Higher Education Case Study

Private Liberal Arts College

Ohio

Background Information

Lead Recruiter

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Notable Attributes

HISTORY | Founded in 1833, this college has a rich history of progressive values, being one of the first colleges to admit African Americans and women.

SIZE | The college has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,978 students, with a very small part-time undergraduate population.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE | Known for its rigorous academics, has a student-faculty ratio of 9:1, allowing for personalized attention and a supportive learning environment. The college offers a variety of popular majors including Music Performance, Biology, Political Science, and more.

MUSIC CONSERVATORY | They have one of the oldest and most prestigious music conservatories in the United States, drawing talented musicians from around the world.

CULTURAL IMPACT | recognized for its strong emphasis on social justice, sustainability, and community engagement. It is also known for producing a significant number of Fulbright students annually.

Search Context

I partnered with the newly appointed Chief Information Officer (CIO) to assist in building his new team. The CIO had recently succeeded a long-term employee who was retiring. This transition presented a significant opportunity to enhance and develop the college's IT department.

Over the course of the year, we conducted several searches to identify leaders capable of driving hiring initiatives and team members skilled in handling hands-on tasks. The roles we focused on included:

- **Director of Information Security**
- **Application Developer**
- **Director of Academic Technology**
- **Director of IT Support**
- **IT Business Analyst**
- **IT Project Manager**
- **Manager of Digital Infrastructure**
- **Endpoint Specialist**

Many of these roles were newly created, while others had been vacant for some time. This strategic initiative aimed to enhance the college's IT capabilities and support its future growth.

Position Details

Here's why each role is important:

Director of Information Security: This role is crucial for protecting the college's digital assets and sensitive information. The Director of Information Security develops and enforces policies to defend against cyber threats, ensuring the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of data. This is essential for maintaining trust, safeguarding institutional reputation, and ensuring compliance with regulations.

Director of Academic Technology: Focused on integrating technology into the educational environment, the Director of Academic Technology supports faculty and students by providing tools and resources that enhance learning and teaching. This role is pivotal in fostering pedagogical innovation and improving the overall academic experience.

Director of IT Support: The Director of IT Support manages the technical support services provided to students, faculty, and staff. By ensuring technology issues are resolved promptly and efficiently, this role is vital for maintaining productivity and minimizing disruptions to academic and administrative functions.

Manager of Digital Infrastructure: The Manager of Digital Infrastructure ensures the stability and reliability of the college's network, servers, and other critical IT systems. This role underpins the institution's daily operations, enabling seamless access to digital resources for the entire college community.

These positions are integral to the effective management and advancement of the college's IT infrastructure. They provide the leadership and technical expertise necessary to support the institution's mission and enhance both its educational and operational capabilities.

Challenges Faced

Market Conditions

The job market for IT positions in higher education is highly competitive. Colleges and universities must contend with top technology companies that offer larger budgets, superior benefits, and more appealing work environments, including remote work opportunities. For this particular college, the challenge was even greater due to its location in a small community in Ohio. Many candidates are drawn to roles at larger tech companies that prioritize remote or flexible work arrangements. This makes it especially difficult for institutions like this one to attract top talent, as their on-site or hybrid work requirements are essential for fostering a strong campus culture.

Firm Challenges

The client faced several internal challenges in their IT hiring process:

Geographic Limitations: Being located in a small community in Ohio posed a significant challenge. The preference for on-site or hybrid work to maintain a strong campus culture made it difficult to compete with larger companies offering full remote positions.

Cultural Fit Requirements: The institution's commitment to building a diverse and inclusive team required a careful and strategic approach to recruitment. Finding candidates who not only had the necessary skills but also fit the college's cultural and diversity goals was an additional layer of complexity.

Budget Constraints: Compared to large tech companies, the college had more limited financial resources. This affected the ability to offer competitive salaries and benefits, making it essential to highlight the unique benefits of working in higher education and the specific community and culture of the institution itself.

These factors collectively made the recruitment process more challenging, requiring a tailored strategy to attract and retain the right talent for the institution.

Search Strategy

Research & Planning

Research was the most intensive aspect of these searches for the college. As the Director of Recruiting, I worked closely with internal resources, including colleagues and recruitment coordinators, while maintaining a strong partnership with the CIO. I conducted thorough due diligence meetings with the CIO and the direct supervisors for each position. Additionally, I engaged with team members to gain a deeper understanding of the departmental microcultures.

We leveraged various tools for market research, including LinkedIn Talent Insights, ZoomInfo, and compensation data from LaborIQ. While these tools were invaluable, the most meaningful insights came directly from candidates in the market. Understanding their experiences and learning about the competition's offerings were pivotal to executing a successful search.

Candidate Sourcing

For candidate sourcing, we employed a multifaceted approach. We tapped into our extensive nationwide network of thousands of candidates, utilized LinkedIn Recruiter to identify and message potential candidates, and leveraged Indeed for additional sourcing. Positions were posted on multiple platforms, including our website and higher education-specific job boards, to maximize visibility.

Transparency was a key priority in our candidate interactions. We focused on understanding each candidate's needs, personal motivations, strengths, and what they required in an offer to consider making a move. To ensure alignment with the college's budget, we addressed salary expectations during the initial conversation, an essential step given the competitive compensation packages offered by larger tech companies.

Screening & Evaluation

Our candidate assessment process began with thorough due diligence to understand the college's specific needs for each role. Given the number of positions, each had distinct must-have qualifications, preferred skills, and key requirements. Candidates went through a comprehensive screening process, including a phone screen, a written assessment, and a video interview with me. After this, we presented the most qualified candidates to the college.

