Reflections of a Dean: Opportunities and Challenges of Providing Higher Education in a Research Institution

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Many challenges face today's administrators in higher education. The foci of higher education have changed over the years. Monetary issues, politics, legal challenges and decisions, and human nature continue to affect the universities, both public and private, and thus the way administrators do their jobs. This article examines unique challenges the author faces in her role as Dean, as well as global issues that face higher education administrators on a daily basis.

Several years ago I was asked to contribute a piece to *New Directions for Higher Education* (Allen-Meares, 1997), detailing my experiences as a dean at two research institutions. Reading over the article today, very few aspects of the role have changed. If anything, the role of dean— part intellectual leader, part administrator, part researcher, part fundraiser, and part faculty, part mentee— has become more complicated, with emphasis added to utilizing certain management tools, and to the amount of time one allocates to each aspect of the role shifting according to demands. Not only have the pressures on public research institutions changed, monetary issues, technological progress, politics, legal decisions, and quite simply human nature have continued to evolve and affect higher education in profound ways.

Many of these changes have had an impact on the role of faculty in general, as well as how they perceive their roles. For example, faculty traditions such as academic freedom and the tenure process are being questioned. Many changes stem from the change in focus of higher education—not only amongst faculty, but also amongst students, the public, and administrators themselves. Practical skills, the translation of knowledge,

multi-disciplinary understanding, and a global focus are all emerging trends that will require administrators to change with the time in order to meet the challenges presented.

The administrator's role within higher education has taken on an element of a creative time management: to whom and what do we give priority, what has got to give in order to concentrate on the largest issues, and who is being shortchanged if we make one decision over another?

Personal Experiences - Observing Changes Over Time

Some of the challenges I face as Dean are unique to my personal situations. My administrative experience in the position of Dean started with a 2-year period at the school of social work in a large, rural, Midwestern, research school (University A). Currently, I am the senior-most Dean at a similar university (University B), although this time we are located in a small urban community. As such, I have seen and experienced many more changes than my fellow deans. Several Presidents and Provosts have come and gone during my tenure at University B. Students' requirements for their professional and research training have changed, as has the way they learn—for

instance, the availability and infrastructure of information technology (IT), which is new to many 20th century administrators who started their careers in a classroom with a blackboard and a piece of chalk. Research training, too, has changed with the times, requiring faculty and students alike to embrace multi-disciplinary perspectives and mixed methodologies.

One Illustration of Change from University B

University B has also changed in structure and response to the state, national, and global economy and global events. A very evident example of change is how the University's budget model has been altered since I assumed my current position, from a central University budget to one adapted from RCM, *responsibility center management,* (which itself has seen several modifications). This budget model reflects both a response to the decrease in state appropriations and the nature of the University's largely decentralized and highly autonomous schools and units. Deans and Directors are provided funding and guidance, but in the end are left to manage their school or unit in an entrepreneurial way. This presents the need to manage our schools and units in a manner much closer to private, decentralized universities or to utilize private sector skills and approaches.

Governing faculty, too, are important participants in the RCM model, as they work closely with administrators to communicate priorities and issues that impact their roles while keeping an eye on available resources. We as Deans, alongside members of the governing faculty, ultimately determine the fate — the success or failure — of our own school. Balancing intellectual leadership with cost containment and fund generating activities is both frustrating and stimulating.

While this budget model places Deans and Directors who are *go-getters* in a tremendous position to grow and support their schools' teaching, service, and research programs, it also places them in a situation that may put their schools in jeopardy if they are not successful or state appropriations are further reduced.

The state's contribution to the University's budget has been reduced by over $55M, leaving too few funds to support programs or units when there are financial shortfalls in a particular college or school. Recently, University B has begun a conversation among Deans regarding the taxation policy undergirding the budget model, as well as greater transparency regarding the redistribution of centrally controlled funds to units. Through it all I have been fortunate that the University's Central Administration has historically supported and shown interest in our School and faculty, but many programs and courses at the university and many schools of social work throughout the nation have not fared as well. Talk of consolidation, merger, budget shortfalls, and program elimination continue to circulate throughout higher education around the nation.

Functioning as an African-American Administrator

Another unique experience that contributes to my perspective as an administrator is being both a woman and an African-American. In a general context, African Americans still face barriers in the workplace. A recent article in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* finds Caroline Turner, author of *Diversifying Faculty: A Guidebook for Search Committees* stating that "[E]fforts to diversify the faculty continue to be amongst the least successful elements of campus commitments to diversity..." (Kayes & Singley, 2005). According to a recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* (Gardner, 2005), economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett and professor Cornel West completed research that indicated that among minorities "sterling credentials can be

overshadowed by personal and cultural traits. Everything from cornrows, ethnic jewelry, animated hand gestures, and certain manicures can leave colleagues thinking, "You're different."

