

THE ROLE OF THE ACADEMIC DEAN

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Chief academic officers of colleges and universities wear various names. Some of those labels include academic vice chancellor, provost, dean of academic affairs, and dean.¹ The subsequent essay by Jack Reese views Fair's career as dean of ACU's College of Biblical Studies through the lens of the following summary of research on the role of the academic dean.

The various demands facing deans often limit their ability to accomplish primary tasks. Because of the wide variety of roles deans assume at any given institution, generalizing about their work is difficult.² Deans who fill the role as "chief academic officers" of their institutions or colleges have the primary responsibility of overseeing the teaching and research functions. The balance between teaching and research (two competing forces) depends on a particular school's mission. The following study narrows the discussion to the question, What can the dean do to facilitate an institution's academic mission concerning teaching and research?

In 1870 President Charles Eliot of Harvard, to lessen some of his administrative duties, appointed the first dean of an American institution. Frederick Rudolph observes that before the Civil War most institutions relied on the president, a treasurer, and a librarian to fulfill administrative duties.³ He attributes the growth in administration to three factors: enrollment increases, demands for new services, and the need to free teachers from management. Rudolph notes that in 1860 the median number of administrators in American colleges was four. This number grew to 30.5 by 1933. Responsibilities varied from institution to institution depending upon particular situational needs. For example, student personnel work was mixed with the role of academic

¹ A. Tucker and R. A. Bryan, *The Academic Dean: Dove, Dragon, and Diplomat* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991).

² J. L. Martin, "A Preliminary Theory for Explaining the Effective Leadership of Academic Deans" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1993).

³ F. Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 434–35.

administration until Harvard developed a student affairs deanship in 1890.⁴ From the beginning, differing views concerning the range of roles and responsibilities expected of the academic dean has prevailed in institutions of higher learning across the country⁵ due to institutional size, diverse historical development of the office, and differing governance styles of presidents.⁶ The complexity of presiding over an academic unit containing a variety of different and unrelated disciplines about which the dean may have only generalized knowledge requires skills beyond that needed by most faculty.⁷

Perceptions of the dean's role vary widely.⁸ Often these conflicting perceptions create double-bind dilemmas difficult for deans to resolve. Some struggles center around the dean's role in funding programs, budgeting, faculty morale, classroom facilities, student morale, and acquisition of resources. This list varies depending upon the dynamics of a given institution. As many as 168 different duties have been associated with the dean's position.⁹ Bowker summarizes the research concerning the primary roles the dean performs, noting the following categories as the most demanding on the dean's time: administration, committee service, student personnel work, curriculum functions, and supervision of faculty.¹⁰ Cristina commented on the extent that political and business concerns relating to cost effectiveness is now the driving force for many academic decisions.¹¹ The battles between efficiency and educational quality seem to be waged by other forces that are controlling decisions institutions should be

⁴ J. S. Brubacher and W. Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: An American History, 1636–1956* (New York: Harper, 1958).

⁵ J. L. Martin, "Academic Deans: An Analysis of Effective Academic Leadership at Research Universities" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, Ga., 1993) (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 362 079).

⁶ This is true even when the same institution changes presidents. W. R. Dill, "The Deanship: An Unstable Craft," in *The Dilemma of the Deanship* (ed. D. E. Griffiths and D. J. McCarthy; Danville, Ill.: Interstate Printers and Publishers, 1980).

⁷ Tucker and Bryan, *Academic Dean*.

⁸ L. H. Bowker, "The Academic Dean" *Administrator's Update* 3 (1981). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 216 652).

⁹ W. E. Day, "An Analysis of Selected Duties of Academic Deans of Public Junior Colleges (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1968).

¹⁰ B. Cristina. Class notes, ELC 606 (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1995). He also noted administrative issues as an integral part of his role. These issues included personnel with interpersonal problems, turfism (both protecting turf and building empires), personal and political agendas, budget constraints, and communication breakdowns. He stated, "Many do not understand that what is in the best interest of the university may not be in your best interest." Many deans are unwilling to make the tough decisions larger contextual issues demand.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

making in the best interest of students. Outside the academy only accreditation groups are asking the questions concerning educational quality.

Gould describes the functions that contribute to the satisfaction deans feel while doing their jobs.¹² These functions all relate to the academic life of the institution and include contributions to academic standards, curriculum development, and hiring of highly qualified faculty who aid the institution. Gould also notes these are not the tasks on which deans spend most of their time. Rather, administrative duties involving faculty relations and morale, committee work, and student counseling fill their day. However, Nargle reported research that would suggest little difference between the “actual” duties and the “ideal” duties of the dean in small private liberal arts colleges as perceived by presidents, deans, and chairpersons.¹³

J. L. Martin conducted an inductive case study research project to ascertain not what was expected of academic deans but what they do that makes them effective leaders.¹⁴ This project resulted in a “substantive” theory on effective academic deans. Effective deans must be cultural representatives, communicators, managers, planners/analysts, and advocates.¹⁵ Cultural representatives of a college or university embody the ideals and mission of the institution. As deans reinforce the cultural values of the institution, they will support the faculty and the administration. More importantly, cultural representatives lead by example confirmed by their involvement in the life of the organization.

A second key factor for effective leadership derives from the dean’s communication skills.¹⁶ By striving for efficient and inclusive structures, networks, and processes, deans will create an environment for dialogue. This collegial community will respect the voice of the marginal and oppositional groups represented in academic units. Much of this environment will be created through symbolic means that deans employ that relate to the perceived visibility and availability of their office. For example, Smith notes that the second most common complaint of Harvard Divinity School professors is the lack of contact of the dean with the faculty.¹⁷ Communication skills must include conflict management skills. Conflict is bound to occur within and between departments,

¹² J. W. Gould, *The Academic Deanship* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964).

