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Selecting the right construction manager for campus construction projects

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As schools and universities across N.E. continue their campus expansion and renewal efforts, more and more prefer a collaborative "team approach" for their design and construction delivery method. Unlike the traditional "design-bid-build" scenario, a construction manager (CM) is engaged early to work with the architects and consultants, offering feasibility and constructibility analysis, developing schedules and budgets, and recommending alternatives that preserve both the architect's design intent and the school's budget. The CM keeps the project grounded in reality by assessing the financial and timing impacts of design development .

In order to ensure that you hire a CM that shares your vision and goals for the project, it's important to draft a thorough and detailed request for qualifications/proposal (RFQ/RFP). Following is an outline for a systematic approach that will help make the CM firm selection process an enjoyable learning experience for all parties.

1. Provide relevant background information on the college/school that is pertinent to the project including the mission of the academic institution, enrollment objectives, future growth plans from master planning exercises, site restrictions, and the school's relationship with its town and municipality. This information gives the CM an understanding of the school's priorities and goals .
2. A clear description of the project and its goals, size, expectations, and desired outcomes enables the CM to adequately estimate the resources -- both financial and human - required and the expected level of complexity of the project.
3. Assign a representative, typically the facilities director or business manager, as the point of contact from the academic institution to answer questions or clarify assumptions. This person, along with others who are knowledgeable about the design and construction process, usually comprise the Building or Selection Committee. We've found that when the Building/Selection Committee is formed early, the members are better prepared to choose the right candidate for construction because they are fully apprised of the project's details.
4. Include a well-written RFQ/RFP with enough project detail to allow the CM to compose a "technical" proposal that presents a specific approach and targeted comments. The school can either require CMs to follow a standardized format or give them the latitude to organize a response in their own styles. There are merits to both approaches -- standardization allows apples-to-apples comparisons that may make it easier to evaluate proposals against the competition. The more open-ended request provides an early view of how a CM thinks or organizes information.
5. Create a short "long list" and a shorter "short list" when determining which CMs to invite to submit RFP/RFQs. To save yourself time and energy, it's best to limit invitations to no more than five or six candidates. Our clients often do extensive research and cross checking with the other schools to narrow the field to the most appropriate CMs. The smaller field of competition makes the opportunity

to actually secure the work seem more attainable to the CM and encourages more detailed and project-specific responses. After reviewing the proposals, develop an even shorter "short list," perhaps two or three CMs, and invite those firms for an interview. The interview process allows the selection committee to evaluate creativity and chemistry of the proposed project team while allowing the CM to explain its project-specific approach in greater detail and address issues that need further clarification.

6. Swift decision and announcement - all candidates that were not selected should be informed of the selection committee's decision once a CM is chosen - including those who did not advance beyond the qualifications stage. This notification not only exemplifies the professionalism of the academic institution, but also shows appreciation to the CM candidates for their efforts.

7. Offer feedback - academic institutions that take time to give feedback to both the selected and unsuccessful CM candidates show a high level of commitment and devotion to their long-range capital projects, as well as the project at hand. Debriefing is a terrific learning experience, it builds a further understanding of each other's expectations and the foundation of mutual respect.

The key to a successful CM evaluation and selection process relies heavily on effective communication between the client and the construction candidate, before, during and after the formal proposal and interview. This open exchange of information allows all parties to understand each other's goals, desires, and assumptions. Whether successful or not, the CM gains valuable knowledge about the school and its aspirations and challenges as an educational and business entity.

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