

## **The Evolving Role of the External Search Firm in the Canadian Decanal Search**

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### Résumé de l'article

Malgré le rôle essentiel que jouent les doyens d'université dans le leadership et la réussite des universités, la plupart de nos connaissances sur le décanat au Canada sont issues d'une perspective institutionnelle, y compris notre compréhension du processus de recrutement et de sélection. Les résultats présentés dans cet article permettront de mieux comprendre comment la participation accrue des agences de recrutement externes a influencé à la fois le processus de recrutement et l'expérience des candidats. Des vice-recteurs, des doyens et des représentants d'agences de recrutement ont participé à cette étude. Les résultats ont plusieurs implications importantes pour la politique et le processus de recherche, et le cadre conceptuel proposé soutiendra de nouvelles recherches dans le domaine de l'embauche de cadres supérieurs dans les universités canadiennes.

# THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE EXTERNAL SEARCH FIRM IN THE CANADIAN DECANAL SEARCH

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## Abstract

Despite the critical role academic deans play in the leadership and success of universities, most of what we know about the Canadian deanship we know from an institutional perspective, including our understanding of the recruitment and selection process. The findings presented in this article will facilitate a better understanding of how the increased involvement of external search firms in decanal searches has influenced both the decanal search process and the experiences of those candidates involved in the search. Provosts, deans, and search firm representatives participated in this study. The resultant findings have several important implications for search policy and process, and the conceptual framework proposed will support new research in the area of senior administrative hiring within Canadian universities.

**Keywords:** decanal hiring, senior administrative hiring, institutional recruitment, search firm

## Résumé

Malgré le rôle essentiel que jouent les doyens d'université dans le leadership et la réussite des universités, la plupart de nos connaissances sur le décanat au Canada sont issues d'une perspective institutionnelle, y compris notre compréhension du processus de recrutement et de sélection. Les résultats présentés dans cet article permettront de mieux comprendre comment la participation accrue des agences de recrutement externes a influencé à la fois le processus de recrutement et l'expérience des candidats. Des vice-recteurs, des doyens et des représentants d'agences de recrutement ont participé à cette étude. Les résultats ont plusieurs implications importantes pour la politique et le processus de recherche, et le cadre conceptuel proposé soutiendra de nouvelles recherches dans le domaine de l'embauche de cadres supérieurs dans les universités canadiennes.

**Mots-clés :** recrutement décanal, recrutement de cadres supérieurs, recrutement institutionnel, agence de recherche

## Introduction

Academic deans are ultimately responsible for ensuring universities can fulfill the increasing societal expectations of institutions of higher education and those who lead within them (Boyko & Jones, 2010). Deans are the individuals formally responsible for both the academic and administrative operations of a particular collection of schools or departments within a university (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009). Deans have been understood by scholars to be both middle managers or mid-level leaders (Austin & Jones, 2016; Boyko & Jones, 2010;

Hendrickson et al., 2013; Rosser et al., 2003) and senior administrators (Arntzen, 2016; Perlmutter, 2018; Wood, 2004). While these notions may appear to be in conflict, they are perhaps more so representative of the assessor's own positionality rather than the specific nature of the decanal role. When considered in the context of a college or faculty, deans are senior administrators. However, if considered in terms of the hierarchy of the wider university, deans are middle managers.

The dean is a central component of a university's leadership team (Del Favero, 2006; Dunning et al., 2007; Jackson, 2004). Morris (1981) went so far as to claim

that the dean is “at the center of a university’s *raison d’être*” (p. 8). Consequently, the recruitment and selection of qualified deans is vital to the overall success of universities. The majority of decanal searches within Canadian U15 universities are supported by external search firms.

The use of external search firms by universities in North America began in the 1970s (Mottram, 1983). In Canada, search firms were initially hired to support the work of the search committee, primarily by advertising and promoting a particular position (Usher et al., 2009). However, as this article demonstrates, search firms have become much more involved in the decanal search process in recent years.

While there is a limited body of literature that explores the recruitment of deans specifically, it is neither focused on the Canadian context nor the candidate experience, nor is it empirically grounded (Boyko & Jones, 2010; Usher et al., 2009). This article enhances and expands the limited literature on the recruitment and selection of academic deans within Canadian universities. By focusing on the experiences of those directly involved in the process not only do we learn more about the process from a non-institutional point of view, but a more fulsome understanding of the search process overall is also possible.

