

REIMAGINING

The Academic Leader Search Process



Recruit Broadly: Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

To authentically invite diverse candidates to academic leadership roles requires a change in the status quo. It is time to reimagine how we attract and retain diverse leaders.

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At post-secondary institutions across Canada, the focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in academic leadership search processes is increasing. This shift is fueled in part by changing regulations (such as the new Canada Research Chair guidelines), the uncomfortable spotlight shone on higher education by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and by the increasingly widespread acknowledgement that leadership within the post-secondary sector still does not reflect the diversity of our general population. In particular, while Canada's population has become more ethnically and racially diverse over the past 30 years, this reality has not been reflected proportionately within academia.

That is changing, but the change is slow. In the last decade, there has been targeted attention, vigorous debate, and newly revised equity policies, protocols, and processes as well as growth in leadership roles specifically

addressing DEI issues within universities themselves. But despite these efforts, recruiting and retaining candidates from historically underrepresented groups remains a significant challenge in higher education. The reasons for this are complex, from systemic barriers embedded within the policies and procedures that govern search processes to the persistent – and challenging to identify and resolve – issue of unconscious bias. It is complex work to change behaviour and ensure transformation.

The post-secondary sector still does not reflect the diversity of Canada's population. Is your institution creating unnecessary barriers?



Clients tell us that conversations around these issues are difficult to navigate. First, not all diversity is visible, which requires attuned and holistic approaches to define it, identify underrepresented groups, and be wholly inclusive. Second, diversity is multi-layered and intersectional – individuals identify in multiple ways, further complicating efforts to define identity and evaluate results. Additionally, we have all heard that “what gets measured matters” and attempts to gather and evaluate metrics of success in this space are relatively new. This makes it difficult for any institution to truly understand the impact of their efforts. Finally, while success may be most obviously measured by placements or appointments, there are broader cultural and systemic issues to be addressed around how higher education institutions support, mentor, and retain diverse talent and the inclusivity of the environment into which a new leader steps upon appointment.

It is clear that fresh thinking and reimagined initiatives will be vital for Canada’s post-secondary institutions if they are to make significant progress in attracting and retaining more diverse leadership and ensuring that the processes in place for doing so are equitable and inclusive. Our experience with clients facing these challenges tells us that real change requires intentionality through all phases of an institution’s recruitment, assessment, and selection processes as well as thoughtful alignment with an institution’s values and priorities.

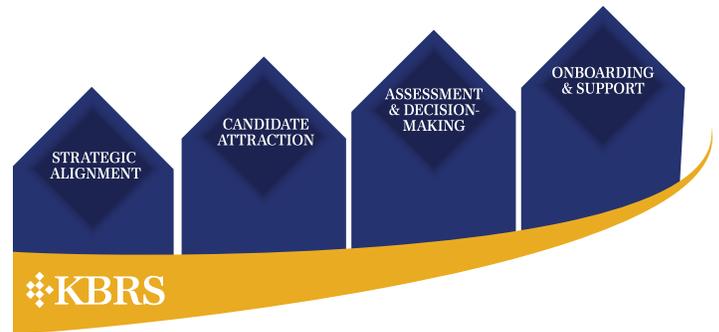
It is complex work to ensure transformation. Fresh thinking is vital.

Our reimagined approach is based on four fundamental phases of a search process.

1. Strategic alignment

In the early stages of the search, be mindful of the composition of your search committee. It is vitally important

that members of underrepresented groups at your institution be invited to the table. Be aware that, perhaps especially in organizations with good intentions, these individuals may receive multiple invitations to participate in such processes and may therefore shoulder an inequitable



administrative burden. It is worth considering if there are ways your institution can help to mitigate this burden through course reductions in recognition of service or by reconsidering over the longer term the weight such forms of service carry in evaluation around tenure and promotion.

Our experience tells us that committees are more successful when they undertake diversity, equity, and inclusion training as a group and take more time at the front end of a search process to thoughtfully consider how DEI principles will frame and inform their approach. This is an area where a search firm, if you have chosen to engage one, should add real value by providing the resources, tools, and training required or by supporting the work of your internal DEI experts. The end result of this alignment process should be more than simply slotting an equity statement into your job advertisement and, depending on your institutional culture, could go as far as opting for a targeted or restricted hire. In particular, it should be clearly understood at the outset of the search how relevant policies around employment equity will impact decision-making, how and when candidates may be asked to self-identify, and how that information will be considered in committee decision-making.

We have also found that it is critical that committees take time up front to examine the line drawn between “need to haves” and “nice to haves” in the candidate profile. Allow

for a full discussion around whether selection criteria or listed qualifications are creating unnecessary barriers and look for ways to emphasize candidate potential or transferability of skills over experience.

