

Should You Change Leadership Jobs in the Middle of a Pandemic?

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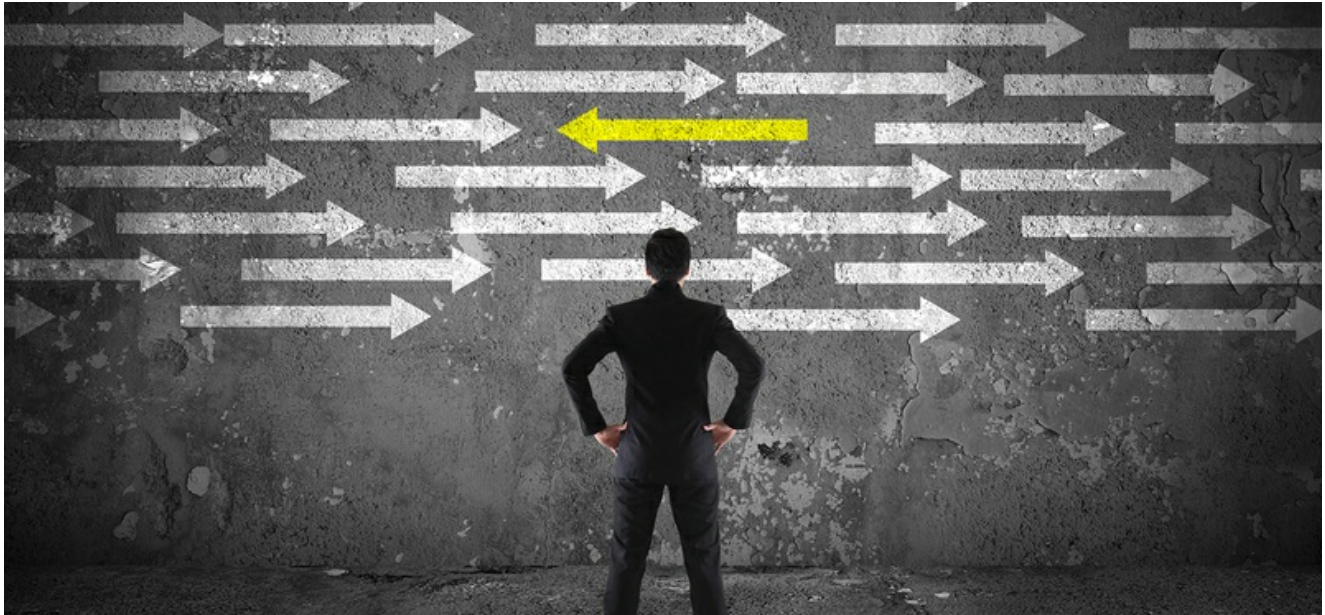


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By Sue May

For Anthony Wheeler, geography made it easy to accept a job offer in early April — even in the midst of a global pandemic — to become dean of Widener University's business school. While he had to conduct his finalist visit on Zoom and saw only the inside of the business school via a cellphone video shot by a member of the search committee, he was excited about its programs and already lived roughly 20 miles from the campus, greatly simplifying his decision.

Wheeler had location on his side in deciding to change jobs at a time of great uncertainty, thanks to Covid-19. But what about campus leaders who have chosen to accept new positions this spring in entirely unfamiliar places where they may never have set foot? How did they decide to take the leap, and what advice do they have for other administrative-job candidates?

A [recent news article](#) in *The Chronicle* explored the professional challenges facing presidents who took office this spring or were hired amid the Covid-19 crisis. My focus here, as a search consultant, is on the personal aspects of this decision for job candidates. What do you owe your family? What do you owe your current institution? How do you know you are making the right choice? And how does relocation even work during a pandemic?

Family considerations. The Covid-19 crisis was just taking hold in the United States in mid-March when David Mee, associate provost and dean of enrollment services at Belmont University, in Nashville, headed to North Carolina for his campus visit as a finalist to be vice president for enrollment management at Campbell University. On his way to Raleigh, Mee was the only person in the security line at the airport, and he nearly had the plane to himself.

