

Announcing Our Next Vice President for Diversity and Innovative Community Engagement

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Dear Saint Louis University community,

I write to announce our next Vice President for the Division of Diversity and Innovative Community Engagement (DICE). Note that it is not one of the finalists interviewed, for reasons I will explain below. I have selected Rochelle D. Smith, MS, and she will assume the position October 12, 2022. Rochelle is an accomplished DEI professional who currently serves as the associate dean of diversity and inclusion and associate chief diversity officer at the Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut.

The search and my assessment

In late October 2021, I [announced the search](#) for our next permanent DICE VP. The search committee was led by Dr. Chris Tinson, chair of the Department of African American Studies, and supported by a national search firm. The committee was composed of a diverse set of voices from across the University. The committee worked hard in a challenging hiring environment, identifying and screening a pool of candidates and ultimately deciding to bring three finalists for campus interviews. I am grateful for the hard work of the committee. Yet, I ultimately determined that it was best to appoint someone not identified among the pool of finalists. In making that decision, I considered the report of the search committee, the results of the candidate feedback surveys, and my own interviews with the finalists.

At the outset of the search process, much of the emphasis was on candidates with an extensive background in social justice and community engagement. In my October 29 message to the University community, I said: “We have a significant amount of work to do as a community to address the past traumas experienced by the marginalized communities both within our campus and in the neighborhoods surrounding our campuses.” That continues to be true, and each of the finalists identified by the search committee would have brought skills and experience relevant for that work. But as the process unfolded and we concluded the candidate visits in early May, it became clear that other professional attributes were equally important to this role.

In reviewing the committee’s report and feedback from students, staff and faculty, and through discussions with leaders from across campus, I gained a fuller understanding of the key professional attributes the role requires (e.g., executive-level experience providing visionary strategic leadership; demonstrated ability to work across boundaries to build unity among diverse constituencies; demonstrated ability to build and sustain trusting collegial relationships and coalitions).

Ultimately, after weighing all those valuable inputs and taking time to reflect, it became clear to me that each of the finalists brought impressive commitment to social justice and relevant experience in some respects, but none of the finalists brought the full combination of skills and significant experience necessary for success as the next VP for DICE. I therefore concluded that our next VP for DICE was not among our three finalists.

Despite that conclusion, the search process and the work of the search committee were extraordinarily helpful in getting to a successful conclusion to this important search. Our search identified the attributes of our next VP for DICE that are most important to the community, and it generated important information about the national hiring environment.

That led me to a recognized DEI professional who has extensive experience leading DEI initiatives at prominent universities, who meets all of the expectations for the position articulated by our community during the search, and who is also intimately connected to the SLU and St. Louis communities. I am excited to say that person is Rochelle Smith.

My selection

Currently serving as the associate dean of diversity and inclusion and associate chief diversity officer at the Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, Rochelle is a tenured DEI practitioner with significant and successful experience in creating, implementing, and overseeing institutional diversity programs within an academic environment. Prior to joining Yale, Rochelle worked for 20 years at Washington University here in St. Louis, where she had been assistant provost for diversity initiatives. Many of us know Rochelle because she is Dr. Jonathan Smith's widow. But her qualifications for the position – which warranted her appointments at two of our nation's most prestigious universities – were the only attributes considered in her hiring.

Rochelle founded the Washington University Diversity Pipeline Consortium for STEM, and her experience also included co-designing two faculty-of-color retention programs at Washington University that resulted in a record number of these faculty receiving tenure. In addition, she led the MD/PhD diversity effort and founded three student affinity groups at the university.

At the Yale School of Medicine, Rochelle has provided strategic direction to the Dean on diversity, equity and inclusion; equal opportunity; discrimination and harassment; and retaliation. She has helped address inquiries and concerns on those same issues raised by Yale community members.

With her proven record of visionary strategic leadership, success working across boundaries, her breadth of management experience, and demonstrated ability to advance and imbed diversity, inclusion, and equity within an organization, Rochelle exemplifies all of the qualities required for this role and many more. Her expertise and impressive experience at Yale and WashU will help build upon the important work that Dr. Amber Johnson, interim vice president of DICE, and their team have started in the past year.

Preparing for Rochelle's Arrival

Rochelle's introduction to many in the SLU community has not yet begun. She will participate in an extensive University community engagement process. I plan to schedule these sessions in August or early September to allow all faculty, staff and students the opportunity to meet with Rochelle as soon as possible (even before she officially joins SLU on October 12). During these sessions, she will listen to and learn from all in the SLU community, and begin to work with colleagues on forming a shared vision for DICE.

Between now and Rochelle's arrival in October, I will work with the leadership in DICE to keep the work of that division running smoothly. The division has undergone a significant amount of change over the past year, expanding from just a handful of people to a team of 14. I want to reiterate my and the University's support for DICE and commitment to the work they lead. While creating an equitable and

inclusive environment at this University is a responsibility shared by all of us, the work of the division itself is integral to our objectives to foster a more diverse and equitable SLU culture, and to attract, retain and support faculty, staff and students of color and of other marginalized groups. The leadership structure of DICE for the interim period leading up to Rochelle's arrival will consist of the division's four assistant vice presidents, Allison Brewer, Katie Heiden Rootes, Richard Marks, and Bryan Sokol, working collaboratively together and with my office.

My gratitude to Dr. Amber Johnson

I also want to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Amber Johnson for their work in leading the DICE team over the past academic year. They were originally appointed an Associate Provost last summer to work alongside Dr. Jonathan Smith in expanding both the DICE team and the resources in the division. With Dr. Smith's passing, Amber quickly stepped into the role of interim VP for DICE and has been instrumental in the expansion and reimagination of the division. Amber has consistently shown deep commitment to justice and equity throughout their time as interim VP, and I am grateful for their hard work and dedication.

Amber plans to continue their teaching and scholarly pursuits in the Department of Communication. In addition, Amber is also a cofounder of the Institute for Healing Justice and Equity, a University-wide institute doing critically important justice-driven, research, and community engagement work. Amber will continue to play a leadership role with the Institute.

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In closing, I want to thank the search committee, led by Dr. Chris Tinson and supported by the search firm, Isaacson Miller, for their tireless work over the last year in conducting this search in an unusually challenging time. The work of the committee was important in identifying the requirements of our campus community and in helping me arrive at the best possible choice for our campus and the surrounding community.

Please join me in welcoming Rochelle to SLU. I look forward to her arrival and leadership of the Division of Diversity and Innovative Community Engagement in the coming years.

Sincerely,

Mike Lewis, Ph.D.
Provost