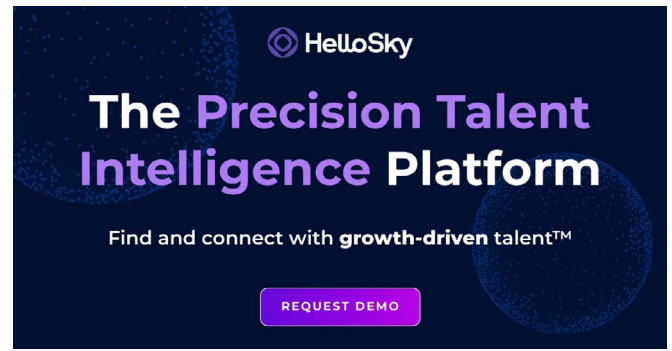




How Executive Search Firms Are Navigating Higher Education's Leadership Challenges



Higher education is navigating one of the most consequential periods in its history as institutions confront financial pressures, enrollment shifts, technological disruption, and heightened expectations from students, boards, and policymakers. As leadership demands continue to evolve, colleges and universities are redefining what they seek in presidents and senior executives to ensure long-term resilience and institutional success.

To better understand these shifts, **Hunt Scanlon Media** spoke with leading executive search consultants specializing in higher education about the challenges reshaping the sector, the changing profile of leadership talent, and the trends influencing executive recruitment across colleges and universities.

Higher education leaders today are navigating an environment defined by complexity and constant change, according to Shawn Hartman, SVP and COO of **Academic Search**. “Financial pressures, demographic shifts, evolving student expectations, technological disruption, and increasing public scrutiny all require presidents and senior leaders to make difficult decisions while remaining focused on institutional mission,” he said. “What makes this particularly challenging is that institutions are rarely confronting these issues one at a time. Leaders are often being asked to address enrollment concerns, financial sustainability, workforce challenges, governance expectations, and emerging technologies simultaneously. Success increasingly depends on a leader’s ability to build trust, communicate effectively, and create alignment among a wide range of stakeholders.”

Guidance Through Uncertainty

Academic Search also sees institutions placing greater emphasis on adaptability. “The pace of change across higher education has accelerated significantly over the past decade, and boards are

looking for leaders who can guide institutions through uncertainty without losing sight of long-term priorities,” Mr. Hartman said. “The challenge is no longer simply managing an institution effectively; it is helping an institution evolve while preserving the values and mission that define it.”

Several years ago, Academic Search partnered with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the Council of Independent Colleges to conduct a national study of presidential leadership competencies. One of the clearest findings was that while traditional leadership responsibilities remain important, today’s college and university presidents are expected to operate successfully across an increasingly broad and complex set of demands. “One of the most interesting findings from the study was the emphasis presidents placed on relational competencies alongside operational ones,” Mr. Hartman explained. “While financial stewardship, resource development, strategic planning, and change management remain essential, presidents consistently highlighted trust-building, authentic communication, resilience, emotional intelligence, and stakeholder engagement as among the most critical competencies for effective leadership.”

BY THE NUMBERS

Leadership Tenure Shrinks

The average tenure of a college president has declined by nearly **31%** over the past two decades...

...from 8.5 years in 2006 to 5.9 years today.

Source: The Change Leader

One of the most interesting trends is the contrast between the public narrative about higher education leadership and what we are actually seeing in searches, according to Mr. Hartman. “It is easy to find headlines suggesting that fewer people want to lead colleges and universities or that the leadership pipeline is weakening,” he said. “While there is no question that these roles have become more complex and demanding, our experience suggests a more nuanced reality. We continue to see talented and highly qualified candidates pursuing leadership opportunities across the sector. In presidential searches, provost searches, and other senior-level roles, many institutions continue to attract individuals who are deeply committed to higher education’s mission and eager to make a difference for students and communities.”

“What has changed is that candidates are becoming more thoughtful and selective in evaluating

(cont’d. to page 2)



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opportunities," Mr. Hartman continued. "Leaders want to understand institutional culture, governance dynamics, board relationships, and the organization's readiness for change. They recognize that leadership success depends not only on the individual but also on the environment in which they are asked to lead. Perhaps the most encouraging trend is that despite all the challenges facing higher education, we continue to encounter people who are motivated by purpose."

Stronger Pipeline

"They believe in the value of higher education, they care deeply about students, and they want to help institutions navigate a rapidly changing landscape," Mr. Hartman added. "The leadership pipeline may look different than it did a generation ago, but it remains stronger than many people assume."

"Declining public funding, enrollment decline, and rising costs are putting financial pressures on institutions and forcing these institutions to think differently about revenue models with a greater focus on philanthropy and industry partnerships."

Leaders of publicly funded institutions are well aware of the challenges of the political environment, according to **AGB Search**. "Risks to funding, board neutrality, academic programs, and student experience are at the forefront of institutional concerns," the firm said. "For privately funded institutions, demographic shifts at the student and employee levels are very powerful. For these institutions, where fundraising is so critical to financial survival, the ongoing financial uncertainties of our country and the world impact the level of donor willingness to participate in major gift strategies."

"Many institutions, both public and private, are facing enrollment challenges that affect their short-term budgets and longer-range planning," AGB Search explained. "They are thinking about how they differentiate from other institutions, how to develop programs that align both with market demand and institutional mission, how to effectively recruit and also retain students, and how to make their value proposition clear at a time when the value of higher education has been called into question."

One of the most sought after traits in our current environment is agility, AGB Search noted. "Institutions need leaders who are nimble and can quickly change plans or direction, much more so now than five to 10 years ago," the firm said. "For Cabinet members, increased financial pressures now manifest more visibly. These leaders must be fiscally savvy and approach decision making with a holistic, strategic mindset. Presidents must be even more adept at fundraising and donor stewardship. They also need to be mindful of the political landscape and delicately manage external influences, in collaboration with their governing boards."