It seems as if universities and private companies alike are trying to diversify, but are finding their own barriers in their efforts to hire, retain, and promote African Americans (and other minorities). If a university is successful in doing so, as Hewlett points out, societal norms and stereotypes can get in the way, with the result that fewer people with those sterling credentials are moving into roles of leadership, regardless of their qualifications and ability.

I have always been a fervent advocate for building inclusive academic communities, which include all persons and all groups. In my personal experience, there are people within the University who are doing the same, and who are truly color blind and see me as Dean, Professor, and Paula, but there are also some who see my race as a liability. There are also those both inside and outside of the University who find my position to indicate the success or failure of affirmative action, regardless of my management experience, accomplishments, and my intellectual capacity.

This is an especially interesting experience to have at the University that defended the most recent affirmative action cases in front of the United States Supreme Court. I have had the opportunity, as both an African American and a social work researcher, to speak out on the results of *Grutter v. Bollinger, et.al.* (see Allen-Meares, 2003), and have also been **expected** to do so. I have had to walk a thin line in many matters that involve race, such as a recent instance of ethnic intimidation, to which the School of Social Work's administration was accused of being too slow to respond. Understandably, it is very much a part of any administrator's job to walk this fine line—that is, to remain thoughtful and constructive in one's actions. However, as an African-American administrator I have found that, due to my race, often there are additional pressures to be open, understanding, and supportive, regardless of the propriety of the request.

Functioning as a Female Administrator

Similar to the expectation of greater understanding when racial issues may be involved, my gender has also been brought into difficult situations within the school. I have been told that, after all, I am the Dean of a School of Social Work, whose very principles call for consideration of minority populations. I have also been told that as a consequence of my gender I am *expected* to take on the role of nurturer. Contrast this to male administrators who are *assumed* to be neutral. While I strive to create an open and welcoming environment within the School, and conflict may include racial or gender issues, this culture is rooted firmly in the ethos of social work, rather than in my personal identity.

As I mentioned in the New Directions piece, there are still hurdles for women to overcome when they have earned a position of leadership. An article in *The Economist* (July, 2005) states that women make up almost half of America's workforce, and yet account for less than 8% of its top managers. The fact is that there are still many more men in positions of leadership, both within and outside of the academic world (although I should note here that this is not the recent case in Social Work education. A quick statistical analysis of the 2005 *Deans and Directors of MSW Programs* yielded 82 male and 105 female administrators, compared to 66 male and 57 female administrators in 1998).

In the Economist article, Booz Allen Hamilton, a consulting firm that provides statistics on American executives, reported that women comprised 0.7% of departing executives in 1998, and 0.7% in 2004. "In

between, the figure fluctuated. But the firm says that one thing is clear: the number is 'very low and not getting higher.'" The article offers several reasons why this may be true, including women's lack of access to informal networks, lack of strong mentorship or role-models, and a continuing skepticism about women's ability to lead.

My personal experience has proven this to be a rather accurate assessment of our situation. Thirty years after the feminist movement hit its stride, women must still deal with issues of how to balance a home life and a professional career as a professor or administrator, and the repercussions of the choices they have made. During my career I have been privy to conversations and condemnations regarding my choice to be a full-time academic and administrator, rather than at home with my family. On the other hand, I rarely hear about the fact that I typically stay connected to the office when visiting family members. I believe that in the larger picture neither situation truly prevents a talented, skilled, and educated woman from making choices that benefit both her family and her institution. Balance is the key.

Mentoring the Next Generation of Leaders

The role of mentorship in academia is a gray area in the life of women administrators, and especially those who are women of color. Although definitive sources may vary, Marilyn Loden, a business consultant, is given credit for coining the phrase *glass ceiling* as an effective way to describe barriers in the process of women rising through the ranks of leadership in a male-dominated society

(Loden, 2003). In contrast, women of color often describe the barriers they face in making the same journey through the ranks as the concrete ceiling—the obstruction is not only seemingly impenetrable; women of color can't even see what the next level of leadership or opportunity would bring.

Although there is a movement afoot that recognizes the importance of mentoring and nurturing women and minorities in academia, the relative lack of these populations in leadership positions, especially those such as President or Provost, means that mentoring at the administrative level often still involves a greater number of male-to-female mentorships or majority-to-minority mentorships.

