

What is Institutional Fit? What Search Committees and Candidates Should Consider

Identifying “institutional fit” is a vital, yet somewhat elusive part of the search process for higher education institutions. Beyond the more concrete criteria of experience, credentials, and leadership qualities – every search committee must determine whether a candidate fits in culturally with the institution for which they are applying. Similarly, candidates must decide whether an institution’s culture fits with their own administrative strengths and philosophies.

So, what is institutional fit? In short, candidates and institutions should share the same set of core values and cultural norms with regard to leadership and administration; they must also be committed to the same educational values and philosophy. But while it is easy to set forth the criteria that a candidate share the same values and mission of the institution, identifying institutional fit, in practice, is more difficult.

Here we offer suggestions for search committee members and candidates to consider when determining institutional fit.

Leadership Style and Character

A strong leadership profile is mandatory for candidates who are applying for senior administrative roles, however the style and character of the candidate’s leadership is just as important. Both search committees and candidates should consider whether the candidate’s leadership style will mesh well with the administrative norms of the university. Styles can range from formal to informal, hierarchical to collaborative, inclusive versus assertive, etc. Keep in mind the leadership style that will be most effective, is often influenced by the institution’s size and culture. For smaller institutions where there is a larger balance of power between faculty and administration, or where more constituents play a part in the decision making processes, the leadership will require a more transparent, involved and cooperative role. At larger institutions, the leadership may be expected to adhere to certain formalities, be an expert delegator, and to focus on a more narrow set of responsibilities.

Professional Strengths

The candidate should possess professional strengths and qualities that not only fit in with the institution’s culture and mission, but will translate to the opportunities and challenges that the institution currently faces. For instance, a small liberal arts college facing enrollment challenges will not only want to look at candidates with previous experience at small, liberal arts institutions (who are therefore likely to embody its values and culture), but also candidates who demonstrate vision and skill with regard to enrollment management.

Mission and Values

A candidate’s career path will give insight into their institutional and educational priorities, and the degree to which they embody the values of the institution. Candidates should discuss how their past experiences and accomplishments illustrate their commitment to the institution’s expressed goals. For liberal arts colleges, the candidate might discuss their role in developing liberal arts programs in their prior position. For colleges that place a premium on service and civic engagement, the candidate may demonstrate their similar commitment by relaying their own volunteer work, or the work they have done to foster community service initiatives at their prior institution.

Geography

It is extremely important search committees and candidates address the candidate's preparation and willingness to relocate. Candidates should take time to look into the region, particularly if it is different from what they are used to, and to understand the differences in lifestyle that relocation may involve. She or he should also take time to discuss this with their families, prior to interviewing for the position. By being thoughtful and honest about the challenges of relocation, candidates help ensure their own happiness and success; this also demonstrates to the committee the candidate's seriousness about the position.

Other Considerations

Search committees should make an effort to understand the candidate's views and priorities with regard to several important higher education issues, and how those views compare to those of the institution, including:

- interdisciplinary learning
- pre-professional programs and on the job learning
- online education
- international recruitment
- intercollegiate sports
- liberal arts education
- community partnerships
- corporate partnerships
- the needs of private versus public institutions
- the role of scholarship in promotion and tenure
- faculty service
- a focus on teaching versus research

Identifying institutional fit is an essential part of the search process, and by affirming this important aspect, search committees help ensure a candidate's future satisfaction and success in their new position.

To learn more about the higher education search process, read our post about the role of the search committee and [managing an effective search process](#).