According to AGB Search, for administrative roles, generally speaking, there are smaller pools of candidates than in the past, as more professionals prioritize security over *(cont'd. to page 4)*

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IN THE NEWS

Isaacson, Miller Helps Recruit 28th President for Texas A&M



Boston-based **Isaacson, Miller** has assisted in the recruitment of Susan Ballabina as the 28th president of Texas A&M. Andy Lee and Julie Filizetti led the search with Raul Bernal and Luciano Zuniga, and Madeline

Fitzpatrick. The members of the Board of Regents conducted a national search that produced a strong pool of candidates. Dr. Ballabina emerged through that process based on her experience, her understanding of the institution and her ability to lead at scale. "Our unanimous vote reflects a clear sense of direction for Texas A&M," said board chairman Robert L. Albritton. "There is strong momentum already building behind Dr. Ballabina across the university and among those who care deeply about its future, and we are confident she will carry that forward."

"Texas A&M has always been defined by its mission and the people who serve it," said chancellor Glenn Hegar. "Leading this university requires an understanding of that responsibility and a willingness to keep the focus on what matters most. Dr. Ballabina has shown throughout her career that she understands that, and that is a big part of why she is the right choice to lead Texas A&M forward."

the risk of the unknown at a new institution. "This is less true for CIOs, but very true for CFOs and CHROs," the firm said. "While institution presidents face challenging environments, we continue to develop robust candidate pools for those positions. The same is true for provosts and VPAAAs. Institutions continue to press for ever faster search timelines; some institutions address this concern by expediting the position announcement without carefully considering what the institution will need in the coming years from the role. We also see that the importance of candidate pool diversity varies in executive searches. While it remains of significant importance to some institutions, others do not broach the subject at all."

Higher education leaders are being asked to solve challenges on multiple fronts at once, Sally Bryant, CEO of **Bryant Group**, shared with Hunt Scanlon. "Institutions are facing budget pressures driven by research funding cuts, endowment tax increases and the long-anticipated enrollment cliff," she said. "Those realities are forcing difficult decisions about priorities, investments and talent. At the same time, we're seeing the early stages of what some are calling the 'unbundling' of higher education. The traditional model of the comprehensive university is being challenged by new approaches to learning, credentialing, workforce development and student engagement. It's not yet a mainstream conversation, but it will be."

Leadership turnover is adding another layer of complexity, Ms. Bryant explained. "Presidential transitions remain elevated across the sector and those transitions rarely stop at the president's office," she said. "Every leadership change resets priorities, relationships and expectations across the institution. In advancement, we often see new presidents seek their own vice president within the first 12 to 24 months. That leadership churn creates disruption, but it also creates opportunities for institutions to rethink the talent and leadership capabilities they need for the future. (cont'd. to page 5)

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The institutions that will thrive are not necessarily the ones with the largest endowments or the strongest brands. They will be the ones led by people who can adapt, innovate and inspire others through change."

Ms. Bryant also noted that institutions are looking beyond technical expertise. "Being an outstanding advancement leader, finance executive, academic administrator, or HR professional is no longer enough," she explained. "Boards and presidents increasingly want leaders who understand the broader forces reshaping higher education and can help their institutions navigate them. We're seeing greater demand for leaders who think beyond their functional areas and bring an enterprise-wide perspective to the challenges facing their institutions. They are looking for visionaries who can see around corners, communicate a compelling future and lead through uncertainty."

"The talent market continues to evolve alongside the challenges facing higher education," Ms. Bryant added. "We're seeing institutions combine positions and responsibilities as they look for new ways to operate efficiently and maximize resources. At the same time, many campuses are operating under hiring freezes—or hiring frosts—where every new hire receives heightened scrutiny."

Perhaps the most significant shift Ms. Bryant is seeing is a growing openness to talent from outside higher education. "Institutions recognize that tomorrow's challenges may require different perspectives than those that have traditionally risen through the academic ranks," she said. "Leaders from healthcare, corporate environments and other sectors are bringing expertise and fresh thinking that many institutions increasingly value."

"One trend that has not slowed is compensation. Despite budget pressures, competition for exceptional talent remains intense," Ms. Bryant said. "We continue to see upward pressure on salaries, particularly for leaders who bring a track record of innovation, fundraising success, institutional transformation, or cross-sector expertise. The talent market has not softened nearly as much as many expected."

Make Hard Reallocation Decisions

The higher education financial model is under real strain, Bill Peterson, partner at **CarterBaldwin**, explained. "Tuition discounting keeps climbing, the demographic cliff is now arriving rather than looming, many institutions are running structural deficits," he said. "The presidents and executives we place are being asked to make hard reallocation decisions, not just grow their way out. Beyond finances, the pressures cluster around a few themes; eroding public trust and skepticism about the value and cost of a degree, enrollment and relevance with shifting student demographics and alternative credentialing, governance and stakeholder complexity as boards, faculty, donors, legislators, and increasingly vocal students and alumni all expect a voice, and the speed of change with technology, AI, and workforce expectations moving faster than traditional academic governance is built to absorb."

The classic profile, a respected scholar who rose through the faculty and provost ranks, is no longer

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sufficient on its own, according to Mr. Peterson. “Boards still value academic credibility, but they are weighting other capacities more heavily such as financial and operational fluency, fundraising and external relationships, communication and crisis judgment, change leadership and resilience, authenticity and fit,” he said. “There is more attention to whether a leader’s values genuinely align with the institution’s mission, rather than a polished resume alone. The net effect is that the pool now includes more candidates from nontraditional backgrounds, including those who have led complex organizations outside the academy, though academic legitimacy still matters at most institutions.”

Mr. Peterson also pointed to shorter tenures and faster turnover. “Presidential tenure has been compressing for years, which keeps the search market active and makes succession planning a board priority rather than an afterthought,” he noted. “There is also a thinner sitting-president pipeline. Fewer accomplished leaders are eager to step into the top job given the scrutiny and demands, so the best candidates are often not actively looking and must be recruited directly.”

Mr. Peterson has also seen the need for more interim and non-traditional placements. He said that boards are increasingly comfortable with interim leaders and with candidates whose path runs through advancement, finance, or external sectors rather than the provostship.

