

# Ad Interim: Practice

IHE [insidehighered.com/advice/2017/08/31/how-be-effective-acting-director-chair-or-dean-part-i-essay](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/08/31/how-be-effective-acting-director-chair-or-dean-part-i-essay)

Several years ago, I served as the acting dean of Michigan State University's College of Arts and Letters -- one of our institution's three core colleges with 20 departments, programs and centers, 250 faculty members, and a mix of graduate and undergraduate offerings. It was a wonderful opportunity to get to know another part of the university and experiment with running a college with a very different structure. At the same time, knowing the appointment was for just a single year made me approach it rather differently than my usual (and concurrent) gig as the dean of Lyman Briggs College, a residential undergraduate science college with 2,000 students and no formal sub-units.

My intent here is to offer a summary of the major lessons I have taken away from that exhilarating, if rather overwhelming, year. I hope other people who are starting interim positions may find them useful. While the details of your interim experience will vary according to whether this is your first time acting as an academic leader, the size and complexity of the unit you will lead, and whether you have any prior familiarity with the unit in question, much of your work will probably follow a common pattern.

When stepping into an interim role, the key questions to answer quickly are:

- What is your core mission during your "acting" period?
- What are people afraid of, and how can you allay those fears?
- How will you acquire the information required for your role?
- Which issues must you address and which should be handled by your successor?
- How can you "perform" your role so that the unit does not feel rudderless?
- How will you manage your successive transitions into and out of the unit?

This essay will cover the first four topics, which are more practical and task-oriented in nature. A companion essay will expand on the last two items, which focus on the performative aspects of interim leadership. Over the course of these two pieces, I will describe how I faced each of the key questions during my period as acting dean and outline how other interim leaders might usefully approach them.

## Establishing the Mission

Fortunately, the provost gave me a clear charge as I started the year: I was to help the college improve *communication* among its academic leaders and faculty members, build active *collaborations* internally and with other parts of the university, and foster a greater sense of *cohesion* among its diverse units. Those were objectives on which one could make a tangible start in a single year. They were also areas in which evident progress could (and did) help attract a strong new dean via an ongoing national search and provide a foundation for that person to build upon.

Having those goals in mind shaped the way that I spent my time during the year. To begin working on communication, I held regular meetings with the chairs and directors, and I built time into the agendas where the unit leaders could share their perspectives and suggest how the college should deal with certain topics. To ensure that individual chairs and directors could ask me questions about urgent matters between regular meetings, I held drop-in office hours for quick confidential chats. And to encourage the unit leaders to converse directly with one another (not only with the dean), I arranged for a few of the group's meetings to be "dean free," which empowered them to share their concerns openly and determine how best to bring them up with the Dean's Office, as necessary.

As a way of fostering collaboration, I started by modeling it in the fall planning and spring budget processes. Each autumn, the provost asks colleges to submit an account of their continuing plans, including progress over the last

year and anticipated new directions; the focus is on ideas rather than costs. In the spring, deans submit budget plans based on the fall planning documents (and the provost's feedback). Each of us delineates how the college will reallocate its own resources to support new ventures as well as how the provost might partner with them.

I engaged the chairs and directors in these planning and budget exercises, encouraging them to suggest broad collaborative directions for the college and to make joint proposals about how to finance them. They prepared unit-level planning materials that were shared with their colleagues. My associate deans helped compile the themes evident in their individual documents and shared them at a special chairs/directors meeting. A number of ideas for collaborations among units and between those units and other colleges came forward from pairs and trios of units -- they spanned everything from artist-in-residence programs to cluster hires -- and I included them in the college's planning and budget documents.

The time the unit leaders and I spent working on communication and collaboration laid the groundwork for helping the college project a greater sense of cohesion through partnership with the college's excellent marketing team. We jointly converged on a set of themes for the college to highlight throughout its websites, reports, magazines and fundraising materials; these were deployed immediately. In parallel, the college created a standard template for departmental websites and helped the units establish a common look and feel for their online presence. All of that was a good first step towards establishing a sense of shared purpose -- a responsibility that the new long-term dean has taken up with enthusiasm.

### **Addressing Anxieties**

You will probably encounter some group of rumors reflecting people's anxieties about the status and future of their department or college. Facing the prospect of working with first a temporary leader and then a brand-new one shortly thereafter leaves faculty members and administrators with a prolonged sense of not knowing what rules and expectations they need to follow. Anyone up for performance review or promotion will worry about the impact on their career. Anyone already deeply engaged in launching a large new curricular or administrative project will fear that it may be cancelled before having a chance to prove its worth.