Using reference point theory (RPT) as a means of better understanding decanal candidate decisions within the recruitment process is also novel. Although Harvey et al. (2013) theorized that RPT could be used to understand how decanal search committees make decisions, the framework lends itself to individual decision-making processes within organizations as well. The findings presented in this article demonstrate that RPT can serve as a framework to organize our understanding of how recruitment practices inform successful decanal candidates’ decision making within the recruitment process.

## The Role of the Firm

There are several institutional benefits to using an executive firm to support a search. Mottram (1983), a former dean-turned-search firm consultant in the United States, argued that executive search firms help to not only improve the likelihood of a successful hire, but they make the hiring process more efficient in an academic context. Such firms help in the development of the formal advertisement, sell both the position and institution to

prospective candidates, present the search committee with the full list of applicants, and tailor the entire process to the particular institution (Ellis, 1995; Usher et al., 2009). Search firms help provide access to candidates who might otherwise not be aware of or interested in a particular position, and help those prospective candidates who may become involved in a search to maintain confidentiality (Dowdall, 1999; Mottram, 1983).

Good executive search firms are willing to spend time on and with the people from the organization looking to fulfill a specific vacancy (Ellis, 1995; Lamoreaux, 2011). Search and recruitment firms also need to be aware of the influence an organization’s culture can have on a particular search (Ellis, 1995; Lamoreaux, 2011). This awareness becomes especially important as constituents in many universities are not entirely comfortable with the level of involvement of external search firms in senior administrative searches (Harvey et al., 2013; Usher et al., 2009), nor are they particularly familiar with the overarching process.

## The Decanal Recruitment Process

Boyko and Jones (2010) provided an outline of the policies and procedures that govern the process by which academic deans are recruited, selected, and appointed in Canadian universities. Of the 30 institutions they surveyed, 19 struck internal search committees to oversee the process, three institutions used elections to select a dean, and at a further three institutions the president themselves made a choice, with varying degrees of input from faculty (Boyko & Jones, 2010). The majority of institutions Boyko and Jones (2010) examined followed largely democratic procedures with, although to varying degrees, active involvement of faculty on search committees. It is interesting to note, however, that Boyko and Jones (2010) made only a passing reference to executive search firms supporting the search committees in the Canadian context.

There are three generally agreed upon stages in the overall recruitment process: generating qualified candidates, maintaining the status of these candidates, and converting the best of these candidates into a new employee (Dineen et al., 2002). Contemporary universities all follow very similar recruitment and selection processes to fill vacant deanships (Harvey et al., 2013; see also Twombly, 1992). These similarities are often evident in institutional documents.

Harvey et al. (2013) divided the selection process into five stages. The provost's office or president's office establishes a selection committee representative of the university community. An external search firm is then selected to support the search committee. Once the firm is in place, they support the search committee to perform a high-level needs assessment of the college or faculty in search of a dean. The executive search firm also supports the committee in managing the advertisement of the position and pre-screening applicants to establish a list of potential candidates to present to the search committee. Finally, following receipt of the list of applicants from the search firm, the committee typically makes their first formal contact with those whom they have short-listed. An in-person visit to campus may follow this initial phone call or video conference. Following these campus visits, the search committee makes a hiring recommendation to the provost or president.

## Understanding the Recruitment Process

Influences on the decanal recruitment and selection process are varied and intricate. To understand how these influences impact the candidate experience and a candidate's decision-making process it is essential not only to consider the environment in which contemporary deans operate, but decision making within this context. By employing reference point theory (RPT) it is possible to gain a detailed understanding of how individuals involved in the recruitment and selection process influence, shape, and inform a candidate's experience and decisions.

Harvey et al. (2013) proposed RPT as an appropriate means by which to study the process of selecting an academic dean and to understand why search committees choose external candidates over internal contenders. However, RPT can also serve as a framework to organize our understanding of how the context of higher education, expectations of the dean, and recruitment practices inform successful candidates' understandings of the recruitment process. By exploring the use of RPT to create a consciousness of how candidates establish reference points and thereby make decisions, it is possible to raise awareness of how search firms and others influence the decision-making process of the candidates within a search. As illustrated in Figure 1, RPT helps us to understand better how decanal candidates experience

recruitment activities, how these experiences influence their creation of decision-making criteria (or reference points), and how such reference points affect the ultimate decision they make—whether to accept or decline the offer of a deanship. RPT has its origins in Fiegenbaum et al.'s (1996) strategic reference point theory (SRPT). Before we define RPT, we must first explain SRPT.

