



Search for the Executive Director of the Innovation Campus Western Kentucky University

THE OPPORTUNITY

Western Kentucky University (WKU)—a public, student centered, applied research university poised to achieve R2 status—seeks a visionary leader, risk taker, and relationship builder to serve as Executive Director of the Innovation Campus. Based in Bowling Green, Kentucky, a fast-growing city just an hour north of Nashville, WKU plays a central role in workforce development efforts, applied research activity, and regional economic development.

The WKU Innovation Campus is a 280,000-square-foot intellectual hub for collaboration among students, faculty, industry, and entrepreneurs that supports the translation of ideas into practical outcomes that drive economic growth. Through initiatives such as the Collaborative SmartSpace, Small Business Accelerator, specialized research centers, and industry partnerships, the campus supports cross-disciplinary, cross-sector activity and fosters innovation and economic development in the region.

The Executive Director will provide short- and long-term strategic leadership for the Innovation Campus, shaping a vision that can engage the community, potential partners, and funders. In addition, they will drive measurable outcomes that strengthen the university, industry, and the regional economy. This individual will work closely with university leadership, faculty, and external partners to attract industry collaboration, expand research commercialization, and foster entrepreneurial activity. As the chief administrative officer and face of the campus, the Executive Director will cultivate partnerships, guide programmatic development, and ensure effective operations and financial stewardship. This position offers a singular opportunity to join a university community that is marked by its bold approach and ambition, partner with regional leaders who are aligned around a shared vision for economic growth, and position the Innovation Campus as a leading driver of innovation, entrepreneurial activity, workforce development, and economic diversification in a growing region.

Western Kentucky University has retained the executive search firm Isaacson, Miller to support this recruitment. Confidential applications, inquiries, and nominations should be directed to the firm as indicated at the end of this document.

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

[Western Kentucky University](#) (WKU) is a public institution that operates a main campus in Bowling Green, Kentucky, as well as [regional campuses](#) and [online programs](#) that extend its reach throughout the state and beyond. WKU emphasizes both teaching and applied research, and its more than 900 faculty and 1,600 staff support more than 15,000 students across a broad portfolio of undergraduate, graduate, and professional [programs](#). The university is home to five academic colleges: the [College of Education and Behavioral Sciences](#), the [College of Health and Human Services](#), the [Gordon Ford College of Business](#), the [Ogden College of Science and Engineering](#), and the [Potter College of Arts and Letters](#).

WKU is guided in its growth by a strategic plan: [Climbing to Greater Heights](#). This plan focuses on enhancing student access and success—including through advising, student support services, and a range of experiential learning opportunities such as internships, cooperative education, and applied research—and ensuring that WKU continues to attract the highest quality faculty and staff. Further, the plan advances the university's commitment to being fully engaged in the broader region while also providing a global context to the WKU Experience. For instance, it prioritizes aligning academic programs with workforce and regional economic needs, expanding applied learning opportunities, and strengthening partnerships with employers and community stakeholders.

[Bowling Green, Kentucky](#) is a mid-sized city with a thriving downtown and a growing regional economy. Located approximately 60 miles north of Nashville, the city provides access to a larger metropolitan market while maintaining a lower cost of living. Poised to boom, Bowling Green has experienced steady population and economic growth in recent years, supported by a diverse base that includes automotive and advanced manufacturing, healthcare, education, and logistics. WKU is the city's largest employer and a central presence in the community, contributing to local development, workforce pipelines, and cultural activity. The timing for this search dovetails nicely with the announcement of a new CEO of the local Chamber of Commerce, who will be an important partner for the Executive Director.

THE INNOVATION CAMPUS

The [WKU Innovation Campus](#) is an intellectual hub that spurs innovative collaboration, promotes problem solving, and nurtures talent to elevate the economy and the region. Its goal is to create an environment where students, staff, and faculty can connect with industry partners, entrepreneurs, and businesses to drive innovation, create jobs, and foster economic development in the region. In alignment with this goal, the campus is structured to support applied projects that connect meaningfully to broader regional economic strengths and opportunities, such as advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and technology, with a focus on translating academic expertise into practical outcomes.