More interesting to him, however, was that throughout the interview process, he was not able to shake a single person's hand. "At the beginning and end of every meeting at Campbell," he said, "we had to improvise a wave or some other gesture — it was very strange to not shake hands as part of an interview process!"

When Mee was offered the job, shortly after his visit, his family had a complex decision to make. His youngest daughter was a rising senior in high school and would have to relocate to North Carolina with Mee and his wife. Relocating with a high-school student is always a tricky proposition, but as a career admissions professional, Mee has particular insight into talking with teenagers about major life decisions.

"I believe in having our children in the conversation from the start," he said. "When they feel part of the process and are allowed to have input, they feel more empowered. So we talked with our daughter early on about the possibility of moving to North Carolina, about the pros and cons, and allowed her to voice her concerns. I wouldn't suggest this is the ideal strategy for everyone — it is all about knowing your child. And we know our daughter does best when she has time to process along the way."

After Campbell offered him the job, he asked for a return visit with his wife and daughter. The family drove together — flying was out of the question by then — to tour the campus and meet with a real-estate agent. Being able to see the area for herself helped his daughter become comfortable with the final decision.

For her part, Mee's wife was interested in meeting with an agent and seeing some of the neighborhoods where they might live. Remarkably, the family found a home on the trip and signed a contract to buy it right away. That quick decision eliminated the need to drive back and forth, looking for real estate in North Carolina, and instead allowed the Mees to focus on selling their house in Nashville.

"My advice to others considering a move," Mee said, "is: Don't be afraid. I have had more complicated moves in nonpandemic times. It can be done."

Real-estate considerations. Things don't go so smoothly in every relocation, however. Jenny Darroch, the new dean of the business school at Miami University, in Ohio, is in the middle of relocating from Claremont, Calif., where she currently serves as dean of the

graduate school of management at Claremont Graduate University. She signed the contract in mid-March, just as campuses across the country began shifting to remote learning and remote work.

Eager to get their house on the market quickly, Darroch and her husband scrambled to get it ready within a week. That proved unusually challenging, given how difficult it is to declutter when a pandemic has closed all the usual donation centers.

The process of showing a house during a pandemic is complicated as well. "The house listed with the normal array of photos," Darroch said. "In addition, the Realtor took drone footage of the house and surrounding area, and Matterport 3D imaging. Open houses have been replaced by a Realtor walking around with an iPad. And California law now requires prospective buyers to prequalify financially in order to even arrange a tour with a Realtor. And anyone who comes inside our house must sign a waiver saying that they do not have a fever and have not traveled outside the country recently. We have provided booties, masks, and hand sanitizer at the front door."

Such restrictions mean that fewer people will view the house in person and that it may take longer to sell. As for where Darroch and her husband will live in Ohio, that remains an open question. With flying out of the question, weekend trips to view houses in Ohio are impossible for now. "I suspect I'll move into an Airbnb or hotel initially," she said. "It won't be seamless, but it will be fine."

Darroch's advice for managing a long-distance move in such strange times is to let go of expectations: "Try not to get overwhelmed by the uncertainty. You can't control everything. My husband and I made an agreement that we wouldn't speculate about the 30 different 'what if?' scenarios with the house until the end of May. The house will sell eventually. Timing might not be ideal. But it will be OK."

And in the end, Darroch and her husband are embracing their new adventure. After 15 years in California, she is excited about her new role and fit at Miami. "I feel a sense of calm and peace about my choice," she said.

But how do you reach that "sense of calm and peace"? In particular, how do you evaluate a new opportunity at a time when everything in life seems so uncertain? How do you reassure yourself and your family that you are making a wise move?

For Angel B. Pérez, the new chief executive of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, he decided to focus on people rather than numbers in making the decision, in April, to leave his post at Trinity College, in Connecticut, as vice president for enrollment and student success.

"Associations are not immune to this crisis," Pérez said. "The work of associations is bringing people together, and they are now canceling conferences, which are their biggest revenue

generators. So even though I looked under the hood at NACAC's financials, it didn't help this time because I knew those numbers didn't matter anymore. That was all history."

Instead, he focused on different questions, and recommends other candidates do the same. Questions like: "Who is the team I'll be inheriting? How stable and strong are they? Is the board prepared to help me succeed?"

