

COVID-19 Impacts on Leadership Transitions and the Search Process

By L. Jay Lemons, President and Senior Consultant, Academic Search

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Campus leadership and faculty, staff, and students across the country have been feeling the impact of the coronavirus for the last year. Most institutions were forced to close their campuses, switch classes to an online delivery of learning, and pull students abroad home. Many faced cutting majors and programs, partial furloughs or elimination of faculty and staff, and budget overhauls. As universities and colleges faced delayed or decreased enrollments due to students, particularly international ones, remaining at home or reconsidering future plans, their financial positions became ominous.

Many institutional leaders who may have been considering retirement or a move decided to delay their plans, and search work came to a standstill late last spring. As the COVID-19 crisis continued on, we did see some thawing of search for positions considered critical to long-term viability such as presidents and provosts. Uncertainty and limited resources made contracting with an executive search firm more challenging for many institutions, resulting in recruitment of position openings being managed internally in many instances. We saw a bit more activity this past fall as some campuses began to open, but the typical search process and more common search calendar has changed in ways that not only accommodate the world in which we currently live but we suspect will become part of the “new normal” in a post-pandemic period.

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Amid the pandemic, financial acuity has developed a new meaning to include the ability to manage reductions in staffing and programming, a need to diversify revenue streams, and increased fundraising capabilities.

Institutions are also looking for evidence of crisis management skills and favor more empathetic, calm, and reassuring leaders as campuses face low morale in this time of crisis. Leaders must be able to demonstrate their capacity to be a visible leader even when physical presence is a challenge and so many of the constituencies with which they will be expected to interact will be remote.

The combination of the pandemic and the activism of last summer that followed George Floyd’s senseless and tragic death have made competency in diversity, equity, and inclusion even more critical in search on many levels. The higher education sector has always led in DEI efforts even though there is need for improvement. For some time, some committees have asked for diversity statements as part of application materials. We are finding that this request for an additional statement or for candidates to

speak to this area as a part of their cover letter is becoming more common. Candidates must be able to demonstrate their successes in developing inclusive policies, understanding cultural awareness, support for marginalized groups across the diversity spectrum, and building diverse teams of faculty and staff. In addition, search committees are now routinely being educated on mitigating bias in their evaluation of candidates and proactively addressing issues of equity and inclusion throughout the search process in ways that were not as defined previously. Campuses are assuming that search firms have a responsibility to recruit diverse pools of candidates, but it is up to the institutions to select and successfully onboard these candidates.

The pandemic has also amplified the need for technological savviness and competence, not only among candidates but also search committee members and other campus stakeholders. Most search processes are now being conducted completely virtually or in a hybrid mode. Candidates must be comfortable with videoconferencing tools and demonstrate an ability to communicate effectively and confidently virtually. Gone are

the times when candidates fly to meet committees at airport hotels. Now, everything from initial to finalist interviews are being conducted online. Certainly, there are benefits to both candidates and the committees who do not have to take time away from their campuses for traveling and can meet quickly and efficiently for a set period of time at no cost to anyone. We have found that the lack of logistical nightmares also allows for two rounds of interviews with the committee, granting both the candidates and committee members increased

interaction and additional data points from which to help inform their decision making moving forward. We still have to wrestle with equity issues, such as rural areas that may not have broadband, or committee perceptions of virtual backgrounds. It is still unclear as well how to best manage ADA and HIPAA compliance challenges for candidates.

The unknown has indeed led to some uncharted waters. We suspect initial virtual interviews will remain a new standard, even after travel begins to pick up with more and more people getting

vaccinated. Campuses will likely return to in-person finalist visits, however, especially in executive-level searches. The typical search process has been disrupted and that is not necessarily bad – the virtual environment has added convenience and cost-savings measures for both the institutions and candidates as well an additional level of interaction that benefits all involved. Plus, the focus being paid to creating more equitable and inclusive search processes lays the groundwork for more successful and diverse appointments. **AS**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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.

For more than four decades, Academic Search has offered executive search services to higher education institutions, associations, and related organizations. Academic Search was founded by higher education leaders on the principle that we provide the most value to partner institutions by combining best practices with our deep knowledge and experience. Our mission today is to enhance institutional capacity by providing outstanding executive recruitment services, executive coaching, and transition support, in partnership with our parent organization, the American Academic Leadership Institute. For more information, visit www.academicsearch.org.