The Innovation Campus's 280,000 square-foot facility serves as a central hub for passion and creativity where people, ideas, and talent connect to the resources needed to support the region's growing business ecosystem. More than just a facility, it provides life to the university's research, emerging technology, and economic development efforts. The campus offers the [Collaborative SmartSpace](#), the [WKU Small Business](#)

[Accelerator](#), state-of-the-art labs and equipment, access to expert faculty and resources, and [meaningful opportunities for partnership](#). In addition, it houses several specialized [research centers and institutes](#).

Select markers of success include the following:

- Companies served by the WKU Innovation Campus have generated more than \$2 billion in revenue in the past 5 years.
- Routinely, \$10 million in private equity investments is raised annually by companies served by the WKU Innovation Campus.
- Over the past five years, the total client company payroll from companies served by the WKU Innovation Campus is more than \$100 million. In the past year, payrolls increased by \$8.8 million.
- The WKU Innovation Campus has supported companies in the region in the creation of more than 100 new jobs each year for the past 5 years. For instance, in the past year, net new job count associated with the Innovation Campus increased by 176 jobs.
- WKU Innovation Campus team members have worked with more than 500 businesses in the region over the past 5 years.

ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A leader who is hungry to build on what has been accomplished and have a real impact on the campus and the university, the Executive Director is the chief administrative officer of the Innovation Campus and provides overall leadership, strategic direction, and operational oversight for it. This person is responsible for developing and executing a clear growth strategy, aligning university priorities with external partner needs, and ensuring effective governance, financial stewardship, and appropriate management of campus programming and operations. The Executive Director works closely with university leaders to leverage the campus in service of the university's academic and research efforts, as well as with community and industry leaders to transform and strengthen the region's growing economy.

In pursuit of these goals, the Executive Director serves as the primary external representative of the Innovation Campus, cultivating partnerships with corporate, government, and community stakeholders to attract industry, investment, and collaborative research opportunities. This person oversees program development, seed funding initiatives, facilities management, and revenue-generating activities, while fostering an environment that supports innovation, entrepreneurship, research commercialization, industry engagement, and workforce development. The annual operating budget for the campus is approximately \$1.5 million. The Executive Director reports to the [Executive Vice President for Strategy, Operations and Finance](#) of Western Kentucky University and is supported by a [team of staff](#).

More specifically, the Executive Director will address the following opportunities and challenges:

Set and execute an ambitious vision and strategy for the Innovation Campus

The Executive Director holds primary responsibility for defining a clear and compelling vision and strategy for the Innovation Campus. To do so successfully, this person will work in close partnership with university

and community leaders to assess the institution's strengths, external partner needs, and broader market opportunities to shape a focused and achievable strategic direction. They will then translate that vision and strategy into action, aligning stakeholders and securing the resources necessary to support execution.

Contribute to the diversification of the regional economy

The city of Bowling Green and Warren County have historically had a thriving manufacturing economy, which has contributed to significant growth in recent years. Now, as WKU strengthens its research enterprise and as the [city strategically envisions its future](#), the opportunity exists to create new regional economies in technology and healthcare. The Executive Director will play a meaningful role in this effort, shaping the Innovation Campus into an incubator-like environment for technology-oriented entrepreneurs and emerging healthcare ventures, supporting workforce development activities that both train students and encourage them to remain local, and strengthening ties with the [Regional Technology Council](#) (which is based on the Innovation Campus), the [Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce](#), and other partners. This work will be inherently collaborative, aligning business, civic, and academic stakeholders to build broader support for a more prosperous and diversified economic future.