For David Mee, the new vice president at Campbell, conducting his due diligence during the pandemic was easier, not harder, than he expected. Mee said he felt "even more sure of my decision because I know so much more about Campbell than I would know under normal circumstances. In tough times, character is revealed. Leadership is revealed. I felt that I got to know the institution even better by seeing how Campbell responds to unusual circumstances."

During his campus visit, Mee sat in on a weekly cabinet meeting with the university's president, J. Bradley Creed, and found the atmosphere "calm and confident. They didn't pretend to have the answers to everything, and they weren't ignoring or denying anything. They put the mission and the community first, and they weren't rash. It showed me volumes about Campbell's leadership approach."

Plus, he said, the "ability of a university to pull off a cabinet-level hire in a thorough, thoughtful way in the midst of a crisis" said a great deal to him.

His advice for administrative-job candidates on the market now: Be open about your concerns, and tell the search consultant what is worrying you, whether it's about the unknowns of the job or the potential challenges of the transition. "Don't be afraid to lay your cards on the table," Mee said. "Maybe you will learn something that helps. Maybe you will decide not to continue in the search. Sometimes just verbalizing the concern is enough. It's all so personal — there isn't one answer out there."

What do you owe the institution you're leaving? Ambassador Reuben E. Brigety II had already been named the new vice chancellor and president of the University of the South (familarly known as Sewanee) when the global pandemic took hold in the United States.

His appointment, announced on February 28, had been scheduled to start on August 1. As the magnitude of the crisis became increasingly clear, the departing president, John McCardell, made an unusual request of the university's regents. He proposed that his successor assume the presidency almost two months early, on June 16. The earlier start, McCardell said, would allow Brigety more time to plan for the fall semester and get to know people (virtually) on the campus.

The board concurred, and Brigety agreed to step into his role sooner than planned. "John suggested we should speed up the transition so I would have as much runway as possible to work with the team to make decisions about how to move forward in the pandemic,"

Brigety said. "I know that wasn't how he envisioned the end of his tenure, and it certainly wasn't how I envisioned the beginning of mine."

Joining the University of the South two months early means that Brigety must also move up his resignation from his current position, as dean of George Washington University's international-affairs school. When asked if he felt any hesitation about leaving his deanship sooner than expected, Brigety said, "I don't feel torn at all. George Washington is well served by a large and competent team."

He added that his early experience at the Naval Academy and later in the U.S. State Department had taught him that "no one person is indispensable. Transitions are the trickiest but also the most interesting aspects of life. An organization has to have a sense of resilience built into it. Your role as an individual leader is to focus on the challenges of the future."

For Angel Pérez, taking the long view was similarly important in deciding to join NACAC. He struggled with the idea of leaving Trinity at a time of crisis. "I knew that it would be hard to replace me in the middle of a pandemic, and I struggled with whether it was even ethical to leave in the middle of a crisis," he said. "But what helped in the end was that I have put in place a phenomenal team. I told the president, 'I would not be doing this if I didn't feel that I hadn't left an office that can run without me.'"

Perfect fit versus bad timing. The choice to change jobs is, ultimately, a deeply personal one. If you have doubts, it may help to remember that this crisis will not last forever. As a search consultant, in both good times and bad, I always encourage candidates to be thoughtful about which opportunities they pursue, but I also caution that sometimes the right job comes along at the wrong time.

As Pérez said of his new role at NACAC: "The last time this position was open was 30 years ago. If I don't go now, it might not be open again for another 30 years. It's important to remain open to the idea there could be the perfect fit out there for you, even if it's not the perfect timing."

Especially at a time of such crisis, higher education needs leaders who will think and act boldly. As Mee said: "If no one is willing to take a risk, it's higher education as a whole that will suffer. If you love higher education and you love what you do for our students, stop and think about what you can do to help the academy. Leadership is critical at this time, and for many of us, it is a calling."

Sue May is a partner with Storbeck Search & Associates, a member of the Diversified Search Group. She has previously written for The Chronicle's Beyond the Ivory Tower column and is a co-author, with Maggie Debelius, of So What Are You Going to Do With That? Finding Careers Outside Academia.

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