I have been fortunate in receiving advice and counsel from several male and several majority mentors in higher education who have served as Provost, Chancellor, and President, and who have shared with me their knowledge and insight into academia, administration, management, and life. The key to facilitating transfer of their insight to other female leaders or leaders of color, is my own ability to effectively lead and transfer the lessons I have learned to the next generation. For example, I am fortunate that I have been able to pass on lessons I have learned by offering guidance and support as a participant in the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work mentoring program for newly appointed deans.

Common Experiences: The Nature of the University is Shifting Educational Relevance

It is not surprising to see that large societal trends also greatly affect the experiences of university and college administration. On a parallel scale to the factors of race and gender, the mission or vision of an institution itself affects one's ability to administer programs. There is a shifting paradigm in the academy regarding what matters within its walls.

Whereas years ago the focus of higher education was less practical and more theoretical, today's parents and students are demanding relevance, especially from great public research universities. On every level — local, state, national, and especially global — those who support the public research universities want to know how their investment of tax dollars pays off for the world outside of the ivory tower. It is no longer acceptable to state that our students are learning liberal arts for the sake of learning. According to Judy D. Olian, Dean of the Smeal College of Business at Penn State, in an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Mangan, 2003), "We need to show that the education our students have received is very relevant...They need to know that our graduates can meet their needs on Monday morning—not 12 months from now." The state wants an educated workforce, the nation wants MBAs with experience, and the world wants research that can cure disease, assist in eradicating poverty, or further our response to global tragedies.

Students of the Future Require a Different Experience

The university is able to, and does, provide every one of these practical requirements. But at what cost, and how, as an administrator does one balance them? In a Fall, 2005 article for the *Social Work Education Reporter* (Allen-Meares, 2005), I pointed out that the basic tripartite mission of the university – teaching, research, and service – is not likely to change. This is the foundation upon which we have built our system of higher education. However, there is tension between the need for the generation of information and the very real demands of the public and the *marketplace-* the opportunity that exits by creating product rather than knowledge. Products may include the tangibles, such as cancer-fighting drugs, transferable technology products, or those less concrete, such as specialized coursework for continuing education students, targeted coursework for professionals in need of brush-up, or a curriculum in response to Americans who are less and less likely to retire from the same company, or even in the same field in which they started their first job.

Scarcity of Funding Dollars Requires Additional Planning/Different Thinking

Adding more pressure to our response to this shift are the ever-changing funding and finance models. I mentioned before how as the senior-most Dean at University B I have witnessed changes in our specific budget model. More generally, all colleges and universities have felt the effect of the most recent national recession, the withdrawal or redirection of state appropriations, and the impact from major national tragedies which funnel monies to specific causes and away from education. But none has felt the impact more than the public university. While tax revenues are down, state needs are up, and health care costs are rising, educational focus has been placed on K-12 education, and administrators are caught in the middle, required to support both the mandatory responsibility to educate students in the best possible way, and faculty research that can inform and advance the world. In the meantime, dorms are in need of upgrading to facilitate new technology, buildings require maintenance and upkeep, and employee health care costs are soaring.

In response, many detractors call for the university to act like a business instead of a learning institution that promotes freedom of thought and unparalleled independence to explore ideas and concepts. Calls for rightsizing and cuts in unpopular programs have been heard around the nation, placing a large burden on administrators, and an even larger burden on students who have to go without the courses they need to fulfill their

majors or the financial aid they need to complete their degrees.

The School has had to make many of those private-sector-type cuts in recent years, limiting building hours, library hours, and having fewer janitorial personnel and services in our building. We also share our physical space with another large program, limiting our ability to expand as our faculty and staff increase, and keep research programs and personnel in house (which has the unfortunate effect of having to spend additional monies to rent space). However, these types of cuts are not always negative. Many systems and procedures have been scrutinized and overhauled, consolidated, or done away with. Processes have been put in place to ensure greater accountability and tracking. Through it all, the faculty and staff remain committed to providing the urgent and core academic services our students require in order to achieve their goals, even if that means tightening the belt elsewhere.

The Changing Faculty

As noted previously, changes within the university processes and culture can have a great effect on faculty members. The debate about the future of tenure and promotion, increasingly tight discretionary funds, and a student body with different needs and requirements all combine to create situations for faculty that simply didn't exist for the previous generation of educators.