## Strategic Reference Point Theory (SRPT)

Fiegenbaum et al. (1996) developed SRPT as a means of predicting decision-making within organizations. They postulated that individuals use specific targets or reference points in their decision-making processes. How decision makers use a particular reference point is dependent upon their background knowledge and where they see themselves or their organization in relation to that point (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996). For example, if an individual sees themselves in a better position relative to a particular reference point, they are more likely to be risk-averse in their decision. Alternatively, if they perceive that they are worse off than the specific reference point, they are more likely to be inclined to choose actions that involve greater risk (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996).

## Reference Point Theory (RPT)

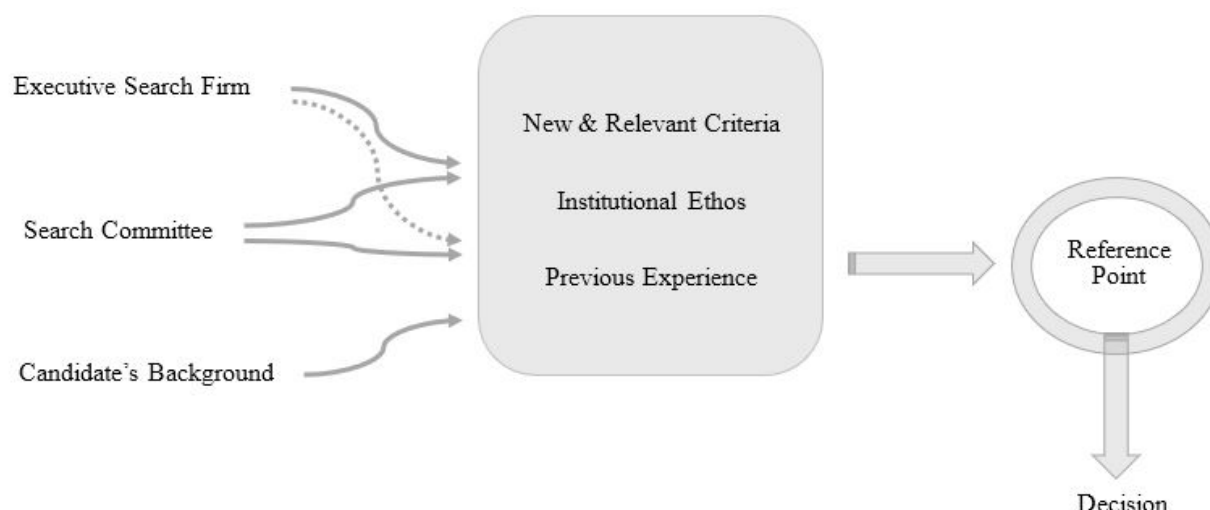
Using SRPT to understand processes that take place within universities helps to clarify how the past experiences of individual members of the university community influence their decision-making processes. Harvey et al. (2013) adopted Fiegenbaum et al.'s (1996) SRPT, theorized its application to the decanal recruitment and selection process, and renamed it RPT. Harvey et al. (2013) proposed using RPT as a means of understanding the decision-making process of decanal search committee members.

## Methodology and Method

In this article I use data gathered from a dissertation study exploring how individuals directly involved in decanal searches experience those processes. Their experiences highlight the perception amongst stakeholders that the role of external search firms in the Canadian U15 decanal recruitment process has become increasingly involved in recent years. The following research questions will be answered in this article:

**Figure 1**

*The Candidate Decision-Making Process (Usunier, 2021).*



Note. Based on Fiegenbaum et al. (1996) and Harvey et al. (2013).

1. How do selected deans, provosts, and search firm representatives perceive the role of the external search firm, particularly as it relates to the experiences of candidates?
2. Given the elements of a decanal search and the experiences of candidates, provosts, and search firm representatives, how can the process be enhanced to support the likelihood of deans' success?

Based on the experiences shared by eight successful decanal candidates, three provosts, and two search firm representatives, I explain how these individuals understand that firms are much more active in supporting decanal searches than ever before. Multiperspectival interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the experiences shared by study participants (Larkin et al., 2019).

The multiperspectival IPA design allows a researcher to gather data about one particular event or process from several directly related groups of individuals (Larkin et al., 2019). IPA is an appropriate analytical approach when a researcher is interested in exploring how individuals experience or perceive a particular situation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA

focuses on analyzing patterns of how individuals make meaning in a given context rather than attempting to produce a theory of that process (Larkin et al., 2019).

