

An Interview With Allen's New President

Meet Dr. Lyvier Leffler.

Rylie Olsen, Student Reporter

On February 26th, I met with the new president of the Allen Community College, Dr. Lyvier Leffler. Dr. Leffler has only been at Allen for a short amount of time, but she has big ambitions to get things changed and make the campus a more fun environment. An in person meeting with Dr. Leffler was a great opportunity to get a vision of what she has in store for Allen. She is the new chapter of Allen.



Rylie Olson: Have you had a position like this before taking on the presidency here?

Lyvier Leffler: I had been an interim president between presidents in my last position. I've been a vice president for many years. I've not been a president, a full-time president before, but I have stepped in, in the absence of the president, and fulfilled those roles for several months at a time and a few different times.

RO: What is your vision for Allen, and what are your (at least) top three priorities for you to accomplish within your first year?

LL: I really want to get to know the... I'm not from Kansas, I'm not from Iowa, so it's really important for me to get to know the community, get to know the local leaders, organizations and businesses, get to know the students on campus; what their needs are, what their desires are, the clubs and organizations, things that we're doing. The practices and policies that we have in place, get to understand them, if they're working that's great, if we need to tweak some things to make it better for our students, then we need to do that. I'd like to increase enrollment, increase student success rates, so what can we do as a campus, what current practices do we have in place, where, if anything are we lacking, what do the students need to be successful, are we meeting the needs of the students, and so those are the things I think need to be required we need to do. For example, new student orientation, we need to bring that back. We currently don't require students to do that, and that's such a basic thing to let a new student, that's coming from the outside, know what to expect. It's just like the financial aid area, the rules on housing, I know you're getting the information here and there; but to have it in one setting and then you can see a face with who's in charge would be so helpful. And that's one thing I've done in the past.

You're shaking your head yes.

RO: With it being my first year at Allen, being a freshman, I do agree with that. I am from here, so I don't live on campus. I was essentially lost on my first day. All I was shown and handed was a map showing where everything was. I didn't get a tour or anything, so I do agree with bringing back orientation and everything.

LL: Good for you, because I mean, every place I've worked at I oversaw that and implemented it. It's so valuable, it's an imperative that we have it. So, I've charged that department to have it up and going for fall. So that students don't get lost through the cracks, because sometimes if you're not from around here or if you're new and you don't know that many people going to college is kind of scary anyway, and if you don't feel like you have that support like, "maybe I don't belong here," "I'm kind of

nervous.” So, we want, you know, students to feel solid, to feel welcomed, to have connections, and know the processes and know who to go to for help, for this or that, for tutoring; all these things that are part of the student success system. You need to be aware of it, instead of just getting a map and then saying “Here’s your schedule.”

RO: Yes. What do you want to see more of from students or the environment at Allen?

LL: It’s hard to say in a month, but I like seeing happy faces. I want student engagement. I would like to see more student activities on campus. Having more activities happen in the area by the cafeteria, I don’t know what it’s called, maybe figure out a name for that area if it doesn’t have one already. Maybe there is a name, but it’s not posted. More activities, like this month is Black History Month, do they have movies, or activities going on. I think it’s really important for students to be engaged. It’s hard to be engaged if there’s not, unless you’re in an athletic sport or club, you have those little clubs already which is fantastic, but if you’re just a student living in the dorms or community you want to feel connected. Having activities on campus would be a good way for those students to meet others and feel more a part of the campus community.

RO: What are your thoughts on the current academic offerings? (Pathways, classes, etc).

LL: I think I’m just learning about what academic programs that we have. I think it’s important to look at the industry needs and our students’ graduation success rates, and their employability once they graduate with a degree or credential. To try to expand those, you know, like what are we offering and what could we be offering? Is there an area that we could do our programs? Are they still relevant, do we need to update any of our curriculum to make them more relevant in today’s job market? Those types of things, so I’ve only been here a month, so I’m trying to meet regularly with my vice president of academic affairs and the CTE Dean. I’ve asked her what current programs that she has and what programs that she has that she’s working towards. She’s relatively new in her position too. It’s important to make sure we’re meeting the needs of the students and community.

RO: Yes, which leads into my next question: Are there any growths you would want to see in certain areas of career pathways, like adding more classes?

LL: Definitely, and I don’t know which ones for example because I’m going to ask for the report on Monday, to be honest with you. About programs we have, what areas we’re looking to grow, what certifications will be offered, the timeline for those, what programs we want to revamp and restructure. This person’s been working on them since Monday, so they’ll forward them next Monday. All those things need to be evaluated on a continued basis. And for our CTE programs, typically we have advisory boards in places I’ve worked. Advisory boards are members of the industries, for example, if it’s manufacturing, we have a degree in that. So, manufacturers in the industry, they’re considered subject matter experts, because they work in that field. Once a semester, they would meet as a board, an advisory board, they would look over our classes and our program and our graduation rates and the curriculum. Is it still relevant? Is this class still relevant in that major, or is that outdated because the industries changed? So, getting feedback from those advisory boards for those career technical areas are crucial. And I haven’t had a chance to look at the minutes yet for our advisory boards, but getting feedback is important and implementing feedback is even more so.

