

# The Forum

## Search confidentiality:

### YEA

By **W. DONALD WESTON**  
Dean of the College of Human  
Medicine

This week, the Trustees will be embarking on the critically important process of selecting an individual to guide the future development of Michigan State University. Though fundamentally the responsibility of the trustees, the selection of a president is obviously of great concern to all members of the University community and to the diverse constituencies it serves. Some, in fact, have suggested that the search and selection process be

totally open to permit free expression of these concerns in the evaluation of individual candidates.

While there is a certain democratic appeal to the full participation implied in this proposal, it must be remembered that the search for a president is essentially a process of selection and not election. It is extremely unlikely that an "open process" would achieve the desired result of attracting the most qualified candidates. Academic leaders possessing the qualifications essential to manage a complex institution such as Michigan State are generally found in positions of considerable responsibility

elsewhere. If expressions of interest or applications received from such individuals were to become public knowledge and the subject of political debate, it would undoubtedly result in the mass withdrawal of the most qualified candidates.

**TO AVOID THIS** outcome, it is essential that the initial phases of the process — namely, the search for, and screening of, qualified applicants — be accomplished in strict confidence to both attract and protect the credibility of high quality candidates in their "home

institutions."

Obviously, in the later stages of the process, individuals who have undergone initial screening and emerge as final candidates should be willing to have their names to be released as an expression of their interest in Michigan State University. At this point, an advisory committee made up of representatives of the faculty, administration, student body and selected constituent groups should be afforded an opportunity to meet and provide input to the trustee before a final decision is made.

### NAY

By **ZOLTON FERENCY**  
Professor of Criminal Justice

In its current search for a new president, the MSU Board of Trustees by a majority vote has again decided to adopt the principle of "confidentiality" with regard to prospective applicants and recruits. "Confidentiality," in the context of a search for a president, means that the names and other personal details of those being considered for the post will remain secret during the selection process. Only the 10 or 12 members of the selection committee will know the names and qualifications of those being considered for the presidency, unless, as has happened before, the cloak of secrecy is inadvertently lifted or penetrated.

The principal argument in favor of

secrecy seems to be that more people will be encouraged to apply for the job, if they can be assured that no one but the selection committee will know of their interest in the position. Ultimately, if past practice holds true, the only applicant or recruit who will admit to having even considered the appointment will be the one who gets the job. Every other candidate for the post, eager or reluctant, will deny having given the opportunity serious consideration and will insist that her/his present assignment provides the ultimate in job satisfaction and opportunities for professional growth. That's why secrecy in the search process invariably produces rumors, news leaks, hasty denials and sheer hypocrisy.

**BY SPECIFIC** provision of the

Michigan Constitution, MSU's Board of Trustees has acquired constitutional status as a governmental entity. Generally speaking, the board is considered a co-equal branch of the government operating at the same level as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches and exercising specifically granted constitutional powers. Among those powers is the following:

*Each board shall, as often as necessary, elect a president of the institution under its supervision. He (sic) shall be the principal executive officer of the institution, be ex-officio a member of the board without the right to vote and preside at the meetings of the board. Article 8, Section 5.*

The execution of constitutionally mandated powers, to put it charitably, ought not be accomplished clandestinely.

Members of MSU's Board of Trustees gain office through a completely open process of nomination by a political party convention and then election by the general electorate in competition with nominees of opposing political parties. Thus, the manner of choosing the board itself stands in stark contrast to the present method of selecting a president. The board's own presiding officer by a process shrouded in secrecy. The public is not required to purchase either a political party or a university president in a political election, especially at today's prices for both.

**A NARROWLY** based search committee cannot adequately represent all the essential constituencies of Michigan State University. Full participation by all constituencies can be achieved only if the selection process is open and receptive to informed opinion.