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Rotating-term Associate Deans: Pathway to Higher Education Administration

Eugenia Gerdes

Christopher Zappe

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Academic Leadership Journal

In a recent article in this journal, Betts, Urias, Chavez, and Betts (2009) argue that higher education faces a leadership shortage—due both to expected turnover in senior administrative positions and to lack of clear pathways into administration. As we have discussed elsewhere (Zappe & Gerdes, 2008), administration is not typically a long-term goal for those whose careers begin with faculty appointments. For the few who switch pathways to become academic administrators, an associate dean position often is the point of transition. Below, we describe the advantages of rotating associate dean positions, in which faculty members from the same institution leave the faculty for a fixed term and then return to the faculty. Based on our experience with this practice over the past 22 years, we have developed recommendations applicable to other institutions as well.

Context and history

Bucknell University is a private institution with characteristics of both a liberal arts college and a comprehensive university. The College of Arts and Sciences currently enrolls 2900-3000 students and serves another 500-600 students in the College of Engineering. Although the student body has grown only slightly over the past two decades, the College of Arts and Sciences faculty has grown dramatically from 190 to 275 positions at present. Before 1987, the College was administered by one dean, reporting to the provost of the University, and two associate deans responsible for student academic issues. These student-oriented associate deans were hired with the expectation that they would continue in their positions, contingent only on their performance. The focus of this article is, instead, on the fixed-term, rotating associate dean of faculty position, which was instituted in 1987. In 2002, a second associate dean of faculty position was added; in 2003, the term was lengthened from three to four years; and, in 2008, a third associate dean of faculty position was added.

The position description initially centered on internal faculty development funding and initiatives, along with hiring and evaluation of part-time and replacement faculty and assignment of office and instructional space. As the position evolved, these areas remained, but the associate dean of faculty assumed more independent authority over faculty development; then additional faculty responsibilities were added, as well as assignment to particular divisions of the College (the Humanities, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, and Social Sciences divisions). Most recently, the primary responsibility of each of the associate deans of faculty has been to strengthen the identity of each division by focusing on the expansion of support and resources for divisional faculty, curricula, and co-curricular initiatives. The associate deans of faculty now have responsibility for the academic departments and programs within their division, which includes overseeing searches for visiting faculty and, in some cases, tenure-track faculty and advising the dean in determining faculty replacement needs and costs of those replacements. Furthermore, the divisional associate deans represent the College on various university committees and work together to ensure consistency in faculty development efforts and funding opportunities across the College.

Advantages

Associate dean positions lessen the dean's workload. At Bucknell, even though the rest of the dean's office staff must spend time educating each new associate dean of faculty, and the dean spends time mentoring each associate dean of faculty, there is a net benefit in terms of the dean's time and in responsiveness to departments and individual faculty members. We recommend a term of three or four years to take advantage of the administrative skills and knowledge developed by associate deans without "burning the bridges" needed for returning to the faculty.

Associate deans who are internal appointments already know the institution's culture and the important players and issues in the faculty. This not only shortens the learning curve for new associate deans but also assures a good fit with the job responsibilities, the dean and other members of the dean's office, and the institutional priorities, all of which are familiar to candidates on at least a general level. From the perspective of those choosing the associate dean, the screening committee and dean are likely to make a better decision because the candidates are familiar to them as well.

Rotating-position associate deans who get "up to speed" quickly, and who consider their predecessors colleagues whom they can consult, enhance continuity. At the end of their terms, associate deans can be particularly valuable to their institutions in providing continuity. At Bucknell, three of our associate deans of faculty have had their terms extended to serve as Interim Dean in periods of significant administrative turnover.

Rotating positions also allow each new appointment to complement the strengths and weaknesses of the dean and any other associate deans. The credibility of the dean's office in understanding disciplinary backgrounds also can be enhanced; our advertisements included preference for an unrepresented division of the curriculum even before our positions were specifically linked to different academic divisions.

These positions provide a pathway to administration by allowing faculty members to test their interests in a more permanent transition. Occupants develop skills they could not develop as faculty members and, should they wish to continue as administrators, become credible candidates. At Bucknell, of the nine associate deans of faculty who have left the position since 1987, seven—including the two of us—assumed senior administrative positions, six serving as Bucknell administrators at some point and four serving elsewhere (three did both). In terms of diversifying higher education (see Betts et al., 2009), four white women, one Hispanic man, and two white men have assumed senior administrative roles after serving as associate deans of faculty.

For some who decide not to pursue administrative positions, the change of pace is an important break in a long faculty career. Those who return to the faculty leave the position with an understanding of the big picture at their university and can often explain that perspective to faculty colleagues. In our experience, four associate deans of faculty have returned to their roles as faculty leaders (one of those three also filled another Bucknell administrative position and one also served as an administrator elsewhere).

In an article on administrative "temps," Deborah Abowitz (2003), one of Bucknell's former associate deans of faculty, describes advantages consistent with those above. She emphasizes the value to the institution of associate deans who are "known quantities" and who can "hit the ground running" and the value to the temporary associate deans of developing the institutional perspective and some "cultural

capital” of the full-time administrative world as well as “relationships and contacts across the breadth of the institution” (p. 8).

Recommendations for recruiting

To enhance credibility with faculty, we recommend advertising the position, requesting nominations as well as applications, and appointing a screening committee. The screening committee could be composed of chairs of departments and major committees who will interact with this associate dean, along with an administrator who is familiar with the position.

