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Six Challenges When Leaving the Office as Dean

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It may seem premature to offer this blog at the beginning of an academic year, but the fact is most deans who are leaving office will have announced their departure from that role with a year's notice. If that's the case for you, you've turned in your graciously-worded resignation letter and the search for a new dean will begin soon. Or, perhaps, another sympathetic, possibly naive, soul from among the Faculty is waiting in the wings to take on the mantle. In either case, you'll soon start contemplating what the "last year" in office will be like, experience episodes of anticipatory grief, and maybe, occasionally closing your office door and doing the happy dance on your desk.

Regardless of the reasons for vacating the office of dean, leaving well is important. That in itself can be a great gift to an institution. How you leave can set the tone for a smooth transition. Leaving well can help or hinder the next dean's entry, and can define your relationship with colleagues when re-entering the Faculty body. Here are five challenges when leaving office as dean:



1. Setting your pace. Some deans will move through their final year in office in "coasting" mode, marking the time until they can unburden themselves. Others will move into it with frenzied determination to get as much of the unfinished business completed before they leave office. One good rule to follow is to take responsibility for your time in office, meaning, being responsible during the last year (no slacking off). There's a balance to be struck between not defecting in place (you're still the dean), while also not trying to fix problems for the next dean, nor setting the agenda for the seminary for after you are out of office.

2. Navigating shifting relationships. When you took office you changed your "position" in the system and realigned relationships. You needed to relate differently with the President, your faculty colleagues, and the staff. Upon leaving office you will once again shift your position. You'll need to renegotiate your working relationship with all those parties, plus, the new dean, if you will remain in the school. Some will welcome you "back from the dark side" and rejoice in your redemption. Others may have difficulty re-establishing a collegial relationship with you if their experience with you as dean was prickly. This is a good time to remember the adage, "It was never about you."

3. Reentering your field of scholarship. The deanship is a full time job, and then some. If you came to the deanship from among the Faculty it probably did not take you long to figure out that you entered a different professional field than the one you trained for and practiced as teacher and academic. There's a qualitative difference between being in the *academic field* of leadership and administration, and practicing the *scholarship* of research, writing, and teaching. By your third year in office you were probably feeling a bit disconnected from your field of scholarship. The guild meetings you once attended were replaced with attendance at conferences related to accreditation, institutional compliance, organizational leadership, and training in administrative software. The pile of unread books related to your field has grown alarmingly high. You may have even canceled a favorite professional journal or two because you spent more time reading about standards, metrics, assessment, and reviewing and writing internal reports. As you leave office it is time to re-engage in the field of scholarship. Now you can get back in the game: write a journal article, dust off that book proposal, and schedule a professional conference in your field of study. Re-acquaint yourself with old colleagues and catch up on their works. Introduce yourself to the fresh-faced rising stars in your field; but you may have to convince them you were once somebody.

4. Defining your boundaries. Once you turn in your keys, you will no longer be the Dean. In another sense, however, you'll always be "dean." It's a relatively rare job, and not many hold it for long. Some will ask you for your opinion about matters, "as a dean," and you'll discover that your opinion counts for more merely by virtue of having had that position. You'll have insider knowledge about the institution, and about members in the institution, that you will need to keep confidential. You'll need to live into the challenge of setting appropriate boundaries, especially if you remain at the same institution. You are no longer the Dean, and you need to be clear about that.

5. Letting go. After you leave office you will no longer be part of the "inner circle" of decision

makers. It will likely feel strange, if not unsettling, to no longer be "in the know" about what is happening in the institution. While your opinion as a faculty member may count for more than previously, your sphere of influence will be narrower. Letting go of the job may include letting go of how others define you as "the former dean." You may be praised as "a great dean," or blamed for every problem and inconvenience in the system--neither of which will be completely true. (When I left office, I told the new dean to be sure to blame me for every problem he faced. He needed to be the new "good guy.").

6. Maintaining the integrity of the office up to the last day. A common tendency in "lame duck" years of any administration is that of being magnanimous in making exemptions and granting favors. It is a non-too-subtle temptation related to not having to live with the consequences of those gestures. You get all the praise, and the next dean inherits all the headaches. Before you grant an exemption or favor to that faculty member who is praising you for being an understanding and flexible dean, it's worth remembering that while in office you remain the steward of the organization, and that includes honoring and enforcing policies. Maintain the integrity of the office to your last day; you will serve the institution better, and will prevent the next dean from having to deal with all the "accommodations" you made on your way out. Remember that one goal is to leave the institution better than how you found it.

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