RO: How will you engage with the faculty and students on receiving input on certain things you would want feedback on?

LL: I would like to have conversations with students. In my past, when I was kind of filling in for the president when they weren’t in that position. I would meet with the student government associations, and I’d have any student on campus that would want to meet. I’d just have an open forum where the president would be, for example, it would be in the activity area from this time to this time and we would have something like pizza provided, and they would just ask questions. I don’t know what students’ needs are, I would want to hear from the students and be like “how can I help?” So, those types of things. In the past too, I liked to meet with the student government association officers, because they are the voices of the students and get a structured meeting with them, so it’s like the treasury, the secretary, the president, vice president; if that’s that layout of those here. And have a more structured meeting to hear the concerns of the students, but then open forums with other students like I mentioned for students that aren’t involved in organizations so they can feel free to participate and feel free to ask questions. And the same would be true for faculty. Meet with the faculty’s senate president, which I have a few times, but there’s an opportunity for me to provide feedback or input and listen to their concerns, I would do the same.

RO: How will you be sure to be transparent when making certain decisions?

LL: Transparency is very important, and I've already been practicing such with the cabinet. We've been having to make a lot of decisions regarding campus structures, working with the budgets, and how it's been affecting different departments. And I've had open conversations and getting feedback from cabinet members; and the cabinet members are those individuals that report directly to me, and so we have joint conversations, decision makings, and we've just interviewed for a Vice President of Finance. I have a committee based on several folks that are directed towards that individual as well as indirect. We have open conversations on qualities and things like that, so I think it's very important to make decisions with stakeholders that are involved in doing the work and giving their input, and so really that's how I've always led. I think it's served me well, because if somethings going to be affecting my area, I want to be a part of that decision and I expect others would imagine wanting it to be the same way, and we've already been doing that.

RO: How do you approach difficult conversations in meetings or other situations where one would need to be held?

LL: That happens every day. And I don't beat around the bush, I am very open, I'm transparent, I'm direct, I hold people accountable. We have a job to do, we have a lot of work to do, it's not easy work sometimes, most of the time it's not. Everybody has to be held accountable. I'm very direct, you can ask anybody that reports to me, they don't have to wonder what I'm thinking or what I'm needing, if I want something I'm just direct and to the point. If someone can form or provide me with information on why they can't get something in by the time I expect it, just let me know. If I ask for something by like the end of the day, and you're like "I can't get it in by the end of the day," and ask to have an extra day, absolutely, just communicate with me. We have to communicate. This is a very busy place, and so just having open, honest conversations, with expectations and deadlines that are realistic.

RO: How would you handle disagreements or conflicts within the office?

LL: I handle them head on. If I feel there's been a conflict or it's been brought to my attention, the worst thing you can do is ignore it and have business as usual. Sometimes it's hard to have direct conversations that are difficult, but I've been in this field for long enough that it's just easier to address it, whether it's with myself and somebody else, or two coworkers, or whatever, we just need to have an open discussion. Sometimes it might be a little tiny thing that's been bothering somebody, or it could be this big thing that we don't know what it is until we have an open, honest discussion so that we can move on. We're all here to serve our students. We're all here to do our jobs as best as we can, and if there's conflict in the office or on campus with employees, it's not a good place to be. We want people to be happy. We want them to do their job, focus on their job. Have good interactions with their peers, and we need to address conflicts so that those good interactions can continue. The sooner we address them, the better that people can move on and be happy.

RO: How do you prepare yourself for important meetings?

LL: I don't really have that so much anymore. Early on in my career I probably was nervous or had anxiety. But now I regularly meet with the board and my committee. Just having open conversations, and I guess early on if I didn't know something, I'd be concerned and try to talk about it, get more information on things. And most times if I didn't know the answer, even now, I'll say "I don't know the answer, I'll have to get back with you." If I don't know, I don't know; I'm learning. I think that if I'm going to give a presentation, it's very important to be prepared. If I know I'm going to be expected to do x, y, or z, at a certain meeting, don't go in unprepared; that's just not smart practice. Do my homework, get all the information ahead of time. If I'm wondering, "Is this what they want?" Ask. I have this information prepared, is this what you're looking for, or is there something else you want before I present? Get feedback, that way when I do present or share information I know I covered my bases the best that I could, and if I still missed something then I apologize and say, "I don't have information, I wasn't aware of that, but I will give it to you by the end of the week or end of the day." That's pretty much how I work with that. Go into a meeting as prepared as I can be, and that's all we want.

Meeting with the president was like just talking to a friend and going out for coffee. She is so down-to-earth, understanding, very open-minded, and wants to know the concerns of the students. She is an incredible leader, and the college will benefit from having her.