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Six Challenges When Taking Office as Dean

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New deans come into the office of Chief Academic Officer in varied ways. Some aspire to the work, others are called, some are pressed into service, and some poor souls are voted in during a missed Faculty meeting. While larger theological schools often have the luxury of searching and securing a seasoned person for the job, smaller schools may fill the office out of necessity from among the Faculty body. Given how critical the office is to the effectiveness and development of the institution, it is puzzling how haphazard filling the offices of the dean can seem.

Starting the job of dean can be daunting and may leave one with feelings of uncertainty or with performance-anxiety long ago left behind as one grew confident in one's field of study and in teaching. When taking office, especially as a novice, there is reason to be anxious. It's new work, in a new field, in a new organizational position, with new responsibilities, requiring new skills and expertise. It has been pointed out that when we enter these kinds of situations we tend to emotionally regress to feeling like a nine-year-old on the first day of class at a new school.

Regardless of how a dean lands the job, whether by aspiration or expediency, there are common issues to deal with when taking office. Here are six common challenges deans must navigate as they establish themselves in their new role, whether coming from outside the system, or, emerging from among the Faculty.



1. Establishing and cultivating a different relationship with the President. When you shift from faculty member to administration you occupy a different functional position in the system, and that requires a re-alignment in how you relate to persons in the system. For deans, the single most critical functional relationship is with the seminary President (or its equivalent in a college or university-related context). Depending on the President, the dean's new role may be that of confidant, lieutenant, guide and advisor (leading upward), second chair leader, or, scapegoat and third point of reactivity triangles. Entering deans will do well to invest in cultivating a healthy and transparent relationship with the President (e.g., the dean is not the President's secretary!). If there's a singular quality that helps foster a healthy and productive working relationship between President and dean, it is trust. If there is trust between the two key leaders in the organization, they can work through any issue and navigate just about any crisis. Lacking trust, however, not only will the relationship remain stuck, so will the school.

2. Establishing and cultivating a different relationship with the Faculty and Associates. If you come into the office of the dean from among faculty you'll have to re-establish a new relationship with former faculty colleagues. You are now someone anywhere from "first among equals" to one who has "gone to the dark side." As with all leadership positions, it can be helpful to accept that most people in the system will relate to you more out of the role you play than with you personally. If you enter from outside the school you'll want to work on establishing your working relationship with the faculty early: expectations, accessibility, and goals (Hint: those should not include being "liked."). If there are associate deans in place you'll need to work on clarifying boundaries, interfaces, and expectations related to the work and to working together.

3. Acquiring new educational expertise. If you enter the dean's office from a field other than education in general, or higher education in particular, you'll need to acquire a new range of educational expertise---quickly. There is now a whole new field about which you now need to be the resident expert: accreditation standards, processes, and requirements; curriculum assessment; curriculum development; assessment of effectiveness in teaching and learning; educational supervision; budgeting and institutional metrics; project planning, etc. There's just no way around it, the job of the dean is educational administration and institutional leadership. In conversations with deans I've heard scholars confess that nothing in their educational or professional experience prepared them to be educational leaders, while also hearing other deans confess that everything they needed to know about educational leadership they learned from training in the field of elementary education. Taking on the job of dean may mean putting your personal scholarly interests and field of study aside for a short tenure, to some extent. Simply put, taking on the deanship is taking on a new professional field.

4. Acquiring new people skills. The contextual relational skills of the dean are very different than those you've cultivated as scholar and classroom instructor. You'll be surprised, perhaps overwhelmed, at how much "pastoral care" you'll provide as dean---for students and for faculty. You'll need to learn to say "no" twice as often as you say "yes," and do so without alienating or unduly disappointing people. You'll need to learn how to set boundaries, and keep them, as well as when extend less grace for lapses, failures, and infractions than you may be comfortable with. If you have not developed a knack for political gamesmanship as a life skill, now is the time to do so; you'll need it to navigate the perpetually triangulated waters of the job as you work with players, constituents, and stakeholders: faculty, administration, staff, students, trustees, and the public.

The most important people skill for a dean to cultivate, however, is closely aligned to the function of academic leadership: getting a disparate group of people to align with an educational vision (often, one they may not fully support) and making it possible for them to work together toward realizing that vision. For deans, that means getting people to pull together on strategies and initiatives that translate and implement the vision (typically articulated by the President). That's no small feat. Recall the often-used phrase about faculty and herding cats.

5. Restructuring and prioritizing life and work. Those who take on the job of dean anticipate they are going to be busier than the usual academic life allows, but they are often take by surprise by how much they underestimate that reality. One of the biggest challenges when taking office is restructuring and prioritizing life and work for the demands of the deanship. This can include:

- Adjusting to longer work hours
- Spending more time spent in the office
- Attending more meetings, each resulting in more work
- Restructuring one's focus, from scholarship to academics; from teaching to administrivia
- Shifting loyalty to the institution over personal relationships

- Letting go of things that are not sustainable in work and lifestyle
- Meeting more often with people you need to and less often with people you want to
- Changing the kinds of professional meetings you attend.

The work of the dean is challenging, at times it can feel overwhelming. But it can be one of the most satisfying professional seasons of one's academic career, despite the challenges. Starting right can make a big difference in how satisfying the work is, and, how effective one can do it.

6. Getting things in order before making progress. It is likely that one thing you'll be dealing with early into your tenure is taking care of issues left undone, or neglected, by your predecessor. If you came up from the Faculty these may be issues you are aware of, and now it's up to you to address them. If you come from outside the institution, the issues may be on a to-do list from a conscientious predecessor, they may come in the form of a litany of complaints from the President or Faculty, or they may be issues you stumble upon by surprise.

In one early educational administration job I discovered a file buried in a filing cabinet indicating the previous person had totally neglected to follow up with federal and state compliance issues. No one in the system was aware of it and it re-prioritized my agenda for the first six months in office. In another academic administration I discovered, in a staff meeting, that the previous administration had not initiated the production of the academic catalog! In one job, it was left to me ("the next guy") to deal with troubling and under performing staff and faculty members. While uncomfortable, dismissing three employees and putting one on notice yielded the benefit of "waking up" the system.

There's no one perfect way to start the complex job of the dean. Many of the issues you'll face entering the office will be contextual--unique, to some extent, to your school. Being alert and appreciating the importance of the establishment phase of your tenure can go a long way to making the rest of time in office productive, if not enjoyable.

<https://wabash.center/2014/08/six-challenges-when-taking-office-as-dean/>