Heightened focus on cultural and mission fit is another trend that Mr. Peterson has seen. “After several high-profile leadership failures, committees are investing more in due diligence around values, judgment, and how a candidate handles adversity,” he said.

Higher education leaders are facing a number of challenges in a rapidly changing and uncertain environment, according to Kenny Gregor, partner at **DHR Global**. “Declining public funding, enrollment decline, and rising costs are putting financial pressures on institutions and forcing these institutions to think differently about revenue models with a greater focus on philanthropy and industry partnerships,” he said. “Additionally, rapid advances in digital technologies, including AI, are reshaping teaching and research. Leadership today needs to balance this innovation with governance and ethics to ensure academic integrity is not compromised.”

“Employers are also seeking graduates who are job-ready, which puts pressure on institutions to adapt curricula and create more offerings for experiential learning, interdisciplinary programs, and micro-credentials,” Mr. Gregor added. “Student experience, mental health, and well-being are other challenges facing higher education institutions as students are increasingly expecting a more personalized experience, mental health support, and value for money from their institution in a time of affordability challenges. Finally, in this ever-changing environment leaders must face the challenge of driving organizational changes to keep up in systems which are traditionally slow-moving.”

Given the challenges and pressures on the higher education sector, DHR is seeing a shift from traditional academic leadership towards more complex, enterprise-level leadership. “Scholarly credibility and knowledge of academia will always remain important, but institutions are now placing a greater emphasis

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on strategic agility, financial acumen, and change management expertise,” Mr. Gregor said. “With technology disrupting the higher education space, senior leaders now more than ever need to have a real innovation mindset and an understanding of emerging technology like AI and online learning. As public financial resources become more constrained, senior leaders also need to have strong external relations and partnership building skillsets. These leaders will engage more and more with industry, government, donors, and global partners to enhance research impact, create student pathways, and secure financial sustainability. Internally, people leadership and culture building skills are being prioritized.”

Mr. Gregor also told Hunt Scanlon that the financial pressures that face all higher education institutions have created a bit of a squeeze on the talent market. “Reduced funding and declining enrollment have led to hiring freezes and some workforce reductions due to program cuts,” he said. “Key senior leadership roles are still being recruited for, but the competition for talent is stiff. Most senior leadership searches are international in nature, but we are noticing a trend in leaders being more hesitant to relocate with a tendency to want to remain closer to family post-pandemic, and in some cases, geopolitical tensions causing uncertainty and candidates being more risk averse.”

“The presidents and executives we place are being asked to make hard reallocation decisions, not just grow their way out.”

“The public’s increasing skepticism about the value of a college education is remarkable,” said Jim Sirianni, education practice leader and managing director at **DSG Global**. “The mountain of rigorous empirical studies demonstrating the ROI of a college education across many life outcomes including physical health, economic standing, and psychological well-being didn’t somehow vanish. Yet, we live in an era where contrarianism and outlier anecdotes can and do drive individual decisions. The challenge for our sector is to communicate the value of higher education in a resonant manner.”

Mr. Sirianni also said that there is an increased emphasis on evaluating candidates’ fundraising and financial skills. “More than ever before, we are seeing sitting presidents express interest in leading other institutions,” he said. “This shift creates unique opportunities for the institutions that welcome a sitting president. It can also create greater challenges for the institutions that must find a new president due to the transition.”

Higher education leaders are navigating one of the most complex operating environments in the sector’s history, according to Lili Rodriguez, managing principal at **Greenwood Asher & Associates**. “Budget pressures, enrollment volatility, shifting public perception of a degree’s value, unpredictable federal funding, and heightened government scrutiny have converged in ways that leave little margin for error—and even less room for leadership missteps,” she said. “The result has been a marked

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increase in turnover across the spectrum—presidents, provosts, deans, and vice presidents. Institutions that once had the luxury of a deliberate search now find themselves urgently needing leaders who can steady the ship while charting a new course. The cost of getting it wrong is significant. A poor hire doesn't just affect one division or one initiative; it can set an institution back years at a moment when it can least afford the setback."

The profile of an ideal senior leader has grown more specific and more contextual, Ms. Rodriguez explained. "Results matter more than ever—and so does the environment in which those results were achieved," she said. "Search committees are focused on demonstrated outcomes in comparable settings; a strong track record in one institutional context doesn't automatically translate to another. Institutional alignment has moved to the front of the evaluation in ways it simply didn't before."

"More than ever before, we are seeing sitting presidents express interest in leading other institutions."

"Personal connection to an institution or region has also gained real weight," Ms. Rodriguez added. "In a climate defined by turnover and post-pandemic instability, candidates with genuine geographic, professional, or personal roots signal something committees are actively craving: stability and the likelihood of longevity."

Ms. Rodriguez also shared that functional expectations have expanded as well. "Fluency with online education and AI is now table stakes across virtually every senior role," she said. "And given the demographic pressures on enrollment pipelines nationwide, the ability to engage meaningfully with enrollment strategy is increasingly expected—regardless of whether the position is directly tied to it."

"What hasn't changed is the enduring importance of collaboration, transparency, and communication," Ms. Rodriguez continued. "Boards, faculty, staff, and students all expect leaders who are visible, accessible, and candid—particularly when the decisions are hard. These qualities remain foundational, and institutions consistently name them among their highest priorities."

The search process itself has changed considerably, Ms. Rodriguez also pointed out. "Budget consciousness has reached a point where vacant positions are no longer automatically refilled," she said. "Institutions are consolidating roles, extending interim appointments—sometimes for several years—and increasingly naming those interims to permanent positions without a national search. What was once a process defined by community input and broad candidate consideration is being compressed or bypassed altogether. Committees are smaller. Timelines are shorter."

"At the same time, the market for strong leaders has never been more competitive," Ms. Rodriguez said. "Tenure in a role is no longer the prerequisite it once was—institutions are actively recruiting leaders with strong results and

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strong constituent support, regardless of how long they've been in their current seat. Salaries for high-demand roles are rising accordingly, while compensation at other levels remains flat or faces downward pressure."

