



Putting Your Best Foot Forward

It begins with the application process

Letter of Application

The difference between a practicing community college leader, and someone who just wants to be one, is simply a matter of understanding the process necessary to obtain the position. Here are some general guidelines to help you achieve your goal of community college leadership. If you're ready for the challenge, be sure you understand the road that will get you there.

THE LETTER OF APPLICATION

When writing your letter of application, it's important point to remember that the college search committee and the internal and external constituents have developed the CHE advertisement and position profile with a specific purpose in mind — to help them select their new administrator.

Take the profile seriously. For example, if the profile states, “**Applicants should state in their letters of application how they would address the issues identified,**” your letter of application should do just that. The search committee is really not concerned with what you “believe,” they want to know what you have accomplished and how it relates to the position at their institution — in five pages or less.

After reading the profile carefully, respond to each issue or preferred criteria in the order they appear. Use bullets, be brief and refer the reader to the resume where key information is highlighted. Do not assume that the search committee will “read between the lines” and thereby determine that you are qualified. Rather, you must demonstrate in your cover letter that you are qualified — then they will pay attention to your resume.

Although some committee members will read a narrative letter of application and “check off” the statements that seem to relate to the profile, most prefer a candidate's letter to list the items and the candidate's response, in order, which demonstrates that the candidate paid attention to the committee's instructions.

The profile has described the tasks the successful candidate will do on the job, and you should portray your accomplishments in terms of the tasks identified. Remember, in most searches, the search committee worked long and hard on this profile description and they are most interested in the candidates who directly respond to the profile.

Always check over your letter of application to assure that you haven't overlooked spelling, typographical or grammatical errors or inadvertently included the name of the previous institution to which you last applied. Candidates are regularly eliminated because of such slip-ups.

The committee will be reading many, many letters of application and it's up to you to make sure that your letter (and resume) accomplishes its primary purpose — getting you on the semi-final interview list!

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The Resume

Understanding how to prepare a letter of application is only the beginning of understanding the application process. Next, your resume, your personal representative, needs to be carefully assembled to reflect your responsibilities and accomplishments.

THE RESUME

Remember, if your written materials aren't effective, you won't have an opportunity to sell yourself in the interview. The details regarding your accomplishments should be in the resume, not in the letter of application. The letter of application describes how you meet the profile characteristics and can be done in two or three sentences — not paragraphs — for each item. The resume documents specifically what you have accomplished.

You may want to re-do your resume for each application and highlight in **bold** the activities that relate to the profile criteria and are referred to in the cover letter.

- Standards: name and page number on the top of each page; plain white 24# paper; dark, black ink.
- Never, ever use your college letterhead stationery.
- Aim for a crisp, clean, professional look. Flush left margins are more effective (and use less space) than indented items.
- Do not staple or bind your resume and cover letter. It creates additional work for the college staff who must duplicate your materials.

The following is the most effective for a senior administrator's resume (see Sample Resume):

Section 1: Name

(Including Maiden Name), Home and Work Address, Home and Work Telephone Numbers, including office extension numbers.

Section 2: Professional Experience

(Reverse Chronological Order -- Current Position Listed First)

Provide basic information about your current and two or three most recent college employers. Include total headcount and FTE, total budget, number of faculty (both full time and part time), geographical area/population served, etc.

For your position, include the total budget for which you are responsible, number of staff supervised, etc. (You want the search committee to understand your institution and to see it as comparable to their institution.)

In addition to "Responsibilities," create an "Accomplishments" section for each of your three most recent positions and list activities that can be credited to you (and to you and your subordinates). It's all right to give yourself credit where it is due, but not where it isn't. Be brief and highlight significant accomplishments, especially those that relate to the profile.

Section 3: Formal Education

Eliminate your dissertation title. If you must use it, list it under publications. (Regardless of how profound and well-written your dissertation may be, every title sounds somewhat pompous when it is read aloud during a search committee meeting.)

Section 4: Faculty or Teaching Experience

Section 5: Community Activities

Highlight Board of Director Positions

Section 6: Awards

(League of Innovation Executive Leadership Institute, Kellogg Foundation, etc.)

Section 7: Grants or Proposals Funded

Section 8: Professional Activities

Section 9: College Committees, etc.

Section 10: Consultancies, Workshop Presentations, etc.

Section 11: Publications

Section 12: References

Your references should represent a cross section of people with whom you worked. Include superiors, peers, subordinates, including clerical staff, and community members. Keep it balanced between male and female references, and include references from your previous institution, if applicable.

Putting Your Best Foot Forward

It continues further with the interview process

The Interview Process

It is often stated that in positions of academic leadership, “Getting the job is more difficult than doing the job!” While, this may be, just an expression of frustrated applicants, it should be realized that going after leadership positions in any field is not for the weak-willed, or timid. Particularly in the interview phase of the process, knowing who you are and what strengths you possess is critical to your success.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The interview process, both as a semifinal candidate and as one of the final candidates for the position, is key to selection. The four essential factors for predicting success on-the-job and, therefore, where you have to “shine” to get the job, are;

- (1) Intellectual capacity,
- (2) Interpersonal skills,
- (3) Personal motivation, and
- (4) The ability to motivate others.