¹³ R. A. Nargle, “Actual and Ideal Functions of the Academic Dean in Selected Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges as Perceived by Presidents, Academic Deans, and Department Chairpersons” (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1980).

¹⁴ Martin, “Preliminary Theory.”

¹⁵ Martin, “Academic Deans.”

¹⁶ Martin, “Preliminary Theory.”

¹⁷ The number one reason was “lack of money.” J. I. Smith, “Response to ‘the Dean’ Responsibility for Faculty Research,” *Theological Education* 24 (1987): 115–19.

especially when the deans must add new departments or close old departments due to changes in society and limited resources.¹⁸

Since administrative tasks dominate most of the time of deans, the ability to manage and implement new directions will be crucial to free them for more important tasks.¹⁹ Therefore, easily executed tasks will be readily delegated. The deans with the greatest skills in organizational management and good understandings of their limitations are able to focus on other priorities more effectively. The manager skill is closely related to the planner/analyst skill. The more “cognitive complex” is the deans’ ability to handle multiple forces, competing priorities, and complicated issues, the more effective they enhance the teaching and research missions of the institution.²⁰

Finally, deans will be an advocate for the college or university by cultivating relationships with various groups and individuals on and off campus.²¹ Faculty and other administrators discern the role as advocate as of greater value than other supervisory concerns that occupy too much time.²²

Dill generalizes the duties of deans who hold varying role requirements in differing institutions.²³ These duties include (1) integrating the interests of various constituencies into a common sense of purpose, including goal setting and strategic planning; (2) creating incentives from existing resources to stimulate new and continuing contributions and commitments to the institution; and (3) maximizing the institution’s efficiency in transforming contributions and commitments of all kinds into educational products and services. American colleges and universities seem to demand more than one individual can provide—the best of all worlds. “Like the European dean, he [she] is expected to be a leading scholar and a leader of scholars; unlike the European dean, he [she] is expected also to be a master of administrative technique, a pivotal man [woman] in the formation of policy, a maker of good decisions, and the self-sacrificing servant of the faculty.”²⁴ The more effective deans are able to be as administrators, the more time they will have for leadership in academics. However, instead of seeing the demands of administration and academic leadership as dichotomous roles, effective deans will forge a holistic approach.

¹⁸ Tucker and Bryan, *Academic Dean*.

¹⁹ Bowker, “Academic Dean.”

²⁰ Martin, “Preliminary Theory.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² D. E. Kapel and E. L. Dejnozka, “The Education Deanship: A Further Analysis,” *Research in Higher Education* 10 (1979): 99–112. E. L. Dejnozka, “The Dean of Education: A Study of Selected Role Norms,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 29 (1978): 81–84.

²³ Dill, “Deanship.”

²⁴ Gould, *Academic Deanship*, 7.

Deans need to manage resources of all kinds (including symbolic resources) to stimulate and maintain teaching excellence in their respective academic units. Since the dean has direct influence in hiring, promoting, tenuring, and evaluating faculty as well as allocating funds that directly influence teaching, no one is in a better position to support the institution's effectiveness in teaching students.²⁵ Deans who keep up with their own disciplines are in a better position to understand and support teaching.²⁶ This may be done by their continued involvement in teaching,²⁷ by continued involvement in research activities, or by released time for professional reading, but overloading the dean with administrative duties can sever the connection between teaching and research.²⁸ Fullerton observes that deans across the country are concerned with their lack of time to pursue their own academic interests.²⁹

Although the balancing act between faculty teaching and research is an ever-continuing challenge, deans also have a responsibility to promote faculty research. Research provides a foundation for quality and cutting-edge teaching. Research provides a means to secure disinterested evaluation in the academic discipline of the teacher and the opportunity to stay in touch with a vocational understanding of one's field.³⁰ Hough suggests eight ways deans can accomplish these goals: (1) conducting personal research, (2) understanding and interpreting faculty research, (3) allocating time for faculty research, (4) publicizing and honoring significant faculty research, (5) seeking funding for assistance of faculty who are doing research, (6) advocating strong research-library development, (7) establishing external institute research projects, and (8) promoting internal institutional research. Deans will also guide faculty in balancing personal and professional concerns.³¹

To conclude, the role of deans is complex. If deans were magically transferred to other institutions, their individual duties would probably be different.

²⁵ L. H. Bowker, *Process and Structures: The Institutional Context of Teaching Sociology* (Washington: American Sociological Association, 1980).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bowker notes only half the deans in America expect to teach in the coming year. Those deans who anticipated teaching projected an average of one course per semester. L. H. Bowker, "The Academic Dean: A Descriptive Study," *Teaching Sociology* 9 (1982): 257-71.

²⁸ Lyle and Enarson both argue that deans should not continue in teaching. E. L. Lyle, "Should the Dean Teach?" *Liberal Education* 49 (1963): 379-83; and H. Enarson, "The Academic Vice-President or Dean," in *Administrators in Higher Education: Their Functions and Coordination* (ed. G. P. Burns; New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

²⁹ N. H. Fullerton, "Issues in the Role of the Dean," *Journal of Teacher Education* 5 (1978): 23-25.

³⁰ J. C. Hough, "The Dean's Responsibility for Faculty Research," *Theological Education* 24 (1987): 102-14.

³¹ Smith, "Response to 'the Dean.'"

Deans must make some fundamental decisions about the function of the office they hold. What is the mission of this institution? How can I best serve that mission? The primary responsibility of deans is to oversee the teaching and research functions of their institutions. All the other related roles that fall within the range of duties assumed by deans need to be channeled by this overriding purpose.