequently used in urban planning. Three separate NGP sessions were convened on the same day – one for professional and clerical staff, one for faculty, and one for undergraduate and graduate students. Each session had its own format, to suit the nature of the constituents and the time of day at which it was held. This paper will explain some of the key details of the formats, how the NGP sessions were conducted, and how the results helped keep the search process focused and organized.

The Nominal Group Process

The Nominal Group Process is a method used to solicit ideas from constituent or stakeholder groups and create a ranked list. Its two major advantages are that (1) it can be applied to a large number of individuals and (2) it can give even the quietest and most reserved individual an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the process. The NGP is commonly used in the *public involvement* or *citizen participation* activities associated with urban planning. A quick search of the Internet for “Nominal Group Process” or “Nominal Group Technique” will yield numerous introductions, explanations, and guides to the use of the NGP. One of the better ones is provided by the Iowa State University Extension (1).

Unfortunately, the standard NGP requires several hours to go through all its steps. Because the Head search committee wanted to get a large turnout from each constituent group, it designed the NGP session for each group as follows:

1. It streamlined the NGP so that it could be completed in one hour.
2. It offered food.

The streamlined NGP followed the steps shown in Exhibit 2. An essential element was the constant reminder to focus on the most important issues and to keep a brisk pace.

Exhibit 2. Steps in the Nominal Group Process for the CE Head Search Committee

1. *Form groups of 5-8 members.*
2. *Silent Generation of Ideas in Writing.* In the next 5 minutes, ask each member of each group to make a list of approximately five questions that should be asked of each candidate for Head of our School of Civil Engineering. Do this silently and independently.
3. Each group *selects a Recorder.*
4. *Round-robin sharing of ideas.* Within each group, proceed around the group with each person in turn sharing one idea from his/her list not already on the Small Group list. The recorder writes the idea on the easel for everyone in the group to see. Continue reading ideas around the group until all ideas have been recorded on the easel.
 - The recorder should use the words of the person presenting the idea and not try to restate the individual's idea.
 - No discussion or refinement now, but clarification is OK.
 - Proceed quickly.
5. *Discuss items on Small Group List.* Explanations to encourage consensus. Combining and refining ideas are permitted.
6. *Small group vote.* Each group member votes for 5 items on Small Group List. Use 5 adhesive dots per participant (if provided), place check marks on the master list, or use any appropriate voting method.
7. *Full Group Round Robin.* Recorder for each group reports to the full session moderator the single top response on the Small Group List not already mentioned to full group. Moderator adds it to the Full Group List without comment. Assign numbers to ideas.
8. *Discuss as full group.* Clarify, combine ideas, seek consensus.

9. *Full group vote.*
 - If full group is small, give each person 5 adhesive dots to place next to their preferred ideas listed on the easel paper.
 - If full group is large or time is limited, have each person list top five choices on note cards.
 10. Announce results as soon as practical.
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The NGP Sessions

The first Nominal Group Process session was held at noon for clerical and administrative staff in a large conference room. Box lunches were served. An attempt was made to keep friends and co-workers from forming small groups with each other, with some success. Both small group and full session lists were posted on easels. Votes were taken using five adhesive dots per participant. Fourteen questions were nominated for final consideration by the staff members. The questions receiving the most votes are shown in Exhibit 3, but all easel papers were kept by the committee for further consideration.

Exhibit 3. Top-Ranked Staff (Noon group) Questions (votes received)