IPA studies usually involve small sample sizes and employ semi-structured interviews, as the aim is to be able to provide detailed analysis about a few specific cases (Smith & Osborn, 2003). These authors argue that semi-structured interviews facilitate a dynamic dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, where the direction of the conversation can shift as need be. Research questions in IPA studies are usually broad and open (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2003). This openness facilitates a degree of flexibility that is essential when a researcher is interested in the rich detail(s) of an individual's experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

IPA research questions are typically "how" questions, as the overarching goal of an IPA study is to understand the meaning research participants make of particular events, situations, or experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). From thematic developments within individual cases, researchers move to analysis between and across groups of related cases (Larkin et al., 2019). Sustained engagement with the transcription of the interview is the best way for the researcher to achieve such an understanding (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As these authors



noted, by first identifying themes in specific interviews, and then connecting or relating the themes of individual interviews to each other, the analysis can explore, compare, and contrast the experiences of each interview participant.

## **Participant Selection, Interviews, and Analysis**

Three separate groups of individuals were invited to participate in this study. Provosts, representatives from executive search firms, and successful decanal candidates were asked to share their experiences and perceptions of the decanal recruitment process. Participant decanal candidates shared their individual experiences of decanal searches, while provosts and search firm representatives, as integral players in the decanal search process, provided context to the experiences of decanal candidates. Purposeful sampling as described by Gall et al. (2007) was used to identify potential study participants. Outreach to potential participants was limited to western Canadian U15 institutions to ensure all were situated within similar institutions and regional contexts. Ultimately, the eight deans and three provosts who participated represented four of the five western Canadian U15 institutions. Confidentiality and anonymity were respected with the use of pseudonyms for participants and the redaction of identifying details from any published quotes. The two search firm representatives were from different Canadian executive search firms with experience facilitating decanal searches. Decanal participants were at various points in their careers. Dean Michael was in the first year of his deanship, Dean Margaret had been in her current position for just over two years, and Dean John had been dean of his faculty for three years. Dean Jane was just renewed for her second term. Deans Andy, Gordon, Matthew, and Nathan were nearing the end of their second and final terms as deans.

The interview questions for all participant groups progressed from general or biographical information to specific topics. Participants were asked about their perceptions and experiences of decanal recruitment processes, the strengths and limitations of these processes, and whether there is room for improvement in the processes as they have experienced them. The interviews continued until saturation was achieved and repetition of information began (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which usually

happened at the 60- to 90-minute mark, although some interviews ran longer.

Following data collection, analysis began. Smith and Osborn (2003) advised that analysis in a multiple participant IPA study should begin with the initial participant interview. Larkin et al. (2019) further added that the initial analysis should also be done group by group. In this single researcher study, analysis began with a review of the initial decanal interview transcript. Following several reads and re-reads of this initial transcript, a list of preliminary themes was established based on inductive coding. The list of themes resulting from the analysis of the initial transcript was of a level sufficiently high enough to enable connections to theory and across cases, but granular enough that they could easily relate to what was said in the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This initial list of themes was then updated based on the review of the seven additional transcripts from within the decanal participant group. The list of the overall themes of the decanal group was added to following analysis of each subsequent transcript in an effort to highlight the similarities and differences in the experiences and perceptions of deans. This process was repeated for the transcripts in the remaining groups, provosts and search firm representatives, and the subsequent progressive analysis ultimately resulted in a final list of themes from each of these three participant groups. These themes led to the categorization of broader major themes across each of the three groups (Larkin et al., 2019; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

## **Findings**

Each of the participants in this study discussed, often at length, the centrality of the search firm in their recent experiences of the decanal recruitment process. Provosts noted that they largely expect firm representatives to guide and manage all aspects of a search. Decanal candidates and search firm representatives commented extensively on the firm's role in supporting and facilitating the confidentiality of at least the initial phases of candidate outreach in the search. This confidentiality is particularly important when trying to recruit applicants who currently occupy other leadership positions. Participant commentary also highlighted the important selection function played by search firms and their representatives. Search firms maintain lists of individuals

interested in deanship roles and establish the initial list brought forward to committees as part of each search process. Participant provosts, deans, and search firm representatives all considered the wide-ranging involvement of search firms in decanal searches as both standard practice and integral to the recruitment and selection process.

