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Four Freaking Awesome Things About Being Dean

Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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There are any number of reasons persons become theological school deans. Some reasons are personal, while some are a product of a particular context and its circumstance. In my experience, most deans answer the vocational calling of dean for good-intentioned reasons, sometimes, even noble ones. Most simply want to serve their institutions, despite the trade offs; they have gifts in administration, expertise in educational processes, perhaps even competencies in leadership. They are willing to make these capacities available to their



organization, and when well-received, they are gifts to the institution. For a few, the deanship may become a permanent vocational calling. For others, the call to deanship will be for a short season. Even those who reluctantly accept the office will discover there are particular aspects of the work that, while challenging and at times overwhelming, can bring great satisfaction.

Deans may discover there are perks that come with the job they may not have anticipated. For

example, here are five freaking awesome things about being a dean:

- You get to wear a cape to Faculty meetings if you want to
- You get first dibs on the seminary's timeshare in Boca Raton
- You gain immediate deference from faculty colleagues and unexpected instant respect from your estranged teenage children (and, your mother will be proud)
- You get a dean's slush fund
- You get to attend the Wabash Center's colloquy for theological school deans (extra days away from the office, shrimp at Mustang Island, chocolate, and you get to hang around Paul and Tom!).

Well, if you were enticed to take office with such promises, by now you've likely discovered that the job is little like what you imagined. However, there are some pretty awesome things about being a theological school dean.

1. You get to work with some pretty smart people and passionate colleagues (although those two may not be the same persons).

Sometimes, when people ask me about what it's like to work in academia, I say, "It's not the real world, but I like it." It's a rare privilege to be in a context that provides the luxury of being around people who are paid to think deep thoughts, work with big ideas, and engage mind and spirit in the pursuit of ideals and noble work. Given the challenges faced by theological schools we can wonder how long that privileged professorial life can be sustained. But in the meantime, being around the rarefied air of scholars can be one of the most enriching parts of being a dean.

2. You get to shape the life of an institution.

Relatively few people get to be in a position to practice generativity at an institutional level to the capacity that is available to Presidents and Deans. It is a high calling to provide meaningful stewardship to a vision and institutionalized values that spans generations. As second chair leaders, deans, perhaps more than presidents, have the opportunity to interpret and shape the vision of the institution. While academic deans will tend to be behind-the-scene persons, their influence on the institution is immeasurable---one we all hope, is for the good.

3. You can make a difference in times of challenge and crises.

The historical narrative of every institution includes nodal periods of crises where survival was in the balance. In every instance the key to moving from survival to thriving was the presence of committed and capable leaders who had the grit to hang on and move forward when others would quit. Everyone admires successful individuals and institutions, but they both had one thing in common most don't consider: they never quit when the going got rough. When it would seem that shutting down the enterprise or just walking away was easier, they personalized the vision, rolled up their sleeves, and did whatever it took to find the way.

For better or ill, and despite wishing it to be otherwise, a dean's greatest opportunities to bring about change and make a difference come during predictable and unpredictable nodal events involving crisis. These provide time and opportunity to "open up the system" and disrupt the normalcy of homeostasis. These nodal events can be a curriculum revision, a troubling accreditation report, faculty hires or dismissals, governance crises (e.g., Presidential transitions, a merger); institutional crises (e.g., financial duress, campus downsizing or relocations). Every dean can anticipate having to deal with at least one major crisis during her or his tenure. For deans who want to make a difference, the mantra is, "Never waste a crisis!"

Deans today serve during a time of unprecedented change and challenge for theological education. One question of perspective is, twenty-five years from now, after this liminal epoch for theological education, what will be said of the deans who led their institutions during this time?

4. You will acquire the capacity for leadership.

A perpetual dilemma for theological schools who emphasize pastoral theology and congregational ministry is how to help seminarians become leaders through an academic curriculum. Most schools make good effort by providing supervised ministry opportunities in various contexts. But that is of limited effect. The reality is that one can only learn leadership when one is in a position that carries the responsibility and burden of leadership, and requires one to function as leader in a context that recognizes one as the defacto leader in the system. Faculty members may refer to themselves as "leaders of influence," or "a leader in my field," but that metaphor does not come close to the realities of being a leader in a system. Should a person move from faculty member to dean in her or his context, that insight comes pretty quickly.

Being a leader requires a change of perspective, stance, functioning, priorities, and the cultivation of courage one did not need before---even in one's same context. Shifting to a position of leader will expand your understanding and perspective of a theological school, and, of its mission. It is likely those would remain out of your reach until accepting the call to be dean. And for certain, you'll never talk about leadership to seminarians the same way as you may have before.

<https://wabash.center/2014/11/four-freaking-awesome-things-about-being-dean/>