

Biden Transition Signals New Influence Of College Faculty

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Education

I am a former university president who writes about higher education.



U.S. President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris have appointed dozens of transition teams, many featuring college faculty and university administrators (Photo by Joe Raedle/Getty Images) GETTY IMAGES

Even as the transition from a Trump to a Biden administration limps along, hamstrung by the recalcitrance of the outgoing administration, Joe Biden has been busy putting together dozens of transition groups and agency review teams that will be responsible for understanding the operations of major federal agencies and preparing the President-elect, Vice President-elect Harris and their cabinet to take the executive reins of the federal government on January 20, 2021.

One striking characteristic of these transition groups is the prominence of college faculty and researchers among their members. With their appointments, the Biden-Harris team is sending a message: Science is back, expertise is

in, knowledge is essential. After years of being belittled, ignored or bullied by the Trump administration, higher education is being given an important seat at the Biden table.

Agency Review Teams

The Biden-Harris Transition website lists 39 “agency review teams,” which still may have new members added in the days to come. They are composed of experienced and well-trained experts in policy areas across the federal government, from the arts to agriculture, health to homeland security, personnel management to the post office.

College faculty and university leaders have been given a strong role in these transition teams, many of which have more than 20 members drawn from think tanks, state government, nonprofits and private foundations.. According to one count by Inside Higher Education, “Of the nearly 600 mostly volunteers announced by Biden’s transition team to serve on agency review teams to help coordinate the transition from the Trump administration, nearly 80 are professors.” And that number underestimates higher education’s influence, given that many other appointees had previously held university posts prior to their current, listed appointments.

The appointees come from several of America’s elite universities like Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Duke, Columbia and the University of California, Berkeley. But land-grant and other public universities are well-represented too, including the Universities of Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota and Nevada along with Arizona State University and New Mexico State University. Other members were drawn from two-year colleges (Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Howard University).

If you consider the agency review teams for just the 15 formal executive branch departments, every one has at least one college/university representative except for the Department of Homeland Security. Here are some other numbers demonstrating the prevalence of faculty expertise on these executive department teams.

Five of the teams are led by college faculty or administrators. They are:

- U.S. Department of Agriculture; Robert Bonnie, Executive In Residence, at the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University.
- Department of Commerce; Geovette Washington, senior vice chancellor and chief legal officer at the University of Pittsburgh.
- Department of Energy; Arun Majumdar, Stanford University, where he holds the Jay Precourt Provostial Chair in the Department of Mechanical Engineering.
- Department of Interior; Kevin Washburn, Dean of the University of Iowa College of Law.
- Department of Justice; Christopher Schroeder from the Duke University Law School.

Seven of the teams have three or more members with current college/university affiliations. They are:

Agriculture

- Robert Bonnie (Duke University), Nicholas Anthis (University of California), Jonathan Coppess (University of Illinois) and Debra Eschmeyer (Arizona State University)

Education

- Norma Cantu (University of Texas), Bob Kim (John Jay College of Criminal Justice), Paul Monteiro (Howard University), Pedro Rivera (Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology)

Energy

- Arun Majumdar (Stanford University), **Dan Arvizu (New Mexico State University)**, Jonathan Elkind (Columbia University), John MacWilliams (Columbia University), Ramamoorthy Ramesh (University of California, Berkeley).

Health and Human Services

- Perrie Briskin (University of California, Berkeley), Jose Cordero (University of Georgia), Tom Inglesby (Johns Hopkins University), Edwin Park (Georgetown University), Mary Wakefield (University of Texas).

Justice

- Christopher Schroeder (Duke University), Dawn Johnsen (Indiana University), Pam Karlan (Stanford University), Richard Lazarus (Harvard University), Mark Lederman (Georgetown University), Barb McQuade (University of Michigan), Cristina Rodriguez (Yale University).

Interior

- Keven Washburn (University of Iowa), Bob Anderson (Harvard University), Bret Birdsong (University of Nevada), Chris Goranson (Carnegie Mellon University), Elizabeth Klein (New York University), Amanda Leiter (American University).

Treasury

- Mehrsa Baradaran (University of California, Irvine), Michael Barr (University of Michigan), Lily Batchelder (New York University), Chris Brummer (Georgetown University), Simon Johnson (MIT), Betsey Stevenson (University of Michigan).

The Covid-19 Advisory Board

In addition, as he prepares to address the nation's biggest domestic issue, Biden has appointed a Covid-19 advisory board to inform him and his administration on how best to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. The majority of the 13 members hold academic positions at American universities.

Two of the three co-chairs are currently affiliated with research universities: David Kessler, former Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration and now a professor of pediatrics and epidemiology at the University of California, San Francisco; and Marcella Nunez-Smith, Associate Professor of Internal Medicine, Public Health, and Management at Yale University and the Associate Dean for Health Equity Research at the Yale School of Medicine.

The other academic members of the board are:

- Ezekiel J. Emanuel, MD, PhD, Vice Provost for Global Initiatives and Chair of the Department of Medical Ethics and Health Policy at the University of Pennsylvania.
- Atul Gawande, MD, MPH, the Cyndy and John Fish Distinguished Professor of Surgery at Brigham and Women's Hospital, and Samuel O. Thier Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School.
- Celine Gounder, Clinical Assistant Professor at the New York University Grossman School of Medicine.

- Michael Osterholm, Regents Professor, McKnight Presidential Endowed Chair in Public Health and the Director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota.
- Robert Rodriguez, Professor of Emergency Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine.
- Eric Goosby, Professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine.

Forced by the Trump administration's stubborn refusal to facilitate a normal presidential transition, the Biden team has had to resort to something resembling a do-it-yourself approach, in which subject matter and policy experts fill in the gaps and answer the questions that historically have been covered by the exiting administration. As frustrating as that is to many people, it comes with an upside - competence and expertise are quickly being rediscovered in Washington.

A Biden administration won't completely put an end to the climate deniers or the preference among some for bad science, quack medicine, or "alternative facts," but it can go a long way to bringing back a respect for government that's guided by foundational knowledge and well-informed advice.