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Program Leaders' New Tools for Outcomes Assessment and Improvement

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Presentation Title: New Tools for New Tasks in Program Leadership

Current and evolving challenges in higher education have dramatically changed what is expected of academic leaders today (Lees, 2006; Wescott, 2000). Deans, chairs, and program directors not only face new responsibilities but many more of them. The idea that individuals in these positions wear many hats is not new nor is the recognition of the importance of these roles. More than fifty years of research has documented these things (Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Jennerich, 1981; Patton, 1961; Wescott, 2000). What is new is the recognition that the expectations have grown rapidly due in large measure from pressures external to the discipline including such things as cost, accountability, competition, graduation rates, and college rankings. One report by a 25-year veteran department chair cataloged the accretion of his responsibilities from a manageable seven his first year, to seventeen two decades later (Pinto, 2013). While the demands of academic leadership continue to expand dramatically, preparation for these roles has not.

Up and down ranks, incumbents in academic leadership positions come to their roles the same way their predecessors did--by being well-respected and effective *faculty* (Gallup, 2013; Cook, 2012; Strathe & Wilson, 2006). While there is no shortage of research attesting to the complexity or centrality of academic leaders' impact on the quality and reputation of their institutions, there is a shortage of support and development mechanisms to assist chairs and other leaders in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills needed not just to "survive" their terms, but to thrive in them. An added dimension to this issue, is the fact that most academic leaders view their time in program or department administration as a one-off and term-limited venture (Hecht, Higginson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999). That is, they continue to view themselves as faculty, to teach one or more courses, and to expect to return to full-time teaching as soon as their terms in administration end (Strathe & Wilson, 2006). This mindset undermines individuals' readiness to address large complex issues, and to seek and develop new skills they perceive as needing on a temporary basis.

Given this context, academic leaders benefit from learning opportunities that augment their faculty-centric skills and, concurrently, enable their use in program and department administration. For example, academic leaders can use specific generative tools in a class to gauge students' prior knowledge of the course subject at the beginning of a unit. Likewise, these tools could be used in a department meeting to generate input from the faculty on technology needs.

In this session, participants will consider a set of process and analytic skills as extensions of their academic (faculty) talents; experience, through real institutional artifacts, the use of these skills in program communication, analysis, or evidence-building; review step-by-step implementation guidelines; and share issues in their own departments to which they can apply the featured skills.

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