These four factors — the most important factors — need to be conveyed during the interviewing process.

Prepare, prepare, prepare. Review the materials sent by the college, highlighting particular items that you believe are most important. An obvious hint: **Review the criteria to identify what their key issues are and be prepared to answer questions about these issues.** Semifinal candidates (those who will be interviewed) typically receive the following information. If you are invited to interview in a non-Pauly Group search, you should request these materials.

1. List of members of the search committee, with designations of faculty, (what they teach, etc.), administrators/staff (positions), community members (their places of employment), and others;

2. Organizational chart;
3. Copy of the Profile brochure, if available;
4. Current catalog,
5. Student and faculty handbooks;
6. Strategic plan;
7. Collective bargaining agreement(s);
8. Summary report of last self-study;
9. Current budget;
10. Maps of area and college;
11. Student newspapers and local news articles about college;
12. Annual Report and/or alumni magazine;
13. Any additional material which would be helpful to you.

Review your application letter, identify any criteria items that are particularly strong accomplishments and speak about them if you are not asked a question that elicits them. However, do not attempt to “weave” your accomplishments into a question to which it does not pertain. You will be seen as trying to “control the interview” and your claims to be a collaborative, participative, team member will not be believed. Furthermore, you will not be responding to the question. “She/he didn’t answer my question,” is one of the most common complaints voiced by committee members.

Answer the questions asked. At the close of the interview, if there is time, remind the committee of additional accomplishments or qualities which they did not inquire about and which are important to their criteria.

Be prepared to enjoy the interview. If you don't relax, the interview committee won't either. They are judging you as a potential leader and co-worker — their supervisor. The committee members are asking themselves, "How would it be to work for this candidate?" Have a positive attitude, one of anticipation that you are meeting new people, learning about them, and telling them about yourself.

Dress for the Interview

Dress the part of the senior college administrator. For women this means no flowered skirts/jackets or suits. If you wear eye makeup, beware to the effect of eyeliner underneath your eyes. Particularly from a distance this "raccoon effect" can be most distracting to the interview committee.

For men, white, long sleeved shirts are the norm; no short sleeved shirts, even in the summer. Ties should reach the top or middle of the belt buckle — no shirt showing. It is not possible to be too conservative.

Save the flowered suits and loud ties for later — when you've got the job!

Beware of perfume and after shave. Many people are allergic and all are offended by too strong a scent.

Watch out for personal habits that are annoying and defeating. For example, some women and men have a habit of pushing their hair back or playing with their hair. When observed by a committee, it serves as a beacon that says: "This candidate is more concerned with his/her appearance than the question I've asked or what I'm saying."

Your goal is to have people identify you as a positive candidate as you walk through a group. Women, in particular, need to present a strong 'presence' and strong does not mean loud or boring. Also, conservative does not mean that you have to wear a black suit. For women, red, bright blue and navy, even deep pink, are also appropriate. If you are tall and/or large — take advantage of your size and don't try to disguise your weight or height. A large woman who dresses in a distinctive color rather than trying to disguise herself by wearing black, and who

carries herself elegantly and professionally, will be much more effective in the interviews.

The first 90 seconds: You never get a second chance to make a good first impression. Walk around the room, look at each person, shake hands, and say “hello”. It is not necessary to repeat your name, they know who you are. Repeat the committee member’s names. “Hello, Bill, I’m delighted to meet you.” You’re beginning to build a relationship with each person.

The hand shake is also important. Your hand shake should be firm, using your whole hand — not just three fingers.

At your chair, sit down comfortably, and look at the committee chair. Sit with your feet flat on the floor, slightly to the front of the chair. Aim to be relaxed, alert, and attentive. Do not slouch or lean on the table with your elbows. Show the group that you’re ready.

Have a colleague or two “interview you” using standard candidate interview questions. How do you look, are there any mannerisms that you can (and should) learn to control, i.e. what do you “do” with your hands, do you have a nervous giggle? How does your voice project? Soft and high and a little weak? Too quiet to be heard at the back of the room? Envision yourself projecting as a college administrator giving the opening convocation of the school year.

Focus on the person asking the question, but do not ignore the others. Look at the individual asking the questions as you begin to speak. Then slowly move your eye contact to others in the group. Candidates have been discounted because, “She didn’t look at me when I asked the question.”

Watch the time. Typically each person in the room will ask a question and possibly a follow-up. Be sure your answers are succinct, clear and short. Learn to make mental “checklists” and tick off each item as you discuss/report it. Check back with the questioner to see if you’ve answered the question fully. Give specific examples of activities to respond to the questions — not philosophy. And, as much as possible, use concrete examples from your career to demonstrate your suitability for the position you are seeking, not the position you currently hold.

Don't be afraid to ask for a question, or a subpart of a question, to be repeated. If you're comfortable jotting down some key words as soon as the interviewer is finished asking the question, do so. It will help keep you focused and remind you of points you want to make. Don't, however, read your answers or your notes to the committee.