This rigorous approach ensured that we only recommended the most suitable candidates, allowing the college to use their time effectively and schedule interviews efficiently. By eliminating those who didn't meet the requirements, we maintained a high standard and were better able to align with the institution's needs.

Execution

Timeline

The timeline for the search process varied depending on the position. Our average search took about 90 to 100 days from start to finish. However, these positions ranged in duration due to the challenging market. Some searches were closed as quickly as four weeks, while others took much longer due to specific criteria and location. The most important aspect was finding the right fit for the institution.

Communication

I maintained consistent communication with the college, providing weekly status reports at the end of each week as a minimum. In addition, I often connected multiple times throughout the week via phone or video calls to discuss candidate feedback, offer negotiations, and search progress. Being accessible to my clients was a top priority, and I made sure the college remained my primary focus. It was not uncommon for the CIO to call me on his way home on a Friday evening to review the status report and debrief on the week's interviews.

Adaptations

Throughout the search, we made several adjustments to align with evolving client needs and market conditions. For example, the Director of Information Security search proved to be particularly challenging. We had to modify the search criteria multiple times, initially making the position fully remote, then later requiring candidates to be based in Ohio. Additionally, we reassessed the importance of each certification, distinguishing between must-have and nice-to-have qualifications. While these adjustments were time-consuming, they ultimately helped us identify the right candidate for the role. We also increased the salary range to remain competitive in the market.

Outcome

Here is the background of each candidate who was ultimately hired for each position:

Director of Information Security

Final Selection:

The candidate ultimately hired for the Director of Information Security position was a local, diverse professional with a robust background in cybersecurity. She had extensive experience building cybersecurity programs and demonstrated excellent organization, attention to detail, and teamwork skills. Her ability to multitask and manage time effectively made her a strong candidate. With previous experience as Director of Information Security at a multinational manufacturing company and Executive Director of Cyber Security and IT Risk Management at a school district, she brought a wealth of relevant experience. She held impressive certifications, including Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP), Electronic Systems Security Design, and Certified Expert Independent Assessor (CEIA), which further validated her expertise. Her education, professional background, and certifications made her a perfect fit for the institution.

Impact:

Her hire greatly strengthened the institution's cybersecurity posture. By leveraging her experience in both educational and corporate sectors, she developed and implemented robust security programs. Her leadership improved collaboration within the IT department and ensured that the college met the growing cybersecurity demands while protecting sensitive data.

Director of Academic Technology

Final Selection:

The candidate selected for the Director of Academic Technology role was a local hire from a large public research institution. They brought a comprehensive set of core competencies crucial for this position, including expertise in educational systems design and implementation, instructional design, and project management. The candidate's proficiency in online, hybrid, and flipped course design, along with their ability to train and consult faculty on pedagogy and educational technologies, made them an ideal fit. Their skills also extended to employee evaluation, career development, financial planning, and business process leadership, which provided the college with a well-rounded leader for its academic technology initiatives.

Impact:

The hire significantly improved collaboration between faculty and the IT department, fostering closer working relationships. This enhanced communication led to more effective use of technology in teaching and learning, benefiting students and the institution overall. The Director's leadership helped streamline the adoption of new technologies and educational methodologies, elevating the college's academic offerings and supporting both faculty and student success.

Director of IT Support

Final Selection:

The Director of IT Support hired came from a local community college, where he had served as Director of ITS User Services for 11 years. Although leaving a long tenure was a difficult decision, the opportunity to work at this institution and align with the CIO's vision for IT innovation proved to be a key motivator. The candidate held a Master's degree in Information Technology Management and was a Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM). His experience overseeing service desks, endpoint management, and media technology (AV) units, along with his strong leadership skills, made him a perfect fit for the role. His ability to drive the department's mission to foster a self-service culture and implement enterprising service management was particularly aligned with the college's goals.

Impact:

The Director of IT Support unified his team, aligning their microculture with the college's broader mission and vision for the IT department. He improved the quality of IT knowledge management resources and documentation, ensuring more efficient and consistent support for students, faculty, and staff. His leadership helped drive the implementation of the ITIL framework and an enterprising service management system, greatly enhancing the user experience across the institution. This had a direct positive impact on teaching, learning, and operational support for the college community.

Lessons Learned

Key Takeaways

Throughout this search, I gained valuable insights into the importance of flexibility when recruiting for lower-level IT positions, particularly in higher education. The college's openness to evaluating candidates across multiple roles allowed us to assess their strengths and place them in the most suitable positions, which was key to filling the roles effectively. I also recognized the intense competition for IT talent, especially given the higher compensation offered by the private sector. This made it essential to focus on local candidates and those from other higher education or nonprofit organizations. Utilizing a wide range of platforms and communication methods—such as email, LinkedIn messages, and job postings—was crucial. Additionally, emphasizing the college's strong benefits package and work-life balance played a critical role in persuading candidates to accept offers, even when salaries couldn't match those in the private sector.

Best Practices

Successful strategies in this search included leveraging a diverse range of platforms for candidate sourcing and maintaining consistent, transparent communication. I engaged in frequent discussions with both candidates and the client to stay adaptable. This openness allowed us to explore flexibility in key areas, such as location preferences and specific candidate requests. Additionally, emphasizing non-salary benefits—such as healthcare, retirement plans, flexible schedules, and growth potential—was highly effective in attracting and retaining top candidates.