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The Case for Growing our Own

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At any given time, there are literally hundreds of institutions recruiting academic deans to fill vacant positions. On November 23, 2008, higheredjobs.com listed 331 dean searches nationwide. Given that staggering number and the fact that the average tenure of deans is five years, this is a trend that is likely to continue (ASHE-ERIC 2001). Why is this, and more importantly, what can be done about it?

Although there is no standard delineation of dean's duties, the role has been described as "all things to all people" (ASHE-ERIC 2001). Once considered the chief academic officer, the increased duties and demands are more accurately portrayed by the title chief executive officer (Gmelch et al. 1999). Deans that only oversee curricula, faculty, and budget are an artifact of the past. Today's deans manage multi-million dollar budgets, fundraise, mediate conflict, and address complex personnel issues (Bisbee and Miller 2007). They also attend a plethora of meetings, complete excessive amounts of paperwork, endure frequent interruptions, and are required to meet numerous deadlines (Gmelch et al. 1999).

Deans work closely with faculty members, agencies outside of the university, the deans of arts and sciences, as well as the university president (Geiger 1989). The dean also interacts with students, parents, and alumni. This diverse array of constituents creates contradictory roles for the dean (Rosser, Johnsrud, and Heck 2003). Upper administration expects the dean to vigilantly manage college finances, while faculty members want the dean to generously provide financial support and release time for their pursuits (Wolverton, Wolverton, and Gmelch 1999). Conflicting expectations are also evident when alumni expect time honored traditions to be respected and preserved, yet faculty members want a leader that represents visionary, innovative, and futuristic thinking. Finally, while administration counts on the dean to evaluate faculty performance and make dismissal, tenure and promotion recommendations, faculty expect the dean to motivate, support, and coach them. The contradictory role expectations of deans force them to maintain a difficult balance (Wolverton, Wolverton, and Gmelch 1999).

Lack of Preparation

Given the complexity and potential influence of the dean role, one would expect the requirements for the position to be abundant. However, in a review of published advertisements for dean vacancies, the most commonly sought attributes were a doctorate, successful teaching experience, scholarship, and a commitment to the values of the institution. A record of administrative experience/ability showed up in only one-half of the advertisements (ASHE-ERIC 2001). Maghroori and Powers (2004) indicate that the skills and abilities required of strong faculty members contribute little to their success as administrators. Hiring an individual with talents and skills complementary to a particular position at a specific institution is much more effective than hiring someone for a generic dean position (Wolverton, Gmelch, and Wolverton 2000).

Succession Planning

The practice of succession planning is common in business and industry where a departing leader can

rest assured that someone is groomed and prepared to take over duties left behind. In some cases, this person has been in training, waiting in the wings, for many years (Laff 2008). In higher education, this practice is less common and may even be considered undesirable by some (Bisbee 2007). While appealing, bringing in someone from the outside presents a risk to the institution. Without an understanding of the existing culture of a college, a new leader implementing novel ideas is set up to fail (Marshall 2007). Wolverton, Gmelch, and Wolverton (2000) indicate that knowing an organization's culture is the most important factor in the success of a leader. "The best leaders are deeply imbued with company culture: outsiders can acquire this, but it takes time. Brought-in leaders pose an unacceptably high risk….'Grow your own leaders' must be the motto of every organization" (Hall 2002).

Santora, Caro, and Sarros (2007) characterize nonprofits as suffering from internal leadership deficits. A potential solution to these deficits in higher education is the practice of succession planning. Succession planning is "broad based, talent management encompassing all organizational levels" (Buhler 2008). It requires an organization to continually think ahead to its needs for the future. Desirable skills and abilities for future leaders must be determined far in advance (Hall 2002). Individuals within the organization who demonstrate potential in these areas should be identified early in their careers (Bisbee 2007). With extensive training, these individuals make up a leadership pipeline prepared to take on new positions long before they are vacated (Boehle 2008; Buhler 2008). Once identified for a particular position, the future leader and the incumbent spend time engaged in formal knowledge transfer to ensure that practices and procedures are learned and institutional memory is well-preserved (Laff 2008).

Support and Training

Even though succession planning ensures a qualified applicant pool of new deans, strong support needs to be in place to retain them. One particularly beneficial support is feedback from the dean's immediate supervisor. Receiving performance feedback needs to be a regular occurrence; expectations need to be clearly articulated. The individual must be apprised of how evaluation will take place and what constitutes success. The duties of the role are extensive; it is imperative for a new dean to know what responsibilities are priorities. Since much of a dean's work is viewed subjectively by different constituents, it is important that dean's supervisor provide objective evaluation of the duties performed (Wolverton, Wolverton and Gmelch 1999). Leadership can be very lonely. Ample opportunities to establish quality relationships with supervisors and other deans should be provided (Johnsrud, Heck and Rosser 2000). Assistance in finding a mentor that can serve as a trusted advisor, provide insights and direction, and offer ongoing feedback is also advised (Wolverton, Wolverton and Gmelch 1999).

In addition to providing support for a new dean, there must also be formal training for the position (Gmelch et al. 1999). When Bisbee and Miller (2007), administered a survey asking administrators how leaders were developed at their institutions, less than one-half of the respondents reported any leadership training. Professional development, in areas identified as particularly stressful, such as fundraising, faculty evaluation, and conflict mediation is warranted (Gmelch et al. 1999). Ensuring that deans are trained in crucial skills and acclimated to the complexities of their roles is a wise investment. Even in times of tight budgets, it is far less costly to provide adequate resources than to search for a new dean.

Institutional progress depends on strong leadership (Gaither 2002). The dean position is ambiguous,

demanding, complex, and plagued by a revolving door of incumbents. Leaving the selection, support, and training of deans to chance is negligent and presents unnecessary risk to institutions. Universities need to give thoughtful consideration to identifying future leaders from within early in their careers thereby cultivating and nurturing talent for the future success of the institution.

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