At the close of the interview, there will usually be time for questions that you may have of the committee. Salary and benefit questions should not be asked at this time. When it's your turn, do not try to ask "a good question." Ask about something you really care about learning and ask a question that relates to the position you are seeking — rather than the position you currently hold.

Too often candidates try to develop a "good" question — the kind he or she thinks will cause the committee to say, "She asked a really good question." These questions generally sound forced and insincere. It is more effective to ask if you may make a statement to summarize your interests in, and qualifications for, the position. Most effective of all is to tell the committee, why you want to be their leader not just a leader.

During your interview with the search committee, you may be asked, "Would you accept the position?" Think about the questions you need to ask and ask them, unless they are salary and benefit issues (which you should already know). You may also wish to say "I'm very interested in the position and after our conversation today, I am quite certain that I could provide the leadership required. Yes, I am most definitely interested in continuing our discussions."

In fact, what the committee most wants to hear at this time is: "Yes, I would be delighted to join your administrative team and work with all of you." If you "waffle" and hedge too much, they may decide you're not really interested and discount you as a candidate — consciously or unconsciously.

Putting Your Best Foot Forward It includes the reference process

THE REFERENCING PROCESS

Identify people who will be candid and positive about both your strengths and weaknesses. You should have a minimum of six individuals on your reference list who know you well enough to give specific answers to questions and who can be contacted regularly without implying that “She’s been hunting for a job for years.” You should include superiors, professional and clerical subordinates, including support staff, community members, and faculty members at **both** your current and most recent institution.

It is acceptable to have more individuals in each category if you wish, however, never, ever use people because they are ‘big names’ unless they know you very well. A “nationally known figure” may look impressive on your resume. But, if they can’t be reached for comment, they are actually useless to you.

Also, effective references will share what they believe to be your areas of strength as well as needed growth (minor, of course). Therefore, a good, sound communicator, who knows your work well, is an excellent reference.

Problem areas: If there are issues or positions in your past which might prove to be a problem, for example, you were relieved of a position; had a faculty vote of “no confidence”; received a less than glowing performance evaluation; or you’re concerned that you may not get a “fair review” from a necessary reference, please alert the search consultant ahead of time.

Think about what your worst enemy might “leak” to the press the morning after your selection is announced. If it’s relevant-or if it can be used against you- let the search consultant know about your concerns. He or she can help you to defuse the issue, confidentially, with the college leadership, if necessary, or by contacting additional references to refute the negative impression.

If the issue is one of potential embarrassment to the board, (for example, you received a faculty vote of “no confidence” when you were president or vice president of academic affairs) the search committee, if informed appropriately,

will be able to affirm that they were aware of the issue, had researched it extensively, and “determined that he/she has grown and learned new skills.”

Random Notes:

Mentoring: Each of us should serve as a mentor to others. In order to increase the diversity of our community college leadership, we need to increase our ranks of women and people of color in positions of responsibility and authority. As a mentor, you will assist in accomplishing that goal.

Acting or interim candidates: Be careful when applying for a position in which the “acting” administrator is a candidate for the position. It can be a “done deal” with a search as a window dressing.

If you are invited to serve as an “acting” administrator and are asked whether you intend to apply for the position, be honest. If you say “no”, stick to it. Don’t allow yourself to be pressured into applying after the process begins. It is a classic “no-win” situation. Even if you are hired as the permanent administrator, your behavior has damaged your credibility and already created some enemies.

As an individual and a professional, you should serve on as many senior administrative-level search committees as possible, particularly for presidential and vice presidential positions. First, and foremost, to ensure that equal opportunity and affirmative action are actually and actively practiced, and most importantly, to insure that the profile and job description are designed with inclusive, rather than exclusive criteria.

Second, to support candidates who are women, people of color, and progressive men and women of all ethnic and minority/majority backgrounds. Third, to understand the psychology of a search committee and learn which candidates are preferred and why. It will be invaluable when you are a candidate.

Putting Your Best Foot Forward Managing the Videoconference Interview

The age of technology is here and, with greater regularity, it is being used in the interview process for community college administrators. While many can and do argue about the validity and impact of technology on the hiring process, nonetheless, it is likely here to stay. Therefore, it is best to prepare for the new methods of conveying information to the search committee.

Videotaped Interviews

Videotaped preliminary or semi-final interviews are now common. While on-campus interviews provide the most complete review of each candidate, candidate videotape interviews are an attractive alternative for college districts with tight travel budgets. Typically, videotaped interviews are conducted using a standard set of questions, and are generally 30 to 45 minutes in length. The Pauly Group does not coach candidates, provide candidates the interview questions in advance, or offer candidates interpretation of the questions. Also, videotapes generally become the property of the college.

Interactive Videoconference Interviews

The newest addition to interview methods is the interactive videoconference interview. Using the campus telecommunications network and external telecommunication sites, committees can now communicate “real time” with candidates without the expense of candidate travel. This method of interview has long been used in the business sector, as the cost savings and reliability of the process have been demonstrated.

Note: It is the policy of The Pauly Group to maintain a consistent interview format for all of the semifinal and final candidates. The mixing of on-campus, videotaped, or videoconference interviews of semi-final candidates is highly prejudicial and strongly discouraged.