Search firms play an increasingly key role in the conduct of decanal searches in western Canadian U15 universities. While initially expected to promote and publicize a search, firms are now expected to guide the search from the initial phases through to completion (Dean Margaret). Provosts are increasingly reliant on the search firm to facilitate and support several aspects of decanal searches. Provost Doug asserted that it would be “almost impossible to search for a dean nowadays without having” a firm involved. As search committees no longer expect candidates to respond to decanal position advertisements themselves, the proactive outreach of a firm and the building of that candidate list is an essential aspect of what firms now do (Provosts Doug and Greg). Search firms make initial contact with individuals to both see if they are interested in the position and to determine their suitability based on the position profile and job advertisement (Provost James and Provost Doug).

Sally, a representative from a Canadian search firm specializing in academic searches, and Fred, a partner with another Canadian firm working in academic searches, understood that one of the primary reasons universities hire them to support a decanal search is their ability to reach out to prospects and potential applicants. As Fred explained, “there’s a reason that you’re paying an external provider like us to support the search, right, so we have an active job in [the] identification of candidates.” Despite advertisement efforts in a variety of forms, Fred suggested that today, 90% of potential decanal candidates are proactively approached by search firms.

Several deans noted that they had not initially been interested in or aware of particular searches until first contacted by the search firm (Deans Andy, Gordon, Margaret, and Michael). When Dean Margaret originally expressed her disinterest in the current deanship she now holds, the firm continued to pursue the possibility.

The woman that was my contact from the search firm, she was exceptional at her job, obviously because I uprooted my family and moved to Maple University,

right?... I looked at the position description and it actually really resonated with me, so I did follow up.  
(Dean Margaret)

Recruiter persistence is key, especially when trying to recruit a sitting dean to an alternate deanship.

Having a search firm make all initial contact also supports the search committee’s efforts to maintain the confidentiality of anyone expressing interest in the position—particularly important in today’s context (Provost Doug). Five of the eight deans who participated in this study were recruited to their current positions while they were sitting deans at other institutions. From their reflections, it is evident that the search firm and their ability to facilitate these initial confidential conversations is particularly valuable. Dean Jane admitted that “once you’re connected to a search firm then they know about you and they call and say, ‘oh, this would be a good position for you,’” but they do this confidentially. The ability to foster the confidentiality of initial phases of a search has become increasingly important.

The ability of a search firm to proactively engage with those individuals whom they may be aware of and who may be interested in alternate opportunities reduces the likelihood of an individual’s interest in leaving their current position making it out to the wider community (Dean Gordon). As Dean Gordon described, “you don’t really need to be seen as looking for other jobs.” Sally expanded on these sentiments, noting that potential candidates

want to manage the risk of putting their names forward.... The risk is not job loss because they do have tenure. It’s not about job loss. The risk though is about their effectiveness in their ability to lead. When we engage candidates, they know they have a level of confidentiality until they get quite deep into the process.

Whereas it was once expected that search firms only assisted in the promotion of opportunities, prospective candidates and firm representatives now see part of a firm’s role as that of a confidential intermediary.

As most of the deans interviewed noted, individuals are no longer applying for deanships on their own; rather, they are waiting to be contacted by recruitment firms (Deans Andy, Gordon, Jane, Michael, and Nathan). Whereas candidates used to proactively express an

interest in a particular deanship, they now wait for an institution to first express an interest in them through a search firm. Dean Gordon argued that the fundamental role of the search firm has changed. Whereas the employment of search firms was initially motivated by a university's desire to extend the reach of their search, "now it's become the *de facto* recruiting [mechanism], it is recruiting. We're gonna recruit you into this position—so much so that the people out there are waiting to be recruited as opposed to apply[ing]" (Dean Gordon). The search firm's role has evolved based on their more proactive recruitment stance.

A search firm's involvement in the initial candidate outreach also provides them with an opportunity to play a central role in establishing the initial list of candidates that is ultimately presented to the search committee. The list that a firm brings to the committee is the result of significant effort and a major component of the role of an external firm in supporting a search (Deans Jane and Nathan; Provosts Doug and James). A firm supports the committee as they narrow the initial list presented to them by providing additional information beyond what may appear in an application package (Provost Doug). Dean Michael proposed that search firms now exert their influence over the candidate screening process in two distinct ways. First, they make significant efforts to convince the university's search committee that the candidates they bring to the committee are the best available (Dean Michael). Second, the firm must also be able to make the institutional search committee comfortable with the list they bring forward (Dean Michael).