Academic freedom, as defined by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, n.d.), allows professors to research, teach, and publish on topics which may prove controversial. The institution itself typically assumes the role of providing a safe haven for faculty to do so. Similar to the impetus behind the First Amendment, the goal of academic freedom is to encourage the exploration and free discussion of all subjects, regardless of their political, religious, or socially determined worth, and has itself been

a hot topic itself, especially after the tragedies of September 11, 2001. For instance, professors who speak out against the American government or support Muslim militarism in any form have found themselves subject to angry and fearful administrators and taxpayers (see http://131.247.89.140/page.cfm?link=article&aid=113 for a press release from University of South Florida's president regarding the termination of Dr. Sami Al-Arian). Crucial questions regarding boundaries and rights are surfacing from recent incidents (see http://www.colorado.edu/EthnicStudies/press_releases/ward_churchill_013105.html for the first press release in the ongoing situation at University of Colorado, Boulder involving Ward Churchill).

An issue closely related to the current debates on academic freedom is the critical examination of the tenure process. Tenure provides faculty members an opportunity to increase their rank, as well as providing an often permanent university home in which to complete their work. Challenges to this process include: a) questioning the wisdom of creating a situation where faculty no longer have to worry about employment, and could therefore potentially let their work suffer or dwindle, b) the structure of how one censures faculty with tenure, and c) the equity of the tenure process for women and minority faculty members, to name just a few. The tenure climate is a particularly hot topic, as reflected in a recent edition of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 4, 2005), which reported that results from a poll of University Presidents indicated that 53% believed that the current tenure system should be replaced by a contract system. It is interesting to note that the majority of those who favored scrapping tenure had never been classroom teachers, do not themselves have tenure, have been president for at least 10 years, and tend to be from private religious institutions (Fogg, 2005).

One of the most difficult struggles today's administrators face is the aforementioned *generation gap* among their faculty. At this point in time, teaching and scholarly publishing are no longer the only skills necessary. Success, merit, and recognition for faculty members require not only excellence in research and teaching, but also the source and amount of external funding, national/international recognition, and an increase in the number and quality of products. The fact that standards for tenure and promotion vary from one institution to the next (I'm sure we have all heard the question "But is (s)he tenurable at University B?), from one department to another, and are often only vaguely related to a candidate, adds to the puzzle for today's new generation of academics.

Additionally, the public expects that faculty will be able to translate research theory to practical application. Providing answers for questions regarding the *significance* of ones research or documenting the *difference* it has made is crucial. This directly relates back to the taxpayer's/supporter's demands that research, teaching, and service have real-world relevance. One notable call for relevance has come from the National Institutes for Health, which have published special articles on the translation of research into policy and practice in several areas of scholarly research.

Another serious challenge presents itself as administrators respond to the whole faculty, which is, obviously, made of up a wide array of personalities, desires, temperaments, and work habits. Very thoughtful consideration must be utilized when trying to reach synergy or consensus among these often very different groups. Just how to strike the balance between those who entered the academy decades ago under a different understanding of what constitutes merit, and those who are recent recruits who bring with them a different set of skills and understanding is an inherent challenge.

Often issues arise when faculty members, experienced and junior faculty alike, reach, or assume they have reached, a status that brings with it privileges beyond those that their peers receive. I have been asked for special compensation, elevated standing, and special review processes and considerations because a scholar perceives that he or she has earned it. Many times that may be accurate, however, in order to create the community and culture that everyone desires, I must consider what community norms have been agreed upon, as well as the greatest good for the greatest number of people with these requests. We are, after all, training the next generation of social workers to provide even-handed services to those in need, and to apply fair assessments and standards in dealing with all populations.

Schools of Social Work: Discipline Specific Challenges

It is especially difficult to react to these challenges within a school of social work. Our faculty, by the very nature of the discipline, tend to be community-oriented and focused on process. As an administrator, I understand and appreciate this mindset; it is, in part, what makes our faculty the best at what they do. As an administrator, I also appreciate the need to act in a thoughtful, task-oriented manner. Whereas research timing and results can be fluid, the leadership to whom I report work on guidelines and deadlines that are sometimes non-negotiable. The need to be focused and organized to get tasks completed in a timely manner is often met with resistance by those not in this position.

Creating a Caring Climate While Emphasizing Education

The fact that we are a school of social work and do not *technically* offer social work services adds another dimension to my

experience. Unlike schools of law, public health, or business, some faculty and staff outside of the school have formed views that schools of social work function as clinics and not as academic units on the campus. Consequently, troubled students are occasionally referred to our school for services for personal problems or academic difficulties. I find that I must delicately turn away those who improperly send those in need of assistance our way, while ensuring that the University's resources are adequate to provide necessary services.

