Strengthening the Foundation: Creating an Inclusive Environment for New Leaders

By Jay Lemons and Shirley Robinson Pippins

> " A successful search does not end at the identification, selection, and announcement of the appointee; developing and implementing a well-structured transition and onboarding plan is imperative to ensuring a smooth, successful change of leadership. "

Academic Search was founded to serve the higher education community. Simply put, our mission is to assist institutions during times of transition. All the marginal revenue of our practice is invested in programs to expand the pool of persons ready for leadership and to support current leaders. We have long been a leader in advancing the cause of increasing diversity in leadership ranks through the programmatic efforts of our parent organization, the American Academic Leadership Institute, as well as the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Council of Independent Colleges, and other national organizations providing leadership development. We are proud to have been an early signer of the Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants' (AESC) Diversity Pledge in Summer 2020. There is urgent work to be done, and we remain steadfast in our commitment to examining our own implicit biases and privileges, as well as their impacts. As thought leaders, we are dedicated to making a difference through the vital role we play in serving the cause of higher education.

As an expression of our commitment, and as a complement to the work we do in executive search, we are honored to be engaged currently with the City University of New York System as it facilitates the transition of seven new campus presidents. Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez recognizes the critical work to be done following the appointment of new leadership, and this is all the more significant during the pandemic. A successful search does not end at the identification, selection, and announcement of the appointee; developing and implementing a well-structured transition and onboarding plan is imperative to ensuring a smooth, successful change of leadership. It is particularly important to keep the challenges of leadership in mind when transitioning and onboarding candidates from traditionally underserved populations, particularly those who are serving as pioneers in the institutions they now lead.

Onboarding is a critical time: candidates of diverse identities that an institution has worked hard to recruit and hire will first intersect with the existing culture on campus and in the surrounding community. If there is a disconnect between the new leaders' prior experiences and the realities of institutional culture, policies, and procedures, additional challenges will emerge and complicate those traditionally encountered during leadership transitions. Such challenges are heightened if new leaders feel they are represented neither internally within the college community nor in the broader external community. By giving attention to the earliest phase of new leaders' tenures, institutions can nurture and enhance the productivity of these individuals and ultimately strengthen the foundation of the institution by creating an inclusive work and living environment. The following suggestions ensure that search committees and hiring authorities keep diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of any transition and onboarding plan.

CLEARLY ARTICULATE THE INSTITUTION'S PHILOSOPHY

Make sure the institution has a distinctly defined understanding of what the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion mean to the various campus constituent groups and how these important terms relate to the overarching mission of the institution. A clearly articulated philosophy and vision for diversity, equity, and inclusion is fundamental to showcasing the institution's commitments. This definition must be lived by the campus community and reflected in all areas of operation. If the campus does not already have a Chief Diversity Officer, a multicultural center, and/or office solely dedicated to efforts focused on promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, consider investing in these areas to foster a comprehensive, institution-wide vision and plan. Such efforts must go far beyond compliance and responding to complaints. Examine the curriculum and co-curricular programming and initiatives, as well as the external work of institutional leaders, and foreground those that demonstrate that the stated commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion is authentic and lived. In addition, continue to introduce new practices, policies, and events that support a multicultural campus community and the institution's philosophy as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

BUILD A DIVERSE TRANSITION COMMITTEE

As with a search committee, a diverse transition committee has an important role. We all have varying identities, experiences, and perspectives. Bringing together committee members who contribute different viewpoints and lived experiences and skills will steer a new leader through a more balanced and broadly informed onboarding process. Members of a transition committee can also introduce and otherwise serve as ambassadors for the new leader among diverse constituencies, serving as guides during the onboarding process and helping new leadership to adapt more quickly to the campus culture, complexities, personalities, and traditions.

Consider inviting other pioneers to speak with committee members to help shed light on the challenges and opportunities a traditionally underrepresented leader will face in the context of that society. Finding the right individuals to serve on a transition committee provides the groundwork for building close relationships professionally and personally.

INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY

It takes a village to raise a child; well, it also takes a village to onboard new leaders. A stable support system is critical for retaining new employees generally, and perhaps especially for new leaders from underserved populations who may have unique challenges. Through informal and formal processes, encourage those already on campus and in the community to create an open dialogue and to host welcoming events for the new appointee. Invite pioneers to share their lived experiences and insights with the new leader. Even in these times when in-person gatherings are challenging, if not impossible, networking events, happy hours, or brown-bag lunches virtually or in a socially distance context can serve as encouraging interactions among historically underrepresented communities and as a starting point for building a support system. Such events can also serve as a space to allow for engagement of unique perspectives and insights on policies that can help individuals from underrepresented groups to advance professionally.

CREATE A WELCOMING CLIMATE

Creating an environment that is truly inclusive means reexamining campus policies and procedures, both internally and externally facing. All marketing materials, including the institution's website, should authentically present diversity on campus, through language, visual components, and recognizable contexts. Take a walk around the campus and note any building décor, signage, statues/monuments, building names that do not reflect the inclusive climate the institution boasts and may, for example, be associated with the oppression of people of

color or those with disabilities. Employee benefits must be considered as well, making sure that, for instance, family leave is inclusive of the LGBTQ community. Does the institution's course curriculum align with strides in diversity, equity, and inclusion? Are the foods offered on campus inclusive of all cultures and health preferences? Is spiritual life inclusive? It is important for new leaders to feel empowered and have a sense of belonging when walking across campus, not feel alienated or excluded from the community they now represent.

CONSIDER AN EXECUTIVE COACH

One of the most crucial resources new leaders can have is an executive coach to walk alongside them in their first year of service. Executive coaching is a professional and strategic partnership to enhance and optimize one's leadership. It is a valuable investment in the vitality and well-being of both the institution and the new leader. Especially in the case of leaders who are pioneers on their campuses, executive coaches can serve as trusted and confidential confidants and companions who help leaders to freely examine their particular concerns and challenges as they accomplish their goals as well as those of the institution. Creating the opportunity for new leaders to have this additional source of support could be vital to their connection to their new institution, their emotional well-being, and ultimately their effectiveness as leaders.

BE PATIENT, AND PERSEVERE

Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion is one step, but establishing a culture consistent with it is more important. Institutions must work not only to recruit diverse pools of candidates and ensure their equitable consideration in the search process, but also to retain appointees with diverse identities through meaningful and effective transition and onboarding processes that set them up for success once they are on campus. Many people are involved in this support: board members, the hiring authority, search committee, faculty, staff, other internal and external community members, and the candidates themselves. Beginning with a strong first impression is a critical reason for being intentional about onboarding and transition work. Although it has become popular in recent years to focus on the first 100 days or some variation, artificial timelines hurt new leaders as often as they help them. No doubt all institutions want their new leaders to "hit the ground running." It is almost always the case that there are external events or an accumulation of issues that await new leaders. However, boards, cabinet members, faculty leaders, and others need to be patient with new leaders. Inevitably, there will be unforeseen ups and downs and challenges, but building a thoughtful plan for welcoming and getting to know a new leader can provide the necessary energy to persevere when the times are tough. This is especially so for leaders who are pioneers and may look, act, and sound different from their predecessors. **AS**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Jay Lemons became president of Academic Search in 2017, after serving for 25 years as a college president in both public and private higher education. A recognized leader in the academy, his experience in key leadership positions for many national, state, and local higher education boards and associations has provided him a vast professional network. Dr. Lemons has a passion for working with new and emerging leaders, and he has long been a champion and leader of efforts for increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education at the institutional and national levels.

Dr. Shirley Robinson Pippins joined Academic Search in 2016. Prior to this consulting experience, she served in major regional and national leadership roles, including as Senior Vice President of Programs and Services at the American Council on Education (ACE), as well as president for three colleges. Dr. Pippins has been actively involved in identifying and developing talent necessary to achieve and sustain excellence in higher education and currently serves as a faculty member with a number of programs designed to provide opportunities particularly for women and persons of color.