

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Women in Leadership Series

Starting a New Job in SEM: How to Be Wildly Successful

By Alicia Moore

It may seem odd to have someone who has been at the same institution for nearly 25 years write about what it takes to be successful in a new position, let alone at a new institution. Yet, during my tenure I have hired a substantial number of new employees, promoted others, and, more recently, coached individuals both internal and external to the college on advancing their careers. I am often asked what is needed to be successful, and I have found that I share some of the same strategies no matter the person or position. Some are what I personally have found or seen to be successful, and others I have gleaned from colleagues and mentors. This article shares just a few of the suggestions that have helped others, both within and outside of our profession, to be successful as they move into senior-level positions.

You're Not Done Yet

Just because you have landed a new position, whether at your own or another institution, does not mean it is time to wave goodbye quite yet. Instead, invest in your “reputation protection” (Walker 2018). That is, develop a plan to exit gracefully. You may be nervous to talk with your boss or ridiculously excited to tell your closest colleague. Regardless, tell your supervisor first and coworkers second. Working with your supervisor, consider to whom, what, and when information will

be communicated, what needs to be completed before you leave, and how you will transition projects to your peers. Offer to help train your replacement, whether in person, over the phone, or via teleconference. Such actions align closely with AACRAO’s core competency regarding communication, with an emphasis on the “responsibility for using strong interpersonal skills to achieve mutually agreed-upon goals rather than for self-advancement” (AACRAO n.d.). This collaborative approach not only will help you retain your current supervisor as a reference for future opportunities but also will maintain a strong network of peers, all of whom are crucial to your success.

Do Your Homework

It is critical that new enrollment managers—especially those at the senior level—delve as deeply as possible into any publicly available information about the institution. While some institutions may not make information readily available, an individual moving into a senior-level position typically can request this information prior to starting the position. What constitutes “homework?” The list is long, but suggestions include:

- Institutional enrollment data and trends, noting areas of strength and areas for potential growth;

- Local, state, and regional economic data (expanse varies by institutional type);
- The institution's strategic plan, especially those sections pertaining to recruitment and retention goals;
- The institution's most recent accreditation report;
- The institution's enrollment management plan;
- Enrollment funnel and retention/completion data; and
- The institution's organizational chart.

Christopher Tremblay (2019a), director of the AACRAO SEM Endorsement, adds, “and don’t forget to do a simple Web search to find the latest press releases or other news items. Being able to talk about issues that are at the forefront of the institution’s thinking shows your commitment.”

In her blog “Advice for a New Executive” (2018), Lara Hogan, vice president of engineering at Kickstarter, encourages new staff to “partner absurdly closely with the product, and in enrollment management, a deep understanding of institutional recruitment and student success goals.” This helps ensure that you and the campus leadership team are in agreement regarding enrollment management goals and expectations. Christine Kerlin (2019), AACRAO senior consultant and former vice president for enrollment management at Everett Community College, emphasizes the importance of building early connection: “Acknowledge that you are not the only smart person in the room. Immediately engage with those you are working with, both vertically and horizontally, and interview them about what they do and how they do it, and ask for their insights and ideas.” This type of outreach and inquiry will strengthen your position as a successful leader.

One of the most effective strategies when starting a new position is to take your own campus tour—*before* your first day. Stop and talk with students to learn about their journey in choosing the institution as well as their experience since starting. If the opportunity arises, introduce yourself to employees, too. The insights you gain from these interactions will be invaluable. More

important, sharing these interactions strategically after you start will demonstrate your commitment to the institution and will help you quickly build credibility and rapport among your peers.

Go Beyond the Data

Even though researching the institution via the Internet and other media is key, even more significant is taking time to understand hidden norms, values, and expectations. One of the best pieces of advice is from Blue Steps, a career management service for senior executives: “Approach your new position as an explorer and adventurer, expecting to encounter barriers, and use it as a basis for learning” (Royal 2014). As an explorer or adventurer would, constantly watch how the institution operates outside of its formal governing or organizational channels, all with the goal of easily overcoming barriers when they arise. Which individuals, work groups, or departments are always consulted for feedback on a new initiative, regardless of their connection to it? How do others successfully communicate about and implement new directions? What written and unwritten processes guide your decisions? Do not hesitate to ask questions—without reference to your former institution. Approaching your new position from a place of curiosity—as opposed to from a place of certainty—respects those who have gone before you and creates awareness that you are genuinely invested in learning about the institution, your peers, and your team.

