

Elizabeth Dill and Jennifer Nutefall

# Managing self-imposed leadership transitions during unprecedented challenges

## Here's your new office! Don't ever come here

**N**o one imagines starting a new leadership role, or any role, in the middle of a pandemic. In the summer of 2020, we found ourselves doing exactly that: moving to new states and starting new leadership roles during COVID-19. Starting new leadership roles can be challenging during regular times, but the pandemic added another layer of complexity. Along with worries about moving, housing, and other logistical hurdles, the main questions on our minds were related to leadership. In the spirit of Amanda Clay Power, Martin Garner, and Dustin Fife's ACRL articles on leadership<sup>1</sup> and book,<sup>2</sup> we opted to interview each other regarding our experiences.

### **When did you start at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC)? Was the campus open or closed?**

**Nutefall:** I arrived in Greeley, Colorado, in mid-June and started on July 1. I was lucky to come in with two other new deans (Graduate School and Business). The provost connected the three of us in April, and it was great to have others to talk to about moving, housing, etc.

After I accepted the position in March, my associate dean kept me informed of the situation at UNC, and we talked several times before I moved. I wanted to connect with my new faculty and staff, so I recorded a short video and provided my personal email. When I arrived, the campus was officially closed, but I was lucky I had the option of going into my office (masked and socially distanced).

After such a long time working at home, it was honestly nice to have separation between my home

and workspace. Campus buildings, including the libraries, officially reopened on August 1.

How about you?

**Dill:** I bet that it was nice to have a cohort. I would have liked that, too. I started all by myself. I relocated from the South at the end of July and started August 3. I reached out to key individuals prior to moving to Cheyenne, Wyoming, such as human resources, the librarians, the IRB administrator (I want to do community college library research), and my new supervisor--the vice president of academic affairs. My campus was closed when I got here, so I started remotely. I went through an entire day of new colleague orientation (akin to a new hire orientation) on Zoom and other introductions virtually on Teams.

### **How did you gain an understanding of the library and institutional culture? How did you get to know people virtually—in the library and at the institution?**

**Nutefall:** I set up individual meetings with all libraries personnel and key individuals across the university. One of the questions I asked was, "What three words would you use to describe the campus culture? What's the one unwritten thing,

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something that everyone knows after they've worked here for a while? I need to know to be successful on campus." Their responses gave me great insights into the university, and the recent transitions it has undergone, and the libraries. Many of the conversations also veered into nonwork topics, and I enjoyed talking about shared areas of interest.

**Dill:** I'm still gaining an understanding of the library and institutional culture. Because I'm coming from a university, my learning curve was pretty steep. But always, I try to lead with empathy. As a feminist leading ten direct reports (yes, ten) all of whom are women in such a strenuous time, I started off giving permission that they did not have to be perfect. Child-care issues? We can work them out. Already I had a meeting with the director of the Learning Commons as she bounced her newborn baby to keep him from being fussy. Zoom fatigue? Yes, me too, and I will not arbitrarily set meetings. And I will never ask you to turn your camera on.

### **How do you create community with your team? I feel like I'm constantly walking a fine line between over- and under-communication?**

**Nutefall:** University libraries already had a weekly email going out to all staff centralizing items, including news, professional development opportunities, facilities items, etc. I've kept the practice the interim dean started of a weekly email (I also include a short video) on Fridays and started monthly "All Hands" meetings. We also restructured our leadership group and now include unit updates at each meeting that are sent out with the minutes on a regular schedule.

**Dill:** Innovative. One thing that I did that I feel was pretty unique was aligning the liaisons from majors to Guided Pathways. A national, evidence-based student success practice, Guided Pathways,<sup>3</sup> gives community colleges an equity-based structure for a holistic, institutional approach to student success.

We're also embarking on strategic planning based on a practice you describe in your article, "How an outside facilitator helped us create a better strategic plan."<sup>4</sup> The whole team is super excited about participating in that. Are you also engaging in facilitated strategic planning as described in your article?

**Nutefall:** We are. The assistant director of human resources agreed to facilitate our process. We've completed drafts of a new mission, vision, and values and will start putting our plan together in the new year. It's

exciting for me to do this at UNC and make tweaks to the process (that also work with the virtual environment).

## **Conclusion**

Moving during a pandemic is definitely hard, different, and requires more planning. We undertook this change and have found the benefits of starting a new leadership position outweigh the challenges. Our advice for starting new leaders during this time is to be authentic, especially right now. Authentic leadership allows full expression of oneself, which includes sharing some of your life/interests outside of work [to foster] trust and openness. Being open about potential struggles and challenges (finding housing, doctors, etc.) can help build strong connections. We already know our fellow colleagues well in just a few months' time. To help our colleagues get to know us, we talk about our pets and what we're reading, watching, bingeing, or listening to. And we ask for their recommendations, as well. Because we can always learn from each other.

## **Notes**

1. Amanda Powers, Martin Garnar, and Dustin Fife, "New Academic Library Leader Discussion Series: Part One," *College & Research Libraries News* 78, no. 9 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.78.9.492>. Amanda Powers, Martin Garnar, and Dustin Fife, "New Academic Library Leader Discussion Series: Part Two," *College & Research Libraries News* 78, no. 11 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.78.11.597>. Amanda Powers, Martin Garnar, and Dustin Fife, "New Academic Library Leader Discussion Series: Part Three," *College & Research Libraries News* 79, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.79.2.81>.

2. Amanda Clay Powers, Dustin Fife, and Martin Garnar, *A Starters Guide for Academic Library Leaders Advice in Conversation* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2019).

3. "Regional Coordinators," California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, accessed February, 2021, <https://www.cccco.edu/College-Professionals/Guided-Pathways>.

4. Jennifer E. Nutefall, "How an Outside Facilitator Helped Us Create a Better Strategic Plan," *Scholar Commons*, January 1, 2015, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/library/28/>. 