

Sharpening the Lens for Hiring Leaders

By Ginny Schaefer Horvath and Maya Ranchod Kirkhope

For those who once sought disruption in higher education to shake institutions from business as usual, 2020 has provided abundant opportunities for new perspectives and approaches. Events and crises in this turbulent year have upended every aspect of people's lives; for every sector of higher education, this upheaval has meant rapid pivots and problem-solving—often virtual—in operations, instruction, finances, enrollment, hiring, governance, performances, research, event planning, and student support.

Academic Search, the organization we represent, has had to rapidly adjust to the changing landscape in higher education. Consultants have seamlessly adapted to the new realities of virtual search: being strategic and effective in using Zoom, supporting partner institutions as they navigate virtual environments to fill key positions, and guiding candidates through each process in the cyber world. Within our organization, we have had extensive discussions about the challenges facing institutions and the changed expectations for skills needed as leaders in the pandemic and beyond. Essentially, as we now develop search profiles for executive positions, we are increasingly modifying the qualities leaders need as they address the new realities facing higher education.

The full impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have yet to be known, in part because communities and institutions are still in the midst of addressing this unprecedented public health crisis. Additionally, many defining characteristics of campus life were suddenly suspended at colleges and universities: not only classes, but performances, lectures, athletics, ceremonies and celebrations, residence life, social events, community service, student organizations, shared meals, and shared governance. The economic blow to already strained financial models in higher education has been great, as institutions face new enrollment crises; increased costs for social distancing, technology, and protective gear; decreased state and federal support; and loss of income from many sources. Other societal changes also profoundly affect campuses: increases in unemployment (and fear of layoffs), the deepening recession, job and financial market volatility, and sharp political division. Racial tensions and systemic injustice have been exacerbated in this crisis, as health care disparities and acts of violence toward people of color leave many people frustrated and angry.

Colleges and universities must navigate through and out of these crises, and those in senior leadership are now expected to have or to develop new essential skills for 2020 and beyond. As hiring authorities and search committees select new leaders through national searches or internal appointments, they must sharpen the lens through which they now see candidates. Although many qualities of successful leaders remain immutable, these top ten leadership qualities have been redefined for current and anticipated changes in higher education.

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1. FINANCIAL ACUITY.

Institutions have always sought candidates who are knowledgeable about managing complex institutional budgets, allocation and tuition formulas for public institutions, pricing and discount rates for private institutions, investment of endowment funds, and the financial implications of facilities, salaries, financial aid, market volatility, and technologies. Amid the current realities of the pandemic, however, financial acuity has expanded to include the ability to manage reductions in staffing, programs, and space. Hiring authorities and search committees now evaluate candidates' strategies for forecasting multiple budget scenarios, managing budget reductions, prioritizing areas of continued investment, and communicating decisions with clarity and sensitivity.

2. CULTURAL COMPETENCY.

A capacity to engage effectively across cultural differences and to value diversity has long been an expectation for leaders at all institutions. Previously, search committees may have asked applicants to include statements on diversity, inadvertently signaling that attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion is an afterthought or philosophical stance. However, in the face of increased racial tensions and violence in the United States and globally, deeper awareness of systemic injustice, inequality, and privilege is expected to be demonstrated in more than public statements. Cultural competency must be more integrated into the world views of all members of campus communities, as they seek to understand themselves and others, to practice inclusion, and to mediate inevitable cross-cultural misunderstandings and clashes. Hiring authorities and search committees must now judiciously evaluate candidates' ability to model this skill in many kinds of settings, to provide concrete evidence of advocacy and inclusive policies, and to demonstrate continuing growth and cultural insights.

3. TECHNOLOGICAL DEFTNESS.

Institutions have typically sought leaders who are comfortable, skillful, and sophisticated in using emerging technologies for instruction, institutional research, assessment, events, and business operations. Gone are the days when senior leaders relied on staff to manage their correspondence, report generation, and routine personnel management matters. The pandemic has heightened the importance of technological savviness and competence. Extensive use of collaborative tools for videoconferencing, shared projects, and virtual meetings requires leaders to model skillful and creative uses of technology. In evaluating candidates, hiring authorities and search committees must now discern their abilities to use technology with ease and to manage and motivate teams virtually.

4. CRISIS MANAGEMENT.

Senior leaders have been expected to be visible and effective at the helm when their institution or division faces a crisis. Now, however, in addition to preparing for natural disasters, fires, network system failures, active shooters, hate crimes, and injuries that require a coordinated response, leaders also face the threats of public health emergencies and shutdowns related to COVID-19 and beyond, with sharply rising incidences of stress and mental health crises of students, faculty, and staff. As campuses reopen during the pandemic, the levels of anxiety from various constituent groups, parents, and local communities are substantial, and leaders need to remain calm, reassuring, and decisive. Hiring authorities and search committees must now assess candidates based on their experiences in developing and implementing emergency preparedness plans, their approaches to leading through a crisis, and their steadiness and strength in times of uncertainty.

5. ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET.

As the pandemic continues to create turmoil with enrollment, increasing financial and related stresses, institutions seek leaders who demonstrate an entrepreneurial mindset. Such leaders have experience in creating internal and external partnerships, forging beneficial relationships with business and industry, and developing revenue-generating initiatives. While entrepreneurial mindsets are vital, implementing such initiatives tactically requires a respect for the mission and values of the institution— its history, its people, its strengths, and its local communities. Essentially, hiring authorities and search committees now evaluate candidates' potential to be calculated risk-takers, innovative entrepreneurs, and effective networkers in their communities, while holding to institutional mission and vision.

6. POLITICAL SAVVINESS.

Knowing how to work strategically with elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels has long been an essential skill for college and university leaders. But with so much of the population now sharply divided along political lines, leaders must be especially adept at navigating through strong political winds. Institutions count on interest and support from elected officials on both sides of the aisle, as well as from the public. Leaders may feel pressured to take a strong stand on controversial issues, but even in their advocacy, they must model calm, informed civil discourse and encourage campus constituents to learn from multiple— often conflicting—perspectives. Hiring authorities and search committees now evaluate candidates in part through looking at examples of their successful work with a variety of local and state government officials and with donors, employees, and families who express strong political or controversial opinions.

7. EMPATHY AND RESPECT.

Leaders of colleges and universities are expected to care about the people associated with their institutions and communities. More than ever, as faculty and staff face anxiety about their employment status and financial security, they look to leaders who are genuinely empathic and treat them with dignity and respect. Students need leaders who are aware of their challenges to attend college and are able to help them prepare for unpredictable career paths. Leaders now need to face the increasing harsh realities of student homelessness, hunger, and lack of affordable health care. Employees and students seek a sense of belonging and purpose as they attend and work at colleges and universities. In making appointments, hiring authorities and search committee now evaluate how candidates show respect for others, how they demonstrate authentic concern and support for those around them, and how they reveal their humanity, even in decision-making.

8. MULTI-GENRE COMMUNICATION SKILLS.

Of course, campus leaders must have strong written and verbal communication skills, but the ways that these skills are assessed are also changing. Leaders are now expected to be more than simply proficient in their writing and speaking. They must be persuasive verbal and visual storytellers, capable of delivering prepared and impromptu speeches—in person and virtually. Leaders must be efficient, timely, and clear in emails and memos, managing tone as well as content. They must have a clear sense of multiple, diverse audiences and a practical eye toward the frequency of communication. They must be good on camera and effective with reporters and media. They are expected to listen carefully, speak confidently, and facilitate productive problem-solving sessions. Leaders now need to know appropriate uses of social media and to manage what they share on such sites. Hiring authorities

and search committees now evaluate candidates in part on their ability to communicate clearly and powerfully in writing, in speaking live and on screen, in conversations and phone calls, and in emerging media.

9. HIGH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE.

Although perhaps the most valued characteristic of leaders has been the ability to demonstrate confidence, people now seek those whose strength comes from knowing themselves and the people they serve. In addition to the quality of empathy, effective leaders are expected to demonstrate other components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, and social skills. Campus communities are increasingly wary of leaders who are egotistic, impulsive, and prone to bullying and micromanagement. Leaders inspire and work well with others when they are comfortable with themselves, self-reflective, keenly aware of their privilege and responsibilities, and able to regulate their emotions. Hiring authorities and search committees now assess emotional intelligence through their communications and interactions with candidates and through their conversations with professional references.

10. AGILITY.

Although leaders come into their positions with considerable experience and well-established professional knowledge and practice, their success now depends on their ability to be flexible in the face of many changes. Despite careful planning, leaders now need to be even more adaptable to rapidly changing conditions, such as the adjustments related to the pandemic. As institutions seek cost-cutting measures, there is an upswing in interim positions and consolidated portfolios, and leaders are directly affected by changes in the scope and scale of their responsibilities. Leaders are now being asked to assume more substantial responsibilities; in some instances, they are now asked to

lead in areas where they have limited experience. Increasingly, hiring authorities and search committees will evaluate candidates on their ability to pivot, learn quickly and independently, and adroitly move a team forward.

Although many current job descriptions may not appear markedly different from those in previous years, hiring authorities and search committees are beginning to place greater emphasis on many of the leadership skills described here, redefined in light of the current crises and events. Demands on institutional leaders will continue to grow, and more than ever, institutions need to select leaders who are capable and effective during turbulent times—demonstrating the fortitude, unflappable ability, and moral compass to do the important work ahead. Hiring authorities and search committees need to use a new, sharper lens for viewing the skills and experiences of potential senior leaders for our times. **AS**

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For more than four decades, Academic Search has offered executive search services exclusively to institutions of higher education. As the subsidiary of the American Academic Leadership Institute (AALI), Academic Search also provides substantial support to a number of leadership development programs across all sectors of public and private higher education.