When discussing the move to his current position Dean Michael highlighted that "it was the consultant who...thought that I would be a good fit for this particular position." Search firms meet, interact, and have lengthy conversations with prospective applicants and candidates long before search committee members do. The deans who participated in this study understood this preliminary screening or filtering function to be standard practice in decanal recruitment at large universities in Canada. All eight participant deans applied and had the initial phase of their interest in and application to their positions facilitated entirely by search firms. Each candidate, aside from the two who were internal, initially learned about the institutions they would eventually work for through the search firm.

Search firms influence the evolution of the short list

in less overt ways as well. The treatment of candidates by the search firm and their representatives or "handlers," as Dean Jane referred to them, throughout the search process can have significant implications on the candidate pool. As Dean Margaret stressed, "had I not been treated as well as I'd been treated [by the search firm's representative], had there been red flags for me through the process, it's very likely I would have made a different decision." Provosts also recognized the centrality of the search firm in how deans experience the search (Provosts Doug and James).

Search firms and their representatives are increasingly central to the experiences of those involved in decanal searches. Provosts expect firms to independently manage all aspects of the search. Decanal candidates and search firm representatives were clear in their understanding of the firm's role in supporting the initial confidentiality of the search and the selection function firms play through a variety of means, particularly in relation to the establishment of the initial list of candidates presented to the search committee. Based on the experiences shared by provosts, decanal candidates, and search firm representatives alike, the search firm is an essential and influential participant in the search process.

## Discussion

Engwall (2014), McDade et al. (2017), and Mottram (1983) noted that institutions hire executive search firms to increase the efficiency of the decanal recruitment process. Dowdall (1999), McDade et al. (2017), and Mottram (1983) additionally pointed to the role of the firm in both broadening the scope of a search and ensuring the confidentiality of candidates who allow their name to stand in a search. While similar sentiments were also expressed by the provosts, deans, and search firm representatives who participated in this study, there was special emphasis on the current role of the executive recruitment firm in proactively and confidentially engaging with prospective candidates, especially candidates who may otherwise be uninterested in or unaware of a current search. This proactive, confidential outreach becomes increasingly important when a firm is targeting a sitting dean. Participant provosts and search firm representatives were quick to point to the value of search firms in enhancing the efficiency of a search and in broadening the scope of searches, which is particularly important in the current



context, but these attributes seemed to be less significant for decanal candidates themselves.

Search firms are responsible for the first formal interaction with candidates during the recruitment or pre-recruitment phases (Harvey et al., 2013; Lavigne, 2018; Usher et al., 2009). Firms use their network to broaden the scope and reach of a search (Bright & Richards, 2001; Dowdall, 1999; Ellis, 1995). However, aside from those decanal candidates who were internal hires, participant candidates also assumed that the firm played a role in determining the fit of candidates within a given institution; this was the expectation of participant provosts as well. As part of a firm's efforts to broaden the scope of a search, provosts expect them to play this initial filtering role and save the committee the time of sorting through every potential candidate. Search firms likewise understood these functions to be a central component of their value proposition.

Harvey et al. (2013) applied RPT to the decanal selection process in the Australian context to further our understanding of how individual search committee members make decisions within that context. The use of RPT in this study as a means by which to understand the decanal candidate decision-making process is novel and an expansion of Harvey et al.'s (2013) original conceptual framework. Whereas Harvey et al. (2013) solely focused on the search committee member decision-making process, building upon their initial work, it is possible to better understand how candidates make decisions within the decanal search process in western Canadian U15 universities.

