



## **Leadership Moves: Developing Your Career Strategy**

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It can be difficult at times to see your way forward professionally. **Ellen Heffernan**, a partner at the search firm Spelman & Johnson in Massachusetts, offers practical and helpful advice for women professionals looking to advance in higher education. Her years of experience helping schools find and recruit high-level executives have given her a well-informed perspective on some of the pitfalls of career moves.

### **Ask yourself the tough questions**

During a presentation at Women's Leadership Institute in December 2013 in Amelia Island FL, Heffernan began by encouraging women to take the time to plan their next move. It is important that individuals take their entire situation into consideration: where is your spouse (if applicable) willing to move? Where are you willing to live? Given the wide variety of types of schools that exist, what kind do you see yourself working at? Which type of school shares your set of values?

If you want to make a successful move up the leadership ladder, it is important that you find the right place, the right "fit" for both you and your family. Many moves, Heffernan emphasized, have failed for this very reason.

In order to identify what kinds of positions you would be interested in, you need to assess your professional strengths and priorities. What do you like to do? What are your strengths? Do you like working with students? Faculty?

Why are you dissatisfied in your current role? Do you enjoy collaborating or working more independently? These are important, Heffernan reminds us, if you want to be not just successful, but satisfied with your new role.

Above all, be honest. It does no one any good to mislead yourself about where your strengths and interests lie.

Once you have identified where you would like to be and what you are looking for professionally, the next step is to find positions that match your goals and strengths. It is important to understand what these positions require in terms of skills and other requirements.

At this stage Heffernan strongly suggests that you do a skills assessment: what are you missing from your current set of experiences and credentials that you would need to qualify for the positions you aspire to hold? Do you need to finish your PhD? Gain more experience with budgets? Increase your supervision responsibilities or experience with project management? Once you have a list of requirements, you can approach your current supervisors about ways to achieve your goal. No supervisor, Heffernan reminds us, will ever say no to someone volunteering to take on more responsibilities.

### **A little help from social media**

Heffernan also emphatically noted, "you can no longer afford to ignore social media in your job search efforts." It is more important than ever to create a professional and consistent online persona for yourself. For administrative positions in particular, you must have a LinkedIn profile and be somewhat active in the relevant groups therein.

Depending on what kind of role you are looking to move into, this can be a way to learn the language and requirements of an area you are interested in.

Twitter can also be an important tool to gather information and expertise in unfamiliar professional areas.

The most important thing, Heffernan says, is that you know what you want to accomplish using social media, you develop a plan, and you stick to it. What you tweet or post, who you follow, and who follows you all matter.

If used strategically, social media can be a very powerful tool in your career path and subsequent job search. You can use it to improve your professional brand and increase your visibility within a new area or field. According to Heffernan, it is also an opportunity to “gather relevant information quickly and in manageable doses.”

It can be overwhelming, but if you understand how social media can drive your personal brand, and you stick to your strategy with your ultimate end-goal in mind, you can and will be able to use social media as a tool to your professional advantage. Search committees, Heffernan reminds us, will Google you.

### **Make a good impression**

As you move yourself toward a new role, decide how you will be selling yourself and your skill set to potential future employers. Your career path “does not need to be linear, but it must be explainable” says Heffernan.

The cover letter is a central piece to any job application, and it is where you can make sense of your career trajectory.

It is also important to tailor your job letter for each particular school you are applying to. Show the search committee that you have done your homework and can explain how you will help them achieve their goals, be it retention, fundraising, completion rates, etc. Illustrate that you understand and can speak to the mission and mandate of whatever type of school you are applying to. Make sure, Heffernan emphasizes, that your letter is mistake-free (spelling and grammar), easy to read, and does not ramble.

If you are a more traditional academic looking to transition into an administrative role, you need to keep these things in mind in order not only to write an effective cover letter, but also to reformat your CV as a resume. These conventions vary according to what the position requires, which is why it is important to do your research before submitting your application. Most administrative positions are more interested in your experiences related to the job description than your publication record. Adjust your CV/resume accordingly.

If you are fortunate enough to get an on-campus interview, it is very important to avoid some very costly mistakes. You must appear organized and knowledgeable about the university (enrollment, demographics of the student populations, size of endowment, strategic plan, number of faculty, student debt levels, etc., depending on the position) and the area itself.

It is also important that you keep your smart phone put away, even if you are being taken from one meeting to another by a student. Instead, take the opportunity to get to know the student; you never know what is going to make it back to the search committee. Set an away message on your email, change your voicemail greeting, and show the search committee that you have made them your top priority.

### **Qualifications of a leader**

Heffernan also shared some of the leadership qualities she is looking for in potential higher-level senior administrators. Candidates, in order to be taken seriously, must understand the larger, national issues facing higher education today, and be willing and able to take ownership of a particular area of concern. You also must be able to communicate how these challenges impact the particular institution you want to work at.

This means, again, having an intimate knowledge of the institution where you are applying. Who are the top ten donors? What are the institution’s priorities? What are the top concerns of the

students, staff and faculty? Being knowledgeable and able to make connections between the local and the national is an essential skill for a leader in higher education today.

Finally, Heffernan offers some strategic advice on making a successful transition into a new position or role. Ultimately, to be successful, you must arrive on campus with a plan of your own. Who do you want to meet with on your first day? Your first week? Your first month? What do you need to learn and want to learn when you arrive?

If you don't have an agenda and a concrete plan in place before you set foot on campus, your time will quickly be filled with other demands and responsibilities. You need to take control, in part to build credibility on your new campus. "How you start," Heffernan states, "is how you will move forward."

There is currently a severe gender gap in higher education leadership, but Heffernan hopes that her advice will help women take the initiative to move their careers forward in a productive and meaningful way. Gaps in your experience can be filled, and wherever your interests or expertise lie, there is a role that can use them.

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