Departments may not understand or appreciate their faculty members seeking a rotating position, so we recommend keeping the application process confidential. In addition to enabling potential candidates to explore the position, only one department has to be upset at the end of the process—and appropriate replacement for the faculty member’s absence probably will allow department members to give priority to the welfare of the institution and the desires of their faculty colleague.

We recommend seeking out tenured faculty members who have chaired their departments and major committees or who have served in part-time administrative positions, and whose judgment is trusted. In our experience, the applicant pools are small; we have found it helpful for the dean or outgoing associate dean of faculty to schedule confidential discussions with appropriate faculty members to encourage them to apply or to accept a nomination. Because applicants will compare the salary offered to their faculty pay, we recommend adding one or two month’s pay to the appointee’s faculty salary rather than standardizing a salary for the position.

We recommend including a detailed job description in the initial advertisement and discussing it with the screening committee before the committee meets with candidates. Discussing the importance of finding someone strong in discretion/confidentiality, interactions with different types of people, and organization/time management, including juggling multiple priorities, is important—these qualities are not the most salient to a largely faculty committee, and they often have weighed heavily in our final decisions.

Because of the importance of teamwork and confidentiality within the dean’s office, candidates should interview with the other professional staff and clerical staff in the dean’s office. The working relationship with the dean is crucial; so we recommend that the dean retain authority for the final decision.

To maintain good relationships with the interviewed candidates who are not chosen, we recommend that the dean meet with each of them to help them find other ways to meet their goals and, if appropriate, to encourage them to apply again in the future.

Avoiding other pitfalls

New associate deans may have trouble negotiating faculty colleagues’ perceptions that their decisions will accord with former friendships and allegiances or, conversely, that they must be treated with suspicion now that they have crossed over to the administrative side. Similarly, new associate deans may feel disconnected from their previous faculty roles as teacher and scholar and their disciplinary perspective. The threats to one’s identity may be worse in a rotating position because of the need to decide whether one will return to the faculty at the end of the term. The dean should be alert to the

possibility of such disconnects and open to conversations about the associate dean's sense of identity throughout the term. Readings that normalize the transitional disconnects could also help (see Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002).

New associate deans usually have significant gaps in their knowledge, such as little budgetary experience beyond the department level. Their expertise might be doubted, reasonably, by career administrators; so the dean should position new associate deans to demonstrate competence in their initial interactions with other administrators. We have been pleasantly surprised by how quickly our new associate deans of faculty have been accepted as real administrators by career administrators at Bucknell, perhaps because we have treated them as the experts in their areas of responsibility and because past associate deans of faculty have made significant contributions.

Associate deans have to be given genuine authority over their areas responsibility; otherwise, faculty members and department chairs will approach the dean instead. When approached on a matter that should have gone to the associate dean, the dean should avoid making a decision without involving the associate dean. In handling phone calls and scheduling appointments, clerical staff can reinforce the impression that failing to consult the associate dean who is responsible for the matter could occasion a delay in the decision. Meeting frequently with the associate dean allows the dean to privately monitor the associate dean's handling of matters.

Some faculty members might perceive that the dean is not as accessible as s/he was prior to the introduction of associate deans. We recommend that the associate deans be deployed in a way that indicates increased rather than diminished accessibility to the dean's office. Specifically, associate deans can respond directly to department chairs and faculty who need assistance with routine or straightforward issues. Such delegation allows the senior dean's scarce time to be directed to addressing more difficult or strategic issues, such as mediating conflict among members of a department or helping a department formulate a proposal for major curricular revisions.

The assignment of associate deans to some committees on which the dean has served previously may generate similar concerns about the dean's accessibility. However, these concerns can be addressed by ensuring that the associate deans and the dean regularly discuss the various issues and developments within committees to which an associate dean is assigned. Associate deans can thus provide input to committee discussions that refers directly to their periodic conversations with the dean regarding the work of the group.

Real expertise is developed by an associate dean and disappears from the office when that associate dean's term is over. To minimize disruptions due to turnover, terms of multiple associate deans can be staggered so that only one associate dean is replaced at any given time. Departing associate deans can be charged with converting their job descriptions into month-by-month to-do lists and with orienting their replacements. We also recommend creating the expectation that the new associate dean will consult with his/her predecessor in at least the initial months of the changeover.

While introduction of rotating associate deans could eventually lead to competition or conflict among the associate deans or difficulties between the dean and an associate dean, that has not been our experience. We have avoided conflict through careful recruiting processes and the establishment of a work group culture in which members of the dean's staff are expected to protect one another and never to blame another member of the team when things go awry. The development of this culture of mutual

respect and support is cultivated and reinforced through weekly meetings of the entire staff during which associate deans and the dean share their experiences—both success stories and frustrating episodes—with each other.

Finally, it is important to recognize that an associate dean in a temporary position can fall behind on scholarship, which has negative consequences whether s/he intends to return to the faculty or seek a senior administrative position. Therefore, it is critical to provide rotating associate deans with travel funding, time to work on scholarly projects (especially during the summer and other slower periods during the academic year), and, if possible, enhanced sabbatical funding upon their return to the faculty.

Conclusion

Some of these pitfalls would occur with any new associate dean or entry-level administrative position. The fact that predictable problems occur more regularly with fixed-term rotating positions makes it easier to develop solutions. Overall, the benefits for faculty members interested in such positions, for institutions, and for higher education as a whole make these fixed-term, rotating positions a win-win-win strategy for increasing the pathways to higher education administration.

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