Significant Regulatory Changes

Higher education confronts unprecedented challenges, mainly due to a shrinking number of college-aged students known as the "demographic cliff," along with ongoing financial deficits, reduced state funding, and increasing operational expenses. Institutions need to adapt by promoting lifelong learning and integrating technology effectively while preserving the essential human and collaborative aspects of education, according to Shelli Herman, president of **Shelli Herman and Associates, Inc.** "Additionally, higher education is responding to significant regulatory changes, shifts in federal policies, and political opposition concerning DEI efforts," she said.

"The era when academic pedigree was the primary asset for higher education leaders is over," Ms. Herman explained. "Nowadays, a successful university leader or president must blend respect for academic tradition with business agility, demanding high emotional intelligence to handle campus divisions. Executive searches now prioritize trust-building, resilience, and authenticity as the top leadership qualities. Emphasizing empathy, cross-cultural skills, and approachable communication, along with the capacity to make quick, tough decisions without distancing the academic community, are now the key criteria the search committee focuses on."

AI fluency has become a baseline expectation, not an elective, Ms. Herman also noted. "The labor market is forcing a necessary change," she said. "Higher education can no longer view AI as a niche subject. By 2026, most will understand that integrating AI into various majors will be essential for survival. This marks a pivotal year when colleges will face a new reality: students demand quicker routes to credentials, employers look for clear skills, and policymakers seek tangible outcomes. While the degree will still carry importance, it won't suffice on its own. Successful institutions will adopt shorter credential programs, foster AI literacy, create earn-and-learn pathways, and demonstrate measurable ROI. These realities impact the very people we will recruit into leadership positions."

"The challenges facing colleges and universities today range from the growing skepticism of the value of a degree, financial pressures, demographic decline, and the role of AI," said Ponneh Varho, partner in **Spencer Stuart's** education and social impact practice and leader of the firm's higher education practice. "There's a disconnect between cost structure and student demand, particularly with a decline in international student enrollment. Institutions must rethink their business model while maintaining a commitment to their mission and focusing on what makes them distinctive. The main challenge is not just managing financial and enrollment pressure but also redefining the value proposition of a college degree to students, families and the general public."

"Traditionally, institutions have prioritized academic credentials in hiring a president," Ms. Varho

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IN THE NEWS

Funk Associates Assists Clemson University with the Recruitment of 16th President

Following a national search, **Funk Associates** has assisted in the recruitment of Kevin Guskiewicz as the 16th president of Clemson University. Through the search process, the committee conducted stakeholder meetings

and interviews to engage the campus community in the process prior to the finalization of a position description and criteria for the search. The committee engaged with 18 different stakeholder groups including the faculty and staff senates, student governments, affiliated organizations such as the Alumni Association, IPTAY, the Board of Visitors, Clemson University Foundation, Clemson University Research Foundation and community representatives—among others.

“The search committee was overwhelmed with the robust and highly qualified candidates who expressed interest in leading our great University,” said search committee chair Cheri Phyfer. “Dr. Guskiewicz rose to the top of a remarkable list with his deep understanding not only of higher education on the national level, but familiarity with Clemson University and its land-grant mission.”

said. “That certainly remains important but is no longer sufficient. Boards are looking for enterprise leaders, not just academic leaders. They increasingly want experienced, battle-tested leaders who can navigate complex issues and crises in a multi-stakeholder organization.”

Increasingly, institutions are hiring experienced leaders, often sitting presidents, who have demonstrated an ability to operate under external pressure, according to Ms. Varho. “We increasingly see school deans and other senior leaders with backgrounds in operations and risk management, such as general counsels, rather than traditional academic pedigrees,” she said. “And even if they are not ultimately hiring individuals from outside of higher education, our clients are increasingly interested in exploring candidates who are motivated and capable of transferring experience from other professions to an academic leadership role. We are also, unfortunately, seeing more turnover and shorter tenures, given the increased pressure and public spotlight that academic leaders face today.”

Higher education leaders are navigating an unprecedented level of complexity, Ayla Maloney, managing partner at **The Christopher Group**, explained. “Financial pressures, demographic shifts, evolving student expectations, technological disruption, and increased public scrutiny are all converging at once,” she said. “The challenge is no longer simply managing an institution. It is leading transformation while preserving mission. Presidents and senior leaders must make difficult decisions about enrollment, academic offerings, workforce needs, and resource allocation, all while maintaining trust among faculty, students, boards, alumni, and external stakeholders. The institutions that will thrive are those led by executives who can balance long-term strategic vision with the agility needed to respond to a rapidly changing environment.”

Expanded Leadership Expectations

“Institutions continue to value academic credibility, but leadership expectations have expanded significantly,” Ms. Maloney said.

“Today, search committees are increasingly focused on strategic leadership, financial acumen, change management, and the ability to build consensus across diverse stakeholder groups. Leaders are expected to navigate ambiguity, communicate effectively, and drive innovation while remaining grounded in institutional mission and values. Perhaps most importantly, colleges and universities are placing greater emphasis on adaptability. In a landscape defined by constant change, organizations are seeking leaders who can anticipate challenges, identify opportunities, and guide their institutions through periods of transformation.”

Ms. Maloney also noted that the higher education talent market remains highly competitive, particularly for leaders with expertise in enrollment, finance, advancement, technology, and student success. The Christopher Group is also seeing increased demand for executives who bring cross-sector experience and a demonstrated ability to lead complex organizations through change.

“Institutions are becoming more open to nontraditional career paths when candidates possess the strategic and operational skills needed to address emerging challenges,” Ms. Maloney said. “At the same time, succession planning has become a growing priority. As leadership transitions accelerate across the sector, boards and institutions are placing greater emphasis on developing talent pipelines and identifying leaders who can position their organizations for long-term sustainability and growth.”