Related to an earlier discussion regarding race and gender, our own faculty and staff have indicated that the communal culture of social work and social work research should facilitate an open, cooperative, collaborative, and caring environment. Many have indicated that they would like to spend more school time getting to know one another on a personal level, or more time responding to one another's needs, or the opportunity to reach out or be healed by their peers. Furthermore, faculty members expect Deans to focus their energies internally by providing intellectual leadership, whereas fundraising requires Deans to focus externally. The tipping point between the two obligations is often found by trial and error. Facilitating a collaborative and friendly environment within the school and facilitating collaborative and friendly relationships outside of the school, are both equally important to a successful program.

While I welcome the desire for faculty and staff to connect with one another and with students, and while I want troubled students to receive the best possible services, there are often times when my attention and focus are on budget items, donor relations, serving on committees and boards both on and off campus, and mentoring students in order to keep our school vibrant and alive. These tasks are often on my mind when I hear that people require a more personal touch, my increased

attention, or resources outside of what we can provide. And although Deans strive to provide the perfect balance that each member of the school requires, the old adage is true: it is simply humanly impossible to be everything to everyone.

In the effort to be accessible to all, I discovered that I truly missed the day-to-day contact with students. Thus, I have created opportunities and structures to reach out and to stay connected to the student body as a whole by facilitating Dean-Student forums, meeting with student leadership groups, mentoring individual students, participating in dissertation review and oversight, and providing the opportunity for students to join me in ongoing research and publication endeavors. These activities not only allow me to keep a finger on the pulse of the School and enjoy interacting with eager pupils, they give students avenues of access that can enhance their educational experience.

When Business Weighs Greater than the Pursuit of Knowledge

As administrators, what is most often lost in this delicate transferring of attention from one event to the next is our own ability to pursue what brought us to higher education. I believe it is important for administrators to maintain their intellectual pursuits, their quest for knowledge, and their appetite to keep up to date with their profession and the news of the day. It makes us better able to make informed decisions, better discuss issues in our fields in context to the world around us, and helps us maintain our presence in academia (and brings the potential for us to raise our profiles, and, subsequently, that of our schools).

I have discussed how the process of having to decide who gets the next 15 minutes of my time is, some days, a daunting task. What tends to get put aside as I respond to the needs of the School is my own research. Although I have tried to maintain a publishing

agenda, I know that often my results would be available sooner, my articles much more plentiful, and my focus greater if only there were more than one of me.

Conclusion

So the question remains: At what point and in what time does one balance each need of this excellent group of people, researchers, and programs? This narrative outlines only some of the important questions and issues with which I deal with on a daily basis as a Dean. It is truly a developmental process. There are learning curves and stumbling blocks, mistakes and missteps, and moments of "Why?" that come with each trial, each crisis, or each hurtful implication. But there are those moments when a student stops me in the hallway to thank me for something that seemed insignificant at the time, or I receive a card with a special note indicating that I have greatly affected someone's life. There are the emails that are sent to celebrate a faculty member's research success, publication, or appointment. There are the mornings when a press release detailing the accomplishments of a student or faculty member is published and congratulations pour in. What becomes most clear is that each individual moment should be met with its own reaction, response, and consequent action.

When all is said and done, serving as a Dean in a large, public research institution means being many things to many people. On a macro level, I am accountable to the people of the State in which the University is located, who require that our School create unique learning opportunities for excellent faculty and students, that I budget my funding appropriately, with care and foresight, and educate the students who attend this university in the best and most responsible way I can. On a micro level, I am accountable to central administration, faculty, students and staff, whose needs are not always in sync. I am also responsible to both donors and students,

and giving time to one may necessarily meaning taking time away from another.

Finally, I am accountable to myself. I have shared a few of the challenges I face by virtue of being an African-American, a woman, and a veteran dean. Each adds another layer to the roles I have played, or have been asked to play in the larger scope of dean. It is this last accountability that so often gets lost in the shuffle of a dean's balancing act. At the end of the day budgets can be balanced, faculty needs are discussed and decided, students are learning with leaders in the field, and the state has the opportunity to retain social workers trained to provide service to its citizens. But at the end of the day if I cannot say that I have tried my best, exceeded my own expectations, and acted on behalf of the greater good, it is then I will define myself as beleaguered. Until such time I am balancing those things that need to be balanced, fighting the good fight, and enjoying the overall experience as it happens.

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