

I joined the University of Virginia in 1982 as an assistant professor of business and reveled in the thrill of teaching and writing. As I advanced up the tenure-promotion ladder, I assumed various responsibilities to strengthen the institution: chair of this program and that committee and executive director of an institute.

In 2005, the president of my university called to ask if I would serve as the dean of the business school for a year. He'd been conducting a search and hadn't been able to fill the slot in time for the start of the next academic year. He just needed a placeholder for a short while until he could close the sale with one of a number of candidates.

I was ready for a new challenge. But to leap from scholarship to administration is a big, and often one-way, move. The school really needed help. This wouldn't be an easy assignment. My faculty friends said that I'd be giving up the professorial life that offered self-direction, flexible hours, and a cloistered world. Academic leadership is lonely and conflict-ridden. And my wife correctly foresaw the distractions, stress, long hours, and travel.

On the other hand, some of my prior work was quite relevant to the school's needs. The issues at hand mattered a lot to me, and I wanted to rally others to them if I could. For every doubt, a reply came to mind. So I finally accepted.

How to Cultivate Faculty Leaders

To build pools of potential leaders, colleges are trying to change the negative ways administrative roles are viewed, and give faculty structured opportunities to learn behind the scenes.

As I had been warned, life changed radically from professor to dean. One is always "on" and closely observed. The pace of work is faster, with the help of a dedicated assistant, chief of staff, and associate deans. More than most professors appreciate, you discover how significantly the members of the professional staff sustain the school. The dean is the external face of the school, to whom the biggest complaints gravitate, to whom the reporters gather, and only to whom the major donors want to talk.

A large chunk of my time was devoted to our capital campaign, for which I gave up almost all teaching, a sacrifice I mourned. And from the moment I entered the dean's office, my relationship with the faculty changed: no longer a peer; henceforth, the "administration." Now I had to speak for all stakeholders, not just the faculty, some of whom joked that I had gone over to the dark side.

I willed that the dark side would be pretty bright. Good administration leverages the strengths of faculty, staff, and students to produce a community that is stronger than the sum of the parts. It pays attention to the skyrocketing expectations about what a school should deliver; it looks over the horizon at approaching threats and opportunities; it responds with a vision and strategy that resonate with the stakeholders; it mobilizes collective action; and then it marshals the resources sufficient to execute the plan.

Academicians and hard-boiled business leaders are natural skeptics about vision statements, but I learned that the ability to express a compelling vision is vitally important. Everyone wants to feel part of something bigger; a strong



vision enlists people around a common purpose. Given the mobility of faculty and professional staff these days, a dean basically is the leader of a large volunteer organization; the best people start to decamp when a school loses its mojo. A compelling vision binds people together, strengthens the school's culture, and helps confront tough decisions that come down the road.

One year as dean turned into 10 years as dean. The school worked through its challenges and grew stronger. As my second term as dean neared its end, people complimented my work and urged me to re-up. Headhunters called about loftier gigs in academic leadership and nonprofit organizations. But I declined them all and announced that I would return to the faculty.

Search committees choose deans for many different reasons. And dean candidates puzzle over whether to apply and what to say. There is a great deal of advice out there, much of it banal. Life suggests to me that among the most important considerations for candidates and search committees are readiness, temperament, and purpose.

Readiness matters. It derives from accumulated leadership experience, which in turn is a rough indicator for wisdom. The best deans are wise in the world, as well as ethical and effective. They came into the position with some general management experience, organizing people to get results, under a budget and deadlines. They hired and fired, and probably failed at points along the way. They handled failure maturely and went on to do better. As the influential banker Walter Wriston once said, "Judgment comes from experience. And experience comes from bad judgment." If you want wisdom in a dean, look at experience and readiness.

Temperament matters. Personality, mood, and emotional response define a leader more than most rationalists would like to admit. After Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. met Franklin Delano Roosevelt, he concluded that the new president had a "second-class intellect, but a first-class temperament." FDR, one of the top-ranked presidents in U.S. history, was intelligent, but not intellectual. Similarly, academic leaders needn't be geniuses or Nobel laureates — but deans must be comfortable with such people. Among the best academic leaders I've known, four attributes stand out: high self-confidence, resilience to failure, humility, and a bias for action.

Purpose matters. Seeking a deanship simply for the pay, power, and prestige is foolish — the hours are long, the stress is high, and there are enough unhappy endings to deanships that whatever the emoluments are, they may not be worth it. Instead, dean candidates, say "yes" if you feel the call of mission and values. Say "yes" out of an eagerness to serve the diverse stakeholders of a school. Say "yes" because you have something special to bring to the situation. Say "yes" out of a belief that the students you graduate will help to make the world a better place. In all you do, your motives will be glaringly evident. Hence, a choice by a search committee is often a fateful determinant of the future purpose of a school.

Robert F. Bruner is a professor of business at the University of Virginia.

A version of this article appeared in the [January 20, 2017 issue](#).