

Can Deans Fix Higher-Ed Dysfunction?

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July 7, 2017

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By David English and Rob Kramer

A March article in *The New York Times*, ["Want to Fix Schools? Go to the Principal's Office,"](#) piqued our interest. We wondered: If we could "fix" the problems we see going on in academe, particularly at universities, at whom would we aim attention and money?

That's not a simple question. Universities are complex creatures. Systems have been built upon systems. Decades, if not centuries, of calcified processes and cultural norms can be traced back to the German model of the research university and the teaching and hierarchical models of 11th-century Bologna.

However, in the current Rubik's Cube that is the contemporary university, the people we see as the crucial linchpins for transformation are the deans.

Deans live in the middle of the academic system. As leaders of their schools and divisions, they guide the daily and long-term operations of multiple departments, tend to dozens if not hundreds of faculty, and oversee numerous academic programs. They manage staff, facilities, and complex budgets. Did we mention fund raising? All of those duties result in grueling schedule demands for travel and relationship building.

Deans also handle the dicey personnel issues that fall under the category of "you can't make this s**t up!" Don't forget the necessary (and often overlooked) skill of influencing up — advocating to the provost and president in a productive and healthy way. Oh, and deans should be good at working with the media, managing politics, and communicating a course of direction that people want to support.

Deans are jammed between:

- The swells of enthusiasm, discontent, ill-informed requests, and blind blame that comes from below.
- The endless flow of requests, demands, big ideas, and stress from above.
- And the collegiality, unwarranted competition, and delicate partnerships from across.

Deans are the natural bottleneck, looking for solutions in an isolated world.

At issue, as well, is the void in training and professional development to prepare deans prior to, during, and when completing their tenures. The thinking seems to be: "This person was successful as an academic, administrator, and/or professional, so they are ready to be dean," and "When it's time to find the next dean we'll just do another national search." Ultimately, the skills that academics acquire prior to becoming a dean may only prepare them for a fraction of what they will encounter in the job.

What are the consequences of hiring deans without equipping them for the role?

In our experience — both working within institutions and consulting with them — the list of problems confronting any dean can seem endless: budget woes and mismanagement, faculty upheaval (retention issues or even revolt), missed partnership opportunities, lost resources, drops in fund raising, personnel issues (grievances, turnover), and the uncomfortably growing presence of campus lawyers and HR staffers in administration.

Having seen those problems play out so consistently in academe, we decided to tackle them head on at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts (UNCSA) where one of us (English) is provost. Much like any university, the deans at UNCSA are talented, passionate, and committed — but also overloaded, overworked, and not fully prepared to be successful in their roles. We wanted to develop a leadership program tailored to their needs. The question was: How could we provide the right kind of support for their unique needs as individuals, and as a collective leadership team?

What we tried and what we found out. We put the program in place over a two-year period. We thought it was vital to provide the time and space for the deans to develop as leaders and acquire new skills. The outcomes we were seeking wouldn't be sustainable if we rushed through the program so the deans could get back to work. Stretched over two years, the program allowed the participants frequent and regular opportunities to explore their development, to gain new insights into how they lead, and to put it all into practice by applying it to actual situations they were dealing with.

What worked well:

- Bimonthly topical sessions: We held short, specific, targeted, and applicable discussions on real-time situations the deans were managing.
- Group training: The deans and the members of the president's cabinet met together for a group training session. It was a powerful opportunity for campus leaders to collectively work through issues affecting the entire campus community.
- Leadership challenges: Each dean identified a situation that challenged his or her abilities as a leader, and developed a strategy for handling it across the course of the two-year program.
- Regular feedback: Each participant received a comprehensive report containing job-performance insights from superiors, colleagues, faculty, and other stakeholders. The data was used to create customized

individual development plans.

- Executive coaching: Perhaps the most effective component of the program was the regular one-on-one coaching that the deans received to aid them in managing particular problems.

What didn't work so well:

- We had intended to have additional long training sessions. However, time pressures and conflicts made them too burdensome to schedule.
- It proved difficult for some deans to meet consistently for their coaching sessions. The idea was for deans to meet with their coaches once a month. Again, schedule pressures meant some deans couldn't make all of their appointments, which impaired their momentum.
- Turnover. During the course of the two-year program, two new deans were hired. We did not have a good way to catch them up in the development process. They attended the group sessions, but did not get the benefit of the other components of the program.

Still, we've seen some tremendous results from the effort:

- Collectively, the university's Council of Deans is reporting substantial improvements in handling major campus issues, including: reaccreditation, development of a thoughtful and well-executed strategic plan, creation of a campus master plan, and the start of a comprehensive fund-raising campaign. None of those initiatives could have been achieved as successfully without this program.
- Individually, the deans are reporting improved relationships within their schools, and a better ability to manage conflict, gain buy-in, influence others, and build higher-performing teams. They also have a clearer sense of areas where they have struggled previously, and how to handle things differently now. As one dean reported, he wished he had been through the program years ago, as he would have avoided many of the mistakes he made over that time.
- A plan is in the works to sustain the momentum. It will most likely include robust training for all new deans, with substantial feedback, mentoring, and coaching over the first three years of their tenure. It will also include continuing leadership development for all deans and the restructuring of the Council of Deans meetings to provide time for peer coaching on challenges they are dealing with.

How to adapt this program at your campus. The biggest thing that made this program possible was the complete support of the provost and president. Their buy-in — not only financially, but in participation, as well — is extremely important.

Next, figure out the needs, skills, and challenges that your deans are struggling with. The sessions are useful only if they are tailored specifically to their actual needs. It's also important to focus on what goals they have for their divisions, and design sessions around how to help achieve those objectives.

Use external, professionally certified coaches who have extensive knowledge and/or experience with higher education. We can't stress this enough. Executive coaching has become popular in the last decade or so, and some institutions now provide internal coaches (often from HR or perhaps a faculty-development office). Participants at the level of dean need to feel safe that they can have confidential conversations with someone who is outside the university and has no personal interest in internal politics or power dynamics. Using internal coaches for this type of program makes things complicated and murky.

Don't try to cheat the program's length. The easiest things to schedule were the bimonthly sessions, which we coordinated at regularly scheduled meetings of the Council of Deans. For this effort to show results, your deans will have to embrace the content, process it with their coach, and then put it into practice as the appropriate situations arise. These things take time.

As pressures continue to mount against higher education (see anything happening in politics, the economy, tuition rates, and rapidly evolving student demands), it is the deans who can make or break a faculty, a school, a campus. Find ways to support their leadership development and you find ways to resolve some of the tricky problems confronting academe today.

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