Connection Is Key

I often take for granted that senior managers know the value of building relationships across the institution. Yet repeatedly, I see others fail in this regard, and they are shocked when they encounter roadblocks to achieving divisional priorities. Building strong connections with institutional colleagues will help you understand the organization and its hidden values or norms, foster allies to help advance the enrollment management mission and goals; and build communication and support networks. A successful enrollment manager is only as strong as the connections made across the institution.

Two types of relationships are critical to anyone aspiring to or starting in a senior enrollment management position. The first is focused on building a network to advance an understanding of and support for the enrollment management mission. Relationships must be forged with stakeholders throughout the institution, including instructional peers and those in any department whose work impacts or is impacted by enrollment management recruitment and student success goals. It is equally important to connect with those who may not have a formal leadership title but who have great influence among their peers. In *SEM Core Concepts: Building Blocks for the Profession* (2017), Wayne Sigler underscores the importance of relationships, emphasizing that a successful enrollment leader must possess “the ability to enlist and maintain the confidence, support, and involvement of key stakeholders in the EM effort” (40).

The second type of relationship is more inwardly focused. No matter how talented we are, having the ability to talk confidentially with a colleague about challenges is critical. Tremblay (2019b) shares, “Find a peer outside of your division to connect with for moral support. Enrollment management positions are challenging, and you need someone you can count on to listen and help you navigate the institution.” I could not have said it better. Look for colleagues who have a reputation for working successfully across organizational boundaries. Ultimately, they are successful not only because of their content expertise, but also because they have the communication, collaboration, and interpersonal skills that align with the organization’s values.

Trust and Empower Your Team

As a leader, I believe it is my job to create an environment in which employees enjoy coming to work; to remove barriers that hinder their ability to do their jobs; and then to step aside to let them do their jobs. Couple this with the adage that good leaders surround themselves with people who are smarter than they are, and you will have set the foundation for success. That said, the concept of empowering others is nebulous at best. Here are a few guiding principles:

- Continuously ask for feedback on existing and new challenges—and, more important, on your own perspectives and leadership.
- Mentor your team members: Help others succeed, whether through formal interactions and professional opportunities or by modeling successful behaviors.
- Get out of their way: Be clear about goals, expectations, and your staff’s level of decision-making authority—and then trust them to do their jobs. Do not continually check on the details.
- Be open to differing perspectives and new ideas, and actively solicit and celebrate them.
- Stay focused: Keep your team focused on the institutional and division mission and goals. Do not assume that because they heard it during new employee orientation, they have a sense of what it means. Actively and intentionally work toward a common understanding, share progress toward institutional and division goals, and revisit all of it continually.
- Give credit where credit is due: You may be the face of a project or the leader of a division, but many others helped make it reality. Acknowledge their contributions, publicly and personally.

Take time to get to know the institution and utilize successful leadership skills from day one. This is imperative not only for you, but also for the success of your team.

Parting Thoughts

Finally, breathe. You’ve got this! After all, you were hired for a reason. Be your natural and best self, be competent and professional in all that you do, and you will succeed.

The wisdom shared in this article may seem somewhat elementary, but it is intended to remind you of the basic and often unspoken rules of starting a new job. Whether just starting out or moving into a senior enrollment position, this guidance is designed to help your transition and to build the foundation for strong, long-lasting, and successful enrollment management career.

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About the Author



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Alicia Moore is currently the Dean of Student and Enrollment Services for Central Oregon Community College, with oversight for Enrollment Services, Student Life, Diversity and Inclusion, and Student Technologies, among other areas. She has more than 25 years of experience in higher education, including admissions, marketing, advertising, publication design and writing. Prior

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During her tenure at COCC, Alicia's accomplishments include development of comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan; a one-stop service center, development of a first-year experience program, and design and construction of

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Alicia earned her Ph.D. in Education Oregon State University, has her master's degree in student personnel administration from Colorado State University, and a bachelor's degree in communications and Spanish from Willamette University.