Strengthen the Innovation Campus's capacity to address regional needs through innovative activity

WKU's location in Bowling Green and proximity to Nashville are a major asset, and the Innovation Campus will play a central role in maximizing the potential of the university's location. To this end, the Executive Director will lead efforts to expand the Innovation Campus's regional footprint by attracting and supporting both established and emerging companies, offering them an accessible platform for growth, and connecting them to the university's research enterprise. This work is already underway, for instance through the [Metals Innovation Initiative](#), which is headquartered on the Innovation Campus and brings together industry, academia, and government to advance a thriving metals ecosystem in Kentucky. An enterprising Executive Director will find further opportunities to address regional needs by convening key partners and leveraging the strengths of the university.

Partner with faculty to expand research translation and commercialization efforts

Under the leadership of the Associate Provost for Research, WKU has grown its research enterprise in recent years. The Executive Director will work closely with the Associate Provost for Research and the faculty to identify and advance research with applied potential, helping to translate early-stage ideas into viable ventures. This work will necessitate leadership at multiple levels. Strategically, the Executive Director will engage in deep conversation with the academic community about the role of the university as an anchor institution, about its potential to enhance quality of life in the region, and about the opportunity to encourage a broader base of funding. Tactically, this person will participate in building a more structured and effective pipeline for innovation efforts, including targeted support such as seed funding and faculty time allocation.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

WKU understands that no single candidate will possess all the ideal qualifications and characteristics, but seeks candidates who bring many of the following:

- Demonstrated ability to execute an organizational strategy and translate vision into outcomes; strong project management and organizational skills, with particular attention paid to execution;
- A heightened sense of political acumen; the leadership presence needed to guide change, influence diverse constituencies, and build alignment around new strategic directions;
- Experience leading complex, multi-stakeholder initiatives involving academia, industry, and government; demonstrated capacity to foster collaboration among different stakeholders;
- Familiarity with applied research activity, research commercialization, or technology transfer; an appreciation for the academic, scholarly, and teaching missions of a research university;
- Ability to engage and build trust with faculty, researchers, entrepreneurs, and corporate partners;
- Knowledge of regional economic development practices and drivers of industrial growth; an interest in supporting entrepreneurship in targeted sectors such as technology and healthcare;
- Experience managing organizational operations, budgets, and personnel; the ability to leverage limited resources creatively and to maximize return on investment;
- Strong communication skills and the ability to serve effectively as the face of an organization;
- A team player with a natural curiosity and the desire to work hard to realize an ambitious vision;
- A bachelor's degree is required.

COMPENSATION

This is a 12-month, full-time position based in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Total compensation will be commensurate with experience with an approximate target of \$160,000. In addition, WKU offers comprehensive wellness and health benefits to employees and their families, including domestic partners and other qualified dependents, and takes pride in providing a workplace culture that supports balancing the responsibilities of work and family life. Paid time off for holidays, vacation and sick leave, and a tuition discount program for employees and dependents are also provided.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Applications (including resume and cover letter), inquiries, and nominations should be submitted in confidence to Jackie Mildner, Keith Mason, and Pamela Carty via the Isaacson, Miller website: <https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/western-kentucky-university/executive-director-innovation-campus>

Kentucky state law requires all public institutions of postsecondary education to conduct pre-employment criminal background checks to determine suitability for employment.

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is committed to a policy and practice of providing equal employment and educational opportunities to all individuals. In accordance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Revised 1992, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, no form of discrimination or harassment will be tolerated at WKU on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, marital status, age, uniformed services, veteran status, genetic information, pregnancy, childbirth or related medical conditions, or physical or mental disability in admission to career and technical education programs and/or activities, or employment practices.

Persons with disabilities, who need reasonable accommodations to participate in the application and/or selection process, may contact the Office of Institutional Equity at 270-745-5121 for assistance. To report concerns related to WKU's Discrimination and Harassment Policy, No. 0.2040 and/or WKU's Sex and Gender-Based Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation Policy, No. 0.2070, please complete the [Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation Reporting Form](#). Additional information regarding Title IX, including contact information for the Title IX Coordinator and reporting options, is available on WKU's [Title IX website](#).

This document has been prepared based on the information provided by Western Kentucky University. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by Western Kentucky University would supersede any conflicting information in this document.