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Headhunters at Harvard May Pick a Woman

By Alan Finder

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Could [Harvard](#) be preparing to select a woman as its new president? A scientist? A female scientist?



Only the nine members of the university's secretive presidential search committee know for certain — or whether they are leaning in any direction at all. The search to replace [Lawrence H. Summers](#) is as opaque as the selection of a pope and has posturing worthy of a political campaign.

Dr. Summers resigned last February amid fierce faculty discontent that had erupted in part over his suggestion that intrinsic aptitude could help explain why fewer women than men reached the highest ranks of science and math in universities.



So what could be more delicious, Harvard watchers and Harvard faculty members say, than naming a woman for the first time in the history of the 371-year-old university?

A list of several dozen potential candidates that the search committee shared with the 30 members of the Board of Overseers during a closed meeting in December included three women who are presidents at other [Ivy League](#) universities, The Harvard Crimson

reported and university officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed: Shirley M. Tilghman of Princeton, Ruth J. Simmons of Brown and Amy Gutmann of the [University of Pennsylvania](#).

Others suggest that the search committee's priority is to identify an insider who knows the institution well and already has rapport with students, faculty and alumni. Also on the list are three senior Harvard administrators: Steven E. Hyman, the provost, or chief academic officer; Elena Kagan, dean of the law school; and Drew Gilpin Faust, dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

There are suspicions, on the other hand, that the committee might be leaning toward the selection of a scientist to oversee the expansion of research in stem cells and other cutting-edge science on a new campus to be built in the Allston section of Boston.

"If I had to guess, I would say it would be somebody with intimate Harvard connections, perhaps an internal person," Jack Maguire, a former dean of admissions at [Boston College](#) who now does consulting for colleges and universities.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the new president is a woman," Dr. Maguire added. "It's just time. There are lots of good women around."

The search began last spring with a broad appeal to students, faculty and alumni for nominees. The committee quietly sifted through lists of nominees, with the goal of reaching a decision by February or March. The search has become the gossip of academia and even led to odds on an online betting site.

The search committee includes six members of the Harvard Corporation, which governs the university, and three members of the Board of Overseers, the much larger advisory panel. None of the corporation members returned calls for comment, nor did several dozen of the members of the Board of Overseers.

Many candidates whose names became public were quick to assure their current employers of their lack of interest in the post and their zeal for their current job.

"President Tilghman has consistently said she believes she has the best job in academia," said Cass Cliatt, a Princeton spokeswoman.

Dr. Gutmann told the Board of Trustees at the University of Pennsylvania, "I will say it for the last time: I am absolutely committed to being Penn's president, and I am not interested in any other presidency," according to *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, the student newspaper.

Lori N. Doyle, a spokeswoman for Dr. Gutmann, confirmed the president's remarks. "Just because someone's name is on the list doesn't mean they are interested in the position," Ms. Doyle said.

If Dr. Gutmann, who graduated from Harvard and was once provost at Princeton, did have an interest in the position, her chances were probably not enhanced by a photograph that preoccupied bloggers for a few days in early November that showed her posing with a student dressed as a suicide bomber at an annual Halloween party. Dr. Gutmann herself dressed up as Glinda the Good Witch.

She said afterward that she had been taking pictures with many students and that the moment she realized the nature of the student's costume, she declined to be in any more photos with him.

Also on the Harvard list is Alison F. Richard, vice chancellor at the University of Cambridge in England and a former senior official at [Yale](#), although shortly after her name surfaced her office released a statement saying that she was deeply committed to Cambridge and did not consider herself a candidate at Harvard.

It is hard to know how seriously to take the disavowals.

"It's not different from [Hillary Clinton](#) or [Barack Obama](#)," said Richard P. Chait, a professor of higher education at Harvard. "Why don't they just say, Yeah, I'm interested in being the president of the United States. People don't say that. There's a certain coyness."

Dr. Chait said he could not recall a president of an Ivy League university being chosen to head another Ivy League institution. At least half of the current Ivy League chief executives were reported to be under consideration, including [Lee C. Bollinger](#), the president of Columbia. During Harvard's last search for a president, in 2001, Dr. Bollinger, then the president of the [University of Michigan](#), made the short list.

Several Harvard professors said the faculty was watching the process attentively.

"I don't think any of my colleagues has a preferred candidate," said Everett Mendelsohn, a professor of the history of science and a critic of Dr. Summers.

“After our recent experience, we are very interested, a lot of us, in someone who knows how to listen and provide consensus even while taking initiatives and providing leadership,” Dr. Mendelsohn said.

A number of faculty members said they, too, expected the search committee to choose a consensus builder.

“I think the tough thing for the corporation is they want someone like Derek Bok, who doesn’t cause any unnecessary sparks, but also who is tough enough to negotiate with the faculty, which feels somewhat empowered,” said [Howard Gardner](#), a professor of cognition and education, referring to a former law school dean and Harvard president who was summoned from retirement to be the interim president.

Students interviewed on campus as they prepared for final exams said they doubted that the selection would have a major impact on them, though women enthusiastically endorsed the idea of a female president.

“I think that would be wonderful,” said Lotte Thomsen, a graduate student in psychology.

“To me, the tension is between having a president who doesn’t say wildly incorrect or offensive things about any groups, and having someone who is not simply politically correct,” Ms. Thomsen added.

Some students were eager to recite a list of issues that mattered to them, including proposed changes to the undergraduate curriculum and ideas for improving the faculty advising system.

“It can affect my life,” said Ben Schwartz, a freshman. “The priorities of the new president will have a serious impact on the university.”

Spencer Vegosen, a freshman, said he had not been carefully following the search.

“It’s not a huge topic that we discuss a lot,” Mr. Vegosen said. “School’s been a big enough adjustment.”