2. Candidate attraction

Are your promotional efforts reaching a broad candidate pool? Review available media platforms to determine their reach and target audiences and look for alternatives such as networking groups, conferences, and associations with a broader audience, if necessary. If using a search firm, ask how they are making intentional targeted efforts to reach a diverse pool and what steps they are taking to thoughtfully engage diverse candidates in conversation.

Identify and reach out to individuals or leaders who have connections with key communities, or potential candidates who might not apply based on a passive advertisement but would add to the diversity of your institution's faculty or leadership team. Keep in mind that many of these candidates may be risk averse based on negative previous experiences with these processes. Some may have different approaches to decision-making that have been shaped as much by cultural and gender differences as by previous experience and institutional biases. It may take several conversations to address questions and ensure candidates feel authentically engaged in the process. When an active recruitment process may require additional resources, external support such as search firms can be engaged to complement the efforts of an institution's internal team.

3. Assessment and decision-making

Clients who have had success in inclusive hiring have been deliberate and intentional at the assessment and decision-making phase. They have examined their policies, tools, and procedures to identify areas where bias might have an impact on intentionality and inclusion. When assessing candidates, they are thoughtful, question their actions or presumptions, and are willing to look beyond an applicant's CV for context.

In our experience, it can be valuable to invite candidates themselves to specifically comment within their

application packages on their fit with the qualifications or criteria in order to highlight the value of nontraditional career paths and address any gaps in experience. We have also seen positive impacts made by tailoring an interview approach to accommodate candidates of all backgrounds and abilities and account for gender and culturally-based differences in approach and style.

Be aware that there are no truly neutral merit-based decisions, and everyone involved in this stage of the process will exercise some form of bias, conscious or not. For this reason, it is important to ensure the entire committee stays focused on the "must have" selection criteria established at the outset of the search and engages in thoughtful and intentional discussion, being careful not to be swayed by the most credentialed or loudest voice in the room or the most charismatic interview candidate.

Our experience with clients tells us that real change requires a reimagined and intentional approach to all phases of hiring.

4. Onboarding and support

Inclusion does not end with hiring, and it does not become embedded in your institution because of who you hire. Creating and maintaining an inclusive culture is active and ongoing work. But engaging in this work will increase the likelihood that you will retain your new leader. Our experience tells us that you can help ensure positive outcomes by assessing your institution's current environment and your past experiences in onboarding candidates with diverse backgrounds to see where you have been successful and where improvements are necessary. Most important? Develop an onboarding plan supported by coaching, 360 feedback, objectives, and introductions to key staff so the new leader feels integrated and valued, and sees opportunities to grow into the role.

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Laura Godsoe provides counsel and strategic advice on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues as the Diversity and Inclusion Lead for KBRs. With a background in the academic sector, Laura's finely-honed research skills and ability to communicate effectively with diverse stakeholders has allowed her to serve as a trusted search partner to organizations and institutions across the country as they seek assistance with hard-to-fill leadership roles. Laura is a Canadian Certified Inclusion Professional™ through the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion.



Jan Campbell MBA, CPOC
Associate Partner, KBRs
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Jan Campbell is a highly regarded leadership, strategy, and change specialist. She has over 20 years of experience partnering with leaders, teams, and boards in organizations globally to bring about transformative change in education, non-profit, government, and corporate sectors. Jan draws on her deep understanding of leadership and skill in facilitating critical conversations to support academic institutions throughout the search process and as an executive coach to their leaders.

OUR TEAM IS COMMITTED TO YOUR ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP SUCCESS.

KBRs has been a strategic talent advisor to universities and colleges across Canada for more than 40 years. Our approach is shaped by four important principles: our deep understanding of academic leadership, our ability to facilitate strong committee decisions, our exceptional candidate care, and our commitment to successful long-term partnerships. Over the past five years, our firm has conducted more than 150 leadership searches for universities and colleges nationwide.

One of Canada's largest independently owned executive search firms, we pair the flexibility and focus of a boutique firm with the research and rigour expected of a multinational organization. Our team of partners and recruitment professionals focused on academic search are informed by an Academic Advisory Council of past-presidents of Canadian universities and colleges.

We work in partnership with Lee Hecht Harrison Knightsbridge, which has 27 offices across Canada and is affiliated with Knightsbridge Amrop's 80 offices in 50 countries, giving us both local presence and global reach.



Join the conversation. We are committed to working with our clients to improve the academic leadership search process ingrained in today's institutions and know that change takes time and collaboration. We believe our efforts will be strengthened by the contribution of diverse perspectives, including yours. We want to learn more about your experiences with the search process and to discuss ways to further improve the approach. What challenges are you facing? What successes have you had? What insights have you gained? We invite you to connect with our Academic Search Partners at Reimagining@KBRs.ca.

Read more. Find our *Reimagining the Academic Leader Search* series at www.kbrs.ca/reimagine



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