“At Summit, we’re trying to balance a couple of things,” said Carrie Coward, president of **Summit Search Solutions**. “First, we are trying to stay abreast of the ways AI is being used in search – essentially be informed and aware. Second, we discern which tools make sense to adopt or not and how to use them thoughtfully and ethically.”

Ms. Coward said, “the firm’s litmus test during this discernment is: does this add value in a way that helps us be more informed, efficient, and organized without compromising human interactions, relationships, and sound judgment? Recruiting and coaching are personal, relationship centered processes. No matter what tools we use to help along the way, personal communication and relationships are the foundation of our work.”

“The current landscape of executive recruiting in higher education reflects a sector undergoing profound transition,” said Robert Luke, co-founder of **EQU Advisors**. “Universities and colleges are no longer solely looking for traditional leaders but are increasingly seeking leaders who can navigate an environment shaped by digital transformation, diversity initiatives, and financial volatility,” he said.

“The old model of leadership has given way to a more dynamic pursuit for individuals with transformational leadership and boldness when it comes to protecting the liberal arts, contributing to workforce development, and redoubling their efforts on student success.”

“This change in recruiting has been in motion for several years now, but we are seeing an

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IN THE NEWS

ZRG Retained by Virginia Union University to Lead Chief Investment Officer Search

ZRG Partners was recently retained by Virginia Union University to lead in its search for a chief investment officer. Dakota Doman, managing director in ZRG's education practice, and principal Jerel Booker are leading the

assignment. The chief investment officer will play a pivotal role in advancing this vision. This senior executive will develop and implement comprehensive investment strategies aligned with the university's long-term objectives. They will oversee portfolio management to maximize returns while prudently managing risk. "This is more than an investment leadership role," Dr. Dakota said in a LinkedIn post. "It is an opportunity to steward resources in service of purpose — to ensure that financial strategy directly fuels access, equity, innovation, and generational impact."

acceleration of this change as automation and globalization increase (seemingly exponentially) with each passing year," said Veena Abraham, co-founder of EQU Advisors. "As a result, the demand for highly competent leaders that are comfortable managing through uncertainty and change with a sense of optimism and service has never been higher. Those that institutions tend to gravitate toward today and for the foreseeable future will be adept at balancing both mission-driven ideals and pragmatic organizational realities."

Everchanging Environment

"What we have found is that executive search consultants are increasingly sought out as strategic advisors and not just as talent matchmakers," Ms. Abraham continued. "We are helping institutions redefine what leadership means in this everchanging environment where the future of education symbolizes the broader transformation of work and society."

"Making sure a candidate's vision for institutional growth aligns with a college or university's strategic goals takes time, conversation, and genuine curiosity on both sides," Mr. Luke said. "It's not something that can be rushed. The process starts by taking a careful look at what the institution values most—its mission, current challenges, and long-term ambitions. From there, we help leaders articulate those priorities clearly so candidates can understand the bigger picture they'd be stepping into."

"Equally important is giving candidates the space to talk through their own ideas about growth and leadership," Ms. Abraham said. "We find that meaningful insights start to emerge when both sides have the chance to discuss what motivates them and what they hope to achieve. What we have observed is that these searches don't just include formal interviews, they are opportunities to exchange perspectives and test how well visions align."

Over the next few years, the most significant shift in executive search within higher education will likely involve a growing emphasis on assessing leadership through the lens of institutional resilience and systems thinking, according to Mr. Luke. "As higher education contends with financial pressures,

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evolving workforce needs, and new learning models, search committees are recognizing that success depends less on traditional measures of experience and more on an individual's capacity to anticipate and manage complexity," he said. "This will push executive search toward more sophisticated evaluation frameworks that examine how candidates think, collaborate, and make decisions under uncertainty. Rather than focusing solely on academic credentials or prior titles, searches will increasingly explore leadership behaviors, stakeholder engagement strategies, and adaptability to change. The evaluation of candidates may include the structure of what we have come to expect in searches, but the content may shift considerably to more scenario-based discussions to reveal how candidates approach institutional challenges."

"No matter what tools we use to help along the way, personal communication and relationships are the foundation of our work."

Colleges and universities need partners who understand the institution as a whole, not just the role in front of them, according to **ZRG Partners**. "From presidential and cabinet searches to interim leadership and advisory support, our higher education practice helps institutions navigate transition with sound judgment, sector fluency, and a customized, connected approach," the firm said. "Our work spans the full institution, from academic and cabinet leadership to advancement, student affairs, finance, facilities, athletics, and other functions where the right leadership can shape far more than a single office."

"We begin with the institution's mission, the role's purpose, and the work that must be done, then match those needs to the right solution," ZRG explained. "Across higher education, that may mean executive search, interim leadership, talent consulting, embedded recruiting or specialized support for critical functions. Through ZRG Aspen Leadership Group, clients also benefit from deep advancement search expertise."

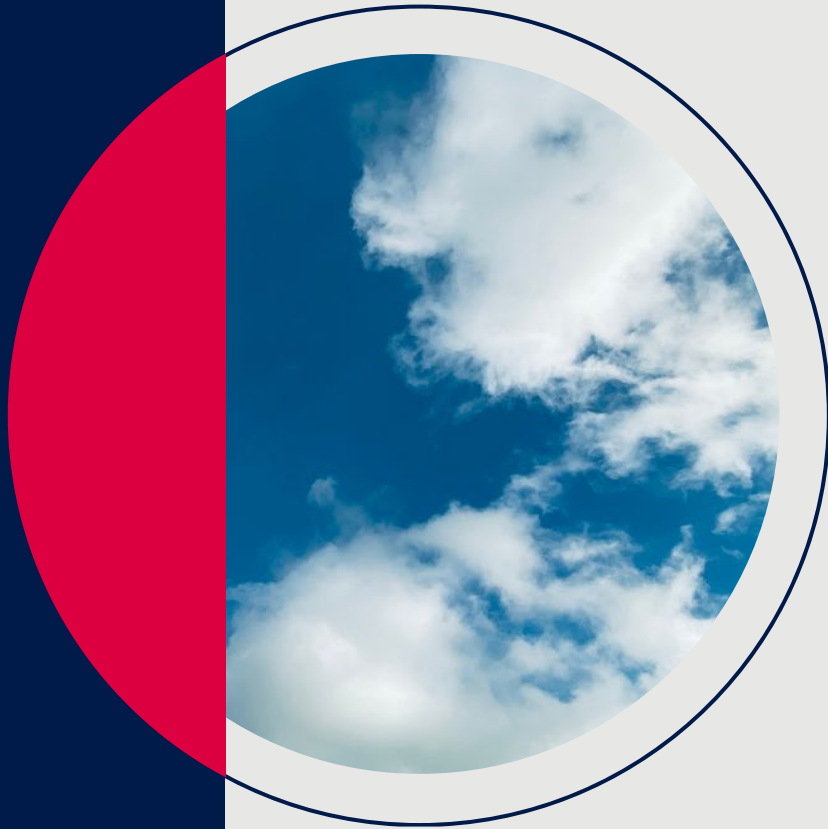
"Interim leadership is one of the clearest examples of this mandate-first approach," the firm continued. "Through ZRG The Registry, institutions gain access to the nation's most experienced interim leadership resource, helping them maintain continuity, navigate transition, and strengthen the path to permanent leadership."