As soon as my appointment was announced, I began to hear the rumors: Arts & Letters was to be merged into my Lyman Briggs College; there would be no search for a new dean; I would eventually be announced as the new permanent dean; the provost was going to run Arts & Letters herself with me as her proxy and spy. Since all of those rumors were unfounded, I thought it best to address them head on with the chairs and directors, so at my first meeting with each group, I specifically refuted them.

Naming and speaking about those worries at the very start -- and reiterating frequently throughout the year how our current work was preparing the college for its new dean -- was important for giving people in the college the confidence they needed to work together for a bright future beyond the transitional period.

### **Gathering Input**

Because you will be called upon to make decisions and to represent the unit to outsiders, you will need reliable sources of information about all the facets of its operations. Some of them will be encoded in spreadsheets or policy documents. Others may exist as practices or conventions well-known only to those with long service in the unit. You will need to become comfortable asking questions and admitting what you do not yet know or understand.

Stepping into the role on only a few weeks' notice, I had to learn where to find reliable information and advice on a wide range of topics. Fortunately, the college had many highly experienced and knowledgeable academic and administrative staff members. At the very beginning, I encouraged them to explain their portfolios to me and to tutor me on what they thought I would need to know immediately. As the year progressed, we held weekly team meetings to keep track of everyone's projects and ensure that I could hear multiple perspectives on issues that arose.

I learned not to be shy about asking someone to re-explain items a few weeks after I'd first heard about them.

Sometimes the sheer volume of material to learn was overwhelming, and I would have to absorb information in layers -- getting a basic orientation the first time through and filling in detailed budgetary or personnel histories during the second or third round.

I also kept reminding myself to make decisions only after consulting multiple advisers. That's usually my practice because integrating varied perspectives leads to better decisions. But as an interim dean it was even more necessary than usual because, although my team members all came highly recommended and were clearly dedicated to the college, I had not worked with most of them before. I did not know which issues were their hot-button items, how *laissez faire* or action-oriented they tended to be, or whether they generally favored particular kinds of solutions to administrative issues. Consulting each of them on a wide range of topics both helped me get to know them better and also provided a valuable spectrum of advice.

### **A Time to Every Purpose**

In order to transact the regular business of the college, certain tasks will have to be completed during your interim period. Budgets must be prepared and managed. Scheduled hires must be made. Annual and promotion reviews must go forward. Conversations with major donors about gifts they are already contemplating cannot be postponed.

Other things will have to wait till the new leader arrives. A decision about whether to reformulate the unit's entire curriculum, for instance, might be better made by the new leader who will have to take responsibility for most of the multi-year process.

Inevitably, some items fall in the middle. You should start to address them, perhaps by beginning conversations or putting some structures in place, so that the unit does not ignore major or contentious issues where progress will be essential. However, you must also accord the incoming leader the latitude to take that initial planning in new directions.

Early in my year as interim, the advisory board of an academic center within the college that had led its efforts on inclusion and diversity for several years informed me that the group had served its transitional purpose, needed to disband, and should be replaced by a new elected college-wide committee. After reviewing their report, I concurred. So I spent the next six months working with the College Advisory Council to determine what was needed and then draft bylaws changes, an administrative structure, and a charge that could bring the new committee into being. At the last college-wide faculty meeting of the academic year, the formation of new committee was approved. When the new dean arrived that summer, he was able to focus on how best to deploy this new structure to sustain a focus on diversity and inclusive practices within the college.

Indeed, a major aspect of the interim role is to sort the tasks that flood your inbox into those "must do," "must start," and "must wait" categories. Be prepared to explain the principles you are using to make the separation, so the people with whom you work can appreciate why some projects they care about cannot go forward immediately. Bear in mind that as the end of your interim period approaches, the criteria by which you do the sorting need to shift to reflect the impending leadership transition. To put it bluntly: fewer and fewer items should be handled by you rather than by your successor.

This essay has covered several practical tasks that confront a new interim leader: identifying your core mission for the interim period, allaying colleagues' fears, acquiring reliable information, and triaging the issues that land in your inbox. At first glance, it may seem that managing them would fully occupy your time. But leading a college that includes a theater department helped me understand that an interim also plays important performative roles in academic administration. Those will be the topic of a future essay.