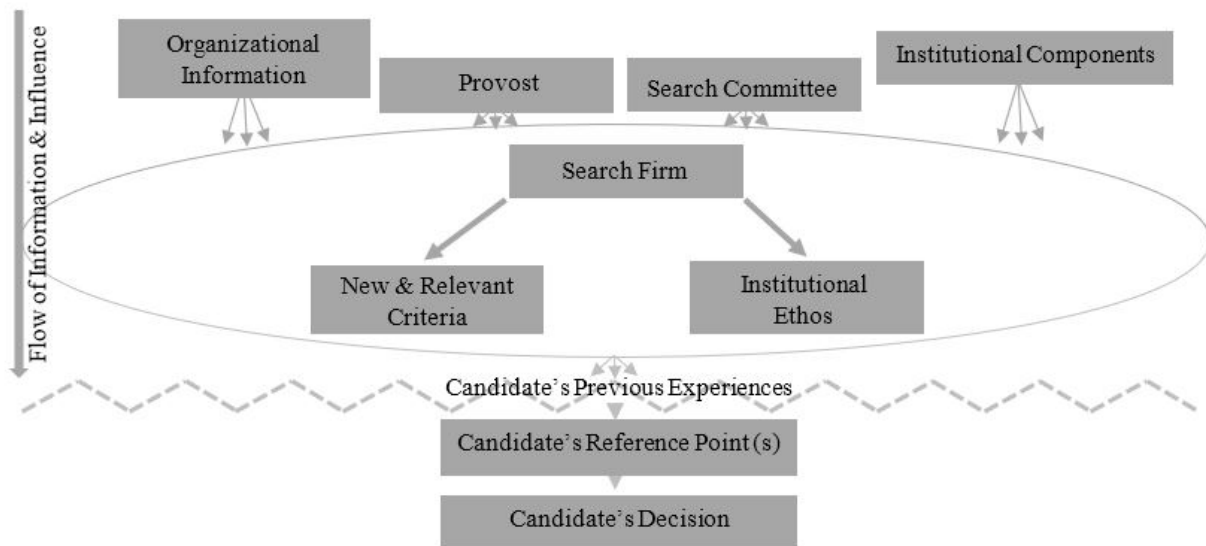
Recruitment firm representatives influence the decanal search process in a variety of ways throughout a search; they are central to the experience of candidates. They decide which prospective candidates they reach out to and are the initial sources of information for many candidates. This knowledge that firm representatives obtain primarily through their initial interactions with the provost and the search committee shapes and frames the search for candidates. Candidates process this situational knowledge, which, when filtered through their individual experiences, helps them to develop the reference points they employ when making decisions within the context of the search. Rather than playing a purely facilitative role, search firms have a significant influence over not only the candidate experience, but also a candidate's decision making within the search process.

Based on the perceptions shared by participants in this study, search firm representatives are one of the major vectors through which information flows to candidates in a decanal search. As Figure 2 depicts, influenced by their awareness and understanding of organizational information and institutional components, firm representatives provide candidates with details of the position and an understanding of the context in which the occupant of that position operates. Firm representatives share new and relevant criteria and convey the institutional ethos in their varied interactions with candidates throughout a search. While the influencers of a candidate's decision-making process within a search are not exclusively limited to search firm representatives, this group was repeatedly mentioned by participants and is thus the primary focus of this conceptual framework. However, the influences of others, including search committee members, the provost, family, mentors, colleagues, and others external to the search process can directly shape and inform a candidate's previous experiences and decision making as well.

The explicit inclusion of organizational information and institutional components as direct influencers of how search firms communicate details of the position to short-listed candidates is also a further expansion of Harvey et al.'s (2013) RPT. This information sharing begins with the initial outreach of a search firm representative. Candidates gather details throughout a search and consider them through the lens of their own experiences. Insights gained are then filtered through a candidate's previous experiences, and subsequently employed to create reference points. These reference points are then used to inform a candidate's decision-making processes as they relate to the search, including the ultimate search decision, accepting the decanal appointment if offered. Decanal candidates spend much of their time involved in a search working directly with the search firm's representative. Only in the final stages of the search, once short-listed, do candidates have the opportunity for any substantive interactions with members of the search committee. Until this point in time, all of their reference points have been established based on their own experiences and information provided exclusively through the search firm representative(s).

**Figure 2**

*The Search Firm and the Candidate Decision-Making Process (Usunier, 2021)*



Note: Based on Cohen et al. (1972), Fiegenbaum et al. (1996), and Harvey et al. (2013).

## Implications for Policy and Practice

The details provosts, search firm representatives, and successful candidates shared as part of this study were numerous, and the resultant findings have several important implications for policy and practice. Enshrining and detailing the role of the search firm and their consultants into institutional policy would further help to regularize the involvement of the search firm. Whereas search firms were initially hired to support institutions with the administration of a search and prospective candidate outreach, their role has expanded well beyond this narrow scope in recent years. However, institutional search policies do not reflect these changes. Clearly articulating the current expectations and deliverables of the search firm in policy would help to clarify their role in the search and the degree to which it is now expected that they support the provost, search committee, and individual candidates. Search firms have a robust expertise with which they can support the decanal recruitment process, but institutions need to clarify what they expect of firms at an institutional level if uniform conduct of firms and their consultants is desired across searches.