Many of ZRG's managing directors have held the kinds of senior roles they now help clients fill. They bring firsthand understanding of institutional leadership, paired with the discipline, reach, and rigor of executive search. ZRG also brings a more strategic approach to transition. They help clients use leadership solutions with intention, not just urgency. Whether the need calls for permanent search, interim leadership, consulting, or a combination of services, we help define the right path forward.

ZRG brings proprietary tools, AI-enabled insights, and assessment capabilities, including ZI and the Taylor Assessment, to make search more informed, efficient, and evidence-based. That allows the firm's teams to spend more time on the human judgment that matters most: fit, credibility, leadership capacity, and institutional context.

Hunt Scanlon Top 60 Higher Education Search Firms

Academic Career & Executive Search Jennifer Muller, Managing Partner (860) 740-2600	Heidrick & Struggles J.J. Cutler and Jackie Gallagher Zavitz, Global Leaders (215) 988-1000
Academic Search Dr. Jay Lemons, President (202) 332-4049	Isaacson Miller Ericka Miller, President & CEO (617) 262-6500
AGB Search Roderick J. McDavis, Managing Principal & CEO (202) 776-0856	JDG Associates Darren DeGioia, President (301) 340-2210
Alexander Hughes Julien Rozet, CEO (33) 1 44 30 22 00	JM Search Jeff Slade, Partner Education Technology & Services (610) 964-0200
Allen Austin Robert Andrews, Chairman & CEO (713) 489-9724	Keeling & Associates Eric Engstrom, Executive Consultant (212) 229-4750
Anthem Executive Mike JR Wheless, Co-Founder & Principal (713) 570-6992	KBRs Andrea Forbes-Hurley, Managing Partner (902) 425-0101
Berkheimer Clayton Betsy Berkheimer-Credaire, President & CEO; Fred Clayton, Chairman (213) 621-2300	Lindauer Deb Taft, CEO (617) 262-1102
Blue Rock Search Human Capital Ruben Moreno, Founder & CEO (865) 686-5139	McDermott+Bull Alex Verdecchia, Principal (778) 388-2722
Boyden Brent Cameron and Alun Parry, Managing Partners +61 2 9225 7413	Myers McRae Premkumar Dhande, CEO +1 732 662 8975
Bridge Partners Tory Clarke, Co-Founder & Partner (212) 265-2100	NU Advisory Partners Meredith Rosenberg, Co-Founder & Partner (617) 413-8873
BRYANT GROUP Sally Bryant, CEO (972) 739-6030	Odgers Kennon Kincaid, CEO (646) 553-4758
Buffkin/Baker Martin Baker, Managing Partner (629) 216-2002	Parker Executive Search Laurie C. Wilder, President (770) 804-1996
Caldwell Heather Ring, Managing Partner (416) 934-2210	Pauly Group Angela Provart, President (217) 241-5400
Campbell & Company Kris McFeely, Managing Director, Executive Search (877) 957-0000	Pearl Street Collective, a Lindauer Company Adele Mezher & Maeve Clifford, Managing Partners (800) 285-0464
CarterBaldwin Executive Search Bill Peterson, Partner (678) 448-0013	Peña Search Carlos Peña, Founder & President (214) 775-0903
The Christopher Group Nat Schiffer, President (440) 953-9559	Pender & Howe Glenn Lesko and Travis Hann, Managing Principals (587) 881-7835
Cook Silverman Search Victoria Schiff Silverman, Managing Founder and CEO (415) 342-2444	R. William Funk & Associates Bill Funk, President (214) 522-1222
Cooper Coleman LLC Johnny Cooper, Founder & CEO (312) 380-9384	R.H. Perry & Associates Paul G. Doeg, President (828) 785-1394
Deerfield Associates Doug Cooney, Executive Search Consultant (781) 237-2800	The Registry, a ZRG Company Kevin Matthews, Senior Consultant (508) 366-5800
DHR Global Bryan Arthur, Managing Partner (403) 817-0980	Reffett Associates William Reffett, Founder, Managing Partner (425) 637-2993
DRG Talent Dara Z. Klarfeld, President & CEO (212) 983-1600	Russell Reynolds Associates Jett Pihakis, Managing Director (202) 654-7800
DRiWaterstone Human Capital Doug Trout, Chief Executive Officer (434) 962-9352	Scott Healy & Associates Dr. Scott F. Healy, President (315) 269-8666
DSG Global Jim Sirianni, Practice Leader and Global Mng. Partner, Education (484) 263-5518	Shelli Herman & Associates, Inc. Shelli Herman, President (800) 396-0595
Egon Zehnder Neil Hindle, Partner (212) 519-6000	Spelman Johnson Ellen T. Heffernan, CEO (413) 529-2895
EMA Partners Dick Sbarbaro, Senior Partner, Global Practice Leader, Education (708) 531-0100	Spencer Stuart Michele E. Haertel, Managing Partner (203) 324-6333
EQU Advisors Veena Abraham, J.D. and Robert Luke, Co-Founders (321) 438-3362	Summit Search Solutions Carrie Coward, President (828) 669-3850
FaithSearch Partners, Inc. Ed Fry, President (214) 865-6561	True Matt Engel, Partner (617) 970-6030
Greenwood Asher & Associates Dr. Lili Rodriguez, Vice President & Managing Director (850) 337-1525	TriSearch Bob Aylsworth, CEO & Co-Founder (720) 800-3636
Griffith Group Executive Search Jane Griffith, Managing Partner (416) 508-5353	WittKieffer Zachary A. Smith, Executive Partner, Education (888) 281-1370
Harris Search Associates Jeffrey Harris, Founder & Managing Partner (614) 798-8500	ZRG Partners Rosa-Lyn Morris, Global Market Leader, Education (205) 902-9029