1. Give us examples of leadership decisions that you have made that prove you are a good listener. (7)
 2. What is your experience with conflict resolution and what is your style/approach? Give examples. (6)
 3. What new programs did you institute at your prior institution and what were the results? (5)
 4. How would you conduct/handle/utilize employee evaluations? (5)
 5. What assets of the school attracted you to apply? (5)
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Later that afternoon, all Civil Engineering faculty members were invited for cookies and drink in a large classroom for their NGP session. Three groups were formed. Two small groups used an easel for Step 4 in Exhibit 2; one small group preferred writing on a sheet of paper where they sat. During the *Full Group Round Robin* (Step 7 of Exhibit 2), the questions offered by the small groups were entered into an MS Word file that was projected onto a screen at the front of the classroom. Nineteen questions were nominated. Because this electronic format precluded the use of red adhesive dots, and because time was short, a different voting method was employed. Each participant was asked to write the numbers of the five questions he/she preferred, one on each of five note cards provided to each person. As each person left, his/her cards were placed on a table in piles corresponding to the question numbers receiving votes. Several faculty members stayed to watch the piles grow at different rates. The note card method proved to be very fast and visual. The results for faculty are summarized in Exhibit 4. The faculty members who attended said that it was a useful – even enjoyable – way to get their input.

Exhibit 4. Top-Ranked Faculty (3:30 PM group) Questions (votes received)

1. As Head, whom do you work for? (9)
 2. How do you resolve conflict? (6)
 3. How do you make faculty accountable? (6)
 4. Why are you interested in the position? (5)
 5. What is the worst thing you have heard about Purdue's CE program and what would you do to change it? (5)
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The student session featured pizza at 5:30pm, in the same classroom that had been used by the faculty. The electronic method of accumulating the small group lists was again used, as was the note card method of voting. The students – both undergraduate and graduate – were enthusiastic and serious about this activity. They generated 23 questions for their final vote. The five questions ranked most highly are shown in Exhibit 5.

Exhibit 5. Top-Ranked Student (5:30 PM group) Questions (votes received)

1. Do you support improving physical facilities? How is this accomplished? Office space? Lab space? How will you decide what improvements take priority? (12)
 2. How would you insure that Purdue stays in touch with industry's wants and needs? (9)
 3. How are you planning to increase funding for the department and how do you plan to use the funds? (9)
 4. Would you sacrifice the quality of education to improve ranking? (9)
 5. What are your short-term vs. long-term plans for the school? (8)
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After the NGP Sessions

The Head Search Committee took all the questions nominated by the small groups during the three sessions and placed them into the following categories:

- VISION AND PHILOSOPHY FOR CIVIL ENGINEERING AND THE SCHOOL
- MANAGEMENT SKILLS, EXPERIENCE, STYLE
- FACULTY DEVELOPMENT
- GRADUATE PROGRAM / RESEARCH MISSION
- UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM MISSION
- OUTREACH AND DEVELOPMENT

Because there were more than 80 questions in the combined list, the committee spent several meetings (and the weeks in between) reducing the list to a manageable number of questions that would cover all the major issues that had arisen during the sessions. Those individuals who did not attend a NGP session were allowed to suggest questions to be considered by the committee. Keeping in mind the questions that received the most votes, questions were sometimes combined to produce a list that could be used during a candidate's visit. The list had the advantage of ensuring that all candidates would be asked the same questions. As Exhibits 3, 4, and 5 indicate,

the issues of greatest concern varied by stakeholder group. It is unlikely that such a broad spectrum of issues would have been captured if the NGP (or something like it) had not been used. Each group would be given time with each candidate during his/her visit and were free to ask any questions they wished, but the combined and refined list gave the Head Search Committee members the guidance they needed to represent the concerns of their constituents while being fair and consistent with all candidates.

Conclusions

Although several months passed between the Nominal Group Process sessions and visits by candidates for interviews, the questions generated by those sessions provided valuable guidance to the Head Search Committee as they evaluated potential candidates and prepared for the Interview Phase. The group aspect of the sessions seemed to foster a sense of teamwork. Several NGP participants expressed their appreciation for being included in the search process in this way. The request for questions to ask the candidates, rather than a list of qualities or characteristics, proved to be a good idea. It gave the Head Search Committee insight into the concerns of the various constituent groups and allowed the committee to provide better representation for those groups.

Reference

¹ Iowa State University Extension (2001). "Tips For Nominal Group Process", <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/decisions/nominal.html>, last updated Thursday March 01 2001, retrieved 6 January 2007.

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