A review and updating of institutional policy will also inform the practice or process of decanal searches. Including more explicit details as to the conduct of searches and the role of the search firm will give all involved constituents a better grasp of the process from the outset, particularly candidates. Candidates understood the search firm and their representatives as the individuals most directly responsible for their experience of the search. As such, institutions need to carefully consider the firms they employ and how the reputation and conduct of a firm and its search consultants impacts candidates' perceptions of the universities who hire them. Finding a search firm to support a search that understands both the goals of a particular search and the wider institution is the first step toward identifying candidates who have the necessary skillset and personality to fit within a given institution.

## Implications for Theory

RPT proved useful in better understanding the major influencers in a decanal candidate's decision making within the recruitment process. However, RPT is less

valuable in helping us to understand some of the more individualized influences on particular candidates that have significant implications. It does not adequately account for the uniqueness of individual circumstances or every situational context. RPT enables a researcher to develop a strong and robust summary of influencers on decision making within a particular process but cannot provide detailed explanation at the individual level. Future expansion of this theory to completely consider the degree to which particular and unique influencers impact individuals would further enhance its value in understanding decision making within specific contexts. While no theory can ever be expected to account for the minutia of all individual experiences, further enhancements to RPT would continue to strengthen its value in supporting and facilitating qualitative research inquiries.

## Reflections on Methodology

With this as with any IPA study there are limitations. As a result of the focused nature of the inquiry, the generalizability or the “inferential range,” as described by Larkin et al. (2019), of the findings is limited. While there is some contextual generalizability, the understanding of the decanal recruitment process presented here is based on the experiences shared by a relatively small group.

The personal motivation of the individuals who participated in this study may also have limited the information and perspectives they shared. The simple fact that the decanal candidates who contributed were ultimately successful in the recruitment process also influences their perception of the process. Likewise, the willingness of search firms and provosts to openly share their insights and thoughts might also have had a limiting influence on data collection. Their concerns of reputation, confidentiality, and market positioning undoubtedly influenced their interest and ability to share certain details. Time may also have reduced the strength of feelings participants had during the actual recruitment process or the clarity of those experiences.

## Future Research

All provosts and successful decanal candidates who participated in this study were from western Canadian U15 universities. In future, it would be valuable to include individuals from institutions in Ontario, Quebec, and

the Maritimes. Broadening participation would enable further exploration of the decanal candidate experience across regions within Canada and comparisons among those regions.

Data collection for this study concluded prior to the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement in mid-2020 and the associated renewed emphasis of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) considerations within North American universities and institutions more broadly. Participants likewise did not raise these issues in any substantive detail during interviews. In future, explicit exploration of how a refocus on EDI has influenced the experiences of those involved in decanal searches would be valuable as an enhancement of the findings of this study.

As the data presented in this article was gathered prior to the worldwide onset of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it would be particularly interesting to explore how the sudden and unexpected shift to work-from-home policies at many Canadian universities has impacted the experience of candidates in the midst of decanal recruitment processes. The shift to virtual recruitment brought about by COVID-19 has the potential to significantly alter the candidate experience and their ability to interact with institutional stakeholders in traditional formats. The inability to arrange campus tours, the impact of virtual interviews, and the elimination of face-to-face interactions between candidates, search committees, and search firms have transformed how universities recruit. Exploring how these recent changes have been perceived by candidates can further inform decanal recruitment practices when Canadian campuses are able to fully return to in-person activities.

## Conclusion

Participant decanal candidates, provosts, and search firm representatives all confirmed the centrality of the search firm in today's decanal search, but the role of the search firm in western Canadian U15 universities has shifted in recent years. Whereas firms were initially hired to promote, advertise, and build awareness of senior administrative searches within universities, the scope of their efforts as they relate to decanal searches have broadened. Firms are now expected to engage in proactive confidential outreach with prospective candidates, act as the sole source of outreach and external point of contact for a search, filter the list of potential candidates

prior to presenting them to the search committee, and support the search committee as they establish their shortlist. Firms and their representatives engage in this work all while supporting candidates themselves as they progress through the various stages of a search. The role of the firm has become much more central, more multifaceted, and more influential in the contemporary decanal search process as a result.

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