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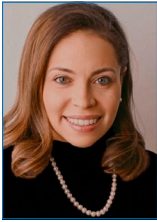
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SPOTLIGHT

Navigating the Search for Tomorrow's HBCU Leaders



*Amanda Washington Lockett is president of **TM² Executive Search (TM²)** and a dedicated scholar-practitioner with over a decade of experience in higher education and strategy development. Her research and practice focus on innovations in higher education, transformative leadership and institutional sustainability.*

TM² Executive Search specializes in providing exemplary executive talent acquisition consultation for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Predominantly Black Institutions, and other organizations looking to attract highly qualified, motivated, accomplished diverse candidates at all levels of the administration. The firm focuses on filling C-suite leadership positions, including presidents, chancellors, and board directorships.

Hunt Scanlon Media recently sat down with Ms. Washington Lockett to discuss the evolving demands of presidential leadership at historically Black colleges and universities, the qualities boards are prioritizing in today's search process, and the strategies institutions are using to identify leaders equipped to navigate a rapidly changing higher education landscape.

Amanda, what are the most common priorities boards identify when launching a presidential search, and how do those priorities differ among HBCUs?

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are institutions with deep roots, loyal communities, and a track record of impact that any incoming president will be expected to honor and build on. That context shapes what a board looks for when a search begins. In our work at TM², we often hear similar priorities: fundraising capacity and donor relationships, external visibility, mission fluency, technology readiness, and the competence to navigate complex funding environments. The particularities unique to each HBCU matter when it comes to board priorities in a presidential search. The institution's private or public designation, geographic location, student population, financial condition, endowment strength, and religious affiliation are just a few data points that determine the board's priorities, and no two HBCU searches are the same.

What are schools currently seeking?

What we know with certainty, across every board we have worked with, is that they are all looking for the same thing at the core: vision coupled with a proven skillset. The best HBCU presidents do not rest on what was built before them. They keep building, widening the path for those who will come after. These are leaders who can stand inside 150 years of institutional history and still keep their eyes on the next 150 years. The greatest presidents at the helm of HBCUs plant seeds for trees under which they know they may never sit in service of a mission that has always been bigger than the person leading it. Finding that person, for that institution, at that exact moment in its history is what TM² was built to do.

How do you engage key stakeholders—including trustees, faculty, students, alumni, and donors—throughout the search process to ensure alignment and confidence in the outcome?

At TM², stakeholder engagement is the foundation of every search we run. From the moment we begin, we are in deep, intentional conversation with every constituent group, including trustees, faculty, students, alumni, and the broader community. We do not collect their input and then move on; we treat every constituent as a partner in the process. What they share in a listening session, what they hope for, what they have seen, and what they need from the next leader shape nearly every decision we make throughout the process. The best searches are not simply about delivering a candidate to a board. They are about ensuring that an entire community feels heard, represented, and confident in who comes next. That is the standard we hold ourselves to at TM².

Looking ahead, what leadership challenges will define the next generation of HBCU presidents, and how should institutions assess candidates' readiness to address them?

The next generation of HBCU presidents will step into institutions that are, by every measurable indicator, on the rise. Applications are up. Philanthropy is paying attention. The national conversation about what an HBCU education is worth has shifted in ways that would have been hard to predict ten years ago. The challenge is finding a leader who can hold it and push it further. Artificial intelligence is the most immediate frontier. HBCUs are already in this space. The question is no longer whether they belong in the AI conversation. They do. The question is whether the next president can move their institution from interest to infrastructure, building the academic culture, faculty capacity, and industry partnerships that make it real for students. That is leadership. Philanthropy is changing, too. Major donors are paying attention to HBCUs in ways they were not a generation ago. The next generation of HBCU presidents must know how to meet that moment, not just by closing a gift but by building relationships that grow endowments over time and give an institution the financial foundation to lead rather than react. In that way, fundraising is not something you hand off; it is something you own.

So how do we assess whether a candidate is ready?

The best, most relevant questions speak to candidates' demonstrative data. In other words, evidence. We ask how this person led when resources were scarce, and the path was unclear. We ask what exists now that did not exist before they arrived. We ask where the candidates have been and what they have done. At TM², we believe the best indicator of what a leader will do is what they have already done. The record tells the story. Our job is to read it well.

How have the qualities colleges and universities look for in senior leaders changed in recent years?

The qualities institutions seek in senior leaders have shifted in ways that reflect the compounding

(cont'd. to page 17)

pressures now defining the sector. For much of higher education's modern history, the ideal candidate was evaluated primarily on academic credentials, institutional pedigree, and a linear trajectory through the faculty and administrative ranks. That profile has not become irrelevant, but it has become incomplete. Today's institutions seek a more composite leader. Financial fluency has moved from a secondary competency to a foundational expectation. Presidents are now evaluated on their ability to think strategically about resource allocation, engage governing boards on long-term fiscal sustainability, and work in genuine partnership with their chief financial officers. Institutions are also broadening their definition of who qualifies. Search committees are increasingly open to candidates whose pathways did not follow traditional academic trajectories, provided they demonstrate genuine mission alignment and the relational capacity to lead within higher education's distinctive culture. The margin for a misaligned leadership appointment has narrowed considerably. Institutions cannot easily absorb the cost of a senior leader who possesses the right résumé but lacks the judgment and adaptability the moment requires. Getting the right leader in the right seat is no longer simply an organizational priority but a strategic imperative.

What trends are you seeing in the higher education talent market right now?

TM² Executive Search is observing several notable shifts in the higher education talent market that have meaningful implications for how institutions plan for and execute leadership transitions. Sitting leaders are demonstrating a heightened reluctance to leave stable positions. The financial uncertainty of prospective institutions has introduced a level of professional risk that candidates are weighing more carefully than in previous cycles. For many experienced leaders, the calculus of a career move has changed. The opportunity to lead a new institution must now compete with the very real concern that the environment they are stepping into may not be positioned to support their success. The sector is also experiencing a higher volume of unplanned leadership transitions than in prior years. Institutions are increasingly turning to interim appointments as a bridge while permanent searches are organized and conducted. Both trends underscore a broader truth. In the current environment, leadership continuity is not guaranteed. The institutions that plan ahead and approach every search with strategic intentionality will be the ones best positioned to lead through uncertainty.

What leadership issue will most define the future of higher education?

The single greatest leadership challenge facing higher education today is the growing gap between what institutions cost to operate and what students and families can afford to pay. Everything else flows from that. Tuition increases have reached their limits. Enrollment is declining. Students and families are making different choices. And the institutions that have not yet moved from awareness to action are running out of time to do so deliberately. The institutions that navigate this moment well will not be the ones that cut the most. They will be the ones that lead the best.

TM² EXECUTIVE SEARCH



TM² Executive Search partners with higher education institutions to identify and develop exceptional leaders who drive institutional excellence.

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Top Searches Making News...

Lindauer Recruits CEO for Penn State Alumni Association



Lindauer has placed Reggie Bustinza as associate vice president for alumni relations and chief executive officer of the Penn State Alumni Association. He was selected after a nationwide search to succeed Paul Clifford, who departed Penn State in January 2025. The search was led by Lindauer executive vice president Faith Montgomery and senior consultant Raegan Harvey in partnership with Penn State. "Lindauer is honored to have partnered with PSU on this search and looks forward to seeing the impact of Bustinza's leadership as he strengthens alumni connections and advances the Association's mission for Penn Staters around the world," the search firm said. Mr. Bustinza brings nearly 20 years of alumni relations experience to his new role.

Anthem Executive Assists the University of Montevallo With President Search

Anthem Executive has assisted in the recruitment of Michelle R. Johnston as the first female president of the University of Montevallo (UM). Michael Ballew, Scott Watson, Mike "JR" Wheless, and Florene Stawowy led the assignment.



Dr. Johnston had served as the president of Georgia Southwestern State University since 2024. Prior to her current presidency, she served as president of three other higher education institutions: the College of Coastal Georgia, the University of Rio Grande and Rio Grande Community College in Ohio. Her top priorities have been enhancing student success, ensuring excellence in all academic and student development programs and expanding strategic partnerships and donor engagement.

Myers McRae Assists Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology with Provost Search



Following a nationwide search, **Myers McRae Executive Search and Consulting** has assisted in the recruitment of Richie Roberts as provost of Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology.

Kenny Daugherty and Brianna Douglas led the assignment. Dr. Roberts' selection was guided by a search committee of OSUIT administrators, faculty, staff and students, which was assisted by national search firm Myers McRae. "The entire OSU system shares a commitment to our students to not only provide the highest quality education in the classroom, but to prepare them for success after they graduate," OSU president Jim Hess said. "As a three-time OSU graduate, Dr. Roberts understands that commitment well and is ready to help pave the way for the next generation of Cowboys."

...More Searches Making News

WittKieffer Retained by Roosevelt University for President Search



Oak Brook, IL-based **WittKieffer** has been retained by Roosevelt University in Chicago to lead in its search for its seventh president. Ali Malekzadeh is retiring after being with the school since

2015. Senior partner Christine Pendleton, consultant Sandra Chu, senior associate Maya Holt-Brockenbrough, and senior advisor Ray Crossman are leading the assignment. Roosevelt University seeks a student-centered president who is committed to the school's social justice mission and who has the imagination and energy to build on the University's current trajectory, leading it boldly and creatively into the future. Roosevelt University is a private, non-sectarian university founded in 1945 by faculty, students and staff dedicated to fundamental access to education, excellence in teaching and social justice issues.

RH Perry & Associates Assists Holyoke Community College with Provost Search

RH Perry & Associates recently helped to place Jessica Nicklin as provost and vice president for academic affairs at Holyoke Community College (HCC).



Senior consultants Jessie Thompson and Levy Brown led the assignment. "Dr. Nicklin is a respected leader in higher education and an organizational psychologist, recognized for her strategic vision, collaborative leadership, and dedication to student, faculty, and institutional success," said George Timmons, president. "She is a proud, first-generation college graduate, and her extensive experience in academic and student affairs will be instrumental in advancing our strategic plan and enhancing HCC's impact in our community." Holyoke Community College is a public community college in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and the state's first community college, founded in 1946 as Holyoke Junior College.

AGB Search Helps Recruit 20th President for the University of Montana



Washington, D.C.-based recruitment firm **AGB Search** has assisted in the recruitment of Jeremiah Shinn as the 20th president of the University of Montana. His selection follows a national search that drew more

than 70 accomplished applicants from across the country. Roderick McDavis, James H. McCormick and Janice S. Fitzgerald led the assignment. "Dr. Shinn's on-campus visit affirmed our belief that he is an exceptional candidate who, throughout the search process, repeatedly rose to the top of an outstanding and diverse field of applicants," said Montana commissioner of higher education Clayton Christian. "His demonstrated leadership, commitment to student success and collaborative spirit make him uniquely suited to lead the University of Montana."

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